


## Tinker dominates market as private companies scramble to fill aircraft tech jobs

Wayne Jamroz, general manager of AAR Aircraft Services, speaking about the skills shortage and job demand in the aviation industry.

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As business in Oklahoma City's aerospace industry soars, the market's profound deficit in aircraft maintenance technicians is plummeting deeper.

Annapolis, Md.-based ARINC, which repairs U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy and foreign aircraft, in July opened a second hangar east of Will Rogers World Airport to meet growing work demands, while Illinois-based AAR Aircraft Services, at its neighboring hangars on south Meridian, is picking up new maintenance lines for feeder airlines to Delta Air Lines.

ARINC since February has jumped from six maintenance technicians to 120 and currently has five additional openings, senior director Ray Ord said last week. Meanwhile, AAR, which employs 331 hands-on workers on Alaska, Allegiant and now Pinnacle/Mesaba aircraft — has 143 openings, or some 43 more than this time last year, namely for sheet metal technicians and airframe and power plant (A&P) technicians, said Anita Brown, senior human resources manager.

The industry's skilled laborers are retiring faster than area vocational schools and Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology in Tulsa can graduate new ones, studies show. In this market, Tinker Air Force Base is snapping up 98 percent of graduates, observers say.

“Tinker's 76th Maintenance Wing is hiring in these areas, but we do not consider there to be a shortage,” spokesman Ron Mullan said. The base, he said, employs 1,778 sheet metal mechanics, 80 of whom have A&P licenses, and an additional 149 A&P mechanics in various other career fields.

AAR starts A&P techs at \$14 to \$14.50 an hour, and unlicensed sheet metal techs at \$12.50 an hour, Brown said. Lately, she said, the company has lost workers, mainly those with five or fewer years' experience, to ARINC, which Ord said offers “comprehensive and competitive” salaries.

Comparatively, Tinker typically starts sheet metal techs at \$30,282 and A&P workers at \$32,035, Mullan said. After six months' and more experience, the latter can jump quickly to \$35,755 and higher.

But Tinker's greatest edge may be partnering with area vo-techs to offer students paid internships to work part-time while they're completing their studies.

Since 2001, Metro Technology Center has put 1,200 techs, or 98 percent of its graduates, to work at Tinker, program director Pete Lee said. Over 18 months, students complete 46 courses in sheet metal, hydraulics, landing gear and other areas, he said. Upon completion, they take written and oral practical exams to become licensed by the Federal Aviation Administration.

His program, which carries an \$8,000 tuition and earns 37 credit hours toward an associate degree at Oklahoma City Community College, accepts 54 students every March and September, based partly on their reading, math and mechanical tests. Similar programs, with smaller class sizes are offered by Gordon Cooper Technology Center in Shawnee and Canadian Valley Technology Center in El Reno.

For more introductory and unlicensed sheet metal training, Francis Tuttle Technology Center offers free, state-funded 12-week day and 18-week night programs to participants, who are accepted based on baseline testing and an aptitude of working with hand tools. So as not to exceed industry demand, the program has been closed for about a year, but will reopen soon, training project manager Clark Jermain said. Prospective students can go to [www.aircraftsheetmetaltraining.com](http://www.aircraftsheetmetaltraining.com).

Meanwhile, AAR is scrambling to meet its present and future job demands, from awarding internships to high school students to expose them to careers in aviation and scholarships to teachers to attend aerospace expos. More tangibly, Anita Brown in August secured approval to reimburse employees up to \$5,250 in tuition in exchange for 18-month work commitments.

Though AAR can't compete salary-wise with Tinker, the private company offers workers the chance to work holistically on an aircraft, Brown said. "Instead of putting one rivet in a certain panel day after day, they get a broader base of knowledge," she said.

But the biggest future challenge for the industry, she said, is for today's parents to view aircraft technicians as a viable career, Brown said. "We as parents make the mistake of touting college (over trades) to our kids," she said.

"We want our kids to go to college, but then many of today's graduates are coming out of school with no jobs and flipping burgers," Brown said. "There's a disconnect there," she said.