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Students put robots to the test

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BUTLER TWP — About 96 high school students on Saturday showed off the robots they designed and put them to the test.

They participated in the Sea, Air and Land Challenge sponsored by the Penn State University Electro-Optics Center (EOC). This was the second year for the event at Butler County Community College.

Six teams from Butler High School and five teams from Seneca Valley High School participated. Teams also came from Kiski, Lenape Tech and Norwin. Each team participated in one of the three events: sea, air or land.

Lori Harvey, senior program coordinator for the EOC, said although called a "challenge," the event was not a competition.

"It's more to showcase the prototypes," Harvey said.

For the air challenge, teams had to design a payload system for an aircraft that would drop weights meant to hit targets.

For the sea challenge, teams had to design a robot that would navigate an underwater obstacle course, and for the land challenge, they had to design a robot that would navigate a dry obstacle course.

"We don't give the answers to the test," Harvey said. "It's truly open ended."

Bill Kiser, senior director of the EOC, said the goals of the event are to get students exposed to science, technology, engineering and mathematics — STEM — to teach them the engineering process and to show them different careers.

He said the challenges had a military bent, partially because the EOC is a U.S. Department of Defense contractor but also to show how important technology is to security.

Dan Braun, a senior at Butler, was on a team participating in the sea challenge.

The team's robot worked well, but it hit a snag when it ran into a wrinkle on the bottom of the rubber pool where the challenge was taking place.

He said doing a project rather than just learning about it is difficult, but he said it has its rewards.

"It's a hundred times more enjoyable," Braun said.

Tyler McGee, a senior at Seneca Valley, was on a team participating in the air challenge. Late Saturday morning, the team had just finished its first run at the challenge.

McGee said the payload system had a few issues. He said that it worked fine on the ground, but started having problems when it got off the ground. Wind also was a factor. The team had to retool the design before trying the course again later.

Team members spent about five months working on the robot. Joe Logsdon, a technology education teacher at Seneca Valley, said all five teams from the school were participating as a part of the engineering class.

He said that the projects allow students to see and experience real world applications for engineering projects. He also said it is good for students to actually do a project rather than just read about theory.

"Apply what you learn," Logsdon said.

He said that he believes the sea challenge is the hardest of the three challenges because on top of all the other designing, the robot has to be waterproof as well.



Ryan Hannon, left, and Eric Stauffer, right, look on Saturday as Westey Eckstein pulls their submersible robot from a tank following a test run at the Sea, Air and Land Challenge sponsored by Penn State's Electro-Optics Center. The three students were members of one of the Butler High School teams taking part in the event at Butler County Community College.

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