

Challenges

A. Sustainability

Sustainability for the proposed two-year commercial pilot diploma program will be driven by a good reputation and an ability to turn out competent northern pilots while still having a continual pool of students.

Creating such a program involves:

- Continual networking and marketing with potential students and future employers,
- Program content that is safe and fulfilling to students, and desirable to future employers,
- Successful completion of the program by students and placement with future employers, and
- Continuous feedback from former students and employers regarding ways to strengthen the program.

The manner in which the proposed program is meeting these issues includes:

- Partnering with a well-established program with a good safety record and proven curriculum,
- Partnering with a well established local flight school that also exhibits a good safety record and is embedded in the Northern Pilot Network,
- Working with local school districts to foster interest in northern aviation career tracks and increase awareness of what life is really like as a pilot in the north, and
- Working with the District of Vanderhoof and community partners for infrastructure support and business opportunities.

Importance of a Diploma

Despite this planning, there may exist a challenge in convincing some Northern Air Operators the possession of a diploma is a true asset in the commercial pilot industry. In the Northern Air Operator survey, forty-six percent of respondents stated they did not feel there was an advantage in hiring new pilots who possess at least a two-year aviation diploma and commercial pilot's license vs. hiring those who possess only a commercial pilot's license. Another twenty percent did not know how they felt on this issue, either because they did not know enough about commercial pilot diploma programs or they were of the opinion an applicant with a diploma did not stand out simply on the basis of having a diploma. This also would seem to be supported by the fact survey respondents were nearly unanimous in stating the importance of an applicant's overall general attitude and personal initiative when it came to being successful in the industry.

There is little disagreement attitude and initiative go a long way in serving a pilot throughout his/her career. Good pilots exist long before they are ever trained because it takes a special combination of personality, drive, and passion to be attracted to the profession in the first place. But, what if that drive/initiative could be supplemented and honed with training in business and marketing, interpersonal communication skills, and management in a professional environment? The goal of the proposed program is not to provide a post-secondary credential just for the sake of itself, but rather to produce the type of pilots Northern Air Operators say they want.

Many respondents in the Northern Air Operator Survey indicated they have hired pilots in the last five years who were deficient or lacking in the knowledge of how a business is run, in decision-making skills, and in knowing the reality of the job. Nearly 70% of survey respondents indicated some preference toward pilots with business/revenue and client/marketing training. Respondents also indicated they want to hire applicants who are familiar with the geography and lifestyle of their region. This is precisely the point of creating a two-year commercial pilot

diploma program in Vanderhoof, BC, to train students interested in becoming northern pilots with the skills they need to prosper in the industry here. There is a dwindling number of flight schools in northwest Canada, and air operators are finding their insurance companies prefer pilots who possess a two-year aviation diploma along with a commercial pilot's license. The proposed program will not only give northern operators applicants who can make a commitment to learn and complete a goal within a set time frame, but also applicants who are familiar with the region and possess business sense and professionalism.

Job Placement

A number of respondents in the Northern Air Operator Survey stated they plan to hire pilots in the next three to five years. Part of sustainability for the proposed program will be to find jobs for its graduates. To do this, the College must foster relationships with operators across northwest Canada to ensure job placements after graduation. Operators who responded to the survey indicated they rely heavily on their own personal networks or a referral from an existing employee in their recruiting processes. This means the College must be diligent in structuring and maintaining a program with a good reputation.

Advice on how to create a program with a good reputation has come from private flight schools and college programs in BC, from pilots who were graduates of programs outside BC, from seasoned operators who have examined countless resumes, and from retired and semi-retired pilots alike. To produce quality graduates and a program with a good reputation feedback on this issue stated the College must:

- Foster students to work as a team,
- Keep classes small with a high degree of quality control,
- Provide “real world” curriculum in the course content, as well as in the flight and simulator exercises,
- Hire Level 1 and 2 flight instructors who have real world experience flying in the North, and
- Maintain an exemplary safety record.

The key to overcoming job placement challenges for the proposed program will be to effectively link the College's already well-established reputation in Northern BC with the local flight school's Northern Pilot Network association and connectedness. This task will fall to the Program Coordinator and the head of the local flight school to ensure program recruiting is combined with visits to Northern Air Operators to discuss program curriculum and benefits. The Program Coordinator will also work with partnering entities (UFV/CPA, the local flight school, and the District of Vanderhoof) to seek out opportunities within the business sector to further job placement for the graduates from the potential program.

Continual Funnel of Qualified Students

By virtue of its placement in Vanderhoof, BC, the proposed program will draw candidates not only from Northern BC, but also from northwestern Alberta, southeast Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories who are looking to train in a familiar environment. It is likely the program's placement will also increase interest in becoming a commercial pilot in surrounding high schools during the initial years of the proposed program. In northern BC, excluding Prince George, there is an average of 1.8 people per sq. km., making it one of the least densely populated areas in the world south of the 60th parallel (BC Tourism 2009). The first challenge will be attracting enough students during the first years to establish a reputable program. This will be achieved through cross-marketing with the local flight school, the local school district, the College's international program, and the District of Vanderhoof. If needed, a risk management

strategy during this time could be to lower the minimum cohort size in an effort to build resources and more fully develop curriculum around feedback from cross-marketing efforts.

Another challenge will be a continual funnel of qualified students into the program year after year. Candidates who apply to the will all have an interest in, perhaps even a profound passion for, flying, but not all may be suited to be commercial pilots. Advice from Northern Air Operators states the proposed program needs to be diligent in turning out good commercial pilots, not just turning out pilots because there are people willing to pay money to learn to fly. To do this, the proposed program will need a screening process. The first part of the screening process will be the prerequisite course entrance requirements, while the second part of the screening process will be an interview and a computer-based aptitude test to help solicit personalities who will be successful. In addition, the program will take a realistic approach to aviation even as it markets to potential candidates. Students will know before they enter the program being a pilot is not just about flying the plane. As stated by one respondent in the Northern Air Operator Survey, there are roughly 2000 hours to be worked in a typical year and a good year of flying might log a pilot 500 flight hours, leaving 1500 hours each year for a pilot to fill with other duties (maintenance, ramp operations, professional development, safety, recurrent training, building knowledge of different aircraft, etc.).

The obvious challenge in this approach will be keeping the applicant numbers high enough to ensure a full cohort of qualified students is funnelled into the program at each intake. A few methods for meeting this task if it becomes a challenge will be to change the intake interval, temporarily mobilize the program or a part of the program, and/or market directly to international students. If a yearly intake of 16 qualified students becomes too difficult to meet, the program could examine an intake every two years. This would keep students who want to ladder into UFV/CPA's program on schedule while not over-tapping the market. Likewise, if the "local" market appears to have been too heavily tapped after a few years and the proposed program is not drawing as many applicants from areas where there is known interest, mobilizing part of the program for a short time to those areas could alleviate the challenge (Whitehorse, Yukon; Grand Prairie, Alberta; etc.). This approach has been successful with the aircraft maintenance engineer program at Northern Lights College. Adopting a similar approach with the proposed program would help strengthen its northern ties and aid greatly in marketing and exposure for the proposed program. Lastly, the Northern Air Operator Survey indicated interest in the proposed program from nearby southeast Alaska. Although current fluctuations in the Canadian dollar inhibit easy predictions for the near future, historic data indicates interest in Canadian aviation programs by various foreigners attracted to a low Canadian dollar and superior safety regulations (ATAC 2009). Direct marketing to bordering US states (Alaska, Washington, Idaho, and Montana), as well as countries with similar geography will increase awareness of the proposed program and aid in funnelling more students into the program at each intake.

Optional Student Housing

With the proposed program's potential to draw candidates from a variety of locales across northwest Canada, reliable housing for students is a must. Calls to local housing providers revealed Vanderhoof and its closest neighbors, Fort St. James and Fraser Lake, all possess apartment and townhouse complexes, the majority of which possess low vacancy rates. Likewise, all three towns have two to three bedroom houses for rent from time to time, but one must be diligent to follow word-of-mouth leads in order to successfully acquire housing in this manner, as rental housing is likely to be spoken for by the time an ad is placed in the local newspaper (Bayliss 2009).

Because the proposed program is geared to draw students from across the north, and the curriculum will demand much of a student's time, the notion of dedicated student housing for the

proposed program becomes a serious consideration. Four RCAF barracks, originally built for WWII, are now privately owned and occupied and stand at the edge of the Vanderhoof airfield. If space is available and compatible with regional planning efforts, it might be possible to run additional water and electrical lines past these barracks to a nearby area where five to seven mobile trailers or three to four modular homes could be placed as student housing for the proposed program. Each modular home would have five bedrooms, at least two washrooms, laundry, natural gas, electricity, sewer and water service. This endeavor would play a vital role in the student's success rate for the proposed program, and would necessitate key involvement from the College's partnerships with the District of Vanderhoof and local industry.

Airport Infrastructure

Students who enroll in the proposed program from across northwest Canada will be attracted to the ease at which they can acquire flight time in the uncongested airspace around the Vanderhoof area. Current plans by the District to add AWOS and flight tracking abilities to the locale will enhance students' attraction to the area. One vital piece still missing at the airport is a terminal/dispatch building. Although this building is not essential for the proposed program to function, it would provide an anchor for the airport as pilots/students fly in from other areas.

As the District of Vanderhoof explores options with an airport development plan to determine what is needed to help diversify the area's economy, consideration of a terminal building with public and non-public areas will be encouraged. A two-story building with public use on the lower floor and non-public use on the upper floor would allow for secured workspace and dispatch areas. Second floor workspace would be used for classrooms, offices, and/or briefing rooms to augment the proposed program. This building could even be built large enough to incorporate a space for a simulator used for recurrent pilot training, and share heat and utilities with the terminal area in an effort to cut down on operating expenses.

B. Funding Identification

Funding for the proposed program will be required for project coordination, obtaining and adapting curriculum, completing accreditation processes, hiring instructors and support staff, developing facilities, and buying equipment and supplies. In the current economy, it is recognized funding sources may be limited, but projects that serve to diversify local and regional economies in such times are good investments.

The College and its partners intend to seek funds from government and non-government sources for projects eligible for infrastructure and capital investment funding. Such projects include one-time equipment costs such as the flight simulator(s), and structures that would serve multi-public use and help expand local economies.

The College will seek to purchase one simulator that will accommodate the full cohort of students enrolled in the proposed program. As interest in the program increases, additional simulators/flight training devices will be sought according to need and use. If additional simulators are needed as part of the proposed program, the College will seek further funding for that need. If an economic spin-off for recurrent training to regional pilots is realized from the use of the proposed program simulator and an additional simulator is needed to accommodate these needs, the College will support the District and industry in their seeking of further funding for that need.

The College will seek provincial funding to aid in the costs of running the proposed program in the north. It is noted, all other two-year diplomas attached to commercial pilot training in BC currently receive some amount of provincial funding, ensuring programs can run year after year if student numbers vary.