

Business aviation program takes flight coast to coast

Since 2002, aviation students at St. Cloud State University have been privy to something few other university aviation programs offer: on-site experience with the world of business aviation operations. And now, Tara Harl, assistant professor in the Department of Aviation who initiated the program here, is engaged in an initiative to launch the program nationwide.

"It's really a compliment to our program," Harl said of the initiative, which is modeled on Aviation 413: Business and General Aviation Operations. The class puts groups of students into "on-site labs" with area companies that own or use aircraft for their business operations.

Business aviation, which does not include airline or military aviation, logs more than 18 million hours and 110 million passengers annually. For many Minnesota-based industries, business aviation is an integral part of operations, whether such operations include marketing, production or corporate administration.

"They fly executives, middle management, and tech support people to wherever they're needed," Harl said indicating that for some businesses, "wherever" may be half a world away.

Although today's communications technologies have amazing capabilities, an eight-year study conducted on behalf of the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) shows that a business's ability to provide an actual human presence through business aviation has tremendous positive impact.

The study, which involved 335 S&P 500 companies that own or share one or more business aircraft, indicated that the use of business aircraft improved the companies' performances in forming new relationships and alliances, attending critical meetings, closing transactions, expanding into new markets and increasing contact with customers.

In fact, the study reported that chief financial officers of the companies often stated that people involved in all aspects of the companies' missions had noted the positive impact of using business aircraft.

And piloting those aircraft is just one of many careers business aviation offers.

"For every aircraft that launches, there are seven to eight people behind it," Harl said, indicating everyone from flight mechanics and avionics technicians to flight managers.

Harl's own experience in business aviation spans 23 years and ranges from piloting corporate jets to owning and operating a flight management company.

And her experience tells her that the list of careers that can fill a niche in business aviation is almost endless.

"You can apply any career to business aviation," she said, citing caterers, accountants, computer technologists, aero medical evacuation personnel, teachers, trainers and security workers.

"Just to name a few," she said.

Since the number of aviation professors with business aviation experience is small, students are often surprised to learn that such career possibilities exist, she said.

As her students complete their initial visits to participating businesses in the Twin Cities and elsewhere, she often hears such comments as "Why have we never heard of this world before?"

The decision to open that world to her students was the result of a July 2002 "brainstorming session in a corporate hangar at the St. Paul Airport," by Harl and two friends who are corporate aviation leaders.

The subsequent telephone calls to regional business aviation leaders for help resulted in "strong affirmation and support," she said, and so the initial program took shape.

On site at Cargill, General Dynamics, General Mills, Target, 3M and others during fall semester 2002, students working in groups were to research and solve one of the "real world" challenges facing that specific company. These included jet acquisition issues, aircraft and organizational merger issues and pilot succession and hiring issues.

But the lab assignments of the class vary each semester "according to what (the) industry considers vital for them," Harl said, adding that the students are always impressed that business professionals take time to "open their doors, turn off beepers and cell phones and 'reach back' to them."

The NBAA-funded initiative to give students at other collegiate aviation programs the opportunity to explore business aviation came from Harl's membership on the Corporate Aviation Management Committee, a standing committee of the NBAA, and the advocacy of some of its enthusiastic supporters.

"The first step was getting it blessed by the board of directors for NBAA," Harl said. "Dave Maib, being a member for that board, went to bat for us as an advocate." Maib, who is with Target Flight, personally works with her students.

"The second step is opening further talks with the other interested universities; then we'll begin meetings with those facilities," she said.

Hampton (Virginia) University, Ohio State, Purdue (Indiana) and Eastern Michigan are communicating with her about incorporating business aviation into their programs. Another school showing interest at this time is Central Missouri State.

The initiative is placing the SCSU aviation program on the "national radar" both within collegiate aviation and industry, Harl said.

For more information regarding the aviation department, please go online to <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/aviation/>.