

This communications strategy was developed as the final project for the course, "Strategic Communications for Public Interest Communications" at the University of Florida.

A Communications Strategy for The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Health Policy Research Scholars Program

Introduction

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched four new leadership development programs in 2015 to increase collaboration amongst various groups in improving health and well-being in the U.S. One of these programs, the Health Policy Research Scholars (HRPS) program, is a program for second-year doctoral students who aspire to apply their research to "build healthier, more equitable communities and diversify the field of future leaders" (The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, n.d.). This is the program this communication strategy focuses on.

With an understanding that today's scholars need to be able to take the complex issues tackled in their research and make them accessible and applicable to the communities that would benefit from the research's findings, the HPRS program seeks to help doctoral students from across the U.S. become leaders within the health policy arena.

Contextual Analysis

The existing narrative presented by the HPRS program's communications materials is that the program provides tools and mentorship to doctoral students who aspire to develop the skills needed to apply their research toward building a "Culture of Health" (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2019). The program messaging emphasizes the idea that there is a need for "greater diversity in future generations of researchers and policymakers," and that the HPRS program accomplishes this goal through providing scholars with professional development opportunities, networking opportunities, mentorship, and an annual stipend to help alleviate the financial restraints scholars may face by participating in the program.

When communicating with the target audience about the Health Policy Research Scholars program, it is important to understand the system in which applicants engage with as part of the program's application process. The clear timeline provided on the HPRS program's website (see Figure 1) outlines each step of the program's application cycle and can be used as a starting point for reviewing the journey that prospective applicants take before applying for the program.

At the beginning of the process, prospective applicants are encouraged to learn more about the HPRS program by reviewing information on the program's website, such as a downloadable fact sheet about the program and reviewing profiles and testimonials from previous participants. Next, the call for applications opens on January 10 and applicants

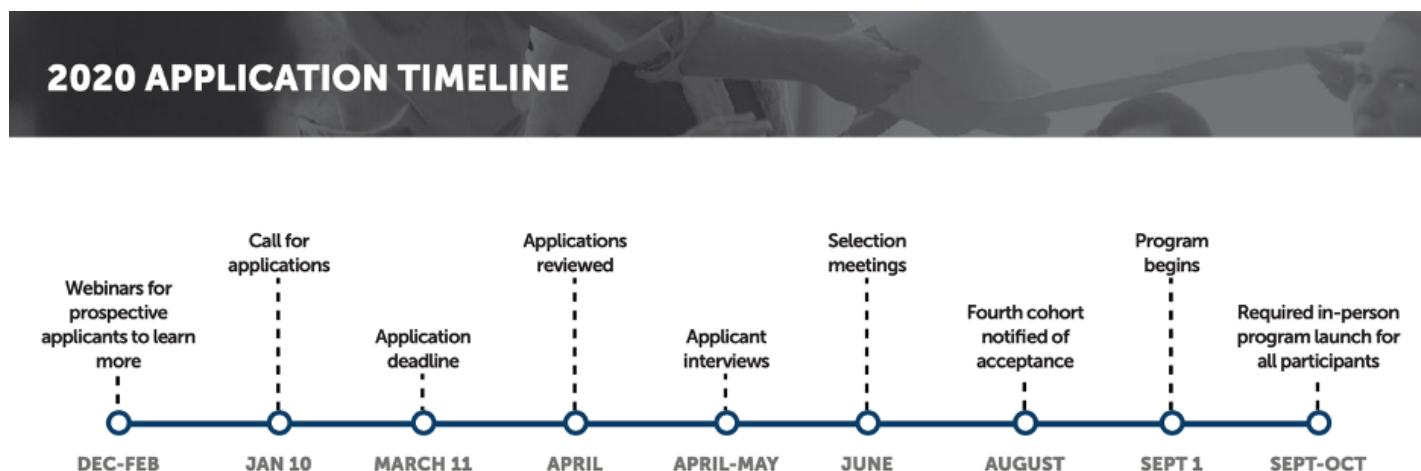


Figure 1. The Health Policy Research Scholars Program includes an easy to follow application timeline on its website for prospective applicants to review (The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, n.d.).

who would like to apply are asked to create an account on the HPRS website and begin collecting the materials needed for their application, such as a curriculum vitae, letters of recommendation, and school transcripts. Applicants must also identify a faculty member from their institution who agrees to serve as the student's mentor throughout their time in the program. Additionally, applicants are encouraged to provide an email address to sign-up for notifications from the HPRS program about upcoming informational webinars and other events. The application deadline is March 11, and interviews for the program take place in April or May. Review of the applicants takes place during the summer months, and those selected to join the next cohort are notified in August.

Campaign Goal

The strategic goal for this campaign is to utilize the HPRS program's existing communications channels to tell compelling stories about the program that attract an increased number of doctoral student applicants from new fields and geographical locations. Achieving this goal will ultimately increase the diversity of doctoral students participating in the HPRS program.

To attract more diverse and quality applicants to the HPRS program, it is beneficial to complete a review of higher education institutions that best serve minority and underrepresented populations. Connecting with these institutions and receiving their assistance with putting the campaign's message in front of each school's doctoral students will help ensure the strategic goal is achieved and that the campaign is reaching its target audience.

Target Audience

The target audience for this campaign is doctoral students at colleges and universities who are from underrepresented populations or disadvantaged backgrounds and who have a desire to use their research to improve the "culture of health" in the U.S. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seeks candidates who fit this description to apply for the Health Policy Research Scholars program, specifically those who are in the second year of their doctoral studies.

It would be an ineffective use of resources to attempt to reach every doctoral student at every college or university, and the campaign's

communications strategy should be focused on reaching its target population as narrowly as possible (Christiano & Neimand, *The Back-of-the-Envelope Guide to Communications Strategy*, 2017). While the HPRS program is open to doctoral students from a variety of disciplines and areas of expertise, the commonality amongst those who participate in the program is their shared values, specifically a shared drive to improve their communities and develop a "culture of health," a mindset that is aligned with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's core organizational values (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2019).

To ensure the campaign's messaging reaches doctoral students from underrepresented populations, it is recommended to review higher education institutions included in two of U.S. News and World Report's 2020 rankings lists: the 2020 rankings on Campus Ethnic Diversity, an index that ranks institutions based on their "total proportion of minority students and the overall mix of groups" (U.S. News and World Report, 2019), and the 2020 rankings on Social Mobility, a list which ranks institutions based on their ability to "enroll and graduate large proportions of disadvantaged students" who receive Pell Grants to pursue higher education (U.S. News and World Report, 2019). A focus on the institutions that are highly regarded in both of these areas and who are attracting the diverse doctoral student populations the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seeks to attract to the HPRS program may be a strategic approach that ensures efforts to reach new and diverse populations of graduate students are worthwhile.

In addition to reviewing the home institutions that prospective applicants come from, a review of the identities, values, and beliefs of doctoral students in the HPRS program's target audience will also be valuable for shaping the messaging and story strategy for this campaign.

Recent research has explored the personal values of minority graduate students and how those values impact their experiences within higher education institutions. In one study, a survey of 1,500 biomedical doctoral degree recipients found that students who come from underrepresented populations did not find university research culture appealing, and these students were less interested in a career within academia following graduation when compared to their white and Asian peers

(Gibbs Jr., McGready, Bennett, & Griffin, 2014). Instead, these students were more motivated by a desire to take what they've learned throughout their graduate studies to "serve their communities," and make a more tangible impact on the environments they come from.

In an article published by the Chronicle of Higher Education, Beth McMurtrie explored what research has found about minority student experiences and how they differ from their peers. In an interview for the story, Kimberly A. Griffin, an associate professor in the department of counseling, higher education, and special education at the University of Maryland at College Park, shared with McMurtrie about her perspective on why minority students are not motivated by the "individual achievement" of research and publishing that is often praised in academia. If minority students "pursue academic careers, it is more often with the idea that their research and teaching can provide positive influences on others, including people in the communities they came from," (McMurtrie, 2016).

After a review of testimonials from HPRS program participants on both the program's website on the program's YouTube channel, there are a few key insights that can be gathered about participants' motivations for applying to and committing to the program.

Participants Seek a Community of Like-Minded Peers

One of the attractive "draws" of the program expressed by numerous participants was the opportunity to connect with individuals who shared similar aspirational goals to them, and to network with scholars outside of their home institutions. The structure of the HPRS program allows for meaningful collaborations amongst scholars, who have the opportunity to get to know their peers and collaborate on work outside of what they're engaged in at their home institutions.

Marie Plaisime, a Ph.D. student in Sociology and Criminology at Howard University, shared about the value the HPRS program has provided to her since she first joined her cohort:

HPRS, to me, signifies friendship, family, and opportunity to network with different scholars across the country. Currently, I'm working on a project with students who are also in the

program who are not in sociology. Together, we're able to look at how racism impacts health in a really unique way. So it's an exciting opportunity to really start from the beginning of our PhD careers to network with one another, to attack or approach the problems that are so important for many of us from multiple perspectives (Health Policy Research Scholars, 2019).

Previous research has found that one of the challenges often faced by first generation doctoral students is a feeling of "otherness," or that the student and their peers come from "two different worlds," and that the student's background and financial status make them feel like an outsider at their institution (Gardner, 2013).

One HPRS participant, Angela Adler, a Ph.D. student in Sociology at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, touched on this theme in her testimonial by sharing about her journey as a graduate student participating in the HPRS program and how the interdisciplinary nature of her background made it challenging for her to find a group that she could fit into:

My cohort, and the other cohorts as well, the bonding that we've done, the sharing that we've done, they've been a phenomenal support to me and also just an incredible group to learn from. I'm very interdisciplinary. I had trouble getting into PhD programs because I am so interdisciplinary—with a pre-med undergraduate degree and an anthropology master's degree. People just didn't know what to do with me, and didn't know how I would work in a Sociology Ph.D. program. So it's lovely to be in a room with people who have such broad interests and to be able to talk to my friends on their expertise in economics, and psychology, and social work, and public policy, and to learn from each other (Health Policy Research Scholars, 2019).

Participants View the Program as a Supplemental Experience That Will Help Create Meaningful Impact

Multiple program participants shared how the program has benefitted them and the real-world implications that their work as a Health Policy Research Scholar will have on society. Destiny Printz, a Ph.D. student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Connecticut, shared about how the

HPRS program is helping her to develop a skill set that extends beyond what she is learning in her doctoral studies at her home institution:

In clinical psychology, we often don't think about what can we do with the research that we take in. Coming into my Ph.D. program, that was something that was really important to me—especially with working with marginalized communities, communities of color, low income communities—was really figuring out how can I take all of this data I am collecting and bring it into the community in a way that will impact their lives in a meaningful way. So when I saw that not only could this help my academic career moving forward, but also the way that I could do work within my communities, it seemed like a no-brainer, and it's been a really amazing experience" (Health Policy Research Scholars, 2019).

Each of these testimonials serves as an example of the motivations and aspirations for those who choose to apply for the HPRS program, and can serve as a roadmap for the program's staff as they refine the recruitment campaign's messaging and story strategy.

Messaging and Story Strategy

Research has found that people are more receptive to a message when it is framed in a way that aligns with how they see themselves, and their values and beliefs (Feinberg & Willer, 2013). To best reach the communities organizations hope to serve through their work, public interest communications scholars recommend "joining the community" they target, to ensure the campaign's message is reflective of how the community sees the world and their role within it.

In "The Science of What Makes People Care," authors Ann Christiano and Annie Neimand explain that it is important to step into the world of a campaign's target audience because "we have to connect to what they care about and how they see themselves," (Christiano & Neimand, The Science of What Makes People Care, 2018). The messaging used to communicate about the HPRS program should take a two-pronged approach for reaching both prospective applicants and the administration at their respective institutions. Messaging that centers around serving local communities will most resonate with doctoral students from underrepresented groups and

provide a value proposition that encourages this target audience to apply for the HPRS program, and messaging that emphasizes the prestige that comes with being selected as a scholar in the program will appeal to higher education institutions, who regularly look for student success stories to promote that will help boost their school's reputation amongst their communities and peer institutions.

Messaging about the HPRS program should focus on a theme that highlights a world view shared amongst all participants—the desire to make their academic work "more meaningful." Additionally, the messaging used to promote the program should emphasize the resources, tools, and support that the program provides its scholars so that they can achieve their personal and professional goals of creating positive change in both the public policy field and within their home communities.

Communications Tactics

To best reach the campaign's target audience and their institutions, I recommend a series of tactics that can be separated into two overarching themes: storytelling and outreach. These two themes blend to meet the campaign's target audience where they are—studying within the communities at their host institutions and interacting with their peers online through various social media platforms.

In "Stop Raising Awareness Already," authors Ann Christiano and Annie Neimand emphasize the importance of using the right messenger when communicating with an audience. This is important because people are more likely to listen to those they trust, and trust is "very much connected to how people see themselves, their values, and their identities" (Christiano & Neimand, Stop Raising Awareness Already, 2017).

Storytelling Tactics

To ensure the campaign is using the right messenger, I propose the HPRS program develop a series of engaging and visual content that helps to tell the program's story.

These stories—published either in a written or video format, depending on the resources and visual elements available—will resonate with doctoral students in the campaign's target audience because the overarching theme of these materials will be focused on the campaign's messaging strategy of

communicating about the program's ability to help students achieve their goal of making an impact and serving their communities. Ideally, these stories will be presented from a first-person perspective that provides both current participants and program alumni with an opportunity to share about their journeys, why they chose to pursue doctoral studies in their area of emphasis, and how the HPRS program is supporting this journey and helping participants accomplish their goals.

A recommended tactic for storytelling about the program is to increase resources allocated towards visual storytelling initiatives. Public interest communications scholars recommend using "vivid imagery" in storytelling because it keeps the audience's attention (Riddle, 2013). When a narrative can transport the audience into another world, it can result in "greater attitude, belief, and behavior change" for those exposed to the message (Green & Clark, 2012). This narrative transportation can be achieved through the creation of a series of videos or blog posts on the program's website that includes not only testimonials from scholars, but also compelling visuals about the scholars' work, such as video footage or photographs of participants conducting research at their home institutions, meeting with their cohort or faculty mentors, or out in their communities and using their work in the program to create change. An increased emphasis on storytelling from scholars about their work will help demonstrate the program's impact and create a heightened sense of interest for prospective applicants.

Alongside an increased emphasis on visual storytelling, another tactic the HPRS program can implement to increase its storytelling capabilities is to encourage the program's scholars to blog more frequently about their work, and highlight these blog posts on the program's website. The creation of blog content that is not only interesting to prospective applicants, but that is also informative, could serve as a useful resource when developing a content calendar for the program's social media channels, and could also be shared by the scholars and their home institutions to help amplify the content's reach across online platforms.

Some sample blog post topics that prospective applicants may find interesting or informative include:

- Blog posts that recap special events, workshops,

and professional development opportunities that scholars participate in throughout the program.

- A blog post about how doctoral students can make the most of mentorship programs during their graduate studies.
- A blog post about how scholars are maintaining work-life balance while participating in the HPRS program.
- Blog posts that provide first-person accounts about from scholars about how they collaborate with other scholars, how the program is benefiting them in their doctoral studies, and how they have been able to take their work through the HPRS program and give back to their communities.

Each of the topics explored on the blog will demonstrate the impact" the HPRS program has created for both its participants and their communities and this messaging theme will highlight the appeal of the program for future applicants. Additionally, this type of storytelling also benefits the program's overarching goal of increasing collaboration across disciplines and creating healthier, more equitable communities.

Outreach Tactics

In addition to increased storytelling about previous program participants and their experiences in the program, I also propose the HPRS program engage in multiple outreach tactics to ensure the program's messaging reaches the target audience. To further the reach of stories published through the HPRS program's website, the program can utilize already formed networks and online communities on social media to help promote the program and to form a wider network of scholars and organizations who are engaging with the program about its work.

To begin this process, it would be beneficial for the program to review its communications goals and determine which social media platforms may be a good fit for achieving these goals. It will also be important to determine which channels the program can reasonably produce content for regularly to ensure a continuous flow of content being shared with its audience. It is recommended that HPRS begin its social media presence on Facebook due to its popularity, Twitter due to the connected nature of the platform, and LinkedIn for its focus on

professional networks and career growth.

In addition to having a presence on social media and developing a content calendar to ensure the regular sharing of content, the HPRS program could also encourage its scholars to engage with their networks in their online communities to share about their involvement in the program. This could be accomplished through communicating with scholars about the benefits of promoting their scholarship on social media, and by providing resources for scholars to effectively do so, such as a breakdown of best practices for each social media platform, guidance on how to update their profile biographies on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, and the development of a social media hashtag that scholars and community partners can use when communicating about the program.

An example hashtag that could work for this tactic is #HPRScholar, which helps align with the program's account handles on already existing social media channels. By encouraging scholars to share about their scholarship and engage with others in online communities, it will not only help scholars in achieving one of their goals of networking with those outside of their home institutions, but it will also increase the HPRS program's reach, allowing the program to reach individuals who might not otherwise hear about the opportunity.

Another outreach tactic that the HPRS program should engage in is direct communication with the higher education institutions whose doctoral students were identified as the program's target audience for this campaign. These activities should include communication with identified higher education institutions' scholarship and fellowship offices and graduate schools because these departments are typically well-equipped for communicating directly with the broader student population at their respective schools, and these students are in regular communication with these offices and expecting to hear from them.

When communicating with higher education institutions, the HPRS program should frame its messages about the program to not only include the program's benefits for scholars, but also calls to action that prospective applicants can immediately act upon, such as registering for upcoming webinars, connecting with an HPRS program staff member to request more information, or reviewing the

program's website to learn more about the application process and next steps to apply.

One approach for effectively communicating with institutions in a way that encourages them to share with their students about the HPRS program is to develop a communications toolkit that the school's administration and staff can use when sharing with their students about the program. This toolkit would include all of the details about the program and the benefits for doctoral students who choose to participate. Additionally, the toolkit would include helpful resources that make communication about the program simple and easy, such as email message templates with ready-to-send messaging and social media post templates with visually engaging imagery and videos that institutions can share on their social media channels.

Additionally, if an institution's student is selected for the program, the HPRS can further extend communication about the program by providing the institution with a media kit that can be used to promote the student's acceptance to the program. The messaging in this media kit should frame the HPRS program as a prestigious national award and include links to the program's website and official hashtag for online conversations.

Measurement and Evaluation

In the resource guide "Deepening Engagement for Lasting Impact," the authors explain that each metric tracked as part of a successful engagement campaign should pass the "so what test," because the metrics measured should be useful and actionable to better inform strategy (Learning for Action, 2013). To measure this campaign's effectiveness over time, it is important to monitor and evaluate meaningful metrics that provide insight into how well the campaign is working toward achieving its strategic goal.

To accomplish this, multiple pieces of data can be monitored throughout the campaign. A review of the total number of prospective applicants who have signed up by email to learn more about the HPRS program, or to register for an upcoming webinar can be indicative of how many doctoral students were reached through the campaign's communications tactics. A comparison of how this number compares to that of previous years could indicate whether the reach for the campaign's materials has increased.

Additional benchmarks that should be measured include a review of the total number of institutions who shared about the HPRS program and the call for applications through their communications channels, either on their website, through email, or on social media. This information will inform whether or not the program's messaging to higher education institutions was reflective of the type of programs they are interested in their students applying to, and if they are actively encouraging their graduate students to participate. This could also indicate whether or not the communications toolkit developed for institutions was a useful resource, especially if the language they use in their messages about the program is similar or identical to that reflected in the toolkit.

The campaign should also monitor the use of the HPRS program's hashtag on social media channels to evaluate whether or not the program is reaching new audiences and if the stories told as part of the campaign resonate with target audiences.

Finally, the campaign should monitor and evaluate the total number of applications received throughout the campaign, and review whether the application numbers have increased when compared to previous years. Additionally, this information can serve as a learning experience for program staff to help answer two key questions: are these applications coming from a wider array of institutions compared to previous years, and are the applications received reflective of the types of applicants the program aspires to attract?

To assess the impact of the campaign once completed, HPRS program staff could look to those who were accepted as scholars in the program to learn about their experiences throughout the application process and what motivated them to apply to the program. Asking applicants as part of the program application how they heard about the HPRS program could also inform strategy for future application cycles, and provide insight into which communications tactics were most effective in reaching the target audience.

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