

WORK EXPERIENCE SUZANNE KEARNS

Research and teaching in harmony

After realising her pilot dreams as a teenager – on fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters – Suzanne Kearns has established herself as one of Canada's leading aviation academics, with a special interest in human factors

It sounds as though you made an early start with aviation

I became fascinated with flight in my early childhood. I grew up in Ontario, Canada and began formal flight training at the age of 15, flew solo on my 16th birthday, and had my private pilot fixed- and rotary-wing certificates signed off on my 17th birthday. After high school I completed a one-year commercial helicopter pilot diploma that included some really fun flying – long-line operations, using chainsaws to create log landing-pads, and lots of work in confined areas. I then moved to Florida and began a degree in aeronautical science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU). This was a wonderful experience and allowed for a tremendous amount of personal and intellectual growth. While there I completed my fixed-wing training to the commercial multi-IFR level. Through this process I became fascinated with human factors and pilot safety, and stayed on at ERAU to do a masters in human factors.

What came next?

I returned to Canada and sent a cold résumé to the University of Western Ontario. I was hired shortly thereafter, and officially began my academic career at the age of 24. I was always the kid obsessed with aviation but now I had to learn how to succeed within a 'publish-or-perish' environment. While working full-time at the university, I completed my PhD in education and



Kearns was first aviation academic to hold tenure at Canadian university

transitioned into a tenure-track position at the university. When you begin a tenure track position you have five years to prove yourself as a researcher, at the end of which all of your work is evaluated and you are granted tenure (which means a job for life) or you are fired. It is a stressful career period and mentorship from other academics who work in a related research area is vital.

Was mentorship available?

Not in Canada, so I attended a University Aviation Association (UAA) meeting in the USA. The UAA is a non-profit organisation that is the 'voice of collegiate aviation'. Its goal is to support aviation as an academic discipline. Through the connections I made with other aviation academics at the UAA meeting I was success-

ful in the tenure process – becoming the first aviation academic to receive tenure within a Canadian university.

What are your current duties?

I am an assistant professor with tenure at the University of Western Ontario. The typical workload for an academic is 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service activities. I teach several courses related to aviation safety and aviation human factors. My research explores training methodologies and teaching technology. I have also successfully published research articles and books. My service activities include serving as the president of the UAA. I am also a committee member of the International Civil Aviation Organisation's Next Generation

of Aviation Professionals programme. And I'm excited to say that on 1 July I begin a new position as associate professor with tenure with the University of Waterloo.

What have you been researching?

Research allows me to focus on issues that I notice through observations of the industry. Most recently I observed increasing discussions around 'competence'. Working with two co-authors from Australia, we spent two years writing a book called *Competency-Based Education in Aviation: Exploring Alternate Training Pathways*, which came out earlier this year. The distinction between 'competence' and 'competencies' is very important, because as soon as competencies are put on paper, some of the intricacies of real-world performance can be lost. Professional competence is so diverse and intuitive, research suggests it is very hard to describe in written language. This creates a gap between the written 'competencies' and actual professional 'competence' and can lead to statements that are artificially simplistic. ■



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