

Students flock to flight schools as airline pilots retire

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TULSA – The phones are ringing off the wall at the University of Oklahoma Department of Aviation and at flight schools across the state.

A spike in airline pilot retirements is fueling demand for young up-and-coming pilots, and students are breaking down the door of opportunity, said local and state pilot training schools.

Several factors are at play, said Ken Carson, director of the OU Department of Aviation.

“Our prospective student inquiries have increased over the last eight months due to the fact that people are becoming aware the airlines are hiring,” Carson said on Friday. “Pilot retirements are starting in earnest at all the major airlines and will increase yearly for the next decade and then some.”

Mandatory retirement has been set at 65 by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and an entire generation of senior pilots is going away, said Bill Christiansen, founder and owner of Christiansen Aviation Inc. at Tulsa’s Jones/Riverside Airport.

“This is due to massive retirements at the major airlines – Delta, United, American, Southwest,” Christiansen said. “Plus, the expansion of the global economy along with increased global traffic is creating significant upward career movement within the pilot ranks from regional airlines, corporate flight jobs and instructor positions.”

For pilots, there has been no better time in the last 50 years for a man or woman entering the career to start out, Carson said.

“The demand for professional pilots going forward is already great and will continue to grow steadily each year for the next 14 years,” Carson said.

Kevin Gerfen echoed the point. Gerfen is senior academic counselor at Oklahoma State University and the lead academic adviser for the aviation program at the school.

“We are seeing the increases,” Gerfen said.

Growth in the airline market worldwide is also creating demand for pilots, said Yuri Milner, owner of Riverside Flight Center.

Carson, a national board member of Aviation Accreditation Board International, recalled that at a recent national meeting of Delta, United and American airline executives confirmed that they are hiring an average 50 pilots a month this year.

“The number will only go up,” Carson said.

Boeing has forecast a need for pilots over the next two decades. The airplane maker estimated that there will be a need for 533,000 new commercial pilots and 584,000 maintenance technicians worldwide. The projections fuel speculation about a pilot shortage.

Officials at the Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology in Tulsa recognized the need months ago and last year revamped the curriculum, said Aimee Brown.

“Changes in airline regulations are creating dramatic changes at the school level,” Brown said.

The school closed during the process, then reopened in the third quarter. Today there are more than 100 students in its program.

“We streamlined it, allowing a pilot in training to be able to earn their flight hours at a quicker pace,” Brown said.

Spartan has a career path program agreement with Envoy Airlines. The pipeline program allows a student to become a regional airline pilot while committing to work for the airline. The student pilots will be able to build time toward earning their airline transport license. Pilots are guaranteed an interview with American Airlines once completing requirements at Envoy Airlines.

“The biggest shortage is expected to be in the regional airline carriers as airlines will be pulling pilots up from the regional carriers,” Brown said.

In the past, the business model for airlines was hiring talent from those pilots retiring from the armed forces or those finishing their 10-year pilot training commitment from the military, Carson said.

“They were hiring pilots and flight instructors, or regional airline pilots who were 28 years old to 34 years old and had 2,500 to 3,000 flight hours on average,” Carson said.

The military is not the source of pilots it once was, which is putting pressure on flight schools to fill cockpits for regional airlines, Gerfen said.

“The Vietnam-era pilots are retiring,” Gerfen said.

At OU, aviation flying numbers dropped 25 percent to 35 percent after the Great Recession, Carson said. From a high of 12,000 flight hours logged in 2008, the number of hours logged tumbled to about 8,000.

“But since 2010 we have been steady increase each year,” Carson said, referring to the number of flight hours logged. In 2013, it was 8,200 hours and as of July, with the end of summer school, we’ve logged 9,500 hours this year. We expect to see large bump coming through the rest of the year.”

Of the 180 students at OU, about 110 are in the professional pilot or aviation management programs, Carson said.

The number of aviation students at Oklahoma State University increased 12 percent from 2010 to this past springs, said Gerfen. The number of students enrolled this spring was 239, compared to 213 four years ago.

Because of the retirement age restriction and the difficulty going through airports today, the growth of corporate travel is mushrooming.

People want to get around but avoid the airlines, Christiansen said.

“The worse the airline experience gets, the more people are looking to corporate travel,” Christiansen said. “They want in the small jets and fractional business aircraft.”

Carson agreed that there are ample opportunities and significant growth in corporate and business aviation.

“When you take all of the corporate airplanes in the U.S. they make up the largest U.S. airline as there are more planes in the business aviation sector than all the planes in the major airlines combined,” Carson said. “It is a difference type of flying – more on call and on-demand but it can be awarding.”

Beginning pay for regional pilots is typically \$20,000 to \$25,000, Brown said.

However, there are many variables, Browns said.

A newly trained certified pilot can work as a corporate pilot, with a charter airline, a regional carrier, agriculture or as a shuttle pilot for a company, Brown said.

“They each have different pay ranges, career potential and benefits,” Brown said.

Riverside Flight Center has also grown over the last few years to 80 students. Of those, 75 are international students, Milner said. The program had 120 students before the recession.

“I do not even advertise in America,” Milner said. “Our students come from 65 nations.”

Led by Asian nations, there is greater demand worldwide for planes and pilots as people are earning enough extra cash to travel, Milner said.

“There are greater opportunities for pilots to get into wide-body jets outside the U.S., where it is harder to become a pilot,” Milner said. “There is must bigger growth in airlines overseas because the industry is just getting off the ground.”

There are other jobs in aviation, including medical evacuation and agriculture, Carson said.

There is also the potential for unmanned aviation vehicles, of which Oklahoma State University plays a role.