

We caught up with Wendy Evans, Parkland College Institute of Aviation Program Manager and Recruiter, to chat about the flight school program at Willard Airport.

Q: Tell me about yourself and what you do for the Parkland College Institute of Aviation.

A: My job is multifaceted, I spend a lot of time recruiting students both in state and out of state promoting Parkland College and the Institute of Aviation. I also help with student services, advising, faculty assignments, and flight schedules.

Q: How many flight programs are in the state of Illinois?

A: There aren't that many programs in the state or the country. There are more options for four-year programs but a flight program at a community college is less common.

Q: What would you tell someone who doesn't know a lot about aviation but might be interested in the flight program?

A: We are seeing more students who want to be commercial pilots. Those are the students we are really trying to focus on, along with students who just want their private pilot's license. We are kind of lucky because a lot of students come in and know what they want to do, including their potential career path.

Q: What are the pros and cons of attending Parkland College Institute of Aviation vs. a four-year institution?

A: At Parkland, students get a family atmosphere, where they get to start flying almost right away. They don't have to sit through a year of general education requirements before they ever get in an airplane. We are also a better value than most four-year fees, although flight training is generally expensive either way.

Q: How is the health of the program?

A: Since Parkland took over the program from the University of Illinois in 2015, it has seen a steady increase in students. We are in a great position to ramp up growth in the program without losing the personal touch that comes with Parkland College. Currently, we have approximately 80 students, and could handle about 100 students total, give or take, successfully.

Q: As a student, after your two years is complete at Parkland College, then what?

A: The federal mandate is 1500 hours of flight time before you can fly for the airlines. We are an approved Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) program, so we get a 250-hour reduction from the FAA. Our students, if they have enough qualified training, are eligible for the airlines at 1250 hours. Students graduate from the program with about 250 hours of flight time, so that leaves about 1000 hours left before they can fly for the airlines. A lot of students will choose to become a Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) to build those hours.

Q: How many students will move on to a four-year institution after they graduate from Parkland?

A: That's hard to say right now. A few years ago, to become an airline pilot a Bachelor's Degree was required, now it is "highly preferred" because of the pilot shortage. I find it beneficial for students to get their four-year degree, because it will probably take them about two years to complete their hours anyway. A four-year degree will also give students a fall back plan in the event that being a commercial pilot doesn't work out long-term as a career.

Q: What are your biggest challenges?

A: We struggle finding career educators and Certified Flight Instructors (CFI's), which seems to be our biggest challenge. A lot of our CFI's complete their flight time requirements and move on rather than staying in career education.

Since this was the University of Illinois Institute for so long, we also struggle with name recognition. When Parkland took over the program, branding was an initial challenge. That is why I spend so much time recruiting and promoting the college and the program.

