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Examining Instructor Pay in Relation to Student Dropout Rates and Customer Satisfaction

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I*NSTRUCTORS CAN'T EARN A LIVING INSTRUCTING.* This longstanding assertion seems to have demoralized much of the flight training community and perhaps even suggests a certain inevitability about its decline and ultimate demise. The assertion, however, has largely remained unchallenged and thus merits further analysis.

Consider that there are notable examples of highly successful aviation educators that should serve as role models. Take John and Martha King, Irv Gleim, and Rod Machado, for instance. Each is focused, self-motivated, and hard working. Each has also demonstrated a commitment to customer service, quality, professionalism, and continuous improvement. Though relatively few may achieve comparable levels of success and recognition in aviation education, these same time-tested attributes not only underlie potential economic success for all instructors, but infusing such attributes into our training culture could make aviation education a more attractive career option to others as well.

The secrets of successful instructors, according to Gregory N. Brown, include looking, acting, and speaking like professionals; earning the respect of students; and taking seriously the concerns of students.¹ Dedication, perseverance, personal commitment, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit are also hallmarks of many successful aviation educators. Listening to customers and tailoring products and services accordingly are equally significant factors. This does not suggest an easy career path. It is, however, the path that must be followed for a shot at success; there simply are no shortcuts.

Aviation is a Business

Passion and a love of flying alone, though important to career satisfaction and happiness, cannot guarantee success. Enthusiasm must be tempered with business savvy. And despite aviation dogma, attracting, training, and retaining customers *is* a business. From a business standpoint, the U.S. has nearly 210 million potential customers between the ages of 15 and 64.² Yet general aviation only managed to attract an average of about 82,000 student pilots a year during the period 2005–2009.³ And nearly 60 percent of those students subsequently dropped out of aviation before earning their private pilot certificates.⁴

The numbers paint a clear and disturbing picture. Yet many flight schools continue to function under two misguided beliefs: first, that they must accept "aviation has always operated this way" as a business model; second, that they must view the flight school next door as "the competition." General aviation's real competition comes from the myriad non-aviation businesses that actively compete for the customer's discretionary income. As an industry, we have lagged far behind in the art and science of educating potential customers and competing for their dollars.

William G. Moore identified numerous problem areas during a gathering of flight instructors two decades ago:⁵

- We market flight training like a commodity even though it is not
- We believe price is the only consideration
- We tend to be pilots first and profit-seekers last, which results in financial and economic irresponsibility
- We have lost many of the social aspects associated with being pilots (e.g., hangar flying is largely a thing of the past)
- We continue to offer mostly 1960s/1970s products and services to modern-day customers

Moore contends that aviation is a retail business, that customers will pay the asking price if they know what they are purchasing and are convinced you can deliver on your promises.⁶ The traits exhibited by successful retailers are strikingly similar to those of successful aviation educators. They include being customer-driven, under-promising yet over-delivering, understanding the price-to-value relationship, and emulating and improving upon the best.⁷ Furthermore, Lawrence L. Steinmetz observed that declining retail sales typically are not caused by price, but by factors such as “poor delivery, poor quality, inept marketing, or bad service.”⁸

A Detrimental Regulatory Quirk

According to a survey of students, instructors, and other pilots published by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) in October 2010, “the unique experience of learning to fly is inherently rewarding for all audiences.”⁹ Yet even though costs are “a dominant concern,” the survey concluded that “the quality of instruction is a persistent issue and a weak link in the chain.”¹⁰

The accepted practice of using instructing as a steppingstone for an air carrier career may be a significant factor in the overall poor quality of instruction. As Master Instructor Radek Wyrzykowski points out, “our system of developing young professional pilots forces them to do something many of them aren't interested in doing—being instructors.” This observation exposes a serious weakness in our industry: the marketplace does not control the supply of instructors. Instead, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations are largely responsible for perpetuating an oversupply of instructors by allowing instructional hours to count toward air carrier requirements. The result, according to Wyrzykowski, is a large group of instructors “who simply don't teach well but who, through no fault of their own, were put in that position by a flawed system.”¹¹

The unintended consequence has been the de facto creation of a two-tier hierarchy within the flight training community comprised of *teachers* and *time-builders*. *Teachers* are those instructors who develop and demonstrate expertise at their craft (even if some of them aspire to an airline career), whereas *time-builders* are those who exploit the regulatory incentive merely to build time. The recent Congressional mandate concerning increased flight time requirements for air carrier pilots will likely exacerbate the surplus of pure *time-builders*, further degrading the stature and compensation rates of flight instructors as a whole. Our customers, our *teachers*, and ultimately general aviation will continue to suffer as a result. To mitigate the adverse effects associated with *time-builders* posing as *teachers*, perhaps it is time to consider capping the number of instructional hours that can be applied toward air carrier time requirements.

What's Important to the Customer

The above issues notwithstanding, the health of general aviation hinges on customer satisfaction. A model for an optimal flight training experience emerged from the AOPA research that consisted of four broad themes and eleven key attributes. At least eight of the attributes are tied directly to aviation educators: instructor effectiveness, organized lessons, test prep, additional resources, aviation community, recognition, information sharing, and value. Researchers distilled the following:¹²

- *Effectiveness* describes how flight instructors interact with, and demonstrate their commitment to the success of, their students.
- Organized lessons enhance student learning and keep training interesting and efficient. (Addressing the problem of too many instructors teaching “by the seat of their pants,” the following recommendation was made during the 2011 Pilot Training Reform Symposium chaired by the Society of Aviation and Flight Educators: “Incorporate new guidance and PTS revisions [to] require Initial CFI candidates to develop a Plan of Action and demonstrate the use of a syllabus during the practical examination.”¹³)
- Careful preparation by instructors can ease the stressful process many students go through as they prepare for written tests and check rides.
- It is important for instructors to be able to direct students to additional aviation resources and websites, and help them obtain medical certificates.
- Students generally attach importance to admission into the aviation community and to recognition of their aviation accomplishments; hence, instructors need to facilitate student assimilation into the community and recognition of milestones.
- Students are at a knowledge disadvantage; therefore, they seek real-world estimates of the time and expense involved in training and they expect to review qualifications and the experiences of others.

On one hand, instructors complain they cannot make enough money instructing; on the other hand, students have been explicit about what they need and expect. Given that the overall attrition rate among those who have tried to become part of the aviation community is estimated to be as high as 70 to 80 percent,¹⁴ our customers have been speaking loudly and clearly: the cost has not been worth it.

Value versus Cost

A solution to systemic customer dissatisfaction and low instructor pay, according to Aviation Consultant Robert A. Wright, “may require a value proposition.” Wright states that “there are instructors today who command a three figure fee for each hour they instruct because they offer a specialized product not available elsewhere or a product which reduces training time, provides customer convenience, or creates some other kind of value.”¹⁵ For example, some instructors increase value through the skillful integration of simulation, light sport aircraft, online resources, and other modern technologies into the training process.

Elaborating on the value proposition, Moore defines two types of value¹⁶ in retail business:

1. Real value, which is the result of price and quality achieving equilibrium in the mind of the customer; and,
2. Perceived value, which is the customer’s expectation of getting real value.

The results of the AOPA survey reinforce the notion of value as a more accurate metric than monetary cost alone. *Value*—which can be positive or negative—is the sum of cost plus service plus intangibles that customers consider to be commensurate not only with their investment of time and money, but also with their desires such as safety, honesty, enjoyment, utility, and convenience. If value is the true measure, it is clear the training community generally has not been delivering sufficient customer value for a long time. Lack of real and perceived value contributes not only to the student pilot drop out rate, but also to the widespread belief that instructors cannot earn more, or that instructing cannot be a viable profession. Yet successful aviation educators demonstrate that customers are indeed willing to pay—and not drop out of aviation—in exchange for fair value.

Instructor Nick Frisch concurs: “Customers who are treated well, with honor and respect, want to come back for more. Customers who are treated poorly often become discouraged and leave.”¹⁷ He counsels, “We lie to customers a lot as an industry, especially about how much it costs to become a pilot.[*] When we are honest up front, we may lose the ‘price shopper’, but we create expectations that can be met in the real world.”¹⁸ Steinmetz adds, “price is virtually always more significant in the mind of the seller than in the mind of the buyer.... Very few customers buy anything on price [even if they tell you they do]. Virtually always there are some other primary and secondary reasons for buying.”¹⁹

Provided you conduct yourself as a true professional, Brown concludes, “people fully expect to pay for [such services].... do a thorough, caring and professional job, and charge accordingly [and] your students will respect you for it.”²⁰

Advancing Professionalism

The Society of Aviation and Flight Educators (SAFE) describes the role and responsibilities of aviation educators thus:

Aviation educators perform the most vital and influential duties in aviation: they are the gateway for those entering aviation, be it for pleasure, business, commercial, airline, or even military flying. Ground and flight instructors are responsible for advancing pilots through a regulated system of certificates and ratings, transitioning pilots to different aircraft and technologies, and ensuring that pilots satisfy FAA, insurance, and flight school or company recurrency requirements.²¹

Professionalism is a must at the educator level. In his keynote speech during the 2011 Pilot Training Reform Symposium, then-FAA Administrator Babbitt said:

Education helps develop professionalism...but professionalism is a lot more than rule-driven behaviors. It’s a mindset [that requires] application and correlation. It’s an attitude that drives you to do the right thing—every time, all the time, regardless of who’s watching. It’s about being a good aviation citizen.²²

* *Code of Federal Regulations*, title 14, section 61.109 mandates that private pilot applicants must log at least 40 hours of flight time; 35 hours if participating in an approved private pilot course conducted by a training center. The national average to obtain a private pilot certificate, however, is on the order of 70 hours of flight time. The large discrepancy between the published regulatory requirement and reality has led to confusion in the minds of customers, deceptive advertising practices by some in the training industry, and to some extent, a degree of mistrust between students and instructors. Provided other minimums are met, perhaps it is time to eliminate the 40- and 35-hour rules in favor of proficiency-based standards not only for private pilot applicants, but for other pilot applicants as well.

The Flight Instructors Model Code of Conduct (FIMCC) was released in April 2011 to advance a culture of safety, professionalism, and good aviation citizenship. The FIMCC “presents a vision of excellence for flight and ground instructors.”²³ One of a growing family of thoroughly researched and vetted codes of conduct, the FIMCC is not a standard, but a customizable model that is most effective if users have a “firm grasp of the fundamentals of flight as well as a commitment to achieving professionalism as educators.” The intent is to assist “in teaching the core principles that help aviators build a foundation of flight safety, proficiency, and wisdom.”²⁴

Flight and ground instructors—or more broadly, aviation educators—are the first points of contact for the majority of those who enter general aviation. These educators become the role models. They set the standards for students and others, imbuing their charges with a sense of what is and is not culturally acceptable. Educators who habitually abide by the FIMCC (or a similar code of conduct) make it more likely that students will likewise adopt appropriate codes of conduct.

The Link between Continuing Education and Wages

According to Wright, “Beyond initial FAA certification, there is clearly a gap between the minimum FAA certification standard and what customers and employers want instructors to know and how they want them to perform in the real world.”²⁵ This observation hints at the two competing viewpoints regarding instructor pay: those who feel that instructors are entitled to professional compensation by virtue of having gone through the FAA certification process, versus those who recognize that compensation is a function of demonstrated expertise. A recommendation by the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI) exemplifies the former viewpoint by suggesting that pay for instructors needs to be brought up “to a level commensurate with the investment in training they have incurred”²⁶ as a way to make it a viable career choice. This notion promotes pay based on acquisition cost rather than performance and expertise. However, as the AOPA survey found, “the quality of instruction is a persistent issue”²⁷ and contributes significantly to the overall high student pilot attrition rate. In other words, the market has been saying that the current state of primary instruction is overvalued already.

The NAFI recommendation is antithetical to the philosophy promoted in industry-based initiatives such as the Master Instructor Continuing Education Program (MICEP). Whereas a pilot can legally become a Certificated Flight Instructor with as little as 250 hours of total flight time and without any actual experience providing instruction, MICEP encourages aviation educators to strive to become experts at their craft by offering a national accreditation based on advanced professional standards and rigorous peer review.²⁸ While becoming an expert flight instructor does not require the estimated 42,000 hours of study and training needed to become an expert neurosurgeon, it certainly requires more than the 700 hours needed to become a yoga expert.²⁹ Satisfying FAA minimums is just the first step on the path to becoming an expert *teacher* qualified to command professional-level wages.

MICEP has granted more than 1,600 Master designations to nearly 700 aviation educators in 49 states and seven countries. Even though the number of current Master Instructors represents less than half of one percent of all instructors, this small group is remarkably overrepresented in terms of aviation work product, FAA Safety Team (FAASTeam) participation, and ultimately, its impact on safety. Since the program’s debut, for instance, each individual honored as either the National Flight Instructor of the Year or the National FAASTeam Representative of the Year has been a Master Instructor.

Just how prolific the Master Instructor community has been was revealed in a survey conducted by the program creators.³⁰ Respondents collectively had been aviation educators for 1,300 years, including 330 years holding various Master designations. These Masters had received more than 175 aviation awards. They had amassed 380,000 hours of flight time, and provided 200,000 hours of flight and at least 120,000 hours of ground/simulator instruction. Respondents had administered 6,700 check rides/stage checks and mentored 4,900 other aviation educators. These Master Instructors also reported:

- 4,300 safety seminars given,
- 2,800 articles/white papers authored or edited,
- 1,700 books, newsletters, etc. authored or edited,
- 670 audio-visual programs hosted, scripted, or produced,
- 60 aviation-related products, services, and processes developed, and
- At least 43 “saves” attributed in part to instruction that had been provided to fellow pilots who later had experienced emergency situations.

Regarding the MICEP designation process and its benefits, the vast majority of respondents acknowledged that the program “challenged them to become better educators.” Participants also clearly recognized the importance of the program “to their craft, their livelihood, and their marketability” as well. Most reported a corresponding increase in income of 10 to 40 percent; several reported more than a 100 percent hike in their sustainable hourly rates.³¹ A number of flight schools also provide incentive packages to their Master Instructors worth thousands of dollars. Similarly, other flight schools have instituted tiered rates for instructors based on experience and advanced credentials.

Considering the influence quality of instruction has on student attrition rates, and notwithstanding the issue of *teacher* versus *time-builder*, promoting the mindset where “a better instructor earns better pay” will result in a superior product than the opposite notion, “better pay results in a better instructor.”

The Role of Mentoring

Wright states that an effective mentoring program “could allow new instructors to more quickly be assimilated into the real world of instructing.” Mentoring would also facilitate a “more rapid transition from theoretical knowledge about teaching to the practical side.” Not only would this benefit student pilots, it would also “accelerate the instructor’s earning potential”³² by elevating him/her above FAA minimums to a point where advanced accreditation (such as a Master Instructor designation) is attainable.

SAFE has responded to this challenge with its Aviation Educator Mentoring Program. Launched in March 2011, this first-ever, nationwide effort was developed using results from a needs-based survey of SAFE members. The program provides support, leadership, and professional guidance for aviation educators. It also provides an effective framework for mentoring by matching those who seek assistance or improvement with experienced educators who have the specific expertise being sought.³³ The mentoring program is not just limited to new instructors, either. SAFE notes that even experienced educators may occasionally want or need insights when teaching in new aircraft, or with new technologies and techniques. Though currently available only to SAFE members, the program may be expanded in the future.

Wyrzykowski takes this concept one step further, proposing a National Flight Instructor Academy whose mission would be to produce true aviation educators. The Academy itself would be created “by a council of the industry and aviation education leaders and composed of approved independently participating flight instructors and aviation schools across the nation.”³⁴

Conclusion

According to SAFE, "Though the reasons for increased attrition among students and other pilots are many, instructors often represent the first and last lines of defense to motivate pilots to continue in aviation. Instructors directly influence our safety, security, and environmental mindsets as well—influence that has significant and widespread ramifications both inside and outside general aviation."³⁵

Treating instructing as a staging area for something better is a tradition that has never served our customers or general aviation well. It is also past time for us to evolve beyond the outdated and ineffective paradigm of *students and instructors* to a *service industry* with *customers, clients*, and dedicated *aviation educators*. The "race to the bottom," as 2003 National CFI of the Year Jeffrey Edwards labeled it,³⁶ must end. Even if instructing is an avocation or a temporary stop en route to another career, we must nevertheless demand professionalism and higher standards. In the words of Wyrzykowski, "We need to institutionalize the role of Career Instructor."³⁷

Furthermore, Frisch notes, "the customer must have confidence in the instructor-client relationship. The relationship...is the most important tool to make learning successful. The relationship is the best predictor of a satisfactory outcome."³⁸ These observations are consistent with the conclusions reached in the AOPA survey.

The more instructors improve their skills and embrace their pivotal role as aviation educators, the higher the wages and benefits. Equally as important, the more instructors and flight schools become customer-centric and focus on quality and value over price, the higher the probability of greater student retention and success. Improved aviation citizenship, a more vibrant and vital general aviation industry, and increased safety could very well be the long-term outcomes.

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