Generating the next generation of O.C. scientists

UCI hosts first in-person Science Olympiad since onset of COVID-19 pandemic.
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Kimberly Edwards, a professor of teaching in the Department of Chemistry, has led UCI's involvement in the Orange County Regional Science Olympiad since it moved to the campus in 2015.

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Steve Zylius / UCI

After an unexpected two-year hiatus, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, UCI once again hosted the Orange County Regional Science Olympiad on Feb. 25. Despite the stormy weather, more than 1,000 students from middle and high schools throughout the county arrived on campus to undergo written exams and engage in partnered science projects and experiments. They were competing to make it to the Science Olympiad's next round, which pits teams from across California against each other in preparation for the national finals.

UCI's Kimberly Edwards, a professor of teaching in the Department of Chemistry, has led the university's involvement in the Science Olympiad, which began in 1984, since it moved to the Irvine campus in 2015. The last O.C. Regional Science Olympiad to be held at UCI took place in early 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the event moved online for 2021 and 2022. "This year we had rain, but it really went well," Edwards says. "I think everybody was happy to be back in person."

"They prepare all year long," she adds. "These kids are doing this instead of playing a sport, and they specialize in particular areas." The competition lasted from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and was open to both students and family members. "It's pretty incredible," Edwards says. Weather permitting, "the parents bring their E-Z UPs and order in huge crates of pizza. It's a crazy beehive."

She and Holly Steele, the Orange County Department of Education's STEM administrator, who's in charge of the O.C. Regional Science Olympiad, work together to recruit event writers, managers and monitors from UCI at the beginning of each spring quarter and also run a course teaching them how to do so.

"This connects with the Science Olympiad rules that the junior high and high school students are using to prepare for the event and what they need to do the day of the event in regard to proctoring and grading," Edwards says. "It's a real win-win: UCI students are able to give back to the junior high and high school students."

For example, she says, this year, Antonio Velasco, an electrical engineering major, responded to the recruitment call. He played a pivotal role in the management of the event and is in the process of setting up a Science Olympiad student club to provide future support for the competition at UCI and in the community.

Another UCI student who helped out was Megan Sullivan, a doctoral candidate in Earth system science. “This is the first year I contributed to the Orange County Regional Science Olympiad, but I’ve been somewhat involved most of my life,” she says, explaining that she competed in both middle and high school in Baltimore, where she grew up.

“As an undergrad at Johns Hopkins University, I mentored middle school teens in Baltimore County,” Sullivan adds. “My senior year, I wrote an exam for the Maryland state competition, and then I came to grad school at UCI. This year, I was an event writer and supervisor. We began getting the events together in September, and I basically volunteered for whichever earth science events didn’t have a writer. We started gathering resources like prior tests and then doing a lot of research on freshwater hydrology, which was the main topic of the event.”

More than 20 teams from O.C. middle schools and over 30 high school teams competed Feb. 25 at UCI, she notes. “I love the fact that there are a lot of environmental and earth science events, because there still isn’t much focus on that in high school and this gives them a lot of exposure to that,” Sullivan says. “It’s really cool to see how eager the kids are to learn.”

Irvine’s Sierra Vista Middle School, Irvine’s Jeffrey Trail Middle School and Santa Ana’s Orange County School of the Arts placed first, second and third, respectively, in the O.C. Regional Science Olympiad’s Division B. And Fullerton’s Troy High School, Irvine’s University High School and Irvine’s Portola High School placed first, second and third, respectively, in Division C.

If you want to learn more about supporting this or other activities at UCI, please visit the Brilliant Future website. The campaign aims to raise awareness and support for UCI. By engaging 75,000 alumni and garnering $2 billion in philanthropic investment, UCI seeks to reach new heights of excellence in student success, health and wellness, research and more. The School of Physical Sciences plays a vital role in the success of the campaign. Learn more by visiting https://brilliantfuture.uci.edu/uci-school-of-physical-sciences.

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