Record Participation Marks 6th Year of VFS Design-Build-Vertical-Flight Student (DBVF) Competition

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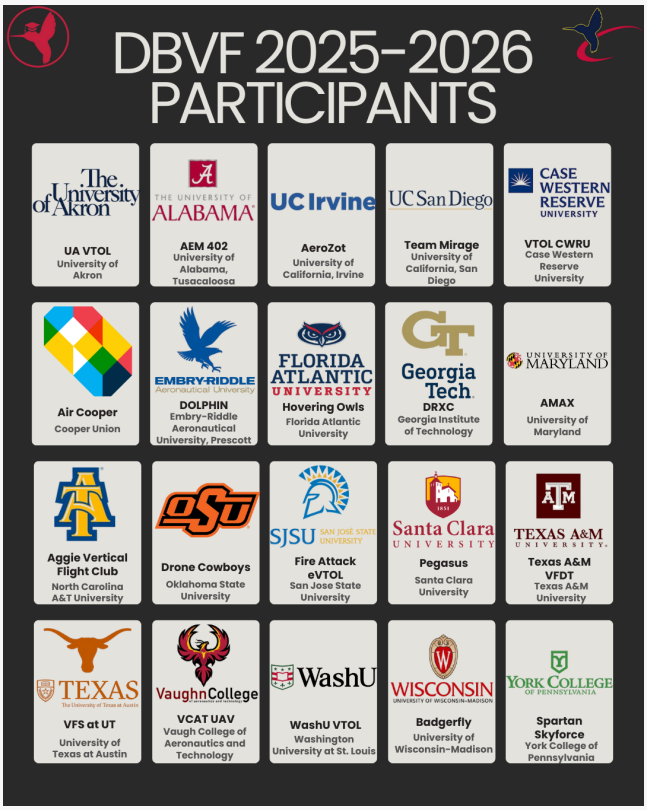

DBVF Participating Universities

FAIRFAX, VA, UNITED STATES, January 7, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Vertical Flight Society has officially launched the sixth year of its Design-Build-Vertical-Flight (DBVF) Student Competition, welcoming a new cohort of university teams from across the United States to compete in the 2025 to 2026 season. A total of 20 university teams have been accepted following the submission of Letters of Intent, representing a broad geographic footprint and continued growth in student interest across vertical flight, autonomy, hands-on engineering, and mission-driven design.

The VFS DBVF Student Competition has become a demanding, mission-focused competition that challenges students to tackle real-world applications in the vertical flight industry. The competition tasks university teams with designing, building, and flying a single electric vertical takeoff and landing aircraft tailored to a realistic operational challenge. This year's competition continues its focus on wildfire response scenarios, building on the foundation established during the previous season. Teams are evaluated not only on flight performance, but also on the depth of their engineering reasoning, safety practices, testing methodology, and their ability to clearly connect design decisions to operational mission needs.

As wildfires continue to pose escalating risks to communities, infrastructure, emergency responders, and many more, the DBVF competition challenges students to move beyond theoretical design and confront real-world constraints. These include speed, precision, reliability, autonomy, safety, and operational effectiveness. From early concept development through flight testing and final competition missions, students are expected to justify why their aircraft is

designed the way that it is and how it would perform in high-consequence emergency response operations.

“This competition is intentionally structured to mirror the complexity and tradeoffs engineers face in industry and government today,” said Adithya Ramaswami, Chair of the VFS DBVF Student Competition. “Students are not just building an aircraft. They are being challenged to reason through mission needs, safety considerations, autonomy decisions, and validation through testing. Each year, the level of technical maturity, systems thinking, and thoughtfulness demonstrated by the student teams continues to rise.”

The 2025 to 2026 participating teams represent a diverse and highly motivated group of institutions, disciplines, and design philosophies. Together, they form a national cohort of emerging engineers and leaders focused on vertical flight, advanced air mobility, autonomy, and mission-critical aerospace systems.

The accepted teams for the sixth year of the competition are:
University of Akron, UA VTOL
University of Alabama Tuscaloosa, AEM 402
University of California Irvine, AeroZot
University of California San Diego, Team Mirage
Case Western Reserve University, VTOL CWRU
Cooper Union, Air Cooper
Embry Riddle Aeronautical University Prescott, DOLPHIN
Florida Atlantic University, Hovering Owls
Georgia Institute of Technology, DRXC
University of Maryland, AMAV
North Carolina A&T University, Aggie Vertical Flight Club
Oklahoma State University, Drone Cowboys
San Jose State University, Fire Attack eVTOL
Santa Clara University, Pegasus
Texas A&M University, Texas A&M VFDT
University of Texas at Austin, VFS at UT
Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology, VCAT UAV
Washington University at St. Louis, WashU VTOL
University of Wisconsin Madison, Badgerfly
York College of Pennsylvania, Spartan Skyforce

The competition will culminate in the in-person Fly-Off event from April 7th to 10th 2026, hosted at SURVICE Engineering’s Applied Technology Operation facility at Harford Airport in Churchville, Maryland. SURVICE Engineering, a defense and engineering services company, provides teams with a professional test environment, including dedicated space to fly and areas to set up and operate between flight missions. SURVICE Engineering continues its role as a long-standing partner in enabling hands-on student learning and real-world testing experiences.

AVL joins the DBVF competition as a Premier Sponsor and the Software Sponsor for the 2025 to 2026 season. As a sponsor, AVL is providing complimentary simulation software to teams accepted to compete in DBVF, giving students access to professional-grade tools widely used across industry.

Perseus Defense also joins DBVF as a Premier Sponsor. Perseus Defense develops counter unmanned aircraft system capabilities for the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security, with a focus on affordable, scalable, and field-ready solutions.

The VFS DBVF Student Competition serves as a critical bridge between academia and real-world aerospace challenges, preparing students for careers across the unmanned aircraft systems and advanced air mobility sectors. Many past participants leverage their experience in DBVF to pursue internships and full-time roles following graduation.

The Vertical Flight Society extends its deepest appreciation to the sponsors, volunteers, judges, community, and partners who make this competition possible. Sponsorship opportunities remain available for organizations interested in supporting student innovation, workforce development, and the future of vertical flight.

More information about the competition, including the full Request for Proposal and key dates for the 2025 to 2026 season, can be found at www.vtol.org/fly.

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