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## Hurtigruten

*Marit Finnanger discusses the Norwegian cruise operator's unique formula to develop cruise talent*

**MARITIME SIMULATION**  
THE NEXT BIG THING

**CREW CONNECTIVITY**  
INTERNET ACCESS  
CRITICAL TO RECRUITING

**WORKBOAT ACADEMY**  
COMING OF AGE

# Workboat Academy: Coming of Age in Challenging Economy



*The unique, apprenticeship-based format attracts both quality candidates and employers, changing forever the way North American workboat operators grow loyal talent.*

**By Joseph Keefe**

\*All images courtesy PMI / the workboat Academy

**A**t a time when workboat operators perhaps are looking to cut costs, preserve the bottom line and some, merely survive in a deepening down cycle for many sector stakeholders, a curious thing is happening in Seattle – and beyond. A different kind of maritime training scheme has emerged from humble roots and ten years of sweat equity; one which also promises a different kind of officer who possesses the skill sets necessary to hit the ground running from day one. Aptly named the Workboat Academy, the ten-year old school is slowly changing the way North America develops brown water maritime talent.

According to Workboat Academy Director Marja Pietersom, the first Workboat Academy program started in 2006 at the Pacific Maritime Institute (PMI) in Seattle with the guidance of the Pacific Marine Towing Industry Partners, with the goal of providing a hybrid approach of Hawsepape and Academia. “The results have been astonishing,” says Pietersom.

Back in 2006, the traditional Maritime Academies – then as now – were of course producing licensed mariners. But, says WBA’s director, at that time, those graduates were not necessarily interested in working on a towing vessel, nor were the majority of academies catering to the towing industry. Beyond this, those graduates who did stick their toes into the murky world of brown water were, through no fault of their

own, largely and at first unprepared for what they were about to be tasked with.

Over time, that part has changed as the traditional academies shifted gears to provide curriculum to better reflect the true nature of the U.S. merchant marine – one which reflects the fact that as many as 39,500 of our collective 40,000 merchant hulls can be classified as brown water, shallow draft tonnage. And, while they (the one federal and six state maritime academies) now produce workboat mates and engineers in good numbers and with much improved quality, these schools now find themselves competing with the Workboat Academy. And, for very good reason.

## **In the Beginning**

The Pacific Marine Towing Industry Partners (PMTIP) was formed, which was a non-partisan collaboration between business, education, labor, government, the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council and Economic Development Council. As a result of this collaborative effort, the nascent Workboat Academy initially received tremendous local support to identify issues and work towards finding a solution to the impending workforce shortage issue in the Workboat Industry.

Graduates of the Workboat Academy are provided an STCW



Officer in Charge of a Navigational Watch endorsement, a Mate 500 or 1600 GRT Oceans License (Depending on sear-time) and an able seafarer endorsement.

Pietersom explains, “At that time, the median age of Deck Officers was early/mid fifties and there was a very real concern to fill the upcoming slots with capable, well trained mariners. The Workboat Academy has grown over the 10 years of its existence, but more importantly has gained the respect of companies and mariners.” That happened, in part, because of a different demographic of candidates being sought and catered to by the WBA. But, in the end, insists Pietersom, it was the method of bringing these students along that has made all the difference.

After the success of the pilot program and the first full program of Workboat Academy-Seattle at Pacific Maritime Institute, the Workboat Academy expanded to include PMI’s sister campus in Baltimore; Workboat Academy-Baltimore started in 2007 at the Maritime Institute for Technology and Graduate Studies. Workboat Academy-Baltimore, like WBA-Seattle, focused primarily on the Towboat Industry.

In order to effectively serve the three coasts, and responding to growing industry demand, WBA searched for a training facility in the Gulf of Mexico in 2012. The Workboat Academy at the new Houston Marine facility in Kenner, Louisiana was eventually inaugurated. That’s not to say there haven’t been

some bumps along the way. There were.

According to Pietersom, WBA-New Orleans focuses on the Offshore Supply Industry and was very successful until the downturn in the oil patch. She told MarPro in February, “We have temporarily suspended enrollment, but are looking forward to starting the next program when the oil Industry picks back up again.”

## Apples & Oranges

After 2002, it became more difficult for mariners to climb up the hawsepipe because of many reasons – regulatory changes and pressures not the least of them. At the same time, the median age in industry had climbed to the mid-fifties. Pietersom explains further, “There was a genuine concern, especially in the Towboat Industry, that the knowledge from the experienced Mates and Masters who were close to retirement was not being passed on to a younger generation.” Out of these concerns, the idea of the apprenticeship program was born.

Pietersom continues, “All of industry was involved; Companies, Governmental Organizations, Labor, Maritime Associations, Schools, etc. We feel fortunate that our Partner Companies are much vested in the education of their cadets and are in support of this program; they continue to be on our Program Advisory Committee (PAC).”

This is not your grandfather's maritime school. The Workboat Academy's program length is 28 months. The apprentice alternates between academic and sea phases throughout the program. An intensive hybrid vocational program, blending classroom learning with simulation and on the job training with a company who selects the apprentice, it is also an intensively competitive program, which yields measurable results.

- *Along with the change in how candidates are taught, the program also caters to a much different demographic than the typical maritime academy. According to Pietersom, the program is well suited for candidates who:*
- *are not interested in a 4 year college;*
- *have gone to college, but are not happy in their chosen field;*
- *have worked on yachts and recreational vessels and now want to pursue the professional route;*
- *have been in the service and want to transition into the Maritime Industry.*

Those candidates also tend to be a bit older than typical maritime academy cadets, who sometimes enter school as young as 17 years of age. Pietersom insists, "We have found that retention clearly starts with selection, so our selection process is a key difference between us and a State Academy. We have been very successful with recruits who transitioned from the Military into our program. These man and women understand what life on the water entails; they understand chain of command, being away from home and usually have a base of maritime knowledge acquired during their time in the NAVY, USCG or ARMY. In our Baltimore program, close to 50% of our cadets are veterans." In other words: the perfect example of a successful military-to-maritime transition.

Apprentices go through a rigorous interview process, both with the academy and the Partner Company. Once the cadets are selected by a Company they remain with that company for the duration of the program. A sense of loyalty also then

develops. "90+ % of our apprentices remain with their Partner Company upon successful completion of the program. The Partner companies train the apprentice on workboat specific elements right from the start," adds WBA's Director.

### Participating Partners, Measurable Metrics

The PAC meets yearly and assesses that the program is addressing the ever increasing demands in the wheelhouse. Many Partner Companies' suggestions have been implemented over the years. Ten years after its humble inception, Pietersom says that more than 40 Partner Companies are involved, divided over the three U.S. Coasts, as well as the Great Lakes. She adds, "As this is a 500-1600 GRT program, our Partner Companies are primarily operating Tugboats, Offshore Supply Vessels, Research Vessels and Salvage Vessels."

These last ten years have seen measurable growth, with WBA averaging 12 apprentices on three campuses in each class, each catered to by faculty that maintain a student-instructor ratio of about 12-1. Simulator based ratios are further reduced to 6-1. Ultimately, however, enrollment is entirely dependent on available billets in industry.

2012 WBA Graduate Cameron Northrop, now working for OSG, told MarPro, "The apprenticeship relationship between the cadet and partner company allows both parties to get to know each other and grow together. The schedule of the program is excellent and the order of classes is logical. I went straight from License Prep to sit for my license; two days after getting my license, I was sailing as a full time employee."

Beyond the military-to-maritime aspect of the program, WBA has the same issues as everyone else when it comes to attracting a more diverse student body. Pietersom laments, "We have seen a small increase in women entering the program, especially on our Seattle campus. Each class of 12 has had at least one woman enrolled. Unfortunately, we are not as diverse as I would like to see; it seems challenging to attract minorities to our Industry."

The apprentice aspect of the program, combined with a mature and focused student body, and guided by a curriculum that more closely identifies with the so-called 'European model,' has produced a solid generation of mariners. Pietersom explains, "During the final simulation exercise, we invite Partner Companies to observe the students during their final SIM exercise, for which they write the voyage plan and execute the voyage solo in the tug simulator. In order to put metrics to their performance, we recently put the cadets towards the end of their studies through our Navigational Skill Assessment Program (NSAP). In our last NSAP, the majority of our cadets performed as well as some of above-average scoring Deck Officers (from other sectors)."



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– Workboat Academy Director  
Marja Pietersom



### Just Over the Horizon

As 2016 kicks into high gear in a choppy business climate, further dragged under by the sagging fortunes of the offshore oil & gas industry, WBA is hardly sitting still, waiting for the next rebound. To that end, Seattle Central College, Seattle Maritime Academy, the Maritime Institute of Technology & Graduate Studies-Pacific Maritime Institute and the Workboat Academy have received a \$5 million American Apprenticeship Innovation Grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to help build a new apprenticeship program.

According to Foss, through the grant, more 150 engineers will be trained over the next five years, both in Seattle and Baltimore. Notably, the engineering program will mirror Workboat Academy’s deck apprenticeship. Engineering cadets will blend time in the classroom with simulation, and apply this knowledge to real work aboard vessels. The candidate’s license will depend on the type of partner company vessels and the routes where cadets gain sea time as an apprentice.

“This partnership exists to respond to the growing need for more trained marine engineers,” says Scott Merritt, Senior Vice President, Harbor Services. “Working together, we aim to train hundreds, if not thousands, of new apprentices in the maritime and advanced manufacturing fields.”

Marja Pietersom adds, “In the first year of the program, we will train approximately 4 of Foss apprentices, but as mentioned earlier, there were many companies involved in receiving this grant, who were part of the original PMTIP since 2006. Some of those operating companies in addition to Foss Maritime Company included Western Towboat Company, Crowley Marine Services, Dunlap Towing Company, Sause Bros., Harley Marine Services and Kirby Offshore Marine.”

Partner Companies who joined the Workboat Academy over the years have

also pledged similar support towards this effort and will each take between two and six apprentices during the first year – 2017, according to Pietersom – the new program will be up and running.

2016 is and will be a difficult and exciting year. With the oil prices at an all-time low and some vessels laid up due to the petroleum crisis, it becomes harder for Partner Companies to justify taking an apprentice. Those partners, nevertheless, remain effusive in their praise. Dale Sause, with Sause Bros., a staunch supporter of WBA, said “It is our contention that graduates of the PMI program entering our fleet may be the most well-rounded and thoroughly prepared mates available to the industry today.”

Pietersom therefore remains optimistic. “We are fortunate that many of our Partner Companies feel that this is the right time to train new mariners, but not all are able to do so. The effects have been hitting our Partner Companies in the Gulf of Mexico the hardest and some had to close their doors.” On the other hand, if the barriers to entry in this sector weren’t enough to prevent the WBA from standing up more than ten years ago, then it is likely that today’s economy also won’t stop it from not only surviving, but also thriving – and continuing to innovate.

