Prepping for robot challenge

FAU students to compete in global robotics competition

BY JESSICA MESZAROS
Staff writer

DANIA BEACH — The zigzag trails sparked in the water as the small boat hit about 2 knots. But the Florida Atlantic University student gripping the remote control was no longer instructing the 36-foot robotic craft where to navigate at the Dania Beach Marina. With the flick of a silver switch with his right thumb, he had set the vessel to do everything on its own.

FAU’s engineering students are among three U.S. teams who will travel to Singapore in October to battle in the Maritime RobotX Challenge, a boat robotics competition offering $100,000 in prize money. The event will require the vessel to hit an obstacle course and, on its own, accomplish several feats: Determine colors, register sounds, navigate around buoys and automatically dock itself, but only after calculating the fastest route.

“An undergraduate degree is a lot of theoretical design, and this really allowed me to apply what I’ve been learning in the classroom,” said Owen Paledinuzz, 22, of Delray Beach, a mechanical engineering student.

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Robots

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“Think the bigger picture overall is getting involved with this early, and getting this in the hands of younger people,” said the head of the project, who is proud his team was selected.

“I think that we [FAU] have a strong history of using unmanned surface vehicles. We’ve been using them for the past seven years,” he said. “I think the winning vessel would demonstrate how cutting edge the research is and how much that research has progressed over the past year or so.”

Marine Advanced Research Inc., a California company, supplied the FAU students with a vessel, and the Office of Naval Research, a federal agency based in Virginia, gave them $25,000 in grant money to assemble and create their unmanned boat.

They received the vessel around December 2018 and have since then built up its self-operating capabilities. So far, the students have tested the boat’s abilities separately and not all at once, like the obstacle course that awaits them.

The FAU students ordered an obstacle course Friday that includes multiple buoys. When it arrives, they will finally see just how well their boat accomplishes the tasks.

“One of the goals is to get students interested and excited about robotics,” said Karl von Ellenrieder, the professor overseeing FAU’s team. “The students learn a lot because they have to venture out into areas that they’ve never seen before.”

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Students from FAU will be competing in the Maritime RobotX Challenge in October where their vessel will have to tackle an obstacle course on its own. A California company supplied the students with the vessel and the Office of Naval Research gave them $25,000 in grant money to assemble and create their unmanned boat.