



ERIKAH BROWN

Taking the Controls Early

Flight academies help Oklahoma K-12 students incorporate aviation into dreams for their future.

BY ANNA ANDERSEN

While the OU School of Aviation prepares its students for future aviation careers, two youth programs on the university's north Norman research campus are encouraging kids from kindergarten up to consider aviation as a career path.

At OU's Sooner Flight Academy, or SFA, weeklong summer camps and school-year field trips teach K-12 students about STEM and aviation. Students take their first SFA flight at age 8, while high schoolers learn to pilot a plane.

Many campers return year after year—like SFA's new program director, Ashley Chrisman, who started attending when she was 7 and came back for 10 years as a camper before serving as a counselor or "navigator." When Dawn Machalinski retired after 18 years as SFA director, she tapped Chrisman, an OU 2017 alum.

"This has been a big part of my life for so long," says Chrisman, who sees SFA "inspiring the next generation of leaders in aviation and STEM." In her first summer as director, she respond-

ed to higher demand by adding two camps at the Eagles 1 (ages 14 to 18) level and diversifying the flights that Eagles 2 pilots (ages 15 to 18) take.

"They're learning how to do slow turns, they're climbing, ascending and descending—hands-on in all the different elements of flying," she says.

This winter, SFA will launch Adult Camp Experience Weekend, giving grown-ups the opportunity to build a rocket, go up in a plane and generally join in on the fun.

While SFA has drawn young students from around the country for decades, a relatively new academic offering welcomes local high schoolers to Oklahoma Aviation Academy, or OAA. A STEM-focused, aerospace-themed program of Norman Public Schools, OAA was established in 2022 and is led by longtime educator Terry Adams.

Left: Sooner Flight Academy Director Ashley Crisman shares her love of aviation with summer campers.

Right: Oklahoma Aviation Academy students visit the Lady Liberty A-226 bomber during a field trip to Enid's Woodring Regional Airport.



Right: The future Oklahoma Aviation Academy will also house the OU School of Aviation.



"There is a massive shortage of workers in the aviation industry—not just pilots, but mechanics, engineers and air traffic controllers," Adams says. "We provide opportunities for students to consider careers in aviation."

Students spend half days at their regular school site and half at OAA, where they are taught by certified OU flight instructors and assisted by OU students who share knowledge about everything from learning the parts of a plane to using drones in meteorology research.

Based upon a curriculum from the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, the OAA program begins with STEM courses Aviation 1 and 2. Sophomores also take a course in Aviation History. By junior year, students can branch out into specializations like preparing for pilot's exams, earning a commercial drone certificate, or

gaining hands-on experience through Moore-Norman Technology Center's aviation maintenance program. Via a regional non-profit, students can even build a two-seater airplane during their last two years of high school.

Adams says there are plans to add pathways in meteorology and cyber defense as the academy continues to expand. More than 200 students are enrolled in OAA for fall 2024 and a dedicated facility is in the works at Max Westheimer Airport that will be shared with the OU School of Aviation.


"I look at it as a partnership," says the OU school's director, Eric Wydra. "Since aviation is Oklahoma's second-largest industry, it makes sense that we would be working together. The demand is there. It's a win for the state, it's a win for OU, and it's a win for Norman Public Schools."

This fall will also be the first time

the academy offers concurrent OU enrollment, providing high school students with college credit. But OU has been an integral OAA partner since the academy's inception. The school's advisory board includes members of university leadership, Adams says.

"The board is involved in fundraising, creating access and opportunity, and connecting OAA with the aviation and STEM professions to ensure that we provide the best possible experience for our kids," he adds.

Adams believes that OU is quickly becoming an epicenter of aviation education.

"SFA helps bring kids to us, and we help bring them to OU and the aviation professions. It's a perfect opportunity." 

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