

## MONDAY BUSINESS

THE AGENDA: AVIATION



ANDY CROSS Denver Post

**THE AVIATION** job market is complicated by strict federal regulations and what an industry executive calls the “poach chain” pertaining to flight instructors. Above, United Airlines pilots Capt. Tom Spratt, left, and Dean McDavid sit in the cockpit of a Boeing 747 at Denver International Airport in October.

# Industry faces a pilot shortage

## Airlines raid flight schools, creating a dearth of instructors to train next wave

By Andrew Van Dam

Airlines’ insatiable demand for pilots threatens to sabotage flight schools’ ability to train new ones. Carriers are raising wages and hoarding every available pilot — including the instructors schools rely on to teach incoming students.

The very pilot pipeline that is supposed to meet decades of projected labor shortfalls is being squeezed. According to a report from the Government Accountability Office, some schools have been forced to scale back operations or turn down qualified students because they do not have enough instructors.

Michael Farley has been teaching at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts for 18 years. Applications for his program are up, but the aviation department chair is so short on instructors, he has had to cap the number of students in his program.

“In my tenure, this is unprecedented,” Farley said, reflecting on the speed with which airlines were hiring recent graduates.

The problem is rooted in how collegiate aviation is structured. Courses such as meteorology and aviation law are taught by academic faculty, but flight instructors are usually experienced students or graduates looking to gain flight hours before heading off to the commercial big leagues.

Details vary between vocational, two-year and four-year schools, but an aspiring pilot at a typical accredited institution needs about 250 to 300 hours to become a certified instructor. Those 250 hours used to be all you needed to join an airline as a co-pilot. In some countries, it still is.

Since 2013, most students have had to fly 1,000 to 1,500 hours to qualify for work at a passenger airline. Even before that, the GAO report found, airlines expected as much as 2,000 hours of experience from entry-level employees, depending on the job market.

So, where do young pilots get the other 1,000 hours or so? Some do aerial photography or fly banners, but the overwhelming majority work at their aviation college or an affiliated institution as a flight instructor. It is built into their career path.



JOHN TLUMACKI Boston Globe

**SCOTT PACE**, a flight instructor at East Coast Aero, stands on the wing of a plane used in his business in Bedford, Mass., in 2016. Airlines are increasingly poaching instructors to meet their demand for pilots.

In an ideal world, pilots work first as instructors at their flight school, then as co-pilots and pilots at a regional airline (such as Cape Air or SkyWest Airlines) and finally as co-pilots and pilots at a major airline (such as Southwest Airlines or United Airlines).

Demand for pilots swings hard. In 2009, as American families and businesses slashed their air-travel budgets amid the Great Recession and furloughs swept the industry, major airlines hired just 30 pilots, according to pilot-advisory service Future & Active Pilot Advisors, or FAPA.aero. Last year, the number of hires soared to 5,000. This year it will be even higher.

When the market was slow, students stuck around, and instructors were cheap and abundant. But when hiring took off, they vanished into jobs flying passenger or cargo jets.

When employees complain about worker shortages, the obvious reply is employees would not be so hard to find if businesses just offered more money.

The aviation job market

is complicated by strict federal regulations and what FAPA’s president, Louis Smith, called the “poach chain.”

Flight-school instructors are almost all flight-school students, which means they came into aviation because they wanted to sit in the cockpit of a mammoth Boeing or Airbus with “Delta” or “American” stamped on the side, not baby-sit their peers in a single-engine Cessna.

From Day 1, they are focused on getting to a major airline and building seniority, the all-important number that rules route assignments, pay scales and access to standby tickets. Those major airlines poach from the regional airlines, and regional airlines poach from flight schools.

Life is hard at the bottom of the poach chain, where flight schools compete for instructors. U.S. Aviation Academy, a large training outfit that partners with Tarrant County College in Texas, offers new instructors a \$2,500 bonus and \$27 to \$35 an hour — a wage it has had to raise about 15% in recent months.

“We think we’re solving the problem,” said Scott Sykes, who handles business development for the academy. “We’ve got a full-time recruiting staff that are out there nationwide beating the streets.”

Their pay is competitive with regional airlines, where new pilots earn an estimated \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year. But when a 21-year-old instructor gets poached, the schools are not competing with the regional carrier. They are competing with the promise of a 44-year career in a high-profile, lionized position that can pay more than \$200,000 a year and offers excellent benefits.

Aspiring pilot Cade Glass, of Midlothian, Va., plans on becoming an instructor to help pay for flight school and said he has considered a career in aviation education, but the 13-year-old already understands the cold calculus involved.

“If airlines are paying like they are today, with nearly \$20,000 signing bonuses? I’m going to go there every time,” Cade said.

As flight schools pay instructors more, they are

raising their prices to compensate. It is a fraught decision in an industry that worried it is charging too much to attract the quantity and diversity of students that airlines need.

Federal student aid, although available at many aviation schools, typically does not stretch to cover flight-school costs, which are boosted by investments in aircraft, fuel and facilities — not to mention the instructors. The GAO found that most pilot programs charge more than \$50,000 for flight training alone.

Not all students have access to the wealth or credit needed to fill the gap between student aid and the flight-school bill, even if they can be reasonably sure — in this job market, at least — that they will earn it back. Schools told the GAO that, after instructor attrition, their biggest obstacle to training enough pilots was their own high price tag.

Cade’s first choice of flight school — Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, where he went to aviation camp and learned the ropes from student instructors —

costs \$48,000 a year. That does not include the cumulative \$40,000 to \$60,000 the school expects students to spend on flight training while they are there.

“If you don’t have the financial backing, it’s difficult,” Cade said.

The quickest solution to the instructor shortage would be another downturn in the cyclical industry, which would reduce demand for new pilots and flood the market with laid-off and furloughed workers, but nobody is advocating that. It seems unlikely given the industry’s bullish projections that predict the pilot shortfall will extend for decades.

In the short term, schools have partnered with regional airlines and struck deals that enable pilots to earn seniority while they are instructing. They have also offered what Tom Hiltner, FAPA’s vice president of operations, called “indentured servitude packages,” in which students promise to stick around longer in exchange for advanced flight training. The GAO found at least one school is trying to negotiate non-poaching agreements with regional airlines.

Hiltner said some schools have also intensified recruitment of nontraditional instructors including retired pilots, pilots who might not meet medical restrictions for airline certification, and pilots who care less about globe-trotting and more about working regular hours and sleeping in their own beds each night.

It is still a challenge. Farley, of Bridgewater State University, said that he had not been able to hire nontraditional instructors and was not sure they would be a long-term solution to his instructor shortage. People join aviation because they want to work for airlines, and aviation schools just cannot compete in terms of pay or prestige.

The shortages are growing acute as airlines hire away the people who would otherwise be training more people for them to hire — and Farley does not see a solution coming until and unless the bottleneck works all the way up the poach chain.

“When it affects the major airlines, we might see some changes,” Farley said.

Van Dam writes for the Washington Post.