

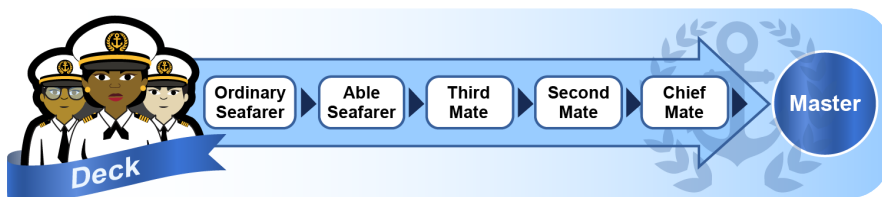
A report to congressional committees

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What GAO Found

Mariner students typically take training courses to begin or advance their careers, and many such courses are approved by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) to meet requirements for credentials to work on vessels. Institutions offering USCG-approved courses include one national and six state maritime academies, colleges and universities, and other training institutions such as ones affiliated with maritime unions. Of non-academy institutions, the Maritime Administration (MARAD) has designated 47 as part of the Centers of Excellence program for domestic maritime workforce training. The eligibility of training institutions for federal financial aid varies. For example, maritime academies are eligible for aid from MARAD and the Departments of Education and Veterans Affairs (VA). In contrast, most other training institutions do not have the approvals required for mariner students to use available aid. Of the 197 non-academy institutions that offered USCG-approved courses as of August 2025, GAO’s analysis found that less than 20 percent of them were approved to accept aid through the Departments of Education, VA, or Labor.

Figure: Example of Mariner Career Pathway with Deck Roles



Source: GAO presentation of U.S. Coast Guard information and MicroOne, vector_master, kaprihe/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-26-108184

MARAD has taken limited steps to help address challenges that mariner training institutions face in being able to accept federal financial aid. Survey respondents from 26 Center of Excellence institutions that offer mariner training said they face challenges such as navigating separate approval processes for Education, VA, and Labor. MARAD has identified strategies to address some of the challenges but has taken limited steps to implement them due to staff resource constraints. By leveraging existing resources, such as the U.S. Committee on the Marine Transportation System (CMTS), a federal interagency coordinating committee, MARAD could work with other agencies to help address challenges, such as sharing expertise from VA and Labor on aid approval processes.

MARAD has shared information about its financial aid, and its strategies call for publicizing other agencies’ financial aid. However, MARAD has taken limited steps to implement these strategies. GAO’s review of MARAD websites found links to other agencies’ websites with little context on their financial aid, such as type of aid offered. Respondents from 11 of 26 surveyed institutions reported that MARAD had not communicated with them in the past 3 years on aid available to students, and respondents from another 11 institutions reported they did not know if MARAD had offered such communication. While MARAD has limited resources, additional targeted action to promote financial aid, such as using social media, could help MARAD reach more students. In addition, promoting available financial aid would better position MARAD to support its mission of growing the maritime workforce to promote national and economic security.

Why GAO Did This Study

The maritime industry relies on mariners to work on vessels carrying goods and passengers domestically and internationally. However, industry stakeholders have raised concerns about a mariner shortage. To work in the industry, mariners often take courses through a training institution. MARAD and the Departments of Education, VA, and Labor administer federal financial aid that students could use for mariner training.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 contains a provision for GAO to review issues related to federal financial aid for mariner training. This report addresses: 1) use of aid available for mariner training through MARAD, Education, VA, and Labor; 2) challenges mariner training institutions face related to this aid and MARAD’s steps to address those challenges; and 3) MARAD’s communication about aid available for mariner training. GAO reviewed MARAD documents and analyzed data from federal agencies and selected training institutions on financial aid for mariner training for fiscal years 2024 and 2025. GAO interviewed officials from MARAD, Education, VA, Labor, USCG, and four maritime unions. GAO also obtained information from a selection of mariner training institutions, including through a survey of 47 institutions in the Centers of Excellence program; 46 institutions responded.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to MARAD, including that it leverage the CTMS to identify options to help mariner training institutions address challenges in accessing federal aid programs and that it identify and use targeted actions to share more information about other federal agencies’ financial aid. MARAD agreed with the recommendations.