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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Griffiss Institute Hosts 17th Annual AFRL Challenge Competition, Highlighting Mohawk Valley Student Talent

Local Students Showcase STEM Talent in Real-World AI Challenge

Rome, NY – April 16, 2026 – Where curiosity meets capability, the future takes shape. The 17th Annual AFRL Challenge Competition, hosted by Griffiss Institute (GI) in collaboration with the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL), transformed the Innovare Advancement Center into a proving ground for the next generation of problem-solvers.

From April 6–10, students from across the region stepped into a mission-driven environment, arriving with questions and leaving with sharpened skills, technical confidence, and a deeper understanding of real-world defense challenges. The week culminated in a formal award ceremony recognizing the teams that rose to the top, demonstrating exceptional performance, discipline, and ingenuity.

Student teams from across the Mohawk Valley, including Holland Patent, Rome Free Academy, Waterville Sr. High School, Notre Dame, New York Mills, Little Falls, and Madison Oneida BOCES, each made up of one teacher and two students, were given a mission: Build the best AI pilot.

Students were challenged to design and train an AI-powered pilot within a simulated environment, using reinforcement learning to improve performance over time. Teams had to guide their agent to complete missions with speed and precision by rewarding successful decisions and correcting errors, ultimately competing to develop the most effective, adaptive solution.

On the fifth day, each team presented its solution to three judges, who based their decisions on the team's ability to demonstrate a strong understanding of the challenge,

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apply creative and strategic thinking to their solution, and balance immediate feasibility with long-term potential. Judges looked for teams that could effectively navigate technical constraints while developing adaptable, forward-looking approaches grounded in real-world applications.

"It was a very inspiring event, seeing the talent of our local students and educators align with Air Force Research Laboratory's scientists and engineers. What the students were able to accomplish in 4 short days is a testament to the perseverance and adaptability of the participants as well as the quality mentorship from the AFRL Challenge Team, Griffiss Institute, and their partners", said Matthew Paulini, Chief, Warfighter Integration Branch with the Air Force Research Laboratory in Rome, NY. "The generational leadership that was showcased by the hard work and support of all involved is sure to further advance the revitalization of the Mohawk Valley."

This year's champions are Timothy Hill, along with Elijah Pomales, and mentor Albert Bangs, representing Rome Free Academy.

"I really enjoyed the challenge. It took a lot of trial and error, but I stayed determined, kept learning, and came back this year ready to win," said Timothy Hill, a Senior at Rome Free Academy.

Timothy and Elijah earned a \$2,500 contribution to their New York 529 college savings account. All participating teams walked away with contributions, recognition, memories, and inspiration for the future.

Additional winners of the 2026 Annual AFRL Challenge Competition are:

🥈 2nd place: Xavier Regan and Joseph Koch, mentoring teacher Christopher Snell, Little Falls

🥉 3rd place: Oscar Yang and Rylan Stanton, mentoring teacher Wes Laurion, Waterville

🏆 4th place: Nico Lavesa-Cesana and Vincenzo Korthas, mentoring teacher Patricia Calcara, Madison Oneida BOCES



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🇺🇸 5th place: Holly Buchanan-Wise and George King, mentoring teacher Michael Reilley, Holland Patent

🇺🇸 6th place: Mark Klein and Abbey Calhoun, mentoring teacher, Audrey Foote, New York Mills

🇺🇸 7th place: Michael Cannistra and Ashley Wood, mentoring teacher James Gulick, Notre Dame

"At AFRL, we believe the future of innovation lies in empowering students to think critically, adapt on the fly, and tackle complex problems in dynamic, real-world scenarios like this competition," said Michael Hayduk, Deputy Director, AFRL Information & Spectrum Warfare. "It's more than a learning experience; it's a chance for students to immerse themselves in the mission space and see firsthand the skills our teams rely on to drive mission-critical advancements and how science and engineering play a pivotal role in safeguarding our nation."

"The AFRL Challenge Competition gives students a unique opportunity to work with AI and reinforcement learning and see its connection to real-world national security challenges. The most rewarding part of the competition is watching students transform in just a week. They come in curious and leave more confident, more capable, and more prepared, not only in problem-solving experience, but with a deeper belief in themselves as young professionals," said Makenzi Enos, STEM Senior Program Analyst, Griffiss Institute.

In addition to the competition, the week was supported by local partners, including Stewart's Shops, Spressos, and Market 32, whose contributions helped create an environment where students could stay focused, collaborate, and fully engage in the experience. Together, Griffiss Institute and AFRL are creating opportunities for students in the Mohawk Valley to engage with real-world STEM challenges. As the competition concluded, students left with greater exposure, hands-on experience, and a better understanding of how their skills can be applied beyond the classroom.

Interested in similar programs? Explore upcoming opportunities for students at www.griffissinstitute.org/stem/.

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Griffiss Institute:

Griffiss Institute is a 501c3 not for profit organization based in Rome, NY, accelerating national security innovation through its three-pillar mission of Talent, Technology, and Venture Development. As the steward of the Innovare Advancement Center, an open, unclassified research and collaboration campus, Griffiss Institute fosters and drives partnerships across government, industry, and academia to advance dual-use technologies. Griffiss Institute is committed to strengthening national security through nontraditional STEM education, accelerated innovation, and the commercialization of emerging technologies, with a deep belief in American-made solutions, and the development of a resilient U.S. science and engineering workforce.

About AFRL

The Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) is the Department of the Air Force's primary scientific research and development center and one of six centers within Air Force Materiel Command. AFRL plays an integral role in leading the discovery, development and integration of affordable warfighting technologies for our air, space and cyberspace forces. With a workforce spanning across nine technology areas and 40 other operations around the globe, AFRL provides a diverse portfolio of science and technology ranging from fundamental to advanced research and technology development. For more information, visit afresearchlab.com.

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Enc. Winning Team of the 17th Annual Challenge Competition, Rome Free Academy – Timothy Hill and Elijah Pomaes.

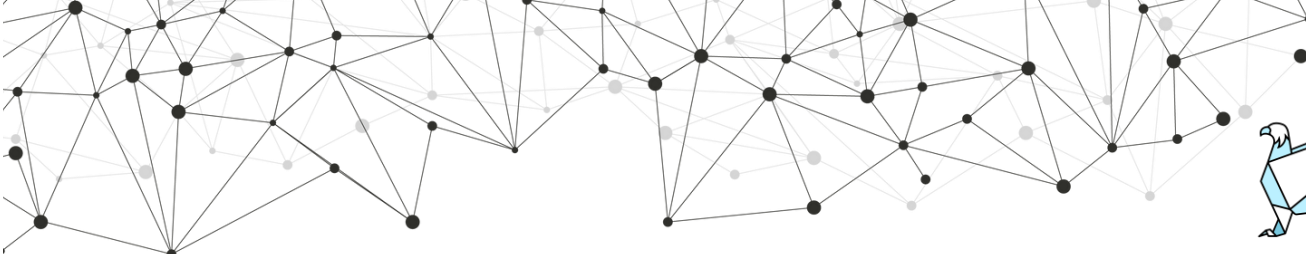


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