UWF and IHMC announce inaugural cohort for state's first Ph.D. in Intelligent Systems and Robotics

Pensacola, Fla. – Oct. 7, 2019 - This fall, the University of West Florida and the Institute for Human and Machine Cognition welcomed the inaugural cohort of five students to the newly established intelligent systems and robotics doctoral program.

The program centers on developing leading-edge software and hardware technology that combines human and machine elements to exploit their respective strengths and mitigate their respective weaknesses. It aligns with the University's strategic vision for research that impacts Northwest Florida's economic development and technology enterprise. The first of its kind in Florida and one of only a few in the nation, the program will serve the manufacturing, health care, defense and other high-tech industries, providing critical support to high-demand career fields.

"UWF welcomes an esteemed group of eager doctoral students, each with a uniquely impressive background," said UWF President Martha D. Saunders. "They are ready, and we are confident that UWF and IHMC will guide them to their individual success."

The doctorate in intelligent systems and robotics program will provide students with individualized paths tailored to their interests. The program is comprised of foundational courses in robotics and artificial intelligence, or AI, that address topics such as knowledge representation and reasoning, machine learning, computational methods in AI, basic hardware/software interaction and research methods.

"Our mission for this program is to develop students into graduates who can step right into opportunities in the workforce that will be ready and waiting for them, to further the field and innovative research," said Dr. Ken Ford, CEO of IHMC.

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Two of the students, Taher Rahgooy and Andrea Martin, transferred to UWF from Tulane University to be part of the inaugural cohort on the heels of Dr. Brent Venable being named director of the intelligent systems and robotics doctoral program. Venable previously held a joint appointment as a professor of computer science at Tulane and research scientist for IHMC. She said her first priority in the program is setting the students up for success in research that interests them.

"The way I see it, my job is to make this an optimal environment and opportunity for all of the participants; the students, faculty, researchers involved," Venable said. "These students will work in labs with researchers for more than four years and will have a chance to make a difference. From a mentor point of view, this is 'academic parenting,' and it's my job to make sure it's successful."

Jacques Perry, a UWF alumnus and military veteran, is another candidate who was accepted into program. Perry has 10 years of cybersecurity experience and currently serves as the lead cybersecurity engineer and information system security manager for the 782nd Test Squadron at Eglin Air Force Base.

Perry completed an internship with IHMC during graduate school, which he said first sparked his interest in AI. When the opportunity arose to conduct AI research that could enhance cybersecurity efforts, along with access to IHMC resources, he didn't hesitate to apply for the doctoral program.

"My doctoral work will be directly applicable to cybersecurity for Air Force missions," Perry said. "This degree program will also allow me to gain a leadership position in the Air Force cyber community, where I'll be able to bring more focus on the capabilities of AI in cyber defense and offense. I eventually expect to see AI playing both strong defensive and offensive roles in cyber warfare, which will inherently require the next generation of cybersecurity personnel to thoroughly understand the capabilities and limitations of AI and how it will shape the cyber battlefield."

The other students included in the Fall 2019 class include UWF alumni Duncan Calvert, who currently works in the robotics lab at IHMC, and Bhavyansh Mishra, a recent UWF graduate who interned at IHMC in the summer of 2018.

A not-for-profit research institute of the State University System, IHMC is a pioneer of technologies aimed at extending human capabilities through a unique approach combining computer science, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, engineering, medical sciences and related disciplines.

For more information about the Ph.D. in Intelligent Systems and Robotics, visit uwf.edu/isr.

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