

Students INSPIRe with virtual research opportunities

A group of interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Calgary are creating new opportunities to share their research – virtually.

More than a dozen students from the faculties of medicine, kinesiology, science and arts will be hosting the first annual International Network of Student Perspectives In Research (INSPIRe) Virtual Symposium on September 22.

After a call for abstracts under the subject ‘Exploring ability expectations through diverse disciplines and topics’ the group approved 20 submissions from students studying at universities in the United States, Canada, China, Belgium, and the United Kingdom with titles ranging from Enhancing bodies: The treatment of ability in sports to The Ethics of Prenatal Diagnosis: A Twist on the Disability Rights Perspective.

As researchers in ability studies, the group investigates the social, cultural, political and other considerations by which any given ability may be judged, along with the impact and consequences of ableism at various levels in its different forms.

“We use the ableism lens in a lot of our research and we wanted to link up and collaborate with other students doing similar projects maybe from a different lens and see how they can incorporate our ideas and we can incorporate theirs,” says Natalie Ball fourth-year Bachelor of Health Sciences student.

The group, led by associate professor Gregor Wolbring, PhD, Institute for Public Health, decided to host the virtual conference in order to provide students with a peer-reviewed opportunity to share their research and to collaborate with other students without being constrained by financial limitations.

“Conference travel money is very limited for undergraduates, so we’ve been looking into virtual opportunities for a while. The students send me a list of the conferences they want to go to, and I try to renegotiate the model of how it’s done, so they can send PDF’s of posters, or use podcasts or instant messaging, instead of showing up,” says Wolbring. “In the end, we will see what the feedback is about this format and how it’s received.”

The primary benefit to a virtual model is that you don’t need a budget to travel, but there are numerous other perks as well.

“We also really wanted to get student work out there. We’ve all been at conferences where there are expert panels and that kind of thing, but having the student voice prominent and available is something that’s important to us,” says Emily Hutcheon, graduate student in the Faculty of Medicine.

“This format also gives students the opportunity to have their work seen without having to compete for travel awards; it puts everyone on an equal playing field; if your work is good it makes it through the peer review process,” adds Lucy Diep, fourth-year Bachelor of Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies student.

Since participants can access materials online at any time, there are also no scheduling conflicts or time commitment issues, not to mention that presenting your research at conferences around the world looks pretty good on a CV – even if you never left your home or office to do it.



(Back row, L-R) Lucy Diep, Emily Hutcheon, Brian Litke; (Front row, L-R) Gregor Wolbring, Natalie Ball, Jacqueline Noga (via web cam), Verlyn Leopatra, Jeremy Tynedal. Absent: Kassi Shave, Sophya Yumakulov and Dana De Bok

“We want other conferences to consider this as an option, and it doesn’t have to be a purely virtual model either,” says Jeremy Tynedal, fourth-year Faculty of Kinesiology student.

Of course there are challenges as well.

“After my podcast was played in Denver, I was instant messaging with the coordinators over Skype, and it’s really hard to get the question and answer it without seeing the reactions of the people in the room – you can’t tell if you may have said something wrong or even something right,” says Jacqueline Noga, third-year Bachelor of Health Sciences student. “But it’s so much better than having nothing.”

To learn more about the first annual INSPIRe Virtual Symposium, visit: <http://ableism.wordpress.com/conference/>

To learn more about the student group visit: http://www.crd.org/research/faculty/Gregor_Wolbring
