



Sara Bingham, Associate Director, Women Entrepreneurship Centre  
Lazaridis School of Business and Communications  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
[sbingham@wlu.ca](mailto:sbingham@wlu.ca) or 519.729.1436

Kate Tippin, Director of Marketing and Communications  
Lazaridis School of Business and Communications  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
[ktippin@wlu.ca](mailto:ktippin@wlu.ca) or 226.791.6489

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## Laurier's Lazaridis School receives funding boost to support women entrepreneurs

WATERLOO – Wilfrid Laurier University's Women Entrepreneurship Centre has received \$290,000 in funding from the federal government's Women Entrepreneurship Strategy's Ecosystem Fund. The funding is part of \$4.8 million in additional funding designed to support women entrepreneurs in Ontario as they adapt and grow during the pandemic.

In August 2019, [Laurier received up to \\$1,385,000 in funding through the Ecosystem Fund](#) to support women entrepreneurs. The funding was part of a \$2-billion investment aimed at doubling the number of women-owned businesses by 2025.

"We are grateful for the federal government's continuing commitment to the Women Entrepreneurship Centre at Laurier," said Micheál J. Kelly, dean of Laurier's Lazaridis School of Business and Economics. "This gift provided a much-needed platform for talented women across essential industries to innovate and to breathe new life into the Canadian economy."

The announcement was made by Mary Ng, minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade at the [StrikeUP 2021](#) conference, hosted by the original 19 Women Entrepreneurship Strategy Ecosystem partners and led by [Northumberland Community Futures Development Corporation](#).

Located within the Lazaridis School of Business and Economics, the Women Entrepreneurship Centre has used the Ecosystem funding to support women entrepreneurs across southern Ontario, particularly those businesses within retail, hospitality, allied health and food sectors that need digital marketing support, such as website design, branding, social media support and related training.

The centre is dedicated to empowering women entrepreneurs to achieve their business dreams. The centre's programs include workshops for Indigenous women entrepreneurs, a Grow-My-Business Accelerator and a Start-My-Business Boot Camp, as well as one-on-one business consultations, mentorships and networking events.

"Our centre partnered with several digital media companies in the area that are also women-led to provide these digital boosts to women entrepreneurs," said Sara Bingham, associate director of the Women Entrepreneurship Centre. "We have an incredible community here that has been coming together to help each other manage through the pandemic. With each other's support, we will come back stronger."

One such company, [UNSGND](#), is a Toronto-based design agency focused on building brands for small businesses and artists while creating opportunities for young women of colour to work in design and tech.

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"As a young entrepreneur, working with Laurier's digital boost program has greatly impacted my business, allowing us to scale while being able to positively impact other women-owned businesses through branding and design strategies," said Dymika Harte, [UNSGND](#) founder and creative director. "From a financial standpoint, this contract has allowed us to bring back team members that had been previously laid off due to the impacts of the pandemic, while also providing new opportunities to other young women professionals."

The pandemic has affected women entrepreneurs particularly hard. Mercy Onuoha, founder of Ephatha Fashion, has witnessed the challenges firsthand.

"As our business faced the impact of the pandemic, especially meeting and attending to clients in person, the need to have an online presence became so pressing and the digital boost came at the right time. Now, we are working on a website where customers can interact with us online," said Onuoha.

The Women Entrepreneurship Centre originally set out to help 345 women start their businesses and 90 women to grow their existing businesses, while providing workshops, mentorship programs and networking activities to at least 25 underrepresented women. Since the centre launched, they have already worked with more than 1,500 entrepreneurs. In September, the centre's second accelerator will begin and, by spring 2022, the centre will launch workshops for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

The funding aligns with Laurier's strategic focus on fostering an equitable, diverse and inclusive community, which spans many university initiatives, including research. In 2019, Laurier was selected as one of 17 post-secondary institutions to participate in a Government of Canada pilot program, [Dimensions: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Canada](#), to increase equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in research. Laurier has also secured a federal [EDI Institutional Capacity-Building Grant](#) and was also one of the first institutions to sign the [Dimensions Charter](#), which commits participating institutions to embracing EDI across disciplines and to implementing specific measures to address systemic barriers underrepresented groups face within academia.

Laurier introduced its [action plan for equity, diversity, inclusion and Indigeneity](#) earlier this year, which was developed as a concerted effort for the university to realize and hold itself accountable to its EDI goals. The plan outlines institution-wide strategies and initiatives based on research and consultations within the Laurier community.