

# Call to action for Kings Pt. academy

■ **13 in Congress** write to Merchant Marine Academy

■ **Concern over** allegations of sexual harassment

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Thirteen members of Congress, including three from Long Island, have joined in support of reinstating the Sea Year program at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy while also asking for school and federal agencies to address sexual harassment and other concerns that have put the Kings Point school in the spotlight.

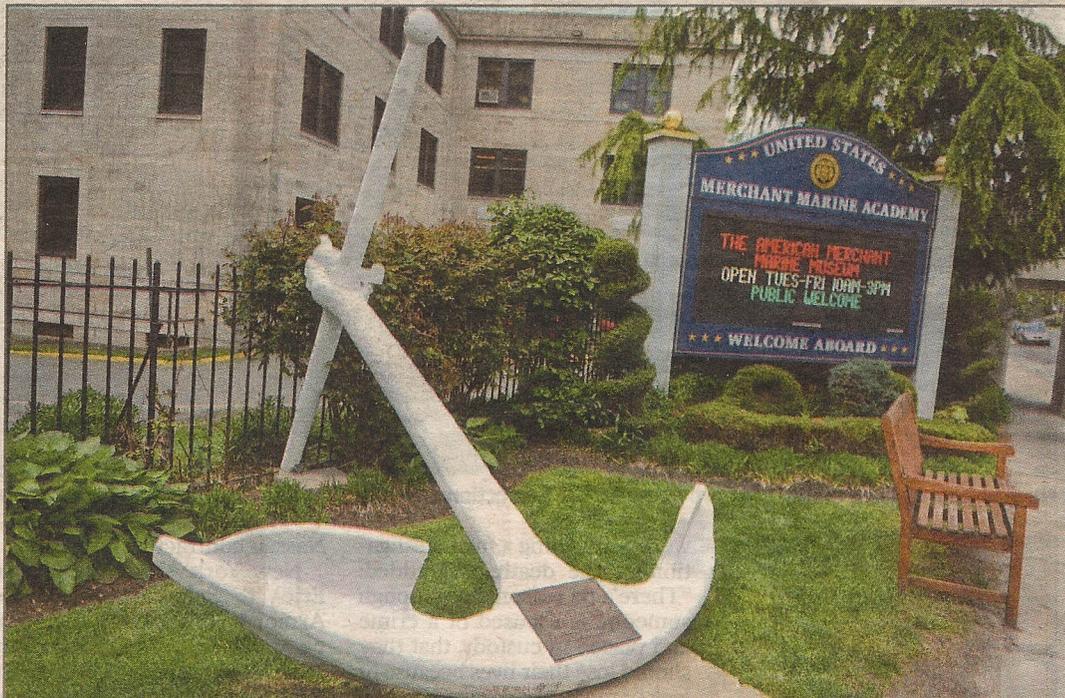
The elected officials, in the letter to the service academy's overseers, including U.S. Transportation Department Secretary Anthony Foxx, requested specifics on what is being done to meet requirements to keep the school's accreditation and what has been done to protect all students.

The academy was placed on warning in June by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, its accrediting agency, which said it did not comply with requirements to meet five of 14 benchmarks, including governance, institutional assessments and financial planning.

The school remains accredited while on warning, which is the lowest of the commission's noncompliance actions, and has up to two years to work to reverse the ruling.

The Sept. 2 letter was signed by Reps. Peter King (R-Seaford), Kathleen Rice (D-Garden City) and Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley) and 10 others, and advocated for the school to continue graduating licensed Merchant Marine officers that go on to work with military and commercial fleets all over the world.

"We write to express our strong support for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) and the reinstatement of the Sea Year program with meaningful protective measures ensuring the security of



The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy is being urged to address accreditation and sex-harassment issues.

all midshipmen," the letter states. "We strongly believe that one report of sexual harassment is too many and that meaningful action must be taken to safeguard midshipmen against all forms of sexual harassment."

The Sea Year program is a key element of the academy's appeal because of the "real-world" experience it provides. Students serve on vessels — some federally owned, some commercial — for about 300 days and often are out of communication with the academy, friends and family.

Academy and U.S. officials halted Sea Year in June but partially reinstated it in July, letting midshipmen to serve on federal ships but not commercial ones.

The letter to Foxx, U.S. Maritime Administration Administrator Paul Jaenichen and Adm. Jim Helis, the academy's superintendent, gave them five business days to address 14 sets of questions on issues ranging from meeting accreditation standards to explaining the decision process that initially caused suspension of Sea Year to detailing how students will

meet graduation requirements. The letter also asks if there are any plans to close the academy.

Academy officials did not respond to a request yesterday for comment. A Maritime Administration spokeswoman said yesterday that "we have received the letter and are in the process of responding to the questions."

King, in an interview, said the missive is a call to action. He and other members of Congress want to make sure that federal officials and the academy take ownership of the issues.

"We do want the program reinstated, but there have to be reforms before they are reinstated," King said. "The issues they [students who allege harassment] raise are significant . . . and at the same time, we don't want this caught in a bureaucratic struggle."

King said that, as chair of the academy's Board of Visitors, he is presiding over an October hearing where he hopes specifics will be discussed.

"You have midshipmen's education being upended," King said. "It's at the same time important to put in place real safe-

guards, but all we are saying is 'Get it done.'"

Rice voiced similar concerns in a statement issued yesterday.

"We want to know what is being done to protect midshipmen from sexual assault and harassment and to make sure that the academy meets the necessary requirements to maintain accreditation in the future," she wrote.

Zeldin said Sea Year should be reinstated while the allegations are addressed.

"My office is taking these allegations very seriously, and any and all allegations of sexual assault, bullying and harassment must be immediately investigated," he said in a statement.

The Transportation Department said in a statement last month it was working to achieve those goals, adding it would have "independent outside experts" examine these issues at the academy, "both on campus and at sea, in an attempt to identify root causes and their impacts to the academy culture and offer possible short-term and long-term corrective actions to address the issues."