

Aviation industry talks give ASU students the inside scoop

Professionals including leaders from American Airlines share how to be successful in various aspects of aerospace

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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American Airlines Chief Operating Officer David Seymour was less than two minutes into his speech at the Aerospace on Campus series event Wednesday when he cleared up a misconception.

Talking to more than 60 Arizona State University students who had gathered on the second floor of the ISTB12 building on the Polytechnic campus, Seymour said that a “lot of people” think that if they want work in the aviation industry, they have to be a pilot or an engineer.

“I’ll give you a quick point of view,” Seymour said. “We have 130,000 team members at American Airlines. Not everybody has a college degree. We also have engineers, pilots, IT professionals, finance and accounting folks, flight attendants.

“There are a lot of different capacities. I tell people that, within an airline, you can do a lot of different jobs.”

The Aerospace on Campus series, supported by the [Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering](#) and presented by the [Wings Club](#), a global society of aviation professionals, was a two-day event at the Tempe and Polytechnic campuses in which students interested in an aerospace career could hear from and network with prominent figures in the industry.

Dana Jeffries-King, a junior majoring in aeronautical management technology, said hearing from aviation experts opened her eyes to a different future than she had imagined.

“It made me want to broaden my horizons and not be so narrow-minded in what I want to do. Just be open and let it flow to me,” Jeffries-King said.

The series was especially relevant to students in ASU’s aeronautical management technology degree program, which provides four concentrations that prepare learners for careers in those fields:

1. [Air transportation management](#): focuses on preparing students for leadership positions in the on-ground areas of the industry, including management of air carriers or airports, airport planning and general aviation operations.
2. [Air traffic management](#): equips students with technical foundations in air traffic control procedures and also provides a strong background in aircraft operations, management skills and business principles specific to air traffic control.
3. [Professional flight](#): prepares students for careers as pilots through a combination of academic instruction, simulator training and flight experience.
4. [Unmanned aerial systems](#): focuses on one of the fastest-growing areas in aviation. Students learn about drone operations, remote sensing, data collection and analysis.

“You are very fortunate to be at ASU and have the facilities and capabilities that you have here,” Seymour told the students.

Wednesday’s panel discussion featured Seymour; Lee Ann Shay, executive editor of the Aviation Week Network; Drew Larrabee, director of American Airlines’ technical operations and a 2008 ASU alumnus; and Veronica Duran Madrigal, a 2022 ASU graduate who is a software engineer for American Airlines.

Seymour said one of the reasons he loves working in the aerospace industry is that no two days are the same.

“If something is happening in the world, it’s having an impact on aviation,” he said. “Whether it is geopolitical issues or places we can’t fly or it’s a supply chain (issue) ... I like that variety. I am not a ‘go in and sit at your desk for five days a week doing the same thing over and over again’ (kind of person).”

That unexpected nature of the job is what still entices Larrabee.

“You have so many different diverse work groups under one roof, and there’s so much to learn about those different work groups, what they do and what kind of technical experience they bring to the table,” Larrabee said.

“Even (Tuesday) night, I was talking with some folks ... and learning about their processes and tools and absorbing it all. I realized that even after being here (at American Airlines) for 20 years, I could spend another 20 years and probably not know everything. I’d still be learning and absorbing.”

One of the topics the panel discussed was the human factor, a concept that changed the thinking of Deep Snehalkumar Shah, a graduate student studying mechanical engineering.

Shah said that before attending Wednesday’s event, he was singularly focused on technology. But as he moves forward, he said, he’ll also think about how humans work with technology.

“When we design technology, being a mechanical engineer, we should also think about how easy it is to interact with the human so they can avoid mistakes as much as they can,” Shah said. “If the technology is simple, they can operate it simply.

“That’s a different perspective, and every designer should keep that in mind.”

Near the end of the panel discussion, a student asked how they can differentiate themselves in the interview process.

Seymour said applicants must be passionate and curious.

“If you don’t have a passion for it, you’re wasting your time,” he said. “The people that are really successful, they’re successful because they have that passion.

“And be super, super curious. My team always nags me because I ask a lot of questions, and I’m 27 years in. I can still learn and still understand.”

Madrigal encouraged students to be themselves and make sure they get along well with others.

“Do you have the persona that people like working with?” Madrigal said. “Can you get along? Can you communicate well? In engineering school, they kind of teach you to not give up and to use all your resources.

“I would say, do that now. Do that in your life when searching for a job. Try everything and anything.”

Joy Gaeraths contributed to this story.

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Main image



American Airlines Chief Operating Officer David Seymour speaks with ASU students during an Aerospace on Campus series event held at ISTB12 on the Polytechnic campus on April 1. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University

Text image(s)



From left: American Airlines aircraft software engineer Veronica Duran Madrigal and American Airlines technical operations director Drew Larrabee speak on a panel moderated by Lee Ann Shay, executive editor of business aviation and maintenance, repair and overhaul at Aviation Week during an Aerospace on Campus series event held at ISTB12 on ASU's Polytechnic campus. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University



ASU students network with aviation professionals as part of an Aerospace on Campus event held at ISTB12 on the Polytechnic campus on April 1. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University