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## United Express Strategic Audit

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# **United Express Strategic Audit**

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of  
University Honors Program Requirements  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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## **Abstract**

United Express is the regional brand of United Airlines, a worldwide airline from the United States. United Express provides excellent domestic and international service from smaller airports to United Airlines hubs. With a volatile and solid industry of vast competition and operational styles, this report seeks to give an industry analysis of the regional airline industry with relation to United Express' position. It surveys the industry using a PESTLE analysis along with Michael E. Porter's Five Competitive Forces Model. United Express has many resources and competitive advantages which headline the advantages it boasts to be a regional airline industry leader. Finally, an examination of strategy and objectives will give way to corporate recommendation that can help propel United Express.

Keywords: US Government, hubs, point-to-point, regional carrier, regional airline, regional branch, fleet, partnership, United Airlines, United Express, trends

## **History of United Express**

United Airlines is the fourth-largest US commercial airline. It was founded in conjunction with its future merged enterprise, Continental Airlines, in the 1930s. United Express is the regional branch of United Airlines. United Express was founded in 1985, during the era of US Airline deregulation. Customer coverage began flourishing. Direct competitors include Delta Air Lines and American Airlines each having Delta Connection and American Eagle as their respective regional branches. Regional branches are divisions of airlines that operate short and medium-distance flights from small cities to hubs. According to the Regional Airline Association (2023), “regional airlines operate 43% of scheduled passenger flights and provide the only source of scheduled air service to nearly two-thirds of the nation’s airports”. Per the agreements to operate the short-distance flights, United Express outfits the contracted airlines’ planes with its livery. As of 2023, United Express has contracts with Air Wisconsin, CommuteAir, GoJet Airlines, Mesa Airlines, Republic Airways, and SkyWest (United Express Partners, n.d.). Mutual benefit is attained for branding and infrastructural input from United Airlines along with the supply of short-distance flights from the regional airlines. United Express provides service to all mainland US United hub airports that are Chicago-O’Hare, Denver, Guam, Houston-Intercontinental, Los Angeles, Newark, San Francisco, and Washington-Dulles. United Express customers can enjoy the same (when available) amenities, services, and MileagePlus benefits expected from a United Airlines flight.

## **PESTLE Analysis**

A PESTLE Analysis will be conducted regarding the external environment of United Express. Six environmental categories are considered with how they might benefit the course of United Express and the overall airline industry. It allows for considerations that help executive

managers make decisions amongst Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental factors in the industry (CPID, n.d.).

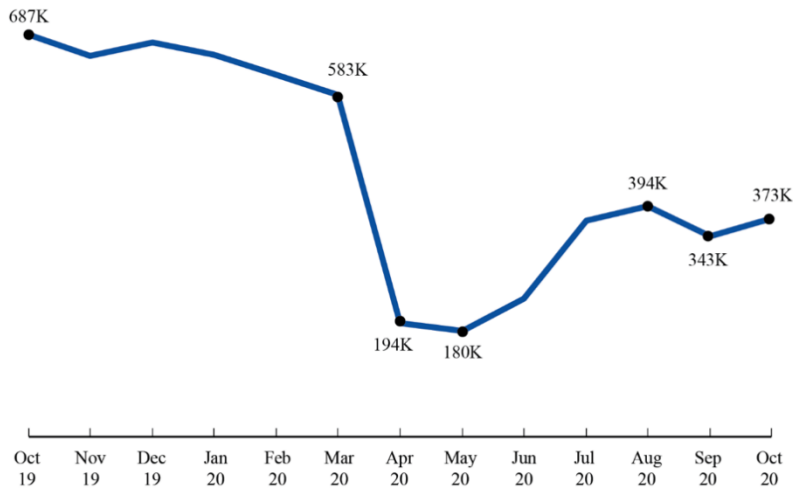
### *Political*

As aforementioned, the United States Government (1978) passed the Airline Deregulation Act in 1978. The act freed the regulatory constraints originally imposed by states and the federal government to rule competitive behaviours. Vertical integration commenced with major airlines creating contracts with regional airlines to use their brandings and enjoy their services. This expansion of coverage was undertaken by Northwest, Continental, United, American, and most successful national airlines. From ramping up operations of the hub-spoke model, the deregulation caused the smaller airports' service to be less of a priority. The Essential Air Service (EAS) was codified with the Airline Deregulation Act to guarantee service for the smaller airports through subsidies on a per-seat basis (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Criteria also include that the regional airport be no less than 210 miles from the nearest medium-large hub airport. United Express is not the only regional branch who gets to fly EAS routes. Additional airlines include Delta Connection, American Eagle, and other regional airlines not linked to the Big Three. For example, United Express provides EAS for Houghton/Hancock Airport (CMX) in Hancock, MI. However, Contour Air (a private regional airline) provides EAS for Cape Girardeau Airport (CGI) because the US Government assigned Contour to serve Cape Girardeau and the surrounding areas (Capital City Aviation Group, n.d.).

### *Economic*

Many points are in flux with the economic aspect of the PESTLE Analysis. COVID-19 brought many operations for United and other global airlines to a halt.

U.S. Airlines Operated Domestic Flights  
 Operated = Scheduled Minus Canceled  
 Marketing Network Carriers and Branded Code-Share Partners



From <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.transportation.gov%2Fbriefing-room%2Fair-travel-consumer-report-october-2020-numbers&psig=AOvVaw2HeHLzNAVcJotrUhe1jv&ust=1678834883474000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAwQjRxqFwoTCPDzhmB2v0CFQAAAAAAdAAAAABAH>

United needed to adapt to the ridership drop after the beginning of 2020. During the mid-March 2020 closures, a sharp decrease in customers caused many airlines to reduce their routes. Many had been cut between decreasing high-volume routes and sometimes cutting unprofitable short-distance United Express flights. Throughout the second half of 2020, United implemented various safety precautions to normalise flying during a pandemic. These precautions included mask-wearing, vaccination requirements, and cleaning the plane inside-out (United Airlines, n.d.). The latter has been the only significant part maintained since COVID has waned. Passengers began to take to the skies again in the last 12 months, opting United to reextend its routes again.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), airline pilots had a median income of \$202,180 and a job outlook of 6%. This job outlook growth is moderate and consistent with the national average. However, the job outlook for flight attendants is staggeringly higher with a 21% rate. The median salary for flight attendants is \$61,640. United has seen this growth of both passengers and available labour, announcing that the company will hire 15,000 new

employees and order 100 Boeing 787 widebody planes in 2023 (Avalos, 2022). United should be wary of these decisions being made as another recession looms. The economy is perhaps in a unique state. Large technological companies have applied hiring freezes and lay-offs, but there is record-*low* unemployment. The Federal Reserve has decided to raise the interest rate to combat stubborn inflation (Martichoux, 2023). Furthermore, United employees have bargaining power in their affairs by the support of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (Teamsters, 2023).

### *Social*

United is facing a typical political environment and unprecedented economic environment. What about the social force? In wake of the 2008-2009 Sub-mortgage Loan Crisis, there has been a declining birth rate in the US amongst the other developed countries in the world. The US has a birth rate of 1.6 per woman as of 2020, compared to 2.1 in 2000 (The World Bank, n.d.). A spectrum of spending habits has been found between Baby Boomers and Generation Z. The majority of Baby Boomers are retiring soon, hence many of them may be travelling. However, spending trends suggest that they have not prioritised travelling/experiences over physical objects (Peacock, n.d.). Subsequent generations (those born after 1964) have been found to prioritise those travelling experiences over tangible objects (NCR Corporation, n.d.). Much like the uncertain economic outlook United has decided to push forth expanding in, the social outlook of a plateauing developed population choosing to travel more is conflicting. United Express is as affected as is the rest of the airline industry by these changes due to the economy that connects the rural and urban economies together.

United Airlines is known for its strong Global Community Engagement (United Airlines, n.d.). The first facet is Disaster Relief, partnering with non-profits and governments to transport supplies in areas affected by disasters. The second facet is Environmental Sustainability

supported by United's Environmental Commitment (United Airlines, n.d.). The third is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for supporting marginalised groups. The last is the investment in Education, providing exploratory opportunities to K-12 students and a robust internship program for university students.

### *Technological*

Fleets across all airlines have become more efficient in the perspective of fuel-costs (Dess et al., p. 37). This is both for a cost and sustainability effort. United Airlines has dwindled its quad-engine aircraft for dual-engine ones. This comes at the heels of retiring the Boeing 747, older 737 models, and the extant Airbus planes. The United Express Fleet has the Bombardier CRJ Series, EMB 145, and EMB 170/175 – all regional narrow-body airplanes (United Airlines, n.d.). The average age of the fleet is 13.8 years, on par with the rest of the Big Four airlines (Planespotters.net, n.d.).

With its Community Global Engagement, United has decided to push its fleet into the electric plane market. Many other airlines are doing the same. The Heart ES-30 is a turboprop plane developed by Heart Aerospace that runs entirely on electricity. The planes will have test runs in the next few years flying ranges of 200 miles or less, the optimal distance regional airports are to United hubs to fly United Express. By 2030, United envisages its 2021-ordered planes from Heart as flying on high-volume routes such as ORD (Chicago-O'Hare) to DEN (Denver International) and more (Tomorrow's World Today, 2022).

### *Legal*

All airlines have much to answer for regarding legal questions. Nearly every part of their operations is supported by legal services. Pilots are supported by liability waivers that function as insurance in case any sort of issue arises with the planes' ability to fly safely and other



extraneous uncontrollable circumstances (Cane et Dore, 2020). Baggage is protected by legal safeguards. For domestic travel, most US airlines will reimburse travelers for the value of their bag of \$3,800 or less (as of March 2023) if it is lost while in the hands of any service. Regarding international law, the US airlines must abide to a different repayment policy if there is baggage lost in other countries outside of North America (United Airlines, n.d.). Ground crew and employees are protected by the common law (United Airlines, n.d.).

A particularly frustrating event occurred on April 9, 2017. United Express Flight 3411 from ORD to SDF (Louisville) was about to leave but needed United crew to be transported. When passengers refused to give up their seat, United crew decided to bring on Chicago's Department of Aviation Police Force who forcibly removed Dr. David Dao. He suffered head injuries, including a concussion. The Chicago Department of Aviation was promptly decertified from conducting airport security and handling similar matters (Goudie, 2017). United had to pay Dao an undisclosed settlement and change its policies regarding flight bumps (McCarthy, 2017). This has paved the way for better boundaries set for how airlines conduct themselves with passengers.

### *Environmental*

In the recent years, airlines are facing scrutiny for creating a great portion of global greenhouse emissions. A study in 2020 concluded that the overall airline industry makes up 2.5% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Further impact measured shows that non-CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from airlines make up 3.5% of the impact of global warming (Ritchie et Roser, 2017). According to the World Economic Forum (2019), one out of seven people would choose not to fly because of climate change (Broom). Technology to significantly reduce subsonic airplanes is in its infancy. However, each major commercial/passenger airline in the US has made an environmental

commitment to hit net-zero emissions by a certain year (Delta Air Lines, n.d.) (American Airlines, n.d.) (United Airlines, n.d.) (Southwest Airlines, n.d.).

### **Porter's Five Forces Model**

Professor at Harvard Business School, Michael E. Porter has published a comprehensive model for distinguishing various forces in the competitive sphere that go *beyond* direct competitors. The five forces include the forces of Competitors in the Industry, New Entrants, Substitutes, Bargaining Power of Suppliers, and Bargaining Power of Buyers within a particular industry. Porter himself has remarked about the uniqueness of the airline industry (Stewart, 2008).

#### *Competition in the Industry*

United Express has two direct competitors who emulate similar features. Delta Connection is the regional branch of Delta Airlines, providing regional support to its major hubs Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles (UA Hub), MSP, JFK, LaGuardia, Salt Lake City, Seattle, and Raleigh-Durham (Delta Air Lines, n.d.). American Eagle is the regional branch of American Airlines, providing regional support to its major hubs Charlotte, Chicago-O'Hare (UA Hub), DFW, Los Angeles (UA Hub), Miami, JFK, LaGuardia, Philadelphia, Phoenix-Sky Harbor, and Washington-National (American Airlines, n.d.). Additionally, per the aforementioned information about rotating regional airlines, all three compete against each other for the regional airlines' contracts. Regional airlines are constantly in flux with contracting their fleet and support to the Top 3 US airlines. For example, Air Wisconsin will be moving from United Express to American Eagle in April 2023, per a new contract (Air Wisconsin, n.d.). Southwest Airlines has emerged as the third-largest US carrier (ahead of United), but using a different strategy compared to Delta, American, and United. Southwest uses a point-to-point system, not relying on hubs and having

more frequent flights and shorter AOG times. This lowers costs from an operational standpoint. Furthermore, Southwest does not have first class and various offers including two free checked bags per passenger. Southwest offers marginally cheaper tickets than the other three major airlines, which has caused it to be the largest US airline providing domestic service (Southwest Airlines, n.d.).

### *New Entrants*

Going back to the point-to-point system, Southwest has re-engineered an older model of airport operations that do away with the hub-spoke model. JetBlue is a similar airline that provides stronger coastal support, even acting as a regional airline for remote locations such as Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Long Island airports, and locations where the Big Four do not provide service to. JetBlue has expanded into transatlantic travel to London/Paris routes and further expansion into the Midwest (JetBlue, n.d.). Other budget airlines that have rejected using hubs include Spirit, Allegiant, and Frontier deeming themselves "ultra-low cost" by charging various amenities such as boarding pass prints, carry-on baggage, snacks, and more (Weiss, 2021). Many have criticised these airlines for gross negligence and DOT (n.d.) audits regarding deceptive policies that "cut corners". New airlines are being promoted for their forward-thinking behaviour, including Breeze Airways (founded by the same creator of JetBlue, David Neeleman) finding a niche role in more-specific point-to-point routes (Breeze Airways, n.d.).

### *Threat of Substitutes*

While air travel has been recovering in the last 24 months, substitutes that had presented themselves as more convenient to air travel during COVID have stabilised (Godoy, 2020).

Driving can pose as an easier alternative in general, skipping lines and coordination to get to airports. Furthermore (unless there is an accident involved), cars are nimble enough to get

around delays and move forward to the destination. According to Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2022), 2022 was the worst year for delayed flights in eight years. Indirect issues that contribute to delays is the combination of poor staffing from the pandemic and increased travel coming out of the pandemic (French).

An unexpected substitute to air travel comes from the pandemic. Video conferencing had initially been a patch to the interruptions made by travel advisories. It rendered talking to people face-to-face an option again and less of a personal tool from that of FaceTime and Skype. Companies needed to rethink their entire businesses on the online and video-conferencing platform. By consequence, air travel went down and the choice for videoconferencing as a mainstay of business/school communication (Centre for Aviation, 2021).

### *Bargaining Power of Suppliers*

Three special factors regarding suppliers' bargaining power directly affect regional airlines.

Forward integration can occur with the freedom of regional airlines revolving between the regional branches of United Express, Delta Connection, and American Eagle. United Express can have a strong network of regional airlines that must be cultivated and nurtured if this segment of United Airlines wants to flourish. Take Air Wisconsin for an example. If Air Wisconsin provided service to the Upper Midwest for United Express, SkyWest and Republic Airways among other regional airlines will have to pick up the slack. This will cause a slack of service from the regional airlines being spread thinner and hence dedicated to other airlines' regional branches.

The second force is the air crew unions. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, among many other unions have

always played a role with how regional airlines treat their employees. Pilot strikes that affected Alaska Airlines brought its service to a halt. This event can cause United and its subsidiaries to suffer more immense losses due to its larger size (Kakade, 2022).

Lastly, the suppliers of aircraft compose the infrastructure of airlines. Airlines need planes in all its segments to carry out operations. Regional airlines use a healthy mix of Bombardier and Embraer jets for regional operations. Its costs are lower from buying smaller parts for the narrow-body jets at Airbus (current owner of Bombardier) and Embraer. United has historically been connected the strongest with Boeing. UA decided to buy Airbus A320 products in the 1990s for its failed budget segment Ted (Simple Flying, 2022). These have been the only significant orders from Airbus, while United has strengthened its ties with Boeing, ordering hundreds of the 737-MAX, 767, 777, and 787 models. United expects to retire its A320 models (A320 & A319) in the coming years, unlike Delta and American who have submitted more orders for the Airbus models beyond the meagre A320 family (Simple Flying, 2022). United must keep up its strong ties with Boeing as Boeing is posed to be United's sole supplier which will give them intense bargaining power for orders (contract negotiations, etc.) and part supplying.

#### *Bargaining Power of Buyers*

The competitors in the industry, substitutes, and new entrants are all at the buyers' disposal. The airline industry has a crisp correlation between the choices buyers make. A passenger either flies or does not. Airlines benefit when passengers use their services based on cost and convenience. They suffer when the service is neglected and seldom used.

Regional branches have experimented with how passengers interact with their new routes. Given the market research, the company makes an educated decision to create service to a

region of the country unserved. This is typically need-based through the EAS, but occasionally will be discretionary. For example, United Express had service to Chicago-O'Hare from Topeka Regional Airport (FOE). It seemed like a good choice for the airline as the University of Kansas sports teams use the airport frequently. Moreover, it would be a route for a population nearing 300,000 in eastern Kansas that would not need to travel over an hour to Kansas City International Airport. However, the demand for the FOE-ORD route was pitiful and caused United Express to cancel it in 2014 (Van Dyke, 2013). On the flip side, Kansas City International Airport has promising growth that Southwest Airlines has taken advantage of (Hartle, 2022). Southwest has increased routes due to the increased accessibility in the new terminal used by a region of 2.6 million people. Delta, American, and United can see this potential growth in the new terminal's enplanement increases. Establishing the potential hub as a great and efficient connector for rural airports to global destinations is the goal to a successful hub. Declining passenger numbers can kill routes, stability is the safe route (per Porter), and growth can create immense growth.

### **Strategy and Objectives**

For United (n.d.) as a whole organisation, it aspires to live by the words "Good Leads The Way". It has a high emphasis on employee well-being which catalyses customer well-being. The three pillars that uphold the United way are building a more sustainable airline, diversifying the flight deck, and transforming the flight experience. United's main sector is focused on optimising the first and third pillars while making sure United Express' partners are investing in the new United Aviate Academy and giving a positive working environment.

From the customer's perspective, United (Express) uses a broad differentiation strategy. (Dess et al., p. 145) It has a large customer base with a large range of seating options. Economy

passengers can enjoy free carry-on baggage, movies/entertainment/free messaging, and snacks. For a slightly lower cost, Basic Economy has the same amenities as Economy. However, passengers must pay for any carry-on baggage, board in the last group, and have a non-refundable ticket. For a slightly higher cost, passengers who opt for Economy Plus (premium economy) get guaranteed power at their seat and MileagePlus Premier Platinum status points. There is of course a much larger set of amenities associated with United First: two free checked bags, Premier Access (premium line for security), and complementary meals/alcoholic beverages. Lastly, United Polaris is the highest level of business class: premium bedding, access to Polaris Clubs, and all else offered from United First (United Airlines, n.d.).

### **Competitive Advantages**

Per the Community Global Engagement Initiative, United has set a Global Citizenship Milestone Program to help curtail the effects of carbon emissions. United CEO, Scott Kirby has called for the entire United corporation to be carbon-neutral by 2050 through the corporation itself and cross-industry collaboration. Since 2019, United has created partnerships with various green-energy groups who venture with alternative fuels, batteries, solar power, hydrogen power, and much more that will be in development during the coming years (United Airlines, n.d.). [Refer to the Technology section for more insight for the battery-powered planes from Heart Aerospace, United's first successful entry into alternative fuels.] Small-volume flights from United Express will have priority in testing routes that use these electricity-powered planes.

United has several advantages based on the locales it serves. United (Express) serves its hubs Chicago-O'Hare, Denver, Guam, Houston-Intercontinental, Newark, San Francisco, and Washington-Dulles the most out of any airline. Los Angeles has stiff competition with all major US airlines operating a hub or focus city at LAX (United Airlines, n.d.). Qualifying United

customers have access to all United Clubs. Passengers can sit back and enjoy the 33 United Clubs in non-hub airports such as Philadelphia (American) or Seattle (Delta/Alaska). Compared to other US airlines that only have clubs at their hubs (or no clubs altogether), these clubs are not exclusive to hubs with United. International destinations including Tokyo-Narita and London have United Clubs (United Airlines, n.d.).

## **Resources**

As mentioned, United Express serves as an umbrella for its contracted regional airlines. [See History of United Express] Its airlines provide service to all United hubs and can qualify for technical operations support. The United Technical Operations division is headquartered in San Francisco, containing full MRO (n.d.) support for “engines, line maintenance, Global Emergency Maintenance, landing gear, parts loans, component maintenance and engineering services” (United Technical Operations, n.d.). Over 30 worldwide locations provide base service to aircraft and have mobile crews who can perform non-scheduled maintenance in remote locations (United Technical Operations, n.d.). The entire ticketing and HR-relation operations stem from the Willis Tower headquarters in Chicago. Nearly all affairs for ensuring strong organisational and employment transitions between United and United Express are conducted in the Chicago headquarters (Foursquare Labs, Inc.; n.d.). Though United has a large presence for in-flight meals using outsourced catering, United Express typically does not serve meals on its flights (Ahlgren, 2022). United has a 500-mile requirement to serve snacks for purchase, 300-mile requirement for alcoholic beverages, and 1,500-mile requirement for meals. There is no limit for non-alcoholic beverages (United Airlines, n.d.). The middle 50% of United Express flights are between 200 and 600 miles, hence many do not have snacks. United’s outsourced catering



partners provide catering service to all Express airlines. United Express ticketing and logistics with baggage is managed through United's website.

### **Future Challenges and Growth Opportunities**

While United Express was founded closer today than when United Airlines was founded (1926), it has been able to pick up the pieces of routes formerly tended by smaller stand-alone airlines. In the Mature Stage, Dess et al (p. 161) say that "it's no longer possible to 'grow around' the competition... [sic] rivalry among existing rivals intensifies because of fierce price competition at the same time." Gone are the days of Ozark Air Lines, TWA, US Airways, Northwest Airlines, Continental Airlines, and so on. Services that United Express institutes are meant to spur stability. It is emphasising process-based excellence by providing stable and stellar service on all their long-standing routes that connect smaller airports to the many United hubs. Defending market share is key, especially in the wake of losing Air Wisconsin. In 2023, United has been able to secure a strong contract with Mesa Airlines to replace the void left from Air Wisconsin (Mesa Air Group). United Express can provide the same differentiation of services that its parent provides: United First, Premier Access, United Clubs, MileagePlus, and a range of available seats. The United Express seats can also tap into the cost leadership aspects of United, basic economy allowing passengers on a budget to fly at an affordable price.

How can United Express keep up with the newest trends in aviation while maintaining its strong network of routes? United ought to consider having its own regional airline service that does not outsource to other regional airlines. With the same current planes, this centralised arrangement allows United Express to function without needing to contract routes with regional airlines. United Express can have greater flexibility with selecting routes and avoid another significant loss of routes, like that of Air Wisconsin. United can have better planning that

emphasises clairvoyance and consistent service to hubs. Another strategy can look at curtailing the effects from Breeze Airways and Southwest Airlines. United Express could have more high-demand point-to-point routes that come from smaller airports. The highest-demand routes can be found through market research. Passengers want to deal with the fewest connections as possible which means skipping hubs and getting direct connections. Cleveland gets a high-demand direct United flight to Orlando, two airports who are not United hubs (Cleveland was a United hub at one point). A bad omen would be having smaller airports to lobby for their routes. Topeka came up with the right money at the time to woo United, but the FOE-ORD route proved weak in little time. Finally, United has the potential to be a leader in electronic commercial air service. Its partnership with Heart Aerospace can be successful if it either perfectly caters to its differentiated focus market or serves all types of customers. Smaller airport passengers have the capacity to drive to the closest hub if United Express should choose to use the electrified planes that would run up ticket costs. The (currently) short-range of these planes make for solid alternatives to jet fuel that transport shorter-range routes that United Express operates.

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