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900 N. Stiles Ave., Oklahoma City, OK 73104-3234, USA • Tel: 405-815-6552 • OKcommerce.gov

Media Contact:

Becky Samples
Oklahoma Department of Commerce
405-967-1730
becky.samples@okcommerce.gov

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Oklahoma Focusing on Growing Aerospace Workforce

OKLAHOMA CITY – Last week, the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, alongside Governor Kevin Stitt, led a delegation of Oklahoma aerospace and defense companies, as well as communities and institutions, to represent the state and its vast aerospace and defense sector at the 2023 Paris Airshow which ran June 19-25. Included in this year’s delegation were multiple entities playing roles in the state’s vital efforts to supply and grow an aerospace workforce for the more than 1,100 aerospace and defense entities operating in Oklahoma, including the Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission, Rose State College and Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

“Oklahoma is the most pro-business state in the nation, and a key component of that is ensuring our companies have the skilled workforce needed to thrive,” said Governor Stitt. “We’ve focused on building strong workforce programs to train the next generation of aerospace and defense workers right here in Oklahoma— and I was proud to showcase these programs and our state’s initiatives at the Paris Airshow.”

Oklahoma has nine colleges and universities which offer aerospace degrees and certifications, including the first university in the U.S. with a PhD program focused on UAS design at Oklahoma State University. The state’s university system estimates nearly 5,000 aerospace and engineering program completions annually.

But the state’s aerospace focus extends beyond vocational training and higher education. K-12 schools across the state utilize curriculum to expose more students to these career opportunities from an early age.

In 2022, the state was named #1 in high school aviation curriculum as the leader in offering the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA)’s four-year “You Can Fly” high school curriculum. For the 2023-2024 school year, more than 80 high schools across the state offer the curriculum. Additionally, last fall, Norman Public Schools, located in Norman, Okla., just south of Oklahoma City, launched the Oklahoma Aviation Academy, a program that allows high schoolers to earn credit toward an aviation degree as well as drone certifications. The program was the vision of Rick Nagel who also serves as a Regent for the University of Oklahoma, in addition to serving on the boards for the Oklahoma Aviation Academy and the Oklahoma Defense Industry Association.

“There is incredible alignment in Oklahoma with respect to supporting the aerospace sector by and among all the key stakeholders in the education and training space,” said Nagel. “High schools have begun adopting the AOPA introduction to aviation elective as part of their core curriculum. Our Career Tech system, one of the best in the U.S., has invested heavily in the technical and hands-on professions needed to make sure students start their careers ready to contribute. Our colleges and universities, led by the University of Oklahoma, have all expanded their degree programs that cover all segments of workforce needs, with OU doubling its capacity and enrollment into the nation’s number one flight training and aviation programs.”

Rose State College, located near Tinker Air Force Base and many defense contractors in Midwest City, Okla., currently offers multiple degree and certification programs to support the aerospace and defense workforce. Some of these programs include Bachelor of Applied Technology in Cybersecurity (pending HLC approval) and Associates of Aviation Management, Engineering and Engineering Technology). Rose State also offers custom micro-credential development programs created with industry partners to support partner companies’ specific needs. Rose State is also designated as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense.

“We know that addressing workforce needs in the aerospace and defense sector is important to the economic growth of Oklahoma and are continually working to be responsive to the needs of Tinker Air Force Base and our defense industrial base partners,” said Dr. Jeanie Webb, President, Rose State College. “Rose State’s Bachelor of Applied Technology in Cybersecurity, once approved by HLC, and our Associates in Aviation Management and Data Analytics are in direct response to industry demand.”

Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU), located in Weatherford, Okla., provides students with three distinct avenues to pursue a fulfilling profession in the aerospace and defense sector. Through rigorous coursework and practical training in Engineering Technology, Engineering Physics, and Computer Science programs, students receive the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in these highly specialized fields through a combination of theoretical and hands-on experiential learning opportunities. The university has also expanded its Cybersecurity and Data Analytics options within the Computer Science program to meet specific requests from the program’s advisory board.

“Aerospace is the second-largest industry in Oklahoma and has been identified as an area of critical occupation need,” said Dr. Diana Lovell, President, SWOSU. “Southwestern Oklahoma State University has deep ties to supplying the aerospace and defense workforce in the state and the United States. Our agility and flexibility allow us to thrive in partnerships with industry. Our relationship to the Oklahoma Space Port & Clinton-Sherman Airport at Burns Flat furthers commercial and public research and the continued expansion of aviation and spaceflight in both sectors.”

For more information about Oklahoma’s aerospace and defense sector and to find out more about the Oklahoma delegation for the 2023 Paris Airshow, visit okcommerce.gov/airshow.

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