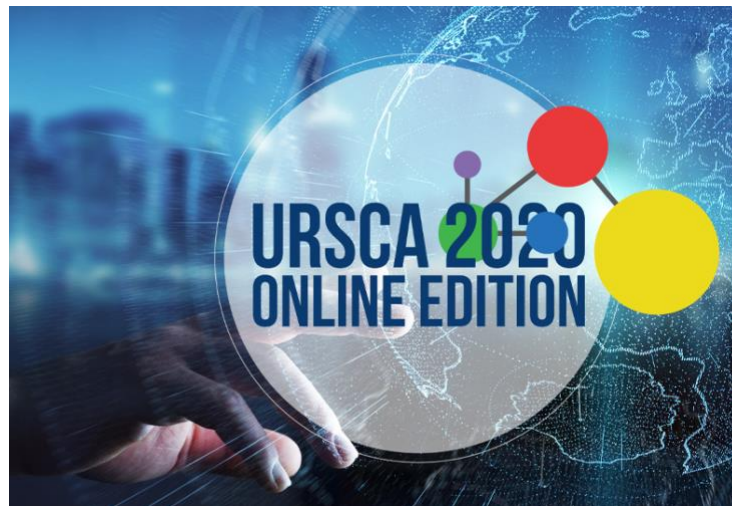


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University of Lethbridge jumps in to host annual URSCA event online, allowing students to showcase research

The University of Lethbridge lived up to its reputation as one of the country's top-rated universities for undergraduate research by stepping up at the last minute to host the annual Undergraduate Research in Science Conference of Alberta (URSCA) — and presenting it in an online format.

URSCA, in its sixth year, is a celebration of Alberta's scientific discovery and innovation at the earliest stage of post-secondary education. Increasingly, student-focused, research-intensive institutions are not only encouraging hands-on research in the laboratory and the field at the undergraduate level but are also providing a wide range of experiential education opportunities.



Originally scheduled to be held at MacEwan University, COVID-19 restrictions put an end to any chance of an in-person URSCA gathering. When schools were surveyed over whether an online event could be put together, the U of L jumped in as host. The result was the biggest conference yet, with 220 attendees.

“To empower the next generation, it is essential to provide opportunities for budding researchers to gain experience in the public dissemination of their work as they become members of a community of scholars,” says the University’s Dr. Matthew Letts, incoming dean of the Faculty of Arts & Science, of why it was important for the conference to take place. “It bodes well that Alberta universities understand this need and celebrate this form of experiential learning.”

For many students, this was their first time presenting their research, and they were asked to do it online, which came with a new set of challenges and pressures. Organizers offered three separate drop-in help sessions to address any technical concerns with the online format, and then grouped abstracts into themes, to ensure that all attendees got the most out of each session. Judges and moderators from across Alberta were matched to sessions within their area of knowledge, so they could ask meaningful questions to encourage further growth and development for presenters.

The conference opened with U of L Tier I Board of Governors Research Chair and computational chemist, Dr. Stacey Wetmore, presenting *The Things Computers Can Teach Us About the Chemistry of DNA and RNA*. The next day, the formal conference took place as students participated in 60 oral presentations and were able to view 54 poster presentations.

“The quality of the presentations was exceptional, which is a testament to the students’ dedication to research, and to the support they receive from their faculty supervisors,” says Letts. “It also signalled that not only is research still alive during the pandemic, it is thriving.”

Organizers were pleased to be able to present a platform allowing students to showcase their work.

“We are humbled by the number of our colleagues from across Alberta who stepped forward to volunteer throughout the conference,” says Catharine Reader, an event organizer with the U of L’s Faculty of Arts & Science. “They volunteered to review and group abstracts and to serve as hosts, moderators and judges. We acknowledge the collaborative efforts of all participating Alberta post-secondary institutions in making URSCA a successful experience for undergraduate research students.”

To view online: <https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/university-lethbridge-jumps-host-annual-ursca-event-online-allowing-students-showcase>

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