

*Tim Mekeel/Staff Writer LNP April 16, 2018*

## How an impending pilot shortage is being addressed at Lancaster's Eastern Mennonite University

If you had to pick somebody who's likely to become a commercial pilot, you'd pick Ethan Sommers.

The 18-year-old senior at Lancaster Mennonite is the son of a JetBlue Airways captain.

For the past six or so years, the family's vacations have included traveling on JetBlue, which gave his father a chance to show Ethan around the cockpit.

His passion was stoked even more during his junior year when he took a one-hour "discovery flight" at Lancaster Airport, which gave him a chance to take the controls (with an instructor's supervision).

"My dad encouraged me to find a job where I could get paid for doing something I love," Ethan said.

Ethan planned to learn to fly at Hesston College in Kansas, which offers an associate degree in aviation. It's also where his father Denver and mother Rose graduated.

Then his mother read about a new program at Eastern Mennonite University's Lancaster site — a bachelor's degree in leadership and organizational management with the option of having an aviation concentration.

Students who complete the 60-credit concentration will earn private and commercial pilot licenses with an instrument rating plus a flight-instructor certificate, and get an internship.



Ethan switched his college choice a few months ago to EMU-Lancaster.

“That’s a little bit more convenient for me since I live only a couple miles down the road, rather than across the country,” said Ethan, who lives on Becker Road, near Oregon Dairy.

Ethan is excited about having his future up in the air, so to speak.

“I’m really looking forward to it. I can’t wait to start,” he said.

## **Second in state**

When the fall semester’s classes begin in August, EMU-Lancaster will become just the second college in Pennsylvania to offer a bachelor’s degree with an aviation component.

Marywood University in Scranton is the other.

EMU-Lancaster’s program, to be done in collaboration with Aero-Tech Services at Lancaster Airport, comes as the nation nears a dire shortage of commercial pilots, predicted to hit in the 2021.

“In my world, I hear daily about the shortage of pilots,” said David Eberly, Lancaster Airport director.

The crisis will be triggered by a wave of Baby Boomer pilots hitting retirement age, the same trend that has prompted predictions of shortages in many professions.

Commercial pilots face a mandatory retirement age of 65.

Eberly, speaking at a reception Tuesday at Lancaster Airport to unveil EMU-Lancaster’s new program, pointed to a recent study by aircraft manufacturer Boeing.

Boeing found that the global aviation industry will need 637,000 new commercial pilots over the next 20 years.

Demand already is high, Eberly pointed out, reflected in the fact that some airlines are paying newly hired pilots sign-on bonuses ranging from \$10,000 to \$30,000. Annual pay from major airlines frequently hits six figures.

“This program is really needed. The market is probably better than it has ever been...,” said Jim Cistone, EMU-Lancaster’s aviation coordinator. “It’s a new era, really.”

But students in the aviation program have more options than being commercial pilots, school officials emphasized.

They also will be prepared for jobs such as: corporate, charter, drone or missions pilot; flight instructor; airport operations manager; and aviation safety inspector.

“One of the hazards (of being a professional pilot) is, any time a pilot doesn’t pass their medical (tests), they’re grounded,” said Mary Jensen, associate provost at EMU-Lancaster.

“So if someone were to head down this path, and for some reason their physical health didn’t allow them to fly, this would give them a broader base to keep working in the industry,” said Jensen.

Having a bachelor’s degree will be a plus if they pursue an aviation-industry job other than flying, school officials said.

The aviation concentration will have a capacity of 10 students. In time, EMU-Lancaster officials envision the capacity doubling.

The more students who land those family-sustaining jobs, the better it will be for the airport, the aviation sector and the county overall, said Lancaster Chamber President Tom Baldrige.

“It’s about adding to the community’s prosperity,” he said.

## **STEM skills**

Completing the aviation concentration leading to those jobs, however, will require a strong STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) background, Jensen said.

The curriculum includes classes on aircraft systems, aerodynamics, statistics and meteorology. There’s also an aviation research project.

“We’ve been trying to make the case with our area STEM teachers that this is an innovative way to think of STEM. It’s not technically engineering, it’s not technically math. But it takes all of those skills,” said Jensen.

“I don’t hear aviation mentioned in the same sentence as STEM very often, but we really see that it is,” she added.

EMU-Lancaster, in the Greenfield Corporate Center, opened in 1987. It serves up to 500 students annually in graduate-level pastoral studies, a bachelor’s degree program for registered nurses and graduate-level studies for teachers.

The new leadership and organizational management degree, with an aviation concentration, got its impetus five years ago, when EMU-Lancaster officials began looking for a program to add.

Julie Siegfried, director of operations for EMU-Lancaster, and Catherine Stover, associate director of marketing and program development, learned of the looming pilot shortage.

When they looked to see which colleges were teaching aviation classes, they saw none in southcentral or southeastern Pennsylvania.

But EMU-Lancaster knew it couldn't buy aircraft and train pilots. They had to find a partner.

A friend of Siegfried's husband and an EMU-Lancaster student both had the same recommendation — Matt Kauffman, owner of Aero-Tech, which provides flight instruction, charter and delivery services, and aircraft sales, rental and maintenance at Lancaster Airport.

Siegfried made the cold call to Matt Kauffman, who also is Aero-Tech's director of operations.

"I just said, 'Hey, did you guys ever think about partnering with higher ed and doing a degree?' He said, 'Absolutely. We thought about it. Let's get together and talk.' ...

"I did not have to sell it very hard at all" before Kauffman and Zach Hurst, chief flight instructor, agreed to collaborate.

Kauffman remembered the conversation the same way. "No, it wasn't very difficult (to persuade me)."

In fact, Kauffman had been trying to find a college collaborator, reaching out to three area colleges over the years without success.

"For many years, I've felt there would be a substantial benefit not only for my company, but for the community," he said.

Collaboration will bring Aero-Tech more students plus a homegrown pool of potential hires, Kauffman explained.

Lately, when he wants to hire a pilot, he's had to look out of state. In the past two weeks, he's approached pilots in Florida, North Carolina, Indiana and Illinois.

The EMU-Lancaster program's classes will meet one evening a week, for the convenience of students who hold jobs.

Students also will be able to apply for federal student loans and get a 15-week internship — features a flight school typically doesn't have.

Students ranging in age from 18 to 50 have expressed interest in enrolling so far, said Jensen.

“Back in the day, when I was young and wanted to be an airline pilot, there was no pathway to get there,” said Cistone, who became a private pilot in 1973.

“It was either you were in the military, or you had to be in the right place at the right time, or you had to know somebody. It was almost a matter of luck.

“But now we’re trying to build a pipeline,” Cistone said. “You go through this program, you’ll be trained. You can move into being a licensed professional pilot for an airline if you want. You can be a flight instructor if you want. You can do general aviation, whatever you want.”