



Iowa Lakes launches drone course

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By Seth Boyes - Staff Writer



Dickinson County Emergency Management purchased a drone to assist in critical situations last year. (File photo)

The idea of electronic drones flitting about means different things to different people. For some, the machines are simply the fancy toys of a new generation. For others, they are a new and upcoming tool in the business world. Iowa Lakes Community College has begun offering a course to help students pass the Federal Aviation Administration's drone certification test and modernize their work.

Ron Duer, aviation program coordinator for Iowa Lakes, said the first course was officially offered last fall on the college's Estherville campus. He said the curriculum is offered as a continuing

education course and focuses on the rules and regulations of drone operation more than the actual flying of drones.

"Anymore, the new drones are pretty automated," Duer said.



Ron Duer, aviation program coordinator for Iowa Lakes, shared information with students that would help them become certified by the FAA to pilot drones commercially.

Photo submitted

So far, Duer's students have included representatives of engineering firms, Iowa Farm Bureau, seed companies and even a few students studying environmental studies. Duer said most are signing up for the course to learn about the new technology and how to safely use it in their respective fields.

"We stay on the front end of cutting-edge technology," Jason Bendixen, of Estherville engineering firm Jacobson-Westergard and Associates, said. "I think these classes will get a lot bigger in the future."

Prior to the Iowa Lakes course, local authorities were being trained to operate a drone. Dickinson County Emergency Management hopped on the drone trend in 2017 when it purchased a drone to aid in a variety of emergency situations, including search and rescue operations, fires and natural disasters. It has been deployed several times in the past year.

Duer said drones are also used to inspect bridges or survey building sites by some engineering firms.

"I even heard of them doing it for mine inspections," Duer said, noting the unmanned machines make inspections safer.

The added safety of using the unmanned machines for dangerous tasks extends even to Iowa's expanding wind energy industry. Duer said safety personnel once had a difficult task when checking wind turbine blades — some exceeding 130 feet from tip to tail — for stress damage.

"They used to have to hang a guy on a rope and dangle him off the blade to take photos," Duer said. "Now they can do this in probably less than half the time with a drone."

Drones have also added efficiency to more traditional field work.



Aaron Siskow and Gary Fandel with Iowa Farm Bureau joined Derek Behrens and Jason Bendixen of Jacobson-Westergard and Associates during Iowa Lakes Community College's most recent drone certification course.

Photo submitted

"A lot of farmers are using (drones) on their own farms," Aaron Siskow, of the Iowa Farm Bureau, said. "They're starting to use these technologies in their everyday farming. We see it as something that's more commonplace."

Duer said agricultural producers could potentially use drones to survey their fields periodically.

"I think there's going to be an unlimited number of applications," Duer said.

The college is also working to drum up interest in a drone skills course for those interested in learning more about flying the drones. Jolene Rogers, Iowa Lakes executive director of community and business relations, echoed Duer, saying most students taking the certification course are either already familiar with flying the machines or have access to training software as part of their drone purchase. The college is also working to bring a representative of the FAA to campus to host a speaker panel in the future.