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## Challenges and Opportunities in Recruiting Middle School Students into Aviation Courses

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**FORUM*****CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN RECRUITING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INTO AVIATION CAREERS***

Angela R. Olson

It is no mystery that some people are enthralled with aviation from a very young age. These people are the dreamers. They live in a world with only windows, not walls. Not all people come to aviation through a world of windows. Many young adults live in a world with only walls. It is our job as aviation educators to allow young adults to see past these walls and into a world of possibilities in aviation. Two pertinent questions arise: When is the right time to start mentoring young adults to numerous career opportunities in aviation and how should this be accomplished?

Throughout the last decade, researchers have found that career exploration and awareness for students should begin prior to high school (Castellano, Stringfield & Stone, 2002; Fouad, 1995; O'Brien, et. al, 1999). According to a document titled *Preparing Young People for Tomorrow's Workplace* published by the National Alliance of Business (1999), "Middle school is an ideal age at which to expose students to the challenging world of work" (p. 5). When a career track is identified, students are able to make better class choices in high school. This is particularly important when choosing a technical career path such as aviation. Students who have identified a career path can better identify the education requirements needed to achieve this goal. This, perhaps, is even more important for students who are classified as at-risk. When at-risk students are encouraged and motivated by a career, they become more focused on their future (Castellano, Stringfield & Stone, 2002) and have a greater probability of completing high school and continuing on to post-secondary education.

The U.S. Department of Education has developed a grant program appropriately (and perhaps ironically) named GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). Specifically, the GEAR-UP program's mission is to increase and prepare the number of low-income students for entering post-secondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Glasgow Middle School in Fairfax County (Virginia) uses articulated lesson plans from Career Connections Across the Curriculum for Middle School students (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2001) at each grade level that includes topics ranging from specific career opportunities to more complex activities including personal timelines, electronic budgeting, performance evaluations, etc.

Other formalized initiatives such as Individual Career Plan and Career Passport are supporting career

exploration for young adults. These initiatives (generally initiated by the local school districts) have been effective and can be further enhanced by the support of aviation professionals in the area. Local professionals can lend their time and expertise by participating in career days, community partnerships, career/college planning workshops and job shadowing. To provide young adults with the best information and opportunities that are both timely and relevant in career exploration, local school districts should not be expected to sustain these programs alone.

*Marketing Aviation Careers to the Public.* The public at large is constantly bombarded with advertising and other promotional media. This overload is problematic because marketing aviation programs and careers to aviation appropriate audiences can be daunting at best. Family appropriate activities (e.g., airport day fly-ins, air shows, airplane rides, etc.) can be effective in drawing favorable attention to career opportunities in the field of aviation. Formal organizations like Aviation Exploring Posts or Civil Air Patrol Cadet programs that actively target and involve youth in aviation related activities are excellent venues to stimulate self-esteem and enthusiasm for further involvement in aviation. In marketing aviation opportunities to the public, it is evident a "one size fits all" model does not work. For example, programs need to be developed that tailor to the needs of various groups including students who may be categorized as high risk or come from low-income families. There is and continues to be great opportunities to promote aviation opportunities with various underrepresented minority groups in order to attract them into rewarding careers in aviation. For example, Nebraska's Native American Outreach program (started in 1996) includes an annual *Aeronautics Day* at the Sioux City airport that provides a highly interactive opportunity for Native American youth to learn about careers in aviation.

### ***Recruiting Middle School Students***

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***Sustaining Student Interest in Aviation.*** Perhaps one of the greatest marketing tools to attract and sustain interest in aviation is the airplane itself. Many aviation professionals and educators may have been smitten with the love of flight sometime during their youth. Some of these individuals are destined to fly while others develop an interest in non-flight opportunities in the field of aviation. Assisting youth in “getting the flying bug” can provide the impetus in cultivating the next generation of aviation professionals although one major challenge in sustaining a student’s interest in aviation (particularly for flight careers) is exorbitant training costs. For middle school students who may contemplate flight lessons, the realization (by students or their parents) of a huge financial commitment followed by years of debt often provides a strong negative experience. Ultimately, this can easily sway students to avoid a career as a pilot or to completely disassociate with any further

thoughts of pursuing other non-flying aviation career opportunities altogether.

Public perception of aviation career opportunities does not seem overly positive. Jet fuel is becoming cost prohibitive and five airlines (Champion, Aloha, ATA, Skyway and Skybus) have been or are in the process of closing their doors. Historically, the negative publicity generated by the media towards the airlines has been almost relentless and assuredly provides a barrier in fostering a favorable outlook for young adults considering a career in aviation. It is our job as aviation educators to work through this negative publicity and public perception by supporting and encouraging young adults who are contemplating a career in aviation including those individuals who have never considered even the possibility. We need to mentor in our community to allow young adults a glimpse of what is beyond the walls of their world. →

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