Our Wings: Aviation Science and College Learning

Andrew C. Holman
Bridgewater State College, a2holman@bridgew.edu

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Andrew Holman is Professor of History and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.

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The news this Spring was hard to miss by anyone who spent much time on campus: Bridgewater State College opened its own, new Aviation Training Center in a neat, one-story building near the New Bedford airport. There, since January 2009, the College has offered Aviation Science majors classroom learning and uniform, rigorous flight training by its own instructors in one of nine leased GMA 11E aircraft recently repainted in BSC-Bear crimson and white. The change means that incoming aviation majors will no longer be sent out to several local airports for instruction; as President Mohler Faria noted in his address at the Center’s opening ceremony, “We now have the ability to control and ensure the highest quality in our flight training.”

On campus, the news was met with a curious mixed reaction of celebration and wonder. “I think the new facility is a big step in the College reaching out to students and other businesses in the community,” second-year aviation science major Dennis Murphy said. One social scientist’s reaction took a different tack: “Now we have our own airforce…and it’s probably bigger than those of many countries in the world!” Beneath the light-hearted humor, the quip betrays a curiosity—perhaps even latent ambivalence—about aviation science and its fit in the College’s mission. How does practical instruction in flight-instrument training or air carrier operations square with traditional learning in liberal arts and professional study—philosophy and mathematics, sociology and elementary education? What those in Harrington Hall (and the New Bedford airport) know is what the rest of us should: aviation science has a firm place in the curriculum of American higher education. Like many American colleges that have diversified their offerings beyond the liberal arts, the fit has grown more comfortable over time.

AVIATION STUDIES AT BSC
Aviation science at BSC took flight thirty years ago, when Vice President Wallace Anderson helped engineer a course of study and flight training at Norwood Airport. The program began its life as part of the college’s management science curriculum. Like so many recent initiatives in that school, management professor (and then department chair) Sylvia Keyes played an important role. “I hired our first aviation science faculty member in 1980–81,” she recalls. Since then, the program has expanded steadily under the direction of a succession of leaders: Ken Howe (1983–1987), William Annesley (1987–92), Frank Sterrett (1992–95), Veronica Côté (1995–98). Under Professor Côté, the program was elevated to full department status and in January 1997, a part of the School of Management and Aviation Science. In 2000, the program hired Frank Sargent as Director of Aviation Planning and Operations, with the aim of stabilizing the school’s flight-training component. When the School of Business was created in 2007, Aviation Science became again its own department (and Sargent the School’s Associate Dean). The department’s current chair, Michael Farley, has witnessed its development and challenges, both in his ten years as a faculty...
member at BSC and as a graduate (in two ways, he is one of “our own”). With four full-time faculty members, a manager of aviation, three flight instructors and several staff members in Bridgewater and New Bedford, Aviation Science is among the college’s smaller departments, but off campus, one of its most visible.

Aviation Science majors at Bridgewater State concentrate in one of two streams: Flight Training or Aviation Management. Both streams seek to prepare graduates for careers in the air-transportation industry: the former largely in the air, as flight instructors and commercial or corporate airline pilots; the latter largely on the ground as airport, carrier or general aviation-operations managers. “A very high percentage of our majors enter the department in Flight Training,” Farley notes, “but almost half of them migrate to Aviation Management before graduation.” Both branches of the major are academically demanding (each claims more than half of a student’s required college credits) and all majors are required to do courses in flight training. Still, the flight training concentration is plainly more onerous, requiring students to gain their private and commercial licenses, instrument and flight instructor ratings and spend an extraordinary amount of time in the air. “At first, many students may not appreciate the commitment,” Sargent said.

The profile of the students in Aviation Science is not much different than it is for other majors at BSC. Most of the student body comes from eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island; but the special nature of the program also brings some students from places beyond the college’s traditional sources, including California, Pennsylvania, and even Japan. Though the College doesn’t recruit aviation majors in any unique way, the program’s place among the country’s relatively few four-year degree programs makes it more conspicuous to prospective students. And its comparatively inexpensive cost helps, too. Aviation science is a notoriously pricey major, particularly at the nation’s private schools. At BSC, New England-origin students pay half again as much in tuition and fees as their colleagues in other BSC majors. One AvSci major from Dorchester, Mass., estimated his first-year cost at $22,000; after considering flight training programs at SUNY Farmingdale and a community college in Connecticut, he concluded that BSC was the best value for his money.

BEYOND BSC

There are about 60 baccalaureate programs in aviation science in the United States, AvSci department chair Farley notes, and about twice that many flight-training programs at the country’s community colleges. Aviation science is offered at small, private institutions as well as several large, public schools. Like many scholarly disciplines, the field has its own tacitly ordered hierarchy, at the peak of which is Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, a multi-campus specialty school with an enrollment of 54,000 students. For decades, students have earned four-year aviation science degrees at large omnibus “multiversities” as well, such as the University of North Dakota, Arizona State, Ohio State, Western Michigan and the University of Dayton. Several smaller private schools, such as Florida Institute of Technology and Nashua’s Daniel Webster College, round out the choices that prospective aviation students entertain. Where do we fit in the big picture of aviation science? “We’re always compared to Daniel Webster—our most local competitor, and Embry-Riddle—the biggest school,” says Farley. “There are a lot of similarities and differences. They have good students and instructors, and so do we.”

As in any field, excellence is a rather slippery concept; it depends on how it is defined. As Farley said, “Students in big schools sometimes get lost. We can give our students more individual attention. And there seems to be many more students who are transferring into our program from other schools than there are those who transfer the other way.” All flight training is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration and is, therefore, standard. The only difference there, Dean Sargent notes, is that some schools have been doing it longer than us. For Murphy, who has a friend at Embry-Riddle, BSC’s aviation science program “can hold its own...We’re small, but I feel that the education and training I’m getting here will make me competitive.”

Currently, the AvSci program has the Federal Aviation Administration approval it needs to operate its own flight school. Moreover, BSC’s program is affiliated with the University Aviation Association, a 60-year-old forum for aviation educators that sponsors an annual academic conference and publishes a scholarly journal, Collegiate Aviation Review. Still, BSC’s program is not yet approved by the discipline’s only accrediting body, the Aviation Accrediting Board International (established in 1988 as the Council on Aviation Administration). Uncertainty and concerns about unevenness in flight-school training and the slowness of governance has dissuaded program directors from seeking AABI sanction. “It’s not something that faculty have deemed critical yet,” Farley said. “And administration hasn’t made a real push for it, either,” though he expects that will change soon. “Our ten-year program evaluation begins this summer. A plan to seek accreditation may come out of that.”

FAREWELL COMAIR, HELLO ATC

If it does seek AABI accreditation, Bridgewater State’s program is poised to make a case much stronger than it
could have a year ago when its flight-training program experienced turbulence. In July 2008, the College received the unexpected news that Comair—the Delta Air Lines subsidiary and a company with whom BSC had contracted since 2003 to provide flight training for the College’s AvSci majors—had chosen to terminate the arrangement. Negotiated by Sargent in fall 2002, the BSC/Comair partnership consolidated flight training and obviated the need to send students to a variety of local airports to get their flying hours. When Comair withdrew, the program’s public image suffered and enrollment declined (once up to 230 majors, the program now has 160). Students returned to multiple flight schools. Ever positive, Farley recalls the gallows humor that emerged in the department. At one meeting, members joked that Comair’s departure was a good thing: “Now we can run our own flight school.”

What they didn’t know was that such a prospect was so close at hand. After considering the options, President Mohler Faria decided to create BSC’s own flight-training center, the first state school-operated facility of its kind in the northeastern U.S. The center has a $1.4 million budget, which includes a $2,800/month, two-year lease agreement for each aircraft, and a staff of twelve employees at the site, including flight instructors. “Our Chief Pilot and Assistant Chief Pilot are exceptional,” Sargent said. “They maintain very high standards.”

THE “FIT”

Some years ago, Farley was surprised by a member of the BSC Board of Trustees who asked him why the College has an aviation science program. The question was startling for an academic unaccustomed to justifying a field already established in other colleges and universities. “Often, we’re not looked upon as academics. We’re different. None of us have doctorates, though all of us have graduate degrees. Our expertise is technical.”

The difference has previously confronted Farley, a longtime department chair and member of several campus-wide committees, including CART and Project Compass—a campus-diversity initiative. Dean Sargent states the case more bluntly: “There’s a lack of respect; it’s unfortunate.” Unfortunate perhaps, but not uncommon in other schools. For example, a minor fracas emerged in 2003 at Western Michigan when the university decided to offer tenure rights to its faculty “specialists,” such as those in its School of Aviation. About a third of WMU’s faculty voted against the move, arguing that faculty members whose fields do not require them to do research or have terminal degrees shouldn’t be eligible for “the academy’s brass ring.” The case underlined a resonance in higher education about credentials and a propensity among some long-established academicians to “guard well the portals.” Happily, the Bridgewater State community has avoided that depth of division, perhaps because our roots in professional training are long. “The College has decided that the aviation science curriculum is worthy of a Bachelor of Science,” Farley said. “It’s part of our mission and I don’t really need to defend our place in it.” Indeed, BSC’s investment in aviation education mirrors a broader pattern afoot in the American higher-education market in the past thirty years. A pressure to attract new students and to better serve the communities that host American colleges and universities has meant that more professional and pre-professional programs—such as nursing, speech pathology and aviation science—are finding secure places in the academy.

There is a new optimism in aviation science at BSC and a sense that operating its own flight training center is a launch pad for even greater success. “Our goal is to have 300 majors,” Farley says. Sargent has additional goals: “I’d like to see us develop even more advanced flight training, like glider and aerobatic flight. As it stands now, we’re not far behind the country’s premier flight training programs, but with some work we can provide our students with an even better edge.” One of those students, Dennis Murphy, is already convinced: “Bridgewater State College has a special place in the aviation world. I hope it takes full advantage.” The sky is, after all, the limit.

—Andrew Holman is Professor of History and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review. He does well on takeoffs, but still finds landings a little tough.