

NC State Student Branch of AIAA's Outstanding Student Branch Activity

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Despite the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, NC State's student branch of AIAA has remained an engaged community of aerospace-enthusiasts. In early March, when our university made the switch to all virtual learning, our AIAA branch did too. Our student branch continued to meet over Zoom and hold social events including an annual attendance awards ceremony and celebration of graduating seniors (including our chair of two years) that helped us to stay connected although we were not together in person.

Fortunately, preparation for the fall semester was no different than any other year; because we are all in different places, virtual meetings are our go-to anyways. We were able to use our experience from the virtual portion of the 2020 spring semester to prepare and plan for the fall semester. The university gave us loose guidelines on club meetings that implied our meetings would remain virtual for at least another semester, so we prepared with that in mind.

Our fall semester of 2020 brought many speaker's we have not had in the past. Here is a brief list of some of the speaker events (NC State Alumni are indicated with an *):

- Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) – Erick Sanchez* and Kristine Roberts
- Former SpaceX – Huade Tan
- NASA Langley Research Center – Robin Hardy
- Northrop Grumman and AIAA Intelligent Systems Technical Committee – Dr. Steve Cook*
- Retired Lockheed Martin Space – Mike Hamel
- Department of Homeland Security Robotics – Kyle Snyder
- Sandia National Laboratories and AIAA – Dr. Basil Hassan*

Although there are many disadvantages to a virtual format meeting, one of the huge advantages was the ability to invite speakers who typically would not have been able to travel to Raleigh to present. Virtual meeting attendance has been steady ranging from 10 to 30 members, which is quite similar to our in-person numbers. Another positive change that was made while transitioning to a virtual format was the ability to record meetings. The recorded meetings and speaker events have been accessed on YouTube 73 times by individuals who miss out on attending a live meeting. Most importantly, a virtual meeting format has made it easier for freshmen to attend and become involved. This is due to the fact that our in-person meetings are held on a different campus from where freshmen typically reside. All of the lessons learned conducting online meetings have given us a new perspective on how to make our in-person meetings more accessible to everyone and we look forward to implementing these new ideas when we return to in-person events.

Another area of focus identified by our student branch officers has been providing our students with a network and opportunity to connect with speakers and student branch alumni students and officers. To implement this idea we have taken two courses of action. The first was the creation of a NC State AIAA LinkedIn group. This has provided students with an ever-growing platform for networking virtually with speakers and alumni. The second action we have taken is an upcoming panel discussion where students will have the opportunity to ask questions and network with ten NC State AIAA alumni. Through these courses of action, we envision creating a network that will continue to grow and become more beneficial to students each year.

Though our meetings continue to be held virtually, our branch activities have no plans of slowing down. Our design teams — Special Projects and Design/Build/Fly — still hold meetings weekly and are in-person in the lab when allowed. We have continued our mentorship program between upperclassmen and underclassmen to advise and assist our members wherever we can. We have a multitude of speaker events for the remainder of the spring semester as well.

Regardless of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, our student branch continues to serve as a unique and effective organization fostering and growing the community of students with a passion for aerospace at NC State.