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See Campus Focus

The Center of It All

By Julee Cobb

In the emerging industry of unmanned aircraft systems, or UAS, Andi Meyer is determined to make the Kansas State University Polytechnic Campus a go-to hub for the technology's advancement.

When the UAS program was established in 2007 on the Polytechnic Campus in Salina, Meyer was studying mechanical engineering at Wichita State University. But living and learning in a city dubbed the "Air Capital of the World" made aerospace impossible to avoid, and it was aviation-centered experiences that brought Meyer where she is today as research program manager of the Applied Aviation Research Center at Kansas State Polytechnic.

"While we can't be masters of all, we can cultivate an environment, through a network of experts, that produces solutions to a broad array of complex challenges facing the UAS industry," Meyer said.

Meyer worked part time at Spirit AeroSystems while earning her bachelor's degree. The Wichita-based aviation manufacturer chose her to compete in an international airplane design challenge. Meyer sought advice for the contest from an expert at the National Institute for Aviation Research and was offered a job on the spot. She worked on translational research at the institute, merging aerospace technologies with biomedical engineering. At one point, her assistance was needed on a collaboration between the facility and Kansas State Polytechnic's UAS program. Less than a year later, Meyer was a full-time Wildcat.

Meyer's responsibilities are many, but creating a hub for UAS exploration — design, integration, flight testing and data analysis — is her No. 1 goal. She believes the center can be a principal provider of new ideas and solutions for the unmanned frontier because of the program's talent, experts on the Manhattan campus and K-State's connections with other universities and companies.

"I want Kansas State Polytechnic's UAS research program to be known for pre-eminent problem solving," Meyer said. "Commercial applications are still in the early stages, and the regulatory pathway is murky. Applications of this technology are yet to be discovered and tested. If we can bring together the skills and proficiencies of our staff with the bright minds of various departments in Manhattan and industry stakeholders, this program can be the center of it all."

Meyer's plan is working. The UAS research program has been awarded four projects from the Federal Aviation Administration in the last two years.

Industry collaboration also is thriving. The program teamed up with Precision-Hawk, a drone data and safety company headquartered in Raleigh, North Carolina, to calculate an achievable level of safety for drone pilot response time and choice of action when confronted by a manned intruder. The program also is working with Westar Energy to demonstrate how unmanned aircraft can propel the electric utility industry forward through inspection and maintenance methodologies.

Meyer says the UAS research program is typically involved in multiple large projects at a time while balancing numerous small ones, such as collaborating with the entomology department on the Manhattan campus to provide data collection flights over fields throughout the growing season. This wide variety of projects is all according to plan.

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