

## **Strengthening Public Health Interest Groups: Lessons Learned**

The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada (AFMC) received funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada to advance public health education. One of the objectives set out is to enhance public health competencies in all medical school graduates and increase student interest in choosing community medicine as their specialization. Funding was made available to students who were interested in forming Public Health Interest Groups (PHIG) at their respective schools.

This information sheet contains suggestions and ideas based on lessons learned, with the hopes that it will provide assistance to the sustainability of PHIGs. The three key areas highlighted are: Structure and Sustainability; Recruitment; and Activity Planning.

### **Structure and Sustainability**

A well structured interest group is an asset in its creation and stability. Many aspects play a role in creating a strong and coherent group.

**An executive should be created with defined roles and responsibilities.** This ensures that everyone is aware of what they should be doing and distributes the workload. Some groups have created positions around the coordination of events such as: speakers' coordinator; elective coordinator and many more. There are also specific roles such as treasurer and co-chairs that should be filled.

**Have the executive members focus on their area of interest.** For example, if a member is keen on organizing lectures, but not the food or advertising for the events, let someone else handle the food and advertising. Giving members responsibility for the tasks they're interested in will help keep them engaged.

**Seek executive members from other health professions.** Once a connection is made with other health professional students, welcome them to your executive. This will enrich your group by broadening its base, scope and outreach to other health professional students who are also involved / interested in public health.

Students' lives are already extremely busy so some ways to help the executive move its agenda forward is to **create working groups for activities/events**. The working groups would work with the executive member who is planning a specific activity. This will disperse the workload and get members involved and possibly promote interest for future leadership roles.

Another way is to **seek out advisors**: Some examples of advisors include: AFMC Public Health Educators' Network representative; community health residents; resident coordinators; and local community groups with a public health focus. These connections can play an invaluable tool when planning activities and events.

**Leadership succession is vital to the continuation of the interest groups.** One of the roles of the Executive is to assure leadership succession. An example that has proven to work well is to seek members interested in leadership roles early in the year (those in their junior years in the program) and have them shadow current leaders so they will be able to take over from students going into clerkship or leaving the group for other reasons.

**Financial planning is key.** It's important to save surplus funds for the following year and years. Some interest groups hold fundraisers to raise money for future sustainability. Some have been able to get grants from their schools or other sources on an annual basis; others are saving now for next year and beyond.

Some schools have **distributed campus sites**. AFMC funding is open to each site. Therefore, each site can have their own executive and plan their own events. Communication should be maintained between the various campuses and collaborative activities incorporated if possible.

**Hold an annual forum either at the beginning or end of the school year** to allow members as a whole to discuss ideas and goals for the upcoming year. Members will then have a better idea of what will be happening and can become more active in the organization of activities and events.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment is a key part, along with the activities, that can assist in the retention of members and the overall success of a group.

**Promote to other healthcare students.** Since health care is delivered in an interprofessional manner, it is important that those working relationships be created prior to practice, during one's education. Promoting group membership to other healthcare students will also increase the number of members.

Some schools are limited to how much interprofessional work can occur due to the physical isolation of the school. If this is a situation it is important to **work with advisors that are from other health disciplines**. The majority of other health professional students will have their own general groups (such as the Nursing Society, Physiotherapy Society etc.). Try and contact them and see if you could have an opportunity to discuss your group and its activities at their next meeting. If this avenue does not prove successful you can also look to professors in the other areas. Even making short announcements and/or presentations in their classes can help spread the word about the public health interest group.

Many groups find **the beginning of the school year to be a great opportunity to recruit new members.** Some groups have held an “Awareness Week” to promote their group. You have to make yourself visible to as many people as possible to gain interest.

**Recruitment should continue throughout the school year.** Activities and meetings should be promoted by making class announcements, posting flyers and posters around the school and or on a website, and/or sending out emails.

When meetings and activities are being held always **put money in the budget for food and refreshments.** This is an enticing factor to many people and make sure that it is promoted as well.

#### Activity planning

When planning the year’s activities it is important to **work within your means.** It is better to focus on fewer events that are manageable and of interest. When planning activities consider a time that would be the most convenient for students to attend.

Once the activities plan for the year has been created, it is important to **prepare a timeline to help with the planning process.** This will help in the overall success of an event. For example if the group wants a recruitment campaign during orientation week for the new students, you want to have people on a working group and planning prior to summer break. This helps the event to happen and diminish any last minute stresses that can occur. Also **if activities were a success the previous year and there is interest, re-do those activities.** You don’t need to re-invent the wheel.

Some groups **partner with other interest groups** such as Global Health, etc. on specific events of mutual interest. Just don’t lose sight of your group’s own interests when you partner with others.

The following is a list of some of the activities done by public health interest groups:

- Created a community medicine bursary for a student to participate in community medicine elective over the summer. This is a great way to work in promoting public health practice.
- Created a community medicine elective day. This takes quite a bit of planning and involvement from numerous individuals.
- Collaborated with a pre-existing course (global health) and advocated for a public health lesson to be incorporated into the course structure.
- Advocated with advisors to have public health grand rounds open to students.
- Presentations and lectures were held by many groups – one group did manage to use video-conferencing to expand the presentation to their other sites.

- Hosted movie and discussion nights – many documentaries are available around different aspects of public health (such as health and homelessness) and is a great avenue to bring people together and evoke discussions on critical issues.
- Produced and disseminated culturally appropriate educational outreach packages to use with youth in Aboriginal communities called "Eating Well" that can be reused and improved on by future group members.
- Created a list of Public Health professionals that were open to having students shadow them. This can be time consuming in relation to the plan phase but a remarkable opportunity. This is another way that the advisors can play an invaluable role with their own networks in the community.
- Assisted with securing student placements (one school was able to secure an opportunity in an Aboriginal community)
- Hosted a “health and hygiene” evening for local refugees.
- Hosted a conference – this could be planned in partnership with other groups and open to other healthcare professional students.
- Planned a public health Career Fair/Night.
- Developed a web site that has the potential to be used by all public health interest groups.

AFMC would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of all the students who started public health interest groups in their schools. If there are any suggestions or best practices that you have experienced and feel would be of assistance to other schools please contact, Colleen Gushue, Project Associate, at [cgushue@afmc.ca](mailto:cgushue@afmc.ca).

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