Flying High in Wichita

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR AVIATION RESEARCH AND CITY MAKE GREAT PARTNERS

For two decades, the National Institute for Aviation Research and the city of Wichita — the Air Capital of the World — have worked together to meet the ever-changing needs of the aviation industry.

The partnership is as vital today as it was 20 years ago, when the institute was established at Wichita State University.

The institute is a valuable tool for local industry, as well as for students at Wichita State University. The school offers more than 60 undergraduate degrees in more than 200 areas of study and 56 master’s degrees in more than 100 areas.

"If you go back into the history of NIAR, it was formed because of the strong aviation base in Wichita," says John Tomblin, NIAR executive director. "So, NIAR has a history of cooperating with the city and aircraft manufacturers, as well as a lot of the subcontractors to those manufacturers."

NIAR conducts hundreds of research projects annually in its 74,000-square-foot facility, which includes 15 laboratories.

Two of the laboratories — the Walter H. Beech Wind tunnel and the Crash Dynamics Laboratory — underwent recent upgrades and were rededicated in January 2005.

The improvements, plus the planned construction of the fourth-largest icing tunnel in the world, are being funded with a $13 million state legislative appropriation sought in a joint effort by aircraft manufacturers.

That type of collaboration is even more important in the post 9/11 world, Tomblin says.

“As everyone knows, after 9/11, the aviation industry took a dip. Companies are restructuring themselves as the industry picks back up. NIAR here at WSU is playing a key role in that.”

Tomblin says NIAR has partnered with Raytheon Aircraft Co. in the past year to take over part of the firm’s testing business, an example of a growing trend in the aviation industry.

Instead of individual companies developing their own testing facilities with the accompanying overhead costs, NIAR can develop a lab in a particular area of technology that the entire industry can benefit from, Tomblin says.

“The real success story here is the 18 people who were employed previously by Raytheon became Wichita State University employees. Because of that, I was able to market their services to other people outside the state,” Tomblin explains. “Now, as a combined effort of WSU and the aviation industry working together, we’re insourcing to Kansas and Wichita. That’s a real positive story.”

NIAR projects are developed from two major sources: federal grants and contracts with agencies such as the FAA, NASA and the Department of Defense, as well as the local and national aviation industry.

“We’re constantly working with the aviation industry here in Wichita and surrounding counties around Wichita to basically provide services that will boost the area’s overall economy,” Tomblin says.

— Anne Gillem