

University of Lethbridge names the 2022-2023 Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Scholar

Dr. Laura Keffer-Wilkes (MSc '12, PhD '16) an instructor in the Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry, has been selected as the 2022-2023 Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Scholar.

“We are pleased to announce that Laura will be the University’s EDI scholar for this year,” says Martha Mathurin-Moe, executive director of equity, diversity and inclusion. “Her project is broad based and not only seeks to remove barriers that women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) face, but also encourage younger women to consider STEM careers.”

As EDI Scholar, Keffer-Wilkes, who’s also recently been named as the director of Synbridge, will work on a project titled Women in STEM – Support Our Sisters.

“I’m very honoured to be named this year’s EDI Scholar,” says Keffer-Wilkes. “Women in Canada are still under-represented in STEM fields. While many women study STEM subjects as undergraduates, there’s a disconnect once they finish graduate school. They’re just not being hired as instructors or professors. This isn’t a Lethbridge-only issue; it happens across North America.

“The goal of my project is to use a cooperative model to reach out to women who are already at the University and work together to create a strong, safe environment and remove the isolation between departments. We also want to partner with young women and gender-diverse individuals to create safe spaces to learn.”

The project includes establishing a coordinator position and creating a Women-in-Stem organizing committee to identify ways to remove barriers, such as inclusive language and mentorship programs.

In addition, the project aims to connect with the Alberta Women’s Science Network and participate in Operation Minerva, which provides half-day workshops and half-day job shadowing to Grade 8 students who identify as girls or gender diverse.

Keffer-Wilkes also hopes to promote STEM to the broader community through public lectures and to provide focused learning opportunities for high school students. Coding and synthetic biology workshops could be offered through Agility, while lunch-and-learn sessions on STEM careers could be used to promote research and form bonds between colleagues. Networking with various groups on campus could increase awareness of STEM-focused events and educate faculty on the inherent biases and barriers women face in STEM.

The first initiative — I am a Scientist — is well underway and consists of a series of posters of women in STEM at the University in conjunction with Science Literacy Week from Sept. 19 to 25. These posters will be circulated on campus, shared on social media and posted at local libraries.

Additional plans include establishing a women-in-STEM speaker series and a organizing a women-in-STEM conference in February to coincide with International Day of Women and Girls in Science on Feb. 11. Activities are also being planned for Women in STEM Week in Alberta from Oct. 9 to 15.

“I’ve always been a really big advocate for women in STEM,” says Keffer-Wilkes. “As I was moving through undergraduate and graduate school, and then moving on to become an instructor here, I’ve seen a lot of peers not continue in STEM. I want to know why and what can be done to improve retention of women in STEM fields.”