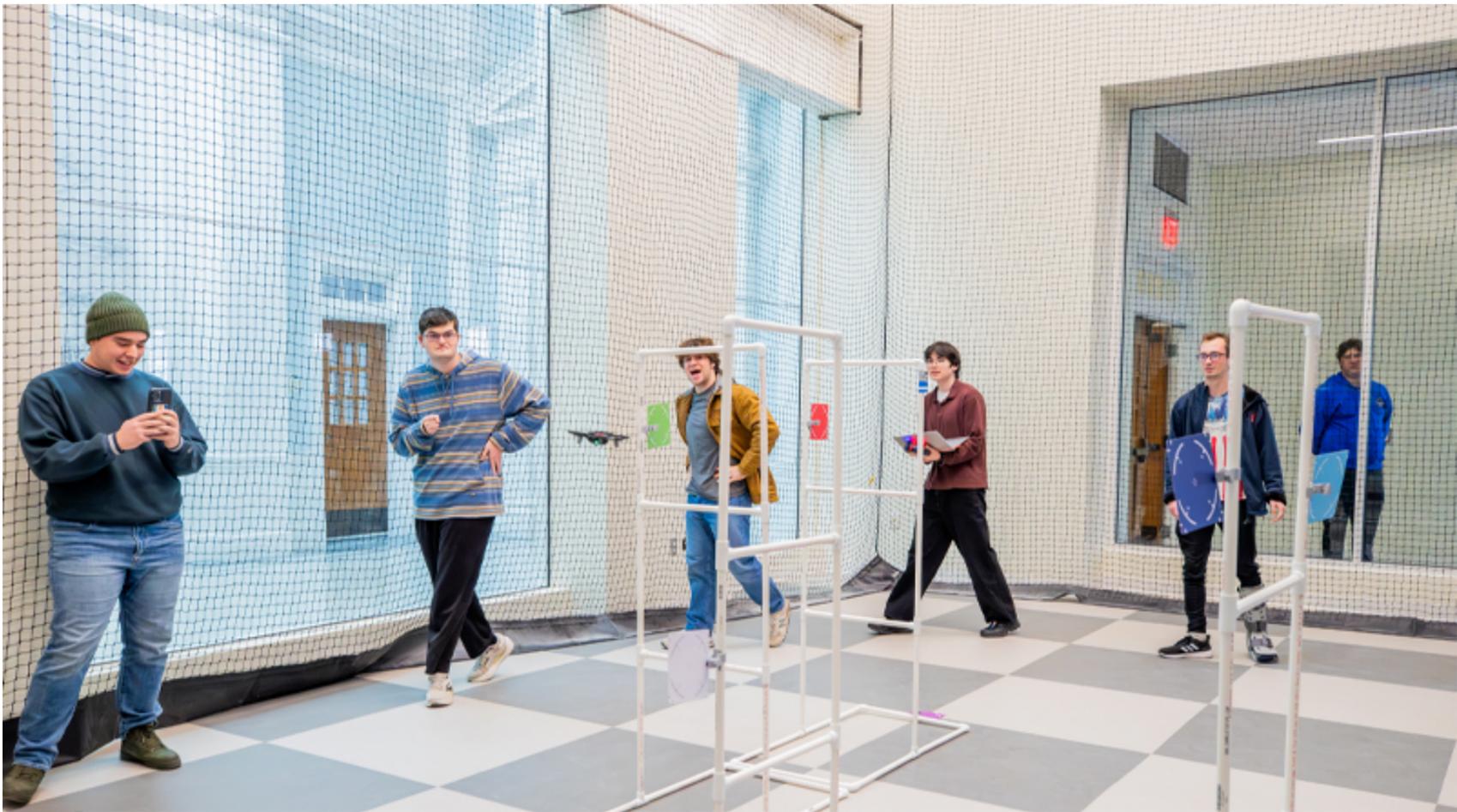


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LAB SPACE

NEW UNCREWED AERIAL VEHICLE CLASS CREATES RUNWAY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | February 19, 2026

The first drone class at Christopher Newport has taken flight at the state-of-the-art two-story lab located in the new [Science and Engineering Research Center](#).

And Captains are abuzz, hoping to add skills and knowledge to their resume and depth to their technology know-how.

"I was really excited when I heard about this class," said Martin Balla, '26 [Computer Science](#). "I was really worried I would not be around to take it."

The lab and the building opened this semester, just in time for Balla and other students to gain drone experience before they graduate and enter the workforce.

The class, "Flight Lab: Fundamentals of UAV," is the University's inaugural drone offering. More than 30 students are enrolled.



"This really puts CNU on the map," Balla said of the University's focus on drones.

The class was the brainchild of Dr. Abhishek Phadke, a professor in the [School of Engineering and Computing](#). The course introduces students to the essentials of uncrewed aerial vehicle (UAV) technology through hands-on labs, simulations, and real-world drone programming.

"The inspiration for it was my desire to bring robotics, particularly uncrewed aerial vehicles, to undergraduates at CNU. During my hiring process, I noticed there was no existing class on drones," he said. "The class can be taken by electrical and computer engineers as well as computer science students, which makes it broadly accessible to a large population at SEC.

"This class is not offered at many universities and colleges," Phadke said. "I think it's a very valuable addition to CNU/SEC's course catalog."

The drone lab is a technologically-advanced space that is ideal for students to advance their skills. It is designed to be a hub of innovation in which students and the community develop and test uncrewed aircraft systems and other robotics.

"The new lab is an absolute state-of-the-art miracle, and a researcher's dream. Equipped with high-bay ceilings and advanced motion-capture/tracking system, it can handle much larger drones," Phadke said. "The facility exponentially increases our research capability and will attract a whole new group of researchers."

Phadke obtained a \$15,000 grant for the class, which will help pay for six graduate assistants to help with the coursework and the development of a core curriculum that will be shared with other universities.

"There has been so much interest in the class," Phadke said. "It's been really amazing."

The class not only teaches the basics of UAVs and coding, but also instruction for passing the FAA Part 107 drone flying license exam.

"This is a very important document to have today, as almost all industries and the military require prospective job applicants to have it before they are eligible for a drone-related job. They can take this exam if they wish, thereby building their resume with a very important skill and certification," Phadke said.

The use of drones has grown expedientially in a number of fields, he said.

"Drones are used in agriculture, inspection, fire fighting, police departments, ecology monitoring, and more. The industry is now pivoting toward hiring a workforce that is educated and capable of handling drones," Phadke said.

The class "is a great opportunity on our campus," said Daniel Belsky, an instructor in the School of Engineering and Computing who is assisting with the class. "It's a win-win for students not only to try something really neat, but also to be well positioned to get their drone license."

For Alyssa Carroll, who graduates in May with a degree in Computer Science, the class is ideal. She plans to attend Virginia Tech for graduate school, and she is confident the drone knowledge will put her ahead.

"It's been really cool to be able to fly a drone. I wanted to get more experience with them and this gives me a foundational understanding," Carroll said. "It's really good hands-on experience to have. This will definitely open up opportunities for more people."

The lab will also serve industry partners that will in turn provide students with insight into possible career opportunities.

Demand for drone pilots is expected to increase rapidly as the uses for UAVs in a variety of fields continues to expand. For example, 67 percent of construction companies utilize drones for surveying and monitoring and more than 340 cities worldwide deploy drones for air quality monitoring.

The global drone market is projected to reach \$127 billion by 2032, from almost \$53.9 billion in 2023. More than 1.1 million drones were registered in the U.S. by 2023, with 63% used for recreation and 37% for commercial use.