Four schools take top honors at 9th annual BEST Robotics competition at UWF

Pensacola, Fla. – Oct. 29, 2016 – Today, the University of West Florida hosted the 9th annual BEST Robotics competition, a project-based STEM program that inspires middle and high school students to pursue careers in engineering, science and technology through participation in a sport-like competition to design, program and build a robot.

This year, the competition expanded by 33 percent to include 23 schools from all five counties in the Emerald Coast region. Students began the seven-week program at a kickoff event on Sept. 17 and have since been preparing their exhibits for Game Day.

The winners of the 9th annual BEST Robotics competition, who will compete at Auburn University for the South's BEST Regional Championship, follow:

- Woodlawn Beach Middle School
- Seaside Neighborhood School
- Gulf Breeze High School
- Pace High School

Sam Russel, manager for the UWF Unmanned Systems Lab and hub director for Emerald Coast BEST Robotics, said it is important to encourage students to participate in competitions because it gives them real-world experience in a setting that teaches competition skills, as well as confidence in areas such as critical thinking, leadership, organization, technical knowledge and problem-solving skills.

"By having a competition like this in a setting that is comparable to a sporting event it shows students that you can be celebrated and cheered for doing things that involve science, math, engineering and technology," Russel said.

Russel said it "means the world" to UWF to have the honor of hosting this competition. The opportunity not only allows the University to showcase its STEM offerings, but also the students to see and feel what it's like to be on a college campus, many for the first time. In turn, it gives university faculty, staff and students the opportunity to mentor the next generation of engineers.

The University partners with industry leaders such as Gulf Power, AT&T and International Paper, as well as organizations like the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers

Northwest Florida Section and the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers Northwest Florida Chapter, in an effort to bridge a pathway between K-12 education, college and industry needs. The ultimate goal is to educate and retain the leaders of tomorrow, bringing innovation to the Gulf Coast. Each competition is based on a real life product-to-market scenario that gives students the opportunity to experience exactly what it takes to start a business. Teams competing for the overall “BEST” award gave marketing presentations to convince potential investors that they were the BEST for the job.

The theme of this year’s competition was “Bet The Farm.” Teams had 42 days to build a robot, documenting the engineering process along the way. The robot was expected to be able to harvest and deliver corn, turn on a water valve to keep the crops hydrated, harvest tomatoes and lettuce and deliver them to a farmer’s market stand, corral pigs and feed them.

Russel is quick to credit his support team of more than 100 volunteers, with special mention of Lt. Commander Brad Gilberston, a naval aviator and instructor pilot who supervised and constructed the two game fields; Tawnya Gilberston, electrical engineering student and assistant hub director who coordinated and trained the schools; Vaughn Nichols, electrical engineer and key account manager for healthcare and universities at Gulf Power; Steven T. Harrell, curriculum specialist for Escambia County School District Workforce Education; and Louis Leduc, UWF student who conducted the testing of the robot kits.

"This is the best STEM educational event I have seen that encourages students to share their knowledge with their team, their school and their community," said Nichols.

“For me, the best part about the competition is the level of excitement from the students when building and competing with those robots. I’m proud to see the drive to succeed and immense courage displayed by those young students,” Russel added. “The chance to be part of a process that positively impacts so many young minds is truly gratifying, and I look forward to repeating it for a long time.”

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