

'Drone Zone' Helps Lift W.F. West Summer STEM Academy

By Justyna Tomtas / jtomtas@chronline.com | Posted: Friday, August 7, 2015 8:09 pm



Zach Zandecki, a junior at W.F. West High School, calibrates a drone during a Summer STEM Academy on Thursday afternoon at Centralia College.

Students faced off in the ultimate robotics competition Friday to complete a week-long Summer STEM Academy hosted by W.F. West High School.

This year's theme was "Drone Zone," and students tested their navigation skills of unmanned aerial vehicles through obstacle courses, while also pitting their robotic programming against opponents for a SumoBots competition.

The robots were programmed to push their opponents out of the ring, gaining points as they proceeded through the competition.

A two-to-one ratio of students to drones and robots provided ample opportunity for students interested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics to test their abilities and get hands-on experience.

Earlier in the week, the 80 students involved in the academy took a field trip to Boeing's Future of Flight Aviation Center, had the opportunity to program their robots, and spent a day at the college participating in a variety of workshops.

"I think that our goals for the week are really to excite kids about STEM and STEM careers and give them a week of learning new skills," Lynn Panther, a W.F. West High School teacher, said. "We want them to have fun while they are doing it and it just kind of opens their minds to some of the possibilities in the field."

During the day at the college Thursday, students explored practical robotics, made deodorant from recycled pop cans or learned more about predator-prey interactions.

All of the workshops were taught by professors of Centralia College.

Karen Goodwin, a professor of chemistry at the college, said the day gives students direct experience with equipment they may not otherwise be able to use. It also gives the college a chance to promote its programs.

Goodwin's workshop had students creating aspirin from willow bark and analyzing it to determine its purity.

"It gives them a taste of what we do in a chemistry lab on a day-to-day basis," she said. It showed students the importance of pursuing jobs in STEM-related fields and provided an opportunity for them to network.

"They know that they are intelligent, and it's important that they see that that's OK," she said.

Goodwin said all students need to come to this realization, but it is especially important for young women to realize a STEM-related field is something that could be rewarding.

The week was dedicated to the science fields, but Goodwin said she also stresses the importance of the humanities and fine arts classes to students, because she believes there is a fine balance between the two.

"What I really want these students to notice is that it's not just about STEM; it's also about being able to think creatively," she said.

"We need people who can speak and write intelligently. We need people who can think creatively about problems and those other classes support us."

This was the third year for the Summer STEM Academy.