



FLYING INTO



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS

A NEW ERA

*Welcoming a fleet of nine new planes and being named the top national program—
twice—are just the beginning for OU's School of Aviation. BY TAMI ALTHOFF*

IN APRIL, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA President Joseph Harroz, Jr., stood on a wing of a new Piper single-engine airplane at OU's Max Westheimer Airport, celebrating the "Fly-In" arrival of nine aircraft and ushering in a modern era for the university's top-ranked School of Aviation.

The airplanes—which expand the school's fleet toward a goal of 28—are part of a myriad of enhancements increasing OU's capacity for flight training and supporting its mission to produce qualified pilots, air traffic controllers and airport managers ready to lead the state's growing aviation industry.

"Welcoming these new aircraft today marks a significant milestone that serves as a tangible illustration of OU's longstanding commitment to strategically align with our state's workforce needs," Harroz said in front of a crowd spilling across the airport tarmac.

The program's growth is driven by market realities, says Eric Wydra, director of the OU School of Aviation. Delta Airlines alone faces a shortfall of 2,000 pilots annually, highlighting industry-wide demand and the necessity of expanding aviation education.

"There's a significant pilot shortage, and if you read Boeing studies, it's not going to get any better—primarily due to the aging demographic of pilots," he says.

Wydra points to a 2023 Oliver Wyman analysis that forecasts a shortage of 17,000 pilots within a decade.

"Other factors are that the military is producing fewer pilots and there aren't enough new pilots training in the private sector to fill the gap.

"If you look at Oklahoma specifically, aviation is the state's second-largest industry and will probably be its biggest industry in the next few years," Wydra adds. "You have a perfect storm of demand for our degrees in a state that is very aviation-friendly."

The School of Aviation is part of OU's College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences. Aviation enrollment has been at capacity for years, and demand has grown even more since *FLYING Magazine* twice named OU the best aviation program in the nation. Currently at 357 enrolled students, the program has nearly doubled its numbers in the past two years and plans to grow to 600 students by 2025.

"What we've seen is an incredible demand for our pilot and non-pilot programs," Wydra says. "It is increasing every year. The only thing limiting us is equipment; if we had more planes, we could take even more students."

"When I applied to OU, I knew I wanted to be an aviation major," says Macee Peterson, a pro pilot senior from Fort Worth, Texas. The president of OU's Women in Aviation chapter already holds a commercial pilot's license and is training to earn her FAA flight instructor certificate.

"I'm very passionate about aviation," says Peterson, who hopes to become an airline pilot. "Teaching people who have the same passion will be rewarding."

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—ERIC WYDRA

This fall, OU will expand opportunities for students to explore further by adding a rotary-wing helicopter aviation program to its degree options. Training will initially be provided on three helicopters by Semper Fly Helicopters, a veteran- and female-owned private company in Norman. The program will offer students additional aviation career pathways and address the workforce shortage of qualified helicopter pilots.

"There is a demand out there," Wydra says. "We're already seeing interest in students wanting to enroll in the helicopter program."

Brandi Rector, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and owner of Semper Fly, says OU is one of few universities with a rotor program and will be the sole SEC program of its kind.

Rector says her instructors are thoroughly vetted, and most have served in the military.

"My mind is blown that OU chose us to do this program," she says. "OU has such a great reputation. It means a lot that I'm in a position to change the rotor industry, change lives and give soon-to-be pilots a better position and footing in the industry."

The School of Aviation's Air Traffic Management and Aviation Management programs have also recently undergone significant upgrades. A former Red Cross building on OU's north Norman research campus has been renovated to include state-of-the-art flight simulators that enhance hands-on learning experiences.



TRAVIS CAPERTON

OU President Joseph Harroz, Jr., stands on a wing of a new Piper airplane at OU's Fly-In event in April.



ERIKAH BROWN

A student practices on an air traffic control simulator at the OU School of Aviation.

The growth of OU's School of Aviation aims to counter a national pilot shortfall and fulfill the demand for aviation education.



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“We’re able to teach all simulation options and will offer a concentration on tower simulation, thanks to the advanced capabilities of our tower,” says Steve West, director of the school’s Air Traffic Management program.

With air traffic control jobs in high demand, the Air Traffic Management program is working toward becoming one of the first schools certified through the FAA’s Enhanced Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative. The program will allow students to bypass training at the FAA Academy and go directly to work in air traffic facilities.

“A low student-to-faculty ratio is important for our mission with the FAA to ensure that future air traffic controllers get as much individualized attention as we

can provide,” West says.

He says the Air Traffic Management program is growing rapidly and expects it to expand to up to 150 students within the next three years.

“Being recognized as No. 1 in the country has brought a lot of attention to the School of Aviation and increased our recruiting power. It’s a result of our capabilities in air traffic, the quality of our faculty and the new airplane fleet coming on board.”

In addition, a \$36.5 million federal appropriation and a private gift from the Pigman Family Charitable Fund will support improvements to OU’s Max Westheimer Airport that include extending and strengthening the runway, developing a new taxiway and building a new aircraft hangar.

The Pigman Family Charitable Fund gift benefits the \$2 billion *Lead On: The University of Oklahoma’s Campaign for the Future*. The campaign designates \$30 million toward the OU School of Aviation.

The hangar’s construction is the first step in adding up to 90 hangars for leasing to outside aviation companies. These projects also mark the first phase of a multifunctional OU Center of Aviation Excellence that will feature state-of-the-art classrooms, labs and office space.

“By 2026, we will have brand-new classroom facilities and new hangars, and the fleet will be reinforced,” West says. “And, as we build our capability to serve more students, we will work to preserve the high quality of individual student instruction and attention.”

With a focus on fleet facilities, student support and faculty expansion, Wydra says the OU School of Aviation is poised to continue its upward trajectory, preparing the next generation of aviation professionals for success in a rapidly evolving industry.

“Aviation is growing leaps and bounds, and I credit OU’s administration for realizing that,” he says. “They’re all in. We’re all in.”

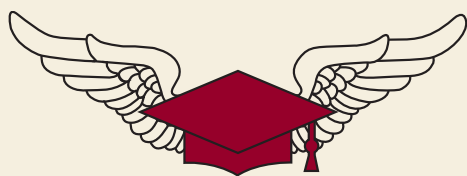
Berrien Moore, dean of OU’s College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences, believes that the university is a key component in meeting the nation’s needs for highly skilled people in all areas of the aviation industry. He says former methods of supplying the market solely through the U.S. Armed Forces and corporate aviation schools have changed.

Today, he says, the industry wants students with a university undergraduate diploma, a flight certificate and a broad background in both business and science.

Moore says it’s “incredible” to watch OU’s School of Aviation take the lead through creative initiatives and with the staunch support of alumni and the private sector.

“We are providing students with opportunities that no other university can offer,” he says. “Only OU can bring it all together.” 📍

Tami Althoff is content lead for OU Education Services.



Aviation Alumni Notables

Below is a short list of OU alumni who have made an impact on the aviation industry. If you know of others we should recognize, please share them to sooner magazine@oufoundation.org.

Lindy Ritz, OU '71 BS home econ, was a longtime director of the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center in Oklahoma City and retired as acting vice president for technical training for the Federal Aviation Administration’s U.S. Air Traffic Organization.

Grayson Ardies, OU '09 BS Atm and Geo Sci, is executive director of the Oklahoma Department of Aerospace and Aeronautics and serves on the OU School of Aviation Advisory Board.

Eric Gaffney, OU '10 BS Atm and Geo Sci, is a United Airlines pilot and children’s book author. His book, “Airick Flies High,” tells the story of an airplane with one wing shorter than the other. Gaffney says the book “is symbolic of my life and career as a one-handed pilot.”