American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Back to school: American team members accompany students to SIU for career day

5/1/2018

Nearly 120 Chicago-area high school students interested in aviation boarded a McDonnell Douglas MD-80 early Saturday, April 28, for a quick 45-minute flight. When they landed at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, they were surrounded by all things aviation – airplanes, hangars, engine test cells, simulators and more.

Since 2005, American Airlines has flown more than 1,250 students who are thinking about a career in aviation to SIU through donated charters, giving them hands-on exposure to the industry. The university offers a comprehensive aviation program with majors in Aviation Flight, Aviation Management and Aviation Technologies – a program from which many American team members have graduated.

The American team members who volunteered to join, including pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, controllers and managers, are an important part of the career day. Not only are they all SIU graduates and eager to show off their alma mater, the aviation professionals are excited to give the students a real-life look at what they can accomplish if they pursue their passion.

“I want to see students get involved in aviation careers, and I like to do what I can for these young kids, for the future generation,” said Nadine DeJohnette, a Chicago-based Flight Attendant. “They need to learn all they can about aviation and find a mentor. They can end up wasting time trying to navigate through the process, and finding a mentor can help that.”

Students toured the campus, listened to the experiences of the team members and heard about the university’s nationally recognized aviation program. “There has not been a better time to enter the aviation industry than there is right now,” said Mike Burgener, chair of the SIU Aviation Technologies department.

The origins of SIU's career day date back to 1999 with TWA, but after a lull, the tradition gained new life through the efforts of Boeing 787 Check Airman Jay Rud. He works with a number of SIU alums, including Chicago-based Flight Attendant (and SIU adjunct professor) Steve Emmert and Chicago Control Center Manager Ray Walden, to offer the special career day.

Jay became interested in aviation as a 14-year-old when his dad sent him to the local airport to get a job waxing airplanes. His original aspiration of being a mechanic transformed into dreams of being a pilot. He says the lessons he learned at SIU have been integral to his career at American.

"We started in 2005 because one of our pilots was interested in showing his child opportunities in aviation. We called SIU and asked if this was something we could do," Jay said. "In the many years since, we've seen the impact it has on the kids, and that's my 'why.'"

Indeed, it's made a difference for many aspiring pilots. One of those former career day attendees is Boeing 737 First Officer Christine Albertson. Christine, whose father also flies for American, participated in the first charter in 2005. She told the students about her journey from SIU to the Air National Guard to American.

Evanston Township High School sophomore Izequiel Freitas is thinking about a career in aerospace engineering. On the return flight back to Chicago, he sat in his seat contemplating the information and guidance he received during the career day.

"This was a really unique opportunity, and I really enjoyed learning about all of the careers in aviation," Izequiel said. "I'm really focused on how I can turn my passion for engineering into a career in aviation. It was cool to see all of the parts of the plane broken down — that's something I've never seen before."

Check Airman Jay Rud, second from bottom, organized American Airlines team member volunteers to accompany students to SIU for the aviation career day.

Boeing 737 First Officer Christine Albertson, who graduated from SIU in 2008, shares her experience with students.

Dr. David Newmyer, the retired chair of SIU's Aviation Management and Flight program, poses with Envoy First Officer Dalton Thompson. Dalton graduated from SIU in December.