

# Mercer aviation program threatened by fiscal woes

By Emily Laermer  
 Staff Writer

WEST WINDSOR — The Mercer County Community College Aviation Department has given students the unique chance of learning how to fly for over 30 years, said Joseph Blasenstein, a professor, chief pilot and program coordinator in the department.

"For a kid in Newark, Camden or any local kid who dreams of flying, this is an opportunity for them," he said. "America is about opportunities."

This opportunity may be ending for these students, however, if Blasenstein, staff members and graduates of the program cannot raise enough money to keep it running.

The program, which currently has a \$350,000 deficit, has been granted authorization for two more years. After that, though, the program will only be allowed to remain open if it is able to find benefactors who would be willing to donate large sums of money to keep it alive.

"We have individuals who have been working tirelessly," Mr. Blasenstein said. "Hope remains eternal."

The department is the only associate degree program in the state, and one of a handful in the country that is accredited by the Aviation Accreditation Board International. Because it is the only such program in the state, any student in New Jersey can attend the program with in-county fees.

"This is the people's college," Mr. Blasenstein

said. "We give people the opportunity to get professional pilot credentials to go into the environment at a reasonable cost."

The entire two-year program costs approximately \$32,000, compared to other programs which can cost over \$50,000. However, students who are in the top 20 percent of their high school class can participate in the New Jersey Stars Scholarship program, which entitles them to free tuition to their county community college.

The students in the Mercer County program are required to take liberal arts classes, including English, mathematics and science courses, in addition to their aviation courses. These courses include history of aviation, aerodynamics and flight classes.

"They get a strong general education," Mr. Blasenstein said.

After students graduate from the school, they can work in many different pilot professions, including state police, military fields, regional and major airlines and aviation management firms.

"It's a gem of a program in a college that meets the public's need for education," Mr. Blasenstein said.

If the funds are not raised, though, the program will have to be shut down and New Jerseyans who dream of being pilots will be forced to go out of state, Mr. Blasenstein said.

"I don't even want to think about that," he said. "They will really put themselves in a bind."

For more information or to donate to the program, contact the Mercer County Community College Aviation Department at 609-570-3489 or [aviation@mccc.edu](mailto:aviation@mccc.edu).

