



Excellence in Aviation at Florida Memorial University

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Albert Douglas, Jr., Assistant Professor in the Department of Aviation and Safety at Florida Memorial University, brings a wealth of experience and a lifetime of knowledge to his campus work. Having become an air traffic controller in the United States Air Force, he rose to the highest levels at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) by the time he retired; he continues his energetic engagement with the field as a subject matter expert to the FAA as well as teaching all air traffic control courses at FMU.

Douglas began his career as an air traffic controller in the United States Air Force, where he earned his first FAA certifications in air traffic control. He worked in a variety of positions within the FAA, ultimately achieving the highest rank by moving into the Senior Executive Service (SES) at FAA headquarters. As the Office of Personnel Management website states, these “leaders possess well-honed executive skills and share a broad perspective on government and a public service commitment that is grounded in the Constitution. Members of the SES serve in the key positions just below the top Presidential appointees. SES members are the major link between these appointees and the rest of the Federal workforce. They operate and oversee nearly every government activity in approximately seventy-five Federal agencies.” As an SES member, Douglas became Director of the Air Traffic Systems Requirement Service; in this position, “he was responsible for new and existing system requirement definitions, market surveys, system acquisition funding requests and vendor contract selection,” as his faculty bio states Douglas brings this elite experience to his work at FMU.

After this distinguished career in the FAA, Douglas retired in 1998 and began to do some consulting work in the field. In 2010, he met Captain A.J. Tolbert, who was directing FMU’s Department of Aviation and Safety at the time. Tolbert, who passed away in 2018, was a “former Air Force and commercial pilot [who] assisted in turning the aviation program into a premier academic program at the historic Black university,” according to a university press release at the time of his death. Tolbert asked Douglas to help re-establish the aviation program. The two spent the summer revising courses, with Douglas bringing the program up to date to ensure that it met—and would continue to meet—current FAA standards.

Douglas began teaching all air traffic control courses at FMU in the fall of 2011, and he remains committed to making the program ever more successful. He says that the transition from his previous work within the FAA to adjunct instructor—now Assistant Professor—was easy for him. In the FAA, Douglas held many different positions, one of which involved training controllers. To prepare for his move into that particular position, he had gone to the academy for

trainers, so he had already learned how to be an instructor for air traffic controllers before joining the faculty at FMU. Additionally, of course, he came to FMU with vast knowledge of all aspects of air traffic control, and he had managed air traffic control at some of the busiest airports in the country, including the John F. Kennedy International Airport, Andrews Air Force Base, Philadelphia International Airport, and Washington National Airport.

Last summer—in the culmination of one of the initiatives Douglas has pursued to further strengthen FMU’s aviation program—FMU was certified by the FAA to be part of the Air Traffic-Collegiate Training Initiative (AT-CTI). According to the FAA’s website, “The AT-CTI program is designed to provide qualified candidates for developmental air traffic control specialist positions.” Jorge Guerra, Director of Aviation and Safety at FMU, says that Douglas had been petitioning the FAA for ten years to include FMU on this elite list. As Douglas points out, only thirty-four institutions of higher education have this designation, and FMU is the third HBCU to attain this achievement. The



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AT-CTI puts FMU students on an even stronger path to careers in air traffic control.

Douglas says that he is proud to have been able to contribute in this way to support FMU's aviation program mission of producing students who are competitive in aviation fields. The AT-CTI designation demonstrates that instruction within the program fully meets FAA standards. As both Guerra and Douglas point out, this achievement is a draw for potential students; as the FAA website states, graduates of the program can "bypass Air Traffic Basics Course, which is the first five weeks of qualification training at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City. Students must successfully complete all required training at the FAA Academy to continue employment with FAA." The FAA says that "collegiate aviation is considered a critical hiring source to meet the FAA's need for air traffic controllers now and in the future." In fact, Douglas says, depending on position availability, the FAA at times only opens hiring to CTI graduates—so graduates of FMU's program will be in this small, select pool of applicants.

Guerra says that FMU is "really fortunate" to have Douglas as part of the team because of his vast experience and knowledge he has gained from the number of roles he has played. Guerra says that Douglas was one of the pioneers of the satellite GPS tracking of aircraft. Previously, aircraft had been tracked using radar, but the move to satellite provided more accurate data, leading to better safety. Guerra says that Douglas got the idea for satellite tracking of aircraft when watching the U.S. military using satellite-guided missiles during the first Gulf war. As an air traffic controller, he immediately saw the possibilities for using the technology to improve air traffic control.

Douglas pitched the idea with the FAA and was part of the FAA's Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) program from the beginning. According to Guerra, satellite tracking has been a "game changer" for air traffic control; it provides more accuracy in tracking, which allows for more planes in the sky. According to the FAA's website, The NextGen program has grown into "one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in U.S. history

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[which] aims to increase the safety, efficiency, capacity, predictability, and resiliency of American aviation. Through research and collaboration, NextGen contributes to defining new standards and further advancing our global leadership in aviation.” As his faculty bio states, Douglas continues to work as “a consultant and subject matter expert to the FAA and contractors in support of the FAA Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) programs and projects.”

Douglas has been a vital part of several influential organizations. One such group is the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals (OBAP), which is—according to its website—“a nonprofit organization dedicated to the encouragement and advancement of minorities in all aviation and aerospace careers.” Additionally, Douglas was involved with the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees (NBCFAE), a group whose mission is to “promote equal opportunities for African Americans, other minorities, and female FAA employees; improve employee management relations; and provide an effective liaison among FAA employees, management, and the community.” The work Douglas does at FMU parallels many of the initiatives, attitudes, and strategies employed by both OBAP and NBCFAE.

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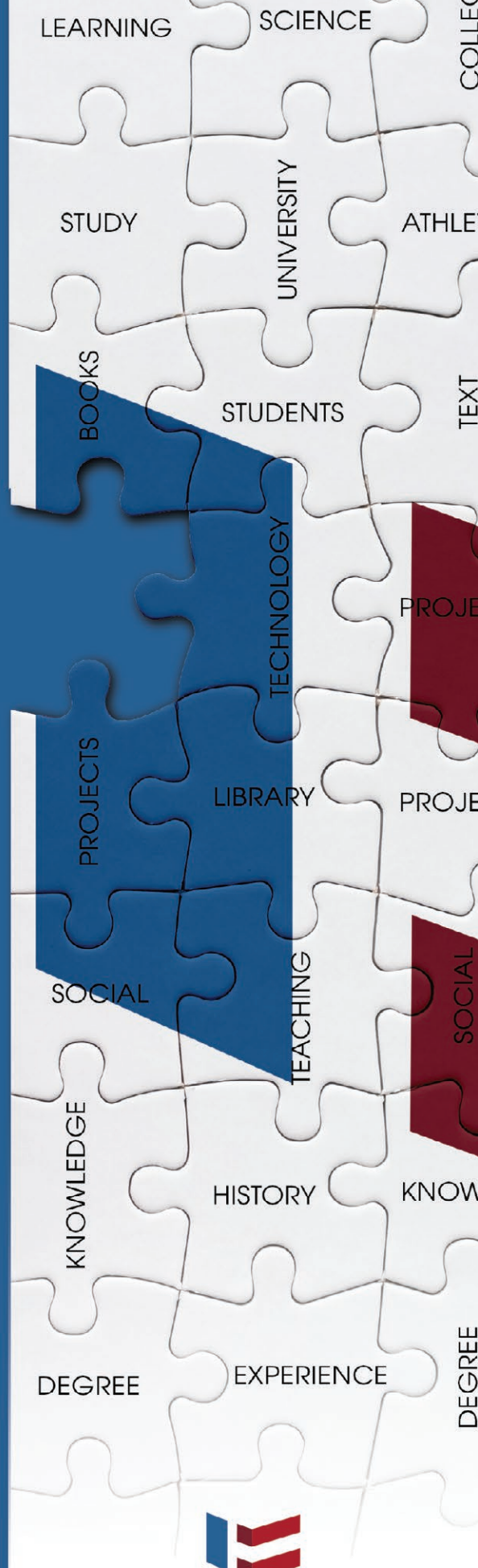
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FMU—the only Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in South Florida—was founded in 1879 as the Florida Baptist Institute. After a series of developments and relocations, it was established in its current Dade County location in 1968, becoming a university in 2004. Throughout its history and across all disciplines, FMU has focused on its mission “to instill in our students the values of leadership, character, and service to enhance their lives and the lives of others.” On its small, beautiful campus in south Florida, FMU provides a well-established aviation program with the highest level of instruction. Students in the Department of Aviation and Safety can earn a Bachelor of Science degree in either Aviation Management or Aeronautical Science; within Aeronautical Science, they can concentrate in Air Traffic Control or Flight Education. The air traffic control program’s graduates find positions as air traffic controllers all over the country, with many of them working in one of the several airports in the Miami area. While enrolled, students in the program tour different area airports, including Miami International. This term, Douglas reports, the program has more than eighty students enrolled across the various degree programs.

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The aviation program at FMU was established in 1984, with funding for the aviation building provided by the FAA. The campus is situated “just across the fence” from the Opa-Locka Airport, where the flight school is housed. According to Douglas, graduates of the program are very competitive for hire throughout the aviation industry, including within the Traffic Safety Administration (TSA). One recent graduate is both an adjunct within the program and a member of the Coast Guard who flies out of Opa-Locka. The aviation building at FMU has a control tower and a radar simulation lab that duplicates the FAA’s training facilities. Because of these resources, students graduate having already become familiar with what happens in real-world aviation settings. The program also partners with American Airlines, Miami International Airport, Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport, and Spirit Airlines to provide students with internship and mentorship opportunities. Flight Education students are required to earn a commercial pilot’s license along with their degrees from FMU. Earning a commercial pilot’s license is quite costly; several major airlines, however, offer programs to help graduates attain the needed flight hours. These programs, Douglas points out, also give students a chance to move up in the ranks at the airlines.

Douglas has influenced every aspect of FMU’s Department of Aviation and Safety; the school, his colleagues, and his students all benefit from Douglas’ commitment to excellence within air traffic control and aviation more broadly. He is “such a wonderful guy—you can’t describe him in just a few minutes,” Guerra says, adding that he is “conscientious,” “meticulous,” and “loves his students—he’s a great professional who goes out of his way to help them.” Douglas, however, describes himself much more humbly and simply: “Once you’re an air traffic controller, you’re always an air traffic controller.” With this key faculty hire, FMU leads the way in showing how private colleges and universities can draw on the expertise of seasoned professionals from outside of academia to continue strengthening established campus programs.

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