

Taking flight with Athens Tech's emerging technology

Technical course offers inside look before offering new program at Walton campus



Stephen Milligan | The Tribune

Droning On

Students from Athens Technical College run some pre-flight checks on their drones as part of the Emerging Technologies Day held at the Walton campus Wednesday, an open house event welcoming the public to witness the new program.

Posted: Saturday, March 25, 2017 12:00 am

One by one, the drones lift from the ground, rising slowly until, in unison, they soar into the sky, glide over the watching crowd in formation, casting shadows on the ground below as they fly high above everyone.

The drone pilots jokingly call it their "Apocalypse Now" moment, as the drones recreate the iconic helicopter flight from the classic war film, needing only the strains of "Ride of the Valkyries" to make the scaled-down simulation complete.

This was just one taste of what is offered in the new emerging technologies program at Athens Technical College, a technical path which features a variety of concepts and career paths, from drone piloting to augmented reality and much in between.

Mark Evans, the program chair for the tech school's emerging technologies department, brought his students from the Athens campus to Monroe Wednesday for the school's Emerging Technologies Day, an open house which allowed the public to swing by and see what the new course offerings would bring to the Walton campus when new classes start in the fall.

It all started with the need for a few pictures. "Our drone course was asked to take video and pictures of all the various Athens Tech campuses for use in promotional material," Evans said. "So we came here today to fly the drones over the school buildings and capture what we need using the drone's cameras. "We thought, while we're here, it'd be great to invite the community out to see what we do."

Visitors gathered at the football field behind the main Walton campus, where the students were doing maintenance on their drones, running them through pre-flight checks and allowing curious onlookers a chance to take the stick and pilot a drone themselves for a minute or two.

Evans said the drone class has been one of his most popular offerings since they began the emerging technologies program at the main Athens campus. "We're always waiting to fly," Evans said. "Outside of jumping in an actual airplane, this brings people closer to that dream than almost anything else."

Evans spoke with prospective students while other visitors enjoyed free hot dogs and soft drinks provided by the school's culinary program. Evans said the day was a great way to entice people to sign up for the first of new emerging technologies classes at the Walton campus this fall. "We'll be really focusing on mobile

programming,” Evans said of his plans for the Walton class. “Students will build their own apps.” Drones and other concepts will come later, especially if the demand seems to be there. “We’re a real flexible program,” Evans said. “And everything we do has a real-world component. We want you to be able to walk into an office or tech start-up and know what you’re doing from day one thanks to what you learn here.”

The students Evans brought with him said the emerging technologies program was just right for them. Adam Smith, of Greensboro, was one of those students. Working on his drone — one of six planned to take footage of the campus when the official flights began — he said he’d learned about much more than just the miniature fliers. “We learn about 3-D design and how to build and program different robots,” Smith said. “It’s real interesting.” Elliott Radcliffe, of Athens, agreed. “I like it because it offers new ways to address problems and encourages us to think around an issue,” he said. “It challenges us to find new solutions on our own.”

Evans has high hopes for the program when it debuts at Monroe next semester. “Monroe will be a tech hub one day based on its proximity to Atlanta,” he said. “This is a great way to get ahead of that now.”

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