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# Business Aviation Days: Mentorship and Partnership

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Business aviation is a vital component of the U.S. economy, growing at a double-digit rate year-over-year since the pandemic, and offers many outstanding career opportunities for collegiate aviation program graduates. Despite the opportunities available, many students may need to be made aware of the options available in business aviation due to a lack of exposure compared to other aviation industry sectors. This paper describes one university's efforts to advance understanding of business aviation through a new annual multi-day conference that has produced new partnership and mentorship opportunities that greatly benefit students and industry alike.

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## **Introduction**

As defined by the National Business Aviation Association, business aviation uses small aircraft, including jets, propeller-driven planes, and helicopters, for business transportation (National Business Aviation Association [NBAA], 2021). Business aviation is a significant driver in the U.S. economy, contributing over \$128.3 billion to the U.S. GDP in 2018, supporting over 1.1 million jobs, and contributing to economic development in every state (NBAA, 2021). With the ability to fly into over 5,000 noncommercial public-use airports in the U.S., not served by airlines, business aviation efficiently links communities and economies of all sizes, minimizing travel time and increasing productivity. According to Fortune Magazine's Top 50 "World's Most Admired Companies" list, 98 percent of the companies featured utilize business aviation; however, only three percent of U.S. business aircraft are flown by Fortune 500 companies; the other 97 percent are flown by non-Fortune 500 companies and non-profit organizations such as universities, hospitals, firefighters, law enforcement, and government agencies with the vast majority of flights seating no more than six people and flying less than 1,000 miles (NBAA, 2021). The pandemic caused an increase in new users in the business aviation market, as people avoided large crowds in airports and commercial flights by flying business aircraft, stimulating growth in business aviation (CAE, 2023). The U.S. business aviation sector has become the largest in the world and continues to expand. In the first half of 2022, there were 15.2% more business aviation departures in the U.S. than during the same period in 2019 (Smith, 2022).

## **Business Aviation Careers**

Business aviation offers many job opportunities, including pilot, aircraft maintenance technician, scheduler, dispatcher, safety manager, operations manager, aircraft sales and marketing, aircraft and insurance brokerage, and Fixed Base Operator (FBO) managers. A director or chief pilot often manages business aviation organizations, supervising flight operations and ensuring regulatory compliance. Proponents of business aviation cite career benefits such as job variety, better company culture, personalized service, direct passenger interaction, less seniority-based career progression, and improved work-life balance compared to the airlines. Industry experts predict the business aviation industry will grow by 18% in the next ten years, requiring 66,000 new professionals to support the expanding fleet (CAE, 2023). Over the next decade, business aviation will provide numerous career opportunities, but hiring professionals need help as they compete with the airlines for talent.

## **Recruiting Challenges**

Airlines use their scale to recruit pilots regularly on collegiate aviation campuses with much success. Before the pandemic, air carriers had over 175 career pathway agreements with over 70 higher education institutions in the U.S. (Lutte & Mills, 2019). The number of agreements has increased post-pandemic due to rapid airline hiring. Recruiting young talent for business aviation is challenging due to competition from airline career pathway programs with a more substantial presence on collegiate aviation campuses than business aviation since there is no equivalent business aviation presence scale. Furthermore, airlines have recently increased pay

by as much as 50% to meet pilot hiring demand and raised benefits such as higher employer contributions to 401(k) retirement accounts (McMillin, 2022).

A study by NBAA found that pilots who left business aviation for airlines did so due to better pay, schedules, retirement benefits, and job stability (NBAA, n.d.). To address this issue, experts suggest improving communication and education on the value proposition of a business aviation career, emphasizing the perceived better quality of life for pilots compared to those in the airline industry. To improve communication and education, business aircraft operators may partner with aviation technical schools, colleges, and universities to establish mentorship and internship programs to encourage young people to join the industry. Experts also suggest that some hiring standards, particularly for Part 135 commercial operators, may need to be revised to consider the quality of training and experience, not just numerical flight hours. The shortage of aviation professionals goes beyond pilots and includes maintenance professionals as well (McMillin, 2022).

### **Business Aviation Days**

Auburn Business Aviation Days (ABAD) was founded in 2019 by alums of the School of Aviation who are leaders in the business aviation industry and have been recognized as NBAA Business Aviation Top 40 Under 40 Award Recipients for their industry efforts. ABAD is a multi-day conference held on the main campus of Auburn University and at the Auburn University Regional Airport (KAUO), which is only three miles away from the campus. It showcases the career opportunities and benefits of business aviation for both professional flight and aviation management students. Attendees include Part 91 and 135 flight departments, national associations advocating for business aviation, and various industry participants such as pilots, aircraft manufacturers, aircraft sales brokers, and insurance brokers. Auburn Business Aviation Days aims to expand the pool of future professionals, elevate career opportunities, and increase industry awareness beyond classrooms through networking and partnerships.

Networking is crucial to building connections between students, faculty, and industry participants in business aviation. By connecting with others, young professionals gain valuable insights into various companies, their fleets, work cultures, and operating environments. This knowledge helps them make informed career choices and relationships with potential employers. Networking also provides opportunities to learn about career opportunities that may not be publicly advertised and develop highly valuable professional references in the business aviation industry. Auburn Business Aviation Days networking may lead to new mentorships, providing advice on career opportunities, progression, overcoming challenges, and internships to gain practical experience. Mentors encourage students to join professional organizations like NBAA and Women in Corporate Aviation (WCA) to further connect young professionals with the larger community of business aviation professionals.

Creating partnerships between business aviation organizations and higher education institutions is crucial for many reasons. These collaborations bridge the skills gap by tailoring the curriculum to real-world applications and aligning it with the needs of the industry. As a result, graduates are job-ready and possess the knowledge, skills, and attitude required for business aviation. Partnerships established through ABAD also provide opportunities for business

aviation members to get involved with higher education through career fairs, industry advisory board service, and funding scholarships and innovative research that improves the quality of education for the future business aviation workforce. Faculty members who may have limited professional exposure to business aviation can now apply their subject matter expertise in the context of business aviation in class, such as fatigue risk management in global business aviation in a human factors course, teaching the human factors content to be learned, but also the reinforcing the career opportunities in business aviation.

ABAD has grown since its inception in 2019. The program was held virtually in 2020 due to the pandemic and saw a spike in attendance in 2021 following the resumption of in-person events. A summary of ABAD organizational participants is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Summary of Participating Organizations, Auburn Business Aviation Days*

Year	<i>Business Aviation Organization</i>		
2019	Alfa Insurance	Encompass Health	NetJets
	AT&T	FedEx Corporate	OGARAJETS
	Avilution	Fidelity Financial Trust	Quest Diagnostics
	Blue Origin	Flightworks, Inc	Richards Aviation
	Chick-Fil-A	Grande Aviation	Sonic Tools
	Chicken Salad Chick	Gulfstream Aerospace	Textron Aviation
	Coca-Cola	JetAVIVA	The Home Depot
	Cox Enterprises, Inc.	Medical Properties Trust	Universal Avionics
	Eagle Aviation, Inc.	NBAA	
2021	Aflac Inc.	Hill Aircraft	Premier Private Jets
	AirMed	InFlight Law	Regions Bank
	Axis Jet	Jet It	SMI
	B&C Aviation	Jeteffect	Sonic Tools
	Blue Origin	JetEx	Southern Company
	Buford Construction	Medway	Textron Aviation
	Chick-Fil-A	MMA Aviation	Tuscaloosa Regional
	Columbus Regional Airport	MRO Insider	Airport
	El Reno Airport Authority	NBAA	Unmanned Safety Institute
	Embraer	Northern Jet Management	West Star Aviation
	Encompass Health	OGARAJETS	Women in Corporate
	FedEx Corporate	Peco Foods, Inc.	Aviation
	Georgia Crown	Pioneer Aviation	XO Global
	Distributing Co.	Management	XOJET Aviation
	Global Air Charters	PNC Bank	Zimmer Biomet Solutions
	Harbert Management Corporation		
2022	Clay Lacy Aviation	JetEdge International	Solairus Aviation
	Contour Flight	Jeteffect	Southern Company
	Management	Kennedy Aviation	Southern Sky Aviation
	Dillard's, Inc	MMA Aviation	Textron Aviation
	Duke Energy	MRO Insider	The Home Depot
	Eagle Aviation, Inc.	NBAA	The Procter & Gamble Co.

Encompass Health	NetJets	Thoroughbred Aviation
Flexjet	Nor-Wes, Inc.	Tuscaloosa Regional
FlightSafety International	OGARAJETS	Airport
FMS Aerospace	Phoenix Air	Wheels Up
Global Air Charters	Group/Unmanned	Women in Corporate
Aerospace	Piedmont Jets	Aviation
Hill Aircraft	PNC Bank	XOJET Aviation
JetAVIVA	Progress Rail	Yonderwest

The Alabama Business Aviation Association (ALBAA) starts the Business Aviation Days event with a charity golf tournament. This tournament serves as a fundraiser for ALBAA student scholarships and allows industry professionals and students to network in an informal environment. The event continues with the welcome reception hosted by the School of Aviation on the main university campus. Throughout the next several days, there are various events to promote diversity and explore trending career topics in the business aviation field. Women in Corporate Aviation hosts a breakfast for aviation program students, and afterward, students attend multiple speaker panels focused on trending business aviation topics. Faculty members welcome industry participants who serve as guest speakers in their classrooms, examining course topics through the lens of business aviation. Students get to meet business aviation executives at the Executive Experience reception on the second evening of ABAD. Students can explore the industry's offerings through a static display of corporate aircraft of all sizes that support a variety of business aviation missions. At the networking fair, students can connect with recruiters from participating organizations. A sample schedule of events for ABAD is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Sample Schedule of Events, Auburn Business Aviation Days*

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scholarship Fundraising and Networking Golf Tournament (Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, Grand National)</li> <li>- Welcome Reception (Main Campus)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women in Business Aviation Breakfast (Main Campus)</li> <li>- Speaker Panels (Main Campus)</li> <li>- Executive Experience Reception (Auburn University Regional Airport)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Classroom Guest Speakers (Main Campus)</li> <li>- Aircraft Static Displays and Networking Fair (Auburn University Regional Airport)</li> </ul>

**Figure 1**

*An industry representative speaks to aviation students.*



*Art Morris III*

*Note. Photo courtesy of Art Morris III.*

**Figure 2**

*Students and industry representatives at a reception.*



*Art Morris III*

*Note. Photo courtesy of Art Morris III.*

**Figure 3**

*Students tour a business aviation test aircraft during the static display.*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of Art Morris III.

**Figure 4**

*Static display aircraft at Auburn University Regional Airport.*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of Art Morris III.

Positive energy and momentum sparked by ABAD can lead to new partnerships that expand the business aviation workforce. These partnerships have created new student internships and mentorships and a heightened understanding of the rewarding career prospects available in business aviation. Furthermore, several business aviation organizations are contemplating the creation of new pilot career pathway programs, with insurance underwriters participating in discussions that aim to reassess pilot hiring criteria, placing greater emphasis on the quality of training and experience rather than just numerical flight hours, similar to many airline career pathway programs.

Auburn Business Aviation Days is made possible through generous sponsorships at various levels. The revenue generated from corporate sponsorship fees covers the program's expenses. Preparation for the following Auburn Business Aviation Days starts soon after every conference, taking into account industry professionals, students, and faculty feedback. The event is held in autumn when the weather is more predictable than the unpredictable spring weather in

southern regions. The scheduling committee must consider avoiding overlapping with other business aviation events like the National Business Aviation Association Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition (NBAA-BACE) and Citation Jet Pilots Owner Pilot Association conference and ensure not to plan the ABAD during the week of a home football game when hotels and conference services are limited.

### **Conclusion**

Auburn Business Aviation Days has been an immense help to Auburn's aviation students by providing them with access to new partnerships and mentorship that foster career opportunities in the business aviation industry. These new relationships have resulted in students finding employment in world-class business aviation organizations, helping students and industry alike.

For information regarding Auburn Business Aviation Days 2023, please visit [aub.ie/ABAD](http://aub.ie/ABAD).



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