

Managing Aviation Business Administration Past 9/11: Case Study

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Abstract

This case study examines management of the short-term aftermath of the 9/11 attacks at one of the world's premier aeronautical universities.. Using official and publicly available documents, University-level management of external stakeholders is presented. The traditional core competence of the Business Administration Department is airline and airport management; thus its faculty and staff were especially stunned by 9/11. The hope is that crisis management in business education may be discussed in an open forum.

I. THE SITUATION ON 9/11

The Daytona Beach, Florida campus of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious schools focused on any specific industry. (There is a sister campus in Prescott, Arizona and an "Extended Campus" which delivers programs to remote locations around the world. This paper focuses on the Daytona Beach campus.) The supplier of world-class aerospace engineers, the plurality of airline pilots, degreed /FAA-certified mechanics, and other industry-specific technical specialists, it also hosts a Business Administration Department. While the Department's program is accredited, it offers concentrations in, as examples, aviation maintenance management, aviation marketing, and airline and airport operations. Like other parts of the University, it draws upon a market of students that is truly global in character and very culturally diverse.

As of this writing, there were 4210 undergraduate and graduate students at the Daytona Beach campus. The international student body was 568 strong, and graduate programs were almost 50% international and growing. Students came from 107 countries, with very significant representation from countries politically or culturally associated with the events of 9/11 [1.]

One can easily surmise how the Department and University were shocked by the events of 9/11/2001. To illustrate, there were erroneous rumors that the University had trained at least one of the main terrorists. The FBI was on campus for weeks interviewing profiled students. The local newspaper and television media made understandable demands for information. Some non-U.S. students were ordered home by their embassies; some simply fled in panic. It was truly an acute crisis management challenge.

II. MANAGING THE SHOCK

Within hours of the 9/11 attacks, local, national and global attention was turned to the University and its role in the global aviation environment. A global cable television network reported on the school, focusing especially on its training mission and international orientation. Worse, the report confused ERAU with another Florida-based flight training facility. Locally, there were several similar reports on television, again leaving open to speculation who the school

might have graduated, and confusing its role in the admissions process with that of governmental immigration services. On September 12, the University publicly released the following announcement [2].

Today, we grieve with the rest of the nation. Many of our faculty, staff and students work at military bases around the world, and have been directly impacted by yesterday's events – some may have even lost their lives.

We are cooperating with the FBI and other law enforcement officials. We are quickly responding to each and every request. At this point, we hope and pray that the University has not been a victim in this madness.

We will not publicly provide further information because we do not want to impede the ongoing investigation. Any additional request must be directed to the FBI.

With the world's attention focused on this tragedy, Embry-Riddle unfortunately becomes a part of this story. Some people have questions about our mission and the important role we play in the aviation and aerospace industry.

Embry-Riddle graduates account for more than one-fourth of all commercial airline pilots in the United States. Further, the University has more commissioned officers and rated pilots in the Air Force than any other educational or military institution, with the exception of the Air Force Academy.

Embry-Riddle also has the largest volunteer ROTC detachments in the country. Many of our faculty, staff and students work at military bases around the world, and have been directly impacted by yesterday's events. The University has graduated war heroes, astronauts, and many professionals employed in the armed services, government agencies including the FAA, NTSB, FBI, DEA and numerous aviation and aerospace corporations around the world.

Embry-Riddle, a fully accredited university, has the largest aeronautical science degree program in the country. We also offer more than 30 degrees through the master's level at locations worldwide. We were recently named by U.S. News and World Report as the number one aerospace engineering program (non-PhD granting) in the nation for the second year in a row.

By September 14 rumors continued to flourish and the environment was very tense. On campus, reactions were mixed but all emotions were high. In many classes time was taken to discuss matters, and the faculty was tasked to coach students through dismay and confusion. One foreign embassy from the MidEastern region ordered all its students to come home immediately, and dispatched an airplane for them. Another ordered its students not to attend classes. A few students simply panicked and disappeared to homes of friends, which did not help manage the rumors. Most others, at face value, seemed to take a "wait and see" posture. Naturally the local news media was very concerned, as suggested by excerpts from an article in the local newspaper [3.]

ERAU Students, Staff Hurt by Terrorists Attack. Random e-mails and phone calls accuse the University of knowingly training terrorists, and TV crews have lined up at the school's entrance.

To students and staff at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, it feels like the world is pointing fingers at them.

“People are hurt by this kind of stuff” said [a university spokesperson] because one suspected terrorist involved in the attack on the World Trade Center was an ERAU graduate.

Embry-Riddle is used to the media spotlight – for good things...

“There are so many good students who come through and go on to do good things. I know all the good that has come through this door,” said [the] community relations director.

“When a bad apple gets through, it really does hurt. It’s a knot that’s in the pit of your stomach. I just find it very hard to digest.”

In addition to the pain of the realization that a terrorist likely lived and studied here have been the negative comments targeted at the university...

“The public needs to understand the university community is mourning, as well,” said [the interim chancellor.] Parents of students were killed at the World Trade Center. The pilot of American Airlines Flight 77, which was hijacked and crashed into the Pentagon, graduated from ERAU in 1983.

“The students, the faculty, the staff and the alumni are victims. One of our members, at least, has perished in this and it’s reasonable to assume others have perished...”

“The one thing that has sustained students and employees through it all ... is an outpouring of support through it all’ [said a university official.] Many public officials have called to offer words of encouragement...”

“I think it’s very irresponsible to blame a student’s action on the university. That would be like blaming the community because he lived here,” said [a local county official.]

This article was associated with an editorial. Excerpts follow [4.]

Blaming School, Students Only Adds to the Tragedy. For 35 years, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has been a part of this community, so much a part that it is often taken for granted.

A national tragedy has brought unwelcome attention to the school and its students, many of whom have come here from abroad. It’s important to remember why those students come here, and why they are welcome...

Is it also possible that one or more of the suicidal fanatics ... were once backpack-toting students at the school? Yes, sadly, it is. Can the school be held responsible for failing to recognize an evil intent that had not yet even been formed? No, of course it cannot...

The U.S. State Department reviews every foreign student who is accepted at ERAU for pilot training. Should those reviews be tightened? Perhaps. But it is important to recall that, throughout the world’s history, free countries have always been graced with academic communities that span borders and surmount political divisions.

People who study at ERAU, and then return to their countries, could become part of those oppressive governments. Or they could become dissidents,

speaking out about the need for liberty. That is the price, and the great advantage, of academic freedom.

Allowing students born in oppressive regimes to study here gives them the opportunity to see, first-hand, what their leaders have been demonizing and to realize for themselves what America really is.

In the aftermath of tragedy, it's always tempting to slam the door against outsiders and turn against anyone who questions the wisdom of that action. But recriminations based on illusory suspicions heal nothing, and should not be turned against an institution and student body that share in the sorrow we all feel.

As the initial shock wore off, the atmosphere on campus became less tense, but initial fears of terrorism became somewhat replaced by worries about the long term ramifications of 9/11 for the future of aviation and careers. Since the airline industry, in particular, was thrown into severe financial and political crisis, students as well as faculty were forced to reconsider the changing world. Students who just invested three or four critical years focusing on an aviation education experienced genuine career crises, even though the industry would certainly rebound in the long term. Faculty became concerned for the University itself, as its entire mission was aviation oriented. The Department of Business Administration was especially forced to introspect, as its curriculum was much more focused on airline and airport careers than others such as Engineering.

III. THINGS CALM DOWN

On October 3, a "Frequently Asked Questions" page appeared on the University's publicly available website [5.] The following summarizes the unfolding news. All published connections of the 9/11 terrorists to ERAU had proved false, and cooperation with the FBI was continuing. It was also a relief to learn that an alumnus, with a name similar to that of one of the hijackers, had been found safe and innocent in a foreign country [6.] Dispelled rumors included all reports of retaliation against Muslim or Arabic students, and reports that the campus was being patrolled by outside police agencies.

The public was assured that a business-as-usual approach was being taken towards the continuing accomplishment of the University's mission, with emphasis on the stability of classes, programs, and academic activities. While the tension was recognized, it was being managed without interruptions to any operations. Service to the aviation communities was uninterrupted, at least in terms of recruiting and student admissions. U.S. State Department and Immigration and Naturalization procedures would continue to be followed without any additional local restrictions. This included policies regarding Middle East students and flight training for international students. The cause of educational diversity was championed repeatedly.

Assurances were given as to the long-term prospects of careers in aviation and aerospace, as a function of inevitably-advancing global and economic forces. Attention was given to the concerns of parents, about the future of the industry, ERAU's continued prominent place in it, and of course, student safety.

Also on October 3, the University President released separate letters to students, alumni, and parents [7-9.] In addition to repeating several of the above clarifications, the amalgam of points stressed stability, safety, diligence and normalcy.

On December 21, the University announced [10]:

... On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, our country suffered unprecedented attacks of aviation terrorism. In response, the President of the United States ... has declared war on global terrorism. The President has also directed that aviation security be strengthened in order to meet any challenge ...

To support the president's goals and strengthen aviation security, Embry-Riddle is initiating the 9/11 fund. Potential projects ... include

Conducting applied research in safety and security, focusing on issues such as the screening and evaluation of pilot candidates and methodologies for enhancing the identification and security processing of flight crew members.

Developing additional University level courses and programs in aviation security, including an interdisciplinary approach to the education and training of those changes with aviation security management.

Professional education and training in such areas as human resource management, profiling, international security, intelligence analysis and computer security.

Policy papers, analyses and proposals pertaining to a national aviation security system: aviation security legislation, intelligence and national security issues.

Soon thereafter, the University announced the establishment of a Memorial fund in the name of the alumnus who piloted the airplane that was used to attack the Pentagon [11]:

The fund will be used to provide scholarships for Aeronautical Science students ... and to support research in aviation safety and security. Examples of research projects are [to] ...

Evaluate new methods to improve the performance and retention of airport baggage screeners.

Identify the factors that screeners use in the decision-making process to search for luggage.

Create a systems model to predict the potential for passenger disruptive behavior using elements of airport physical structure, passenger processing, organizational demands, and environmental stressors.

IV. INTO THE NEW YEAR

Into 2002, the situation on campus roughly paralleled the mood and attitude elsewhere in the nation and industrialized world. The restoration of much confidence was greatly helped by watching the war on terrorism go very well, and of course most media coverage focused on air power that seemed invincible. The orientation of many ERAU people was generally "this is what's happened to us, and this is what we're doing about it." Media attention on the University returned to normal; if anything, community relations improved once the panic was gone.

Events started to happen that suggested that while the aviation industry was forever changed, that opportunities for the University were so large, they were practically responsibilities. For example, while Congress was passing legislation to de-privatize some aspects of airport security, ERAU was asked to develop a professional certification program for

the new federal employees. A feeling of ambivalence was a natural reaction, coupled by ongoing introspection.

V. REFERENCES

[1] “Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Fall Enrollment – Residential Campuses.” Office of Institutional Research, September 15, 2001.

[2] “Embry-Riddle Joins The Nation in Mourning,” <http://www.erau.edu/mourning.html>, September 12, 2001.

[3] “ERAU Students, Staff Hurt by Terrorists Attack,” Daytona-Beach News-Journal, Friday, September 14, 2001.

[4] “Blaming School, Students Only Adds to the Tragedy: News-Journal Editorial,” Daytona Beach News-Journal, Friday, September 14, 2001.

[5] Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Frequently Asked Questions. <http://www.erau.edu/911faqs.html>, October 3, 2001.

[6] [Alumnus Cleared.] <http://www.erau.edu/alumcleared.html>, September 21, 2001.

[7] [Letter to Students.] <http://www.erau.edu/tostudents.html>, September 21, 2001.

[8] [Letter to alumni] <http://www.erau.edu/toalumni.html>, September 21, 2001.

[9] [Letter to Parents.] <http://www.erau.edu/toparents>, September 21, 2001.

[10] “Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Establishes The 9/11 Fund,” <http://www.erau.edu/erau911fund.html>, December 21, 2001

[11] “The David M. Charlesbois Memorial Fund,” <http://www.db.erau.edu/campus/alumni/alumnioffice/charlebo.html>, [no date.]