

Consortium Connections

Connecting campuses to promote excellence in science and mathematics

January 2026

Founded by the Pew Charitable Trusts in 1988

Vol. 19 No. 1

Mark your calendar for upcoming events:

- March 31, 2026: Janet Andersen Award nominations due
- April 25, 2026: Executive Board Meeting
- July 7-9, 2026: Mid-Career Workshop. Application live online. Due by May 8
- July 14-16, 2026: Workshop for Early Career Success. Application live. Due by May 8
- Nov. 6-7, 2026: Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science Undergraduate Research Symposium at Washington University in St. Louis
- Nov. 13-14, 2026: Biological Sciences and Psychology Undergraduate Research Symposium at the University of Chicago
 - All URS applications will be live on July 1, 2026. They are due by midnight on Sept. 21, 2026 except University of Chicago which has an Oct. 5 deadline

Director's Comments

At the two Undergraduate Research Symposia over 200 students eagerly discussed their research with one another and the 30 faculty in attendance. Presenters reported that they enjoyed interacting with peers from the Consortium institutions and learning about the myriad research projects. Many participants said the symposium generated excitement for careers, whether as a scientist or in seeing the role that research plays in their future.

Due to restrictions on venue availability, we had to hold the Biological and Psychological Sciences URS on Halloween, which resulted in fewer applicants. Yet, five institutions had more applicants than MCMS limits. With rebalancing and funding from home institutions, additional applicants were able to attend.

	Biological & Psychological Sciences	Physical Sciences, Math & Computer Science
Oral presenters	29	40
Poster presenters	62	76
Faculty	13	17
Total	104	132

Many thanks to our hosts at Washington University in St. Louis, Drs. Anthony Smith and Andrew Richards, and Dr. Scott Snyder, Sara Baker and Lucas Williams at the University of Chicago.

Events for the **Biological and Psychological Sciences URS** kicked off on Friday, October 31 at the Eric P. Newman Event Center in St. Louis. Dr. Keith Hengen from Washington University gave the keynote address titled, *One Step from Chaos and It's All Good*. Dr. Hengen's neurobiology lab investigates questions centered on how computation emerges from biological systems, and how billions of neurons can generate cognition. He discussed criticality, a setpoint around which healthy brains optimize computation. He discussed the dynamics that maximize information processing, and the models and machine learning tools his lab uses to find meaningful structure in complexity.



After dinner, Dr. Elizabeth DeStasio from Lawrence University gave the Janet Andersen Award lecture titled, *A Transparent Window on Genetics and Gene Expression*. Dr. DeStasio discussed how different model systems from *E. coli* to *Arabidopsis* or rats allow biologists to answer different kinds of research questions. She then focused on how the transparency of her model organism, *C. elegans*, had been vital in addressing questions related to neurobiology, gene expression and development. Dr. DeStasio also highlighted the contributions of over 110 undergraduate collaborators in her research program.



Biologists and Psychologists at Washington University in St. Louis

On Saturday, attendees spent the day listening to presentations at one of three concurrent oral sessions, and then engaging with research at the three poster sessions. At lunch, students had the opportunity to choose from a panel of graduate students or MD/PhD candidates from Washington University who discussed their experiences pre- and post-baccalaureate. Staffed tables with summer research program and graduate school information were also available.

Events for the **Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Sciences URS** began on Friday, November 7 at The Study at the University of Chicago. Co-recipient of the 2009 Nobel Prize, Dr. Jack Szostak from the University of Chicago, gave the keynote address. His talk, *How Did Chemistry Give Rise to Biology on the Early Earth?* discussed recent research focused on the RNA hypothesis, where lipid-bound protocells in UV-intense environments could synthesize other macromolecules and replicate. He emphasized curiosity and employing a trans-disciplinary approach across domains of knowledge rather than being siloed.



After dinner, Dr. Amanda Nienow, from Gustavus Adolphus College, gave the Janet Andersen Award Lecture. Her lecture, *Chasing Light, Cultivating Purpose: Undergraduate Research in Environmental Chemistry* focused on the photodegradation of the herbicides, imazethapyr and dicamba.



Her undergraduate research lab uses analytical techniques like HPLC and mass spectrometry to determine degradation rates and transformation products in different environmental conditions. She also discussed how her research students have gained technical and professional skills, which catalyzed their careers in chemistry, medicine, environmental policy, and outside of science.

Amanda Nienow, front, pictured, with Gustavus Adolphus College attendees (L-R): Youdahe Asfaw, Samantha Anderson, Jaxon Jones, Bradyn Nordeen, Kendall Wiggins, Miranda Vizoso-Marino and Jonathan Ryan

On Saturday, attendees circulated to learn more from the presenters at three poster sessions, and at three concurrent oral sessions. Over lunch, graduate students from the University of Chicago discussed their path to graduate school and what their lives entail.



Physical and Computer Scientists and Mathematicians at the University of Chicago

The programs for both Undergraduate Research Symposium, including the abstracts for the presentations, are posted on the Midstates website at mathsciconsortium.org.

Funding for Speakers and Short Term Collaborations

MCMS programs can provide money to support a seminar speaker at your institution or fund collaborative work with someone at a Midstates Consortium institution.

Speakers Series: The Speakers Series facilitates the exchange of ideas between members of the consortium. Consortium funds are available to pay for the travel, lodging and meals associated with a visiting speaker. In the 2025-2026 academic year, we sponsored three speakers at Colorado and Grinnell Colleges. Midstates could sponsor additional speakers this spring if you have interest in bringing someone in!

Short-Term Collaborations (STC) encourage and support collaborations involving individuals at different consortium campuses. In July 2025, Dr. Deanna Donohue (Lawrence University) used the STC to travel to Gustavus Adolphus College in order to learn more about and to co-facilitate the Early Career Workshop. We would happily fund other collaborations related to consultation on curriculum, research, demonstration of a laboratory technique for teaching or research, advising on proposal and project assessment, or the use of laboratory equipment.

Please search Consortium schools websites for speakers or potential collaborators. The applications for the programs are short and simple, and available at mathsciconsortium.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Nominations for the 2025 Janet Andersen Award Lecture

Nominations for the 2025 Janet Andersen Lecture Award are due March 31, 2026. Please send the nominee's CV and a brief email or letter outlining the nominee's achievements in mentoring research students and in teaching to Pamela Kittelson (midstatesdirector@gmail.com). Nominees are selected by the Executive Committee. Awardees present at the fall Undergraduate Research Symposia on a topic of his or her choice. This award honors Professor Janet Andersen from Hope College. As a teacher and scholar in the Mathematics Department, Janet provided creative, high quality learning experiences for her students. She also found ways to connect and support faculty as the Midstates Consortium Director.



Executive Board Meeting

The Midstates executive committee is scheduled to meet virtually on April 25, 2026. Campus representatives from each institution will review annual programming, including budgets and future consortium activities. The proposal for next year's budget also will be deliberated. The Janet Andersen Lecture awardees for the fall URS also will be chosen.

Early Career Workshop

The early career workshop is scheduled for July 14-16, 2026. It will be held at a new venue, Lawrence University with new co-facilitators, Drs. Deanna Donohoue from Lawrence and Scott Snyder from the University of Chicago. Participants in the Early Career Workshop will generate a strategic plan for the next 2-4 years. To create their individualized plan, attendees will reflect on



goals related to teaching, research and other aspects of an academic career. Discussions also consider the changing landscape of higher education and work-life balance. Participants benefit from listening to and giving feedback to colleagues. Ample time will be given to developing and refining potential strategies and actions.

There is no cost. The workshop is open to faculty completing their first or second year, newly hired tenure track or term appointment faculty, postdocs and advanced graduate students interested in working at undergraduate institutions in the physical and biological sciences, mathematics, computer science and psychology. Applications are due May 8. Decisions about participation will be made no later than May 18, 2026. A complete description and application can be found at mathsciconsortium.org.

The Midcareer Faculty Workshop is scheduled for July 7-9, 2026, at Lawrence University with co-facilitators Drs. Kimberly Dickson (L.U.) and Pamela Kittelson (MCMS and Gustavus). Participants in the Midcareer Workshop will generate a strategic plan by reflecting on priorities and expectations associated with a post-tenure academic career. Challenges in higher education and work-life balance also are considered. Ample time will be given to thinking about actions and discussing strategies with colleagues.

There is no cost. The workshop is open to faculty post tenure in the physical and biological sciences, mathematics, computer science and psychology who consider themselves ‘midcareer.’ Application due May 8. Decisions about participation will be made no later than May 18, 2026. A complete description and application can be found at mathsciconsortium.org.

Undergraduate Research Symposia

The Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science Symposium is set for Nov. 6-7, 2026 at Washington University in St. Louis. The Biological Sciences and Psychology Symposium is Nov. 13-14, 2026 at the University of Chicago. Applications will be available on the Consortium website (mathsciconsortium.org) on July 1. The deadline for all campuses is September 21, 2026 except University of Chicago which has until midnight on October 5, 2026.