

Why new FAA hiring practices for air traffic controllers are being investigated

SAN GABRIEL VALLEY TRIBUNE



Students work with a radar simulator at Mount San Antonio College's as part of aeronautical classes. These students are part of Mt. SAC's Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative (AT-CTI) program. Many recent graduates of CTI programs have have run afoul of new FAA hiring practices. courtesy photo

By [Steve Scauzillo](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune

12/07/15

While the Federal Aviation Administration intends to hire 3,200 additional air traffic controllers over the next two years, its quixotic hiring practices have done the opposite, keeping out veterans and highly qualified aeronautics school graduates from Mount San Antonio College, according to professors, students and even members of Congress.

A 180-degree change in the hiring protocol — in place for a year and a half now — moves application requirements from straightforward competency tests into a subjective realm, one depending on a personality screening test known as a biographical assessment.

Applicants must receive a passing grade on the assessment or are no longer considered, regardless of their competency or pilot experience.

The changes have prompted:

- A class-action lawsuit from thousands of frustrated applicants who studied air traffic controlling for years but were dropped from the applicant pool.
- The resignation of the FAA official in charge of training, effective Aug. 30.
- A call from Congress and the U.S. Department of Transportation for an investigation.

An audit and a response

On June 17, the DOT announced it would audit the agency to examine the “FAA’s justification for adopting the new hiring process and the changes that have occurred in the hiring pool since the process was implemented.”

Earlier, Fox News reported instances of cheating on the biographical assessment test, a charge the FAA strongly denies. At least two letters were signed by members of Congress asking for an investigation.

The FAA’s Office of Security and Hazardous Materials conducted an inquiry into charges that an FAA employee provided some applicants with the answers to the biographical assessment.

This past week, the FAA responded in an email, saying it “found no evidence that any FAA employee provided (air traffic controller) applicants with either the questions from, or the answers to, the BA.”

Many, including Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-El Monte, have said the FAA lowered entrance standards in an effort to deepen the applicant pool. Napolitano referred to the new hiring practice as “taking people off the streets.”

The FAA says casting a wider net, even if it includes fewer applicants from aeronautics schools such as Mt. SAC’s, is balanced out by the FAA’s own vigorous training. It defends the new personality quiz as a way to “shorten the hiring cycle.”

Trained applicants dropped

Ana Mendivil is a pilot, a flight instructor and has earned two degrees, including one in air traffic control from Mt. SAC in Walnut, the only school in Southern California to offer Air Traffic-

Collegiate Training Initiative degrees. Yet for five years, she could not get the FAA to offer her a position.

After graduating in 2010 from Mt. SAC, Mendivil finally got an offer from the FAA this past summer on her third attempt.

“I told myself if I didn’t get hired this year, I was done,” said Mendivil, 26, during an interview at her home in La Verne. She’s awaiting results on her drug test, psychological test, medical evaluation and background check. If OK’d, she’ll attend FAA air traffic controller training in Oklahoma City.

After President Ronald Reagan fired all the controllers for striking in 1981, the path from Mt. SAC’s program to the coveted government job guiding airplanes through the nation’s crowded airspace was more direct, albeit without guarantees. Then, in early 2014, the FAA dismissed the Collegiate Training Initiative applicants, lowered the standards and started using the computer-based biographical assessment as the first rung of the application ladder.

If an applicant did not pass the personality quiz, he or she became “biographically ineligible.”

Between 60 and 80 percent of the applicants coming out 36 Collegiate Training Initiative schools, or about 3,000 people, suddenly became ineligible from 2014 to the present, said Mt. SAC aeronautics Professor Robert Rogus. Some from Mt. SAC had scored 100 percent on the aptitude test but were disqualified by the biographical assessment. Many eliminated were minorities and veterans attending Mt. SAC, their dreams dashed, according to accounts from students and professors.

“I wouldn’t say the FAA hiring process has been a success,” Rogus said.

‘Silly’ questions block access

Like many of her classmates at Mt. SAC, Mendivil did not pass the biographical assessment in 2014, which included questions such as:

- What is your favorite color?
- Did you play high school sports?
- I am more (a) eager or (b) considerate.

Applicants who do not pass get a red X on their computer screen but no explanation. They then must wait another year until the application window reopens.

Napolitano [listened to student concerns in April 2014](#). She wrote a letter to FAA Administrator Michael Huerta, requesting the agency tell the applicants their biographical assessment score and why they were rejected. Still not satisfied with the FAA’s response, Napolitano said the revised hiring practice lacks transparency.

FAA spokesman Ian Gregor said the quiz “was independently validated by outside experts,” but critics, including Napolitano, want to know the criteria as well as the score needed to pass. They say applicants should not be kept in the dark.

Mendivil took the assessment again in March 2015 and finally passed, saying the FAA had changed it, adding more relevant questions about stress in the workplace.

“A lot of my schoolmates are waiting for the same opportunity,” she said.

Students claims reverse discrimination

Another former aeronautics student is Corey Kurilko, 28, of Willoughby, Ohio. Kurilko, a helicopter pilot, graduated from Kent State University’s air traffic control program in 2012. Kurilko scored a 96 percent on the aptitude test but didn’t pass the biographical assessment, so he was dropped from consideration.

“I came out of school with the mindset I was set to go for an (air traffic controller) job. I feel like I was screwed, not by Kent State but by the government,” he said.

With \$100,000 in student loans and a wife who is pregnant, he recently took a job selling mattresses.

“I’ve got to support my family. But if I can get into the air traffic control that would be a perfect world. From the looks of things that is not going to happen,” he said.

Kurilko is one of about 3,000 Collegiate Training Initiative graduates who are part of a class-action lawsuit against the FAA. In his complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a prerequisite for filing a lawsuit, Kurilko, who is white, claims reverse discrimination.

“They want more diversity in the field. But this is discrimination against the white male,” he said.

Kurilko said he went to school with diverse classmates: an Asian-American, a paraplegic man and a veteran. All were rejected by the FAA despite completing the college program at Kent State, he said, adding the new system did not make sense.

“This whole thing is disgusting. There are a lot of us that are screwed,” he said.

He’s asking the government to pay off his student loans, or what he now calls money spent for naught.

Aeronautics enrollment drop

At Mt. SAC, enrollment numbers are down in the highly rated program, which began in 1946, from 600 aeronautics students in early 2014 to 400 today, Rogus said. Many have begun applying for the air traffic controller job without any training, he said.

“I’m still getting calls for ATC (air traffic controllers) but not as many,” said Rogus. Yet, the vocational training is still beneficial, he said. Students with two- or four-year degrees from a Collegiate Training Initiative program are more likely to pass the FAA academy, Rogus said.

“The wash-out rate is higher under the new system. Those are the people who are hired but don’t make it through training,” Rogus said. “But the people who go through (college training) have a better chance at getting hired.” That is, if they can get past the first hurdle, the biographical assessment test. Most — more than 60 percent with aeronautical experience and college degrees in this specialized field — never get that chance, he said.

“What can we do? The government has decided,” Rogus said.