

Positive Living BC

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Evaluation and Final Report

POSITIVE

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WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Who Attended?

The Positive Women's University proposed to engage women living with HIV from across British Columbia (many of whom we currently serve, and many of whom are marginalized and underserved within the HIV community), including those who identify as: sex worker, new immigrant, refugee, lesbian, bi-sexual, younger, aged, heterosexual, women of colour, transgender, gender-identifying as female and/or living as women. In particular, we made every effort to ensure that the Positive Women's University was an experience of equanimity: women from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds were invited to attend and contribute as equals.

The Positive Women's University developed and strengthened the capacity of women living with HIV across British Columbia to take action on their own health issues.

Using an empowerment model, women were mentors and champions for each other. The University provided a space where women recognized their own resiliency, their own power and sense of community.

The Positive Women's University was designed to help women recognize, strengthen and "test" out their leadership skills, giving them tangible resources they can use in their own communities.

With the aid of the MAC AIDS Fund, the Positive Women's University was a barrier-free opportunity for women of varying geographic, economic, social and educational capacities and backgrounds. Diversity was fostered and experienced in the makeup of participants, their shared activities and their learning.

Positive Women's University was a pilot project, and we plan to adapt and apply our learning to other specific populations like gay men living with HIV, the transgender community, and heterosexuals living with HIV for future Universities.

Goal

The overall goal of the Women's University was:

To cultivate women's voices in response to the epidemic by engaging women from diverse backgrounds and life experiences in an empowering weekend of learning, sharing and leadership-building to grow women's ability to take leadership roles in their communities.

Objectives

The project was evaluated considering the following objectives:

- University participants will increase their peer and social support opportunities
- University participants will develop a sense of responsibility and appreciation for the continuous well-being of the women's community
- University participants will develop creative abilities and presentation skills
- University Workshop presenters will be more involved in the community
- We will build on the experience for future Universities

Activities

What happened?

The Positive Women's University was a unique, educational, and empowering weekend. Women living with HIV were provided with opportunities for growth and learning to build leadership skills, and improve their own health and quality of life – all in a weekend retreat setting at a fully-staffed forestry/camp setting.

Utilizing a self-empowerment model, participants also contributed by being workshop instructors.

Workshop offerings were as varied and dynamic as the interests and skills of the participants. Each participant was given the opportunity to present a workshop on a subject they are passionate about. Prior to attending the University, each participant was asked to create a “paragraph of passion” on a topic that they would present to other participants in a workshop format.

Evaluation Results

The first part of the Positive Women's University evaluation consisted of eighteen individual Workshop Surveys that were completed by all participants at the end of each workshop.

These surveys were shared with each workshop facilitator to continue learning and growing as an effective facilitator based on feedback from their peers.

At the end of their workshop, each facilitator completed a self-evaluation Facilitator Feedback Sheet to provide their own perspective on what things could enhance the effectiveness of future workshops.

The second part of the Positive Women's University evaluation, participants were asked about their experience and if they felt a change in their ability to do the following:

- Develop a sense of responsibility and appreciation for the continuous well-being of the positive women's community
- Develop leadership skills in supportive environment through community involvement
- Develop creative abilities for effective oral and written communication of materials for presentation to peers with proficiency
- Function effectively in community by understanding communication, social norms and conflict management
- Become knowledgeable of self-care and impacts of HIV.

The third part of the Positive Women's University evaluation is a summary of the focus group guided discussion with participants representing the African, Aboriginal, Youth, and "over-fifty" communities.

This report contains the results for the third part focus group discussion, where more in-depth feedback about the first two parts of the evaluation was explored.

Focus Group Questions and Answers

The Positive Women's University Focus Group was held with a diversely sampled group of participants, held at Positive Living on April 9, 2013, and facilitated by an independent evaluator.

Selected participants were asked a series of open-ended questions pertaining to their experience after attending the University.

Based on the written evaluations of the entire participant group and the Focus Group discussion, we were able to succinctly summarize their overall experience.

The Positive Women's University was consistently effective in building community. All (100%) of the women participants claimed to have developed new skills, made new friends, participated in new activities and increased their peer support. The overall consensus was that the experience "was extremely powerful, fulfilling and empowering."

In the Focus Group, the participants were asked a series of five open-ended questions:

How has the University experience increased your peer and social supports?

The focus group provided an opportunity for disclosure among similar others where the participants experiences were validated. The women agreed that it was *"important for women from small rural communities to have a venue to get together and access support with other women with HIV or just in their community"* as support is not readily available in rural communities. The group bonded because *"people were nervous about presenting so there was an opportunity to provide social support to others, in a safe place and feeling supported"*. One participant claimed she *"really developed sense of working together and working toward something with other women."* The University offered an ***"opportunity to develop skills and empower women to speak another voice, not an HIV+ voice, a voice that they know and are passionate about."***

How has the experience developed a sense of responsibility and appreciation for the Women's Community?

The women *"walked away with a sense that women were empowered by their skills and not just HIV status, we need to take responsibility as women to develop skills."* Looking at and learning from examples of how to support each other from other communities proved inspirational. *"Gay men(s) example is good for us to learn from, we need to develop our own community of women and fill that need... to work on further programs for women, we need more than just retreats for women."* The University *"helped me to become a good communicator, being able to deliver my voice, being able to tell people how I feel and look at the situation. I learned about the small responsibilities as well as the big ones."* The University presented an occasion to reflect on ways to help other communities. One participant felt a *"responsibility for the future to pay it forward. Perfect opportunity to learn about presentation skills that doesn't exist in the community otherwise."* The participants were clearly thinking about ways to make this unique event happen for other HIV+ communities.

What presentation skills and creative abilities did you develop as a result of the University?

One common theme that came out of the focus group was the increase in self-esteem. The women observed the increase in confidence in others and themselves; the University *"helped me to develop my public speaking, I came to know I could do it, I didn't before. Before when I was asked to do presentations I said no, I cannot do this"*. Another participant added *"I can express myself in a different way, I had too much anger in the past it got in the way, I'm not so shy anymore."* Others learned how to modify for their workshop for their audience; *"When you take something like a universal concept and bring it down to a community level. I learned to adapt training (dance) from a professional level to people that had never danced before. I learned about what is possible for*

*people to do. Much more is possible than is not possible.” Speaking publicly can be transformative. **“It changed how I feel personally, more confidence helped me overcome my stage fright. It has lasted since the University, and I have done more presentations since then.”***

How has the University experience gotten you more involved in the Community?

The participants of the focus group were more engaged as evidenced by the following quotes:

- “It’s elevated me to the next levels of peer to peer, and where it’s at!”
- “Before the training I found myself pretty shy, now I feel like if she can do it, I can do it too. I just have to work on it and I’ll be able to get involved.”
- “Now I help women in the community to integrate into a new community (immigrants). Reaching out in the community to talk to people who are isolated (newcomers) and make them feel welcome and loved.”
- “Before the University, something was holding me back from being involved, now I can let people know that women with HIV are happy, were not dying and we rejoice.”
- “Inspired me to consider bringing dance to the HIV community as dance therapy and artistic outlet for women with HIV.”
- “I am more engaged. I went from a member to a become a Board member then being on CTAC Board and getting a position with CHIWOS as a peer research associate.”

“I can’t think of a single person who would have walked away from the University without feeling more involved in their community”

What are your ideas on how we could improve the experience for the next group?

The group offered a number of suggestions to improve the experience when we are able to offer it again for other communities.

- Provide a “Train the Trainer” session to be offered at the beginning of the University.
- More outdoors activities if the weather cooperates, moving around gives you more energy.
- Have a take away resource guide from all presentations.
- Have a one-day Women’s Fair.
- Institute a mentoring program for those too shy to present.

*We need to find more women, where are they?
How do we get them engaged?*

Anything more?

The women observed that “we need to find more women, where are they, how do we get them engaged?”

Part of the problem in engaging women (who did not apply) may have been that the word “University” could be a barrier keeping some women from attending because they were intimidated or worried about presenting a workshop in front of other people.

Conclusions

The University was an overwhelming success in achieving the objectives it set out to accomplish. Women were given a supportive setting in which to cultivate their own voice. The diversity of the group was celebrated and shared in an engaging empowering event. The participants observed increases in confidence in each other, and themselves. Many have been inspired to go on to leadership roles in their respective communities.

The University also offered an important opportunity to escape the HIV label and stigma that is ever-present, and just be “normal people” even if it was momentary. One woman stated there was *“no need for me to focus on my HIV with these women, they know it’s not all we are.”*

This was an “intensive present your stuff weekend” where the social was outweighed by the skills development, and not for the faint of heart. Though the women were encouraged and committed to being more public and sharing more of their experiences in the future, it was generally acknowledged that they would have liked even more formal presentation training as part of the University.

The women hope to see the experience happen for other communities in the future.

The University created opportunities for women living with HIV to invest in their community; sharing their skills and wisdom promotes communication, community building and self-esteem among women living with HIV.

As a result of the Positive Women's University, participants experienced the following changes, benefits or impacts.

Short Term Outcomes

- Women tried many new activities (i.e. structured and unstructured social networking, yoga, meditation, writing, presenting, teaching, facilitating, or interacting in the context of participatory workshops in the streams mentioned above).
- Women met and made new friends, improved relationship skills and increased their peer support network.
- Women developed increased awareness of diversity among themselves and the HIV community.
- Women learned and applied leadership and mentoring skills.

Intermediate Outcomes

- Women increased their utilization of peer and social support opportunities after the University.
- Women reported their stress level was reduced by the experience.
- Women moved into leadership positions at Positive Living BC and other HIV support organizations.

Long Term Outcomes

- Women reported higher self-esteem continuing after the University.
- Women reported returning to the workforce.
- **Women reported an increased sense of wellbeing (measured as satisfaction with their own health and the ability to sustain one's self on each of the axis of the social determinants of health – i.e. stable housing and income, access to learning opportunities, connection to social networks and family, access to needed health services)**

Recommendations

A University where participants must also become teachers is a valuable empowering community-building tool.

The benefits can be observed in a shy woman from an oppressive culture who would barely make eye contact, standing out and now making presentations in her own community.

“One of the great pleasures of being part of the University was witnessing transformations in people just by giving them a chance to believe in themselves and offering them the opportunity to offer something to others.”

- When we offer this University to another specific population, we will offer the “train the trainer” sessions on numerous occasions prior to the University. By offering training near the beginning and at the end it will give participants an opportunity to learn some public speaking tips and overcome their nervousness.
- A person living with HIV with academic experience will present the next University’s “opening remarks”.
- We will offer the participant workshops on more than one occasion. At the Women’s University the participants had to choose between two workshops presented during each time slot.
- We will offer a little more personal time, as the pace can be challenging for some with compromised immune systems.
- We will also encourage more outdoor workshops, weather permitting.
- We will create a take-away resource guide for each participant.

For other organizations that may be interested in conducting similar projects, we will discuss our findings with the organizers, and suggest meeting with leaders in the target community and include them as much as possible in the process.

Organizing the University requires consistent encouragement and patience. It is crucial to get the target community involved in all aspects of planning, participant interviewing, and selection. This is a program that has incredible value to the greater HIV community, and specific sub-communities. Significant resources are required to organize the University; organizations must be sure to dedicate the staff and volunteer resources to make it successful.

“It takes a serious time commitment but is well worth it!”
