Stakeholders’ Views on Challenges for Initial Pilot Training Programs

**What GAO Found**

GAO identified 147 collegiate aviation schools that offered professional pilot degree programs in academic year 2015–2016. All pilot students must pass the same knowledge and flight tests to obtain pilot certificates from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), but schools’ programs vary. For example, 101 of these schools operated relatively more formalized, FAA-certificated degree programs. The other 46 schools operated under a model that provides flexibility and meets FAA requirements but that does not require FAA certification to conduct such training. Total annual pilot-student enrollment and graduation numbers are not known. According to FAA officials, FAA does not require schools to submit enrollment data and does not verify enrollment data that many certificated schools voluntarily submit. Regarding graduation data, schools must classify and report completed degrees by program type to the Department of Education (Education) using that agency’s classification system. Education’s data indicated a total of 1,356 professional pilot degrees in academic year 2015–2016. Because pilot-student graduates can be classified under a number of aviation-related programs in Education’s system, the number of pilot-student graduates could be higher.

Flight instructor retention, which has been influenced by the current high demand for airline pilots, and the high cost of pilot training are key challenges that affect schools’ ability to produce pilots, according to aviation stakeholders GAO interviewed.

- **Flight instructor retention**: Nearly all (16 of 18) selected school representatives cited difficulty recruiting and retaining flight instructors as a great or moderate challenge for schools’ ability to train pilots. According to most school representatives (15) and other selected stakeholders, instructors who aspire to be airline pilots are rapidly accruing the flight hours necessary to qualify and are obtaining employment as soon as they are eligible. In addition, regional airlines have recently increased hiring, generating high turnover among flight instructors, who are traditionally their main source of new pilots.

- **High cost of training**: Nearly all (16) selected schools’ representatives identified the cost of a professional pilot degree program as a great or moderate challenge to recruiting and retaining pilot students. High education costs are not unique to these programs. Nonetheless, in addition to tuition, flight training fees alone often exceed $50,000, well above the cap for federal financial aid available to eligible students.

Schools and regional airlines have taken a range of actions to address these challenges. For example, eight selected school representatives reported increasing flight instructors’ compensation and benefits. In addition, some regional airlines’ cadet programs provide mentorship and incentives such as bonus pay or tuition reimbursement to select students while they are still in school. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has also launched an initiative to assess the level of interest among veterans in becoming pilots and to examine strategies for employing military veterans as pilots.