



## 2008 OHTN Summer Learning Institute: Social Justice and HIV/AIDS Research

Thursday, July 10 – Sunday, July 13, 2008

### Summary and Evaluation Report

#### Executive Summary

- 44 students who are enrolled or accepted in graduate programs in 12 disciplines at 10 Ontario universities attended the four-day OHTN Summer Learning Institute
- 8 Core Faculty Mentors with 25 Faculty Mentors from 11 universities, 10 community organizations, and 1 government department provided presentations, panel discussions, and facilitated break-out groups

**Main Topic Areas:** Eight panel sessions covered various aspects of HIV research within a broader social justice framework including:

- the historical evolution of Ontario's HIV epidemic and the social justice issues unique to diverse Ontario populations affected by HIV
- Community-Based Research (CBR) as an approach
- the unique ethical considerations in HIV research
- social determinants of health as a theoretical framework in HIV research
- innovative research methodologies
- strategies to mobilize knowledge into action
- HIV and AIDS in a Human Rights and Legal Framework.

**Group Assignments:** Students worked in interdisciplinary teams to prepare a proposal for a community-based research capacity building grant, based on issues identified by the community. The proposals developed by students were evaluated by faculty and are now being reviewed for their potential to be refined - with community partners - for submission to the OHTN capacity-building fund. The OHTN is also exploring the potential to match students with community-based agencies interested in working with researchers to enhance their programs and services.

**Evaluation:** The OHTN Summer Learning Institute (SLI) was most effective in helping students improve their knowledge and understanding of HIV research and social justice issues (9 out of 10 students agreed that the OHTN SLI had helped them to build a knowledge base about and familiarity with social justice issues and HIV and AIDS Research). It was also highly successful in creating networking opportunities between students and community and academic stakeholders and improving their understanding of knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE) theory and strategies (over 85% of students agreed that the OHTN SLI had enhanced their understanding about KTE theory and strategies, and helped them create opportunities for networking and partnership development). The OHTN SLI could have been improved by building skills related to research evaluation processes (only 7 out of 10 students agreed that the Institute had helped enhance knowledge and reflexivity in evaluating overall impact of research processes on social justice issues).

# Background

## ***Background to the OHTN Summer Learning Institute***

In July 2008, the OHTN convened the 1<sup>st</sup> annual OHTN Summer Learning Institute (SLI), titled: Social Justice and HIV Research. The four-day program was designed to provide a learning opportunity for graduate students with an interest in HIV and AIDS research in the social sciences, humanities and arts, and health services disciplines through intensive mentorship with academic and community stakeholders.

The OHTN SLI was taught by over 30 nationally-recognized experts in: HIV and AIDS research, KTE, front-line service provision, and provincial policy. The curriculum was designed to enhance the capacity to conduct interdisciplinary HIV research on health services and community and public-health interventions, and translate research findings into healthy public policy.

## ***Learning Objectives***

1. Build a knowledge base about and familiarity with social justice issues in HIV and AIDS research
2. Build skills related to innovative methodological approaches to HIV research that address social justice and equity issues
3. Enhance knowledge and reflexivity in evaluating overall impact of research processes on social justice issues
4. Enhance understanding about knowledge transfer and exchange theory and strategies
5. Create opportunities for networking and partnership development

## ***Application Process***

A call for applications was circulated (***Appendix I, Call for Applicants***) to Ontario-based universities, with the following eligibility criteria:

1. Applicants had to be enrolled or accepted in a graduate level program at an Ontario university
2. Preference was given to students who:
  - Were conducting research in the HIV and AIDS field leading to a Masters or PhD (or equivalent) or a combined health professional/PhD degree
  - Had demonstrated interest and commitment to social justice issues
  - Were conducting research with an Ontario focus
3. Applicants had to commit to attending the entire OHTN Summer Learning Institute

Applicants submitted a letter of interest outlining their learning expectations, their current focus of research, an academic or community letter of reference and a recent CV. Applications were reviewed by four OHTN staff and two external reviewers. Of the 44 eligible applications received, 36 were accepted and eight waitlisted. Invitations were extended to five people on the waitlist as spaces became available.

## ***OHTN Summer Learning Institute Structure and Agenda***

The Planning Committee developed a dynamic and interactive agenda that involved over 30 community and academic Faculty Mentors from the HIV field (***Appendix II, Program and Faculty Mentors Biographies***). The agenda was designed to provide intensive opportunities for hands-on learning and interactive discussion among students and faculty, and to meet students' learning objectives. Over the four days, there were 8 panel presentations, four student break-out sessions, daily networking breakfasts, and two student-faculty social events (a Wine & Cheese following the first day, and a Student-Faculty Dinner).

## ***OHTN Summer Learning Institute Website***

A website was established to facilitate communication and preparation for the OHTN Summer Learning Institute, featuring required reading materials for each session, recommended resources and documents, and faculty mentor biographies. (<https://frontend.ohtn.on.ca/sites/SLI>; Username: SLI; Password: SLI2008).

### ***Panel Sessions***

Eight panel sessions with four to seven presenters covered various aspects of HIV and AIDS research within a broader social justice framework including:

- the historical evolution of Ontario's HIV epidemic and the social justice issues unique to diverse Ontario populations affected by HIV
- Community-Based Research (CBR) as an approach
- the unique ethical considerations in HIV research
- social determinants of health as a theoretical framework in HIV research
- innovative research methodologies
- strategies to mobilize knowledge into action
- HIV and AIDS in a Human Rights and Legal Framework.

### ***Group Assignments***

During the Institute, students worked collaboratively in teams of six to eight people during break-out sessions (a total of 7 hours) to draft a capacity building grant proposal for a research project that responded to a priority issue identified by community organizations in Ontario (***Appendix III, Group Assignment Topic Areas***). The assignment was designed to build on and integrate knowledge gained from the panel sessions. On the final day, each team presented its proposal, and received feedback from core faculty mentors and other students.

### ***Core Faculty Mentors***

Eight faculty acted as 'Core' mentors throughout the OHTN Summer Learning Institute. They were chosen to provide specific forms of expertise (e.g., community relevance, policy, ethics, methods, theory, KTE). They provided group guidance and mentorship throughout the course of the Institute, facilitated Student Break-Out Groups; and provided feedback and evaluations on student presentations on the last day. Each group met with four of the eight core faculty members.

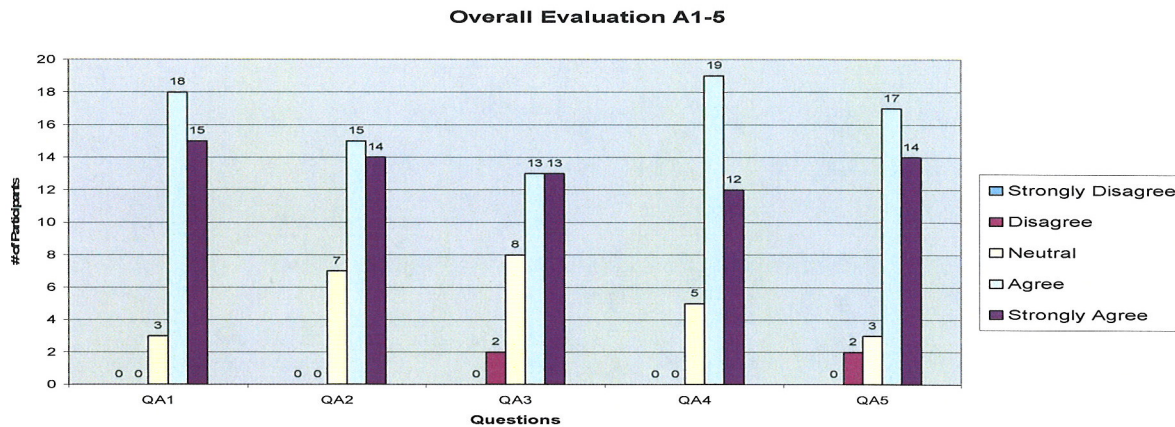
## **Student Evaluation Highlights**

### **1.0 Learning Objectives** (Figure I)

The OHTN Summer Learning Institute was most effective in helping students improve their knowledge and understanding of HIV research and social justice issues (9 out of 10 students agreed that the OHTN SLI had helped them to build a knowledge base about and familiarity with social justice issues and HIV and AIDS research). It was also highly successful in creating networking opportunities between students and community and academic stakeholders (over 85% of students agreed that the OHTN SLI had helped them create opportunities for networking and partnership development). The Institute enhanced knowledge of innovative methodological approaches to HIV research (over 80% of students reported that the OHTN SLI had helped them build skills related to innovative methodological approaches to HIV research that address social justice and equity issues).

The OHTN Summer Learning Institute could have been more effective in building skills related to research evaluation processes and social justice issues (7 out of 10 agreed that the OHTN SLI had helped enhance knowledge and reflexivity in evaluating overall impact of research processes on social justice issues).

**Figure 1: Accomplishment of the OHTN Summer Learning Institute's Learning Objectives**



**Q. 1. Learning Objectives; The Summer Institute has helped me to:**

1. build a knowledge base about and familiarity with social justice issues in HIV and AIDS research
2. build skills related to innovative methodological approaches to HIV research that address social justice and equity issues
3. enhance knowledge and reflexivity in evaluating overall impact of research processes on social justice issues
4. enhance understanding about knowledge transfer and exchange theory and strategies
5. create opportunities for networking and partnership development

**2.0 Student Group Assignments (Figure II)**

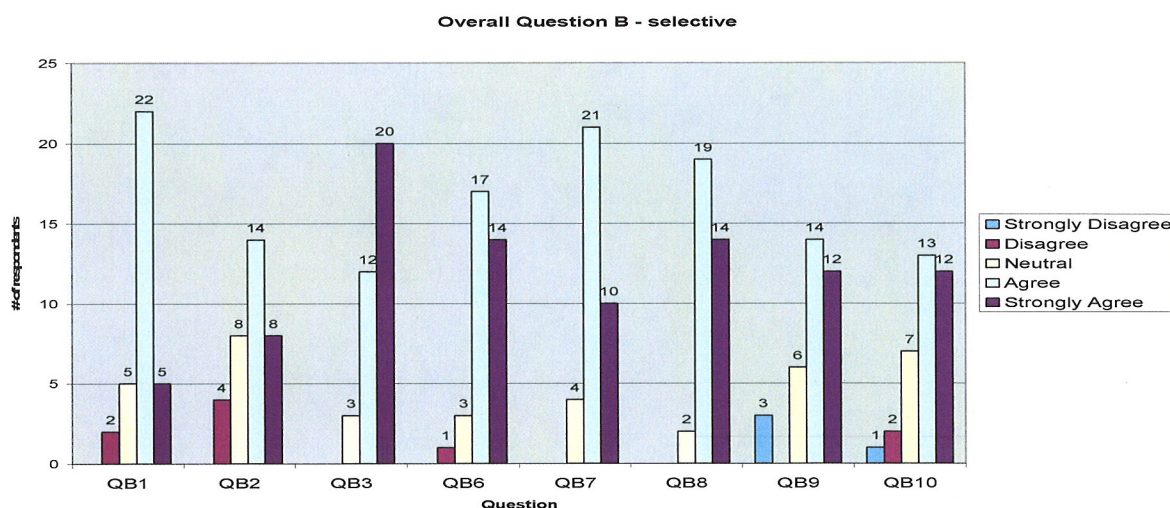
The Student Group Assignment was effective in fostering co-learning and interdisciplinary engagement (over 85% of students agreed that they learned from their fellow students and that their assignments were completed as a team), but was less successful in enhancing students' understanding of social justice in HIV and AIDS research (less than 70% of students agreed that the assignment had enhanced their learning about social justice and HIV and AIDS research).

Students scored the Core Faculty Mentors' availability and engagement in supporting Group work very highly (9 out of 10 students agreed that the Faculty Mentors were available to assist students and over 85% of students agreed that the Faculty Mentors were engaged in the program).

Students' experience would have been more positive if the Student Group Assignments had been presented more clearly (only 75% of students agreed that the OHTN SLI Group Assignment was clearly presented), and if Core Faculty Mentors had played a stronger role in facilitating discussion on the assignment (only 60% of students agreed that the guided discussions facilitated completion of the assignment). The Student Group Assignment appears to have been less successful in enhancing students' learning.



Figure II. Student Group Work and Dynamics



#### Q. Student Group Work and dynamics

1. The group assignment was clearly presented
2. Guided discussions facilitated completion of the assignment
3. Assignments were completed as a team
6. I learned from my fellow students
7. The Faculty Mentors were engaged in the program
8. The Faculty Mentors were available to assist students
9. I enjoyed the assignment
10. This assignment enhanced my learning about social justice and HIV AND AIDS research

### What students liked most about the OHTN Summer Learning Institute

#### I. Social Justice Framework

More than half of the students commented on the unique opportunity to receive structured learning on how to operationalize social justice strategies and approaches through HIV research and KTE, and for the Human Rights and Theoretical Frameworks presented.

*"I really enjoyed learning about the case studies and seeing how knowledge/theory is applied in Social Justice."*

#### II. Integrated Networking Opportunities

The unique and intimate opportunity to engage with key community leaders and researchers alike was cited by many students (60% reported this as a key aspect they liked most). The formal and informal opportunities built into the program throughout the four-days including the panel presentations, Q&A sessions, break-out sessions and break out-times were identified:

*"Frank and Ruthann's talks were extremely helpful; rarely get to hear from policy experts."*

*"Dinner was an informal networking session that I think worked very well to connect and engage us on several topics discussed throughout the day."*

#### III. Core Faculty Mentors: Mentorship, Support and Feed-Back

Students (40% of completed evaluations) commented on access to the Core Faculty Mentors and their on-going support and feed-back -- in particular, the unique opportunity to work with and be mentored by key stakeholders and multidisciplinary researchers.

*"Our CFMs were really helpful, and I liked that we were exposed to a number of different faculty supports and perspectives."*

#### **IV. Co-learning and Student-Group Assignments**

Almost half the students said the structure of the agenda with built-in time to apply new knowledge hands-on through the Group Assignments was key to effective learning.

*“I liked the chance to apply what we had learned right away in our break-out sessions.”*

*“Watching other students try out diverse strategies presented over the weekend and receive criticism or commendation proved useful models and inspiration for future projects.”*

#### **V. Practical Skills & Concrete Examples**

Participants found the examples of innovative methodologies and recent KTE strategies useful and relevant.

*“The presentations for KTE & Advocacy and the Positive Spaces, Healthy Places were really useful towards imagining KTE strategies and possibilities...”*

Students particularly appreciated Dr. Cairney’s presentation on the social determinants of health and Alison Symington’s address on human rights and the law. A few students commented on how these two presentations provided useful theoretical and contextual frameworks to situate HIV research:

*“The key note speaker gave an exceptional presentation, and integrating a human rights approach was very important in the SLI.”*

*“Researchers need a lot more information on HIV and AIDS, Human Rights and the Law. The keynote address raised good questions about these issues and they need to be followed-up by the researchers.”*

#### **VI. Preparatory Organization and Communication**

Students found the preparatory organizations and on-going communication through the OHTN Summer Learning Institute Website helpful in preparing for the Institute.

*“I felt very prepared for each lecture because the readings provided the background and an appropriate level of detail.”*

### **How Students Thought we could Improve Future Student Learning Initiatives**

#### **I. Allocate more time to panels, Q&A and small group discussions**

More than half the students felt “overwhelmed” by the number of presentations (particularly on Day 1) and suggested having fewer faculty mentors to allow for longer presentation times and more discussion.

*“It might be better next year to have fewer speakers and to give each speaker more time so that they can go more in-depth into their subject area and not be as rushed.”*

Four students commented on the need for more explanation about theoretical frameworks and definitions before jumping into the case-studies. Three students commented on the need for more historical context on the HIV movement.

*“Clearer definitions of social justice, anti-oppressive, feminist, anti-racist frameworks- some students don’t get this training at their home institutions and just learning the words and being exposed to the idea is important, but isn’t enough.”*

One student suggested opening the Summer Learning Institute with a presentation on the social determinants of health:

*“I think that Dr. Cairney’s presentation should be the opening presentation for next year’s summer school because it provided a rather comprehensive overview of what a social justice framework looks like. This way the rest of the presentations (case studies) can follow nicely, afterwards.”*

## **II. Provide More Opportunity to Network with Faculty and Students**

Despite efforts to create multiple networking opportunities, nine students commented on the need to have more built-in “free” time to network with both faculty and other students. On the final day, in response to verbal feed-back, students were encouraged to organize themselves based on interest areas. This informal networking lunch could be integrated into future learning initiatives.

## **III. Have more community representation**

A few students commented on the need for more visible representation across panel presentations of the communities being discussed (IDUs, transgendered, PHAs).

*“Would have liked to have seen more participation from people who have participated in research from IDU community, trans community, homelessness, youth, etc.”*

Two areas students felt were missing from the panel presentations were: conducting CBR in Prisons and working with sex workers.

*“Doing community based research in the prison setting is very unique because of the confined, punitive setting. I think that hasn’t been addressed in terms of creative approaches to doing CBR.”*

## **IV. Make the connection between the preparatory readings and presentations more explicit**

Four students expressed frustration with panellists either not directly speaking to the “required readings” or simply repeating information already covered in the readings.

## **V. Reconsider the rotation of Core Faculty Mentors across student break-out sessions**

Though many students commented on the role of the Core Faculty Members in their break-out assignments, six students were frustrated by having to work with a different Core Faculty Member during each of the five break-out sessions:

*“It would be a better idea to have one faculty mentor that stayed with one group entirely throughout the learning institute. We found it very hard and time consuming to provide an overview of where we were at each time we had a new faculty mentor. Also, ideas and discussions changed with each faculty change and sometimes we felt that we were back at square one. A suggestion would be to assign a faculty mentor who has the most experience with the group’s topic and then ‘borrow’ other faculty’s expertise as needed from time to time as questions arise.”*

## **VI. Reconsider group composition**

While the Student Break-Out Groups were planned to include: students from various disciplines, a balance between PhD and Masters students, and geographic diversity, three students found the group dynamics and having to work with students from very different disciplinary backgrounds and varying levels of experience and knowledge frustrating:

*“Unsure if the way the groups were composed was helpful in meeting most learner’s needs. The students that are younger, less experienced, and early in their careers do not have enough experience- it takes group time to teach them.”*

## **VII. Include more information on CBR methodologies and approaches**

Three students commented on the need to include more examples in CBR methodologies:

*“I would like to have seen an introduction to the various CBR methods that can be used with vulnerable populations, e.g. Photo voice, Photo Elicitation, etc.”*

*“The message of community involvement/partnership was clearly heard and responded to well by students. However, I’m not sure real capacity on how to work with communities was built. Our groups allowed us to build interpersonal skills with other researchers (or wannabe researchers), not with these desired community partners. These interpersonal skills are crucial, but the way we got them here really doesn’t guarantee we will be more equipped to work with communities, which is very important. Bringing young, community based researchers who are affiliated with university program would address this pressing problem.”*

## **VIII. Make more use of alternative teaching tools**

Three students expressed attention fatigue with three intensive days of panel style presentations. The increased use of multi-media and audio-visual teaching aids were cited as alternatives. Two students commended Sean Rourke’s use of a short video clip as a teaching aid and encouraged more use of alternate formats.

## **IX. Other comments**

- A few students commented on the need for more of a ‘green’ approach (i.e., non-disposable cups, healthier foods, and fewer printed hand-outs).

## **Recommendations for Future OHTN Summer Learning Institutes**

- Open the Summer Learning Institute with a Panel that provides a historical and theoretical framework from which the presentations and case-studies could flow.
- Provide more history on the HIV movement in Ontario.
- Build-in more discussion and Q&A time that does not detract from the Student-Break-Out Sessions.
- Have fewer panellists per session to allow for in-depth presentations and more discussion time.
- Build into the agenda time and space for self-organized conversation/discussion on specific interest areas for students and faculty to meet.
- Make the event more environmentally friendly.