



2019 U.S. Merchant Marine Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups

Overview Report

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Overview Report

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The lead analyst on this assessment was Amanda Barry, Fors Marsh Group. Dr. Tina DeMarco and Ms. Anna Scolese, Fors Marsh Group, assisted in the preparation of this report, and Dr. Laura Severance and Mr. Mark Petusky, Fors Marsh Group, and Dr. Ashlea Klahr and Ms. Lisa Davis, OPA, assisted with the review of this report. Policy officials who contributed to the development of the focus group content included Dr. Nathan Galbreath and Ms. Anita Boyd (Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office). We would like to thank all of the individuals at the Academy who assisted us in organizing the focus groups.

The data collection team consisted of Ms. Amanda Barry, Ms. Lisa DeMelfi, Mr. Sam Evans, Mr. Hunter Peebles, and Mr. Mark Petusky of Fors Marsh Group.

Executive Summary

The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) seeks to continually expand and improve sexual assault and sexual harassment programs and resources. The *2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups (2019 SAGR)* study is a part of an assessment cycle at the Military Service Academies (MSAs) that started in 2005, which focuses on gender relations, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, and Academy culture. The cycle alternates annually between a qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) assessment. The goal of the survey is to provide statistical information about incidence rates and cadet/midshipman perceptions on a host of issues, whereas the focus groups provide a deeper insight and understanding of the climate at each Academy. Combined, these assessments help Academy leaders and policy makers assess the effectiveness of the programs and identify opportunities for improvement. The *2019 SAGR* was administered at the United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA), each of the DoD Service Academies (United States Military Academy at West Point, United States Naval Academy, and the United States Air Force Academy), as well as the United States Coast Guard Academy (USCGA).

The current report presents findings from the USMMA and uses data from the focus groups to explore the perception of issues related to sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other gender-related topics at the USMMA. Results provided in this report are qualitative in nature and cannot be generalized to the full population of USMMA midshipmen. Themes should be considered the attitudes and opinions of focus group participants only and not the opinions of all USMMA midshipmen, faculty, and staff.

Focus Group Methodology

Ten focus groups were conducted at the USMMA from March 25 through March 28, 2019, with 59 Academy students and 22 faculty and staff. Sessions lasted 90 minutes and were conducted by trained focus group moderators on the USMMA campus.

Using a focus group protocol, the moderator led a discussion covering topics related to the Academy's culture, prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment, reporting, and alcohol use. Major themes were identified and coded into key categories. Findings from the analysis are summarized and presented with quotations throughout the report.

Summary of Themes

The perspectives of the midshipmen as well as the faculty and staff are invaluable in assessing and understanding the policies and programs addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment and the culture at the USMMA.

Academy Culture

Midshipmen reported that they have a highly regimented schedule, which can result in a stressful environment. They also reported viewing their Academy as unique compared to “typical” colleges and even other MSAs due to the largely discrepant gender ratio and Sea Year.¹

Focus group participants identified several factors that impact relationships across the USMMA, including gender, the ratio of males to females, and class year. Midshipmen in the focus groups noted that midshipmen of opposite genders have close-knit, familial relationships. However, due to the small community at the Academy, midshipman participants identified that the rumor mill is a prominent feature of Academy life. They expressed that the rumor mill can have an impact on a midshipman’s reputation, particularly for women because there are so few of them on campus. Female midshipmen reported believing that they must act as “one of the guys” to fit in with the male midshipmen, which at times, can result in ignoring behaviors that might qualify as sexual harassment, such as sexual language or jokes.

Male midshipmen in the focus groups said they perceive that the Academy favors female midshipmen for leadership positions and that the Academy is more lenient toward female midshipmen compared to male midshipmen when it comes to punishments both related to sexual assault incidents and other infractions. This belief can add to a divide between the male and female midshipmen.

When asked about the official rules, midshipman participants identified dormitory “open door” policies and fraternization policies as official rules that impact gender relations. When discussing unofficial rules, midshipman participants mentioned being taught by fellow midshipmen to handle situations at the lowest level and that they should avoid getting other midshipmen in trouble. Male midshipmen discussed avoiding interaction and romantic relationships with female midshipmen to avoid being unjustly accused of sexual assault or sexual harassment.

Prevention at the Academy

The 2019 SAGR focus groups sought to better understand what types of behaviors midshipmen have difficulty identifying as worthy of intervention. When given a list of behaviors that ranged from roughhousing or horseplay to committing an act of sexual assault, midshipman participants largely responded that they are comfortable intervening in severe behaviors, would not intervene in behaviors perceived as consensual or horseplay, and are hesitant toward intervening in situations in which there is little contextual information. In “gray” situations, midshipmen reported that they believe they can often tell when someone seems uncomfortable and would intervene if that were the case.

Though many midshipmen reported feeling capable of intervening, many felt that trainings on bystander intervention are redundant. They expressed the trainings make them feel more confident in intervening but do not necessarily teach them new information. Further,

¹ Sea Year refers to an experience in which USMMA midshipmen spend extended periods of time serving on a vessel as part of its crew, often with the vast majority of the crewmates being professional sailors instead of their peers.

midshipmen believed that most sexual assaults are happening when others are not around, making it difficult to intervene. Resultantly, some midshipmen suggested a focus on prevention rather than intervention. For example, midshipmen and faculty and staff believe that the majority of negative behaviors happen during Sea Year. Many female midshipmen suggested trainings on how to empower and advocate for themselves during Sea Year, when they may be the only female onboard a ship of men. Senior leadership was viewed as prioritizing sexual assault as an Academy issue, messaging zero tolerance for offenses; however, many midshipmen indicated wanting more transparency from leadership around sexual assault cases at the institution. Midshipmen in the focus groups said they believe the lack of transparency from leadership feeds into the rumor mill and perceptions of false reporting on campus. Participants expressed mixed views regarding peer leadership. Although participants cited that most peer leaders are approachable and available, there was a lack in confidence with regard to confidentiality, trust, and the rumor mill. Further, some peer leaders may unintentionally perpetuate false beliefs about sexual assault and sexual harassment by making light of things such as the open-door policy and false reporting.

Resources and Reporting

When discussing the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) office at the Academy, midshipman participants discussed the change in leadership, lack of familiarity of the resources, and mixed comfortability with reporting to SAPR personnel.

Barriers to reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment persist. Participants identified these barriers as including the rumor mill, perceptions of false reporting, fear of getting someone expelled, stigma, fear of delayed graduation and commissioning, and ambiguity around what happens after reporting. To increase reporting, midshipmen suggested victims need more support regarding how to handle the potential backlash from other students. Also, midshipmen suggested that if punishment were more aligned with the severity of the crime, victims may be more likely to report, and it would reduce fears of students getting expelled.

Alcohol Use and Training

Midshipmen at the Academy spoke of alcohol use as a way that midshipmen release stress, often describing alcohol use as binge drinking. When asked about the trainings provided about alcohol use, participants stated that the trainings are unrealistic and not always helpful in creating behavior change or promoting responsible alcohol choices, but instead, the trainings focus on fear and abstinence. Midshipmen discussed the need for training that promotes responsibility over abstinence and suggested it be taught by trainers who midshipmen can relate to, such as alumni. Further, during Sea Year, midshipmen go from a highly regulated life on campus to an unregulated setting on the ship with a heavy drinking and smoking culture. Some midshipmen suggested that alcohol trainings specific to Sea Year, before they go out to sea, could be useful to address these common ship behaviors.

Synopsis

Participants highlighted parts of the culture at the Academy that could hinder the promotion of healthy relationships, including the tolerance of lower level behaviors that could lead to an

increased risk of sexual assault for midshipmen. Midshipmen are taught how to intervene in situations in which it is apparent something wrong is occurring; however, students do not feel as confident intervening in many of the lower level behaviors identified by focus group participants as falling in the “gray area.” Often participants identified these lower level behaviors as not rising to the level of intervention, and are even tolerated as an everyday part of Academy life.

Participants largely said they believe leadership is making efforts to stop sexual assault and sexual harassment. Participants reported feeling confident in senior leadership’s ability to address sexual assault and sexual harassment; however, they expressed concern regarding the perceived lack of transparency with which senior leadership handles accusations of sexual assault. Peer leadership and individual students interact on a more regular basis and, therefore, have the most influence on day-to-day Academy life. Participants noted a lack of consistency in the quality of peer leaders and their implementation of senior leadership messaging.

Finally, participants recommended improvements to both their bystander intervention and alcohol trainings. Midshipmen expressed that current trainings are not resonating and are often seen as unrealistic or just “checking a box.” Across both types of trainings, students in the focus groups expressed a desire for relatable training facilitators (such as alumni) and more realistic scenarios that apply to their unique experiences (such as Sea Year).

The perspectives expressed in these groups are invaluable in assessing and understanding the dynamics surrounding sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other gender-related issues at USMMA. The ongoing program of alternating focus groups and surveys conducted at the Academies will strive to inform Academy leadership on the depth of issues associated with unwanted gender-related behaviors and to identify potential cultural and environmental factors that can be addressed to reduce these behaviors. The body of this report contains a wealth of information on these topics. Although this report alone cannot answer all of the questions about unwanted behaviors experienced by students at the Academy, it is a powerful source of insight from the students and faculty that cannot be obtained otherwise.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) strives to provide a safe environment for its students' educational and leadership development by implementing programs to reduce sexual assault and sexual harassment, while continuing to update reporting and victim care procedures. A recurring evaluation of these programs through ongoing mixed-methods research informs the development of improvements to policies, procedures, and trainings aimed at reducing instances of sexual assault and sexual harassment, as well as advancing care. Both focus groups and representative surveys are used to gain qualitative and quantitative feedback from students and personnel at the Academy. This report presents findings from the USMMA's *2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups (2019 SAGR)*, a source for exploring general attitudes and evaluation of the gender relations environment at the Academy. This introductory chapter provides background on why these focus groups were conducted, a review of the methodology used to administer the focus groups, an overview of the report, and an introduction to key terms.

Study Background

The Health and Resilience (H&R) Research Division, within the Office of People Analytics (OPA) in the Department of Defense, has conducted congressionally mandated gender relations focus groups at the Military Service Academies since 2005.² Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.), Sections 4361, 6980, and 9361, as amended by Section 532 of the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2007, codified an assessment cycle at the Academies that consists of alternating surveys and focus groups. This requirement applies to the DoD Academies (U.S. Military Academy [USMA], U.S. Naval Academy [USNA], and U.S. Air Force Academy [USAF]). Although not covered by the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2007 requirement, U.S. Coast Guard Academy (USCGA) leadership requested to be included, beginning in 2008, to evaluate and improve their programs addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment. USMMA, within the Department of Transportation (DOT), is not congressionally required to participate in the assessments under NDAA 2007, but the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009 required the Secretary of Transportation and USMMA to address sexual assault and harassment at the Academy, including assessment. USMMA officials requested that they be included in the SAGR assessment cycle, beginning in 2012, in order to evaluate and improve their programs addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment. This is the fourth time focus groups have been conducted at USMMA.³

Methodology

OPA conducted 10 focus groups on gender relations with midshipmen, faculty, and staff from March 25, 2019, to March 28, 2019, at USMMA. Each group was conducted in a 90-minute

² The first assessment in this series was conducted in 2004 by the DoD Inspector General (IG). Details are reported in the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Defense (2005).

³ Previous surveys were administered in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018, and previous focus groups were conducted in 2013, 2015, and 2017.

session with a moderator trained in sensitive topic facilitation. Researchers collected comments from 59 Academy students and 22 faculty members, coaches and activity leaders, and military cadre. Focus groups were held on the Academy campus. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary.

The focus group protocol covered a range of topics, including Academy culture and gender relations, official and unofficial rules, bystander intervention, perceptions of leadership, perceptions of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) office and resources, reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment, and alcohol use.

Data collection for focus groups was discussion based; therefore, although many subjects were addressed, not all questions were asked in all groups and not all participants were able to answer each question. Procedures for selecting participants, developing the questions, conducting the groups, and analyzing the data are described below. The focus group procedures were reviewed by a DoD Human Subjects Protection Officer as part of the DoD survey approval and licensing process.

Participants

Study participants were selected from the general population at the Academy and may or may not have had direct experience with sexual assault and/or sexual harassment. Those who were selected and volunteered were recruited to participate in one of 10 groups (nine student groups and one faculty and staff group). Student groups were broken out by gender and class year. Senior Peer Leadership also participated in one mixed-gender group. See Table 1 for a detailed layout of the groups that were conducted.

Table 1.
Group Composition Layout

Class Year/Category	Gender	
	Male	Female
Senior	Male	Female
Junior	Male	Female
Sophomore	Male	Female
Freshmen	Male	Female
Senior Peer Leadership	Mixed	
Faculty and Staff	Mixed	

Participants were recruited via e-mail and in person. To begin the selection of participants for the student groups, the Academy supplied OPA with a roster of all midshipmen at the Academy. After randomizing each list within clusters defined by gender and class year, rosters were returned to USMMA. The Academy was responsible for recruiting the first available 12 students to participate in the appropriate session with an even split of female and male midshipmen for the mixed-gender group. The Academy was required to emphasize that participation was

voluntary, and participants were able to pull out of the study at any time. For this reason, the size of the sessions varied.

For the faculty and staff session, Academy officials advertised the session through the most appropriate forum for the Academy and solicited volunteers.

Development of the Guide

Using findings from the *2018 Service Academy Gender Relations Survey (2018 SAGR; OPA, 2019)* and the topics of interest identified during its release, OPA analysts drafted the initial focus group protocol. Working with the Academy, OPA incorporated collaborative feedback before finalizing the focus group guide. The guide was broken into four parts:

- Culture
- Prevention
- Reporting
- Alcohol

Each section covered multiple related topics, including questions on culture, official and unofficial rules, gender-related beliefs, leadership, bystander intervention, perceptions of the SAPR office and resources, barriers to reporting, and alcohol use and trainings. The student and faculty guides can be found in Appendixes A and B, respectively. The protocol also included several activities and handouts designed to encourage discussion and to foster thought beyond top-of-mind responses. Table 2 shows the different activities used throughout the focus groups. The handouts that were provided to participants can be found in Appendix C.

Table 2.
Focus Group Activities

Activity	Group Type	Description
Leadership Assessment	All groups	Participants were asked to grade different levels of leadership, including peer and senior leaders, on their handling of issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment. Moderators probed about the reason behind the grade and what leaders could do to improve their grade.
Bystander Intervention	Students groups	Participants were asked to place a range of behaviors on the handout to indicate if they would or would not intervene to stop the behavior. Participants were also given the option to place the sticker on a third option, the “gray area.”

Conducting the Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted onsite at the Academy in a closed-door setting. Facilitators trained in focus group moderation and sensitive topics led the sessions. Gender-specific groups were led by facilitators of the same gender (i.e., male groups were led by a male facilitator and female groups were led by a female facilitator). For the mixed-gender groups, the facilitator was either male or female. Focus group sessions were audio recorded and then transcribed. All audio recordings were destroyed 90 days after transcription.

Analysis

Data from the focus groups were analyzed using analytic induction, a six-step method (Erikson, 1986). First, analysts developed assertions that stated possible findings. Then the data were organized by group, removing any personally identifiable information (PII) or other identifying information. Next, using qualitative analysis software (NVivo), the team coded data into the assertions, allowing the creation of new assertions as necessary. All transcripts were coded and verified by two analysts to avoid individual bias. Then, researchers compiled data that supported or contradicted each assertion. Once the data were compiled for each assertion, researchers determined whether to keep, revise, or eliminate the findings based on the support and contradictions for the assertion. Assertions are summarized in the subsequent chapter of this report and includes quotes exemplifying key findings reached through the analytic induction process.⁴ The final chapter provides a discussion of major themes from the focus groups conducted at USMMA.

Terminology

Throughout the report, terms such as “offender,” “perpetrator,” or “victim” are not intended to convey any presumption concerning sexual assault allegations. Without knowing the specific outcomes of particular allegations, the presumption of innocence applies unless there is an adjudication of guilt. Use of the phrases “sexual assault” or “sexual harassment” does not indicate that actions met the definition under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). References to “retaliation,” “reprisal,” “ostracism,” or “maltreatment,” or perceptions thereof are based on the negative behaviors as reported by the focus group participants. Without knowing more about the specifics of particular cases or reports, this data should not be construed as substantiated allegations of reprisal, ostracism, or maltreatment; also, no legal conclusions can be drawn on whether behaviors meet the definition of an offense having been committed.

Sea Year Program. As part of the licensing and graduation requirements for USMMA, midshipmen spend a year at sea split between sophomore and junior years.

Stand Down. In June 2016, the Maritime Administration (MARAD) of DoT and USMMA suspended the Sea Year program due to concerns related to improper behavior aboard ships, including concerns of sexual assault and sexual harassment and a lack of a standardized policy for handling incidents of sexual assault. As part of the Stand Down, midshipmen were both

⁴ For clarity throughout the report, filler words (e.g., “like,” “um,” “you know,” “yeah”) were removed from quotations, and explicit words are indicated by [explicit] where removed.

recalled from ships and kept ashore. The Stand Down began to roll back in March of 2017 and has not been reimplemented since.

Chapter 2:

U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Findings

The United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) is located in Kings Point, NY, east of New York City, and is the home to around 1,000 midshipmen. The Academy is a predominately male environment with a 4:1 ratio of male to female midshipmen. Between March 25 and March 28, 2019, ten 90-minute focus groups were conducted at USMMA. Of the ten focus groups, nine groups were conducted with student participants, and one group was conducted with faculty and staff for a total of 59 student participants and 22 faculty and staff participants. Of the focus groups with student participants, four groups comprised all male midshipmen by class year, four groups comprised all female midshipmen by class year, and one group comprised midshipmen (men and women) who were peer leaders.

Midshipman participants are identified by four class levels. Students in their first year at the Academy are “fourth class,” “plebe,” or “freshman”; students in their second year at the Academy are “third class” or “sophomore”; students in their third year at the Academy are “second class” or “junior”; and students in their fourth and final year at the Academy are known as “first class” or “senior.” The student class levels are an important layer in understanding the structure of the student hierarchy and relationships and are a factor in understanding the differences in perceptions of Academy culture by class year.

Results from the 2019 SAGR focus groups are presented in this chapter, including findings related to culture, leadership, the Stand Down of the Sea Year program, perceptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment, reporting, retaliation, training, and prevention.

Academy Culture

Culture is an important aspect of the Academy affecting everyday activities, ranging from their day-to-day interactions with their peers and instructors to their broad views on a variety of topics. The focus groups explored several cultural topics, including general culture and interaction between midshipmen; cultural beliefs about gender; the official and unofficial rules that govern the lives of midshipmen and the enforcement and effects of those rules on midshipmen; how these beliefs, perceived policies, and guidelines are passed down; and how all of these cultural factors affect perceptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment at USMMA.

Life at the Academy

Participants were asked to describe their perceptions on what life is like at the Academy. Many participants described their perceptions of how unique the Academy is relative to civilian institutions and other Service Academies due particularly to the gender ratio and Sea Year. Further, some midshipmen described their time at the Academy as immensely structured and at times stressful.

Unique Culture and Climate

Midshipman participants at USMMA discussed the unique culture and climate of their Academy. Key topics included the gender ratio, the structured and rigorous schedule, and the small size of the Academy.

“Everybody here definitely agrees it’s a really unique place. It’s like no other civilian college. It’s definitely not even like any other Academy because of the opportunities. It’s such a small group of people who have graduated from here and all the alumni.” —Freshman, Female

Sea Year sets the Academy apart from the other Military Service Academies. Throughout sophomore and junior year, students go out to sea and work in the maritime industry where they interact with people outside of, and not employed by, the Academy who are held to different rules and standards; therefore, each midshipman’s experience is very different. Sea Year takes place in an environment outside of the Academy’s control, creating a variety of experiences for each midshipman.

Stress

Many midshipmen said they find life at the Academy to be challenging, and they often discussed the tight, regimented schedules that dictate their day. Due to the strict schedule students follow, midshipmen said they are left with little free time outside of classes and extracurricular obligations. Students reported feeling stressed and isolated from friends and family at times because of this extremely busy, regimented daily life. Participants expressed that there is often a feeling as though they always have to be “on” and never have the opportunity to take a breath or relax.

“It’s a lot of hard work and be prepared to be cut off from your family and your friends back home. And if you play a sport here the in-season, it’s literally going to be wake up, school, then after school you go to sports, after sports, you’re doing homework, and after you do homework, you’re going to bed.”
—Senior, Male

“We’re never off duty. Even walking down the hall, especially as a plebe, there’s always upperclassmen. You’re always being watched. And I think, in terms of relaxing and kind of getting a more destressed mental state, it doesn’t happen. You’re always on edge.” —Senior, Male

Staff and faculty agreed that students’ lives can be very stressful, viewing their regimented life as a training tool used to break them down and build them back up. Midshipmen at the Academy are expected to meet these high standards. Faculty and staff said they remind students that their hard work builds character, and they encourage students to focus on their end goal. They indicated telling students that there is a “light at the end of the tunnel” and their journey at the Academy is “not a sprint, it’s a marathon.” They said they suggest students put their heads down and work hard. They simultaneously advise students to take advantage of all the Academy has to offer, including things such as extracurriculars.

“Our mission here is to build leaders of exemplary character.... When you’re here you’re going to suffer through academics, long days, and stuff, but all that suffering is going to build character, perseverance.” —Faculty/Staff

“You’ve got to have a long view, buckle down, and just keep going. And it’s tough even for the seniors, because at any normal college all I have to do is just not fail any classes...and you sail into graduation. Here, they have to pass their classes and take this multiday, extremely challenging Coast Guard license exam.” —Faculty/Staff

Gender Ratio and the Rumor Mill

Throughout the focus groups, midshipmen often referred to the small size of the school and the imbalance of the gender ratio, with a student body made up predominately of male midshipmen. USMMA’s small size creates a community where students all know one another, which can facilitate a strong rumor mill culture where midshipmen know the minute details of each other’s lives. Information, as well as misinformation, travels quickly among midshipmen. The rumor mill is of particular concern for female freshmen. With a small student body on campus and even smaller numbers of female midshipmen, at times, female midshipmen said it seems like they are under a microscope, noting that often everyone knows who they are and what they do in all aspects of their academic and personal lives.

“It can kind of feel like the girls here are under a microscope. Everything that the ladies do is blown up. Everyone knows all the girls. We’re very much in the spotlight because there’s so few of us, and everyone knows who you are.” —Junior, Female

“Everyone knows everyone here. If someone’s in your class, and especially if they’re in your split⁵.... So, everyone in their split knows everyone. So, if something happens on one side of the campus, by the time you get to this side of the campus, basically everyone in your class knows.” —Junior, Male

Relationships

The general culture at USMMA is one of a close-knit, tight community where students support each other, considering themselves to be a part of a brotherhood and sisterhood.

Relationships Between Males and Females

While many midshipmen said men and women are treated the same regardless of gender, participants also added that they think of each other as family in which male midshipmen feel and act protective of their female comrades. Participants discussed the impact of the small number of students on their sense of community even when off campus. Midshipmen in the focus groups asserted that they can tell who the other Kings Pointer students are even when they are off Academy grounds, such as when they go into New York City on the weekends. For

⁵ A split is the group that students rotate to sea and on campus with.

example, when off campus, midshipmen look out for one another, and they will ensure that all Kings Pointer students make it on the train leaving the city and get back to the Academy at the end of the night. They will assist a midshipman they do not know very well simply because they are a Kings Pointer.

“I wouldn’t say I interact with girls any different than I interact with guys.... You treat them the same.” —Sophomore, Male

“It’s a brotherhood, and a brother and sisterhood. So, if you’re going out, the male midshipmen are going to be there to protect the females or just the other male midshipmen.... Everybody’s there to protect each other.” —Faculty/Staff

“There’s definitely a sense of teamwork. Like when we come back from the sea and we aren’t done with our schoolwork...it’s 10 of your best friends up until 2:00 in the morning. Everybody helping each other to get one thing done, so you’re not the friend that falls behind or anything. So, I’d definitely say there’s big teamwork and everyone’s helping everybody.” —Sophomore, Male

Some midshipmen said they believe culture around male and female interactions is established in the first two weeks during indoctrination training (indoc). At USMMA, indoc is an orientation during which plebes learn about maritime culture and regimental life. The importance of physical fitness, teamwork, and discipline are emphasized. During this time, they are also given Sexual Assault Response and Prevention (SAPR) training. Indoc is an extremely rigorous period that provides plebes with the information required to become a midshipman. Male and female midshipmen go through indoc together and midshipmen noted that the women tend to form a clique with one another during this time period because there are so few of them.

“They gain a sisterhood you’ll never see anywhere else.... They’re all such good friends...I feel like they become a unit.” —Senior, Male

However, these relationships change over time and the large gender discrepancy becomes less apparent, particularly right after indoc. Interactions between male and female midshipmen are viewed as normal, because there are so few female midshipmen. Male and female midshipmen interact often and end up spending more time together, such as working on their homework, and the gender groups start to blend more.

“When you first come here, I think you tend to notice the disproportionate amount of men versus women. But as you get through, you kind of start to forget it, because everyone kind of becomes very equal.... You might notice when you first come in, but everyone eventually becomes people.” —Senior, Female

“Right after indoc...that’s probably the time period when you’re most treated equal. Everyone is bottom of the totem pole. They force you to act like a family and a team in order to get through indoc.” —Senior, Female

“You look at the seniors and they’re all tight. It doesn’t matter what gender you are; they are all close.” —Freshman, Male

Relationships Between Females

A discrepancy exists between female upper and underclassmen's views of their relationship with one another. Female upperclassmen recalled feeling supported by upperclassmen when they were underclassmen. They said they try to provide underclassmen with advice, including to work hard, respect yourself and others, and to lean on each other.

"Give it your best and don't let anyone tell you, you can't do it because you can."
—**Senior, Female**

"Lay low and just be friendly to everybody, work hard, and then you'll eventually see how relationships develop and what you want and what you don't want. That's the best way to stay out of trouble." —**Sophomore, Female**

However, some female midshipmen reported feeling that upperclassmen are not supportive and are actually competitive with them. For example, a few underclassman females noted that upperclassman females get jealous when upperclassman males pay attention to the female underclassmen. One noted they will even go as far as getting them in trouble for being out at bars.

"Upperclassman girls too are kind of the worst ones to you. They're jealous, and they're like, 'Oh you're getting attention.' A lot of it here is girls tearing down girls.... 'I have competition.'" —**Freshman, Female**

Gender Beliefs at the Academy

Many midshipman participants described a male-dominated culture in which inappropriate language and behaviors are often tolerated. Female midshipmen expressed a need to try to fit in with this culture. Female midshipman participants also expressed that gender plays a role in how the accomplishments of female cadets are perceived. They said they believe that as long as they are able to satisfy the necessary physical requirements, they are treated with respect.

The Influence of Male Midshipmen Culture

One topic that came up repeatedly was the higher ratio of men compared to women. Because of the large ratio of male to female midshipmen and close relationships, some female midshipmen said they are told, or feel they need to be, "one of the boys" to fit in. Sometimes this means showing similar interests to the men, such as drinking beer and watching football, other times it means acting like the men by using certain language, such as "guy talk" and sexual jokes, so as to engage in the conversation. A few female participants gave examples of discussing television shows and guns and engaging in other stereotypical male roughhousing and joking. Some female midshipmen expressed discomfort with being asked to be "one of the boys" to fit in, whereas this idea of fitting in did not bother other female midshipmen.

"That's something people told me before I came here as a plebe.... 'Just be one of the guys and just hang out and be cool.'" —**Junior, Female**

“The way I explain it to recruits whenever I have one is that the school’s kind of like a guys’ locker room with some girls in it.” —Freshman, Female

“We regress to a lot of stupid humor here, because it’s so baseline and it’s just so easy and it’s just a level that we all connect on.” —Senior, Male

Because of the small number of female students, they sometimes create cliques within themselves and become a close unit. The participants expressed that the gender ratio makes it so that all students know who the female midshipmen are, which makes them particularly susceptible to the rumor mill. It also makes it so that the culture itself is male dominated, which influences perceptions and interactions at multiple levels, including at the school level (e.g., male midshipmen believe female midshipmen fill a quota in peer leadership) and individual level (individual interaction between midshipmen).

“The thing that you have to understand is women run the world, but in this institution, women are at a distinct disadvantage, because there’s very, very few of them. And you have to be really cognizant of the fact that it’s a male-dominated environment.” —Faculty/Staff

Similarities in Gender Beliefs Between Men and Women

Both male and female midshipmen said that they feel that if you are good at your job and work hard, gender is not an issue. Some gender differences were more apparent, such as physical training (PT) standards or job-related activities. The differences in PT standards for male and female midshipmen can cause a strain on relationships between them. Some male midshipmen noted that differences in physiological makeup become apparent due to PT. However, good performance on job-related activities diminishes the perceived differences. Accordingly, female upperclassmen said they give the advice that working hard will earn respect and to respect themselves and others.

“If you’re good at your job, they don’t care what your gender is at all.... My sea partner was an engineer, and she’s a female and she was working way more than I was and doing heavy lifting and getting dirty and down in tanks, stuff like that. And it was like no one cared...back in the day or in certain parts of the industry people might think that ‘Oh, that’s more of a man’s job’ but no one cared because she was good at it. It doesn’t matter. Same thing here [at the Academy]. No one cares what your gender is if you’re good at your job or you’re smart or you know what you’re doing.” —Peer Leadership

“If you conduct yourself in a manner in which people are going to respect you, they’re going to respect you. And I’ve found that on my ship...in my sports teams...in the classroom.... So, the advice I always try and pass down is conduct yourself well and be polite to everyone, but you don’t have to be everyone’s best friend and you don’t have to make everyone like you. And through that people will respect you.” —Senior, Female

Perceptions of Women

While female midshipmen reported believing that gender relations have improved over time, they still encounter gender biases. For example, in a heavily male-dominated climate, there are Sea Year traditions that women are not invited to, such as “guy’s night” at sea, during which male midshipmen go to strip clubs or hire prostitutes when docked. This often leads to female midshipmen being left behind on the ship feeling uncomfortable. Further, some female upperclassmen reported that they have still been told sexist things throughout their time at the Academy by male upperclassmen, such as “girls only belong in the galley or bridge, not the engine room.” Female midshipmen noted that this same sentiment is present out at sea with sailors, but it is often even worse. Some expressed believing that midshipmen come back from sea with this mind-set because it is just accepted in the industry. The galley of a ship is where food is prepared, and the bridge is where the ship is commanded. The engine room is where the propulsion machinery lives on the ship, and it typically requires work that is more physical in nature than in the galley or bridge. Even more extreme, female midshipmen reported that some male midshipmen still believe female midshipmen should not be at the Academy at all.

At the Academy there is also a belief that there is a quota for female midshipmen in peer leadership. This belief was held by both male and female midshipmen. They both said they feel it delegitimizes female leadership, who also said they want to earn those positions and not be placed in leadership roles just because of their gender.

“I think that it’s like they’re trying to represent the females in a positive way. I’m not saying that people don’t always deserve it or not, but I definitely think that sometimes the command staff try to reach a quota of like, ‘Okay, this year we need to pick a female RC [Regimental Commander] or a female RX [Regimental Executive Officer] because we haven’t had one in a while.’ So, it looks bad on us, you know?” —Senior, Female

“The ratio is not necessarily represented in the wedge [leadership roles] with the three people, because we don’t necessarily have a third over the class of girls. So, what I have found is that a lot of people, like males who don’t get a position in the wedge when a female does, they kind of resent her sometimes...I think there is definitely a little bit of resentment between males and females regarding opportunities and officer positions in that sort of sense.” —Sophomore, Female

Participants expressed a belief that female midshipmen get special treatment and are given an advantage at the Academy. Many participants said they believe that female midshipmen are given more chances than male midshipmen and are allowed to get away with more. They indicated believing this occurs due to a need for the administration to keep female midshipmen in the Academy and because there are already so few. Both female and male participants reported witnessing this type of discrepancy; however, male midshipmen discussed more resentment around this belief.

“Coming here, I realize girls get away with a lot more stuff here. If you’re a girl and you fail three classes, you’re just set back. But if you’re a guy who failed three classes, you get kicked out.” —Freshman, Female

“There’s a bigger leniency when it comes to females here. But I think it might be...to get a lot of females here, and I think every college in today’s world is trying to make it a 50–50, male–female ratio.... Because there are some situations where some people do get kicked out, it seems like it’s easier to just kick out guys than it is for them to kick out girls. They need to keep those.”

—Freshman, Male

Differences in Gender Beliefs Between Men and Women

Although both male and female upperclassmen teach underclassmen to lean on and support each other, female midshipmen seem to get additional gender-related advice. Female midshipmen are given advice to stay away from certain male midshipmen based on interactions or information they have heard through the rumor mill. They also advise each other not to put themselves in situations in which they could get taken advantage of. Female midshipmen mentioned one example being, when a male midshipman asks them to watch a movie, not to do it unless other people are invited. Female midshipmen are given this advice because they said they believe most male midshipmen do not have the intention of just watching a movie as friends. They note, if it is just as friends, they typically would invite a group of people. They have learned this through their own experiences and others’ experiences. Similarly, they also said they believe they need to learn to conduct themselves professionally with their male peers.

“It’s really hard and you’re not going to get through it alone.... Upperclassmen basically told you, ‘You might have been the smartest kid in high school or you might have been maybe the best athlete, but when we all got here that all changed.’” —**Senior, Female**

“Because you’re at a Service Academy you are going to be an officer, and you have to know how your own personal relationships affect your work and your school.” —**Sophomore, Female**

Female participants discussed the tendency for female midshipmen to police other female midshipmen. In particular, upperclassmen enforcing rules and regulations for underclassmen, such as appearance. Female upperclassmen also teach underclassmen the importance of staying unnoticed, because reputation at the Academy is important, especially for female midshipmen. Midshipmen in the focus groups noted that their reputation starts at the Academy and follows them throughout their career, because the community of people is so small.

“Since at this school you actually go into the industry that you maybe plan on working on in the future while you’re on a ship you have to realize that whatever everybody sees of you there is the first impression that you’re setting into that industry. It is a very small industry and people talk as much as they do in that industry like they do in the school.... So being professional kind of runs into your making a first impression in a very small place.” —**Sophomore, Female**

“You have to care about your reputation. That’s a big thing here, especially with the rumor mill that goes around. You have to make sure that you don’t do things

that could even if it wasn't bad that would maybe look bad. Just stay out of situations that could possibly [make you look bad]. —**Freshman, Female**

Official and Unofficial Rules Around Gender

Midshipman participants were asked about rules that impact gender relations, including the official rules—or the rules laid out by the Academy that they have to follow—and the unofficial rules—or rules they learn from others at the Academy that are not strictly codified.

Official Rules

There are official fraternization rules set forth by the Academy that govern how male and female midshipmen interact as well as how class years interact. The main rules include no PDA, doors must be kept open if the other gender is present, no sleeping in the room of someone of the opposite gender, and no relationships within your chain of command. Staff participants said they follow certain guidelines as well, particularly pertaining to entering a female midshipman's dorm room. They said they will not enter the room until they hear a clear "yes" that it is okay to enter. Further, there are specific rules for freshmen, which prevent them from entering a romantic or platonic relationship with upperclassmen. Accordingly, sophomores and upperclassmen are heavily encouraged not to interact with plebes outside of very specific and professional circumstances. After freshman year, there is a lot more autonomy in regard to fraternization; however, each class year still receives a little more autonomy as they progress through the Academy. Freshmen are also not allowed to be in a romantic relationship with each other. Once freshmen become sophomores and are allowed to date, there is the perception that male upperclassmen go after the female underclassmen romantically.

"If you're a plebe or a fourth class, you can't have unduly familiar relationships with upperclassmen, regardless of if it's a male or female. But a lot of people's minds go straight to a romantic relationship, although it does go from being friends to an upperclassman. So that's kind of one of the big rules that I can think of." —**Senior, Female**

"When the plebes can recognize, the upperclass guys kind of descend on the girls because they're finally allowed to have relationships with them." —**Junior, Female**

Due to these strict fraternization policies, students indicated believing that male and female relationships are different at the Academy than in other college settings, and this difference can be detrimental to success, as it can distract from the reason they are really there.

"I've seen this happen a lot...where plebes freshman have gotten into the social aspects and started to date and what ends up inevitably happening is their performance in the other aspects of the Academy that will keep you here, such as academics, that performance suffers immensely. I mean, to the point where a lot of those guys aren't here anymore because they failed out academically or they got sent back into the class behind them." —**Senior, Male**

“At the end of the day we’re all going to be in the military or the merchant marine.... When we come here, accept a military lifestyle. Don’t come here trying to be party-ho. Yeah. It won’t work out.... People who do pursue that path, they’re performance is detrimental.” —Senior, Male

Unofficial Rules

There are also unofficial rules that are perpetuated at the Academy. For example, although romantic relationships between upperclassman midshipmen are allowed, they are frowned upon and strongly discouraged by the Academy and other midshipmen. Both male and female midshipmen reported being aware of this unwritten rule.

“I think there’s a big emphasis...or if you are going to date someone, wait a year and don’t do it here. Date someone over there. Date someone in New York. That was the advice I got from a lot of upperclassmen, was wait until you’re done with your freshman year and then go into the city and find a girl. Don’t do it here.” —Senior, Male

“If you go to Kings Point, don’t date Kings Pointers. I think it’s back to the brother, sister thing honestly. Like you work with them and you’re with them all the time and if you break up, it would just make things so much more awkward between everybody.” —Sophomore, Male

A final prevalent unwritten rule is that upperclassmen teach underclassmen to keep smaller issues within their company and to handle conflicts at the lowest level. Participants in the focus groups noted that bringing issues between midshipmen up the chain of command is viewed poorly when the issue is viewed as something that can be handled within the company. There is a level of distrust in how the administration will handle what midshipmen said they believe to be less severe circumstances and that the situation will be handled too severely by the administration.

“Don’t snitch, don’t snake, don’t be a blue falcon.... Try to protect yourself, protect yourself as a group, and the midshipmen...if you do something like that the entire school is going to hear about it.” —Junior, Male

“There’s definitely a mentality. First you try to keep things in company.... If something happens that could get someone in trouble you try to keep it in company. If that doesn’t work, you try to keep it just in your class and just in the midshipmen. I think it’s like last case scenario is when things get out to the administration.... When you get to the conduct system you know you can have things get blown out of proportion or people get kicked out or things being taken wrong.... A lot of times things can just be handled within our class, company, or whatever.” —Junior, Male

Enforcement and Perception of Rules

Midshipmen who participated in the focus groups expressed there is a lack of standardization in the enforcement of fraternization rules across individuals and class years. Participants discussed the influence of this perception on the interactions between male and female midshipmen. Both male and female participants voiced a discomfort between the genders. Many pointed to the Stand Down as a source of this discomfort. For example, after the Stand Down, the administration has cracked down on sexual assault and sexual harassment, and students have been getting expelled for what many students said appeared to be just accusations. As a result, men are fearful of getting accused of sexual assault or sexual harassment; therefore, they reported feeling they have to be careful when interacting with females in living quarters.

“You just have to be a little more tactful, have a little more caution.... If a guy would barge into a girl’s room when she’s changing, it’ll be a big deal. But if a girl barged into a guy’s room here, I feel like it wouldn’t be. No one would really care.” —**Junior, Male**

“They were trying to teach us all about sexual assault and sexual harassment stuff our plebe year. It wasn’t until last year...people were getting kicked out left and right about stuff like that. And I think that definitely changed the idea. Now, literally, the idea for our frat classroom is like, ‘Stay away from plebes, do not even look at them.’” —**Sophomore, Male**

Underclassmen reported feeling that they receive mixed messages from upperclassmen about whether or not to hold their fellow midshipmen accountable for their behavior. This contradicts the unofficial rule that midshipmen want to handle things at the lowest level before sending it up the chain of command. Similarly, there is inconsistency among faculty about whether advice should be the same or different for male and female midshipmen. Some said they believe all midshipmen should be treated exactly the same, whereas others sometimes will give female midshipmen different or additional advice about how to function as a female midshipmen at the Academy, but will not focus on their gender but rather on their job and their goals.

Passing Down Rules and Culture

At the Academy, culture is passed down from midshipman to midshipman. Upperclassmen influence the underclassmen and teach them both the written and the unwritten rules of the Academy. This mostly occurs through personal experiences, observation of others’ behaviors and consequences, and the rumor mill. Witnessing and hearing about others’ experiences also perpetuates the rules and culture, such as midshipmen knowing to lock their doors on Luau Night.⁶ Faculty and staff discussed their role in correcting negative unwritten rules when they observe them. For example, faculty and staff try to correct inappropriate gender-related language or jokes when they observe it and violations of the open-door policy.

⁶ Luau Night is an event put on by the USMMA Alumni Association and Foundation to welcome back the first class to their final year at the Academy.

“I think it’s gotten passed down among midshipmen...just like your traditions for the current midshipmen will kind of say, ‘Hey don’t do this. You just broke this unwritten rule....’ And a lot of it, I think, comes from more of a team setting.”

—**Faculty/Staff**

“I think what we do really good here is we correct the bad ones. So if there is something in the barracks or within the mids that’s unwritten, once a faculty or staff or a teammate or a company commander catches wind of something, there used to be things that were done in the mess hall of like dropping plates on the ground, chanting at midshipmen, booing midshipmen. That stuff doesn’t happen anymore...but they’ve corrected those.... We’ve corrected some really, really big ones.” —**Faculty/Staff**

“I find that for me, I have not learned a ton from the seniors other than what not to do...I have seen all of those people with negative leadership skills, I have decided what I don’t want to be when I get to be a senior.”

—**Sophomore, Female**

However, not all lessons learned are negative. Midshipmen also learn about how to conduct themselves at the Academy from observing upperclassmen as well.

“The powers of observation and people telling you, ‘Look at the people above you. Look at your leaders, look at the upperclassmen. What do you like that they do? What do you respect about them? And then what do you not respect about them? What have they done what turned you aware from that?’”

—**Senior, Female**

Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Focus group participants repeatedly highlighted that many male midshipmen hold a fear of being accused of sexual assault or sexual harassment. Participants discussed the practice of avoiding female midshipmen all together to avoid being accused of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Male midshipmen discussed fearing that their behaviors will be misinterpreted by either a female midshipman or by the administration. Due to the perceived lack of transparency in sexual assault and sexual harassment cases, male midshipmen described a lack of understanding around what behaviors constitute sexual assault and sexual harassment and, ultimately, lead to students being expelled. Although they understand there are privacy issues at risk, male midshipmen said they desire more transparency to gain a better understanding of what behaviors constitute sexual assault and sexual harassment and what behaviors are getting people expelled. Accordingly, they said they want to know what happened, what was done about it, and what the consequences were.

“I know you can’t be transparent with these types of topics every single time, but I think if they could kill rumors, because the staff does hear rumors as well and that’s how some people even just get in trouble based off of rumors.... It’s just the uncertainty of why people are getting in trouble.” —**Senior, Male**

“It also creates a mistrust of the administration. I definitely think that there’s not as much confidence in the administration as there should be, just because things like that do happen where someone will get kicked out, there’ll be a he-said-she-said story, it’ll get spread around, and by the time it gets from Person A to Person B to Person D it’s like, ‘Well, the administration is just trying to screw us all, they’re just trying to kick us out.’” —Junior, Male

“We have an honor board here...they put out an XYZ⁷ report. Everyone’s anonymous in it, and it gives everyone—this is what happened, this is the evidence that was submitted, and this was the result of the case. And it says pretty much a learning lesson.... They do not do anything like that with any of these reportings of sexual assault/harassment. No one knows what happened. No one knows what the situation is. All we know is he’s not here anymore.” —Junior, Male

Despite sexual assault and sexual harassment issues that occur on campus, most female midshipmen reported feeling safe and comfortable at the Academy. They expressed viewing their male counterparts as brothers and feeling that they often go out of their way to protect them. Rather, there is a commonly held belief that many of the issues that occur happen off campus or out at sea.

“I feel safe here, and I would encourage any female to come here, but this is a unique challenge just in everything. But dynamic-wise, at the end of the day, we are all a family, and we take care of everybody.” —Senior, Female

“I don’t know very many college campuses outside of a city where you could walk across the entire campus alone in the middle of the night and not worry at all.” —Senior, Female

Some faculty and staff also indicated believing that many of the inappropriate behaviors occurring on campus are more minor offenses, such as foul language, and are more often occurring in male–male or female–female situations, rather than between genders. Accordingly, some midshipmen said they believe that the line of what is, and what is not, considered sexual assault or sexual harassment is blurry and depends on the individual.

“I think sometimes the fine line between what is and what isn’t a sexual assault or harassment—is touching a shoulder considered sexual assault? Some might say yes, some might say no. I don’t know the answer. But that fine line, and then the person who touched their shoulder has no idea they did anything wrong. It was so innocent...and now that’s flying around school...it’s like a wildfire.... So, I think that education on the side of ‘this is unacceptable, this is inappropriate, and

⁷ XYZ reports are provided to students and faculty and staff to present the results of disciplinary cases. They are anonymous, but summarize the case including information such as the evidence, how the case was addressed by administration, and the outcomes of the case.

this could be misunderstood and then these are okay things....’ It’s all a gray area, because it’s about how people feel.” —Senior, Female

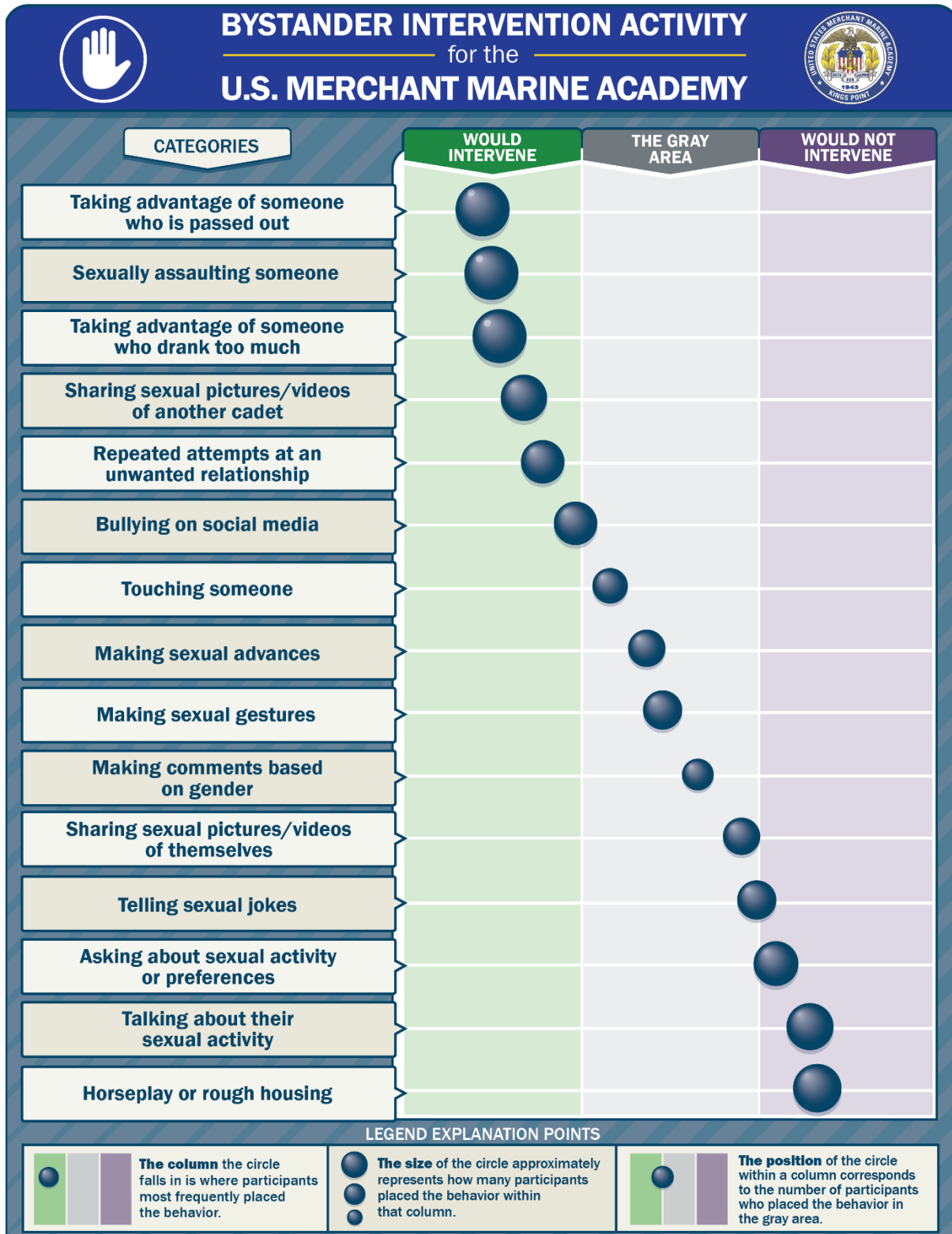
Prevention at the Academy

Prevention efforts are an important priority for the USMMA. Participants were asked about sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention efforts at the Academy. While discussing prevention, participants in the groups participated in a bystander intervention activity, discussed the bystander intervention training they have received, and provided perceptions on senior leaders’ and peer leaders’ involvement in prevention efforts.

Bystander Intervention

During the course of the focus groups, midshipman participants were asked to identify whether or not they believe they would intervene in a number of problematic behaviors they could potentially witness between a variety of people. Participants were also given the option to identify these behaviors as being in the “gray area,” a term used to indicate that the participant was unsure how they would react. Participants were given a set of stickers representing a range of behaviors that aligned with, or were at increasing risk for, sexual assault and sexual harassment and were asked to place them on a continuum where one end signified “would definitely intervene,” the other end signified “would definitely not intervene,” and the middle of the spectrum signified a “gray area” where intervention was uncertain. The behaviors ranged in severity from verbal jokes and comments to sexually assaulting someone. Because midshipmen’s opinions differed on the choice to intervene, the behaviors could appear in multiple categories. Participants then discussed specific situations that they would or would not intervene in, what contributes to the decision to intervene, and the techniques they use when intervening. Figure 1 displays where midshipmen at USMMA placed behaviors they would and would not intervene in as well as which behaviors fell in the “gray area.” Midshipmen were asked to discuss their rationale for placing behaviors where they did on the continuum. The resulting discussions illuminated several factors that contribute to reasons for intervening and not intervening in risky behaviors.

Figure 1.
Bystander Intervention Activity at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy



Midshipmen Would Intervene

Many midshipmen expressed believing that they would intervene in negative behaviors, particularly truly egregious ones and clear-cut cases of wrongdoing. Midshipman participants placed behaviors that they perceived to be clearly unwanted, severe, lacking consent, or violating the agency of the victim into the category of “would intervene.” The scenarios for which there was a consensus for definite intervention were situations of sexual assault, taking advantage of someone who drank too much or is passed out, sharing sexual pictures or videos of another midshipmen, and making repeated attempts to establish an unwanted relationship. Midshipman participants described these behaviors as obvious situations in which they would intervene, particularly for behaviors in which the midshipman felt that the person involved did not have a voice.

“Those things are plainly wrong. It’s obvious that they’re wrong.”

—**Freshman, Female**

“You don’t have to know the person to know if that’s something that’s [wrong].”

—**Freshman, Female**

Midshipmen Would Not Intervene

Midshipmen said they would not intervene in behaviors when they perceive the victim has more agency, such as horseplay/roughhousing, talking about sexual activity, and asking about sexual activity or preferences, unless it appears to be negatively affecting someone else. For example, many midshipmen do not see roughhousing as something that is aggressive or sexual in nature, but rather just something they do for fun. Some noted, however, that if the behavior seems to get out of hand, they may intervene.

“If someone’s at a bar and they’re bragging about sleeping with someone and it’s clear that the other person doesn’t want them saying that I’d be like, ‘Hey, dude or lady, that person doesn’t really want you saying—’ or you’re just like, ‘Hey,’ but again, if they don’t care, then I don’t care... It’s more so how it affects other people.” —**Peer Leadership**

However, a few midshipmen noted that allowing less serious behaviors to occur can have longer term consequences for more serious offenses.

“When you make jokes and when you sexually harass, you’re giving that mentality too that, ‘I’m okay with potential assault.’ Even if you don’t agree with that, you sexually harass or you joke about harassment, you’re making an assaulter think that you’re fine with that. And I think that perpetuates the problems.” —**Junior, Female**

The “Gray Areas”

Many midshipmen said they felt that part of the uncertainty around the gray scenarios has to do with contextual factors of the situation itself because most situations are not clear cut.

Resultantly, midshipmen discussed that the context of events is very important for deciding if something is crossing a line. Factors, such as the relationship between the two individuals, the relationship between the bystander and individuals (e.g., friends or strangers), and the setting in which the behavior is occurring, may influence intervention; however, the most important thing midshipmen noted when deciding whether or not to intervene is perceived consent.

Perceptions of consent was a common topic across focus groups. Some midshipmen said they did not believe the relationship between the two individuals would impact whether they would intervene or not, because it is more so based on whether the individuals appear to be comfortable or giving consent. However, some midshipmen noted that sometimes knowing the relationship between two individuals gives you context about their behaviors and character. For example, if two individuals were dating and talking about sexual activity, then they would not intervene; however, for the clearly wrong behaviors, such as taking advantage of someone who was passed out, midshipmen agreed they would intervene regardless of the relationship. Some said they would read the body language of the midshipmen who are involved to see if they are uncomfortable or consenting in gray situations. Thus, they would largely base intervention on whether the behavior appears wanted or not and less so on the relationship between the individuals.

“Anything that I didn’t really know if it’s consensual or not, I just put it on the middle line because I was like, I don’t know. It’s case by case. You can’t just say a blank statement of talking about sexual activity...you don’t know the context that situation’s in.” —**Sophomore, Female**

“A lot of it is reading the situation in my opinion because you can look at it, and you can kind of gauge, okay, this is right, or this is wrong. So, a lot of it has to do with who it is and exactly what they are doing.... That’s a big part of a community. Even if it’s kind of questionable while still looking at it, I might want to look into that a little but further before I take action because you won’t want to take action inappropriately and then get yourself in trouble.” —**Freshman, Male**

Some scenarios that raised disagreement between midshipmen were telling a sexual joke, sharing sexual pictures/videos of themselves, making comments based on gender, making sexual gestures, making sexual advances, touching someone, and bullying on social media. A few midshipmen noted that what one might consider bullying on social media often takes the form of “banter” on their class Facebook page, which they may or may not consider bullying. Some of the disagreeing opinions on these topics seemed to have to do with the different scenarios that midshipmen were thinking about when they read the scenario. Another contributing factor a few midshipmen brought up was location. For example, telling sexual jokes in the privacy of your own dorm room versus in the library where others are studying changes their perception of whether the behavior is acceptable or not.

“Facebook is one thing, but in a professional setting or in like a Commandant staff meeting, you don’t see anyone here [EXPLICIT] on someone else for something that’s stupid and like a joke. It doesn’t really happen.” —**Peer Leadership**

“Let’s say I’m a witness and two of my friends are kind of starting to date and start talking and I hear this convo, I’d say, ‘Well, if they’re both interested in each other and this is a convo they’re having, why would I stop?’ Neither of them are harmed by this. But I also think you could take that same convo with those same people and if you put it in a different setting, it could change the whole thing. I think there’s way too many variables in that situation.”

—**Sophomore, Male**

When making decisions about whether or not to intervene, some midshipmen said that saying that one would intervene and actually intervening may be two different things. Some male midshipmen expressed concerns around intervention, explaining there is a fear of getting in trouble for collateral misconduct if you were to intervene in an adverse situation. For example, if students were drinking when the event in question occurred, the students may be fearful that intervening could get them in trouble for drinking.

“On campus, if you’re caught doing something here you’re helping someone out, but you’re also drunk and you’re underage, you’re going to get in trouble for that too, even though by helping someone else is the only reason you got caught for it, you’re still going to get in trouble for it.... If you’re on campus you might expose yourself to getting in trouble by pulling someone out of a situation.”

—**Junior, Male**

Midshipmen discussed some scenarios specific to their Academy that were not included in the activity in Figure 1. For example, female midshipmen discussed a continuum of behaviors that may escalate into something more serious, such as assault, including sexist norms and cyberstalking. Also, midshipmen often said they find themselves trying to recognize potentially risky scenarios before they occur, such as when midshipmen make plans ahead of time to go out into the city and get drunk. Lastly, something specific to the Academy and against Academy rules is relationships between plebes and upperclassmen. These are scenarios that midshipmen said they believe could be added to the Bystander Intervention Activity list of behaviors.

Bystander Intervention Training

Midshipman participants were asked what bystander intervention training they had received and what intervention techniques they had learned from training. During the conversations, midshipman participants identified areas in which they feel they lacked training and areas in which the trainings could improve.

Well-Trained Areas

In general, midshipmen reported that they feel empowered and capable of intervening. Female midshipmen recalled specifically being taught to diffuse, distract, and delegate. Some midshipmen reported that the trainings they receive may not teach them much new information, but it gives them more confidence in their ability to intervene. Distracting can be as simple as generating an opportunity for the person to get away.

“If I’m out dancing or something like that, I see the guys being too touchy, I just drag the girl away and start dancing with her or something like that or be like, ‘Oh, let’s go to the bathroom.’ Something like that.” —Junior, Female

Delegating can mean finding someone who can help if the bystander feels uncomfortable intervening or needs help.

“That’s a strength in numbers thing. If I see some football player acting like a complete [EXPLICIT], I might not be the one that’s going to go up there and tell him to cut it out, but I might go up to his best friend who’s a little bit more with it and say, ‘Hey, your buddy over there is really making a fool of himself’.... I stepped in in the way I felt comfortable.” —Senior, Female

Some midshipmen said they believe that addressing someone or a behavior directly is enough to intervene. Although there are still rules in place for how to speak to people in your chain of command that can interfere with one’s ability to speak up, some midshipmen said they believe the Academy has made them more confident and that they have more efficacy to speak up.

“I think it’s also really easy to just say, ‘Okay, stop.’ That’s all you have to say. You don’t have to go into a long conversation. You should just stop. That’s not okay.” —Freshman, Female

“Making someone know that you’re aware of the situation is just as good as intervening. Because a lot of times things like this happen when someone thinks that no one’s watching them. So, if you just let someone know, ‘Hey buddy, I’m watching you.’ That’s the same thing as intervening.” —Senior, Male

Areas to Improve Training

Many focus group participants said they believe intervention training will not end sexual assault and sexual harassment, because these behaviors can happen behind closed doors and not in public. For many, they said they believe it occurs on the USMMA campus, but they do not see it. Accordingly, midshipmen expressed believing that senior leadership can do little to stop sexual assault while it is in progress and should, therefore, focus trainings on prevention.

“Most of these things don’t really happen out in the open. So, you never get the chance to intervene. You don’t hear about it until after the fact.... I think it’s happening behind closed doors.” —Freshman, Female

Leadership and Prevention

Participants were asked to give a letter grade on their peer leadership and their senior leadership to evaluate how well they handle issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. In discussing the grades, participants were asked to explain their grading and to elaborate on their perceptions of peer and senior leadership

Midshipmen Peer Leadership

Midshipmen peer leaders are generally upperclassmen at the Academy. Leadership positions focus either on administering the chain of command structure or on supporting the regimental structure through specific services or programs such as logistics, intramurals, and human relations. They are often seen as mentors to younger students and those they oversee.

What they do well. Midshipmen expressed that their peer leaders have a number of positive qualities. A few midshipmen noted that peer leaders have been trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Most participants reported believing that peer leaders have good intentions and are supportive of their peers; however, many noted that the quality of the peer leaders differ by program, with human relations being the most sensitive to sexual assault and sexual harassment issues. For example, midshipmen noted quality peer leaders let other midshipmen know their door is “always open” and that even when it is not, to come knock on the door. Successful peer leaders make themselves more available and engage with other midshipmen more often. A few also noted that a good peer leader is someone who recognizes when the situation is too much for them and can help refer those involved in the situation to another resource. Some midshipmen also reported that they believe that peer leaders are limited in what they can do, but they are improving as awareness and training are improving at the Academy.

“Having an incident happen [recently] ...the peer leadership stepped up and took all the right steps necessary to break up that incident, to report it, to make sure everything went smoothly, ensure that everybody affected was taken care of and stuff like that. So, I think especially now with the newer classes that have kind of been—they started the Academy while we’re already doing this training, the awareness situations, awareness month, everybody is just a little more prepared to handle situations. So, I think it can only get better from here, from where we’re at.” —Sophomore, Female

Areas to improve. Some midshipmen said they feel that they would be more comfortable reporting to peers than reporting to administration, but others said they feel that because of how small the school is, sometimes reporting to a peer leader means reporting to a friend of the offender. Also, due to the Academy’s size and tight-knit community, it can be challenging to keep conversations professional and confidential. Even if someone does not report an incident, there is a feeling that midshipmen learn about an incident regardless of a report. Participants indicated that peer leadership could improve the culture around sexual assault and sexual harassment by helping to depress the rumor mill and not contributing to it. Some female midshipmen stated that some peer leaders do not keep incidents confidential and talk about sexual assault cases to their friends. Thus, some participants indicated believing that there is room for improvement in the professionalism of peer leadership. Accordingly, female midshipmen in the focus groups noted some peer leaders make light of rules and perpetuate a belief in false reporting.

“I’ve heard some of the male leadership.... ‘Guys you need to put the trash can in the door because if you don’t, you’ll probably end up getting SAPR’d.’ Which

kind of makes it sound like you'll just be minding your own business and get SAPR'd." —**Freshman, Female**

Specifically, underclassmen suggested peer leaders could do a better job at engaging with the underclassmen to establish relationships and trust so that if an incident of sexual assault were to occur, a potential victim would feel comfortable approaching the peer leaders. However, some female midshipmen, faculty, and staff expressed that peer leaders may just be too young in general to handle cases as serious as sexual assault.

"Sometimes I think that we are still really young. That when we're put in those situations that make us uncomfortable—me telling one of my friends could make my friend almost as uncomfortable as it made me. And so, they might not know what to do either. And I think everyone understands the reporting process but asking someone not to report it or asking someone to hold it confidential, that puts them in a really awkward position." —**Senior, Female**

Senior Leadership

Participants discussed a recent shift in senior leadership just before the 2019 SAGR focus groups were conducted, prompting midshipmen and faculty and staff to comment on the little experience that the members of the Academy have with the current leadership; however, they seemed to have an understanding of the new leadership's intent and plans to address issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment.

What they do well. Currently, leadership was seen as doing a better job on issues related to sexual assault than in the past by midshipmen and faculty and staff, although faculty and staff noted that senior leadership's ability to make changes is limited by regulations. Midshipmen and faculty and staff expressed believing that senior leadership has escalated sexual assault and sexual harassment issues and are taking steps toward prevention and improving the reporting process.

"I've seen notable improvement throughout my years here.... Overall, I do feel very comfortable as a female here and I'm someone that would send my siblings here." —**Senior, Female**

"I think they've implemented a lot of things that have helped...just from the day we showed up to today. Or even a year ago. In that span, they're making leaps and bounds in this area, making changes that I thought helped." —**Junior, Male**

"For the past few months, there's just a different feeling.... There's been some changes and stuff and I think with the people in charge and the trust.... It's just a feeling to me that it's changing and it's changing for the good. And I can see that in the midshipman, in the staff." —**Faculty/Staff**

Further, the current senior leadership has made it clear that they have a no tolerance policy.

“Given recent initiatives at our school and the current climate campus, I would not want to be on the end of somebody that is harassing somebody sexually, because they will be so quick to remove you here. And that’s been a big thing for us recently is that we don’t even really mess with it.” —**Peer Leadership**

Midshipmen continued to express their desire and appreciation for leaders who understand their unique climate and culture. Some expressed that without having experienced what the midshipmen do or having a deep understanding of what they do, someone could not effectively lead. Generally, students said they want individuals familiar with USMMA and the maritime industry to be leading them, not Marine Corps or Navy officers or other career DoD officials. They feel these individuals do not understand the ultimate goal of the Merchant Marine, which is to produce licensed sailors for the industry.

“[We want leaders that have] some level of understanding of us being not your typical Service Academy because of the sea you’re in isolation from the rest of the world needs to play a fact in the hiring process of people who come here.” —**Senior, Male**

“With the leadership, we now have a Superintendent who’s a graduate. Who can speak to us on a level no one else can speak to us on. I think that’s the biggest, understand who we are is the key to helping us succeed.” —**Senior, Male**

“Because he [the Superintendent] went to Kings Point, he knows, ‘Okay, this is how people spend their weekends. This is probably where it starts. There’s no way I’m going to stop it, but this is what we can try and do.’” —**Sophomore, Female**

Areas to improve. Despite the upward trend in positive opinions of senior leadership, some midshipmen and faculty and staff still expressed having some suggestions for improvement. A few faculty and staff focus group participants noted that leadership performs well in their tactical approach but could improve in their strategic approach, which has implications for standards and culture. Also, some female midshipmen said they believe that the Stand Down made gender relations worse between male and female midshipmen at the Academy. The Stand Down created concerns about graduating on time and the reputation of the Academy. Male midshipmen blamed female midshipmen for getting Sea Year taken away, and some students said they believe that it ultimately had the unintended effects of discouraging people from coming forward with reports of sexual assault and/or harassment because of the stigma associated with reporting and the Stand Down.

“That [the Stand Down] is the opposite of what needed to happen because sexual assault was happening and all they did by doing the Sea Year Stand Down was ruin the relationships at school between men and women, because men immediately started hating women for reporting sexual assault and causing the single most fundamental part about our school being different from the other Service Academies to just fall apart.... I know they tried...but they just often

times do the exact opposite of what they're trying to accomplish."

—**Sophomore, Female**

Further, participants reported feeling that the quality of senior leadership varies greatly. Some male midshipmen said they believe it is due to perceived inconsistency. Female midshipmen agreed and further noted it may, in part, be due to the recent changes in personnel and policy. In particular, investigations into accusations are perceived as inconsistent in regard to which cases senior leadership decides to and not to investigate in depth.

"I think that sometimes inconsistency and how in-depth sometimes cases go, or situations go, could be taken more seriously or acted upon more in depth."

—**Senior, Female**

Similarly, there is perceived inconsistency and lack of transparency in outcomes and punishments. Midshipmen expressed a desire for more transparency around sexual assault and sexual harassment actions and consequences. Male midshipmen expressed a desire to know what repercussions are associated with what actions. Currently midshipmen in the focus groups expressed a feeling of ambiguity: participants said their understanding is that all levels of severity (e.g., touching versus penetrative assault) of sexual assault gets someone expelled. Further, faculty and staff noted that although punishment may be consistent within company, it can vary greatly between companies. One faculty and staff member suggested that using XYZ reports, as they do for other offenses, may help them to gain better insight into consistency.

"If there was something that I could judge whether or not we did a good job with the different cases and that we're presented over. So, we had the capability to do something for the XYZ report where we summarized what occurred, how it was handled, was it handled in a forthright and equitable manner and respectful manner, and what the outcome was. So, we can see if there is consistency and equity and real attention to get the right outcome." —**Faculty/Staff**

Lastly, when someone is accused of sexual assault or sexual harassment, peer leadership, midshipmen, and faculty and staff noted there is a culture of guilty until proven innocent. Male midshipmen and faculty and staff who participated in the focus groups stated that when in relation to gender, this culture is not unique to the Academy but is prevalent in the general culture and media. Participants also noted that at the Academy, guilty until proven innocent is not specific to gender relations, but all accusations at the Academy such as cheating or a conduct offense. However, particularly for cases of sexual assault, senior leadership seems to have a "knee-jerk" reaction. A few male participants also noted that it appears as though the administration always implements the harshest punishment for sexual assault and sexual harassment offenses, which is often being expelled or set back a year.

"The punishment is the same for raping someone as it is to grope someone."

—**Freshman, Male**

"The thing that makes our school different that I wish we would change is we don't have a real judicial mind-set behind it. It's not innocent before proven"

guilty, which I understand because the percentage of false claims are so low...keeping it here or not keeping it here isn't the same as putting someone away in jail or up for trial. So, they have the right to technically throw out whoever they want. I guess they find it more responsible to not take the risk of keeping someone that has been accused of something on campus."

—**Junior, Female**

"In some of the cases, there's almost a guilty until proven innocent towards the accuser and for certain things like not shaving, that might work, but for extreme cases that very much have a big impact on people's lives, this needs to be handled I think a little more like a court case where innocent until proven guilty with due process." —**Senior, Male**

Sexual Assault Training and Prevention

Many midshipman focus group participants said they receive an oversaturation of sexual assault trainings and as a result, trainings are not always taken seriously. Some students reported that trainings are more of a way for the administration to check a box that the Academy has done something after the Stand Down occurred, but the trainings may not be serving a practical purpose. Some students said they do not believe the trainings are effective in helping change the culture of the school. Male midshipmen reported that they do not remember the trainings, and the trainings they remember receiving make them feel like they are being reprimanded.

"They hate these [trainings]. You put everybody in the same room, and you say you shouldn't do this. They hate feeling accused that they did something wrong, and now they have to spend two hours in a training session." —**Faculty/Staff**

"When people bring up these issues [sexual assault]. They [administration] just want to crack down and throw more training, more training. It just gets more of a joke. Not a joke, I don't know, but they don't take it seriously because there's more rules, more this, more that." —**Freshman, Female**

"There is oversaturation...I know especially whenever we do same month, towards the end of it people are like 'Another speaker?' and I get it...things need to be spaced out and they need to be prevalent. They need to be effective.... Having a training where someone just talks to you or throws a PowerPoint up, those trainings, they're not effective." —**Sophomore, Male**

Midshipmen and faculty and staff said they believe Sea Year poses its own unique challenges regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment. Male midshipmen and faculty and staff reported believing that the majority of negative behaviors happen during midshipmen's time at sea, and those behaviors are not being perpetrated at the Academy or by other midshipmen. Accordingly, female midshipmen reported that while students are on Sea Year, other personnel on the ships are now required to attend sexual assault and sexual harassment trainings but do not take them seriously.

“We had two females that just came back that were not allowed off their ship because the chief mate said, ‘You’re a female, you’re not getting off the ship.’ Now maybe he had good reason, but that’s just something that creates dynamic for them that they’re in a cage.” —Faculty/Staff

“On my ship...they made this new program where you need to have a mentor on our ship, and they need to check in with you every week and make sure you’re not getting assaulted or anything, and they don’t get paid for it. So they’re really upset that you have to do all this paperwork and all this extra work that they don’t get paid for on their off time, and they were just kind of making fun of it.... I still would prefer them being aware of how seriously the school takes it, even if they’re joking. It’s not okay, but it’s better than before.” —Junior, Female

Midshipmen and faculty and staff participants had suggestions for improving sexual assault and sexual harassment trainings, including making the trainings more interactive, applicable, practical, and convenient. For example, they noted one training for which students stood across from one another to talk and discuss what they thought about different issues. The midshipmen in the focus groups said they like the idea of more discussion and smaller groups, rather than a more traditional classroom-style PowerPoint lecture. Participants also noted practical trainings that apply to their unique culture may be useful for translating training into action. Further, female midshipmen said they believe that having administrative presence in some of the SAPR trainings may add some validity to the trainings.

“We know everybody. So if that [assault] were to happen, it’s not some shady figure, it’s someone you have class with...and I think that changes it so much conceptually, and we never talk about it.” —Senior, Male

“The training that you get all four years, it’s the same thing every time.... So, I think if you’re able to diversify the training a little bit more and make it a little bit more interactive or just different each time you do it, I think it would be a lot more productive.” —Faculty/Staff

Additionally, female midshipmen, in particular, expressed their preference to be educated more on actions they can take to take responsibility for their own behavior to help prevent sexual assault. For example, how to conduct themselves while at sea when they are the only female on a ship of men with a heavy drinking culture and how to advocate for oneself at the first sign of risky behavior, such as sexual language, before it escalates into something more serious such as harassment and assault. Although female midshipmen expressed that in an “ideal world,” women should be allowed to behave in ways that may be considered “risky,” such as getting intoxicated or dressing how they want, they also recognize there are actions women can take to minimize their risk of being harassed or assaulted.

“As females, no one really approached us and told us, ‘Okay, you’re about to go out to sea and there’s a good chance you’re going to be the only girl on a ship and we can’t really say what the people on the ship are going to be like....’ No one really tells you ‘Okay, because we’re living in a reality here.... here’s some helpful hints on how you should conduct yourself when you go out onto a ship.”

How you probably shouldn't go into a port and drink so much that you lose all your senses....' There are certain things that you can do to minimize your own risk and certain ways that you can conduct yourself so that you're not put into these situations." —**Senior, Female**

"How do we best protect ourselves and put ourselves in the best situation as we are working for that [gender relations] change? For me, it's learning how to advocate for yourself.... Early on you can talk about escalation of harm. People start with words and it desensitizes you, and that's how things escalate. How do I stop, early on, stuff that makes me uncomfortable?... We never really had training on that, and all of us know raping someone is wrong, but does everyone know how using derogatory phrases can lead to inappropriate behavior?" —**Senior, Female**

Finally, faculty participants reported that faculty and staff need to buy in to the new culture and trainings and interact more with the midshipmen to pass the culture on. Some staff noted that because they do not interact with midshipmen in the afternoons and on the weekends, they are not able to build strong relationships and trust with the students. Further, midshipmen see how faculty and staff engage with trainings, and if they are not sold on it, neither will the midshipmen.

"My very first SAPRO [Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office] training with the faculty and staff. There were a couple midshipmen there, and I watched several staff members rolling their eyes very clearly, very evidently not buying into the SAPRO training and in fact mocking it in some ways.... And the second they [midshipmen] see that...it just continues to proliferate through the entire culture." —**Faculty/Staff**

Reporting of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Reporting experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment is an important step toward ensuring that victims get the support and services they need and that perpetrators are brought to justice and are prevented from offending in the future. The rate of reporting tends to be much lower than the rate of experiencing both sexual assault and sexual harassment (OPA, 2019). Reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment helps ensure victims receive the support they need and that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. Participants were asked about their familiarity with the SAPR office, who they would go to for issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment, and the perceived barriers to reporting that exist at the Academy.

Perceptions of SAPR and Reporting

Participants were asked about their awareness of the SAPR office, its location, and how comfortable midshipmen would be going to the SAPR office. Midshipman participants indicated low levels of knowledge about SAPR resources and that they did not typically perceive the SAPR office as the first stop in dealing with sexual assault.

Knowledge of SAPR Resources

In general, midshipmen expressed a common lack of knowledge about the SAPR office and its resources. Most midshipmen reported not even knowing where the office is located, although participants pointed to ongoing renovations on campus, which may contribute to the confusion.

“I think they need to make their resources more known because I know we were just perusing through the online thing yesterday, and we found this anonymous form that I had no idea about, or all these forms that are online that you can do without going to the office and stuff. So, I think that would make them [midshipmen] way more comfortable if you actually told people about it and not just have it online.” —Freshman, Female

Feeding into the confusion, participants discussed recent turnover among leadership at the Academy and within the SAPR office. Many participants said they did not know the previous Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) had left and that there is a new SARC at the Academy. Participants also noted some of the SAPR materials on campus, such as the SAPR board that identifies who the victim advocates are, are outdated with old personnel.

“There’s such turnover that now whoever we bring in again is going to have to get their [midshipmen’s] respect and admiration from the midshipmen again. So, the previous person had developed relationships with some of the midshipmen, but now you’re going to start that from ground zero again.” —Faculty/Staff

“She [previous SARC] was here for a year and a half and she did a lot of good for the program, and I think she was the first SARC that was here for more than a year.” —Sophomore, Female

“We were never formally introduced to this new SARC.... I feel like that’s something that’s big enough where we should have had an all-hands and said, ‘This is your new SARC everybody. Just a reminder, this is the reporting procedure. If you need help, this is who you can go to.’ But there was none of that. And there was a big question mark in a lot of people’s heads of what’s happening and who do we go to.” —Senior, Female

Trust in the SAPR Office and Staff

Mixed opinions existed regarding whether students would feel comfortable going to the SAPR office. Upperclassman reported that they would likely feel comfortable reporting to the SAPR office, but underclassmen reported they would not feel comfortable. A few female midshipmen noted women may feel more comfortable reporting to a female SAPR staff member over a male staff member. Upperclassman noted that they see the SARC around campus and that familiarity makes them feel more comfortable.

“I think that’s why Lieutenant [REDACTED] does a great job, because he’s down there working out, in the weight rooms, so you see him there. I think if I had anything happen, I’d either go to him or to Chaplin, just because you see them,

you know them, they know you. You don't necessarily interact with them, but you feel comfortable with them, because you do see them; whereas, a lot of people in the SAPR department you don't really see." —**Junior, Male**

Midshipmen in the focus groups stated that they would likely go to a friend first over someone in the SAPR office, as it would not be their first thought to go to the SAPR office if something were to happen to them.

"As senior, we're friends with a lot of the people in the HR and SAPR department, so I would feel comfortable going to my friend and letting them know about something that happened. But as an underclassman, you may not because you see them as the seniors and they're in charge of you...there's still kind of this disconnect between the classes that you may not feel comfortable approaching somebody outside your class. So, I think people are most likely to approach their friends realistically." —**Senior, Male**

Meanwhile, some midshipmen participants noted that although they have been told there is a 24/7 hotline that can be used to reach someone at any time of day or night, they have heard of students who were not able to get through or get connected to anyone when they have called, giving students the perception that the SAPR office is unreliable. Participants also stated that many midshipmen would prefer to go to their Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), commanding officer (CO), or Chaplin, who are not mandatory reporters; however, most participants said they believe midshipmen go to their friends in these cases. Midshipmen expressed that they believe more interaction with these individuals (i.e., CHRO, CO, Chaplin) would increase reporting.

"I think people more go to CHROs than the SAPR office because the CHRO is someone you see every day. It's a person in-company." —**Junior, Male**

"Don't be like, 'I have an open-door policy, You can come talk to me about sexual harassment anytime you want.' If they were active in your day-to-day life and not just being all about sexual harassment but being a moral kind of person and you're buddies with them, you'll be more likely to tell them what happened." —**Freshman, Male**

Midshipmen expressed confusion about who the mandatory reporters are, which impacts a student's decision on whether to report or not. One peer leader noted when someone is about to disclose, mandatory reporters are supposed to stop them and ensure that they know they are a mandatory reporter and confirm their desire to disclose to them. However, there is also a campus policy that as a midshipmen, if you learn of a sexual assault on campus, you are a mandatory reporter and must report the incident to an officer, with the exception of emergency medical technicians (EMT), who are restricted reporters and make up one-third of the regiment. Midshipman participants expressed the belief that many students are unaware of these distinctions.

“There’s also a policy on campus that if you find out about a sexual assault, you have to report it to an officer, and I think that makes it hard for somebody who’s still trying to figure out what they want to do about it talk to a classmate. Because they know that classmate is obligated to and could get a Class 1 offense if they do not tell somebody...you can’t tell a classmate except for two, there’s two victim advocates on campus.” —Senior, Male

Faculty and staff expressed that when they are approached by students who are interested in reporting an incident of sexual assault or sexual harassment, they try to give them options on who they can disclose to who are and are not mandatory reporters. Some noted that they will bring the midshipman to the Chaplain or victim advocates to discuss issues. Faculty and peer leadership said they believe most, but not all, students have mentors, and faculty further believe students may feel more comfortable reporting to a mentor.

“I very rarely see people at this school without some sort of mentor and whether it’s a professor, coach, company officer, anything like that...I think the most important part is that you’re able to talk with someone that you can trust and that you know cares about you and can let you take the proper steps. So, I think we’re able to have that network because most people here have a mentor that they trust.” —Peer Leadership

Barriers to Reporting

Rates of reporting are often much lower than rates of experiencing sexual assault and sexual harassment (OPA, 2019). Participants were asked about the barriers to reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy. Participants identified a variety of barriers to reporting, including the rumor mill, perceptions of false reporting, retaliation, and the impact on their career.

Fear of Consequences for the Academy and Career Impact

Generally, midshipmen reported believing that there is hesitancy to report anything that could impact their ability to graduate and commission on time. The Stand Down still has a lasting impact on reporting sexual assault with the upperclassmen. Some male focus group participants noted that immediately after the Stand Down, students were afraid to report because they feared Sea Year could be taken away again, preventing them from a timely graduation, or worse that the Academy could be shut down.

“The Stand Down for me, it almost felt like a punishment for something that we didn’t do. And we were denied an educational opportunity based on what had happened to some people, and it wasn’t their fault. If you were sexually assaulted and you came forward, you now negatively affected an entire school’s educational opportunity. So that I think has been a hurdle for a lot of people to say something.” —Senior, Female

“There’s this stigma of ‘I don’t want to report because I’m afraid that the school is going to get shut down. I don’t want if there’s X number of sexual reports this year, the school might get in trouble.’” —Senior, Male

Accordingly, faculty and staff agreed that students are often afraid to report to the medical building, fearing a diagnosis could affect their ability to commission. There is an understanding that if students speak to a counselor, it is recorded in their medical record, which could keep them from commissioning or getting a Coast Guard license, which impacts their career goals.

“There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. There’s like blinders to get to that light sometimes. And they conflict their honorable intention, their friendships because of the blinder just to get to the end sometimes. We’re doing too good job of coaching them. Focus on the finish line.” —Faculty/Staff

Similarly, midshipmen are hesitant to report out of concerns of impacting other midshipmen’s experiences and their loyalty to one another. Staff and faculty participants noted there is a strong sense of loyalty within regiments, and the culture of loyalty to fellow students may prevent some from coming forward and reporting.

“I don’t know how to change that.... ‘No, we’re not all here whether you’re good or bad. You want the ones that are good to be with you and the ones that are bad, they don’t deserve what you deserve.’ I’m not sure how to get there with that.” —Faculty/Staff

Thus, protecting one another is interpreted differentially depending on the midshipman’s reference point. Male midshipmen noted that some victims may be hesitant to report because they believe reporting may get a fellow classmate expelled from the Academy, despite the severity of the sexual assault. For example, a few midshipmen noted that at the Academy, the punishment is the same for “raping someone as it is to grope someone.”

“We’ve all got a bright future here ahead of us, and if someone is to report another person for sexual assault, they’re now not only potentially taking them out of this element, but...that could stick with them for the rest of their lives.” —Sophomore, Male

“There needs to be stages of sexual assault, and different punishments for each stage, and then therefore people would report each little thing because right now, if you report it’s you’re just going to get kicked out.” —Freshman, Male

“People that finally do report it usually can’t live with the silence or can’t live with thinking, ‘What if that person does it to another?’... Especially here, where we’re like, ‘Be a leader. Be a leader. Stick up for those who can’t protect themselves,’ especially that whole military mind-set. Why would you report it if it was not for the best of everyone around you?” —Junior, Female

Female midshipmen noted reporting sexual assault is seen as negatively impacting the Academy and other midshipmen; however, some female midshipmen also viewed reporting as doing what is best for the Academy. Midshipmen are encouraged to view one another as family and depend on each other throughout their time at the Academy, leading midshipmen to not want to harm another midshipmen's career or potentially impact others' experiences at the Academy by reporting. However, they simultaneously recognize that not reporting also goes against the ideals set forth for them as students at the Academy to be a leader and protect one another. By not reporting, their experience could happen to another midshipman.

Social Consequences and the Rumor Mill

The rumor mill appears to be pervasive in all aspects of life at the Academy, including having an impact on the reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Although the reporting process is supposed to be confidential, the investigative process makes it difficult for certain elements of the report to remain confidential, and the small community at the Academy creates a challenge in maintaining anonymity. Focus group participants noted that because parts of the investigation and reporting process are conducted during school hours, midshipmen notice when a classmate is not in class and will detect an issue, even without anyone saying anything. As a result, the rumor mill discourages students from reporting. Participants noted that even if you switch companies, because the community is so small, everyone still knows what happened and why you switched. Further, because students sometimes report to other midshipmen, that can feed the rumor mill, as they may be friends with the accused offender.

The rumor mill creates an environment where retaliation against victims can occur, particularly in the form of ostracism. Midshipmen and faculty and staff have observed midshipmen being "blackballed" after reporting.

If I was reporting a sexual assault, I'd be like, 'Okay, this person has friends,' and we say we're all really close-knit here, so I'd be like, 'Man, they're going to come at me.' They're going to be worried because they're going to see him or her going through the process of being investigated. That person's going to be saying all this stuff. It's going to be spreading throughout the whole school."

—**Peer Leadership**

"There was this girl that overheard this conversation...she wasn't okay with the conversation...so she reported it.... It was really messed up because everyone took his side. He ended up getting in a lot of trouble for it and then she was hated the rest of her time here. And it's a really small school, really hard situation to keep that down...that kind of gave everyone this mentality of, 'Oh, don't do that' or 'Don't report it if you know that backlash is going to happen,' because it was intense." —**Peer Leadership**

Female midshipmen said some women do not report because they may want to avoid getting a reputation for reporting.

"I know a girl who has been sexually harassed, sexually assaulted, but she didn't want to be that girl who reported it and be like, 'Oh, that girl.' No guy's ever

going to go near her again...no one's ever going to look at me ever again."
—**Junior, Female**

Midshipmen expressed that both male and female victims may not report because they do not want to be labeled as a victim. Female and male midshipmen noted that male midshipmen may be particularly less likely to report because they do not want to be perceived as weak, and again, in such a small school and community, that label is perceived as important.

"They [men] would seem weak. Or that's what they would think.... I feel like men are less prone to report some stuff. Just because of that whole persona, macho, alpha male type of thing that everybody, males naturally have."
—**Junior, Male**

"Not that it's bad to be a victim, but I don't want to be known as a victim because I feel like especially as a woman...you have to have a strong presence in order to hold your own with the males in the school. And I feel like if I painted myself as a victim I would not do as good of a job keeping that presence, and it would be hard to go to classes and to do other things." —**Sophomore, Female**

Desire to Handle Incidents at the Midshipman Level

At the Academy there is a desire to handle less serious offenses and incidents at the midshipman level. Midshipmen indicated that they share the understanding and belief that many less serious offenses can, and should, be handled by directly addressing the individual, rather than running the incident up the chain of command. Midshipmen said that many situations can be handled with a conversation between midshipmen or by involving peer leadership to facilitate, rather than an official report. Midshipmen try to self-police and step in for each other if they see something is not right. Reporting is viewed as a second or last resort if midshipmen cannot handle the issue within company, and reporting is reserved for what they perceive as more serious issues. Midshipmen do not want to be responsible for getting someone else in trouble or potentially getting someone expelled from the Academy, and all the social repercussions that come with it, such as ostracism and damage to reputation.

"Everybody likes to keep things in-house, too. Nobody likes the sense of having to do all that administrative crap. If anything, it's just better to settle it amongst themselves and just move on from it, but I mean, if you make that statement, you have to realize that it might end up going all the way there. There's some serious repercussions, so that's a lot to think about." —**Freshman, Male**

"I think it's something that comes from the brotherly-sisterly relationship that we all have here. We try and handle a lot of things ourselves. For something to need to go to the senior leadership would probably be pretty extreme."
—**Peer Leadership**

"So, have I heard someone telling a sexual joke? Yes. Did someone address it? Yes. Was the situation handled appropriately? Yes. So, do I feel the need to make a report? No. Because your safety has been reinstated in a sense. If

someone's doing something inappropriately and your peer leadership steps in, cool. We just had an educational moment. —**Senior, Female**

Challenges with the Process

Participants expressed understanding that sexual assault cases are handled only by the Superintendent and the investigative and punishment processes are not clear. Male midshipmen said there is no defined process and that they believe the SAPR office makes a recommendation to the Superintendent and he decides on the course of action, but they do not understand the why and the how and do not have insight into the role of the Dean or the Vice Deputy Commandant in these situations.

"I think one of the big problems we have here is we don't fall under UCMJ while we're on campus, and if we fell under UCMJ...if someone gets accused of sexual assault, they get a General Court Marshal and it goes through actual proceedings, whereas here, if someone gets accused of something, it's up to one person." —**Junior, Male**

Similarly, the process of reporting and its consequences are not clear. Male midshipmen and peer leadership noted that students know who to report to, but they don't know what happens after they report and the potential impact it will have on them and the accused.

"You know where to go to start the process, but for instance, I don't know how that process then builds. So, you're afraid of outside judgment or [the accused] being kicked out or ruining their future... But if it was known, the full process, step by step, like you go to the SARC and then this happens, and it builds to this—because it's kind of like, you report, then does it go straight to investigation and trial?" —**Sophomore, Male**

"They acknowledge in the training that it takes a lot of courage to come forward with this stuff, but to help with that, to ease the process of the person who's a victim of telling them, 'You're going to be treated well, and this is how we can help you.' I think if victims realize what it is, the help they can get then, they'll be more prone to report." —**Peer Leadership**

Some male and female focus group participants said that reporting sexual harassment is seen as too much of a hassle on top of all of their responsibilities. They said they do not believe they have the time to dedicate to reporting an incident. A few male midshipman noted that they have too much going on to get themselves and others involved in an investigation. They prefer to just handle it on their own.

"I'm not going to report someone saying a rude comment. It seems like it's just so much work. Honestly, I have so much of a workload, I'm not going to take the time to write out some comment that some guy said to me. It happened and I can brush it off, no problem...because it happens to everyone. But I am so worried about my time and my efforts that I need to do things that are going to get me

through the school and not things that are going to hold up my studying, if that makes sense.” —Sophomore, Female

Another reporting deterrent is that victims cannot change their mind once they file an unrestricted report. Due to the unrestricted nature of reporting at the Academy, once a report is filed it is permanent. Although victims have the choice to file a restricted report, some midshipmen said they do not trust it will stay confidential because of the small community and the rumor mill at Kings Point.

“One of the key factors of any medical care is that you can say no at any point and just walk away from it. You can’t take back when you tell somebody.... I think in restricted reporting there’s a process for redacting that you don’t want anything to come out of it, but especially with the unrestricted, once it’s done it’s done. It’s permanent.” —Senior, Male

False Reporting and Victim Blaming

Midshipmen discussed the perception that false reporting is believed to be a large issue. In particular, focus group participants indicated that some students have used reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment as a way to get out of other problems they are having at the Academy, such as being on the verge of expulsion for academics.

“There’s a lot of stories. There’s one girl...two separate occasions where she got her mid-term grades and was failing her classes, and she filed a SAPR case against whoever she was dating at the time. And she got complete amnesty from her grades and all that stuff and she’s still here, but he’s thrown under the bus and kicked out.” —Freshman, Male

“You’ve got kids who are freaking out or they don’t think they can take it anymore...and they say they were harassed, they say they were hazed, or something like that. It’s usually when people’s backs are against the wall for whatever reason.” —Peer Leadership

Some female focus group participants said they believe it may not be that individuals are falsely reporting, but rather they are choosing to report sexual assault and sexual harassment due to other motivations. For example, they expressed it is not that the assault did not happen, but they may not report initially and then end up reporting later when they find themselves in a compromising situation, such as an academic setback or getting in trouble for something such as fraternization.

“If you’re a plebe and you’re reporting to upperclassmen... ‘Oh, they were fratting and they got caught and they just want to get out of getting caught.’” —Junior, Female

Concerns about others’ perceptions of false reporting also may deter students from reporting. Due to the small number of students at the Academy and the small industry they will be entering

upon graduation, students are particularly concerned with gaining a reputation for falsely reporting and are concerned their reputation will follow them into their careers.

“I think a lot of it’s just that reputation that girls get if they do report something that happens to them, like they’re just doing it to get attention or stay here if their grades are bad. It’s just an automatic thing that guys will say that deters people from doing it.” —**Freshman, Female**

Accordingly, midshipmen noted that victims who report are demonized for getting their peers “kicked out” of, or expelled from, the Academy.

“When someone in their class gets kicked out, I’d say there is still a bit of—not victim shaming—but kind of blaming the alleged victim because, as they said, there’s not any transparency with it. We don’t know what happens, so they just hear what happened from their classmate that got kicked out, and so they say negative things about the person who got them kicked out if it was a midshipman.” —**Junior, Male**

Focus group participants pointed to a lack of understanding around consent as a contributing factor to perceptions of false reporting. Some midshipmen in the focus groups indicated believing that some people get expelled just because a female midshipman was offended, and that behaviors, such as jokes, are subjective to the person in the room. Resultingly, some male midshipmen said they feel they have to watch everything they say around women because they do not know how it will be interpreted. Additionally, a few female midshipmen noted that coercion is a big issue, and people do not understand that coercion is not consent. For example, if a female is under the heavy influence of drugs and/or alcohol and does not verbally say “no,” or says “no,” but the other person is so persistent, they end up submitting.

“I think a big problem is too, people don’t understand consent, what it actually is.... She literally said no like 50 times, and then relented. That’s not consensual sex really. I think we need more training on that, coercion versus consent. That’s not the same thing... As soon as a girl says no, you should just back off.” —**Junior, Female**

“Say someone is trying to come on to someone and that person panics and basically doesn’t give a response, because they don’t know what to say, and the person just takes that for a yes, but then that person later will feel guilty because they wouldn’t say no, but at the same time that’s one of the first reactions, is to panic and not know what to do.” —**Freshman, Male**

Sea Year

Finally, a unique barrier to reporting at the USMMA is the layer of complexity Sea Year adds to reporting. If a sexual assault were to occur and be reported during Sea Year, typically the victim would be removed from the ship during the investigation. However, midshipmen reported that when you are out at sea during Sea Year, there is no one to report to, and if the incident occurs at

the beginning of your time, then you may have to wait until you get back to report, which could be several months later. Further, if a midshipman were to report while at sea, he or she would be removed from the ship, which could prolong his or her ability to graduate because of sea day requirements, which are a mandatory number of hours spent at sea.

“If you report something, school obviously is going to take you out, take care of the situation, but that also means they just stop getting sea days...and maybe they wanted to report it, but they couldn’t, because if they did report it, they would be in a complicated situation now with their sea time, and their co-sail requirements.” —**Junior, Male**

Improvements to Reporting

Peer leadership noted that they feel victims need more support, as reporting can be associated with backlash from their community. Male midshipmen indicated feeling that the resources are available, but a person cannot be forced to report if he or she does not want to come forward.

“Whoever reported it...that person is going to be ostracized...and since it is such a small community, if you lose that community, it’s like you’re kind of on your own. So having help or knowing that if that happened it’s going to be hard for you to deal with, and there’s mental health professional here and there’s people you can talk to at a hospital and there’s people you can talk to off campus and stuff like that. That’s something that I think would be really, really important.” —**Peer Leadership**

“As far as what I’ve been told while here, if you either witness something or hear about something, what you can do is you can support the victim. You can tell them, ‘Hey, I’m here for you. There is plenty of resources available. If you want to report this, we can go through the steps and I can get you in contact with the people that you need to be in contact with.’ But you can’t force someone to go out there and tell their story.... At that point you’re violating their freedom.” —**Sophomore, Male**

Midshipmen stated another change that would increase reporting is related to punishment. Midshipmen in the focus groups said that lesser offenses are handled with too harsh of punishments. Participants advocated that punishment for lesser offenses should be in accordance with the severity of the offense. Peer leadership suggested that for lesser offenses, a process, such as arbitration, may be an alternative route to formal reporting, rather than having the same “cookie-cutter process” for all situations. Further, male midshipmen suggested remediation for lesser offenses. Participants reported that most midshipmen agree to the consequences for serious offenses of sexual assault but feel there should be other avenues other than expulsion for less severe offenses.

“Let’s say someone gets offended by an off-handed comment. Instead of just immediately, ‘Oh, you’re done,’ which is kind of what is going on now, instead of doing that, make him go to...sensitivity training, where you can actually show him the effects of it, and don’t have a one strike and you’re out. Whereas, ‘Okay, you

screwed up, you go to training.’ Same like we did with honor remediation, where you actually learn from it. It’s not just consequence.” —Junior, Male

Lastly, faculty and staff in the focus groups stated that the culture around reporting needs to change to make it more acceptable to report, and the way to change the culture is by reaching freshman before they are influenced by the existing culture.

Alcohol at the Academy

Participants were asked to identify the culture surrounding alcohol use at the Academy. Participants discussed alcohol use, the close proximity of New York City, areas where problematic behaviors occur, and perceptions of the alcohol training they receive.

Alcohol Use

Midshipman focus group participants identified drinking as a part of both the Academy’s and their profession’s culture. They discussed a belief that drinking is cultural for college students and for sailors. During Sea Year, students who are typically considered underage in the United States and are then exposed to professional mariners who engage in heavy drinking on ship and at port in locations where the drinking age is often lower than in the United States. Students are exposed to these behaviors and often encouraged to engage. Because of the encouragement to drink combined with a lack of oversight on the ships, students often engage in these behaviors despite the Academy’s dry rules. At the Academy, drinking is also seen as what students do on the weekend, and there is a common understanding among midshipmen that drinking still occurs despite the rules against it.

“There’s this thing the seniors will tell us when we have a three-day weekend... ‘This is the bar that all the seniors hang out at. I would not recommend going there. If you see a senior or an upperclassman in the bar you’re going to, I would change bars....’ They’re always like ‘Plebes, we know you’re not supposed to drink, but we know you will.’” —Freshman, Female

Binge Drinking

Binge drinking is perceived as an issue at the Academy. Some focus group participants noted the strict culture at the Academy is seen as contributing to the binge drinking culture, because they are unable to drink when they want to and can only drink off campus on the weekends. Male midshipmen said that because they can only leave campus on Friday or Saturday, they want to make up for not being able to drink all week and make the most of their time until they can drink off campus again.

“Just because of this level of stress that we’re under, the time that we’re here, and the rules and regulations that we have. You’re not allowed to drink on campus or throughout the week, whereas if you’re at a typical college you can drink throughout the week. And I think that leads a lot of midshipmen to relieve their stress on the weekend.” —Senior, Female

“People come to college with this preconceived thing of they want to have a college experience, not just the learning but also like the social party-drinking-type of scene...there are few times when we get to have that.... So when people do have the opportunity, there’s the potential of taking it too far, because you’re trying to pack all that college experience in the little amount of time that you have.” —Peer Leadership

Peer leadership participants expressed feeling senior leadership treats them like they are alcoholics. Male midshipman participants said they believe their drinking behaviors are not different or worse compared to that of a “typical” college. Accordingly, female midshipmen noted that sometimes drinking turns into a competition, particularly between male upperclassmen, resulting in everyone becoming more intoxicated.

“It’s never just, ‘Let’s go out to dinner, have a couple drinks, and come back.’ It’s always dinner, then a bar, and then wait, we’re not drunk enough, let’s go to another. And that is very common amongst guys.” —Sophomore, Female

However, there was a discrepancy among students’ opinions regarding whether drinking is only a weekend activity or something students use more regularly as a coping mechanism. Male and female midshipmen indicated that there is a lack of ways to destress at the Academy, so many students drink.

“I think one thing they aren’t addressing is why people are drinking here. I think the administration has this idea that the majority of people go out and get drunk partying but a lot of people kind of have an actual issue, because they use it as a coping mechanism here.” —Junior, Male

Academy Alcohol Policy

Participants discussed how over time, the alcohol policies at the Academy have gotten stricter. The Academy is now a dry campus even if students are of age, and students are supposed to stay dry on ship and in port during Sea Year as well. As a result, participants indicated that people are drinking less in the barracks and more off campus. They said they feel that this change has decreased hazing behaviors, such as seniors coming back to campus drunk and urinating under plebes doors. Meanwhile, the new Superintendent has implemented a “one-and-done” policy with alcohol offenses. Because the rules are explicit, students are following them with more fidelity; however, students are required to come back to campus on the weekend but are not allowed to come back to the Academy intoxicated, and so they either end up sneaking back on to campus or drinking in their room, so as not to risk getting caught and in trouble for coming back to campus drunk.

Male and female focus group participants mentioned that because of the strict alcohol policies, students never learn how to drink responsibly. One male midshipman said allowing drinking on campus could build an environment for self-control. Similarly, one female midshipman suggested social drinking events at which students could network, such as pub night, could help teach students how to drink responsibly. However, in accordance with stricter alcohol policies

on campus, the Academy has shut down the on-campus pub and suspended pub night. Although pub night was only for seniors, many midshipmen stated that its removal has made drinking behaviors worse because students do not learn to drink socially and responsibly.

“When we did have pub night, the drinking problem was not bad, and it was much more tolerable because you know there was that one night where you’re going to have a couple beers and that was it. But now that it’s gone, you see more usage of alcohol within the barracks. You see a lot more binge drinking, and now you only have the weekend to go out and drink or at night.” —**Peer Leadership**

“At least with the pub, there was a level of responsibility because it was on a Thursday. You did have class the next day, so it’s like, all right, you’ve got to figure out to have a drink or two with your friends then be able to go to bed and wake up at 6:00 in the morning.” —**Senior, Female**

Alcohol Training

Participants were asked to describe the alcohol training they have received at the Academy, revealing positive perceptions of the alcohol training and areas where the training could improve.

Views on Current Training

Many midshipman participants stated that currently, the alcohol trainings are not sufficient because they primarily address official policy and focus on not breaking the rules. Midshipman focus group participants reported that alcohol trainings cover information on topics such as military policy and how drinking infractions, such as a DUI, can affect your military career. Many participants said they do not remember the material they learned from their alcohol trainings and often feel like they are just “checking a box.”

“Sexual assault and sexual harassment training...this is not just for Kings Point, for the maritime industry, or the military. This is also, be a good person and don’t hurt your neighbor, like the common man. The alcohol training is for the purposes of work and possibly go into the military. This is why you shouldn’t drink that much or you shouldn’t drink versus you shouldn’t drink a lot in bingeing, because this is what happens physically and mentally. So, if they made alcohol training more similar to maybe the sexual harassment and sexual assault training, we’d see less issues maybe.” —**Sophomore, Male**

One training that midshipmen viewed as positive was given by an alumnus who did not focus on telling them not to drink, but about why others do drink, why he does not drink, and how to drink safely. A participant noted because he was an alumnus speaking from personal experience, it was easier to relate to and his message was not “don’t do it ever.” Instead, his message was if you are going to drink, this is how to drink more responsibly. Students in the focus groups said that messages regarding responsible drinking and moderation would be the most beneficial.

“Every time they tell us that [not to drink], all of us just roll our eyes and say, ‘Not going to happen.’ If you tell us to be smart about it, give us the actual reasons, ‘Okay, you’re right.’” —Freshman, Male

“It’s just statistics about the world in general, rather than just what goes on here, why people drink here, what drives people to drink here? What are the causes of that? Why do they feel they need it?” —Junior, Female

Areas to Improve

Because students said they feel their climate at the Academy is unique—and similar to their opinions on trainings for sexual assault and sexual harassment—focus group participants expressed a desire to have trainings by people who understand their unique environment, such as alumni or leadership who have been in their shoes and understand the maritime industry.

“We recently had what I think was a great one by a guy who talks to all the Service Academies. I think that really struck a tone, because it was kind of personal. He kind of understood a lot of how alcohol interacts in our environment. And I think that struck a chord a lot better.” —Senior, Male

Midshipmen also noted wanting more relatable, practical trainings. Participants said the trainings are often fear based and do not comprise information that can help young people who are going to drink regardless. Midshipmen reported that most trainings focus purely on not drinking, rather than teaching how to drink safely, often leaving students with the takeaway to “be smart and don’t get caught.”

“It’s [alcohol trainings] just very fear based. You drink, you’re kicked out or you’re going to get AA. It’s just something to help you. It’s just fear. ‘Don’t do it.’” —Junior, Female

“The zero tolerance BS that we always hear that never works. Don’t drink. It’s bad. It’s against the rules. Don’t do it...that’s it.” —Senior, Male

Further, with the inclusion of Sea Year, midshipmen go from a highly regulated life on campus to an unregulated setting on the ship. Peer leadership reported that the students are not prepared for the change in culture and people. A few female midshipmen suggested that health and wellness trainings related to alcohol conducted before they go out to sea could be useful to address common ship behaviors, such as smoking and drinking, and how it affects you.

“When it comes to alcohol usage and alcohol trainings, we go out to sea where it’s basically completely not regulated, it’s free range. So, we’re here with all these regulations in these trainings, and then we go out to sea and actually experience kind of the real world, so you see your boss is an alcoholic, people you work with are alcoholics.” —Junior, Female

Chapter 3: Discussion

The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) is committed to developing strong leaders to serve the national security, marine transportation, and economic needs of the United States. Leadership at the USMMA continues to act on that commitment by ensuring that students have a safe environment to develop their education, physical abilities, leadership, and character. The *2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups (2019 SAGR)* represent qualitative feedback from students, faculty, and staff at the USMMA.

Culture at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

The focus group participants at the USMMA revealed a number of overlapping aspects of their Academy culture. Participants at the Academy were quick to express the feeling of comradery and the familial relationships they developed with their peers, with many describing their fellow midshipmen as kindred or siblings. Many suggested that their entry training period (indoc) played a large role in forging these bonds. Under what participants described as an extremely stressful and unfamiliar situation, midshipmen indicated that they band together to survive and succeed in their training goals.

Midshipmen in the focus groups often mentioned the higher ratio of men compared to women. Many mentioned the gender ratio influences the perceptions and interactions at the Academy and individual level. At the Academy level, some male midshipmen said they believe female midshipmen are more readily accepted into peer leadership positions to help fill a quota and view the Academy as being more lenient with regard to punishment toward female midshipmen. Although at an individual level, female midshipmen indicated feeling they are more susceptible to the rumor mill as a consequence of there being so few of them and that their interactions are watched more carefully than male midshipmen.

Differences in physical training (PT) standards were a major point of contention between male and female midshipmen. Several male midshipmen in the focus groups noted that differences in physiological makeup become apparent due to PT. This sentiment was mirrored by female midshipmen who said that their male peers often are dismissive of their abilities and that they are told by male upperclassmen, both at the Academy and during Sea Year (as part of the licensing and graduation requirements for USMMA, midshipmen spend a year at sea split between sophomore and junior years), that female midshipmen should not be in the engine room due to the physicality of the job. However, both male and female midshipmen said that if the individual performs well at their job and works hard, gender does not matter.

Many midshipman participants described a culture in which female midshipmen are expected to edit their attitudes to be “one of the boys.” Female participants described an environment where they were required to accept problematic language and actions to be considered part of the group. Although some female midshipmen mentioned that they do not have to participate in “guy talk” to be accepted at the Academy, there is generally a wide acceptance of the behavior.

The idea of being “one of the boys” was a topic discussed by both male and female midshipmen at the Academy. It was described as a setting in which a male-dominated environment leads to behaviors, such as inappropriate, sexualized language and gestures, problematic touching, and roughhousing, becoming commonplace in a professional environment. This acceptance of sexually harassing behaviors could increase the risk for sexual assault through the continuum of harm (OPA, 2019).

Many of these problematic beliefs—dismissing the achievements of female midshipmen and forcing them to adjust to be “one of the boys”—are perpetuated by several key entities. Several midshipmen and faculty members who participated in the focus groups said they believe that much information is passed between students at the Academy, either between peers or from

Many female midshipmen suggested more education and training on how to conduct, and advocate for, themselves during Sea Year when they may be the only female onboard a ship of men with a heavy drinking culture.

upperclassmen to younger students. The majority of participants noted that these beliefs and negative behaviors are mostly perpetuated by the personnel on ships during Sea Year and not by the Academy or students, which poses a unique challenge for the Academy, as it does not have the same authority over these individuals.

Prevention Through Intervention and Leadership

Prevention was a second major topic of discussion in the 2019 SAGR focus groups. Many participants shared similar ideas on bystander intervention as a method to increase prevention efforts.

Midshipmen in the focus groups participated in a bystander intervention activity, during which they were asked to identify which of a number of problematic behaviors they would and would not intervene in as well as which behaviors fall into the “gray area.” The midshipmen who participated generally expressed that they ranked behaviors by severity and were able to easily decide what they would intervene in. Virtually all midshipmen who participated said they would intervene in the most explicit behaviors like seeing someone being sexual assaulted, taking advantage of someone who drank too much or is passed out, sharing sexual pictures or videos of another midshipmen, and making repeated attempts to establish an unwanted relationship. On the other hand, there were some problematic behaviors that many participants said they would not intervene in such as horseplay or roughhousing, telling sexual jokes, or talking about sexual activity. Prior research suggests that acceptance of sexual harassment could be leading to higher rates of sexual assault through the continuum of harm (OPA, 2019).

Quite a few of the behaviors that the participants were asked about fell into what they described as the “gray area.”

Midshipmen who participated expressed that they would need more context to understand if something could be interpreted as risky or not. The participants tended to think that the more ambiguous behaviors fell into the gray area, such as touching someone or making sexual advances. Many participants expressed that they would have to determine if these behaviors were wanted or unwanted to know if they should step in and would use visual cues, such as body language and facial features, to help make that assessment. Several midshipmen who participated suggested that this appraisal of situations was sometimes difficult.

Context was described in several ways by the midshipmen who participated. It included situational factors, such as where they were, who was involved, and visual cues, such as body language and facial expressions.

Some midshipmen who participated expressed that their current bystander intervention training had not resonated with them. Several participants said that they need more specific trainings that are tailored to their unique situation to help them identify risky situations.

The midshipmen who participated frequently said they would intervene and felt they could do so confidently. Although many expressed that the training on bystander intervention was redundant, they said it improved their ability to intervene. Midshipmen, particularly the female midshipmen, recalled being taught to diffuse, distract, and delegate, which suggests more

subtle methods to address a situation rather than directly intervening. Some midshipmen suggested that they would benefit from more interactive trainings to address gaps in their understanding of bystander intervention.

Leadership at all levels plays a pivotal role in prevention efforts at the Academy. Many said that peer leaders try their best to address sexual assault and sexual harassment and are supportive of their peers, but they do not have enough authority to have a meaningful impact. Other participants indicated that there is a disconnect between what peer leaders say during official briefings and trainings and how they speak and act privately. Some participants noted peer leaders have trouble keeping incidents confidential, and some make jokes about the training or rules and perpetuate a belief in false reporting. Due to their unique position, peer leaders are often looked up to by other midshipmen. Those peer leaders who are setting bad examples may be contributing to the creation of the toxic culture.

At the time of the focus groups, senior leadership had recently transitioned to new personnel at the USMMA, and participants mentioned that they view the new leadership as doing a better job at addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment than in the past. Midshipmen who participated expressed that although they believe that current senior leaders work to address these issues, they also need to be more transparent with their decisions

Following concerns around a lack of a standardized policy for handling incidents of sexual assault, the Academy instituted the Stand Down of the Sea Year program from June 2016 into 2017. This was meant to improve reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment, but many midshipmen said they felt it was counterproductive and that it has prevented students from reporting and worsened gender relations at the Academy.

surrounding these topics and that there is a need for more concrete follow through. Several

participants said that more changes need to be put into place before they could say whether senior leaders are doing all they can.

Overall, senior leaders are generally providing strong positive messaging regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment and are taking steps toward prevention and improving the reporting process.

Reporting: SAPR, Barriers, and Opportunities

A third topic of discussion during the focus groups centered around the reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Specific to the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) offices and their personnel, many participants expressed a sense of hesitancy to seek their advice if they were ever a victim of sexual assault or sexual harassment. A number of midshipmen stated that the first person they would talk to would be their friends, not a SAPR professional. Mixed opinions existed on reporting to a SAPR representative; upperclassmen said they would likely be comfortable reporting to a SAPR representative, whereas underclassmen said they would not feel as comfortable, as they are not as familiar with the SAPR personnel.

With the turnover at the Academy and within the SAPR office, several midshipmen at the Academy suggested that there is a need to build rapport and have more face time with the personnel that work in the SAPR offices.

In the focus groups, midshipmen discussed several barriers to reporting. Barriers included fears of reprisal from their peers or the Academy and not being believed. Social stigmatization and ostracism are specifically discouraging for female midshipmen who said they believe that fellow midshipmen would shun them as a false

reporter. Many midshipmen noted the culture of loyalty to the Academy as another deterrent to reporting, as they do not want to impose a negative perception on the Academy for fear of another Stand Down or the shutting down of the Academy. Another major barrier the midshipmen discussed was the process itself, which many saw as ambiguous, long, and burdensome during an already stressful time, and it further encourages midshipmen to handle things at the lowest level.

Many midshipmen who participated suggested that reporting could be improved in numerous ways. Some stated that improving the disciplinary system would increase reporting, by instituting appropriate punishments based upon the severity of the offense rather than expulsion for all forms of offenses. Others expressed improving training on consent and emphasizing the difference between consent and coercion. Faculty and staff mentioned the need to inform incoming freshmen on how to report and why it is important to help improve the culture surrounding reporting before they are influenced by the existing culture.

Participants agreed in regard to the need for expulsion for offenses of sexual assault, but they also feel there should be other avenues for disciplinary action, such as remediation, for less serious offenses of sexual harassment rather than only expulsion.

Alcohol Use and Prevention Training

The last topic that the midshipmen discussed was alcohol use at the Academy. Many of the participants suggested that binge drinking is common and is used to either relieve stress or make up for the time during the week when they are unable to drink. Much like the discussions around

Midshipmen suggested reopening the on-campus pub and reinstating pub night (a social event for seniors to network with professionals) to promote responsible drinking. Midshipmen said this would help teach midshipmen how to safely drink, since pub night occurs on a school night and is meant for professional networking.

bystander intervention, many midshipmen who participated expressed that the training they receive on alcohol does not resonate with them.

Many of the midshipman participants indicated believing that the trainings they have received were not realistic, pointing to the focus on abstaining from alcohol use or ways in which

alcohol could negatively impact their career. The participants requested training that is more personalized to their unique situation, such as having a training taught by alumni or trainings that are focused on how to stay safe while drinking.

Conclusion

The questions asked during the *2019 SAGR* focus groups were developed with the results of the *2018 SAGR* survey and discussions with policy makers. The key themes and findings from this qualitative effort continue to contribute to the knowledge DoT has of the USMMA. These findings will be used to further inform the *2020 SAGR* survey as OPA continues to assist the department in their mission to eliminate sexual assault and sexual harassment at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

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Appendix A.

Focus Group Guide: Students

**DATA
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SOLUTIONS
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MAKERS**



Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Student Guide

Part 1: Introduction to the Focus Groups (8 min)

Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is _____. My colleague, _____, and I are here on behalf of the DoD Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA. While I will be leading today's discussion, _____ will be taking notes so that I can concentrate on what everyone is saying today.

I want to mention a couple of things before we get started.

- **This is intended to be a conversation among peers.** I know we are at a service academy and there are policies in place for how to act and when to speak, but for the purposes of this discussion I encourage you to speak freely as peers. I was hired to run this focus group so you won't hurt my feelings or offend me with whatever you say. I don't have a personal stake in these results.
- **There are no wrong answers.** As students at this academy you are the experts on your own perspective on the topics we plan to discuss, and I'm here to listen to you and get your thoughts. Please speak up, especially if what you have to say is different than what someone else is saying. You may represent what a lot of other people think.
- **We are not trying to come to consensus.** It's OK for there to be disagreement and in fact I welcome different points of view. Please share what is true for you. In the spirit of this, I ask that you remain respectful of each other's opinions during our discussion. Everyone in this room may see things differently and we want to hear everyone's perspective.
- **Your participation is completely voluntary,** meaning that you do not have to answer every question and you can withdraw from this study at any time. However, I do encourage your full participation today to ensure that I am getting a representative response.
- As I mentioned, my colleagues are here for notetaking purposes. **We will be recording comments but will not be recording names or other identifying information.** We are interested in what is being said, not who is saying what.
- We will be **audio-recording today's session.** The audio files will be transcribed and then destroyed after 90 days.
- **This is a non-attribution session.** To the extent permitted by law, OPA does not publish or share anything outside this room that can be attributed to any one of you specifically. We ask your cooperation in protecting the privacy of the comments made within this session by not saying anything that would identify you or other participants. For example, do not state your name. In addition, we also ask that you do not discuss the focus group proceedings after you leave.

Today, we will be discussing sensitive topics of gender-related issues, including sexual assault and harassment. I know this can be a fairly awkward topic to discuss but it is an important discussion to have. I want to emphasize that we are here to learn from you and your perceptions here, so please feel free to speak candidly.

1

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Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Student Guide

You were randomly selected for this focus group from the members of your class. Your knowledge and experiences offer valuable insight on these important issues. However, I do not want to discuss any specific cases of sexual assault or sexual harassment. I would like to discuss these issues more generally so we can provide guidance to leadership to create the best environment possible for you.

The information you provide today is a part of a larger study that will help DoD leadership to better understand gender-related issues here as well as at the other service academies.

In the interest of time, we may need to move on from one topic to get to another area of interest.

Does anyone have any questions?

Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to go around the room and get to know each other a little bit better.

Tell me a little bit about getting into the Academy. Who did you work with on getting your nomination?

Moderator Note: Probe on the screening process for the nomination.

Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Student Guide

Part 2: Gender Relations at the Academy, Leadership, and Resources (14 min)

Gender Relations

Warm up Question: Thinking about your day-to-day at the Academy, who do you interact with the most?

Warm up Question: Who do you consider some of the most influential people in your Academy life?

Probe: What makes them influential?

If someone were thinking about coming to <<Academy>>, what would you say to them about how men and women interact at the Academy?

Probe: What are some of the beliefs related to men and women here at the Academy?

Probe: Who influences some of your beliefs?

Grading Leadership

MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out grading exercise for Senior Leadership

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about Academy Senior Leadership, including the Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and Dean in your definition. How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual assault at the Academy?

I understand this grade may depend on an individual person, but let's start by grading leadership as a whole.

A B C D F

Probe: Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

Probe: What can they do to get a higher grade?

How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual harassment at the Academy?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy senior leadership handout AND hand out peer leadership exercise

Now I would like you to grade your peer leadership on the same issue. Peer leaders could include students higher in the chain of command or student unit leaders. What grade would you give your peer leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy?

A B C D F

Probe: Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault that sets them apart from others?

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Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Student Guide

Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

Probe: What can they do to get a higher grade?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy peer leadership handout

SAPR/SHARP Office

When I mention the SAPR/SHARP office, NOT the SAPR/SHARP training, what are some words that come to mind?

MODERATOR NOTE: Keep the conversation on resources and reporting away from training.

Probe: How comfortable are students going to the SAPR/SHARP office?

Probe: When it comes to SAPR/SHARP related issues, who do you consider as the go-to person?

Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Student Guide

Part 3: Rules and Culture at the Academy (18 min)

Culture

Now I would like to take some time to talk about the culture here at the Academy.

If you had to describe the culture here to someone back home, what would you tell them?

Official and Unofficial Rules

What are some of the official rules at the Academy that affect how men and women interact with each other?

Probe: What are some of the positive effects?

Probe: What are some of the negative effects?

What are some of the “unwritten” rules you learned but are not in any rule book?

Probe: How do some of these unwritten rules affect how men and women interact?

Probe: Who taught you those unwritten rules?

Probe: When did you learn these unwritten rules?

Probe: Who else was there when you learned some of these unwritten rules?

What are the unwritten rules for different class years?

What are the unwritten rules for women here?

What are the unwritten rules for men here?

Passing down the Culture

How would you describe the relationship between class years?

I would like you to think back to when you were a 4th year/4th class (for freshman: the start of the year), how did you learn to adapt to the Academy culture?

Probe: Who taught you about how the Academy works?

What are some of the lessons the upper-classmen taught you about life at the Academy?

Probe: What about the alumni?

Probe: What about parents?

Probe: What about sponsors?

Probe: How about the officers at the Academy?

Probe: How about the noncommissioned officers at the Academy?

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not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

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For Juniors and Seniors: What are some of the lessons you have taught the lower-classes about life at the Academy?

For Freshmen and Sophomores: Thinking about the upper-class years what are some of the beliefs they hold about the Academy?

Probe: What about the alumni?

Probe: What about parents?

Probe: What about sponsors?

Probe: How about the officers at the Academy?

Probe: How about the noncommissioned officers at the Academy?

For Juniors and Seniors: Thinking about the lower-class years, what are some of things they need to know about the Academy?

Changes over time

Thinking about before you came to the Academy, how were your views about gender relations different than they are now?

Probe: How much have your views about men changed?

Probe: How much have your views about women changed?

Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Student Guide

Part 4: Boundaries and Intervention (18 min)

Intervention

MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out exercise for Intervention

Please turn to the handout in front of you. When interacting with fellow cadets/midshipmen, leaders, friends, or coworkers we all have different boundaries.

You will see a line down the middle of the paper. I want that line to represent your boundary for when you would intervene in a situation you are witnessing. You will also see a set of stickers with words and phrases. I would like you to stick these words and phrases on either the left or the right side of the line: those that you would not intervene in on the left side and those that you would intervene in on the right side. I also understand that some things might be in a gray area, you can place those on the line.

When placing these stickers on the sheet, please think about witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that you do not know well.

LIST OF BEHAVIORS TO INTERVENE IN: telling sexual jokes, making sexual gestures, sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves, sharing sexual pictures or videos of another cadet/midshipman, bullying on social media, talking about their sexual activity, asking about sexual activity or preferences, making repeated attempts to establish a romantic or sexual relationship with the same person, touching someone, making comments based on gender, making sexual advances, horseplay or rough housing, taking advantage of someone who is passed out, taking advantage of someone who drank too much, sexually assaulting someone

Moderator Note: Participants should not try to move the stickers around during the discussion.

Probe: What behaviors did you place on the “would intervene” side?

Probe: Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side?

Probe: What behaviors did you place on the “would not intervene” side?

Probe: Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side.

Probe: (If there are stickers in “gray area”) What would move that sticker to the left or right side of the page?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect first handout and hand out second exercise for Intervention

Now look at the next handout. I would like you to do the same exercise but imagine that you are witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that you know well.

Probe: For those who had scenarios changed sides, tell me about your thought process.

Probe: How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a romantic relationship?

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Probe: How might the alleged behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a higher class than you?

Probe: How might the alleged behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a lower class than you?

Probe: How might the alleged behavior change sides if you knew the person who allegedly perpetrated the act, but not the potentially victimized person?

Probe: How might the alleged behavior change sides if you knew the potentially victimized person, but not the person who perpetrated the act?

Moderator Note: Collect the handouts.

What are some intervention techniques you have been taught that you would use if you felt someone was crossing someone else's boundary?

Probe: Which behaviors would you use that technique for?

What are some intervention techniques you have been taught that you would use if you felt someone was crossing your boundary?

Probe: Which behaviors would you use that technique for?

Thinking about the intervention training you have received, which techniques do you think would be more realistic to use in real life?

Probe: What are some of the reasons you would or would not use that method?

How does intervention change when you are off-campus versus on-campus?

Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Student Guide

Part 5: #MeToo and Reporting (15 min)

#metoo at the Academy

Starting in 2017 a number of high profile sexual misconduct cases gained attention in the media, causing #metoo, and other hashtags to take off.

Now, we could spend our entire focus group speaking about this issue, however, I would like us to focus our conversation here at the Academy rather than speaking about our Nation as a whole.

How has #metoo affected the Academy?

Probe: What types of conversations have you heard around #metoo here at the academy?

Probe: What, if any, are some positive effects you have seen here at the Academy?

Probe: What, if any, are some negative consequences of #metoo, here at the Academy?

Barriers to Reporting

Now I would like to speak about the reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment here at <<Academy>>.

Here at <<Academy>> the number of people that made an official report of sexual assault last school year was far less than the number of incidents that occur. This includes both cadets/midshipmen who make restricted and unrestricted reports. Based on your knowledge of the Academy and your fellow students, how would you close this gap?

Probe: What are some things the Academy can do to get those reluctant to report the options they need?

Probe: What do you think causes the difference between the number of reports versus the number of incidents?

Probe: What specific barriers are there to reporting incidents of sexual assault?

Probe: Are there any barriers specific to class year?

Probe: How might there be a difference in reporting for men versus women?

Moderator note: If false reporting does not come up naturally, probe around the topic. Example probes: What kind of things do people say about false reporting here at the academy? How prevalent do you think false reporting is at the academy? What steps are in place to prevent false reporting? How does this impact reporting overall/true reports?

There was also a gap between the official reports of sexual harassment and the number of incidents that occur.

Probe: What are the barriers for reporting sexual harassment?

Probe: Do cadets/midshipmen know how to report sexual harassment?

Probe: How are these different then barriers to reporting sexual assault?

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Student Guide

Probe: Tell me about the type of training you receive on sexual harassment. Who conducted the training?
What did you learn?

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Part 6: Alcohol (12 min)

Alcohol on Campus

Now I would like to speak a bit about alcohol use.

How would you describe the drinking culture at the Academy?

You know the ins and outs of this campus better than anyone else: where to go and when to go there. You also probably know more about what goes on here at the Academy than anyone else.

What I would like for you to do now is take a look at this map of your Academy's campus. You will also see a page of stickers.

Moderator Note: Hold up the map and pages of stickers in view of the participants. Hand out materials.

Moderator Note: pass out stickers

Now I would like you to use these stickers to represent alcohol use. I'd like you to think of places where people go to drink alcohol and place these stickers on the map where you think these experiences get out of hand or become potentially dangerous.

Moderator Note: If more clarification is needed: Where alcohol use may lead to sexual harassment. Where it may lead to sexual assault.

What are some of the locations you placed your stickers?

Probe: Talk me through your thought process.

Probe: How would this map look different for different class years?

What are some locations where drinking can get out of hand, or out of control?

Probe: How could the Academy help you from feeling unsafe or keep things from getting out of hand?

Probe: How can the Academy help create a healthy understanding and culture around alcohol?

Moderator Note: collect map

Alcohol Training

Here at the Academy you receive a variety of trainings. I would like to take some time to talk about the trainings you receive on alcohol.

What are some things your trainings teach you regarding alcohol usage?

Probe: How do you and your fellow cadets/midshipmen view these trainings?

Probe: Which parts of these trainings do you find memorable?

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Student Guide

Probe: Which parts of the training miss the mark?

Probe: Which changes would you make to your alcohol trainings?

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Student Guide

Part 7: Risky Behaviors (Remaining Time)

Mapping Feeling Unsafe

So we just spoke about times you may feel unsafe around alcohol use, or when things get out of hand involving alcohol, but now I'd like to talk about times you might feel unsafe generally.

Moderator Note: Hold up the map and pages of stickers in view of the participants. Hand out materials.

Now These stickers represent times you may feel generally unsafe or uncomfortable, but outside of when you may participate in risky or dangerous training activities such as weapons training.

If there's a location off Academy grounds you'd like to place a sticker on, please place the sticker on the white margin, and label it with a pen to the best of your ability. Place as many or as few stickers as you like. Are there any questions before we begin?

Moderator Note: Give participants time to place stickers

What are some of the locations you placed your stickers?

Probe: Talk me through your thought process.

Probe: How would this map look different for different class years?

Probe: How would this map look different for men and women?

What are some locations where you feel that things can get out of hand, or out of control?

Probe: What are some things about these environments that contribute to this feeling?

How could these stickers be removed? What would need to happen?

What could the Academy do to make these areas feel safer/more comfortable?

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Part 8: Conclusion (2 min)

That wraps up my prepared questions for today, but if you have anything you would like to add to today's discussion I open the floor to you.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Your insights have provided valuable feedback.

Appendix B.

Focus Group Guide: Staff and Faculty

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Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Staff Guide

Part 1: Introduction to the Focus Groups (8 min)

Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is _____. My colleague, _____, and I are here on behalf of the DoD Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA. While I will be leading today's discussion _____ will be taking notes, so that I can concentrate on what everyone is saying today.

I want to mention a couple of things before we get started.

- **This is intended to be a conversation among peers.** I was hired to run this focus group so you won't hurt my feelings or offend me with whatever you say. I don't have a personal stake in these results.
- **There are no wrong answers.** As staff members at this academy you know a lot about the topics we plan to discuss, and I'm here to listen to you and get your perspective. Please speak up, especially if what you have to say is different than what someone else is saying. You may represent what a lot of other people think.
- **We are not trying to come to consensus.** It's OK for there to be disagreement and in fact I welcome different points of view. Please share what is true for you. In the spirit of this, I ask that you remain respectful of each other's opinions during our discussion. Everyone in this room may see things differently and we want to hear everyone's perspective.
- **Your participation is completely voluntary,** meaning that you do not have to answer every question and you can withdraw from this study at any time. However, I do encourage your full participation today to ensure that I am getting a representative response.
- As I mentioned, my colleagues are here for notetaking purposes. **We will be recording comments but will not be recording names or other identifying information.** We are interested in what is being said, not who is saying what.
- We will be **audio-recording today's session.** The audio files will be transcribed and then destroyed after 90 days.
- **This is a non-attribution session.** To the extent permitted by law, OPA does not publish or share anything outside this room that can be attributed to any one of you specifically. We ask your cooperation in protecting the privacy of the comments made within this session by not saying anything that would identify you or other participants. For example, do not state your name. In addition, we also ask that you do not discuss the focus group proceedings after you leave.

Today, we will be discussing sensitive topics of gender-related issues, including sexual assault and harassment. I know this can be a fairly awkward topic to discuss but it is an important discussion to have. I want to emphasize that we are here to learn from you and your perceptions here, so please feel free to speak candidly.

Your knowledge and experiences offer valuable insight on these important issues. However, I do not want to discuss any specific cases of sexual assault or sexual harassment. I would like to discuss these issues more generally

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Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Staff Guide

so we can provide guidance to leadership to create the best environment possible for the students here at the Academy.

The information you provide today is a part of a larger study that will help DoD leadership to better understand gender-related issues here as well as at the other service academies.

In the interest of time, we may need to move on from one topic to get to another area of interest.

Does anyone have any questions?

Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to go around the room and get to know each other a little bit better.

What is something you like to do here at <<Academy>> in your off time?

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Staff Guide

Part 2: Gender Relations at the Academy, Leadership, and Resources (18 min)

Gender Relations

Warm up Question: Thinking about your day-to-day at the Academy, what is your role here at the Academy?

Warm up Question: Who do you consider some of the most influential people for cadets'/midshipmen's Academy life?

Probe: What makes them influential?

When it comes to topics related to men and women here at the Academy, who influences the cadets'/midshipmen's beliefs?

Grading Leadership

MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out grading exercise for Senior Leadership

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about Academy Senior Leadership, including the Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and Dean in your definition. How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual assault at the Academy? How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual harassment at the Academy?

I understand this grade may depend on an individual person, but let's start by grading leadership as a whole.

A B C D F

Probe: Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault that sets them apart from others?

Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

Probe: What can they do to get a higher grade?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy senior leadership handout AND hand out peer leadership exercise

Now I would like you to grade cadet/midshipmen leadership on the same issue. Peer leaders could include students higher in the chain of command, student unit leaders, and battalion commanders. What grade would you give cadet/midshipmen leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual assault at the Academy?

What grade would you give cadet/midshipmen leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual harassment at the Academy?

A B C D F

Probe: Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

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Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault that sets them apart from others?

Probe: What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

Probe: What can they do to get a higher grade?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy cadet/midshipmen peer leadership handout

SAPR/SHARP Office

When I mention the SAPR/SHARP office, NOT the SAPR/SHARP training, what are some words that come to mind?

MODERATOR NOTE: Keep the conversation on resources and reporting and separate from training.

Probe: How comfortable are students going to the SAPR/SHARP office?

Probe: Are you comfortable sending students to the SAPR/SHARP office?

Probe: When it comes to SAPR/SHARP related issues, who do you consider as the go-to person? Why?

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol
Staff Guide

Part 3: Rules and Culture at the Academy (18 min)

Culture

Now I would like to take some time to talk about the culture here at the Academy.

If you had to describe the culture here to someone that had never been stationed at the Academy, what would you tell them?

Official and Unofficial Rules

What are some of the official rules at the Academy that affect how men and women interact together?

Probe: What are some of the positive effects?

Probe: What are some of the negative effects?

What are some of the “unwritten” rules the cadets/midshipmen learn to do but are not in any rule book?

Probe: How do some of these unwritten rules affect how men and women interact together?

Probe: Who teaches the cadet/midshipmen those unwritten rules?

Probe: When do they learn these unwritten rules?

Probe: Who else was there when they learned some of these unwritten rules?

What are the unwritten rules for different class years?

What are the unwritten rules for women here?

What are some of the unwritten rules for men here?

How would you describe the relationship between class years?

Culture

What role do you play in Academy culture?

What are some of the things you try to teach cadets/midshipmen during their time at the Academy?

What aspects of Academy culture do you think should change?

Probe: What are some ways the Academy can encourage this change?

#metoo at the Academy

Starting in 2017 a number of high profile sexual misconduct cases gained attention in the media, causing #metoo, and other hashtags to take off.

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not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

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Now, we could spend our entire focus group speaking about this issue, however, I would like us to focus our conversation here at the Academy rather than speaking about our Nation as a whole.

How has #metoo affected the Academy?

Probe: What types of conversations have you heard around #metoo here at the academy?

Probe: What, if any, are some positive effects you have seen here at the Academy?

Probe: What, if any, are some negative consequences of #metoo, here at the Academy?

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Part 4: Reporting (15 minutes)

Role in Reporting

What is your role in the reporting process?

What tools do you use to fulfill your role?

What additional resources would you want that you do not currently have to help assist you in the reporting process?

Probe: Without speaking about a specific case, what are some of the challenges to interacting with potential victims?

Probe: What about potential perpetrators?

Barriers to Reporting

Now I would like to speak about the reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment here at <<Academy>>.

Here at <<Academy>> the number of people that made an official report of sexual assault last school year was far less than the number of incidents that occur. This includes both cadets/midshipmen who make restricted and unrestricted reports. Based on your knowledge of the Academy and your fellow students, how would you close this gap?

Probe: What are some things the Academy can do to get those reluctant to report the options they need?

Probe: What do you think causes the difference between the number of reports versus the number of incidents?

Probe: What specific barriers are there to reporting incidents of sexual assault?

Probe: Are there any barriers specific to class year?

Probe: How might there be a difference in reporting for men versus women?

Moderator note: If false reporting does not come up naturally, probe around the topic. Example probes: What kind of things do people say about false reporting here at the academy? How prevalent do you think false reporting is at the academy? What steps are in place to prevent false reporting? How does this impact reporting overall/true reports?

There was also a gap between the official reports of sexual harassment and the number of incidents that occur.

Probe: What are the barriers for reporting sexual harassment?

Probe: Do cadets/midshipmen know how to report sexual harassment?

Probe: How are these different than barriers to reporting sexual assault?

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Part 5: Boundaries and Intervention (12 min)

Intervention

MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out exercise for Intervention

Please turn to the handout in front of you. When interacting with cadets/midshipmen, leaders, friends, or coworkers we all have different boundaries.

You will see a line down the middle of the paper. I want that line to represent where you think most cadets'/midshipmen's boundary for when they would intervene in a situation they are witnessing. You will also see a set of stickers with words and phrases. I would like you to stick these words and phrases on either the left or the right side of the line: those that they would not intervene in on the left side and those that they would intervene in on the right side. I also understand that some things might be in a gray area, you can place those on the line.

When placing these stickers on the sheet please think about a cadet/midshipman witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that they do not know well.

LIST OF BEHAVIORS TO INTERVENE IN: telling sexual jokes, making sexual gestures, sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves, sharing sexual pictures or videos of another cadet/midshipman, bullying on social media, talking about their sexual activity, asking about sexual activity or preferences, making repeated attempts to establish a romantic or sexual relationship with the same person, touching someone, making comments based on gender, making sexual advances, horseplay or rough housing, taking advantage of someone who is passed out, taking advantage of someone who drank too much, sexually assaulting someone

Moderator Note: Participants should not try to move the stickers around during the discussion.

Probe: What behaviors did you place on the "would intervene" side?

Probe: Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side?

Probe: What behaviors did you place on the "would not intervene" side?

Probe: Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side.

Probe: (If there are stickers in "gray area") What would move that sticker to the left or right side of the page?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect first handout and hand out second exercise for Intervention

Now look at the next handout. I would like you to do the same exercise, but imagine that the cadet/midshipman is witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that they know well.

Probe: For those who had scenarios changed sides, tell me about your thought process.

Probe: How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a romantic relationship?

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Probe: How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were upper-classmen?

Probe: How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were lower-classmen?

Probe: How might the behavior change sides if the witnessing cadet/midshipmen knew the person who allegedly perpetrated the act, but not the potentially victimized person?

Probe: How might the behavior change sides if the witnessing cadet/midshipmen knew the potentially victimized person, but not the person who allegedly perpetrated the act?

Moderator Note: Collect the handouts.

What are some intervention techniques cadets/midshipmen have been taught that they would use if they felt someone was crossing their boundary?

Probe: Which behaviors would they use that technique for?

What are some intervention techniques cadets/midshipmen have been taught that they would use if they felt that they were witnessing a situation that was crossing someone else's boundary?

Probe: Which behaviors would they use that technique for?

Thinking about the intervention training they have received, what techniques do you think would be more realistic to use in real life?

Probe: What are some of the reasons you think they would or would not use that method.

How does intervention change when cadets/midshipmen are off-campus versus on-campus?

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Part 6: Training (16 min)

Alcohol Training

Here at the Academy there are a variety of trainings. I would like to take some time to talk about some of those trainings.

What are some trainings students receive regarding alcohol usage?

Probe: How do cadets/midshipmen view these trainings?

Probe: What from these trainings do you think are impactful?

Probe: What messages miss the mark?

Probe: What changes would you make to the alcohol trainings?

SAPR/SHARP Training

Now I would like to speak about SAPR/SHARP trainings.

What is your role in SAPR/SHARP trainings?

What are some things that you find most helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual assault?

What are some things that you find most helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual harassment?

What are some things that you find least helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual assault?

What are some things that you find least helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual harassment?

What are some things people need to know, but don't, regarding sexual assault?

What are some things people need to know, but don't, regarding sexual harassment?

Thinking about the trainings the students receive, how effective are they in preparing cadets/midshipmen to be an officer?

Probe: How can the SAPR/SHARP trainings better prepare cadets/midshipmen to be an officer?

Probe: If a future subordinate came to them to discuss being the victim of unwanted sexual contact, how has the training they received helped them to assist that person?

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Part 7: Conclusion (3 min)

That wraps up my prepared questions for today, but if you have anything you would like to add to today's discussion I open the floor to you.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Your insights have provided valuable feedback.

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Appendix C. Handouts

DATA
DRIVEN
SOLUTIONS
FOR
DECISION
MAKERS





Ground Rules for Discussion

Thank you for participating in this important focus group. We will follow a few ground rules for the focus group:

- This is intended to be a **conversation among peers**
- There are **no wrong answers**
- We are **not** trying to **come to a consensus**
- Your participation is completely **voluntary**
- The conversation will be **audio-recorded**
- This is a **non-attribution** session
- No side conversations

Preserving the privacy and confidentiality of focus group participants is a fundamental principle for any successful data collection program, and the Department of Defense (DoD) Office of People Analytics (OPA) strives to maintain and protect the identity of every individual who participates in any of our data collection efforts. To accomplish this goal, OPA uses procedures and protocols that protect respondent confidentiality to the extent permitted by all federal laws and statutes.

Participation in this focus group is voluntary; however, maximum participation is encouraged so that data will be complete and representative. The data collection procedures strive to maintain the anonymity of all participants; no one from OPA will know who has been selected and no record will be made of those who participate in any given session. Further, no comments will be kept in the written notes that could be linked to any individual participant. The risk to you is accidental or unintentional disclosure of any identifying data you provide during the session or other disclosures required by law. However, OPA has a number of policies and procedures in place to preserve the anonymity of focus group data to the extent allowed by law, and all potentially identifying information has been removed.



Definitions

Sexual Harassment:

Involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when:

- Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a favorable decision.
- Submission to or rejection of such conduct by a person is used as a basis for decisions affecting that person.
- Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.

This definition emphasizes that conduct need not result in concrete psychological harm to the victim, but rather need only be so severe or pervasive that a reasonable person would perceive, and the victim does perceive, the environment as hostile or offensive.

Unwanted Sexual Contact:

Unwanted sexual contact refers to a range of activities including uninvited and unwelcome completed or attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy (oral or anal sex), penetration by an object, and the unwanted touching of genitalia and other sexually related areas of the body. Uninvited and unwelcome implies lack of consent. Article 120 of the UCMJ defines "consent" as "a freely given agreement to the conduct at issue by a competent person." The term is further explained as:

- "An expression of lack of consent through words or conduct means there is no consent.
- Lack of verbal or physical resistance or submission resulting from the use of force, threat of force, or placing another person in fear does not constitute consent.
- A current or previous dating or social or sexual relationship by itself or the manner of dress of the person involved with the accused in the conduct at issue shall not constitute consent.
- A sleeping, unconscious, or incompetent person cannot consent.
- A person cannot consent to force causing or likely to cause death or grievous bodily harm or to being rendered unconscious.
- A person cannot consent while under threat or fear or under the circumstances described in subparagraph (C) or (D) of subsection (b)(1). (Under the definition of sexual assault, these are (C) making fraudulent representation that the sexual act serves a professional purpose and (D) inducing a belief by any artifice, pretense, or concealment that the person is another person).
- Lack of consent may be inferred based on the circumstances of the offense. All the surrounding circumstances are to be considered in determining whether a person gave consent, or whether a person did not resist or ceased to resist only because of another person's actions."



We appreciate your participation in this focus group. In the event you would like to discuss issues related to this focus group with someone from OPA during (or after) our visit to the U.S. Military Academy, please contact Dr. Ashlea Klahr at (571) 372-2278 or DSN 372-2278.

If you wish to provide feedback regarding this focus group process or the focus group content, please send us an e-mail at: SA-Survey@mail.mil. If you know of others who might like to contact a member of the OPA team, please share this information with them.

In April 2011, the Department of Defense launched the DoD Safe Helpline to provide confidential, live, one-on-one expert advice to victims of sexual assault. Available 24/7, users can click, call or text to access Safe Helpline services:

CLICK: Logging on to www.SafeHelpline.org allows users to receive live, one-on-one confidential help with a trained professional through a secure instant-messaging format. The website also provides vital information about recovering from and reporting sexual assault.

CALL: Calling the telephone hotline (877) 995-5247 allows users to speak with trained Safe Helpline staff for access to resources and support. Safe Helpline staff can also transfer callers to installation or base Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs)/On-call SAPR Victim Advocates (VAs), civilian rape crisis centers or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

TEXT: Texting their location to 55-247 (inside the U.S.) or (202) 470-5546 (outside the U.S.) allows users to receive automated contact information for the SARC at their installation or base.

If you feel uncomfortable or uneasy after participating in this focus group, and/or if you are a survivor of sexual assault, or have experienced sexual harassment or stalking, we strongly encourage you to contact the following resources that are available to you:

Sexual Assault Response Coordinator: (516) 462-3207 – Cell Available 24/7 HOTLINE

Nassau County Sexual Assault Hotline: (516) 542-0404 (Hotline)

Chaplain: (516) 726-5709

Academy EMS Ambulance: (516) 726-5858

North Shore Hospital: (516) 562-4125 (Emergency)

Academy Public Safety: (516) 773-5847

Grade for Senior Leadership

(Includes Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and Dean)

A

B

C

D

F

Grade for Peer Leadership

A

B

C

D

F

I would not intervene	I would intervene

- Telling sexual jokes
- Making sexual gestures
- Sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves
- Sharing sexual pictures or videos of another cadet/midshipman
- Talking about their sexual activity
- Asking about sexual activity or preferences
- Making repeated attempts to establish an unwanted romantic or sexual relationship with the same person
- Touching someone
- Making comments based on gender
- Making sexual advances
- Horseplay or rough housing
- Taking advantage of someone who is passed out
- Taking advantage of someone who drank too much
- Sexually assaulting someone

Behaviors Key



Alcohol use occurs



Alcohol use gets out of hand

Behaviors Key

	Sharing of explicit imagery
	Feeling unsafe
	Staring/Gawking
	Verbal harassment
	Unwanted touching
	Unwanted Sexual Contact



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