



Aviation program soars at Georgia Northwestern Technical College

By Laura Raines
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Since coming to Georgia Northwestern Technical College to build an aviation program four years ago, Jon Byrd's life has moved at mach speed.

"Two years after I arrived, we had designed and built the aviation training center at the Richard B. Russell Airport in Rome," said Byrd, program director and instructor of aviation for Georgia Northwestern. "We got FAA approval for the program on Sept. 30, 2008, and six days later we had warm bodies in the desks. It all seems like a blur, but things are going great."

That inaugural class will graduate on Sept. 17, and more graduates will follow on Dec. 15.

Georgia Northwestern's aviation program offers a degree or a diploma in aviation maintenance technology, as well as three certificates of credit which lead to jobs in the aviation, power plant and auto racing industries. There are 40 students enrolled in the program, which Byrd expects to grow.

"The good news is that there are jobs out there for our students," Byrd said. "When they earn their FAA Mechanic Certification with Airframe and Power Plant Ratings, they are able to work on all kinds of airplanes, blimps and helicopters."

The demand for aviation workers is strong, Byrd said.

"We've had companies call us from Huntsville and Mobile, Ala., and Atlanta, as well as the states of Washington and New York," he said. "Starting salaries range from \$12 to \$22 an hour. Some companies are even offering signing bonuses up to \$2,500."

"The bad news is that most of our students will have to leave Rome to find work. The regional airport is growing, but still too small to support all our graduates."

That doesn't seem to daunt the students, who range in age from 18 to 60. The diverse group includes people who came straight from high school or the military; others who used to work in textile mills; and some who were engineers or were employed in the automotive industry. The thing they all share is the desire to work in aviation.

"Two of our students commute two hours one way from Alabama, and we're flattered that they chose us for their training," Byrd said.

When prospective career-changers tell Byrd that they're too old to work in aviation, his answer is "not really."

"As it stands now, there are more aviation technicians aged 60 than under 30. We have an aging work force, and [we] need new people," he said.

The training, however, is no cake walk.

“We tell people it’s almost like working a full-time job,” Byrd said.

Students are in class or in the lab four days a week from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. It takes eight quarters to earn an associate degree but starting next year, when the technical colleges switch to the semester system, it will take six semesters. Tuition is \$45 per credit hour.

Students take math, physics and learn every system of an airplane from nose to tail, including electrical, battery, hydraulic/pneumatic, airframe, navigation systems and turbine power plants. They also learn FAA regulations; how to read schematic and electrical diagrams; ground and safety operations; and how to work with precision instruments.

“Students need to come with good basic math and science skills,” he said. “One of the first required classes is aviation mathematics, where we go from basic addition and subtraction to basic trigonometry in five days.

“Some mechanics are extremely talented with their hands, but not all. We can teach the skills, and a lot of what we do is inspect with our eyes. We do a lot of troubleshooting.”

Aviation technicians carry major responsibilities and need to hold themselves to high standards.

“You need to have confidence in what you do because you’re working on vessels that defy gravity. You can’t cut corners,” Byrd said. “The FAA requires technicians to sign off on everything they do, and technicians understand that if they don’t torque that bolt just right, a wing could fly off.”

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