UPDATE ON AVIATION WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN ALABAMA

Alabama is home to over 300 companies in aviation, aerospace and defense sectors. According to the Alabama State of Workforce Report XIII, dated August, 2019, the second fastest growing occupation in our state from 2016 to 2026, will be for aircraft maintenance technicians and service technicians. Worldwide, the need for pilots, technicians, and flight attendants is growing faster than the supply of new workers, as a result of fleet expansion, retirements and departures from the industry.

The Alabama State Board of Education has set a goal of adding 500,000 highly-skilled workers to the workforce by 2025. To meet that goal, the 2-year and 4-year education systems are working to expand and improve education opportunities and career path planning programs for students and transitioning veterans in the state.

A few examples:

The Aviation Center at Auburn: The flight and aviation management degree program enrollment is at an all-time high. Through a cooperative program with airline partners, students graduating from these programs can be fast-tracked directly into jobs with the airlines. A new facility, not yet 100% complete, is already at capacity. A 2+2 program is in consideration with the community college system to expand into the aircraft maintenance technician training arena. This would provide additional maintenance technical support for the growing fleet of training aircraft, while providing a pathway for the 4-year degree in aviation management. Additionally, Career Day events, targeted specifically at business aviation careers, have been held at the university. These have been very successful, and more events are in the works.

The 2-year Community College System: This is the traditional entry point, in the state, for students/veterans who are interested in a career in aviation maintenance. There are also a few flight training centers within the system. While enrollment has not been on a rapid increase in every segment, there is a positive trend, particularly in the areas of dual enrollment and aviation programs for elementary/middle schools. The State Director of Aviation Programs is extremely active in looking for ways to increase visibility for, and career opportunities within, the industry in our elementary and secondary schools. Plans are in discussion for expanding dual enrollment programs in several counties, and adding additional programs in counties where immediate and future need for workers exist.

The Use of Museums for Educational Partnerships: The Southern Museum of Flight, in Birmingham, is expected to become a major player in the development and expansion of education/training opportunities in the Birmingham metro service area. Drawing from its highly successful education programming, which includes flight clubs, summer camps, a Boy Scout merit badge program, and an upgraded virtual reality lab, the museum is in the planning phase with the 2-year community college system to establish an Aviation Technology Center, at its existing East Lake campus. With construction underway on a new museum facility, plans are in place to transform sections of the current facility into the Technology Center. Under the Community College System’s Aviation Pathway Plus Program, students will be able to pursue an industry certification through ASTM International certified programs-among which are Aircraft Assembly, Aviation Electronics Technician, and Unmanned Aircraft Systems. For those students who will pursue the aviation maintenance technician certification, the general course study curriculum subjects will also be taught. Additionally, students will have the opportunity to work alongside certified maintenance technicians in the museum restoration facility, as it will initially remain at the East Lake campus. This will provide hands-on experience for the students that will aid in their studies, while also providing documented work experience towards future employment.

The Technology Center will also be a hub for aviation education outreach programs through the expansion of the flight clubs, STEM programs, and dual enrollment programs within the metro area school systems. There is also ongoing discussion regarding the establishment of an aviation school within one of the city school system districts. Additionally, there will be support for veterans and transitioning military personnel who wish to pursue a civilian career in aviation/aerospace. There is broad support for the Technology Center, including local and state government, as well as industry partnerships.