UC SANTA BARBARA

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Digital Student Spotlight

When COVID-19 left them unable to host their usual year-end event spotlighting student research, the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) office re-envisioned it in the way so many things have gone throughout this pandemic: virtually.

From an avalanche of lemons comes a whole lot of lemonade. The digital version — available online all summer — put a fresh spin on the conventional poster session by making it easy for students to present their research in unconventional ways, said Anita Stahl, URCA's new program director.

"There are the obvious limits to how you can share information on a poster. But this year, students had the incredible freedom to share projects according to their own style," explained Stahl, who joined URCA in June after completing her Ph.D. from UCSB in feminist studies. "If the poster still made sense for them, and for many it did, they could submit a PDF of what they would otherwise have printed. But students also could easily add video, interactive content and audio to their presentations by making their own websites or shared Google slideshows.

"Another benefit of the digital format is accessibility," Stahl added. "Students can share the link with family and friends to view the projects without having to travel to the campus. Plus, viewers can zoom in on parts they can't see well, use screen reader technology to listen to text, and pace themselves comfortably through the many contributions."

It’s well worth doing so.

The 50-plus studies featured in the 2021 URCA Digital Colloquium span dozens and disciplines, looking at topics from workplace harassment to the historical roots of anti-Semitism. Many of the projects boast a direct benefit to the community, from research into the effectiveness of the local Kids in Nutrition organization in improving nutritional knowledge in first- and second-graders, to an examination of differences between bees living on Santa Cruz Island and bees living on mainland Santa Barbara.

“What impressed me the most is how student researchers chose topics that engage their community and have clear ambitions to create a healthier social, cultural and ecological environment for them to graduate into,” Stahl said. “The projects combine personal interests with an ambition to do good in some way. The students clearly feel a sense of responsibility that comes with the opportunity to create knowledge through research.”

Stahl and the URCA team are currently looking at options for creating small, in-person events this fall to better connect continuing students with the larger community of undergraduate researchers on campus. They would serve to complement and expand on the virtual research showcase that Linda Adler-Kassner, associate dean of undergraduate education, credits entirely to Stahl.

“The URCA Digital Colloquium captures the exceptional research that UCSB undergraduates have conducted, even during the pandemic,” noted. “As the new director of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA), Dr. Stahl has created an innovative and dynamic platform that has allowed these scholars to shine.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we

draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.