
UNIVERSITY FLIGHT OPERATIONS INTERNSHIPS WITH MAJOR AIRLINES: AIRLINE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the partnership between U.S. airlines and aviation-oriented universities that facilitates flight-orientated internship programs. Through the use of a literature review and phone survey, the researchers investigate the similarities and differences between the top twelve airlines' internship programs. Additionally, the researchers work to dispel some of the myths surrounding these programs and reveal the tangible and intangible benefits to the participant, the sponsoring airline and the university.

INTRODUCTION

Major U.S. airlines and aviation-oriented universities have worked together on flight-oriented internship programs for over fifteen years. For example, the FedEx internship program dates back to the early 1980s. These internship programs are advantageous to both interning university students and the airlines. Students enjoy the educational benefits of working in a major air carrier's flight operations department, while earning

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college credit for their experiences on the internship. Airlines benefit from the free or low-cost, semi-skilled workforce the internship program provides. In addition, airlines have the opportunity to “get an early look” at some of college aviation’s top students and future flight officer candidates. In 1988, United Airlines issued an unpublished internal report that discusses their reasons for developing and maintaining internship agreements with university aviation flight programs (Spencer, 1988). These reasons are as follows:

1. Develop additional resources for high quality flight officer candidates;
2. Improve the supply of qualified flight officer candidates;
3. Increase the number of qualified minority and female flight officer candidates; and
4. Take advantage of the college and university system as a resource for the pilot of the future.

As flight operations internships were integrated into the major airlines, they became a more significant opportunity for university students seeking employment as airline pilots. However, no one has cataloged major airline flight operations internship programs in an attempt to present their size, scope, benefits, limitations and intent.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to present the results of a telephone survey conducted in August and September 1997 targeting the top twelve major U.S. airlines based on gross annual revenue as reported by the Air Transportation Association’s 1997 Annual Report. The goal of the survey was to gauge the size, scope, benefits, limitations and intent of the flight operations internship programs at these airlines. In the course of collecting survey data, a variety of issues related to airline flight operations internships were identified. As a framework for examining these data, four common student perceptions associated with airline flight operations internships were discussed from the perspective of the data collected from the airlines:

1. Interns are actively involved in aircraft operations;
2. Interns are paid a salary;
3. All airlines offer interns travel passes; and
4. All airlines interns are guaranteed a post internship pilot interview.

Definitions

Before proceeding with this research, it was important to define the terms “internship” and “cooperative education”, especially as they relate to aviation.

In general terms, academic or experiential internships are project-oriented experiences that can be taken for academic credit. Internships involve spending a pre-arranged period of time working in a field of study or interest.

The 1998 Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) Undergraduate Catalog defines an aviation occupational internship as “...an unpaid internship position...performing duties and services in an instructional setting as previously arranged with the sponsoring work-site supervisor” (p. 159).

A flight operations internship adheres to the basic principles associated with other internship programs, with emphasis on airline flight operations. For example, the Northwest Airlines-SIUC Internship agreement reads, “The purpose of this agreement is to establish an Internship Program by which students at SIUC will be given an opportunity to enhance their education through work assignments at Northwest” (Mallory, 1997, p. 1).

The National Commission for Cooperative Education (1999) describes cooperative education this way.

Cooperative education is a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student’s academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice. Co-op is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party. (p. 1)

The primary difference between an internship and a co-op is that internships are usually unpaid work experiences, while co-ops are salaried. Also, co-ops typically require that the student alternate between multiple periods of pre-arranged work assignments and semesters of traditional on-campus academic learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is limited material in aviation-related refereed journals that address the subject of university-airline flight operations internships. Non-refereed sources, including aviation-specific magazines, periodicals and industry publications, do contain general information related to aviation internships. These sources discuss such areas as aviation maintenance and management and may have some application to airline flight operations internships.

The University Aviation Association (UAA) reports that “the civil pilot training (CPT) program of World War II served as a foundation for partnerships between colleges and the aviation industry” (Kiteley, 1997). Kiteley goes on to say that internships and co-ops are just one form of partnership between universities/colleges and airlines. Other types of university and college partnerships with the airlines can include internships for faculty, service on advisory committees, and using airlines as sources of guest lecturers/adjunct faculty (Kiteley, 1997).

An article on a potential pilot shortage explains the need or rationale for aviation internships in general. [O]ne of the keys for bridging the experience gap among young pilots is to develop closer cooperation between industry and schools, including establishing internship and work/educational cooperatives (Bradley, 1997, p. 80).

With regard to aviation-related internships and co-ops, a University Aviation Association (UAA) sponsored study (Schukert, 1993) reported that 31 UAA member institutions participated in over 60 aviation-related cooperative educational programs within their non-engineering aviation degree programs. According to Schukert, the federal government serves more aviation-related co-op students than any other agency/organization.

The role of aviation-related co-ops and internships has been addressed by several authors.

The success and popularity of co-op is largely attributable to the fact that all three players benefit. In addition to increasing graduate placement, schools become privy to the public and private sector needs that their curricula should address. Employers gain access to committed, knowledgeable, temporary, and low-cost help, plus an opportunity to groom full-time employees. The participating students get a unique opportunity to experience the real world in their chosen profession. Co-op programs usually provide pay and/or academic credit, and students gain a “foot in the door” with a familiar post-graduate employment prospect. (Kiteley, 1997, p. 1).

Another view is presented by Turney (1997).

More specifically, aviation employers can look forward to the following benefits of starting an intern program: Highly motivated and enthusiastic employees; short term commitment; meeting immediate staffing needs; providing a diverse population; freeing professional staff; and facilitating entry-level recruitment (p. 2).

An article in the November 1996 issue of *Flight Training* notes an important rationale for an aviation internship from a student’s perspective.

Simply stated, an internship or cooperative education program (co-op) is an opportunity for a college student to combine traditional on-campus academic learning with professional work experience in a chosen field. These programs allow students in a large number of collegiate aviation programs to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world. (Phillips, 1996, p. 44)

This article also discusses airline internships at United, Delta, TWA, USAir, and FedEx. The author mentions numerous benefits associated with these internships, including being hired for full time jobs at United and FedEx, potential for being hired at Delta, free simulator time, some travel benefits, and jump seat flights for interns (Phillips, 1996).

With regard to airline internships specifically, an article in the October 1991 *Collegiate Aviation Review* reported that three airlines (United, Northwest and Eastern) had a total of six university or community college “partners” including three airline-university intern agreements (NewMyer, 1991). It was noted that these partnerships were a response to the airline industry’s need for qualified, quality pilots. This article also noted that as a result of an internship connection between United Airlines and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) nineteen former interns from SIUC had been hired by United as flight officers as of the fourth year of the United-SIUC agreement. The article mentioned that, “United Airlines doesn’t use this agreement as a primary source of pilots. Rather, it is a supplement to its regular flight officer employment process” (NewMyer, 1991, p. 16).

One of the strongest statements in support of airline internships, which also provides an interesting corporate philosophy, is the opening statement from the Southwest Airlines Internship Program Guidelines.

Southwest Airlines recognizes the importance and benefits of an official, company-wide internship program. By having young, talented and educated people from the aviation community come work for us, Southwest will be more efficient and productive than ever. In return, the interns will gain hands-on experience in the day-to-day operations of an airline. (Self, 1996)

In general, the available literature points to the benefits of aviation and airline internships to both the airline and the student. The literature also contains some descriptive material that discusses airline flight operations internships and mentions that such programs exist at five major airlines. However, the reviewed literature contained no industry-wide comprehensive information about flight operations internships at all major airlines.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the size, scope, benefits, limitations and intent of the flight operations internship programs at twelve major U.S. airlines (based on gross annual revenue as reported by the Air Transportation Association’s 1997 Annual Report). (See Table 1).

This was accomplished by contacting internship coordinators representing the twelve major U.S. airlines and surveying them by

Table 1. Top Twelve Major U.S. Airlines, Based on Gross Annual Revenues, 1997

Alaska	American	America West	Continental
Delta	FedEx	Northwest	Southwest
TWA	United	UPS	US Air

Source: Air Transportation Association, 1997

telephone. The instrument was qualitative in design. Each question contained either a structured response list or elicited an open-ended response. Kaufman and English (1979) suggested that a prepared list of items may erode creativity, however, a prepared list does provide comprehensive data when validated by expert opinion.

The researchers developed the survey instrument with the assistance of a focus group composed of aviation management and flight department faculty members. The focus group discussed the objectives of the study, and consensus was eventually gained on questionnaire design and composition. The effort to use a focus group is supported in the literature. "By conducting one or more focus groups before initiating a survey, both sponsors and researchers can sometimes get a better grasp of the problem and formulate the research questions more accurately" (Alreck & Settle, 1997, p. 393). Another view, presented by Morgan (1997), is that "focus groups...can be used to generate survey questionnaires or to develop the content of applied programs and interventions" (p. 3).

The survey instrument used in this study is composed of ten question areas, as listed below. (See Appendix A .)

1. How many students does your airline intern per semester?
2. How many colleges/universities does your airline work with?
3. Are interns paid a salary? If so, how much are they paid?
4. Does your airline offer benefits other than a salary?
5. Does your airline offer post internship benefits?
6. What locations/stations are interns assigned to?
7. What departments are interns assigned to?
8. What qualifications/qualities does your airline desire in an intern?
9. What is the most important learning experience your airline provides the intern?
10. What do you believe the internship program brings/contributes to your airline?

A telephone contact list of the twelve survey airline's flight operations internship coordinators was developed. In most instances, the contact person was known. In those instances where the contact person was not known, inquiries were made to the flight operations departments of those airlines.

Telephone calls were made over a period of three weeks in August and September of 1997. Airline internship coordinators were asked to react to survey questions and to expand upon their response to the extent necessary. For example, the majority of participants answered in great depth to survey question 10: "What do you believe the internship program brings/contributes to your airline?" In contrast, research questions 4, 5, 7 and 8 required "yes" or "no" responses to predetermined sub-components of a question. For example, the question: "Does your airline offer benefits other than a salary?" Sub-components to that question included jump seat privileges, travel passes, simulator use, etc.

A telephone survey was selected as the most appropriate method of data collection for this study. Carstenson, Sluti and Luedtke (1996) note:

...several advantages of gathering data by telephone are: one can contact a widely dispersed group of individuals or sites; no field staff are required, as may be necessary when conducting personal interviews; this method has a relatively low-cost per contact; also, that interviewer bias is more controllable; it is a rapid means of collecting data; and the response rate is much higher than mail surveys. (p. 5)

Follow-up calls were made to confirm the data received and to assure a commonality of response made for each question. To increase validity, a new researcher was utilized to conduct follow-up telephone interviews.

Table 2. Number of Interns per Semester at Twelve Major U.S. Airlines, 1997

Alaska	2-7
America West	3-4
American	22
Continental	10-16
Delta	3-12
FedEx	5-8
Northwest	20-30
Southwest	3
TWA	30
United	30-40
UPS	2
USAir	5-7

RESULTS

The response to question 1, which asked “How many students does your airline intern per semester?”, is important to reveal the scope of flight operations intern programs (see Table 2). Four airlines (American, Northwest, TWA and United) serve 20 or more students per semester in flight operations internships. The remaining eight airlines (Alaska, America West, Continental, Delta, Fed Ex, Southwest, UPS and US Airways) serve less than 16 students per semester. Overall, the twelve airlines, as a group, serve 135 to 181 students per semester, or an average of 11.3 to 15.1 students per semester per airline.

Another important scope/size determinant was question 2, “How many colleges/universities does your airline work with?” A total of 103 colleges and universities maintain internship agreements with the airlines surveyed. University-airline partnerships ranged from 1 to 22, with an average of 8.7 for all twelve airlines. Four airlines (American, Northwest, TWA and United) work with 15 or more universities (see Figure 1). The remaining eight airlines work with 7, or fewer, universities. Some of the universities most frequently mentioned were Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (both Daytona Beach and Prescott campuses), Louisiana Tech University, Southern Illinois University Carbondale and the University of North Dakota.

Figure 1. Number of university and/or college partner by airline, 1997.

In an effort to ascertain the compensation component of the airline internships offered, question 3 asked if the internships were paid (by salary or wage), and if so, how much per month. Only two of the twelve major airlines surveyed offered paid internships, salaries range from \$1,500 to

\$2,000 per month (since the completion of this survey, a third airline now pays its flight operations interns).

Since only two airlines pay their interns, it was important to discover what other benefits the airlines offer their interns. Question 4, addressed benefits other than pay options. A key benefit offered at ten of the airlines surveyed are “jump seat” or “observer member of crew” (OMC) privileges. This benefit allows an intern to occupy an observation seat located in the rear of aircraft flight deck during a regularly scheduled flight. This is a tremendous educational experience for the student as they are allowed the opportunity to observe a flight crew “in action”, as well as obtain a first hand view of airline operations. Several of the airlines surveyed limit this privilege to a certain number of flights during the internship period, or as specified by the intern’s supervisor.

Another benefit provided by several airlines is the travel pass. Seven of the twelve airlines surveyed offer this benefit (see Figure 2). The airlines allow interns a limited number of passes that are valid for various periods of time and cost to the student. Travel passes are limited to domestic U.S. destinations, with one exception; U.S. Airways also allows international travel (see Appendix B).

Another key educational benefit to flight operations interns is the use of full motion simulators during their internships. Ten of the twelve airlines

Figure 2. Benefits other than pay offered by airline internship programs at twelve major U.S. airlines, 1997.

offer this benefit. Several airlines encourage simulator use by flight operations interns. Interns at those airlines can receive as much as 50 to 100 hours of simulator “flight time” in one semester in a variety of aircraft including, the MD-80, DC10, B-737 and B-747.

In contrast, Flight Engineer training is only offered by one airline as an internship benefit. This is possibly due to the scarcity of three-person crew training at some airlines and the cost of such a benefit at most airlines.

Finally, all airlines offer tours of major airline facilities as a key benefit of the flight operations internship. Tours of the maintenance facilities are offered by ten of the twelve airlines. Tours of major airline facilities expose students to the complexity and scope of airline operations. Aircraft manufacturing plant tours are also provided by seven of the twelve airlines. Aircraft manufacturing plant tours not only allow interns the opportunity to view the intricacies of the aircraft manufacturing process, but also expose the intern to procedures involved in delivering aircraft for airline service.

Another educational benefit that airline flight operations internships provide is the opportunity for the student to experience learning in an industry setting. Three of the airlines surveyed offer seven or more intern assignment locations, three offer two locations and the other six airlines offer only one location. Among all twelve airlines, a total of 27 separate geographic locations are offered coast to coast (see Appendix C).

Intern duty assignments can vary widely by airline (see Figure 3). Two airlines, America West and Fed Ex, focus their internship effort in airline dispatch or ground-based, flight coordination support functions. These two airlines do not assign interns to their flight training academies or domicile chief pilot offices. Ten of the twelve major airlines do offer internships at their flight academies, while only six of the twelve offer them at domicile chief pilot offices around the nation. A key benefit of being in a flight

Figure 3. Intern duty assignments offered at twelve major U.S. airlines, 1997.

training academy for an internship is that the assigned intern gains an understanding of the process used to train an airline pilot, including the professional expectations demanded of a person in that profession. An additional benefit is that the student gains access to flight training personnel, flight simulators, flight training devices, human factors training and other airline-oriented training experiences. These experiences can be invaluable in a student's career. Seven of the twelve airlines surveyed offer flight operations internship assignments at airline headquarter locations and airline flight safety offices. Finally, two airlines offer flight operations internships in the pilot recruitment area of the airline.

Post internship benefits are also offered by some airlines. Travel pass privileges are offered to students by six of the twelve airlines after successful completion of the internship. The possibility of earning a flight engineer certificate during the course of an internship is offered by only one airline. A key benefit to some students is a guaranteed interview for a pilot position. This benefit is offered by five of the twelve airlines. However, several airlines mentioned that while they do not guarantee an interview, good work during the internship will very likely get the student a letter of reference from the airline, which will help when the student applies later for pilot employment. Of those offering guaranteed interviews, four limit an intern to either one or two interviews. One airline reported that over 200 former interns have been hired as pilots at that airline alone.

Another aspect of the airline flight operations internship programs is the qualifications that the airlines are looking for when they select their interns (see Figure 4). In the area of flight qualifications, five airlines require the Federal Aviation Administration Commercial Pilot Certificate with the Instrument Rating. Two of these five airlines also require the multi-engine rating. None of the 12 airlines surveyed required a flight instructor's

Figure 4. Intern qualifications for twelve major U.S. airlines, 1997.

certificate. In one case, an airline required only a Private Pilot Certificate, with all other certificates and ratings listed as “preferred”. Another listed the Private Pilot Certificate as “desirable”. Others indicated advanced ratings as “nice to see”. Several airlines stated that eligibility requirements were based on decisions made by the universities during their on-campus screening process.

With regard to the grade point average (GPA) of intern candidates, five airlines reported a 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) intern selection minimum, while one reported a 2.5 minimum GPA. The other six either had no requirement, had a “preferred” GPA, or considered GPA as one of several selection factors but with no specific identified level. Finally, in terms of flight hours, two airlines reported that they wanted their interns to have 200 or more flight hours of experience. The other airlines had no hour requirement, but a few looked at this as a selection criterion combined with several other factors but at no specified hour amount.

At the conclusion of the telephone survey, airline flight operations internship coordinators were asked two questions to elicit opinions about the value of the airline flight intern programs:

1. “What do you believe is the most important learning experience your airline provides the interns?”
2. “What do you believe the internship program brings/contributes to your airline?”

These were the open-ended questions, which resulted in a wide variety of responses. However, central themes did emerge when all of the airline’s answers were tabulated as a group.

In terms of what the airlines provide to the interns, six airlines mentioned that the interns get a “total company perspective” or “what an airline really is and really does.” That is, the interns are exposed to the “amount of detail, the amount of regulation” involved in keeping an airline operating on a daily basis. Three airlines mentioned the importance of the internship in preparing university students for a position in the airline industry. As one airline put it, it provides “exposure to what they might be doing later on.” Finally, another three airlines mentioned “the specific involvement with an airline flight operations environment,” or “real hands-on experience” in airline flight operations as the key advantage given to the interns.

As far as the value of the internship to the airline, it was interesting that seven of the twelve airlines mentioned “enthusiasm” as one of the things that interns bring to the airline. Several airlines put it this way: They bring enthusiasm!” “A shot of energy!” “Enthusiasm and hard work—it’s a trade

off, we (the airline) get some hard work and fresh ideas in exchange for what we give to the interns. Another airline mentioned that in addition to enthusiasm, interns are a "morale booster" to regular airline employees.

Three airlines mentioned that interns "take the load off" of regular employees. That is, interns frequently work on projects that regular employees simply do not have time for. One airline commented on the specialized skills students bring to an internship, "Interns bring skills that not only reflect computer literacy, but aviation literacy as well. That combination simply is not available from any other source."

Finally, a contribution mentioned by two airlines was the connection between the intern program and future employment at the airline. As one airline put it, "the internship program helps us identify and, hopefully, select good, solid employees and pilots." Another stated: "This is an opportunity to screen possible future employees. This gives us a base to choose from since we generally hire from within."

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the size, scope and benefits of the airline flight internships at the top twelve major U.S. airlines are as follows.

1. These programs serve 2 to 40 interns per semester per airline, or overall, 135 to 181 students per semester (all airlines).
2. The 12 airlines work with a total of 103 colleges and universities, with partnerships ranging from 1 university per airline to 22 universities per airline.
3. Two of 12 airlines pay their flight operations interns (although a third airline added pay after this survey was completed).
4. A majority of airlines reported offering the following benefits other than pay: Airline headquarters tours; Jump seat privileges; Simulator training; Airline maintenance facility tours; and Airline travel passes.
5. A total of 29 separate geographic locations for flight operations internships were reported by the 12 airlines, with 6 of the airlines offering more than 1 location.
6. A total of 6 of 12 airlines offered post-internship travel pass privileges.
7. Five of 12 airlines offered guaranteed pilot employment interviews to those students successfully completing flight operations internships.

This study has also served to dispel four student misconceptions typically associated with airline flight operations internships.

1. “Interns are actively involved in aircraft operations.”

This is certainly not the case. Interns are assigned to a variety of support positions, but are only allowed on the flight deck in an “observer member of crew” capacity.

2. “Interns are paid a salary.”

Two of the 12 airlines surveyed pay interns a salary according to survey results, with a third airline adding pay in 1999. However, all the airlines surveyed offer some type of non-salary benefit(s) to interns.

3. “All airlines offer interns travel passes.”

Seven of the 12 airlines surveyed offer interns travel passes. Conditions and limitations are associated with the dispensing and validity of these privileges.

4. “All airline interns are guaranteed a post internship pilot interview.”

Five of the 12 airlines surveyed provide guaranteed pilot interviews as a post internship benefit. Several of airlines that do not offer this benefit mentioned that, while not guaranteed, it is likely an intern will receive a letter of recommendation for employment with the airline.

Flight operations internship programs provide a broad range of learning opportunities and professional growth experiences for the interns. As we have illustrated throughout this study, the nature and variety of learning experiences to which the intern is exposed vary among the airlines. Travel benefits, guaranteed pilot interviews, jump seat privileges and other internship benefits also vary among airlines. However, all airline internship programs mentioned in this article do share one common objective—contributing to the professional growth of the student and subsequently securing the future of the aviation industry.

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APPENDIX A

**Characteristics of Flight Operations
Intern Programs at Major US Airlines**

Name and position of airline representative being interviewed:

1. How many students does your airline intern per semester? _____
2. How many colleges/universities does your airline work with? _____
3. Is the internship paid? Yes No
If paid, how much? _____
4. Benefits—other than pay:

Jump seat privileges	Yes	No
Travel pass privileges	Yes	No
If so, how many? _____		

Restrictions/limitations?

Simulator use	Yes	No
Flight Engineer Certificate	Yes	No
World headquarters tour	Yes	No
Maintenance facility tour	Yes	No
Manufacturing plant tour	Yes	No
Other benefits, specify:		

5. Intern assignment locations, i.e., Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, Atlanta, etc.

6. Intern duty assignments:

Flight Training Center/Academy	Yes	No
Domicile Chief Pilot Offices	Yes	No
Airline Headquarters	Yes	No
Flight Safety Offices	Yes	No
Other, specify:		

7. Post Internship Benefits:

Pass Privileges	Yes	No
Flight Engineer Certificate	Yes	No
Guaranteed Pilot Interview	Yes	No
Limit on number of interviews	Yes	No
If so, how many allowed?		

8. Desired intern qualifications

Class rank:	sophomore	junior	senior
Certificates/Ratings:			
Commercial	Yes	No	
Instrument	Yes	No	
Multi-engine	Yes	No	
CFI (A)	Yes	No	
CFI (I)	Yes	No	
GPA:			
Flight hours:			
Other, specify			

9. What do you believe is the most important learning experience your airline provides the intern?

10. What do you believe the internship program brings/contributes to your airline?

APPENDIX B**Travel Pass Privileges****United:**

One 95% discount on ticket for each 30 days worked, for intern and spouse (round trip).

American:

One round trip for each month worked up to 90 days & some service fees—transferable to parents/spouse—limited access.

Delta:

No privileges.

Continental:

Four non-revenue round trips—useable up to six months after the internship.

TWA:

One travel pass with minimum of two weeks service, space available—useable up to six months after internship.

Southwest:

Offer privileges, but no listing of requirements.

Northwest:

One round-trip pass for every 30 days worked—no overseas.

USAirways:

For each 40 hours worked—one domestic travel pass or international travel pass for 80 hours worked.

American West:

No privileges.

Alaska:

No privileges.

UPS:

No privileges.

FedEx:

No privileges.

APPENDIX C

Internship Locations

