

Grant dollars help Iowa community colleges' aviation programs soar

BY: [BROOKLYN DRAISEY](#) - MARCH 21, 2024 1:34 PM



Indian Hills Community College has received grant funds to help update and expand its program. (Photo Courtesy of Indian Hills Community College)

Adam Townsend has been a mechanic his whole life, and plans to turn it into a career upon completion of his training at Indian Hills Community College. He found his passion for aviation in high school, and though he thought about becoming a pilot, aviation maintenance allows him to combine his interests at a college close to home with a good program.

Now in his second year of the program, Townsend is already interning at a company in Des Moines and plans to continue there full-time after graduation. He said the recognition Indian Hills Community College is

receiving through a federal grant solidifies his opinion of how good and important the school's training is.

“It makes me proud, honestly, it makes me feel that much more confident in my schooling and the knowledge that I've absorbed through my professors and through the school,” Townsend said. “It makes me feel like I'm more prepared.”

The [Federal Aviation Administration](#) has awarded a combined amount of almost \$1.3 million to three Iowa community colleges to help update and support their aviation training programs.

Indian Hills Community College and Iowa Western Community College are receiving \$302,816 and \$500,000 for their aviation maintenance and mechanics programs, respectively, and Iowa Lakes Community College has been awarded \$493,657 for its aviation programs.

Each community college will use funds from the grants to obtain new equipment and technology for their programs, from virtual reality systems to drones.

Indian Hills Community College North Campus Program Director Kimberly Dreaden said there is a lot of theory involved in the aviation maintenance curriculum that can be hard to understand unless the students can actually see the equipment, which can be difficult since many of the systems are hidden behind walls within the plane. Having new training aids and VR systems will help students better understand what they're working with.

“Our goal is to use some of these funds to obtain these trainings so students can see how these systems work and what the general flow (is), minus just

using a diagram, like giving them a very active engagement with it,” Dreaden said.

Equipment like VR technology can also be taken into classrooms to show high school students what they could be doing if they pursue a career in aviation mechanics, and to provide access to people who cannot commute to the college for in-person training.

Kyle Norris, an executive dean at Iowa Lake Community College, said the college is planning to expand its aviation programming into emerging technologies like drones and rotary wing piloting and is opening new aviation cohorts in Spencer and Estherville. One of their goals is to fill the aviation career pipeline and reach more students throughout the region.

Drones, simulators and other technology will help the college engage with more high school students and show them that there isn’t just one path for aviation students.

“This will help us open those doors to high school students that might be thinking of a career in agriculture and then really have a keen interest in the aviation side, and understanding that it just doesn’t mean flying planes for a commercial industry,” Norris said.

Promotion of the programs is another area where the colleges will be putting dollars, including expanding partnerships with schools and employers in order to attract students. Diana Garcia, dean of industrial technology and transportation at Iowa Western Community College, said the college previously used grant dollars from a different FAA grant for the same purpose with positive results.

Indian Hills Community College and Iowa Western Community College will also allocate some of the grant dollars to stipends and scholarships for

students in order to relieve some of their financial burdens while trying to earn their certifications.

Dreaden said costs of new tools and even certification examinations can be a barrier for some students, especially if they're handling housing and food costs alongside them, and the college wants to offer support where it can.

Like Townsend, Dreaden has personal ties to her passion. Growing up with her father and grandfather both involved in aviation mechanics, Dreaden knows first-hand the career's benefits, but she also knows the barriers it has to people trying to get their start in the industry. Being able to help students receive the tools and access they need to thrive is important, especially in an industry where she said the college "can't give them enough people."

Beth Elman, marketing executive director for Iowa Lakes Community College, said receiving these funds is made even better when she gets to see the passion in students as they experience the college's programming.

"It's exciting that we're able to have those funds to help catapult the lives of future students, and I think that that's what these grants really mean," Elman said. "They're investing in our program, but really, they're investing in our future and the future of our students."