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## Airway Science (AWS): A Promise Kept or an Opportunity Missed?

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## EDITORIAL

### *AIRWAY SCIENCE (AWS): A PROMISE KEPT OR AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED?*

It seems like only yesterday that J. Lynx Helms, then administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), proposed a plan to develop a baccalaureate-level education program intended to better prepare future FAA managers. The proposed demonstration project, the Airway Science Curriculum, was proposed in the Federal Register on March 18, 1983.

The "plan" was to use the academic expertise and assistance of the University Aviation Association (UAA) to develop a model curriculum for the future FAA employee. One of the initial driving forces behind the AWS initiative was that the FAA had found that only 25% of the entire agency workforce had any education beyond the high school degree. With approximately 75% of this workforce lacking any college-level education, many of these employees were very narrowly focused in their occupation area and it was consequently difficult to move such individuals into management position because they did not have the necessary leadership and supervisory skills. The answer to the dilemma was to be the AWS program, with five major areas of study. These areas were to be Airway Science Management, Airway Computer Science, Aircraft Systems Management, Airway Electronics, and Aviation Maintenance Management. Enter the UAA.

By early 1983, a jointly approved FAA and UAA curriculum was being developed and several schools were in the very initial phases of proposal submission. With the UAA at the helm, AWS was off and running. The next several years seemed to go by in a flash, with schools being visited, programs being evaluated, and programs being AWS approved. Following quickly on the heels of these initiatives was a grants program (which had several iterations of competitive and non-competitive phases), which in some cases required matching institutional funds but did demand the AWS designation.

However, all was not well in Washington and as the first decade of AWS came to a close, several offices in the federal government were asking hard questions. Perhaps the most compelling of these was, "If we started

AWS for FAA employee enhancement, how many FAA employees are AWS graduates?" Tough days were ahead also with the Clinton administration's extensive budget-balancing effort. Suddenly the future of AWS was in doubt. In fact, the most recent permutation of the story is the formation of the AWS Transition Plan. This "sunset" plan calls for the UAA, under the auspices of the AWS, to make the last campus visit to an AWS. And then Airway Science will just go away? Well, perhaps there is more of an AWS footprint on the aviation industry and academia than first meets the eye.

If we look at the whole AWS program, has there been any change over the last 10 years as a result of Lynx Helm's and UAA's vision? Some bureaucratic nay-sayers might quip that there is little evidence that AWS has improved the state of FAA employee education levels. Others might say that few AWS-trained college graduates have found their way onto FAA payrolls. If you are looking only at hard numbers, you miss the point of the whole exercise.

What has really happened has been a complete reworking and revitalization of how the collegiate aviation community (now the largest provider of future aviation professionals) and the federal government, particularly the FAA, view each other. Ten years ago, the FAA had little knowledge of what really went on in university aviation classrooms in Cahokia, Carbondale, and Columbus. Now, the FAA, the UAA, and the entire collegiate aeronautical community know who, what, why, and how these entities further their respective goals and missions. Some schools have been more fortunate than others in their receipt of funds and grants, but, on the other hand, some schools (particularly the minority

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institutions) have received a much-needed infusion of funds as well as other assistance.

The university aviation community, both the two- and four-year schools, will never quite be the same as a result of AWS; and the change has only been for the good. All of us have probably discovered that when we collectively work toward a goal, we bring the strength of all to the fore; AWS has been a catalyst in this area. The promise has been kept if one can see that the original intent of the AWS initiative was really to strengthen the education of tomorrow's aviation professionals, whether

headed to Washington or to another place in the burgeoning air transportation industry. Anyone touched in any way by AWS is better; Helms was on the correct path although the course was not as originally plotted.

But wait a minute, if the federal government is concerned about a squandering of our tax dollars, the General Accounting Office had better take a look at the Microwave Landing System (MLS). MLS has drained the budget of \$140 million and we have virtually nothing to show for it: now *there* is a missed opportunity!

HRL