

Airborne Astronomy: Launching Astronomers into the Stratosphere

Dan Lester, University of Texas, Next-Gen Suborbital Researchers Conference

Sending scientists into the sky to do what could otherwise only be done from space has a long and productive history in NASA's airborne astronomy program. For several decades, this program has provided hands-on real-time experience to space scientists and provided a fertile training ground for new generations of space science instrumentalists, as well as a test-bed for astronomical instrument technologies that would later be used in space. In addition, it has been a successful asset in STEM educational outreach. All of these functions are key for next generation suborbital work and the expeditionary spirit that it entails. Lessons from the LearJet Observatory (LJO), the Kuiper Airborne Observatory (KAO), and the Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA), which is just coming on line, may well pertain to these new directions in suborbital science and technology that would put humans where the action is.