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The United States Merchant Marine Academy

Background

The U.S. Merchant Marine consists of U.S.-flag vessels and their crews of U.S. citizens or nationals, commonly called merchant mariners. While there has been congressional interest in maritime policy since the founding of the United States, legislation related to training and qualifying the maritime workforce was uncommon until the latter half of the 19th century. Economic distress in the shipping industry caused by the American Civil War prompted congressional efforts to reverse this decline, including legislation intended to increase the number and quality of merchant mariners. Two federal entities currently share responsibility for the Merchant Marine. The Maritime Administration (MARAD) manages federal shipping and ocean transportation programs. It also operates the only federal maritime academy for merchant marine officers—the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) at Kings Point, New York. The U.S. Coast Guard administers commercial vessel and merchant mariner oversight programs.

Forming a National Maritime Academy

The concept for a federal institution that would train merchant marine officers arose from concerns over crew shortages during World War I. Navy personnel were drawn from combat vessels, particularly mobilized members of State Naval Militias qualified as merchant mariners, to fully crew Merchant Marine ships. There also was growing congressional concern about the oversight and professionalism of the merchant mariner workforce as maritime accidents increased in number and severity during the post-war period.

The *Merchant Marine Act of 1936* established the U.S. Maritime Commission with broad responsibilities that included training programs. The Commission established the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps to train individuals without maritime experience to be merchant marine officers. At its outset, the only training option for the new program was to train-at-sea on merchant ships because the Commission had no existing capacity for a shore-based school-ship program. By 1942 however, there was a regional shore-based site with training facilities and student housing in New York, California, and Mississippi. The Commission disestablished the western and southern sites in 1947. This left the eastern site at Kings Point as a long-term campus for USMMA; it acquired permanence as a service academy in 1956.

U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

USMMA is a four-year educational institution providing Bachelor of Science degrees to successful candidates who must become qualified for dual-service as military sealift officers and licensed merchant mariners. In 2019, the Department of Labor reported 47,600 licensed mariners in

the maritime work force, 38,900 deck officers, and 8,700 ship engineers.

The superintendent of USMMA is its chief executive officer and typically is appointed as a rear or vice admiral in the U.S. Maritime Service. There is a Board of Visitors for USMMA with membership that includes five Presidential appointees, three members of the Senate, and five members of the House of Representatives. The Secretary of Transportation appoints an advisory board that is required to consult the superintendent and MARAD Administrator on academic and management matters. Enacted budget data for USMMA is in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Fiscal Year Enacted Budget (\$000)

USMMA	2017	2018	2019	2020
Operations	69,000	68,531	70,593	80,216
Capital Assets	14,218	14,121	18,000	5,225
Total	83,218	82,652	88,593	85,441

Source: MARAD at <https://www.transportation.gov/budget>.

Approximately 265 U.S. citizens or nationals are admitted to USMMA each year. Admission is competitive and applicants must meet certain eligibility requirements. Around 225 appointments are made through nominations by Members of Congress and other nominating officials. The MARAD Administrator is authorized to make 40 additional appointments without nomination or competition. Additionally, up to 42 international students designated by their home country may be admitted to USMMA.

USMMA first admitted women in 1974. Students in fall 2019 were 79% male and 21% female (see **Table 2** for race and ethnicity data). The average size of the USMMA student population from 2017 to 2020 was 960; the average for each year's graduating class during the same period was 193. Graduation requirements include:

- completing the academic program;
- accumulating 360 days of sea service; and
- obtaining a deck officer or ship engineer license.

USMMA provides its students room, board, and tuition valued at approximately \$300,000 over 4 years. USMMA does not pay them a salary. Students are responsible for some attendance expenses (around \$5,000 per student for the 2020-2021 academic year). Students at other service academies also attend without charge but they receive a salary (\$1,185 per month in 2021) that exceeds their necessary expenses. The cost per student at USMMA for fiscal years 2017 to 2020 is in Table 3.

Table 2. Service Academy Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

Service Academies	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Multi	Other/ND
U.S. Merchant Marine	79%	1%	6%	7%	4%	3%
U.S. Army	64%	12%	10%	8%	3%	3%
U.S. Air Force	64%	7%	11%	6%	7%	5%
U.S. Coast Guard	63%	6%	11%	7%	10%	3%
U.S. Navy	61%	7%	12%	7%	10%	3%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator at <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.

Notes: Data are from 2019; Percentages are rounded; “Multi” includes two or more races; “Other/ND” includes Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, American Indian, Alaska Natives, or not determined (unknown).

P.L. 116-92 (§3513) requires the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) to assess USMMA and make recommendations for systemic change and improvement.

Table 3. Fiscal Year Cost Per Student

USMMA	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cost/Student	\$76,607	\$71,831	\$65,350	\$73,383

Source: MARAD CFO Directive-16; USMMA Legislative Liaison.

Service Obligation

USMMA graduates incur a service obligation that can be met by merchant mariner licensure for six years and armed services reserve service for eight years, both are fulfilled concurrently (See **Table 4**). Alternatively, graduates can meet their obligation by serving on active duty for five years in any uniformed service or working for the federal government in a civilian maritime role for five years.

Table 4. Federal Service Data for USMMA Graduates

Service	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Active Military	56	52	54	72	81
Reserve Military	166	121	140	128	126

Source: USMMA Legislative Liaison.

Notes: “Reserve Military” includes all armed services. For specific Strategic Sealift service data in the U.S. Navy Reserve, see **Table 5**.

U.S. Navy Reserve

USMMA students must enlist in the U.S. Navy Reserve (USNR) Strategic Sealift Midshipmen Program (SSMP). Sealift Midshipmen are not subject to discipline under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) as students at USMMA, while students at other service academies are subject to the UCMJ and military criminal investigations. SSMP is an education and training program administered by the Navy through the Department of Naval Science at USMMA. The program’s purpose is to qualify participants for service in the Navy’s Strategic Sealift Officer Program (SSOP). Unless they choose to work in the federal civil service or serve on active duty in the uniformed services, the Navy commissions each qualified graduate as a USNR strategic sealift officer (SSO) with the rank of ensign (O1). SSOs are assigned to the Strategic Sealift Readiness Group (SSRG) in the Navy’s Individual Ready Reserve (IRR).

Table 5. SSOP Service Data for USMMA Graduates

Service	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Deck SSO	70	53	69	69	57
Engine SSO	93	68	66	59	69
Total SSO	163	121	135	128	126
SSOP	71%	69%	68%	64%	60%

Source: USMMA Legislative Liaison.

Issues for Congress

USMMA oversight is complex because it supports both national security strategy and national maritime policy. These broad responsibilities require it to have links with various federal agencies and congressional committees.

Student Diversity

Studying whether attendance expenses and the absence of salary affect the recruitment of underrepresented groups may aid any examination of USMMA student diversity.

Student Protection

Congress authorized a sexual assault response program at USMMA in 2016. CRS is unable to determine if its Navy Reserve midshipmen are also included in the Navy’s sexual assault prevention and response (SAPR) program. Studying whether USMMA’s program offers services and protection equivalent to the Navy’s could determine if the intended student safety and well-being outcomes are comparable under both programs. USMMA midshipmen have a military status but they are the only service academy students not within the jurisdiction of the Defense Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct (Committee members directly advise the Secretary of Homeland Security for the Coast Guard Academy).

Academy Mission

Congress may consider how USMMA can expand its mission and capacity to address maritime competitor nations with adversarial national security policies. This could include a larger student population and graduates specialized in competitive intelligence, maritime unmanned navigation, and multimodal transport cyber security.

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