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Youth science outreach programs receive Government of Canada funding, southern Alberta students to benefit

More southern Alberta students will experience science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs thanks to a Government of Canada investment that supports the Actua network, including the Destination Exploration program at the University of Lethbridge.

The Government's Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) announced today \$3.6 million in PromoScience support to 66 recipients engaging over a million young Canadians. Further, the government will be increasing its support for science promotion activities to \$10.9 million per year.

For the U of L's Becca Bouchard, acting manager of Destination Exploration, a youth science outreach program, the \$28,900 grant will allow the University to expand its offerings.

"Last year, we reached just over 20,000 students throughout southern Alberta and we've been growing steadily every year by about 2,000 to 4,000 kids," says Bouchard. "Our funding will be used for a program expansion, allowing us to purchase some new equipment that will keep us in step with the ever-changing world of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, as well as hire some staff to run the programs."

Science outreach activities at the University have been ongoing since 2003 and currently include a host of activities. In addition to weeklong summer camps, Destination Exploration goes into area schools with two-hour workshops in the months of May and June. Throughout the school year, Wednesday and Friday science clubs are available and weekend science-themed birthday parties have proven to be extremely popular. The program is available from kindergarten to grade 8.

"Every camp or club experience that we do, there's always this 'Wow' from the kids and they get really excited about science," says Bouchard. "We get a ton of positive feedback from teachers and parents and often see a lot of kids repeat the program year after year. So we're constantly updating the things we do to keep them engaged and

interested.”

The NSERC PromoScience grant will support Actua and its network members located at universities and colleges across Canada in the delivery of STEM outreach programming, annually engaging 225,000 youth in 500 communities across every province and territory. Specifically, it will support Actua’s work in breaking down barriers to STEM studies and careers for youth who remain significantly underserved and underrepresented in these fields.

Each year, Actua and its network members will engage and inspire over 5,000 girls in all-girl initiatives, 30,000 Aboriginal youth in community-based and culturally-relevant programming, and another 30,000 at-risk youth facing other socio-economic challenges.

“This is critical work”, explains Jennifer Flanagan, Actua’s President and CEO, “because Canada needs the perspectives of women, of Aboriginal peoples, and of others to truly achieve its innovation potential.”

Bouchard says the U of L has a similar focus with its programming.

“We’re lucky to be able to partner with Actua,” she says. “With our program, we are able to go into middle schools and work with girls there to bring them hands-on science and technology opportunities. We are also currently going out to Brocket to deliver workshops to that student population.”

The University’s Destination Project, which will see the construction of new science facilities that will house a significant portion of the science teaching and research activities on campus, is also focused on further expanding community engagement and outreach.

In addition to the University of Lethbridge’s Destination Exploration, Actua network members receiving NSERC PromoScience funding include: Discovery Western (University of Western Ontario); Engineering Outreach (University of Toronto); Geering Up! (University of British Columbia); Mini University (Brandon University); Science Explorations (York University); Virtual Ventures (Carleton University); and WISE Kinetic Energy (University of Manitoba).

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