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# Determining the Best Way to Integrate New Flight Students Who Already Possess a Private Pilot Certificate

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There are a number of ways collegiate aviation programs handle the unique needs of students who have already completed flight training outside of the university environment. This article summarizes the findings of two surveys: one survey that sought to find out how other UAA-member schools evaluate and integrate transfer flight students into their curriculum; and one survey that sought to find out how well one formal integration course is working. The goal of this research is to provide collegiate flight educators with the information they need to consider how well their evaluation and transfer processes are working in their own programs.

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This exploratory research was presented at the 2024 UAA Education Conference during the September 26, 2024, Best Practices session. The purposes of the presentation were to share the results of two surveys that were conducted to identify challenges and best practices related to the acceptance of private pilot students into university flight programs, and to explain how one transition course model is intended to work.

The Best Practices presentation, followed by participant feedback and questions, validated the need for this research. The survey results shared during the session are the basis of two journal articles: one focusing on the perspectives of flight training providers, an article recently accepted for publication in the *Collegiate Aviation Review International*, and one focusing on the perspectives of transfer flight students, an article currently in the draft stage.

## **Introduction**

As university flight programs admit students into their flight programs, they are often faced with the challenge of deciding how to evaluate the quality of previous flight instruction received outside of the university, particularly if they are entering the university with a private pilot certificate. They must also decide if supplemental ground or flight instruction is needed in order to successfully integrate transfer students into the university's flight curriculum.

The conference presentation discussed how common it is for universities to accept transfer flight students, reported various ways university programs are integrating transfer flight students into their programs, reported survey findings asking about differences between the two cohort groups (transfer and ab-initio), shared how some universities are integrating transfer students into their flight programs, and discussed how Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) uses a leveling-type of flight course in an attempt to successfully integrate transfer flight students into their program. The presentation also shared students' opinions about the course, and session attendees were invited to discuss the approaches they used in their own programs.

## **Research Methodology**

To learn how common it is for universities to admit transfer flight students and how they evaluate and integrate transfer students into their programs, a Survey Monkey survey was sent by email to all University Aviation Association member schools. The targeted respondents were Chief Flight Instructors. To learn how transfer students at SIUC feel about the leveling course developed to better integrate them into the flight curriculum; a Survey Monkey survey was sent to all students who were currently enrolled or had been enrolled in the course (AF 199) within the past three years. The most pertinent survey responses, representing the perspective of flight training providers and transfer flight students, were shared during the conference presentation.

## **Highlights of Survey Results & Discussion**

### **Acceptance of Transfer Flight Students**

To learn how common it was for universities to admit private pilots into flight programs, one survey question asked, "Does your program allow students to begin post-private pilot flight

training and potentially complete a flight degree if they have completed the Private Pilot Certificate elsewhere?" All respondents answered in the affirmative. This response, of course, doesn't mean that all collegiate aviation programs admit transfer flight students, but it suggests that many, if not most, do.

### **Percentage of Transfer Flight Students**

Another survey question asked, "What is the estimated percentage of students currently in your flight program who received their Private Pilot Certificate outside of your program?" About 21% of the respondents indicated that a low number, "fewer than 10%," of the total number of flight students earned a Private Pilot Certificate before coming to the college or university. On the highest end, just over 7% answered, "about 40-50%." No response indicated that more than 50% of students transferred in with the certificate already completed.

### **Significance of Research**

These two survey responses validate the importance of this research. A high number of collegiate aviation programs are admitting students who hold a Private Pilot Certificate, and up to 40 or 50% of students may be entering a college or university with this certification and are expected to adapt to a different flight training experience immediately upon starting college.

### **Why are students pursuing the Private Pilot Certificate before coming to college?**

Transfer students who were surveyed said their number one reason for getting their private pilot certificate before coming to college was interest (75%). They had the motivation and the means to complete flight training, and they were excited to get started as soon as possible. The number two reason for pursuing a private pilot certificate before coming to college, cited by 62% of the students surveyed, was cost savings. These students felt that they could complete private pilot training outside of the university environment in more cost-effective ways if they started flying early.

Anecdotally, most participants in the Best Practices session said they are seeing far more students transferring into their programs with previous flight experience than they have in previous years. If these responses are indicative of the wider collegiate aviation environment, this challenge for university programs may be growing.

### **Evaluation and Integration Methods**

In terms of evaluating students as they enter the program, the training provider survey results showed that over 50% of aviation programs conduct either a written or oral test that is modeled after the Federal Aviation Association (FAA) written or practical exam. Almost half do not.

Presumably, an integration experience for all transfer flight students should include aircraft familiarization and airport/airspace familiarization topics because many different types of training aircraft exist, and students will have flown at a wide variety of airports and in different

airport environments prior to transferring into a collegiate program. The provider survey results, however, showed that only 43% include aircraft and airspace familiarization topics in their integration practices.

SIUC makes sure to include these topics in the AF 199 course because flight instruction is conducted at a towered airport, and about half of the transfer flight students are unfamiliar with flying in a towered environment. Also, about 40% of transfer flight students at SIUC need aircraft differences training due to having earned their Private Pilot Certificate in an airplane different from the airplanes used in the SIUC flight program.

### **Differences Between Transfer and Non-Transfer Students**

When university representatives were asked to consider differences between their transfer flight students and those who did all of their training at the university, the survey asked, “When comparing overall quality of ab-initio and transfer students, at the time of graduation, which statement best describes your opinion of the two groups?” Response options were, “There is little to no difference between the two groups” (43%); “The transfer students are more likely to become flight instructors for us and do well in the industry;” (0%); “The ab-initio students are more likely to become flight instructors for us and do well in the industry;” (14%); “I’m not sure which group would be considered generally more successful in terms of these measures;” (36%); and “prefer not to answer;” (7%).

Measuring student success is both important and challenging. An assumption with this question was that flight program faculty and staff generally hire their best students to be flight instructors for the program, and they can usually predict which of their graduates will be successful in the industry. These assumptions may be inaccurate and too speculative. As other researchers explore this topic, they would do well to consider more objective and possibly different measures of student success.

Most noteworthy with this survey response is the admission by flight training providers that many think there is either no difference between the two cohort groups or they simply do not know.

### **One Course Model**

One model used at the researchers’ institution is an eight-week credit-bearing course that includes eight hours of dual, local flight instruction, 1.5 hours of dual cross-country instruction, less than an hour (.8) of IFR, and 17 hours of oral ground instruction. Ground knowledge topics include university-specific procedures, a review of the Private Pilot Airman [sic] Certification Standards (ACS), aircraft limitations, pre-flight procedures and required inspections, communications, aerodynamics, systems, emergencies, aeromedical, weather theory and products, aircraft performance and weight & balance, cross-country planning, and a private-pilot style mock oral examination.

Upon course completion, the student is required to successfully complete a practical exam that follows the Private Pilot ACS. Students who receive a recommendation from their

instructor have the option of testing out of this course early. Students who do not pass the practical exam must take AF 201B, which is the second half of SIUC's private pilot course.

### **Effectiveness of the SIUC Leveling Course**

When asked, "What feedback can you share about AF 199? What was helpful, and what would you change?" The most common answer (44% of respondents) indicated that the course met objectives, 25% stated the course should be shorter, and 23% wanted more flexibility. The survey also showed that some flight instructors delivering the course are not always clearly communicating the intention of the course to the students, nor are they sharing the information that testing out of the course is an option for students who feel confident about already meeting the course objectives.

In terms of the ground and flight instruction provided in the course, the survey illustrated some flight instructor shortcomings that may not have been discovered as readily had the survey not been conducted. About 25% of the students reported issues that could be attributed to flight instructors either not understanding how flexible and individualized the course can be delivered, or not clearly communicating that information to students.

### **Conclusion & Future Research**

Additional research should better define student success measures, suggest ways that other programs could build a flexible, individualized model to meet evaluation and integration goals, and urge collegiate flight programs to better track the outcomes of ab-initio and transfer students within their own programs.

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