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Students spread their wings

After years in the classroom, Purdue aviators put skills to test

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By Adam Kovac, Journal and Courier

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Fourteen Purdue University students are literally putting their grades on a wing and a prayer, test flying model airplanes they built for a course on aircraft design.

The culmination of more than 13 weeks of intensive design and construction for the students, mostly seniors planning to enter the aerospace construction industry upon graduation, the flights also provided about 50 friends and onlookers in the Mollenkopf Athletic Center an opportunity to see the outcome of years of study and effort.

"We want them to integrate all their knowledge from other courses to create a machine that illustrates their ability to create something useful," said professor Dominick Andrisani II.

For students, the true test of their aviation know-how rested not only on the ability of their battery-powered planes to leave the ground, but also to stay aloft long enough to perform a series of tasks.

"You're not allowed to fudge your way through the class," senior Chris Curtis said. "If you do, your plane will crash into the wall."

Curtis described the last weeks of actual construction for his team as "a pair of all-nighters and several dozen 3 a.m.-ers."

The students in the class, broken down into three teams, had to overcome many design hangups, from making sure the weight of each wing was balanced to constructing landing gear on which the planes could safely land.

"It took us three tries, which means the pilot crashed three times in Mollenkopf," Curtis said.

For other students, the class presented its greatest challenges in working within the time frame necessary to complete the project while keeping up with work in their other classes.

"To build a plane from the ground up in 10 weeks is pretty intense when an aerospace company sometimes takes years," said Bridget Fitzpatrick. "It's hard to have a normal semester with this class."

The maiden voyage of Fitzpatrick' and her group's plane, "The Semester Index Destroyer," did impress her dad, who drove from Bloomington, Ill., to watch the flight.

"They said they were building a plane but I had no idea it'd be this complex," said Gene Fitzpatrick.

The teams of students had to design an aircraft that demonstrated the ability of an on-board sensor, or gyro, to change the motion properties of the plane while in flight.

"Both the pilot and the gyro are controlling the control surface -- the moveable parts of the plane that makes it change direction," Andrisani said.

Andrisani said the planes will be on display on the third floor of Grisom Hall until next year, when a new crop of aviation design students will try to build on what its predecessors accomplished.

None of the remote-controlled planes had any mishaps during their examination flights in the indoor football field Tuesday night.

"These students know a lot and this course convinces them how much they know," Andrisani said.

If you go

The planes designed by students in AAE 451: Aircraft design will be on display on the third floor of Grissom Hall at Purdue University until the next year.

For more information, contact professor Dominick Andrisani at 494-5135.

