



**Learning Year Lessons:
Feedback Report and Recommendations**

Fall 2024

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This report and its recommendations are the product of an open feedback session hosted at our First-Annual Policy Challenge, in addition to the suggestions of Taylor Volappi, MSc, Trainee Representative to the OHAP Steering Committee, and anecdotal observations made throughout the year by the Program Director and Associate Director.



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Executive Summary

Internal Communication and Organization

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Last-minute events scheduling - Inconsistent communication - Impact on mandatory events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monthly newsletter implemented - Trainee calendar more consistently updated, more widely distributed - Optional studios increase flexibility

General Programming

Winter Semester Overcrowding

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overbooked Winter Semester - Overwhelming combination of OHAP course, studios, and Policy Challenge - Worsened by mandatory attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Felt hardest by first-year trainees - Studios individually optional, with mandatory minimums for participation - Offer OHAP course asynchronously - Streamline Policy Challenge

Time Zones and Synchronous Activities

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Early-morning events scheduling for Saskatchewan participants - Time zones not advertised - Demand for asynchronous activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No scheduling before 9h00 CST - Clearly indicate time zones - Offer OHAP course asynchronously - Consider asynchronous studios

The OHAP Course

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Late notice of course and syllabus - Supervisors unwilling or unable to organize independent study courses - Non-McGill trainees received no credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Course and syllabus now already prepared, to be communicated earlier - Deputize co-applicants to coordinate independent study courses

Mentorships and Networking

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of guidance for mentorships - Low professional diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create guidelines for mentorships - Recruit collaborators from non-profits



Virtual Forum Organizing

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Low interest among trainees- Difficulty sourcing organizers- Jeopardizes ability of other trainees to meet program requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Incentivize volunteering through special distinction- Consider reducing program requirements for volunteers

The Policy Challenge

Challenge Design

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Disorganized, lacked clear guidance- No PhD-MSc collaboration- Overly similar proposals, not helped by peer-editing- Unnecessary timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Recruit experts to revise guidance and rubrics to share with trainees- Join PhD and MSc challenges- Multiple, categorical subtopics- Condense timeline

Coaching and Training

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Relevant training was too early or late- Disagreements between judges and coach, content vs. presentation- Too many coaching sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Reschedule studios around Challenge- Share judging rubric with coaches- Recruit policy coach to join and coordinate with presentation coach- Fewer coaching sessions, no content changes after deadlines

The Retreat

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Consider new and/or rotating venue, closer to an urban centre- Too much downtime, unable to appreciate local attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Gault remains the best option- Limit and reorganize downtime- Consider alternative recreational activities



Outreach and Recruitment

Public Awareness and Social Media

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Low public awareness in target groups- Poor engagement from members- Meagre social media presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Prioritize content creation- Deputizing social media coordinator(s)- Leverage engagement boosts from high-profile partners

Breaking the OHAP Bubble

Concerns	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Recruitment biases for McGill students and co-applicant supervisees- Comparably few organic applications- Difficulty meeting recruitment quotas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Continue leveraging co-applicants and collaborators to meet quotas- Prioritize institutional networks over social media advertising- Recruitment outreach master list



Recommendations for Internal Communications and Organization

Trainees expressed frustration at our internal communications, which they described as inconsistent and infrequent. Concerns were raised over insufficient notice given for studios and other events. In some instances, students were informed of mandatory events as little as two weeks in advance.

One clear cause of miscommunication has been the inconsistent means by which trainees were notified of upcoming events. OHAP has historically made use of a shared digital calendar, supplemented by notifications of individual events sent by email. Regrettably, there have been several cases where events were added to the shared trainee calendar but not communicated by email or vice-versa. The expectation being, in these cases, that our trainees would make frequent checks of our calendar and of their inboxes. This expectation, however fair or unfair, did not acknowledge the strenuous workload of their studies nor their fair expectation that we would advertise each event by every available means.

Response

A knee-jerk reaction to miscommunication may be to bombard our trainees with notifications and reminders for each event. We are cognizant, however, of the immense existing volume of emails regularly received by graduate students – another concern raised by our trainees. At the suggestion of the Trainee Representative, we have, instead, implemented a regular newsletter containing all upcoming events for the month, in addition to other notable varia. While only a handful of editions have been released so far, they have been issued consistently month-to-month with initial positive reviews.

Any instances of events not being added to the shared calendar, meanwhile, appear to have been isolated to the early months of the program and have not presented as a recurrent problem. Further, we have distributed a subscription link, which trainees can link to their own calendars, improving ease of access.

While we do hope consistent means of communication will alleviate the frustration felt by our trainees, the means of communication do not address all causes of insufficient notice given for mandatory events.

In our attempts to maintain a full calendar, we have faced persistent issues of non-responsiveness from previously committed studio facilitators. We are, to an extent, at the mercy of these individuals, who volunteer their time and expertise, often with no expectation of compensation. It is further worth noting that many of our studio facilitators have working schedules that are both highly demanding and unpredictable. With that said, the combination of non-responsiveness and erratic



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availabilities has manifested principally as last-minute scheduling. We have regularly had to choose between booking a facilitator with little notice or delaying their event indefinitely.

At present, there is no clear solution to our scheduling difficulties, whose impact on our trainees was exacerbated by the prevalence of mandatory, synchronous events unique to the 2023-2024 academic year. We expect, however, that the relaxing of mandatory attendance, as described later in this report, will alleviate the stressful impact of last-minute scheduling. Further, the advent of monthly newsletters has, in effect, created somewhat of a minimum notice – at the very least, events cannot be scheduled the month of.

Recommendations for Scheduling and General Programming

Winter Semester Overcrowding

We heard from our trainees that the Winter program schedule was overbooked. They found the compounded workload of the Winter studios, OHAP course, and Policy Challenge to be overwhelming. The reported overcrowding of the Winter semester could be attributed, in part, to a unique demand placed on our first cohort. The 2023 cohort included several upper-year MSc and PhD students, necessitating an accelerated timeline to complete our program requirements before the end of their studies. As such, we mandated that trainees of this cohort attend all studios offered in the 2023-2024 academic year. Thus, rather than attending the expected 5-6 studios per year, the 2023 cohort was asked to attend ten studios, all of which were conducted synchronously.

Response

In the added context of their full-time studies, concerns about schedule packing are more than understandable. This problem may not be as present among second and third-year trainees, who will not be retaking the course or yearly studios, though this remains to be seen. We should, regardless, explore solutions to ensure each OHAP trainee's first year leaves a good impression, with work-life balance being a primary consideration.

More tangibly, the extraordinary mandatory attendance requirements imposed on the 2023 cohort are no longer necessary. With proceeding cohorts comprised almost exclusively of first-year MSc and PhD students, we are free to allow them greater flexibility in building their training schedules, demanding only that they participate in the prescribed minimum number of studios.

To ensure trainees meet minimum program standards, their attendance will continue to be closely monitored, with individual interventions made if and when



trainees fall short of expectations. We will also explore the practicality of delivering annual or semesterly attendance reports to each trainee, enabling them to better modulate their schedules. We anticipate these changes in attendance practices will alleviate the majority of their workload concerns.

The proposed streamlining of the Policy Challenge, described later in this report, will further serve to reduce the strain on our participants.

Time Zones and Synchronous Activities

Regarding the time-of-day scheduling of events, complaints have been raised by our participants at the University of Saskatchewan, whose time zone is one to two hours ahead of the remainder of the cohort. Past mandatory events have been scheduled at 9h00 EDT, requiring our Saskatchewanian trainees to join at 7h00 CST – well before the customary start of working hours. Unnecessary confusion was also created wherever time zones were not indicated, a recurrent issue.

Such arguably unreasonable scheduling expectations, including the aforementioned concerns of overscheduling, have precipitated an expressed desire to expand asynchronous options for participation. Trainees have specifically requested that our studios, which have so far been exclusively synchronous, be offered asynchronously to fit more easily with the rigid schedules of their studies and research.

Response

Asynchronous participation in the OHAP program is not unprecedented. The OHAP Course, for example, has seen students participate at least partially asynchronously. They did so through ad-hoc accommodation, however, as the course was initially intended to be completed synchronously. The course employs several methods of teaching, both lecture-based and experiential. Students could be given and made aware of the option to participate in any didactic components asynchronously, as some already have. To what extent the experiential elements could be de-synchronized, however, remains an open question.

Similarly, it's unclear to what extent our studios could, or should, be de-synchronized. They also employ a mixture of lecture-based and experiential learning but do so in the span of single sessions. Further, while the OHAP course features several methods of evaluation, our studios rely on attendance to gauge participation. We should, nonetheless, explore the concept, perhaps encouraging our studio facilitators to consider asynchronous participation when designing their lesson plans. In the meantime, we expect that the discontinuation of mandatory studio attendance will, at least partially, alleviate the core concerns that asynchronous offerings would seek to address.



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Lastly, it should go without saying that no events will be scheduled before 9h00 CST (11h00 EDT or 10h00 EST). The working hours of our Saskatchewanian trainees should be respected, and previous failures to do so were thoughtless mistakes not to be repeated. Time zones should also be clearly indicated on all events to avoid possible confusion.

The OHAP Course

The first OHAP course was offered at McGill University in Winter 2023 as ANSC 691: Special Topic: Animal Sciences. While the lectures, coursework, and class portal were made accessible to all trainees, formal registration was open only to those based at McGill. An attempt was made, however, to ensure that non-McGill trainees could receive documented credit for their completion of the course. Trainees were instructed to work with their supervisors to arrange credited independent study or “special topics” courses at their respective universities based on the ANSC 691 syllabus, whereby their completion of the ANSC 691 coursework would satisfy the requirements of their independent study.

While some upper-year students were content to complete the coursework without receiving credit, having already satisfied their program requirements, others were eager to integrate the OHAP course into their degree. Despite their interest, no trainees other than those registered at McGill received documented credit for their completion of the OHAP course. The ANSC 691 syllabus and instructions to register for independent study were only communicated to students on December 15, 2023, roughly three weeks before the course was scheduled to begin. Trainees reported that their supervisors were unable or unwilling to perform the administrative work necessary to establish the planned independent study courses in the timeframe given.

Response

The timeline imposed on our trainees and their supervisors to register for independent study was admittedly unfair – particularly considering the fact they had not been previously made aware of this requirement. Students had been made aware from the beginning that they would be required to attend a course offered in the Winter semester. Even students based at McGill, however, reported difficulty rearranging their schedules to accommodate the OHAP course on such short notice. The delayed communication of the ANSC 691 syllabus and independent study directive was a product of our own difficulty navigating, for the first time, the bureaucratic processes necessary to establish a new course. With ANSC 691 having already been established, we should have no trouble giving appropriate advance notice to our trainees moving forward.

With that said, while the timeline in which their supervisors were expected to establish independent study courses was regrettable, it was not impossible. At McGill, for example, a supervisor would have had until January 16, 2024, a full



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month, to submit a three-page document, the entire contents of which could be found on the provided syllabus. While we cannot speak to the specific requirements of our partner schools, it is nonetheless disappointing to find that our trainees' supervisors were not willing or otherwise able to file the paperwork that would have given their students well-deserved course credit.

Despite this disappointment, it is worth acknowledging the bureaucratic inefficiency of tasking each individual trainee with coordinating an individual independent study course with their individual supervisor. Moving forward, we could, instead, leverage the presence of our co-applicants at each partner school, some of which are themselves involved in teaching the OHAP course. We might consider deputizing a co-applicant at each university to complete the required paperwork and obtain the necessary signatures from their colleagues and trainees. In doing so, we would streamline the administrative process and create a system of accountability, ensuring that any trainee entitled to course credit will receive it.

Mentorships and Networking

While OHAP boasts a 100% trainee-mentor match rate among its 2023 cohort, students have raised concerns over the notably open-ended, self-directed nature of our mentorship pairings. As it stands, we require that each trainee selects a non-academic mentor with whom they will meet regularly to discuss their career goals and develop professional skills.

While trainees could develop more concrete ties with their mentors, pursuing internships or other formal placements, they would do so at their own interest and dependent on the resources and willingness of their mentors. Some trainees have done just that, forging research partnerships with their mentors' labs or inviting mentors to sit on their thesis committees. Such trainees, however, make up a small minority of their cohort. Others have, instead, expressed frustration at the lack of formal guidance, which they felt hindered their relationships with their mentors.

Trainees equally, if not much more vocally, expressed frustration with our virtual networking event, which they did not find helpful in identifying potential mentors. The lack of professional diversity among potential mentors pulled from our pool of collaborators was another source of disappointment among our participants. Indeed, nearly all of our collaborators eligible to serve as non-academic mentors are government scientists from a limited number of agencies.

Response

Concerns over the open-endedness of our mentorships were unexpected but, at first glance, easily remediable. Expanding upon the stated objectives for mentorships found in our deliverables, we could draft formal guidelines



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establishing minimum meeting frequencies and elaborating on various means through which mentors could impart their professional wisdom to our trainees.

In doing so, our primary challenge would be to establish sufficient guidelines to give our trainees a sense of direction without imposing unrealistic expectations or, worse, limiting potential. We could, perhaps, consider a tiered approach, setting minimum standards for mentorships while also laying scaffolding for more advanced relationships, like internships or research partnerships.

The professional homogeneity of our pool of mentors, however, is less easily resolved. In theory, we hope to widen the horizons of our graduate students beyond academia with mentors in government and industry. Our government collaborators have supported OHAP invaluablely, volunteering their time to mentor trainees, facilitate studios, and judge our Policy Challenge.

Meanwhile, despite documented commitments from representatives of industry leaders in pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, no promised mentorship or internship opportunities have materialized. In fact, no industry collaborator has so much as answered an OHAP email, save for the occasional auto-reply indicating that the recipient had left their position. Moving forward, our website and other promotional materials should be modified to remove references to industry while, instead, highlighting our strong ties with government and non-profit partners.

Likewise, we should continue to expand our roster of non-profit collaborators, reaching out to groups like the Quebec Network Environment for Indigenous Health Research (QC-NEIHR) or the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA), who have already tangibly contributed to our mission. Meanwhile, promising connections are being forged with international non-governmental groups like the World Health Organization (WHO). By leveraging our existing relationships, we could feasibly establish new partnerships with science and health policy-oriented non-profits, bringing in fresh perspectives and unique career paths for our trainees to learn from.

In terms of pairing trainees with their mentors, the perceived failure of our virtual networking event is not entirely surprising. Virtual events appear to be relatively poor mediums for networking and relationship-forging, generally. With our cohort and collaborators spread across the country, however, an in-person networking event is likely unfeasible, save for the year-end retreat. In the end, the majority of mentorship pairings were made individually: the product of personal exchanges between each trainee and the Associate Director, who then recruited mentors from our pool of collaborators based on each trainee's unique needs and interests. Supported by its success and administrative simplicity, this informal system should be maintained as the primary means of mentor pairing.



Virtual Forums and Advanced Participation

The Virtual Forum series was not a target of trainee feedback. Rather, it constitutes a noted area of frustration for the Associate Director. Our virtual forums are meant to be events of discussion and debate wholly organized by our trainees. Two trainees are expected to step forward as Forum Organizers, recruiting guest speakers, researching topics, and moderating discussions. Simply put, however, trainees are not volunteering.

Volunteering as a forum organizer is not a program requirement, but when no organizers come forward, it jeopardizes the ability of all trainees to fulfill their parallel requirements to participate in discussion forums. Recognizing this, something must be done to ensure a reliable supply of volunteers.

Response

Reluctance on our trainees' part to take on additional responsibilities is neither unfair nor unexpected. Each of them already carries the workload of their studies and research in addition to the demanding training schedule imposed by the program. The time and effort required to organize discussion forums, as we intend them to be organized, is not negligible, even with assistance. Despite this, the forum organizers are expected to go above and beyond, volunteering their time with no incentive whatsoever beyond the experience they gain in doing so.

While, yes, the point of our program is the gaining of experience, we must also recognize that optional roles like Forum Organizers and Trainee Representatives are examples of advanced participation — critical work without which the program could not function as intended. It is worth considering, therefore, methods to incentivize this optional but necessary labour.

One means to do so could be to alleviate potential concerns over the added workload of optional roles. We could consider slightly reducing the studio attendance requirements for individuals who volunteer themselves, acknowledging the increased time commitments demanded by their roles. Alternatively, we could reward advanced participation directly through formal recognition. Remarks of distinction could be added to the certificates of program completion for trainees who served as Forum Organizers, Steering Committee Representatives, and any other position of elevated responsibility. Such incentives, while requiring no tangible investment on our part, could go a long way in promoting advanced participation among our trainees and safeguarding our ability to continue meeting our goals for programming.



Recommendations for the Policy Challenge

Challenge Design

Our trainees noticed, accurately, that our first-annual Policy Challenge was somewhat disorganized. They expressed frustration at the lack of clear guidance both for the policy pitches and, in particular, for the media challenge assigned to the MSc students. They found the comparison to *Dragons' Den* to be unrepresentative and misleading, finding the Challenge to be much more comparable to an academic group presentation.

While our grant filing described related coaching, mentorship, and presentation-day events in significant detail, there were initially no instructions given concerning the actual policy pitches themselves. From our deliverables, PhD students would be assigned to interdisciplinary teams to develop an innovative policy pitch to one topical case study, with mentorship from non-academic collaborators, which they would then present to a panel of judges for evaluation and feedback.

While rudimentary guidelines were developed by the Associate Program Director, these guidelines needed to be modified and adapted several times throughout the year as the realities of the Challenge and the feasibility of various elements came to light. Such mid-challenge changes were a notable source of frustration among students.

Further, it became apparent that having multiple teams propose solutions to a single case study would yield relatively similar proposals. This issue was then compounded by a required peer-editing element implemented as part of the initial guidelines.

The MSc challenge, while described in more detail, diverged significantly from our grant filing. We realized early on that these deliverables, as exactly described, would not be compatible with the emerging form of the overall Challenge and retreat. Trainees of both streams raised concerns at the lack of integration between MSc and PhD Challenges, which they saw as a missed opportunity for inter-trainee mentorship and team building.

A unifying complaint among trainees and a noted comment of their presentation coach, Dr. Andrew Churchill, was that too much time was given to the Challenge. For the amount of work that was actually involved, they felt it was spread over too many months, lending a lethargic quality that defeated any sense of urgency or importance.

Lastly, though no winners were announced for the 2024 Policy Challenge, the trainees were adamant that the Challenge should not be competitive in nature.

Response

Our first-annual Policy Challenge epitomized the OHAP “Learning Year.” Save for their presentation coaching, any guidance given to students – the academic substance of the challenge; its outlines, rubrics, and examples; the particulars of



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the policy proposals; and the forms they should take – was cobbled together on the fly by the Associate Director. While this guidance was drawn from freely available resources for policy writing and policy competitions, such resources are no substitute for genuine first-hand experience in challenge design. It is entirely understandable, therefore, that our trainees were dissatisfied with the guidance they received. With all this in mind, we are grateful for the patient feedback and constant understanding of our first cohort.

First and foremost, PhD and MSc Challenges should be unified. This could be easily achieved by requiring that each policy proposal incorporate some form of promotional media or outreach strategy crafted by the MSc trainees. The exact purpose and scope of such activities could be negotiated between PhD and MSc teammates based on the unique needs of the policy proposal in question. In doing so, MSc trainees would be empowered to serve as contributing teammates rather than passive observers, opening opportunities for inter-trainee mentorship.

With regard to concerns over pitch similarity, measures should be taken to prevent the possibility of identical pitches in subsequent Challenges. Teams could be offered, for example, a unique subtopic or category of solution drawn from a central theme. This creates further potential for trainees to select or be assigned to subtopics or solution categories that best align with their studies. While this may better facilitate peer-editing, it remains to be seen whether peer-editing is a necessary or helpful addition to the Challenge. Considering the extent to which peer editing extended the timeline, it may be worth sacrificing in order to condense the Challenge, as requested.

Fundamentally, the guidance given to our trainees should be seriously reevaluated, with clearly defined expectations and recommendations for formatting. Though not remarked on by trainees, the rubrics generated for policy judges should be shared with trainees alongside other Challenge guidance. Likewise, the policy briefs written in preparation for the eventual policy pitches should be shared with the judges in advance. Experts in policy research and communications should be recruited to review and, if necessary, rewrite our guidelines and rubrics. Potential candidates could include Dr. Jeff Kinder, *Science Policy 101* studio facilitator; Dr. Erling Rud, policy judge with teaching experience in policy development; Dr. Andrew Churchill, presentation coach; and Ingrid Chiraz, MSc Challenge judge.

Coaching and Training

Though participants were greatly appreciative of the coaching and mentorship they received in preparation for their policy proposals, they expressed several concerns over the timing and composition of their training.



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Throughout the year, studios were organized on science policy, speaking with policymakers, government offices, and communication generally. Regrettably, the scheduling of these studios did not align well with that of the Policy Challenge. Relevant training came either too early in the year to be remembered or too late to be usefully implemented. In particular, trainees were frustrated at the number of coaching sessions, which they saw as excessive, scheduled after their final policy document deadlines.

Further, trainees expressed frustration at perceived disagreements and mixed messaging between their coach and the judges. In one notable example, content changes recommended by their presentation coach were met with rather intense scrutiny from the judging panel.

Response

We have already begun taking action to address concerns over relevant studio scheduling. Training on science policy and speaking with policymakers has been moved to the Winter semester to better align with the Policy Challenge, though this will require cascading schedule changes to prevent the recurrence of Winter semester overcrowding. We should further ensure that any significant deadlines take place after these studios are provided.

While we cannot account for the subjective preferences of individual judges, it is not unfair that trainees would expect advice given during coaching sessions to align with the judges' criteria for evaluation. Disagreements between the coach and judges can likely be attributed to the fact that while trainee guidelines were provided to the coach, the judging rubrics, only prepared during the retreat itself, were not. Regardless, any coaching received after the final deadline for policy documents – if such a deadline is retained as separate from the deadline for policy presentations – should focus purely on presentation style and should not include recommendations for content modification.

Concerning the coaching and mentorship element broadly, we should consider recruiting a dedicated policy coach to provide complementary training in addition to the presentation coaching already provided by Dr. Churchill. Candidates could include Dr. Kinder, Dr. Rud, or a science-minded colleague from the Max Bell School of Public Policy. The two coaches would need to be in communication to coordinate their recommendations and ensure that neither presentation nor policy is compromised in favour of the other.

The policy coach would, ideally, provide advice and mentorship throughout the course of the Policy Challenge, meeting with teams as needed. While the presentation coach could maintain a more structured training schedule, the number of sessions could likely be decreased, further streamlining the Challenge schedule and alleviating the Winter workload strain.



The Retreat

Few genuine complaints were received regarding the retreat itself, as the week-long retreat itself went off essentially without a hitch. The accommodations, scenic location, impressive roster of guest speakers, and, in particular, catering all earned praise from attendees. With all that said, some recommendations were made for possible improvement.

Trainees suggested that we reconsider our venue of choice, encouraging that we rotate venues yearly and, in particular, consider venues in and around major cities with sufficient activities and attractions to fill downtime. Further, they raised concerns with the scheduling of retreat activities, which they felt were awkwardly spaced, leaving too little time to meaningfully enjoy the venue's main attraction, its unique hiking trails.

Response

The as-of-yet unmatched cost-efficacy and administrative simplicity of booking the Gault Reserve, a McGill property, seems to preclude the possibility of hosting the Policy Challenge anywhere else. In particular, the proximity of McGill University and Université de Montréal, which together host over half of our trainees, translates to considerable savings in travel costs. Unless another all-inclusive destination can be identified at a comparable price point, the Gault Reserve should remain our venue of choice.

With that said, efforts should be made either to reduce downtime by booking additional guest speakers and studios, to concentrate downtime in such a way as to allow participants to profit from the venue's hiking trails or some combination of the two. The feasibility of organized after-hours outings to nearby urban centres could be considered; however, initial evaluation suggests that necessary transportation alone would be cost-prohibitive. Further, the nature of the retreat itself is just that: a nature retreat – intended to insulate participants from outside distractions and allow them to focus inward, creating space to build meaningful connections between participants and guests.

Recommendations for Outreach and Recruitment

Although not a source of feedback among trainees, our recruitment and outreach activities have been marked areas of underperformance worthy of examination. Despite our best efforts, we have struggled both to establish ourselves in One Health circles and to connect with potential applicants. While self-promotion may be external to our core training mission, it has cascading impacts on our ability to recruit strong applicants and forge beneficial partnerships.



Public Awareness, Engagement, and Social Media

In our public outreach, we have, until now, failed to achieve a major presence at any of our campuses, in relevant academic circles, or in One Health spaces, generally. We have struggled, at times, to stay on the radars of even our co-applicants and collaborators. Though awareness seems to be steadily growing, the vast majority of eligible students or accompanying supervisors are likely unaware of OHAP beyond the immediate circles of those formally engaged in the program.

Our social media footprint, in particular, is meagre and seems to be buoyed only by the relative popularity of various program partners. OHAP maintains its most active presence on X (formerly Twitter), though our posts are infrequent and attract little engagement.

Response

The most straightforward method to improve our social media performance and, in doing so, our overall public awareness would be to expand our online presence and increase our activity. Compared to other NSERC-CREATEs, OHAP is far less active across its platforms, making fewer posts, attracting fewer followers, and enjoying lower engagement.

As of yet, outward communications have not been a priority. Regrettably but understandably, social media maintenance is regularly deferred in favour of mission-critical responsibilities. While we may be less active on social media, OHAP is otherwise quite a relatively ambitious CREATE, leaving less time for posting than other programs. The processes of creating original content, refining student-generated content, and combing for external content to repost are both remarkably time-consuming and unreliable in their engagement yield.

Given our focus on communications training, it may be auspicious to deputize, formally or informally, one or more of our trainees as social media coordinators. Such a position would join existing elevated roles, like our Forum Organizers and Trainee Representative while providing hands-on training in science communication. In doing so, they could draw on content already created by their fellow trainees while, as graduate students, likely being more aware of current One Health goings-on.

To make the most of our social media presence, however big or small, it would be equally advantageous to make use of our impressive roster of influential partners, leveraging their follows and re-posts to boost our digital traction. Such a practice, weaponizing star power, so to speak, could be equally applied offline.

The extensive personal network of our Program Director, with high-level contacts across government, industry, and academia, is perhaps our most valuable asset in establishing our program throughout relevant professional, academic, and



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otherwise One Health spaces. The Director has enlisted countless notable figures, forging connections between the program and eminent institutions.

However, there appears to be somewhat of a disconnect between this interpersonal network and true name recognition for the program. Anecdotally, individuals who would otherwise be aware of Dr. Jen Ronholm and her CREATE program may not recognize the name “One Health Against Pathogens” nor readily respond to promotional requests from its Associate Director.

Name recognition will likely need to be sewn organically, with familiarity developing through repeated contact over time. To this effect, a master contact list of relevant academic, governmental, and social groups has been assembled, through which targeted promotional requests and communications can be made both individually and en masse. When necessary, the Program Director can be recruited to increase the likelihood of a positive reply.

Breaking the OHAP Bubble

Our shortcomings in public outreach have undoubtedly impacted our recruitment efforts, another area of frustration. Through our first two application cycles, it became evident that the majority of our cohort would be comprised of students either directly supervised or recommended by our co-applicants. Most exceptions occurred among McGill students, with whom we seem to maintain some degree of organic awareness not found at our partner schools.

This anomaly could almost certainly be attributed to McGill’s status as our physical and administrative base of operations. While their causes may be understandable, two nonetheless disproportionate recruitment biases have emerged, strongly favouring McGill students and those directly supervised or closely related to our co-applicants.

The 2024 cohort was our first instance of organic recruitment, the 2023 cohort having been assembled extemporarily from co-applicant supervisees immediately following the grant’s inception to meet our start-up deadline. Attempts were made to bolster our application numbers for the incoming cohort and break through the recruitment bubble surrounding the program, primarily through the use of targeted advertisements across social media sites. Very few applications received appeared to have originated from targeted advertisements, and of those, few met our eligibility criteria.

Secondary efforts were made through physical postering and submissions to some relevant student mailing lists and newsletters, though these activities were, again, largely centred around McGill, whose campus and online community are more readily accessible. Co-applicants and collaborators were also invited to promote our recruitment efforts among their professional circles.



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Despite these efforts, we struggled to meet our recruitment quotas for the 2024 cohort, initially attracting fewer applicants than we had stipends available. We were eventually able to meet our grant expectations, even exceeding our trainee quota with an influx of unfunded participants. The 2024 application cycle nonetheless proved to be a learning opportunity, highlighting the ineffectiveness of paid advertisements for our purposes and demanding a new approach.

Response

Two strategies proved valuable in shoring up our recruitment efforts. Our co-applicants and academic collaborators were effective in sourcing interested supervisors with eligible students alongside students of their own. A further few applicants were drawn from student mailing lists — despite relatively little time and effort having been invested into this promotional tool.

For the present recruitment cycle, we have refocused our efforts towards collegial circles and institutional channels of communication. In doing so, we benefit from a level of trust and familiarity that simply cannot be achieved through social media, paid advertisements, or physical postering. Absent name recognition of our own, it is critical that we cultivate relationships with the groups and individuals that our potential applicants might interact with day-to-day.

As mentioned earlier in this report, a master list of contact information for every relevant Faculty, College, School, Department, Institute, Office, and allied student group at each of our partner schools has been meticulously assembled. For the 2025 Cohort, recruitment materials were sent to every listed contact alongside a message explaining our mission and requesting the recipients' assistance in promoting our call for applicants.

While it remains to be seen how effective this approach will be, we have received positive responses from contacted students, staff, and faculty indicating their support for our recruitment efforts and agreeing to echo our messages. Further, we have seen a small number of early applications, some coming over a month ahead of our deadline, a phenomenon not previously observed. Most significantly, web traffic to our application portal saw an 18-fold increase in unique visitors over October 2024 compared to October 2023.

Alongside academic and student-led institutions, promotional requests were equally made of relevant non-university groups, like the governmental Interdepartmental Indigenous Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (I-STEM) Cluster and non-governmental Tahatikonhsontóntie' or Quebec Network Environment for Indigenous Health Research (QcNEIHR). We hope these groups, and groups like them, will help us reach prospective Indigenous applicants, a demographic we have so far struggled to connect with.



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While the novel strategies employed in the 2025 application cycle show great initial promise, our most successful tools in sourcing potential trainees have thus far been, and may continue to be, our co-applicants and collaborators. Recognizing this, we will likely continue to rely on them to meet our recruitment quotas. We must, however, remain cognizant of the existing cohort bias towards trainees supervised by or otherwise related to our co-applicants.

Moving forward, it may be prudent to clarify that our co-applicants and collaborators should first promote our recruitment through their collegial circles before putting forward applicants of their own. We might also consider implementing a formal limit on the number of trainees a co-applicant can supervise at any given time. Whether such a limit could be imposed without endangering our recruitment quotas remains to be seen.

We are optimistic, however, that our efforts to develop positive working relationships with relevant university, governmental, and non-governmental groups will diversify our overarching recruitment strategy, decreasing our reliance on any one source of applicants.

Conclusions

This report, in its criticisms and recommendations, attempts to hold OHAP to the highest reasonable standard of perfection – comparing the realities of the program with its most idealized yet workable form. In giving life to the program described in our grant application, it became evident early on that certain activities, as outlined on paper, were unfeasible on their own or incompatible with the form the program came to take. The prescribed form of the Policy Challenge and non-academic mentorships, in particular, require serious adaptation to be fully realized. Other optional elements, like trainee placements in industry labs, simply failed to materialize.

Any departures from our grant documents can be attributed to the fact that the program was put to paper years before it began, let alone before any of its elements could be tested. There was no trial run — our first year was spent learning and adjusting to the realities of running a training program comprising dozens upon dozens of students, co-applicants, and collaborators and over 2.5 million dollars of proposed expenses, all led by two individuals, only one of which was hired to run the program full-time.

While there may have been shortcomings and areas in need of improvement, the OHAP program has undeniably been a rousing success overall. Not only do we continue to meet our recruitment quotas and basic grant deliverables — we have gone above and beyond in establishing ourselves as an organization to be taken seriously.

From the moment our funding was deposited in May 2023, OHAP hired its Program Coordinator (now *Associate Program Director*) in less than a month, ramping up to full-



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scale operations in only the next three. We established a distinct and meaningful visual identity, a robust multifunctional web platform, and a program-length budget and training schedule all before our first trainees began their Fall term. In the year that followed, we delivered on all of our major programming while attracting partnerships spanning from the Smithsonian Institution to the highest rungs of the federal government.

While 2023 to 2024 might have been a learning year, it has also undoubtedly been a year of remarkable success. With all we have learned so far in hand, we can only look forward to five more years of OHAP, each one an improvement on the last.