



RISING STARS

## MEET THE WORLD'S NO. 1 DRONE EXPERT



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### WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Got questions about drones? He's got answers.

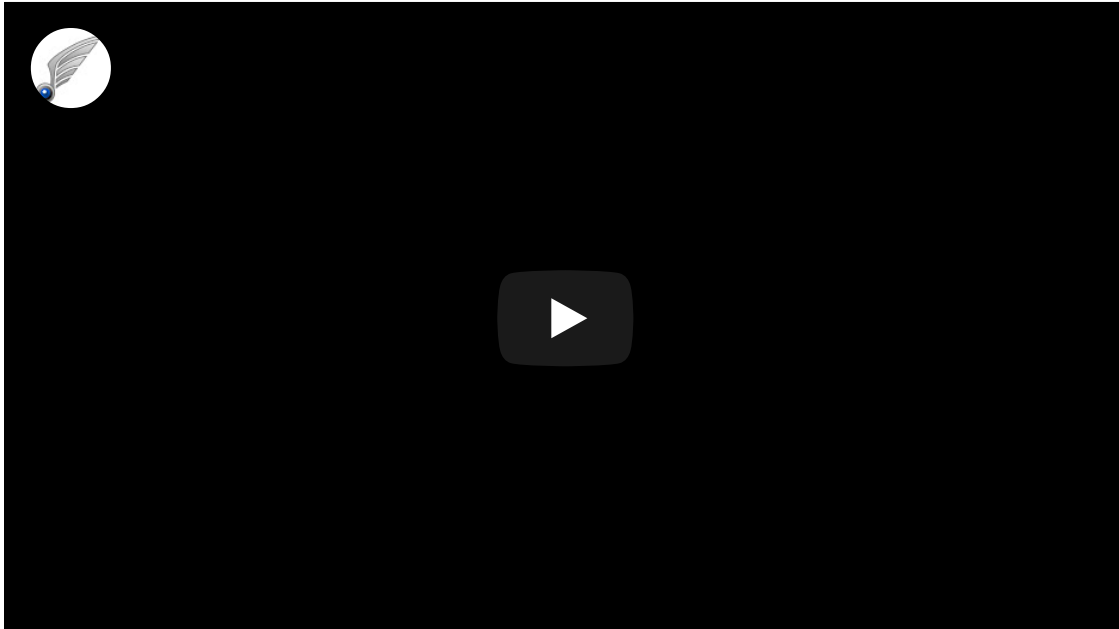
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By Zara Stone

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Arthur Holland Michel says his favorite way to spend his downtime is cycling or reading biographies, but his Netflix queue tells another story. His watched stream includes *Homeland*, *Modern Family* and the teenage dystopian series *The 100*. That's because 27-year-old Holland Michel is the founder and co-director of the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College, and he needs to stay on top of drone sightings in pop culture. "It's a strange job I have," he admits, ticking off recent projects such as curating Lady Gaga's dress-copter drone for an exhibit at the Intrepid Museum in New York, and interviewing KATSU, the notoriously private street artist, about his drone **graffiti**.

Since its founding in 2013, the Center for the Study of the Drone has become a worldwide source for drone research — publishing data, white papers and a weekly newsletter, in addition to running academic seminars. In 2016, the drone industry was valued at approximately \$4.5 billion and is forecast to reach **\$21.23 billion** by 2022. But there’s surprisingly little research on drones from a purely academic angle, as most white papers are sponsored by those with vested interests in the lucrative industry.



“We are balanced and educational,” says Holland Michel. “Drones are a technology that raises so many questions.” Today there’s talk of them revolutionizing industries as wide-ranging as agriculture, entertainment and education, with the likelihood of Amazon drone deliveries looming ever closer on the horizon. His approach is scholarly and rigorous, which is mirrored in his presentation; he keeps his beard and mustache neatly trimmed, and his shirts well-pressed. And much of his work is serious, Lady Gaga’s flying dress aside. He examines military drone use, surveillance and the growing field of media dronism. Basically, any industry that uses drones interests him.

Holland Michel’s path into dronship started four years ago when he was a history major at Bard College, researching 20th-century immigration. He’d paid close attention to media drone mentions, as he found the technology fascinating, but he wished there were an authoritative, unbiased resource for information. “One day I had a flash of inspiration,” he recalls. “Why not create an interdisciplinary center to study drones?”

# HE'S CONSULTED WITH EVERYONE FROM THE U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE TO EXPERIMENTAL DRONE ARTISTS.

He approached his freshman **roommate**, Dan Gettinger, as a sounding board — serendipitous, it turns out, since Gettinger was writing his thesis on drones. They teamed up and approached the college about creating the center, and they were convincing enough to be granted an office and offered help with fundraising. Today, part of their program includes a spring undergraduate seminar on drones; they've taught it twice — both times fully booked. “We wanted to fill a gap in the public understanding of the drone phenomenon,” says Gettinger. “When we started, there was so much discussion on the legality of targeted killings and the ethics of [America's] drone program.”

Originally, Holland Michel viewed the center as a short-term experiment, not knowing how sustainable the interest in drones would be. But then came the 2013 Edward Snowden leaks, and discourse on **drones** moved front and center. Researchers and the media were soon approaching Holland Michel, looking for data and quotes, and his small think tank started gaining national attention. His proudest moment, he says, was being asked to donate a drone to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., in 2015; the center's DJI Phantom 1 is now part of the Smithsonian's permanent collection.

If Holland Michel seems young to be running such a prominent think tank, think again. The field of drone research — drones themselves, in fact — is so nascent that the people in it tend to be youthful, says Tim Kidwell, editor of *Drone360*, a bimonthly magazine. Kidwell's impressed with the volume and quality of the work the center publishes and praises Holland Michel's studied approach to the drone world. However, he cautions that their data isn't always accurate. “The [center] does the best job they can with the information that's out there,” Kidwell says, “but in a lot of the cases, it's flawed information and that skews their data — but it skews everyone's data.” An example would be the current valuation of the drone industry — depending on where you look, it can range as high as **\$127 billion**.



Georgi Tushev, co-founder of Tushevs Aerials, demonstrates drone flying to students at Bard College as part of the Center for the Study of the Drone educational program.

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For now, Holland Michel is content with the center’s organic growth; currently assisted by a small team of student interns, his long-term plan is to hire more staff and create video and podcasts. But his goal remains unchanged: to be the best resource for anyone looking for answers about drones. And he’s proud of the diversity of groups that come to him — he’s consulted with everyone from the U.S. Naval War College to experimental drone artists. That kind of reach hasn’t gone unnoticed: Last year Houghton Mifflin Harcourt came calling, and he’s working on a book about drone surveillance to be published in 2018.

When it comes to predicting the future of the center, Holland Michel laughs. “That’s about as clear to me as where drones will be in 10 years,” he says. “I’m very open to the fact that the world of drones will evolve and that will have bearing on the form and role of what we do here.” The sky’s the limit, literally.

## **STAY INTERESTING**

