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# FAA Closes a Hiring Runway for Air-Traffic Controllers

## Colleges, Students Balk as Agency Ends an Inside Track

By Susan Carey  
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Students at Mt. San Antonio College work at an air-traffic-control training room. *Emily Berl for The Wall Street Journal*

For years, aspiring air-traffic controllers in the U.S. have enrolled in schools selected by the Federal Aviation Administration to offer special courses that could smooth the way for a job at the agency.

But at the end of December, the FAA abruptly ended that special status for the 36 participating colleges and universities, leaving school officials fuming and students frustrated. Under the old system, graduates, who received associate or bachelor's degrees, weren't guaranteed FAA positions, but strong performers who passed an agency aptitude test and were recommended by their schools were put on a special waiting list to be hired.

The change means the FAA now considers applicants from the general public on an equal basis. Applicants don't need any background in the field or even a college degree. The FAA also added a biographical questionnaire that the agency said measures characteristics shown to predict controller success—but that many applicants have found to be baffling.

The FAA said the new process is designed to eliminate long, fruitless waits by job candidates on the former preference lists, to reduce costs, and to "increase objectivity in the assessment of candidates." But some critics suspect it is intended partly to increase the share of minorities and women among controllers, who are now 83% male and white. A study for the agency last year found the school graduates had more success in the hiring process, which disproportionately hurt minority candidates.

The agency said the new hiring process "is blind on the issue of diversity."

School officials, meanwhile, complain that they have invested heavily in flight simulators, buildings and faculty, and contend that they deliver a diverse group of graduates with customized training that lowers the FAA's own training costs. Some school officials say their controller enrollment already has fallen off because of the FAA change.

The FAA's new stance "just doesn't make sense," said Douglas Williams, aviation-program director at the Community College of Baltimore County in Catonsville, Md., who says 42% of the students in its associate-degree controller program are minorities and 30% are female. "They're not getting the best-qualified applicants this way," he said. Since the change, about 40% of the first-year students in the program have dropped out, he added.

Students who have studied for the controller degrees fear they wasted time and money. Navy veteran Oscar Vega recently completed the two-year air-traffic program at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, Calif. He said he passed the FAA controller aptitude test last year, so he was shocked when, in February, he failed the biographical assessment.

"They say you can take it again," said the 28-year-old. "But it's not a test you can study for. And we don't know why we failed because we don't get any feedback."

Controller jobs are stressful. The FAA doesn't take candidates older than 30, and the mandatory retirement age is 56. The pay, however, is good: The 2012 median income was \$122,500, according to federal data.

The FAA currently has more than 14,000 controllers, and it plans to hire upward of 11,000 new ones in the next eight years to cover retirements and attrition.

The FAA first informed the schools on December 30 that it was going to end its practice of keeping "an inventory," or pool of applicants on the preferential list of qualified controller candidates. The last time the agency put out a public call for jobs was in 2009.

In February, more than 28,000 people—including some graduates of the designated colleges and universities—applied for 1,700 controller positions. Only 2,200 passed the new biographical assessment, allowing them to advance to the aptitude test.

The FAA said the new test helped screen "a large pool of applicants into a smaller group of the best candidates."

The schools estimate that more than 3,000 graduates have been removed from the FAA's hiring pool because of the new policy. The FAA said the number is closer to 1,500 out of 2,400 candidates in the pool.

"There is a problem of diversity in the controller workforce," said Stephen West, head of the air-traffic-control program at the University of Oklahoma. "We want to help the FAA. But we think diversity has to go hand in hand with quality."

Graduates of the designated schools, along with former military controllers, have typically made up a majority of the FAA's recent hires. As recently as February, the agency said on its website that it considered the graduates "a valuable hiring source" and allowed them to bypass the first five weeks of controller training at the FAA Academy. In a recent statement, however, the FAA said applicants with controller-school backgrounds have no greater success than other groups, a claim the schools dispute.

A different study the FAA completed last year found the schools helped introduce the profession to minorities and were making strides toward achieving more multicultural student bodies.

"We were kind of shocked," said Ramon Claudio, chairman of the air-traffic controller program at Texas State Technical College in Waco, Texas, of the FAA's diversity studies. "We have Asians, three students from Samoa. We have a lot of Hispanics, African-Americans. Twenty-five percent of my classes are female."

Meanwhile, at least 28 controller applicants have brought discrimination claims against the FAA, including one seeking class-action status. A redacted copy of that complaint alleges the FAA eliminated the preferential hiring list to discriminate against the scholastic group to benefit minority applicants even though, the complaint says, the earlier system wasn't found to have hampered them.

The FAA said it hasn't discriminated against anyone, adding that it can't comment on pending litigation.

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