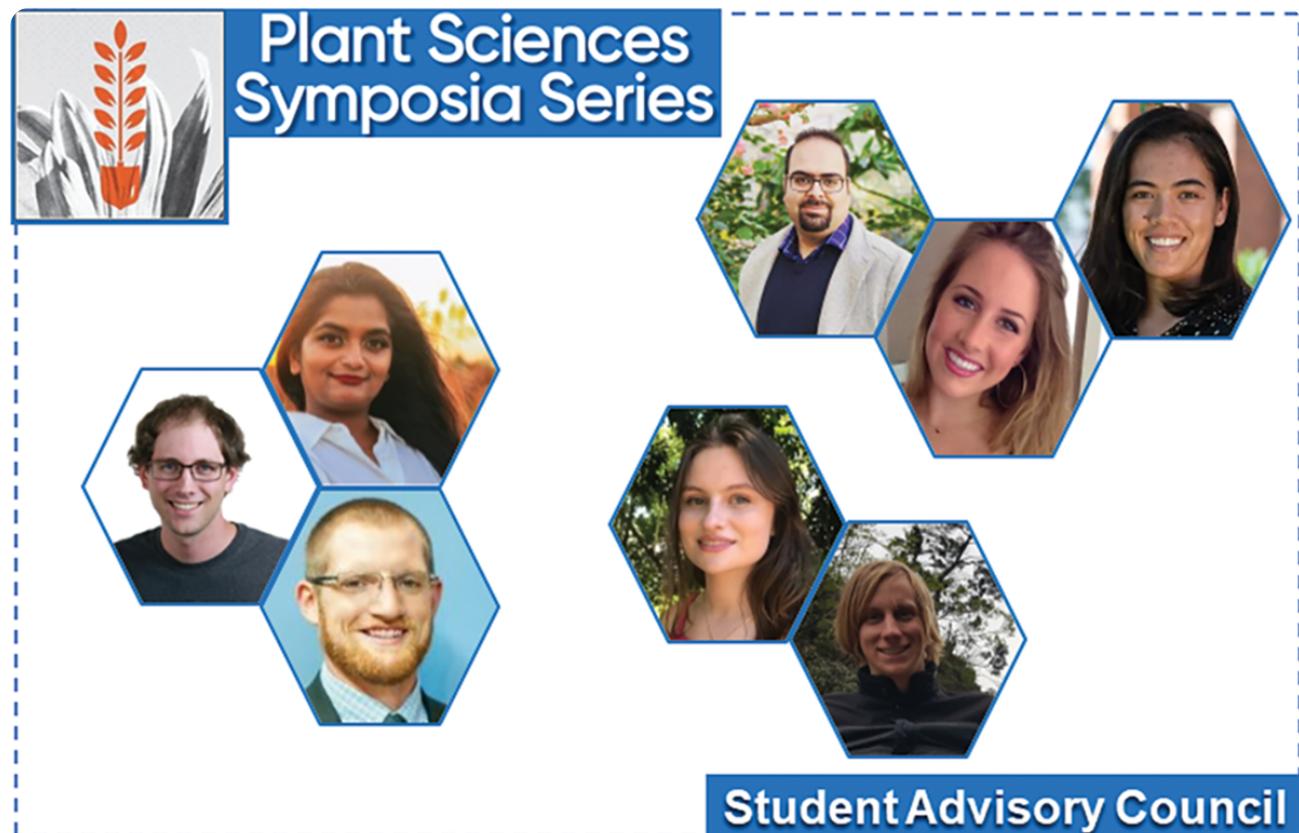




Virtual symposia drive student professional development around the world

By Cody Bekkering, Matthew Breitzman

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Members of the Student Advisory Council for the Plant Sciences Symposia Series. Left group, from top: Ammani N. Kyanam, Matthew Breitzman, and Tanner Cook. Top group,

from left: Mohsen Yoosefzadeh Najafabadi, Christina Finegan, and Merritt Khaipho-Burch. Bottom group, from left: Melina Prado and Cody Bekkering.

The Plant Sciences Symposia Series is a network of events hosted around the world centered on contemporary research in plant sciences. These events are sponsored by Corteva Agriscience and feature disciplines including plant breeding, agronomy, soil science, and biotechnology. Symposia are often daylong events that consist of talks, breakout sessions, workshops, or panels. Beyond the content and programming, the hallmark innovation of the series is that it is an interconnected group of events all planned and organized by graduate students at host institutions. They are given a clean slate to build and maintain their events' brand year after year. In giving student organizers a network of creative spaces, the Plant Sciences Symposia Series represents a novel approach to outreach and graduate education. This series thus provides organizers with invaluable professional skills such as teamwork, event planning, and logistics alongside a growing professional network.

Since its founding in 2008, more than 200 events have taken place at more than 65 institutions globally. Student organizers have found successful careers in industry, government, and academia that leverage skills honed during their involvement in the symposia series. Symposia are often hosted at universities or within national and international meetings. However, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed the event landscape into a virtual environment. Graduate student organizers met this new test head-on and responded to the adversity by continuing to host engaging, student-led events. The virtual component has led to unique challenges and opportunities for

growth.

Challenges of Virtual Events

Graduate students face substantial barriers navigating the professional ecosystem as early career scholars and often lack a large professional network and formal experience coordinating events. These barriers were further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. As organizers, students needed to interact with diverse sets of people in various career stages while designing an engaging and marketable event in an uncharted virtual world. Communication had to carefully be crafted and conveyed as uncertainty in correspondence could lead to event failures. The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly challenging with student organizers needing to cancel venues on short notice after initially planning in-person events.

“Serving as an organizer helped me learn how to better lead a team and how to be a more effective at delegating work within a group.”

Matthew Carroll, Iowa State University

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Instead of reserving venues, students now needed to learn event technology and ensure that it was accessible to a national or even international audience. This led to experimentation with several platforms, including Zoom and Remo, that organizers thoughtfully chose while keeping cost and complexity in mind. Events then needed to be planned in ways that maximized audience engagement and minimized the exhaustion of virtual events (colloquially known as “Zoom Fatigue”). Possible connectivity issues also brought the possibility of speakers disconnecting without warning during talks, questions, or networking—a consideration foreign to in-person event planning. Speaker time zones were also a scheduling concern for the student organizers, especially with speakers and participants joining from overseas.

Translating Symposia to a Virtual World

Even in the virtual setting, the core aspects of the symposia series were still intact from before the pandemic. It was still a network of spaces for cutting-edge research to be disseminated. Opportunities for sponsorship and brand placement were still intact (or even expanded) for new and perennial sponsors of local events. The events also continued to serve as a venue for other early-career scholars to present their work in virtual talks and electronic posters—giving them key experiences to put their verbal and written communication skills into practice. Dialog among events in the series continued also—with organizers at partner institutions and with the Student Advisory Council of the series serving as a vital resource for virtual event best practices.

However, not all aspects of in-person events were entirely preserved in the virtual setting. Enabling networking in virtual symposia remains challenging for even seasoned

event organizers. Student organizers needed to grapple with technical barriers to group discussion such as delays, time zones, audio snags, and even digital room assignments. Accounting for these in advance was crucial for planning virtual symposia during the pandemic.

Growth in a Virtual Setting

There were many fruitful aspects unique to virtual events that were leveraged by the graduate student organizers. The first was the reduced time needed to coordinate the virtual venue. No longer was it necessary to book conference centers, travel, or meal catering. This led to the second profound benefit: cost reduction. Virtual conference licenses are far more affordable than in-person meetings, which substantially lowered the fundraising needs of the event organizers. Finally, going virtual allowed for wider audience participation from dozens of countries. This extended the cultural representation within the symposia by reducing the financial barrier of travel that has historically barred many groups from taking part.

Examples of the growth made possible by virtual symposia include innovative cross-institutional events, such as the West African Virtual Symposium, which connects graduate students at multiple countries and institutions across Africa and provides them with a platform to share their work and interact with peers and researchers worldwide. In Brazil, students affiliated with the Brazilian Seed Technology Association Congress organized an event that included scientific talks as well as a hackathon-like competition that brought teams from dozens of universities across Brazil to solve challenges facing the seed industry.

Beyond the Series—Graduate Student Professional Development

The success of this symposia series has several implications for graduate education in the plant sciences. First, graduate students benefit from organizing meaningful events, even when challenged by global circumstances. Furthermore, the Plant Sciences Symposia Series represents a successful approach to facilitating professional development by giving students tangible products and connections that can be utilized when pursuing careers post-graduation. Moreover, this series serves as a model for institutional outreach by fostering a network of interconnected events centered on cutting-edge research in the plant sciences. The symposia series has set the stage for dialog and networking across institutions from both the public and private sectors by cultivating these international spaces for discourse all under the same banner.

The challenge that lies ahead is to find ways to return to in-person events without losing the access, impact, and creativity provided by our experience in the virtual world. Plans to expand the symposia series model to other scientific disciplines have already begun with the first Chemistry Symposium having been co-hosted by Yale University and the University of Michigan in 2021. As the program transitions from the Plant Sciences Symposia Series to a broader Corteva Symposia Series, it will hopefully continue to impact students at more institutions and scholarly communities, continuing its mission to promote professional development and inclusion within the scientific community.

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