

COA on track with aviation program

By Peter Williams
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College of The Albemarle wants to make sure that those who graduate from its aviation program can find a job no matter what twists and turns the economy takes.

This fall will mark the third birthday for the aviation sheet metal program. A program in propulsion is poised to start next summer. Both are designed to train students so they can obtain Federal Aviation Administration certification and perhaps a job starting at \$40,000.

But a similar aviation program at Craven Community College has been put on hold for the fall semester in part because not enough students signed up. The Fleet Readiness Center East, the agency at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station that works on aircraft, has offered early retirement to 100 employees as it reorganizes.

Elton Stone, the director of the COA program, is aware of the situation in Craven and is working to make sure COA's program is broad enough that students have skills to find a job.

"I'm not putting all our eggs in one basket," Stone said.

"I'm soul searching out there to make sure I hit every widget, and it won't be just aviation but other jobs that they are qualified for."

Stone said COA isn't trying to train workers for specific company, or operation like FRC East in Havelock or DRS Technologies in Elizabeth City.

DRS supports the COA program and has hired nine graduates, but Stone doesn't expect that DRS is the only place his graduates can go.

Out of the 145 students who graduated from the COA sheet metal program, 50 have found jobs.

Stone said he was "tickled to death" with the figure considering the state of the economy and hiring. "I can't complain about my students," Stone said.

"Just because it says 'aviation' that doesn't mean that is the area where you have to work," Stone added. "We're teaching them about construction and I know from a personal experience if you teach them a skill they will find a job."

Meanwhile the COA Aviation Training Center is taking shape. Stone estimates about half of the structural steel has been erected.

"I'm realistic, but I think we will be getting the keys in March 2013," Stone said.

Currituck County is providing the building, but COA will be responsible for getting the tools, equipment and staff to operate the center. COA already has an agreement with the SPCA of Northeastern N.C. to store the equipment until they can move it to Currituck. The SPCA has a large building on Pitts Chapel Road that it plans to turn into a new animal shelter, but is waiting to raise the money to renovate the building.

When the aviation propulsion class starts, Stone estimates the first class will have 18 to 20 students.

“All I can do is say thanks to everybody who has helped get us to this position,” Stone said.

Meanwhile, the elephant in the room is what will happen if a federal budget deal can't be reached and automatic cuts are triggered in January. Half of those will be felt by the military.

An industry trade group predicts dire consequences if a budget deal can't be reached.

A study released by the Aerospace Industry Association estimates the cost to that industry from the automatic cuts will be \$1.2 trillion over 10 years.

North Carolina can be expected to lose 29,239 jobs, 17,434 of them because of non-DOD cuts.

Virginia is expected to lose 207,571 jobs, including 136,191 from just the DOD cuts.

Wayne Harris, the director of the Albemarle Economic Development Commission, wondered how much of that will really apply to the Coast Guard.

“The Coast Guard is a little different animal,” Harris said. “I am sure they are feeling some of the budget pressure, but they have such a tradition as a lean, mean search and rescue machine that there is a difference.”

Stone said COA's decline in students in Craven is more fueled by changes at the Fleet Readiness Center East, the massive repair facility at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station.

Mark Bastyre, industrial execution department head at FRC East, said the base has reduced staff, but it is a small fraction of the 3,500 people who work there.

He said FRC East does not refer people to the Craven college program, but FRC East does hire those who have the specific skill sets and level of experience.

“There will be a need for aviation workers as long as FRC East is at Cherry Point,” he said.

FRC East may be on a list of operations that are shuttered as a result of upcoming rounds of the Base Relocation and Closure Act. No such discussions have been made about the Coast Guard base in Elizabeth City.