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Randolph Macon Academy Welcomes New Director of Unmanned Aviation

Home to a flight program that has taught teenagers to fly since 1985, Randolph-Macon Academy added drones to the curriculum with an “Unmanned Flight Operations” class in 2017. Now, with the hiring of Brian J. Kelly in November, the Academy will be taking the drone program to a level no other high school in the country can claim.

A pioneer in the field of unmanned aviation, Mr. Kelly is the founder and CEO of National Drone Services. He is also an award-winning television executive producer, writer, and director. Having been on board at R-MA for only two months, he has already laid the groundwork for a drone program that will impact not just the Academy and the students, but the local community as well.

The purpose of the developing drone program is to train students on the skills, platforms, and technologies needed for them to be successful in a variety of career paths that involve the use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). The drone industry is growing rapidly, with nearly 100,000 jobs expected to be added within the next five years. Through experiential and classroom learning and real-world projects, R-MA graduates will be uniquely poised to take advantage of this rapidly emerging market.

The overall program will focus on five career pathways: Engineering and Construction, Agriculture, Aerial Cinematography (for television and film), Energy and Infrastructure Management, and Emergency Response Management. Students will accomplish the FAA certification (a.k.a. Part 107) while gaining hands-on experience flying drones.

“The FAA drone certification process is currently only a knowledge test and does not require students to have any experience actually flying drones,” said Mr. Kelly. “As a result, there is a tremendous need for drone pilots who have operational experience.”

The R-MA program includes drone aircraft that are capable of capturing thermal imagery, rendering point cloud 3D models and conducting multispectral scanning of plant health life. They can be used to search and rescue, manage construction products, conduct biological research and even manage crops.

Mr. Kelly has already reached out to a number of organizations in the region to discuss forming community partnerships where students will have the opportunity to work on actual projects while gaining valuable hands on experience. Interest in the R-MA program has been immediate. On December 11th, as part of an agreement with the Warren County Economic Development Authority, Mr. Kelly and new EDA Executive Director, Doug Parsons, brought a team of students

out to a local commercial property that the EDA is hoping to sell. The R-MA team was tasked with conducting an aerial roof inspection and orthomosaic survey of the property located at 426 Baugh Drive in Front Royal, VA. EDA is currently courting several firms considering relocating to Front Royal. The sale of the multi-use commercial property could mean hundreds of jobs for the local community.

"This program represents a unique opportunity for R-MA students," said Mr. Kelly. "They are gaining experience working with 'clients,' planning and flying missions, collecting imagery, and providing actionable data that clients can and will use. With this type of experience students can obtain summer jobs, enhance college prospects, or head directly into the (post high school) workforce. I am not aware of any other high school in the U.S. that is operating a drone program at this level."

Mr. Kelly just completed a highly successful three-week introductory "Drone Applications" course during RMA's J-Term. He will continue to develop curriculum and community and academic partnerships over the next few months. A summer drone course as well as professional training programs will be offered at R-MA, and the full range of drone classes will be available for the 2020-21 academic year.

Watch the R-MA website, www.RMA.edu, for more information in the coming weeks.