‘The Flying Professors’ began distance learning

By Kaitlin Bain
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Before Internet and live streaming, there were four Texas Tech professors who would fly to Pampa, Borger, Amarillo, Midland and Odessa once a week to teach students in those areas in addition to the classes they were already teaching on campus.

Justin Louder, assistant vice provost of Tech Worldwide eLearning, said this was the first distance education initiative in Tech’s history.

“Four faculty members from the College of Engineering started a program called The Flying Professors,” he said, “and they traveled around West Texas offering classes toward the Master in Engineering degree.”

Milton Smith, professor of industrial engineering and previous flying professor, said he joined the program during the late 1960s as a graduate student.

The courses taught were started through a contract between engineering businesses in Amarillo, Borger and Pampa, including the Texaco refinery, Pantex nuclear weapons plant and the Phillips petroleum and chemical refinery plant.

According to the Tech Worldwide eLearning website, when the program started, 58 students participated in the Borger/Pampa programs and 20 in the Midland/Odessa programs.

“They would fly professors up there once a week and teach three hours,” Smith said. “Typically there would be five professors in a single-engine aircraft. We would meet at the airport at about 3:30, fly to Amarillo and drop off one person, fly to Borger, drop off two of us. Almost every time I went to Borger and then went on to Pampa, stayed there and there were two people who stayed there.”

In Smith’s experience, he said students would rotate each week and take the professors to dinner at a “real nice” barbecue restaurant and the group would then go back for class from 6 to 9 p.m.
This was Smith’s first experience teaching a three-hour block, which he said was challenging because he had to have all his materials and plans put together before the professors got on the plane.

“We had maybe a five-minute break every hour and then take us back to the airport and the plane did the reverse,” Smith said. “We’d get to Lubbock International maybe 11 o’clock, so it was 11:30 or so by the time we got home. It was a long day in addition to teaching three hours and almost a full day’s work here and then the travel and getting back.”

While the professors worked long hours and may have had a 7:30 a.m. class the next morning, as Smith did one semester, there were many rewards to keep the professors coming back to teach another year.

When Smith first started teaching, he said, one course was equal to 10 percent of the other nine-month salary.

The companies sponsoring the program coordinated the transportation and paid for the expenses of flying and chartering the plane.

“It was enjoyable teaching and meeting with engineers from industry and every one of these, they were full-time employed,” Smith said. “Some of the students, I don’t exactly remember all of their names, but I remember interactions with them and they’re all pleasant. There was never any conflict between instructors and students.”

Compared to the distance education currently offered at Tech, Smith said he misses the interaction he had with students through the flying professor program as opposed to the lack of interaction he has with students through streaming lectures now.

“The part I miss today is seeing students face to face,” he said. “They see us because we’re lecturing to them and they see us on video but we cannot see them. So when one of those students comes on campus, and occasionally they do, they know everybody and they think we should know them, but we’ve never seen their face before. That’s one thing I miss, getting acquainted with the students.”

Through the many shared experiences, Smith said, the professors became friends.

“We had fun. We talked. I was almost always the only industrial engineering professor, so they had chemical engineers and mechanical engineers,” he said. “There was always talking going on. Someone was always talking.”

Smith said one of his favorite memories involved a time when the professors were flying home and could hear the pilots talking back and forth on air traffic control.

It was one of the darker nights when they were flying and the control tower was instructing the pilot about other aircrafts to avoid.

“The air traffic control towers were talking to some small airplanes and said, ‘watch out for that
Continental plane. He should be…’ telling him where to look for him and the pilot comes back and says, ‘I don’t see him. I don’t see him,’” he said. “That was when the planes had a golden tail and they advertised that and the pilot said, ‘It’s alright. We’re the ones with the golden tail.’ We all died laughing at that.”

After the flying professors program ended, Smith said, they spent some time driving back and forth to the campuses to continue teaching classes.

In 1972, Tech began the first face to face delivery of the Master of Art Education program at the distance campus in Junction, according to the website.

Later, Smith participated in the changing distance education programs when cassettes were being mailed to distance students, he said, and then when DVDs were being mailed and now with online streaming.