STUDENTS CLIMB INTO 727 COCKPIT

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It’s a bit musty inside the 727 parked near a row of storage sheds at Riverside Municipal Airport. Part of the stale smell may be because the plane has been sitting dormant for more than 2½ years. Part of it may be the pigeons that have taken roost in the housings of the unused jet engines.

The former Federal Express plane is the property of California Baptist University and is one of the tools being used as part of the school’s aviation program. But until mid-October, students had never had a chance to wander through its empty fuselage or sit in the instrument-lined cockpit.

That’s because the inaugural class had not yet reached this advanced part of their training. All of them have their private pilot licenses. Some are instrument rated on multi-engine planes. But their experience has been in small propeller driven craft, not a large jet like the 727.

“This is the first time we’ve actually used it,” said Laura Walker, 20, of Glendora. “The controls are completely different. It’s cool to see it hands-on.”

In the cockpit, Walker sat with a handful of other students and watched while instructor Creighton Goodman explained the plane’s fuel systems. Goodman, a major in the Air Force Reserve, flies KC-135 refueling tankers. Being able to give students time at the controls of a large plane, he said, is not only beneficial but a unique part of CBU’s program.

There are no plans for the 727 to leave the ground. Goodman said it is still fully functional and he

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plans to fire the engines up from time to time as part of his instruction. But its function is as a classroom prop, one that will familiarize students with the mechanics of a commercial plane and, perhaps, help them get a job.

Some of the major airlines include questions about large aircraft on tests for prospective pilots.

“That’s where the (727) comes into play,” Goodman said. “The students here can draw it out and explain how a turbo fan engine works.”

Daniel Prather is the director of the university’s aviation science program. He said CBU looked at the reported shortage of airline pilots a few years ago and saw it as an opportunity.

Prather, a pilot and former airport director was teaching at Middleton State University in Tennessee before coming to CBU. Not long after arriving in Riverside, he got wind of a program through which Fed Ex donates some of its old planes. In early 2013, the 727 touched down at the Riverside airport.

“We have really grown significantly since the 727 arrived,” Prather said. “It was really integral in recruiting students into the program. Any pilot that goes in or out of Riverside airport is going to see it.”

Students have been eager to use it, he said.

“This semester is our first opportunity to expose them to the 727,” he said. “Now they’re able to go out and actually flip switches.” The students, he said, are “just now at a point where they’re taking an aircraft systems class, where they’re learning fuel systems, electronic systems, avionics.”

Prather said there are only a few programs on the west coast that offer such training. The only others he knows about are at Cal State San Jose and San Diego Christian College.

Besides the 727, the program owns eleven smaller planes including three dual-prop Beechcraft Duchess planes and eight single-engine Cessnas. The students rent the planes for training and to build up their flying hours.

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