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New simulator offers intense virtual flying for RMC student pilots

BILLINGS, Feb. 14, 2014 – The Redbird flight simulator installed this month at Rocky Mountain College “tightens the gap between simulator and actual flight training,” said Flight Simulator Manager Tom Nelson. Scenario-based training puts two pilots alone in the cockpit for the capstone Crew Resource Management course of the aviation program.

The five-window cockpit view of the new machine shares realistic taxiways and airport environments, weather, three-dimensional landscapes, and structures across the entire nation. Each student flies “the real experience from Billings to Bozeman, for example,” said Nelson. Instructors out of sight watch the cockpit on video as they add jolts from wind shear, avionics use, and emergencies from potential system failures. All of these simulations have increased in realism from older machines. The processing power and motions of the new system offer “better emulation of our aircraft performance,” said Director of Aviation Dan Hargrove.

Instrument and commercial pilot certification programs across the U.S. require simulator training. RMC keeps the new simulator and its two older simulators available 24 hours to students who can work with a flight instructor to log hours. Other electronic simulators include a flight management system trainer that, when new, was identical to those used by SkyWest Airlines. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) protocols and certifications mandate program content.

Six of 12 certified flight instructors are advanced students, while others are recent RMC program graduates accumulating hours of flight experience before they move into careers. All dress in uniform when using a plane or simulator. Senior flight instructor Chris Gartner is graduating a full year early, in part thanks to his hours using the older simulators. The depth and breadth of RMC academic curriculum is one of only 27 programs nationally for which the FAA lets students graduate with 1,000 hours of flight and simulator training, rather than 1,500 hours.

“Each semester early is definitely saving me tuition bills,” Gartner said. He got his private pilot’s license in Santa Ana, Calif., before college, then is finishing his commercial, instrument, and multi-engine certifications at RMC while enjoying liberal arts classes.

“It’s really interesting to see how we can manipulate the simulator to give students exactly what they’ll see in the real world, in cloud height, any visibility, thunderstorms, rain, snow, and resulting icing,” he said.

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