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FORUM

**THE RESPECTABILITY OF COLLEGIATE AVIATION AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE:
HAVE WE ARRIVED YET?**

Jeff Johnson

With a growing popularity of new programs since the latter part of the 20th century, collegiate aviation has made significant gains in US colleges and universities particularly through University Aviation Association (UAA) membership and program accreditation from the Council on Aviation Accreditation (CAA). However, with these gains there appears to be significant lingering problems and a formidable question must be asked: Has collegiate aviation really made any significant strides in combating a negative public perception and misunderstanding in the last 30 years? Undoubtedly, collegiate aviation has made significant gains in program quality in less than 100 years, but seemingly has not arrived unscathed in the public relations arena. How can collegiate aviation's public relations problem be described? Quite possibly, collegiate aviation's perception could be classified as a two-fold problem ranging from *uninformed* to *limited*.

The respectability and perception problem could be further viewed from a three-fold audience perspective: (a) traditional academicians; (b) employees in the aviation industry; and (c) the public at large. Each group seems to have problems that are inherently unique. Unlike traditional academic disciplines, collegiate aviation does not have a longstanding research and publication history. Because aviation is not a pure science, traditional academicians (particularly those with a strong emphasis on research in the hard sciences) may view aviation research at the university level with some degree of suspicion or outright skepticism. In comparing the longevity of other traditional academic disciplines such as math, physics, and history, collegiate aviation is still relatively young in US colleges and universities. Previous studies (Matson, 1977; NewMyer, 1987; Taylor, 1990; Truitt & Kaps, 1995; Johnson, 1997) over a 30 year period of time have suggested that traditional academia's perception of collegiate aviation has been somewhat dismal with only questionable improvement. Over time, several mid to high level administrators from collegiate aviation have commented on traditional academicians' perceptions of collegiate aviation. According to the late John Odegard, former Dean of UND Aerospace at the University of North Dakota, "The acceptability of aviation in the academic community has been painfully slow, but improvement appears to be rapidly on the upswing" (Matson, 1977, p. 178). More than a decade later, former Academic Dean J. L. Carkeet of Florida Institute of Technology stated, "The time has come to dispel the misconception among education traditionalists that those of us in the aviation profession possess only a Joe's Flying Patch, 'kick the tires and light the fires' mentality" (Taylor,

1990, p. 33). In the last decade, former Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University President Steven Sliwa, argued that aviation has still not reached acceptance in higher education (*University Aviation Association, 1997*).

Employees in the aviation industry can also create problems with the perception of collegiate aviation and dispelling ignorance remains an ongoing battle. In April of this year, a midlevel manager for a large, well known regional airline (in a code share agreement with a legacy carrier) accepted a position in collegiate aviation and was astonished to learn that several colleagues within the airline did not know that collegiate aviation programs even existed! To further exacerbate the problem, the inaccurate assumption was also made that aviation (as an academic discipline) existed only in trade schools. Other false perceptions seemed to be problematic with airline personnel. For example, the airline manager also cited that colleagues were clearly misguided in thinking that Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University was only a specialized trade school and not a "real" university.

Collegiate aviation program graduates and current aviation employees play a role in having an impact (favorable or unfavorable) on the perception of collegiate aviation. In the area of specialized flight training, some aviation graduates have complained that a bachelor's degree in aviation is "just a degree" to fly airplanes. Perhaps the same argument can be made for the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) which is another specialized area of study as "just a degree" to help patients get well. Does this demean the importance of the degree? Regional airlines have recognized that the most important skill in modern day pilots is not an abundance of flying hours, but the ability to

Collegiate Aviation

work well with flight crew members, other employees, and passengers (*Regional Airline World*, 2005). The modern day airline pilot needs to be part meteorologist, mechanic, counselor, public relations specialist, security specialist, record keeper, computer programmer, and flight systems manager. Collegiate aviation should go well beyond training pilots to educating pilots and preparing them for the rigors of industry. Educating students in other collegiate aviation specialty area (e.g., airline management, airport operations, air traffic control, etc.) is equally important as well.

Employment opportunities in the airline industry also present unique challenges to collegiate aviation. Many job opportunities for aviation graduates within the airlines do not require an aviation baccalaureate degree. As a result, many aviation degree holders compete with other baccalaureate degree holders. In the area of airline management, many job descriptions will state, "A bachelor's degree in aviation, business, finance, or accounting is required." Ironically, many airline positions with legacy carriers employ individuals with degrees outside of aviation. For an analyst position with Northwest Airlines, a "bachelor's degree in finance/accounting or technical related field" (Northwest Airlines, 2005, Qualifications section) is required. Ideally, should Northwest Airlines require a bachelor's degree in aviation management with a finance or accounting specialization?

Perhaps the greatest challenge with collegiate aviation perception lies with the public at large. Communicating the simple understanding that collegiate aviation actually even exists in the eyes of the public seems to be an ongoing challenge. At the local level, many

communities seem to be unaware of or even ambivalent toward their local collegiate aviation program. Perhaps collegiate aviation needs to do an even better job reaching out to their communities in promoting their programs and careers in the aviation industry and demonstrating the benefits to the local college/university and community. Starting an Aviation Explorers group is one example of an excellent outreach to local area schools. If improvement is still on the upswing, can the perception of collegiate aviation be effectively measured? From an academic perspective, Florida Institute of Technology started a Ph.D. program in Science Education with an Aeronautics option in 1999 (Florida Institute of Technology, 2005, Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Science Education—Aeronautics section) which will surely contribute to enhancing the credibility of aviation as an academic discipline. Why? Currently, the terminal degree in aviation is the master's degree. When the terminal degree in aviation becomes the doctorate in aviation, the entire academic field should be more inline with traditional academic fields. This may help to enhance the credibility of collegiate aviation as a legitimate field of academic endeavor. However, Kaps and Phillips (2004) argued that aviation programs may never enjoy the status of hard sciences. Strong outreach to the community and aviation industry must be a priority if collegiate aviation's identity is to improve. Symbiotic relationships between collegiate aviation and the aviation industry, combined with effective communication of collegiate aviation's mission, is imperative if collegiate aviation expects to be on equal footing with other traditional academic areas.

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