

SIUE STEM Center Digital Event Showcases Budding Scientists

by Megan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE – A slew of event cancellations caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have left children and adults alike disappointed for a variety of reasons. Thankfully, not all previously scheduled events have had to cancel altogether. Instead, many event organizers are creatively using technology to move online.

The Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Center for STEM Research, Education and Outreach is one such innovative organization, converting the annual regional Science and Engineering Research Challenge (SERC) to a virtual science fair.

In late March, local 5-12th grade students experienced technology in action and joined the world in collaborative problem-solving. SERC features the finest STEM-focused student projects from a 10-county area. Participants uploaded their lab reports and submitted videos of their research presentations, which were judged by STEM experts from across the country.

“We are glad to have been able to offer our participants this experience after all of the hard work they had put into preparing for the event,” said STEM Center Instructor and Outreach Specialist Colin Wilson. “International, state and other regional science fairs canceled their events. It was important to us to do everything possible to ensure our local participants were able to showcase their hard work and innovative ideas.”

Wilson notes the virtual SERC was a success, leading organizers to document the process in hopes it can serve as a best-practice template for future science fairs. A welcome positive that arose was that the event was not limited by geography in its call for judges. Experts volunteered from across the nation and South America to review participants’ entries and offer constructive advice to help them advance their scientific inquiries.

The 2020 SERC Best of Challenge winner was Reagan Guerra of Metro East Lutheran High School in Edwardsville. For her superior work, Guerra won a trophy and a \$600 prize. Guerra also took first place in the paper competition, earning a medal and \$100.

“This event promotes independent critical thinking and the opportunity to learn through the scientific process,” Wilson said. “SIUE is proud to support these students who may go on to study in STEM fields and become future industry professionals.”

Winners in the senior division, included:

- 1st place: Prescott Jeckel of Delavan High School
- 2nd place: Amy Dong of Hinsdale Central High School
- 3rd place: Sam Berkely of Governor French Academy

Junior division winners were:

- 1st place: Lillian Kemper of Zion Lutheran School
- 2nd place: Jude Luesse of Columbus Elementary

- 3rd place: Will Wojcieszak of Liberty Middle School

The Southern Illinois University Edwardsville [Center for STEM Research, Education and Outreach](#) comprises an independent group of researchers and educators, innovating ways to engage students and the public in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Within the SIUE Graduate School, the Center brings together research faculty, graduate students and practitioners to conduct education research. The Center contributes educational expertise to SIUE undergraduate classes and provides professional development for K-12 teachers. The Center boasts a significant library of equipment and resources, which are available for loan at no cost to campus and regional instructors. For more information, visit <https://www.siu.edu/stem/> or contact STEM Center Director Sharon Locke at (618) 650-3065 or stemcenter@siue.edu.