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Cost and Perceived Value in Obtaining a Bachelor's Degree in Aviation Professional Flight: Will Collegiate Aviation Price Themselves Out of the Market with Technologically Advanced Aircraft?

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FORUM

***COST AND PERCEIVED VALUE IN OBTAINING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE
IN AVIATION PROFESSIONAL FLIGHT:
WILL COLLEGIATE AVIATION PRICE THEMSELVES OUT OF THE MARKET
WITH TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED AIRCRAFT?***

Michael D. Ferguson and Jeffrey A. Johnson

Traditional academic baccalaureate degree programs have become increasingly expensive throughout the US. For collegiate aviation students, this news is even more daunting. Students obtaining a bachelor's degree in aviation with a professional flight emphasis face unique challenges in today's colleges and universities not typified by a majority of 4-year degree programs. Perhaps the most distinctive challenge lays in the financial arena of cost and return on investment for a bachelor's degree in professional flight. This article will examine the various barriers associated with a typical bachelor's degree aviation student majoring in professional flight.

For the professional flight major, sustained flight training represents a significant additional cost that is necessary if a student is to complete an aviation baccalaureate degree. In addition, other expenses such as tuition, room, board and other miscellaneous living expenses can be extremely cost prohibitive even with relatively new financial aid programs geared specifically to cover flight training costs. Also, any increased expenditures for aviation fuel, insurance, and other operating costs associated with aircraft are often passed along to students, many who are already on limited budgets. Is it possible that collegiate aviation flight programs may eventually lose or at least be hindered in the ability to sustain their existence with an ample supply of students with the ability (or willingness) to pay?

This issue may also be further exacerbated by the fact that typical entry-level flying jobs are often characterized by relatively low pay. For students who are aspiring to fly professionally for the airlines, the issue of low pay still remains, at least for the first few years of employment. With regard to students aspiring to corporate flight jobs, current vacancies in the corporate pilot job market are much more likely to be filled by experienced furloughed airline pilots, military pilots, or by seasoned corporate pilots who may be looking for employment elsewhere. Will some current and potential future professional flight majors be discouraged by this knowledge to the point that they would consider discontinuing their flight education? If this type of perception starts to permeate the public at large, then collegiate aviation programs must consider evaluating their flight education specializations

with respect to cost and industry readiness. Appropriate adjustments will need to be made in order to ensure long-term viability.

Although cost is a significant factor, it is not the only obstacle facing baccalaureate professional flight programs. Other problems still in existence today include perception (or lack thereof) by the public of collegiate aviation programs. Past research over the years has suggested that public perception of collegiate aviation has been problematic. In many cases, members of the general public often do not realize that an aviation degree is even offered in post-secondary education. This factor creates challenges for many collegiate aviation programs with regards to recruitment and perhaps even retention.

With respect to careers in aviation, it would seem that most people do not consider that other vibrant career opportunities presently exist in aviation beyond the airlines and regrettably, the public may often use the current state of the airlines as an indicator of careers in the entire field of aviation. Indeed, some members of the public (and even some new aviation students) mistakenly base their views of the status of the aviation industry as a whole on the current economic crisis that has ensnared many of the airlines. Typically, a majority of entering students majoring in professional flight aspire to fly for a regional or major airline although some will change their career focus to corporate, military, or other specializations within the aviation industry. As it is often the case, collegiate aviation has traditionally used marketing practices to attract students into the airlines and historically, this strategy has typically worked well. However, at a time when much of the airline

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industry holds a degree of instability and uncertainty, what worked for recruiting students in the past may not be as effective in the future.

Another noteworthy trend that is present in some collegiate aviation programs is the acquisition of new generation aircraft for training fleets. Cirrus, Diamond, and new Garmin-equipped Cessna aircraft are some of the products that are being introduced into some programs. This practice of obtaining new aircraft does present somewhat of a paradoxical situation. For example, obtaining new aircraft may draw students into a professional flight program utilizing new generation glass cockpit technologies presents students with the opportunity to gain valuable flight experience and knowledge by learning technologically-advanced systems before they enter the industry as career pilots. The technological transfer from high tech flight training aircraft to the regional airlines should become much

more seamless. Conversely, the new generation of aircraft are often much more expensive to operate. Acquiring new aircraft results in higher costs from increased insurance premiums for hull-loss and more expensive rental rates for students. Insurance rates aside, some students may be reluctant or not even able to pay the higher costs that are associated with the hourly rates of new aircraft. While it is extremely important that students have the opportunity to learn in aircraft possessing advanced flight technologies, it is also important that collegiate aviation programs do everything that they can to provide these opportunities in a manner that is balanced and perhaps incremental in nature, while not placing student retention in jeopardy. In this way, collegiate aviation programs may be less likely to price themselves out of affordability and attractiveness to potential students and their families. →

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