



## UND's equipment attracts air traffic control students

By DAVE KOLPACK, Associated Press Writer

October 15, 2003

The intensity of the situation can be seen on the face of the air traffic controller, who eyes a single-engine prop plane as it seems to move ever so slowly down Runway No. 2.

"Come on little guy, come on little guy," the controller says to himself, motioning with his hands for the plane to get off the ground.

It's only a simulation, but the University of North Dakota's new 360-degree MaxSim tower radar provides such real-life experience that air traffic control students like Matthew Burrell have suffered through many cases of sweaty palms.

"You would be surprised at how intense it can be," said Burrell, from Portland, Ore. "At times it can be overwhelming."

Burrell is one of 210 students majoring in air traffic control at UND, which is believed to have more of such majors than any other college in the country, said Paul Drechsel, director of air traffic control contract training at the UND School of Aerospace Sciences.

"If you want to be an air traffic controller, you go to the University of North Dakota," Drechsel said.

The field likely has many job openings in the next few years, Drechsel said. Many of the current controllers started in the early 1980s, after the federal government began firing controllers who had gone out on strike. Now they are nearing retirement age.

Already, 158 UND graduates are working air traffic control, Drechsel said.

The 360-degree tower, made by Canadian-based Adacel Inc., is one of four in the United States and nine around the world, said Lisa Thorell, director of business development for Adacel.

The \$1 million simulator, installed in June, can mock peak traffic at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, one of the busiest sites in the world.

"This makes UND one of the elite," Thorell said. "There are going to be top-gun controllers coming out of here."

The school also has a 225-degree simulator that has been used for about two years.

"Until now, we didn't have a tremendous capability to handle the program," said Bruce Smith, dean of aerospace sciences. "Now, with the simulators, we are in the position to handle it. This is better than real world training."

The 360-degree simulator can turn a sunny day into a thunderstorm. It can create a driving snowstorm, then send snowplows out on the runway to clear a path. It can have a Boeing 747 buzz the tower to make sure its landing gear is working.

"It's like the biggest video game I've ever played, and probably the most complex one, too," said J.D. Gommoll, a commercial aviation and air traffic control student from Charlotte, N.C.

The software also can create static with radio communications, or knock out radar all together.

"In the real world, it doesn't happen very often, but when it does, it just becomes total chaos because nobody knows what to do," said Chad Didier, manager of the tower-radar simulation system.

It's a far cry from early days of the program, when the simulator was a piece of plywood the size of a pingpong table painted with the layout of an airport. People flew model airplanes by hand and talked on walkie-talkies.

"We're lucky to have this equipment," said Harsh Mathur, an air traffic control student from St. Paul, Minn. "This is real time, hands-on work experience you really can't get anywhere else."