



University of
Lethbridge

NEWS RELEASE

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New Community Bridge Lab serves as hub for connecting students to each other, academics and community

Community Bridge Lab Showcase takes place Thursday, from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Dr. Foster James Penny Building (324 5 St S)

One of the University of Lethbridge’s greatest contributions to southern Alberta is the annual influx of bright, talented, eager minds ready to contribute to society. Building on that, ULethbridge opened the new Community Bridge Lab (CBL) in January — a specific space designed to support multi-disciplinary and community-engaged student research projects across the social sciences and humanities.

The Community Bridge Lab acts as a hub for academic and community organizations that have research and project needs to connect with ULethbridge students who have project ideas and skills to contribute. The CBL enhances student training through expanded work-integrated learning opportunities and creates even more opportunities for community organizations to draw on the unique skill sets of ULethbridge students, even as it supports the core elements of a liberal education.



“Traditional lab spaces are a hallmark of the sciences but more often than not, are lacking for the social sciences — making this lab a wonderful addition to campus,” says Dr. Shelly Wismath, Dean of the School of Liberal Education. “Student-engaged and community-centric work is a strength of our university and until now, independent and group-research in the social sciences and humanities has largely been facilitated through independent studies, applied studies, and honours theses. This lab allows us to build on the strengths of these existing programs by further supporting our students to work collaboratively with faculty, community organizations, and each other.”

To build the same kind of shared lab space aimed at building teams and highlighting the strengths of qualitative research, Wismath and Dr. Jan Newberry (anthropology) proposed the idea of the CBL. In its first year of operation, they were joined by Drs. Jodie Asselin (anthropology), Julie Young (geography and environment) and Kaylan Schwarz (liberal education) as the core advisory group that serves as supervisors and mentors to undergraduate lab fellows working on community-engaged projects.

How it Works

Students engaged in community-oriented research through independent studies, honours projects, or research positions apply to become a lab fellow. Fellows then receive peer support through meetings with other student researchers, training through workshops and speakers, mentorship through faculty support, and lab space withing which to work and brainstorm. Fellows can also apply for CBL funding where appropriate.

“We anticipate holding an annual Community Bridge Day, meant to support creative and community-oriented discussions, where fellows will have an opportunity to publicly share their work,” says Wismath. “During this, the first summer of our collaboration, we supported five lab fellows who shared resources and met regularly to debrief about their experiences working on their independent projects.”

On Thursday, September 8, 2022, the Community Bridge Lab Showcase takes place from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Dr. Foster James Penny Building (324 5 St S), where each student fellow will give a short presentation on their project.

The projects included Lily Overacker’s (anthropology and history) study on what community-engaged research looks like across Canada and in different community contexts, while also doing a local community scan of opportunities for community-engaged research.

Amy Cran (anthropology) examined how a grassroots outreach organization, SAGE Clan Patrol, makes use of traditional Blackfoot Knowledge in their work of assisting people experiencing addiction and homelessness in Lethbridge.

Rebeca Spencer (anthropology and psychology) conducted research using immersive, participant observation with environmentalists and stewards of land in southern Alberta to understand their motivations and their relationship to hope, while Joni Smith (education) worked on the MasterCard Foundation-supported Blackfoot Women’s Empowerment Project to assist in developing a social enterprise for her fellow Blackfoot women artisans and crafters.

Alyssa White (anthropology) continued her work building an educational resource about anthropology in collaboration with both faculty and students that is meant to be inclusive, diverse, and accessible to everyone in the community.

The fellows made use of the lab space, its computers, coding software and transcription tools, but say the most important benefits of the CBL were the opportunities for collaboration with one another, faculty mentors and community organizations.

“It was a great opportunity for me to be mentored by a variety of professors from different disciplines and expand my perspective on interdisciplinary qualitative research,” says Overacker.

Smith’s greatest takeaway was how the CBL connected her to the community.

“I was able to gather data through hosting events and doing surveys to establish a thorough understanding of what is lacking in the artisan industry, using social media and our BWE website to promote our events,” she says. “I also hosted a night market where I met so many Blackfoot women who are dedicated to improving themselves through their passion of being an artisan.”

PHOTO: ULeithbridge student Rebeca Spencer working in the field with environmentalists and stewards of land in southern Alberta

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