Utah Gets Moving on Workforce Development

Its Rotor Pathways Program could show other states the way.

WASHINGTON, D.C., IS A TOWN full of ideas and “solutions” to the many problems we face. However, finding a resolution for an issue as large as workforce development for the helicopter industry may require changing national policy on education and training. And perhaps you haven’t noticed, but things can move pretty slowly inside the Beltway.

However, let’s not forget the states and their power to create their own solutions. With their smaller scale, states can be more nimble, more experimental than the larger federal government. One example of this agility is the exciting Utah Rotor Pathways Program: a public-private partnership that brings together the Utah rotorcraft industry, educators, and government to increase rotorcraft educational opportunities for students in that state.

Utah is a state that values its industries, its workforce, and the heart of the matter, its people. A large segment of the helicopter industry in Utah consists of air medical, firefighting, and training operations. With its large rural stretches, mountainous terrain, and weather, helicopter companies in Utah are conducting highly skilled operations that require well-trained pilots and technicians.

According to a study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, Contribution of General Aviation to the US Economy in 2013, the total economic output of general aviation in Utah is $2.2 billion. The helicopter industry contributes to that figure, and its firefighting capabilities further provide value to this semi-arid western state.

HAI approached the Utah governor’s office last year to brief his staff on the helicopter industry in Utah and our workforce shortage. In our initial meeting with Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox and staff representing Gov. Gary Herbert, I discussed the 2018 Helicopter Foundation International (HFI) study that documented the problem. I outlined our findings from the HFI-sponsored HeliFutures forums, where industry stakeholders met to discuss their efforts to attract and retain pilots and maintenance technicians.

I was glad that I could report that our industry recognized the seriousness of the issue and was already working on solutions. Folks are more likely to help when they see that you are investing your own resources to improve the situation.

Cox immediately understood the usefulness and impact of the helicopter industry and how supporting it could benefit his state. Before I was on my flight back to D.C., we had agreed to move forward with a plan to bring more pilot and maintenance technician students into the pipeline. In other words, we had the initial glimmers of a workforce development plan that would become the Utah Rotor Pathways Program.

Bringing more pilots and maintenance technicians into the industry is the program’s goal. Its workforce development strategy is to provide more Utah high school and post-secondary students with access to rotorcraft education. The idea is simple: if more students are exposed to rotorcraft aviation, more of them will choose careers in the helicopter industry.

Think this approach to workforce development could work in your state? Reach out to me (cade.clark@rotor.org), and let’s discuss.
It’s a straightforward concept that allows for great flexibility in delivery. The program teams industry, high schools, post-secondary schools such as colleges and technical schools, and other stakeholders. I’m sure there are some teaming variations yet to be discovered.

Universities can team up with a local high school to teach rotor-specific aviation flight training and technician classes, where high school students learn the basics and gain college credit in the process. High school students will also have opportunities to work with industry partners in a variety of roles, such as job shadowing, internships, and mentoring. Once students graduate from the university system, they have an opportunity to interview with industry partners.

An important role for industry is to work with education partners to ensure the skills they need are being taught. In today’s educational environment, where post-secondary schools are required to track and report their job placement metrics, this type of cooperation with industry is welcomed.

While the Utah Rotor Pathways Program is in the very initial stages of implementation, we already have some great success. First, we have more than 40 members representing 22 different program partners, ranging from local helicopter operators focusing on air medical and heavy lift, to universities, flight schools, tour operators, and local government agencies. It is exciting to see such enthusiasm by all stakeholders and a desire to work together to solve our workforce issue at a local level.

Second, we have teamed up with Cedar Valley High School, in Eagle Mountain, Utah, which will hold its grand opening this August. In addition to the traditional high school curriculum, the Aviators, as they are called, will offer students rotor-specific education in both pilot and maintenance tracks.

This school’s students will be some of the first to benefit from the Utah Rotor Pathways Program. For aviation curriculum and other educational resources, the Aviators have teamed up with two of our program members, Southern Utah University (SUU) and Utah Valley University. The grand opening ceremony will host a number of prominent Utah elected officials and dignitaries, and will include numerous flyovers by local Utah helicopter companies. From Day 1, rotary-wing aviation will be a central theme of this school!

Third, the Utah Rotor Pathways Program has applied for and won state government grants. It’s great to talk about teaming up and teaching that or doing this, but without resources, not much can be done. Program participants were eligible to apply for a grant for workforce development from the Utah Department of Workforce Services. SUU was awarded a grant for $103,000 to implement a program to provide hands-on aviation electronics training and online training. These resources will be used in local high schools to bring rotor training to a new generation of students who might otherwise never have been exposed to our industry.

Our next step as a program will be to apply to the Strategic Workforce Initiative, which is a funding source from the Utah legislature. The grants will provide ongoing money to implement and run high school rotor education programs, duplicating the Cedar Valley model in high schools throughout the state.

Why is this program working in Utah? We found leaders in industry, education, and government willing to think outside the box. University flight schools committed to teaching the next generation and were willing to partner with local high schools. Industry partners were willing to step up and get involved. Lastly, state officials were willing to fund educational opportunities that connect its citizens with technical careers in an industry that desperately needs them, while supporting Utah’s aviation industry.

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