

PIREPS

UNO Aviation Career Conference Brings Students and Industry Professionals Together

Nearly 350 students gathered for the 2026 UNO Aviation Career Conference on Thursday, Sept. 24, for a day focused on exploring careers, learning from aviation professionals and making connections that could help shape their futures.

Students from the UNO Aviation Institute were joined by students from Burke High School, Lincoln North Star High School and Bellevue High School, creating an opportunity for both current and future aviation students to learn more about the many career paths available across the industry.

Organized by Hunter Pehrson, the full-day conference brought the industry directly to students through a keynote presentation, breakout sessions, an aviation expo and one-on-one conversations with professionals. Whether students

were just beginning to think about an aviation career or preparing to enter the workforce, the conference gave them an opportunity to ask questions, hear firsthand experiences and begin building professional relationships.

There Is More Than One Path to an Aviation Career

Keynote speaker Benji Cunningham, a Boeing 737 First Officer with United Airlines, shared a message that resonated with students: careers rarely unfold exactly as planned.

Drawing from a career that has included military service, corporate leadership, flight instruction and airline flying, Cunningham encouraged students to remain open to opportunities and stay focused on what they are passionate about, even when their original plans change.

His journey from "Plan A to Plan K" demonstrated that an unexpected change in direction does not have to



Keynote Speaker Benji Cunningham, United Airlines 737 First Officer.

mean giving up on a goal. Instead, different experiences can build the skills, relationships and perspective that ultimately lead to a rewarding career.

Cunningham joined United Airlines in 2024 after serving as both a Captain and First Officer with SkyWest Airlines. He also previously served as Chief Flight Instructor at Oracle Aviation in Omaha, where he trained and mentored aspiring professional pilots.



Ray Bennett, Vice President Aircraft Management EJM, speaking to students during his breakout session.

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Aviation Institute Student Izzie Petz speaking to one of the Exhibitors.

Learning What the Career Really Looks Like

Four breakout sessions moved beyond general career advice and gave students a practical look at what they can expect as they prepare to enter the aviation industry.

Ray Bennett led *Building Your Career in Aviation: Making the Most of Every Opportunity*, discussing how students can recognize opportunities, build meaningful professional relationships and make intentional decisions throughout their careers.

Dillon Musil took students behind the scenes of airline scheduling during *Behind the Schedule: How Pilots Bid and Trade Trips*. Students learned how seniority influences schedules, how trips are awarded and how pilots can make adjustments once their schedules are built.

Mallory Larsen offered a personal look at airline life in *Beyond the Flight Deck: A Day in the Life of an Airline Pilot*. In addition to discussing trips, overnights and time away from home, she shared her experience balancing an airline career with family life as a new parent.

Travis Parks focused on one of the most important steps in beginning a career: getting hired. His session, *Before the Interview: How to Prepare and Stand Out*, provided practical guidance on building a strong résumé, researching potential employers, preparing for interview questions and effectively communicating experiences and accomplishments.

For student Caitlyn Musil, the sessions were one of several highlights of the day. She attended Bennett's and Musil's presentations and valued the chance to learn from professionals beyond the breakout rooms.

"I learned so much that will be helpful to my career," Caitlyn said. "I also got to meet so many remarkable people and ask aviation professionals questions. It was a great experience."

Turning Conversations into Connections

The learning continued outside the breakout rooms. Throughout the Aviation Expo, students met with airline representatives, aviation companies, industry partners and professionals representing a variety of career opportunities.

Scott Vlasek, Director of the UNO Aviation Institute, said, "One of the most important things we can do for our students is create opportunities for them to connect what they are learning in the classroom with the industry they are preparing to enter. The Aviation Career Conference gives students a chance to hear directly from professionals, ask questions, build relationships and begin to see where they might fit within this industry.

Aviation is built on relationships, and many of the conversations students have today can become connections that stay with them throughout their careers. I'm incredibly grateful to the professionals and industry partners who give their time to make those opportunities possible for our students."

For some students, the day provided a clearer picture of where they want to go. For others, it introduced career possibilities they may not have previously considered. That is what the Aviation Career Conference is designed to accomplish: help students connect what they are learning today with the opportunities waiting for them tomorrow.

With nearly 350 students participating, the 2026 conference demonstrated the value of bringing students and industry together in the same room. The UNO Aviation Institute looks forward to building on that momentum as planning begins for the 2027 Aviation Career Conference. ✈️

Can you identify the following Nebraska public airport based on the following aerial snippet? North is up.
(Answer is on the last page)



4th Annual Girls in Aviation Day Takes Flight

By Rachel Barth and Samantha Montante Gonzalez

The future of aviation was on full display as the Cornhusker Chapter of Women in Aviation International hosted its 4th Annual Girls in Aviation Day on September 20 at Duncan Aviation's Hangar B at the Lincoln Airport.

This year's event welcomed a record 170+ girls, along with their families, for an afternoon designed to introduce the next generation to the many career possibilities within aviation and aerospace. Girls in Aviation Day is part of a worldwide Women in Aviation International initiative focused on exposing youth ages 8-18 to aviation through hands-on activities, industry role models and STEAM education.

Throughout the afternoon, participants explored aircraft displays, interactive STEM activities and hands-on exhibits, while meeting pilots and professionals representing a wide range of aviation careers.

The continued growth of Girls in Aviation Day demonstrates the power of our local aviation community working together to inspire the next generation. From pilots and mechanics to engineers, airport professionals and countless careers in between, the goal is simple: show young girls that there is a place for them in aviation — and give them the opportunity to see it firsthand.

A huge thank you to our volunteers, sponsors, exhibitors and aviation partners who helped make our biggest Girls in Aviation Day yet possible. We can't wait to see where these future aviators fly next! ✈️

BY THE NUMBERS

- 4th annual event in Lincoln
- 170+ girls attended — a new record!
- Aviation organizations and professionals from across the community came together to make the event possible



Nebraska Airports Quiz (answers on last page)

By Tiffany Thompson

1. How long is the longest runway in Nebraska?
2. How long is the shortest paved runway at a public-use airport in Nebraska?
3. How many public-use airports in Nebraska have turf runways?
4. How many acres of land do the combined turf runways at Nebraska public-use airports cover?
5. What elevation (MSL) is the highest public-use airport in Nebraska?
6. What elevation (MSL) is the lowest public-use airport in Nebraska?

2027 NEBRASKA AVIATION ART CONTEST

FOR AGES 6-17



“Wings over Nebraska”

Every day, Nebraska’s aviators connect people, transport cargo, and support lifesaving medical missions using airplanes, helicopters, gliders, hot air balloons, and even drones. The 2027 Nebraska Aviation Art Contest challenges you to capture those missions and journeys. From the Sandhills to the Omaha skyline, what are the most “Nebraskan” ways to be in the sky? Grab your colored pencils, markers, and paints to show us how aviation keeps the Cornhusker State on the go!

More information can be found on the NDOT website
<https://dot.nebraska.gov/aeronautics/art-contest/>

FAA’s Latest Change To Stall Minimum Altitude Requirements

By David Morris

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has raised the minimum recovery altitude for slow flight and stall maneuvers in Sport Pilot practical tests from 1,000 feet Above Ground Level (AGL) to 1,500 feet AGL, effective October 14, 2026.

This change applies to FAA-S-8081-29B (Airplane), and related Practical Test Standards (PTS) for lighter-than-air, powered parachute, and weight-shift-control categories.

This change brings the requirements into alignment with Private Pilot Standards for the same tasks. Also, the Modernization of Special Airworthiness Certification (MOSAIC) rule expanded the types and sizes of aircraft Sport Pilots may operate under 61.316. The change was made for safety concerns as larger and heavier aircraft have less margin at the lower previous altitude of 1,000 feet AGL. The FAA cited reduced risk and consistency with higher-category standards.

No new maneuvers or test elements were added. The Tasks, Areas of Operation, and test structure remain unchanged. As well, the 600 foot AGL minimum for ground-reference maneuvers still applies where required. ✈

Nebraska Airports Quiz - Answers:

1. 12,901 feet (Runway 18/36 Lincoln/LNK)
2. 2,284 feet (Runway 11/29 Gordon/GRN)
3. 31 Airports
4. 10,932 acres
5. 4926 feet MSL (Kimball/IBM)
6. 924 feet MSL (Auburn/K01)

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

October

- 10/02** | LNK Drive-In Movie Night | 3801 NW 34th St., Lincoln | 6pm, movie starts at dark
- 10/10** | Breakfast at the Airport hosted by Cornhusker Air Force, Inc. | Terminal Building at Hastings Municipal Airport (HSI) | 9-11am
- 10/16** | Nebraska Aeronautics Commission Meeting | Kearney Regional Airport (EAR) | Time TBD | agenda will be available in the Nebraska Aeronautics Commission section of the website
- 10/17** | EAA 569 Fly-In Breakfast | Wahoo Municipal Airport (AHQ) | 8-10am | suggested donation: \$10/adults; \$5/kids
- 10/23** | LNK Drive-In Movie Night: Hocus Pocus | 3801 NW 34th St., Lincoln | 6pm, movie starts at 7:30pm
- 10/30** | Flight of Fright Halloween Party | SAC & Aerospace Museum, Ashland | 12-2pm
- 10/31** | Nebraska Chapter of the Antique Airplane Association Hamburger Fly-In | Hastings Municipal Airport (KHSI) | 11:30am-1pm (free-will donation)

November

- 11/5** | Nebraska Business Aviation Association Fall Luncheon | 11:30am-1:30pm | Location TBD | <https://nebaa.org/event-6409341>

December

- 12/4** | Nebraska Aeronautics Commission Meeting | NDOT Central Complex, 1500 Nebraska Parkway, Lincoln, NE 68502 | 1pm | agenda will be available in the Nebraska Aeronautics Commission section of the website

Airport quiz answer: Harvard