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FORUM

BEYOND 2000: THE UNDISCOVERED FRONTIER OF A CAREER AS AN AVIATION PROFESSOR

Jeffrey A. Johnson

In an era in which aviation research and scholarly activities have increased immensely (Truitt & Kaps, 1995), the demand for qualified aviation faculty members will inevitably increase. As we approach the dawn of a new century and beyond, qualified aviation faculty members may be in short supply. Perhaps equally disturbing, the literature on current and projected needs for aviation faculty is notably silent. Uncertainties in aviation faculty recruitment issues may be further exacerbated by retirements, an inadequate supply of new entrants into the field, and increased demands for more aviation faculty members and researchers.

Ask aviation students about their career plans and the responses are often varied, but somewhat typical: "I want to be an airline pilot" or "I'm thinking about airport management" or occasionally "I'd like to be an accident investigator." But what about preparing a future generation of aviation professors? Are aviation educators proactive in their efforts to encourage aviation students and industry representatives to consider a career as an aviation professor?

As an undergraduate aviation student attending the University of North Dakota in the late 1980s, the author had many opportunities to discuss career goals with other aviation students. After talking with a seemingly countless number of students in a three-year period, the final count was in for the number of students planning a career as an aviation professor -- zero! Surely this number was not an accurate reflection of those who desired to move to the other side of the classroom podium -- or was it? Several years later, after attending Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (Daytona Beach campus), the count was in again -- this time, one student indicated some interest in becoming an aviation professor.

Since then, that student has left the aviation field altogether.

The problem does not seem to end with students. Perhaps just as alarming as an apparent lack of student interest in pursuing a career as an aviation professor is the number of aviation faculty members currently facing retirement. In a doctoral dissertation conducted by Johnson (1997), 12% of the University Aviation Association (UAA) institutional members who responded to a survey questionnaire were 61 years of age or older. Although this figure may not be indicative of all aviation faculty members, it seemingly provides the impetus for further research in present and projected faculty recruitment needs.

Postsecondary aviation programs need qualified faculty members to achieve and maintain prosperity. If aviation programs do not continue to thrive, it will affect the aviation industry's ability to hire qualified graduates. The time to prepare a future generation of teachers and scholars to serve industry, government, and the educational sectors does not lie in the future -- the time is now.□

Jeffrey A. Johnson earned a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration at Bowling Green State University, a Master of Aeronautical Science degree at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, and a B.S. in Aeronautical Studies from the University of North Dakota. He is an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Aviation Institute.

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