

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. merchant marine—the nation’s domestic and oceangoing commercial ships and mariners—supports both U.S. commerce and national defense. MARAD, an agency within the Department of Transportation, is responsible for fostering, promoting, and developing the maritime industry; providing for the education and training of U.S. mariners; and studying all problems related to merchant-marine commerce and national-defense policies. Proper education and training of mariners is important to the success of the merchant marine.

The Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Act of 2012 mandated that GAO review mariner training. This report examines (1) the availability of maritime training, (2) the availability of financial assistance for maritime training, and (3) MARAD’s actions to ensure mariners meet commerce and defense needs and industry stakeholder views on those actions. GAO analyzed documents and interviewed officials from MARAD, the Coast Guard, the Department of Defense, maritime-training providers, unions, and companies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that MARAD study and identify potential problems in ensuring that U.S. mariners are adequately trained to meet the needs of the entire maritime industry. The Department of Transportation did not agree or disagree with the recommendation.

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U.S. MERCHANT MARINE

Maritime Administration Should Assess Potential Mariner-Training Needs

What GAO Found

Maritime training—for domestic waterway and oceangoing operations—is available through many public and private entities. These entities include the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA), state maritime academies, community colleges, union-affiliated schools, and about 230 private sector schools. Private companies also provide training to their mariner employees, including training to operate the vessels in their domestic and oceangoing fleets.

A broad array of federal and non-federal financial assistance programs are available to help pay for maritime training. The Maritime Administration (MARAD) provides financial aid to academy students, GI Bill assistance is available to veterans, and the Department of Education provides loans and grants to college students. Maritime unions also provide assistance to their members, and maritime companies can provide assistance to their employees. Several industry stakeholders GAO interviewed stated that some prospective and current mariners could lack access to financial assistance. However, MARAD’s responsibility towards paying for training mainly extends to students at the USMMA and at the state maritime academies who receive student incentive-payment-program funds.

MARAD primarily supports the oceangoing maritime industry and its training needs. MARAD directly supports the oceangoing industry through subsidies for ships available for defense purposes and provides funding to the federal and state maritime academies. MARAD officials stated that they have not focused as much on the domestic commercial sector because they consider efforts to support military sealift requirements a higher priority for available budgetary resources. MARAD officials stated that they intend to conduct analyses of the domestic commercial maritime industry; however, the officials have not yet devoted the staff resources necessary to complete this effort and did not establish a time frame for completing this effort.

Some stakeholders GAO interviewed expressed concerns about MARAD’s focus on the oceangoing sector, especially as the maritime industry has evolved to predominantly serve domestic waterways. For example, officials from three maritime academies expressed the need for more information to develop courses to meet domestic industry requirements, and several company stakeholders expressed similar concerns about the academies’ lack of curriculums specifically tailored for the domestic sector. MARAD officials acknowledge that many mariners now prefer to work domestically and that this shift in preference, combined with the decline in the number of U.S. oceangoing ships, has resulted in fewer qualified mariners to meet U.S. oceangoing requirements. To address maritime industry issues, MARAD announced in September 2013 that it is developing a national maritime strategy. MARAD is also currently helping the Department of Transportation develop a national freight strategic plan, of which the maritime industry is a vital part. Studying potential training problems affecting the merchant marine’s ability to carry out specified national commerce and defense objectives to ensure economic growth and sealift support in times of war could provide information to maritime stakeholders and help MARAD meet its responsibilities.