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African American Aviator Trail Blazes a Career for Himself and Others

Lynne Rafool Bidwell

James Sulton III, former Pepperdine University alumnus with the Graduate School of Education and Psychology recently discussed his career in aviation and his commitment to providing aviation opportunities for other minorities.

In 2008, Sulton earned his EdD in educational leadership, administration, and policy. "My dream had been to become a high school principal and start an aviation program for minority students," he said. He also obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida.

His interest in the field came naturally as his mother in 1979 became the first African American woman to be licensed as a pilot in the state of Georgia. Sulton said there are about 600,000 commercial pilots in the United States with



30,000 of them being women. Of the 30,000 female pilots, there are less than 100 that are women of color with around 50 of them being African American pilots that fly commercially.

“The FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) doesn’t keep numbers on race, but they do keep numbers on gender. Minority aviation groups have done studies to try and ballpark the figure to around 50,” he said.



Sulton spent much of his time at Pepperdine looking at the challenges facing African American, female pilots. “Many of them have faced extreme racial discrimination,” he said. The title of his dissertation is African American Women Pilots’ Perceptions of Barriers to Success in Flight Training and Strategies to Enhance Their Presence.

Sulton said he thinks all 50 African American pilots knew about his dissertation and participated in some way, including contributing to his survey and being interviewed.

When describing his time at Pepperdine, he said, “It was one of the most powerful educational experiences I’ve had. Not only were people like Linda Purrington, Susan Parks, and all of the instructors guiding me throughout my studies, but my cohort was like a family.” He added, “They looked at me like a little brother, and they took me under their wing.”

While completing his EdD at Pepperdine, Sulton worked as an air traffic controller with Lockheed Martin Corporation and served on the school board for Aviation High School in Oakland, California, a predominately African American and Latino school. “Just as I was finishing my doctorate degree at Pepperdine, the principal of the high school left, and I was asked to replace him,” he said.

Sulton served as principal for two years, eventually helping to raise the school’s Academic Performance Index (API) by 50 points. He said he utilized resources and relationships from Pepperdine to help him in this new role, and New York’s Aviation High School was used as a model.

“Every state has at least one aviation high school, but the school in Oakland was one of the most unique educational projects I’ve ever seen or heard of in that we had a charter school that was devoted to providing a typical high school education but also exposing at-risk youth to the career field of aviation,” he said.

Students took college courses at the College of Alameda in Alameda, California, concurrently with their high school courses for dual credit. Students also had the opportunity to earn FAA certification and gain internship experience at the Oakland International Airport.

Sulton said since his departure as principal in 2010, the school has “fallen on hard times,” and he has been working as an air traffic control specialist in training for the FAA at its Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON) facility in Warrenton, Virginia. “It’s one of the most

complex air traffic facilities in the world, handling approach and control from 3,000 to 20,000 feet,” he said.

Sulton discussed the ongoing need to expose minorities to aviation since “the role models aren’t there in this field.” He personally experienced the absence of African American mentors as a 15-year-old student pilot, and out of the 160 air traffic controllers in his building at TRACON, less than 10 are African American with few African American women represented.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics the need for air traffic controllers will increase by 13 percent through 2018, resulting in the creation of 3,400 jobs. Sulton said, “Many air traffic controllers got involved with aviation because family members are somehow involved with aviation, but it’s difficult to choose this profession when you don’t know the career exists.” Sulton said air traffic controllers can earn over \$100,000 a year.

“It’s important for educators to consider unique career fields as they are impacting the lives of our nation’s youth and to not just think about standard career fields,” he said. “When kids come to you with a dream, especially when we talk about people who are guiding kids in a particular direction, you should remain open-minded when your responsibility is so great,” he added.

Despite his busy schedule as an air traffic controller, husband, and father, Sulton has stayed connected to students through his foundation, AvEd. For the past 10 years AvEd has offered a scholarship competition for at-risk students across the nation. Scholarship winners receive airfare, room and board, and tuition to attend a weeklong summer camp at Sulton’s alma mater, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Scholarship funding comes from a variety of individual and organizational donations.

Sulton said he has enjoyed seeing four previous scholarship winners become students at the university, and the foundation committee will be offering three new scholarships for 2012.

In addition to AvEd’s scholarship program, a college readiness program is in development that will provide participants with tutoring, mentorship, and exposure to career fields that are centered on aviation and aerospace. Other long-term goals include helping students select the right courses so they stay on track for entering the field and offering support for families and guidance counselors.

Sulton said he did not start his foundation to necessarily have kids fall in love with aviation; rather, he wants to build their confidence, self-efficacy, and potential: “The sky is not the limit; it’s the starting point.”

For additional information about AvEd, please visit AviationEd.net .

Issue: [Spring-Summer 2012 Volume 29 No 1](#)

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