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The Collegiate Aviation Student Guide to Success; A Flight Student's Perspective

Stephan Jansen Van Vuuren
Western Michigan University

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The Collegiate Aviation Student Guide to Success;
A Flight Student's Perspective

Honors Thesis
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI

Stephan Jansen Van Vuuren

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Introduction

Hi, my name is Stephan! My guess is if you are reading this you must either be on my thesis committee or interested in making the most of your time in college getting your degree and pilot licenses, but hey! Just a guess.

The idea for this thesis came about on a dreary April afternoon during a meeting with the dean of the Lee Honors College, Dr. Irma Lopez, as she inquired as to why I was not participating in my cohort's service project this year. You see, this year had been particularly tough on me professionally and personally and the service project I had helped create years ago was the last thing on my mind. After starting my thesis three separate times only to run out of motivation, I was desperate for the next idea to capture my attention enough to last at least twenty-five pages. Irma suggested I create a manual of sorts to help future students that will go through what I have gone through and give them the tools and ideas that I wish I had back then. This sounded fun; now we are here.

So, here is some backstory about me. Born at the turn of the century to parents who resided in the southernmost country in Africa, I was raised thinking that my future would involve me living in South Africa for the near future, meeting my future wife there to eventually have a family and start the whole process all over again. This could not be further from the truth, as it played out. My family decided to move from Johannesburg to Naperville, Illinois in the late winter of 2009 to support my dad who had taken a new position in the United States. This started my transition into American culture, education, and society. Being barely eight years old at the time, it was a difficult change to accept. All my friends, family, favorite places, and favorite memories were now across an ocean thousands of kilometers, sorry, miles away.

As I grew older, the age-old question of, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” really started to become important to me. I fancied the idea of being a chemist and wearing a white coat while mixing chemicals into some sort of interesting solution. But I also liked the idea of working as a journalist and investigating. Then there was also this weird feeling I got whenever we went to the airport; a feeling that had ebbed and flowed since I was just a few weeks old on my first flight to Durban on a Boeing 737 to visit my grandmother for the first time. The feeling returned when we would be at the airport to travel for vacation but would go away when we arrived at our destination. I soon started to put it together that the common thread with this feeling was being near airplanes.

After this discovery, I made it clear to my parents that I really enjoyed airplanes. This worked out great because they used to travel all around the world for work every week and I would always go with to drop them off or pick them up. They would start collecting the amenity kits they got on the airplane and bring them home to me, much to my delight!

My first flight in a general aviation airplane was on July 9, 2011, according to my Young Eagles logbook. It was at Clow International Airport (IC5) in Bolingbrook, IL in a PA-34 Piper Seneca. This was through a program called the Young Eagles which aims to get kids ages 8-17 involved in aviation with a free ride in an airplane from volunteer pilots who use their own personal aircraft. Honestly, I do not remember the flight too well, but I do remember we did zero-gravity parabolas and after that, I was hooked for sure. Looking back, it is amazing to think that these pilots are using their own airplanes and paying for it all to be able to take kids who most of the time cannot even fathom algebra up in the air to see if aviation is something they might be interested in. Since the Young Eagles got me started, I plan to return the favor one day and do the same thing in the airplane that I plan to own. I can imagine that is going to be a very

full-circle moment for me. Ever since that day, I put it all towards aviation and made sure I did what was necessary to reach my goal of becoming an airline pilot. I graduated high school in the spring of 2019 and got my private pilot license the summer before going to Western Michigan University in the fall of 2019. At the moment, I am a certified flight instructor (CFI) working at Western Michigan University while finishing my degree in aviation flight science.

This thesis is meant for the high school senior or college first-year student who is crazy enough to want to go into this amazing industry that is aviation. I am sure you have questions about a million things, and I will do my best to answer them if you give me a few pages :) Want to know what you can do in high school to save yourself some money and time in college? Want to know whether you should get your private pilot's license before you go to college? Or do you want to know if you can take a full credit load, work a part-time job, and fly? If you want to be a pilot, I hope that this guide can solidify your plans and give you the best chance of succeeding in your endeavors. Whether you have zero experience in aviation and are the first in your family to pursue this career or were born into an aviation family, I hope you can find some useful information in here to increase your chances of being successful.

Before College

Before you even start to look at aviation as a career field, you better be sure that flying is something that excites you and does not make you queasy every time you sit up front. A quick and relatively easy way to figure out if you're going to be hooked or not is to book an intro/discovery flight. These hour-long flights are offered at every flight school. You will go up with an instructor who works for the school and they will let you fly, show you how things work, and maybe even let you takeoff/land! If you google "discovery flight near me," I am sure you

will find an option within an hour's drive. They run about \$150 which is not bad for what you get, to be honest, the time is even loggable towards the eventual 1500/1000 hours required if you want to fly for the airlines. What I mean there relates to the eventual goal for most pilots: the airlines. To fly for the airlines, you need an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) license and that requires a minimum of 1500 hours logged or 1000 if you earned a bachelor's degree in flight science from an accredited university. This reduced-hour ATP is called the Restricted Airline Transport Pilot (R-ATP) license. Another option if you are younger than seventeen is with the Young Eagles offered through the Experimental Aviation Association (EAA). Young Eagles allows kids to go up for free in volunteer pilots' aircraft and get the chance to fly around and experience the joys of general aviation. After the flight, they get their own logbook (I still have mine to this day), access to Sporty's online learn-to-fly course (which is \$300 otherwise), and free time that they can technically log! The Young Eagles program is put on by local EAA chapters at local airports and you can find the next event through a quick Google search.

If you are like me, you went to a public high school in the suburbs that offered honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes in a variety of subjects. Your high school counselor offers advice that does not apply to you and tells you how their distant relative is a pilot for United. They stare at you blankly and just remind you that pilots need to be good at math, so you better take AP Calculus or Statistics.

I remember thinking in high school that I needed perfect grades, lots of honors/AP classes, and anything less than a 4.0 GPA was going to tank my admission into an aviation program at a university—boy was I wrong. Aviation programs really are not that competitive when it comes to grades or GPA! While I worked as an Aviation Ambassador, a tour guide for the College, I saw people that were admitted with GPAs as low as 2.2 and standardized test

scores that fall well below the expected range. There is nothing wrong with not being a straight-A student, some of the best pilots I know are straight B or C students! If your school offers any AP classes, it is definitely worth your while to look and see if any of the classes they offer would transfer to a university you're considering. For example, my school offered AP calculus AB, AP statistics, and AP Physics. All of them transferred over to most schools I was looking at, with AP physics counting for up to ten credits at Western Michigan University—my eventual home. These classes are a higher workload than regular high school classes and although it might be tough to push through when you are just trying to keep a higher GPA and enjoy your senior year, the payoff, if you score well on the AP exam, is well worth it—figuratively and monetarily. Ten credits shaved off your degree at the going rate at my university of \$694.48 per credit hour for non-residents is \$6,944.8 saved (Western Michigan University, 2022) and might also allow you to graduate sooner! AP and honors classes also allow you to get used to the “firehose” style that flight training will feel like, at least initially.

But what if you are not interested in going to college? That is fine! In recent years, entering the aviation industry sans degree has allowed pilots to become captains at legacy airlines such as Delta, American, and United. A degree is not required anymore, but having a degree, and an aviation degree at that will aid in getting hired. You can get all your licenses for *much* cheaper if you do them at a part 61 flight school—just make sure the training is up to par! Not a cute look having barebones training with no degree.

If you are lucky enough to be in school districts that offer some sort of aviation program, you better take advantage of it! Although not part of most schools' education, aviation is slowly permeating pre-college education and some districts have started buying flight simulators or even partnering with local flight schools to allow students to get real-world experience and even walk

away with their private pilot's license! I wish my district had this and incorporated more aviation education into their curriculum as I was the only person in my grade that was interested in becoming a pilot and I think many more would have if they knew how cool it is.

Going to College for an Aviation Degree

Ok so now you have decided to go to college for an aviation degree, great! That is where I found myself in senior year of high school. Now the question that was yet to be answered: where will I go? If you search aviation degrees on Google, chances are the following schools will flood your results, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU), University of North Dakota (UND), Western Michigan University (WMU), Purdue University, and Liberty University. These schools have the top professional pilot programs and/or the most money to fund ads in saying so. When doing your research, you will probably notice most of these schools are ones you might never have heard of before. Most of the top aviation schools are nothing special in terms of general reputation but are well-revered in the aviation industry for producing excellent pilots. There are other schools, of course, and some that are growing their reputation and size, but these are the schools that at the time I was looking were top of mind.

Visiting the Universities on Your Short List

Besides cost, which you can research yourself as it changes yearly, there is another factor that is important when choosing a school. Those ranking websites are a great way to narrow down which schools are worthy of your application and attention, but they don't help you narrow down which school is right for *you!* You are a complex individual who has preferences and ideas of what makes the best school in your eyes. Does the school have a large enough student body so

it feels like a “normal” college experience? Does the school have sports teams that are worth watching? Does its location matter? How much debt will I have to take on to attend here? But most importantly, can I see myself happy and successful here? That last question is something a ranking website cannot answer for you. No amount of student reviews and aggregation of quantitative metrics can answer that for you. Usually, this answer becomes clear after a tour of the campus and airport.

Touring a college campus is a big step! It means you have enough interest in this place that you might pledge to pay amounts of money so large you will spend the first ten years of your career paying off the loans that funded your attendance. In all seriousness, a tour is worth a thousand visits to their website or phone calls with their representatives—it allows *you* to see if you fit in there! Does this school feel like it could be *my* home for the next few years? Do I see myself being involved and successful here? Are the people here friendly? Is the weather nice here? Are there things to do when I am not flying? These are all great questions to ponder while touring the campus. Make sure you get to visit the airport as well, most times it is a separate tour that needs to be booked. Also, bring a list of questions that you want answers to! It is extremely hard to dodge a difficult question when asked point blank by a tour, speaking from experience—on both sides. Here are some example questions to ask:

1. When will I start flying?
 - a. How is that determined?
 - b. What can I do to increase my chances of flying earlier?
2. Are there any scholarship opportunities available from the University?
 - a. What about from the College itself?

- b. Are there any organizations here that offer their own?
3. Is the program a part 141 program?
 - a. Is the program accredited by Aviation Accreditation Board International (AABI)?
4. How much are flight fees?
 - a. How/when are they billed?
5. Can you start the next flight course mid-semester if you finish one mid-semester?
6. What aviation student organizations have chapters on campus?
7. What is the background of full-time faculty?
8. What fleet is currently used?
9. How do flight activities get scheduled in regard to your class schedule?
10. Are there any student jobs available at the airport?
 - a. Does the school hire certified flight instructors that went through the program?

When I toured schools with my parents, we printed out copies of our typed-up questions and wrote down the answers on the back after the tour so we could remember. After you tour more than one school, it becomes exceedingly difficult to remember which program had this and which had that—trust me. I remember being confused on which school had almost zero scholarships for aviation students and which school had plenty of opportunities.

Evaluating the Cost of Attendance

One of the most important considerations when deciding on schools should be the cost of attendance. This is one of the most overlooked factors to the average teen deciding where they want to go to school—but the realities soon settle in once the decision has been made. I am

probably not the first person to tell you, but aviation is anything but cheap—and I'll certainly not be the last person to tell you this. The price of a professional pilot degree is slightly outrageous, but this is just how it is now. Think about it, the price of a four-year degree (tuition, housing, books, miscellaneous fees) plus the cost of earning at least four pilot's licenses is no small figure. At my school, WMU, the current estimated price for *just* four years of non-resident tuition and flight fees from zero experience is \$141,304.75 (Western Michigan University College of Aviation, 2021). This is not what I meant when I said find a part 141 flight school! Unfortunately, this price is pretty standard among similar universities these days. Luckily, you will not have to pay for all of that yourself, at least not right away. The federal government (and sometimes state government) offer lower-interest loans that can cover up to the entire cost of attendance as determined by your school. Your level of eligible aid from the government is determined by your submission of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). There are also other ways to pay for school, like scholarships! Scholarships are going to be your best friend in college as you watch the loans pile up as each semester ticks by. There are plenty of places to find scholarships to apply for: the university itself, the academic college, aviation organizations like the National Gay Pilots Association (NGPA), the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA), and many more! There are also opportunities available from regional/local flight organizations such as the local EAA chapter, flight school, or business aviation organization. Millions of dollars go wasted every year due to people not applying for scholarships that are actively looking to give away money! This, in my opinion, is the only way to pursue a degree in aviation without graduating with mountains of debt. I know applying for scholarships is overwhelming— I totally get it. I applied to over 100 between my senior year of high school and the end of my first year—it was exhausting, to say

the least. It felt like a full-time job sometimes with my spreadsheet tracking applications seeming to continue forever. It paid off, however. As of writing, I have been awarded \$81,000 in scholarships from a variety of organizations including Western Michigan University, airlines, aviation diversity organizations, and my local bank. The money is there, you just need to put in the work.

Do Not Get Swayed by the Name of the School

One last thing about deciding on where to go to school: please do not get swayed by the name of the school. In this industry and with the current hiring pace and outlook, companies will hire you if you have 1000/1500 hours and have a pulse. Employers are not going to discard your application because you did not go to a “name brand” aviation school. Although it might be very alluring to say you go to ERAU or UND or any other big-name aviation school, in the end, it does not really matter. Any place that allows you to take advantage of the Restricted Airline Transport Pilot’s License (R-ATP) at 1000 hours instead of 1500 by being a part 141 school is going to be quite like the next. Do not get caught up in the alleged prestige of it all and pay double or up to three times more than you would at a similar school for the same licenses and training. I know people that went to a particularly expensive school that ended up paying more than a quarter million dollars when all was said and done—only to be unimpressed with their experience in the end and have the same licenses that I have.

Freshman Year

The Importance of Making Friends the First Semester in College

So you have started college now! You are most likely on your own or you know a few people at this university that has thousands of students. This calls for making friends! Personally, in high school, I had very few close friends, maybe two. This was no fun, and I knew something had to change because, after all, college is when you are supposed to make the friends for the rest of your life. To make sure I fixed my friend situation in college, I made it a priority to put myself out there and just talk to people. That is really how simple it is. We are all scared and a bit timid during the first part of the semester so just muster some courage and go talk to people. About 80% of my friends who I still hang out with and am close with as I am about to end college I met in my first month at school. Try to make friends before the semester starts by joining group chats for first-year students and making plans to meet up in the first few days. You can also meet people in your housing/dorm by keeping the door open and chatting with people that pass by. The point being, there are many different ways to make friends in college so do not be lazy—put yourself out there and get uncomfortable because I promise you it will pay off. Like most things, it is beneficial to make friends that are further ahead of you because you will inevitably have questions that they might be able to answer. They have been where you are and can offer insightful advice that will only help you. This is especially true in aviation, as a lot of the time, concepts might not make sense right away after your professor or CFI explained them to you and a friend might be able to help you understand.

Know Your Professors and Make Personal Connections with Your Instructors

As you will see, the beginning college courses are usually enormous, and the professor is a tiny figure making noises in the front of the lecture hall. It is quite difficult for professors to remember you or your work if they have two hundred other students in just that class. This is an issue because one of the most important steps you can take to be successful in college is getting to know your professors. They are the experts in the field you so badly want to also become an expert in! Professors are also the people that can get you connected to other industry professionals who might even offer you a job or scholarship. It is entirely in your best interests to make personal connections with your instructors as soon as you can and to uphold them throughout your time at college. This can be accomplished by simply showing up to their office hours and asking some questions about the material being taught that week. Even if you understand it completely, ask them about how it will apply in your job one day, and ask them if there is anything more complex about the subject that they did not lecture about in class. Then, get to know them as people, and let them get to know *you* as an individual. Professors are much more likely to remember you when they see you next time or read your name on top of the assignment they are grading if they have had a full-on conversation with you a few times. Now here's where I am going to interject my radical opinion: do not just treat your professors as teachers, treat them as friends. I have been doing this since I was in middle school and it has been fantastic. I have friends from every school since. My technology teacher in middle school, all my English teachers in middle school, my German teacher in high school, my math teacher in high school, and now a handful of professors and other faculty at university. Cultivating a friendship with professors and other full-time personnel at university is a surefire way to make sure you feel included and welcomed wherever you are. When I walk into flight operations, I see

at least one of my professors who I consider a friend and we catch up and share laughs about what has been going on lately—and it is amazing. Some of the people in my grade are still scared of certain professors, to which I take pity because they are missing out on such a great experience of learning from someone you feel completely comfortable with. But to some degree, I get it, there were a few professors that I was afraid of when I heard of their reputation or was taking their class, but I made an effort to be friendly, make myself known, and say “hi, how’s it going?” *every single time* I saw them. Now, one is my boss and thesis chair, but more importantly, a mentor and confidant that I will continue to have after I leave school. Moral of the story—become friendly with your professors.

The Importance of Joining Registered Student Organizations (RSOs)

During my third week on campus, I went to a registered student organization meeting for the organization I had been looking forward to joining the most: the National Gay Pilots Association (NGPA). As a member of the LGBTQ+ community who had experienced homophobia in aviation already, I was excited to see what the NGPA was doing to promote diversity and inclusion in an industry so pale, male, and stale. The meeting had about ten people there and the executive board sitting at the front running the meeting. Not five minutes into the meeting, the secretary stood up and announced his immediate resignation, and just like that, there was an open position on the executive board. The president then asked if anyone wanted to volunteer, and my hand shot up before I could even stop myself. I do not know what took hold of me when I did not even know these people or what they really did, but here I was about to be on the executive board! It was part of my “screw it, put yourself out there” mentality that I was still running. The NGPA was one of four clubs that meetings I attended during my first few weeks to

see what was going on. I remember the dean at the time, Capt. Dave Powell had said to attend as many meetings of clubs as you can during the first few weeks of college, you do not have to stick with them all, just try them. I tried a few clubs but only really stuck to two: the NGPA and Alpha Eta Rho, the aviation fraternity. I made so many friends in those organizations—joining *and sticking* with them was one of the best decisions I made.

Hold a Leadership Position if You Can

Other than friends, I gained mentors in upper class students, had leadership experience, and also just had fun! I highly recommend that you try to hold a leadership position if you can. You will learn so much, and the experience gained, and connections fostered will be invaluable. Most aviation organizations have local chapters of their national organization. This means that there are many chapters like that around the country or even the world that at some point meet up in one place. These conferences are so much fun and can really enhance the experience of being in the organization. These conferences are held in energetic cities all around the country from Palm Springs, to Nashville, to Orlando. They bring together enthusiasts, leaders, activists, and companies that are looking to hire. For example, I attended the NGPA Winter Warmup which includes a massive job fair that featured almost every airline in the United States. They were great places to chat with recruiters from all over, get free swag, and make new friends in the industry. It was at these conferences that you again really must put yourself out there and make new friends. I took a risk and chatted with some recruiters at a random booth and the next thing you know I am a cadet for them and friends with all their recruiters. If you are personable and make an effort to really connect with people at these conferences, they *WILL* remember you next time! This is great, as rapport never hurts, even if it is with a recruiter that does not work for your

dream company. Because guess what—recruiters do not always stick with the same company! I knew a few that worked for Envoy Air (an American subsidiary) that were super nice and we always had good banter. They moved to United mainline, and they happened to do my paperwork and be at my interview when I interviewed for United's Aviate program—small world!

Start Flying as Soon as Possible

At least at my university, Western Michigan University, the process to start flying is complicated and you must know how to play the system. The College will award a certain amount of flight slots every semester based on aircraft availability, instructors on hand, and the number of applications for flight slots received. Once you have your flight slot, they cannot take it away from you unless you stop flying for an extended period. Therefore, it is imperative you get your foot in the door as soon as possible. At my school, there is an algorithm that ranks applicants based on a few merit-based metrics: GPA, credits completed, expected graduation date, and test scores for incoming first-year students. Right off the bat, the best way to increase your chances of flying as soon as possible is to start high school by maintaining a high cumulative GPA and earning high test scores on the ACT/SAT. Once you have completed a semester at Western, they no longer look at test scores but rather more college-based metrics. If you do not get accepted for a flight slot the first time around, do not worry! Most people do not get awarded a flight slot the first time they apply. If you are worried the time away from airplanes might be prolonged (i.e., you do not get a flight slot for a while) or you are interested, I would also recommend applying for an airport job at the airport *where you train*. Go back and read the previous sentence again; it is very important to not get dragged into an airline job as a

bag handler or customer service rep. I say this because although it might sound enticing with a nice hourly rate, flight benefits, and a flexible schedule, I have seen too many people I know and am friends with getting sucked into those jobs. The work schedules are usually harsh with early start times and demanding supervisors. For some reason that I cannot quite put my finger on, flight students that work those jobs take astronomically longer to complete their flight training than students who do not work those jobs. Instead of working as a bag handler, investigate working as an ambassador or representative for your flight school. This job usually involves giving tours to prospective families and recruiting students to the program. I worked as an ambassador for a little over a year and it was the best thing I could have done. I learned the ins and outs of the College quickly, learned who were the important people to network with, and how to cut through the red tape and get things done quickly. An ambassador job is a great way to get your foot in the door of getting to know important people. Bottom line, my advice is to keep applying *every single time* because eventually, you will get one! At least at Western, once you get a flight slot, they cannot take it away from you unless you fall below GPA requirements. The easiest time to get your foot in the door is going to be the summer semesters.

The summer semesters are when students that are not as dedicated go home for a few months and the students that are driven will stay and knock out a rating with great weather and airplane availability. I stayed every summer we were open (WMU closed for COVID-19 April-June of 2020) and got my instrument rating, commercial, and CFI over each summer I was there. Staying the summers will absolutely fast-track your progress and get you going towards making money for flying.

Staying the Summer

The summer semesters are also a fantastic time to get classes out of the way. During the summer, classes are condensed, and the pace is much quicker to complete them in less than half the time of a regular semester. Flying will not take up all your time and so adding in a few classes is a good idea to decrease your time in school. The first summer I took advantage of this was the summer of 2020. At that time, a lot of classes were still online as we were early in the pandemic so I double-dipped classes through Western and a local community college that offered a steep discount in comparison to Western prices for the same coursework. At WMU at least, we have two summer semesters and thus you have two opportunities to take full class loads per summer. In summer 1, I took seven credits at Western and seven at the community college. In summer 2, I took six credits at Western. Combined in the summer I completed twenty credits, which is slightly more than an entire semester's worth of coursework! The best part about it was that the classes were insanely short, and it felt like they flew by, making full semester-long classes feel like a crawl. I credit my decision to load myself hard that summer with a lot of my success in flight training. It would have been even better if I did not do my double major that I ended up dropping in my junior year. I took some classes for the aviation management and operations major that ended up being somewhat of a waste because it did not count towards my final degree. This pushed my graduation by another semester as I could have graduated in three years instead of the three-and-a-half I did. But oh well, you live, and you learn.

Now that the first year is done, all you have to do is rinse and repeat for your sophomore and junior years. Things start to change a bit once senior year hits.

Senior Year

Do Not Compare Yourself to Others

So we have hit our final year in school! How exciting and equally terrifying! This is the time when you make big decisions and get let out into the real world. You might find yourself being pulled in different directions, offers from employers, or entertaining thoughts about cadet programs. What is certain is that you will compare yourself to others. This, unfortunately, is one of the best and worst things you can do in that situation. Let me explain.

Let us say you worked hard, luck was on your side, and you got your CFI before you graduate. You have about 200-300 hours and need another 700-800 before you get your ATP and go to the airlines if you choose to go that route. At this point, you are taking a full credit load and also trying to balance instructing with a social life: pretty difficult if you ask me. At my flight school, I was required to schedule students at least four times a week which works out to eight hours a week per student. I started with two students, and it did not feel like enough because one student is always sick or out of town or what have you. I think four is a good number to start with. An easy trap to fall into once you start working as an instructor is to just work and do nothing else. Instructing is a lot of fun and you are also earning income and accumulating hours, what is not to like? However, the job can consume you if you are not careful. Most pilots enjoy work and would fly every day all day if they could, however that should be avoided. There is a balance to be found between working and living. Yes, be a good instructor to your students, but also be a good caretaker of yourself. My mom always said, “everything in moderation.” To apply her advice, this could look like eating enough throughout the day, not scheduling back-to-back activities from 8 am to 8 pm with no time to eat. This could also look like telling students no, you are not available on your day off. It is hard to establish and maintain boundaries when you are hungry for hours and making more money than you have before, but they are integral to your

sanity and health. This might be a hot take among other instructors that work themselves to the bone for “the grind,” but I found a balance that works for me, and you will too. This brings me to my next point, how to deal with comparing yourself to other people. First, let me start with a fact: there will always be someone that has more hours than you, more ratings, more signoffs, and gets to the airlines quicker than you. It is natural to want to compete in some regard with your peers and keep each other motivated, but there is a balance between competition and sanity to be upheld. It can be so debilitating to constantly compare yourself in numbers only to those around you. I say in numbers only because for most of us pilots, those make the most sense. Who has more hours? Who timed out more this month? Who billed more this week? How little sleep did you get last night? How many hours did you log this month? All these questions can get to you eventually. I will be the first to say they got to me as well. I started making a spreadsheet with my actual vs. goal hours for each month and would rejoice if I met or exceeded my goal but be incredibly frustrated when I did not meet my goal, which was often the case. My spreadsheet didn't account for anything other than Michigan weather. No friendships, no boyfriend, no days off, no vacations, nothing. Yet for some reason, I was beholden to this monthly hour goal like my life depended on it. Once some of my other friends confided in me that they felt similarly, I would counsel them and express how unimportant that spreadsheet was for we can only do our best. We can try to time out every day and stack your day in the most efficient manner to minimize downtime and travel time but in the end, nothing works out quite like you want it to. It was in one of those counseling sessions with my friends that I opened my ears and started listening to myself. I was finally hearing what I was saying all along! I will tell you now and spare you future feelings of inadequacy: you are enough and all you can do is your best. You will

get there when you're supposed to. Have fun and trust that you are doing it right.

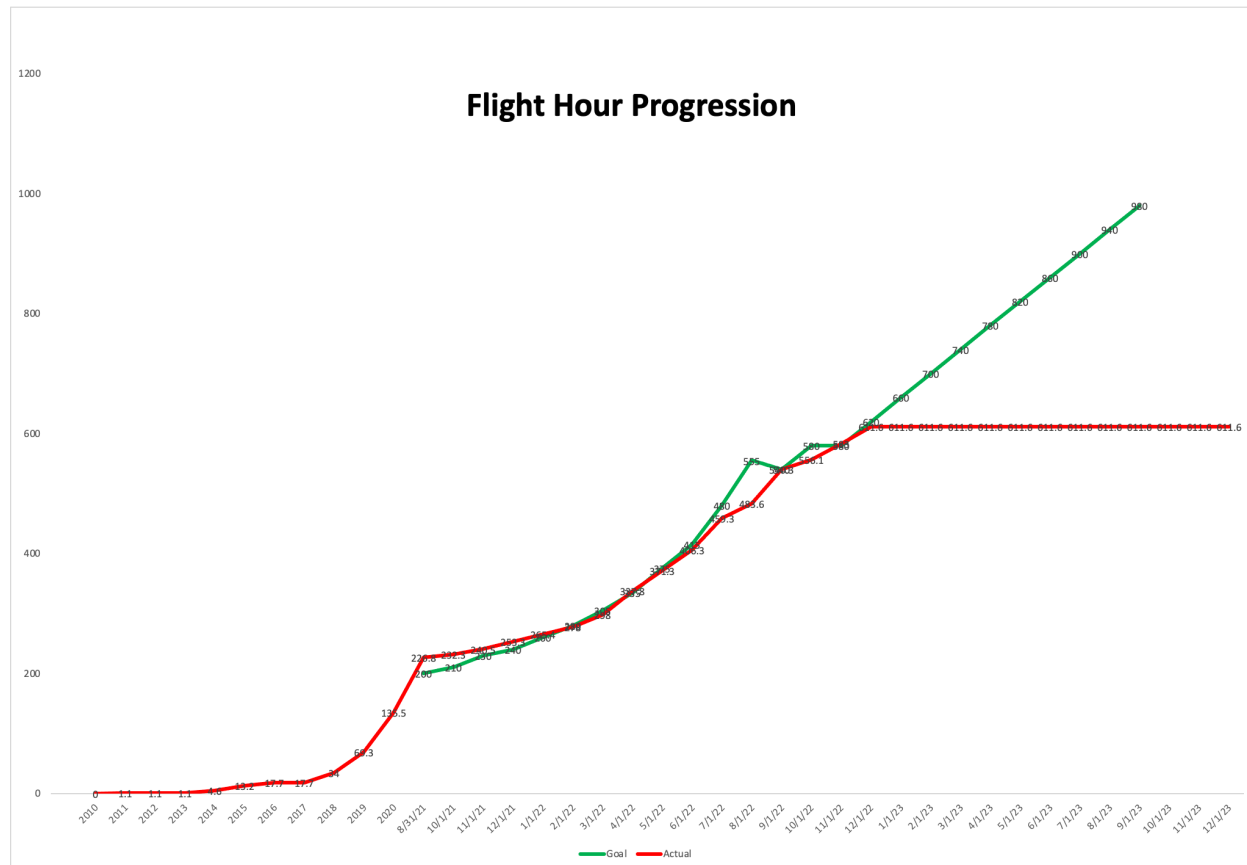


Figure 1. Flight Hour Progression Throughout Career (Jansen Van Vuuren, 2022).

Airline Cadet Programs Pros & Cons

Another facet of the industry you might investigate is that of airline cadet programs. These programs could be one of the best decisions you make as they could get you in the door sooner at an airline of your choice. However, they can also be a double-edged sword. This industry is remarkably cyclical and undergoes immense change every few years in terms of work rules, pay, and hiring. Most cadet programs will entice participants with a significant signing bonus, travel privileges, and other assorted seniority/longevity benefits (think pay scale year and prioritized class dates when you are ready), which to a college student, sounds like the best thing

in the world! The issues start to arise if you decide when you are ready to go to the airlines that you do not want to fly for that airline. Now, you have most likely already signed a contract for that signing bonus, and backing out means you pay that back...with interest. It also damages the relationship you might have with that company and its people. I caution you against joining one of these too soon. In the months/years you have been a cadet, that company might have turned into the least favorable option if other carriers raised pay or got new contracts that change your mind. If you are easygoing and do not really mind where you end up or what you fly, a cadet program will be awesome for you. Reach out to your mentors when contemplating joining a cadet program because they have likely seen every gimmick in the book that you might see fault in. I joined Mesa's cadet program in April of 2022, the first class of new cadets since Covid had hit. It was exciting and new! The signing bonus was attractive and substantial and I love traveling for free on United through the program. I learned about non-revenue flying (standby) and how to work the system as much as I could to explore the US and other countries for little money.

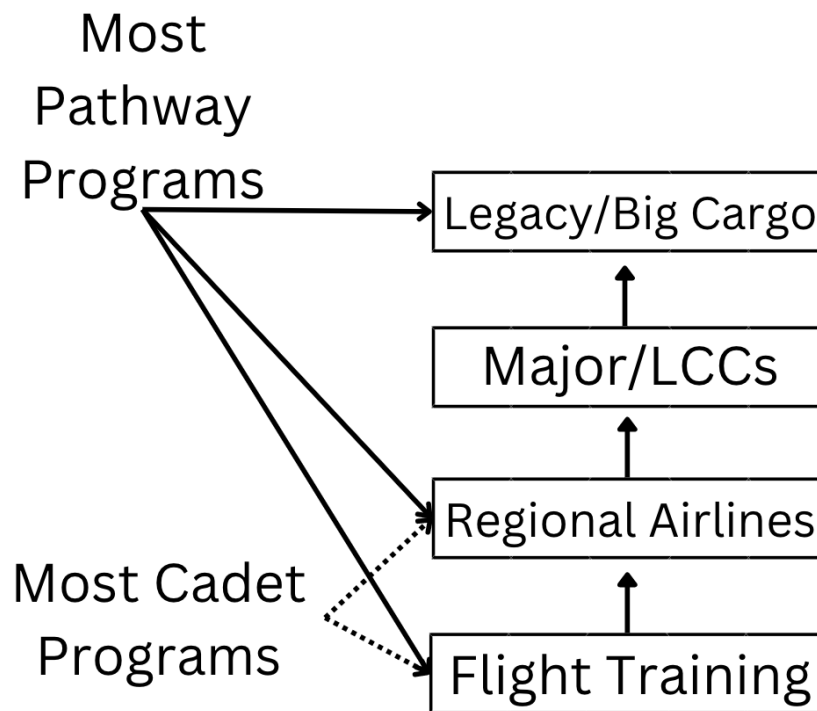


Figure 2. Pathway vs. Cadet programs (Jansen Van Vuuren, 2022).

On the topic of cadet programs, let us chat about one of the newest trends in the airline industry: pathway programs. These are like cadet programs but differ in a key manner. Most cadet programs are for regional airlines (aka puddle jumpers) like SkyWest, Envoy, Mesa, Endeavor, and such. The terminus of those programs is when you start as a first officer at said airline. These new pathway programs introduced by Delta, United, UPS, and others are meant to encompass a larger future pilot group and end once you are a first officer at one of those legacy carriers. These programs are also much more expansive and extend further upstream in the pilot career as far down as kids taking their first introduction flight. What is so groundbreaking about these programs is that legacy airlines have NEVER hired in this fashion. Legacies were always regarded as too prestigious and competitive for them to be hiring college students or flight school students after just their initial private pilot's license! Yet, just this week, my favorite United

recruiter was at my school giving us free pizza and United swag. These are crazy times we live in and something to take advantage of. The connections at United I have made by being a part of their United Aviate program are countless. I have a guaranteed job at United once I have the required flight time....which is insane. A lot of people, especially those my age, might not understand how big of a deal that is. Having a standing job offer from one of the world's premier airlines at twenty-one years old was unheard of five years ago. Every time I say that aloud it reminds me of my experience at the NGPA national conference where they also do "conventional" hiring (think former military aviator in a suit and tie with a resume in hand *begging* for an *interview*). United, American, Delta, FedEx, UPS, and Hawaiian would all rent out these massive ballrooms and bring enormous hiring teams to essentially "swipe" on a long line of hopefuls. I remember my first time at the conference, I saw a long snaking line of people in formal attire with resumes in leather binders, most of them over 30, standing in line just to TALK to a recruiter for five to ten minutes. The recruiter would then mark if they got a call back for a real interview later that day. At the 2022 conference, I believe American hired twenty pilots there from a line that must have been over two hundred. Those candidates are all highly skilled and qualified, most of them with airline experience, and did not even get a second glance from those airlines. This is staggeringly different from the experience I had getting "hired" at United in June of 2021. I applied online, was sent an email a few months later for an interview in Denver (which they flew me out for!), and found out a week later I was accepted. At the time of my interview, I was an instrument-rated private pilot with less than two hundred hours. I was offered the same job that those other highly qualified candidates got....crazy. Take advantage of these programs because we have an opportunity other people would kill for.

Time Building for the Airlines

After you have gotten all your licenses, you are probably around 250 hours and still require a vast number of hours to get your first airline job. This is called the time building phase. You are entrenched in finding ways to collect flight hours through any means necessary. It can take the form of flying to get lunch every weekend, taking your friends up for fun, or finding other unique ways to fill up your logbook. The most efficient way to do this would be to find a job that pays you to fly like CFI or ferry pilot or even skydive pilot. If you wanted a more nuclear approach, you might even consider purchasing an airplane or a share of one to just fly around until you get your time. Depending on current rental and fuel prices in your area, it might be more cost-effective to do just that. Some benefits of having access to your own airplane would be that there are no restrictions on weather or other items that a large flight school might impose through their flight operations manual (FOM). Although these restrictions exist to keep a safety buffer, they can sometimes seem overreaching, unnecessary, and will keep you on the ground on days when you could be safely getting flight hours.

What I have found helpful to build flight hours has been to find a few friends that are also motivated to build time and have a standing time where you are supposed to go rent from a local fixed base operator (FBO), flight school, or flying club. This holds you both accountable and is a good way to predict how much time you will get and how much money you will spend. For example, you and your friend plan to rent every other Sunday for a 5.0 block. The block will be at night and also include flying to an airport more than 50 nautical miles away to make the time count as cross-country. Nighttime and cross-country time are especially important when building time towards your ATP or R-ATP as those hours are usually the least common in what I like to call “organic” flying. In my work as a flight instructor, out of ten flights I might do a

week, I might only have one or two be cross-country or at night. Therefore, you must prioritize accumulating those types of hours and make a plan to reach those hour thresholds required for ATP or R-ATP in a timely manner. I know plenty of people who are at 800 or 900 hours and are still short 70 hours of cross-country time. Don't be that person. Depending on the ratings and certificates held by you and your friend, you will need to fly using one person as a safety pilot to legally log the time. Consult your CFI if you are unsure of how to log the time as the topic is quite complicated and many FAA legal interpretations have been authored on the specifics of logging cross-country time while flying with a safety pilot.

The Inevitable Hardships

Up until now, you might have thought that my journey so far has come without grief or adversity, but that is not the truth. I debated for a long time if I wanted to add this section to this essay and reveal when I failed, felt unmotivated, demoralized, or racked with worry. I did not want to appear weak and put that out there for everyone to read, but I decided to include when things did not go my way so that when you experience something similar you do not feel alone. The road to success is littered with potholes, it feels like a Michigan road. As you hit the bumps in the road, advocate for yourself and make a plan to pick yourself back up and get back on the path to success.

The Road to Success is Littered with Potholes

Early on in my aviation career, I experienced what pilots fear most: failure. I failed my private pilot check ride. It was devastating, to say the least, and set me back in terms of progress and confidence. I want to set the record straight before anyone else can tell you otherwise: a

failed check ride will not end your career. Is it ideal? No. Will it prevent you from getting hired by any major airline? No. Failing a check ride might feel like the world is ending but I'm here to reassure you it is not. Once the dust settles and the emotions have calmed down, there is actually a lesson to be learned from every failure. There was something to cause this failure and it is up to you to figure out what it was and how you can prevent this from causing another failure in the future. In my case, I learned that I was rushing when doing my maneuvers. Rushing is usually the first domino to fall which eventually leads to a larger mistake. In fact, I might even say that rushing is one of the largest threats a pilot must address. The cause of rushing is not always the same and can be intrinsic or extrinsic. In the case of my check ride, it was intrinsic. I was rushing myself because I felt that I needed to complete the check ride at a certain pace and taking time to properly brief and configure for maneuvers was unimportant compared to the perceived pace I had in my head. This, of course, was the wrong way to look at it. What I know now is that I set the pace of the check ride, and the examiner has no place to rush you. You are the pilot in command so be assertive when you need to be. It is imperative to take the time to properly set up for maneuvers, so you have the best chance for success.

Preparing for the Future

Once you immerse yourself in flight training and the industry, you will soon notice two opposing forces in all facets—career vs. quality of life. The dilemma between these two is something you will face in every job you hold and might be the reason you do not hold some jobs anymore. The ambition that we all have (which for most pilots is extremely high) will have to take a backseat sometimes for us to live an enjoyable life. Yes, it is tempting to go work the job that pays the most or upgrade as soon as you can, but on the flip side, your schedule might be

terrible, and you could be away from family and friends during the times they want you most. Is it worth taking the first upgrade when it means you do not get Thanksgiving off until your seniority improves? Is it worth commuting for a company that pays more when you could be home-based? Is it worth instructing at an airport an hour away for more money or at a place around the corner? Is the extra pay worth me having only ten days off this month instead of fifteen? These are the kinds of decisions you will be faced with the moment you get your first pilot job. It is something I struggle with a lot as a pilot. I am extremely driven and want to achieve all that there is to achieve, yet I also want a family life and time to actually live, not just work! It is these sorts of harsh realizations that we never fathomed when we were kids dreaming of being a pilot. For in those dreams, ambition was never stifled. In my experience, I have found that taking time off and actually living your life is extremely important. You are never going to regret working more but I am sure you will regret not taking the time to live your life outside of work. As the forces are constantly battling, at times career might be winning and at other times it is quality of life. It will be up to you to decide which force is winning at the moment.

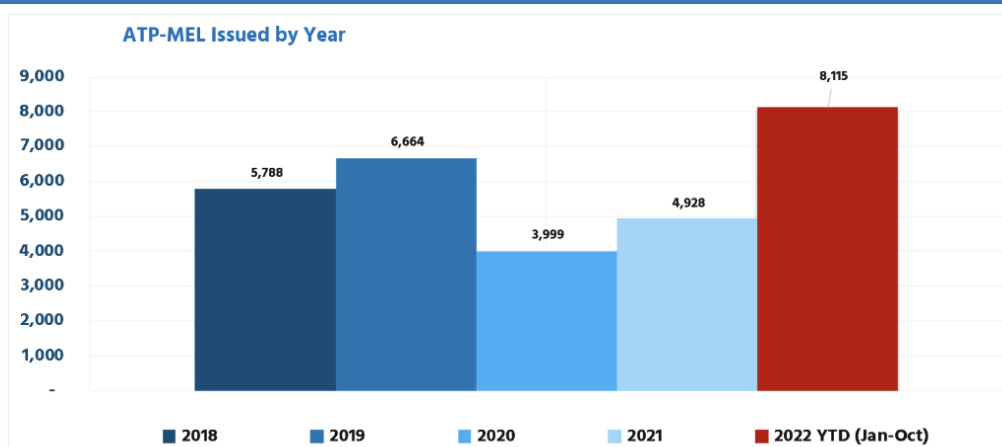
A Few Closing Words

I wanted to end with some summary and encouragement because chances are good you need both. This is such an exciting and rewarding career path that you have decided to embark on! There will be so many times when you are pinching yourself because you cannot believe this is your job. In short, advocate for yourself always, prioritize your flight training, put in the work studying at home, get involved in organizations and immerse yourself in at least one, and lastly keep your chin up when things get tough. In November of 2022, the Air Line Pilots Association

(ALPA) released statistics on newly minted ATPs showing tremendous growth over the last few years (Air Line Pilots Association 2022).

The future is bright, and this has been the best time to become an airline pilot in a long time.

8,115 new ATP-MELs issued in 2022
2,327 more than 2018 and 1,451 more than 2019



Source: Federal Aviation Administration Data



Updated: Nov 2022

Figure 3. New ATP-MEL (ALPA, 2022).

Speaking about the future, now that my time as a college student is quickly coming to a close, mere days at this point, I am excited about what is to come and ready for the next chapter in my life and also my career. Nearing the end of my time as a flight instructor as I inch closer to 1000 hours every day, I will soon head to a regional airline like the ones mentioned in here and start my airline career. I cannot wait to fly a larger airplane with a few dozen people behind the door. After I spend a few years at whichever airline I end up at, I will hopefully one day make the jump to a larger airline and put on the uniform I will wear for the rest of my life. Now, before I plan too much, I know that plans will not always pan out and there will be some changes that I

do not see coming. I am keenly aware of this and will do my best to keep the course I have charted for myself.

The road that lies before you is a true Michigan road: lots of bumps and potholes, but the views are incredible sometimes. Remember to pull off now to take it all in and snap a photo.

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- Western Michigan University. (2022, June 23). *2022-23 Tuition and Fees*. Western Michigan University. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://wmich.edu/registrar/2022-2023-tuition>

Appendix

Scholarships

- National Gay Pilots Association (NGPA) ngpa.org
- Women in Aviation (WAI) wai.org
- Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals (OBAP) obap.org
- Latino Pilots Association (LPA) latinopilot.org
- Professional Asian Pilots Association PAPA asianpilots.org
- Airplane Owners and Pilot Association AOPA aopa.org
- Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) eaa.org
- University Aviation Association (UAA) uaa.aero

General Resources

- Raising Aviation Teens Facebook page facebook.com/groups/RaisingAviationTeens
- Airline Pilot Central airlinepilotcentral.com
- Sporty's sportys.com
- Sheppard Air sheppardair.com
- Pilot's Cafe pilotscafe.com/IFR-quick-review-guide
- Aero Crew Solutions www.aerocrewsolutions.com

Airline Cadet/Pathway Programs

- United Aviate unitedaviate.com

- Delta Propel propel.delta.com
- Mesa mesa-air.com/cadets
- Envoy/PSA/Piedmont
- UPS FlightPath Program
- Destination 225° careers.southwestair.com/D225
- FedEx Purple Runway www.fedexpurplerunway.com