

November 2, 2016

Drone program to begin in fall 2017

By Kayla Gaffney

As the world changes and adapts to new emerging technology, the academic world must do so as well. In the fall of 2017, Southeast Missouri State University will be offering a four-year Bachelor of Science degree program in unmanned aircraft systems, more commonly known as drones. The program will teach students how to operate drones in a commercial setting.

Dr. Bradley Deken, chairman for the Department of Polytechnic Studies, said one of the reasons behind creating this program is to give students an opportunity to work with new technology.

"We have to change as the technology changes, we're now getting to the point where we see them more and more in the workplace," Deken said. "So we want to make sure we follow that change and that we're training students for jobs that will be there not necessarily today but four years later when they graduate."

Dr. Indi Braden, professor of agriculture, said companies want job candidates who have experience with drone technology.

"A lot of companies -- especially agriculture companies for crop scouting -- want to use this type of technology because it's new, it's different, but also because they see that it is an opportunity for us to learn more," Braden said.

This program is for anyone wanting to gain expertise with drones and can be used in multiple fields of study, from law enforcement to agriculture to photography.

"They're used all over the place, so this degree isn't training any one specific area, instead we're trying to do it where you can go out into any one of these areas and be successful," Deken said. "That's the idea -- you have somebody that can plan these missions, operate the drones from start to finish."

Braden said drone technology is useful for agriculture because it makes working with crops more efficient and can save money and resources.

"You can measure the light that's hitting the canopy in your plants without having to be out in the middle of a corn field in August...really quickly you can send a UAV or UAS system out to analyze those and save manpower, save dollars, save labor," Braden said.

Deken said one of the tough aspects of getting this program underway was the Federal Aviation Administration's strict regulations for using drones commercially.

"As a person you can go out and buy a drone and almost immediately start flying it, but the second you buy one as a company you have a whole new set of rules and regulations you have to play by," Deken said. "But they've eased up on a lot of that."

Deken said having this drone program will set the university apart from others, considering not many universities offer this kind of program that focuses on the application side of drone education.

"There's not a lot of programs out there on the operation of drones," Deken said. "We're much more interested on how we use them, there weren't many places that were doing that."

Braden said as long as students are benefiting from the program and they're excited about it, so is she.

"I'm very excited about it because it's technology that is being used today, it's technology that we're advancing in and we are training our students when other universities haven't made that jump yet," Braden said.

Deken said drones are not only fun to use but they're also very practical.

"It's just fun," Deken said. "They're incredibly useful objects -- it's a fun little toy, but it's also a useful tool to use as well."

Deken said even though courses won't officially start being taught until next fall, students can declare the major now. There is not a minor being offered in the program, but Deken said the department hopes to create one in the future.