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# The Changing Face of the FIRC

by Gregory T. French

With few exceptions, all flight instructors must renew their flight instructor certificates every 24 calendar months. This requirement is clearly outlined in the Title 14 Code of Federal Regulations section 61.197. Attending a Flight Instructor Refresher Clinic, or FIRC, is one of the ways that they can accomplish this. There are other ways, such as through flight training activity or receiving another instructor rating (with some conditions), but, by far, the most common method is via the FIRC, either on-line or by attending a two-day, 16-hour, in-person, stand-up presentation, at the end of which the instructors are presented

certificates of graduation that they can take to their Flight Standards District Offices (FSDO). A few weeks later they get their newly minted, good-for-another-two-years, certificates. Some FIRC providers make it a bit easier by taking care of the FSDO part, but the attendee still needs to do the 16-hours. For many instructors it's become a time-honored ritual that must be endured, time after time, year after year.

Attending FIRCs have been met with varying opinions by flight instructors. Some are interested and enthusiastic, others perhaps less so. Part of the problem that some "less-so" in-

structors have had involves the course subject-matter presented in the FIRCs. FIRC providers in the past have had their hands pretty tightly tied by Advisory Circular (AC) 61-83E which defines, in great detail, what they can and cannot present. Much of what is required is pretty basic. In its original inception in 1965, the FIRC was meant to accomplish just what its name implied—to refresh instructors in the basics and keep their fundamental knowledge base sharp. The idea of the AC offering guidance toward this end was a good one: standardization. It's important that there be some kind of uniformity in what is being pre-





*Gerry Fairbairn, an AOPA FIRC instructor addressing a group of flight instructor renewal candidates.*

sented to flight instructors and the AC provides that guidance. In furtherance of that goal, 13 of the 16 required course hours of the FIRC must be devoted to 15 Core and Special Emphasis topics that include such things as aerodynamics, Federal aviation regulations, practical test standards, fundamentals of instruction, weather, etc. While not exactly "Private-Pilot 101," it is still pretty basic stuff. The truth is, frankly, we all would like to think that most flight instructors, whether or not they're current, pretty much know that thrust equals drag, and that Class B airspace is not Class E airspace—even if they do rhyme.

The latest version of the AC was written in 2001, and in many respects carried on the "tradition" of many prior iterations of the guidance that came before it. However, since then, changes in general aviation have been accelerating at a pace that hasn't been seen in 60 years. Sport Pilot, FITS (FAA/Industry Training Standards), IACRA (Integrated Airman Certification and/or Rating Application), the Pilot Proficiency Program, TSA (Transportation Security Administration), VLJ (Very Light Jets) are but a few of the dynamic changes that have appeared or evolved in the six years since that last AC was written and will

directly affect how flight instructors do their jobs.

Clearly, as they say, times are a'changing. The problem with the current AC in today's dynamic flight environment is its rigidity and emphasis on fundamental basics. After presenting all of the AC-required 15 Core and Special Emphasis topics, a typical FIRC provider is left with only three hours to present timely and geographically germane material or to cover information about the latest and greatest technology—certainly not nearly enough time to fully cover the new advances in technology and technique mentioned above.

The FAA is very aware of the limitations and constraints of the current version of the AC and is actively rewriting it based on a new philosophy. That new philosophy is more in tune with that of the professional medical doctor attending a conference. Professional doctors do not attend conferences to relearn basic anatomy or biology. It's assumed that they already know this. Instead, they attend to learn about the latest techniques and technology in their fields. So, rather than a rehash of what a flight instructor is reasonably expected to already know, the intent of the new-and-improved FIRCs will be to emphasize new and ever changing topics. The minimum 16 hours of classroom/training time will be retained. However, the plan is to allow much more flexibility to the FIRC provider in the new version F of the AC, allowing them to decide what the most important topic of the day is and to allow them to decide for themselves how much, or how little, time to spend on it. There will also still be 15 core topics, but they can be incorporated into their Training Course Outline (TCO) however they think best. This means that, for example, some core topics can be combined into a single session provided that inclusion of the required topics is clearly identified. The plan is to remove any individual core module time constraints, although a minimum of 30 minutes each will be recommended, totaling 7.5 hours, whereas the old AC explicitly required a minimum 13 of the 16





hours be devoted to Core and Special Emphasis topics. This new freedom is expected to allow significantly more time to devote to topics that are more in tune with what is happening in the field at that moment.

What's happening to those old Core and Special Emphasis topics? If approved, they will all, every one of them, be relegated to the Recommended Electives Appendix of the new AC, where they will join approximately 25 other recommended topics that, if selected by the FIRC provider in their TCO, will automatically be approved to be used in conjunction with the 15 new Core topics. The provider will, nevertheless, be able to submit proposals to cover other topics, if they wish, and they will be examined by the FAA on a case-by-case basis. If they exhibit merit and relevance, then they too will be approved. The point here is just that the FAA needs to be informed of what's being covered in a particular FIRC presentation.

Just what are these new Core topics? ("Special Emphasis," by the way, is going away.) We can't list them all here as the new AC is still not fully approved, but they certainly are expected to include those items listed earlier, such as the Sport Pilot. Many consider the Sport Pilot certification to be one of the most significant changes to the airman certification structure to have occurred in over 50 years. Manufacturers are getting on board with a multitude of new aircraft, and flight instructors are going to be asked for information and possibly training for this new certificate. The instructor must be made aware of the requirements for and the privileges and limitations of the certificate, particularly the medical requirements.

Use of the Integrated Airman Certification and/or Rating Application (IACRA) is expected to become the certification application method of choice in the near future. It will be critically important that the instructor is well versed in the use of this new Internet-based form of FAA Form 8710-1 submission.

The FAA/Industry Training Standards (FITS) model of training is be-

coming widespread throughout the flight training industry, and flight instructors should be familiar with its basic tenets and be able to apply them in their every-day training, particularly when training in Technically Advanced Aircraft (TAA), which is another area where flight training is changing. "Glass Cockpit" aircraft are becoming the norm for virtually all new light general aviation aircraft being manufactured today. Many manufacturers have stopped producing "round-gauge" aircraft altogether, and certain issues universal to all of the brands of TAA aircraft should be considered by instructors when training in such aircraft. It's only a matter of time before any given instructor will be faced with one of these things. They need to at least know what one looks like.

Post 9/11 airspace is a new issue. Information about concepts entirely new to many GA pilots, such as the Washington, D.C., FRZ (Flight Restricted Zone) and ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone), must be fully understood by instructors before they can effectively transfer that knowledge to their students. "Floating" TFRs (Temporary Flight Restrictions), particularly during election years, are a significant problem to pilots. New regulations regarding power plants and stadiums are now in place. And pilots had better know proper intercept procedures—just in case.

The old Aviation Safety Program has undergone a major overhaul. Now it's the FAA Safety Team (FAASTeam). While the goals are the same (aviation safety), the approach has been revamped and improved. Instructors need to know how to effectively use the resources now available to them through the FAASTeam program in their own programs of training.

While the fundamentals of instruction will remain as an elective, Effective Teaching is a new planned core topic which will strive to emphasize, on a more personal and practical level, how to actually communicate and work with pilots-in-training. For example, the course should bring up such potential issues as young (sometimes

very young) instructors teaching older clients who might be highly successful in their own fields, learning how to perceive and deal with frustration with the learning process both for the student pilot and the instructor, and how the learning process can be affected by their demeanor and dress.

GPS navigation has become a common tool for cross-country flying. Even the Piper *Cub* pilot can be seen pulling a Garmin 395 color moving map GPS out of her pocket before she lights up the engine. Instructors need to be aware of the pitfalls of teaching in aircraft with advanced avionics, be able to recognize and teach when GPS use is and is not appropriate, and to be able to recognize when a student is becoming over-dependent on it. Safe use of the GPS is dependent upon accurate and up-to-date data. Where and how those data are acquired and verified should be taught to all pilots who use the GPS system.

Runway incursions and takeoffs/landings continue to present problems and how to minimize those events will continue to occupy the training spotlight. Risk intervention strategies and safety trends in GA have been covered in the past and will also continue to be topics of interest.

Another significant planned change in the FIRC content will be the option to cover the topic of "Business Practices" for flight instructors. The old Version E of the AC explicitly forbids coverage of that topic. Opinions have changed over time and it is now felt that an instructor who better understands the business end of being a flight instructor, be they self-employed or working for a school, will be more effective in their ability to do their jobs.

No longer will it be necessary for a FIRC provider to print out and physically submit the (currently) required two complete copies of everything to the FAA for approval. In the current procedure, the FIRC provider submits duplicate paper copies of their TCOs and any supporting documentation via some form of physical delivery. The FAA then reviews it all, stamps each page "approved..." and returns





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AOPA FIRC instructor Gerry Fairbairn discusses what to look for on the CFI certificate.

one copy back to the provider, again via physical delivery. And woe be unto the provider who makes a mistake! For then the TCO is rejected, returned to the provider with a letter of disapproval and (possibly) instructions on how to correct it, and the process starts all over again. That's all changing. In compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act, and to simply make life easier for all involved, in the future all material is going to be submitted and approved in electronic format. The FIRC provider will submit their TCOs via electronic mail along with scanned images of any supporting material that does not easily lend itself to conventional document formats. The FAA reviews the material and, if there's a problem, calls the provider on the telephone to discuss the problem. The provider then corrects the error and resubmits, again via electronic mail. Upon final acceptance, the FAA sends a letter of approval via return electronic mail. The entire process now could typically take less than a week instead of multiple

weeks, more typical of the past.

There's a new FIRC Web site, <<http://www.faa.gov/pilots/training/firc>>, where all of the latest information on FIRCs will be available, including a FIRC newsletter, *FIRC FACTS*. The new, more dynamic AC version F is not expected to actually include the Core Topics or Recommended Electives. Instead, they will be in appendices located on that Web site so that they can be changed and updated as required. FIRC providers will be required to periodically check the Web site for the latest information on FIRCs and related regulatory issues. There will also be links to resources where providers can download documents, PowerPoint® presentations, and videos that they think may be useful in their programs.

Some of the changes identified here have already been implemented. Others will be put in place when the approval process for the AC is formally completed within the FAA, expected sometime later this year. The bottom line here is that it is the FAA's intent to

make the FIRC more than just a ritual that is practiced every two years by the flight instructor. Instead, it is the hope that the flight instructor will come to look forward to the FIRC as a dynamic means of "getting up to speed" on the latest and greatest of what's happening in the world that has direct effect on his or her field. No longer should it be perceived as a test of endurance as it might have been by some. Doctors all over the world voluntarily and eagerly attend their conferences so that they can be safer, more effective, and thus, ultimately, more profitable, in their fields. It is the hope of the FAA that the flight instructor will treat the FIRC with equal enthusiasm in the future.



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