COLLEGIATE AVIATION SCHOOLS

Stakeholders' Views on Challenges for Initial Pilot Training Programs

Why GAO Did This Study

Collegiate aviation schools are one pathway for initial civilian pilot training in the United States and are a key source of airline pilots. Over the past 5 years, aviation stakeholders have voiced concerns that there is an insufficient supply of qualified airline pilots, citing increased airline pilot retirements, among other factors.

The explanatory statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2017 included a provision for GAO to review aspects of collegiate aviation schools' operations. This report examines: (1) what is known about schools with professional pilot degree programs and (2) challenges that affect schools' ability to produce professional pilots and schools' responses to these challenges.

GAO reviewed relevant statutes, regulations, and documents from the FAA, Veterans Affairs, and Education; analyzed FAA's data on flight schools, airports, and pilots; and analyzed Education's degree completion data for the 2015–2016 academic year, the most recent data available. GAO also interviewed representatives from: 18 schools, selected based on factors including program type and location; 6 airports selected based on type and location; and 11 additional aviation stakeholders representing schools, airlines, pilots, airports, and flight instructors, selected to reflect a range of perspectives about initial pilot training. The results of the interviews are not generalizable to all aviation schools and stakeholders. GAO is not making recommendations in this report. On a draft of the report, DOT provided technical clarifications, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

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What GAO Found

GAO identified 147 collegiate aviation schools that offered professional pilot degree programs in academic year 2015–2016. All pilot students must pass the same knowledge and flight tests to obtain pilot certificates from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), but schools' programs vary. For example, 101 of these schools operated relatively more formalized, FAA-certificated degree programs. The other 46 schools operated under a model that provides flexibility and meets FAA requirements but that does not require FAA certification to conduct such training. Total annual pilot-student enrollment and graduation numbers are not known. According to FAA officials, FAA does not require schools to submit enrollment data and does not verify enrollment data that many certificated schools voluntarily submit. Regarding graduation data, schools must classify and report completed degrees by program type to the Department of Education (Education) using that agency's classification system. Education's data indicated a total of 1,356 professional pilot degrees in academic year 2015–2016. Because pilot-student graduates can be classified under a number of aviation-related programs in Education's system, the number of pilot-student graduates could be higher.

Flight instructor retention, which has been influenced by the current high demand for airline pilots, and the high cost of pilot training are key challenges that affect schools' ability to produce pilots, according to aviation stakeholders GAO interviewed.

- *Flight instructor retention*: Nearly all (16 of 18) selected school representatives cited difficulty recruiting and retaining flight instructors as a great or moderate challenge for schools' ability to train pilots. According to most school representatives (15) and other selected stakeholders, instructors who aspire to be airline pilots are rapidly accruing the flight hours necessary to qualify and are obtaining employment as soon as they are eligible. In addition, regional airlines have recently increased hiring, generating high turnover among flight instructors, who are traditionally their main source of new pilots.

- *High cost of training*: Nearly all (16) selected schools' representatives identified the cost of a professional pilot degree program as a great or moderate challenge to recruiting and retaining pilot students. High education costs are not unique to these programs. Nonetheless, in addition to tuition, flight training fees alone often exceed $50,000, well above the cap for federal financial aid available to eligible students.

Schools and regional airlines have taken a range of actions to address these challenges. For example, eight selected school representatives reported increasing flight instructors' compensation and benefits. In addition, some regional airlines' cadet programs provide mentorship and incentives such as bonus pay or tuition reimbursement to select students while they are still in school. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has also launched an initiative to assess the level of interest among veterans in becoming pilots and to examine strategies for employing military veterans as pilots.