Accessible Virtual and In-Person Events: A Tool Kit for Event Organizers

Part 2: Equity Considerations for Inviting Presenters
A Good Practice Guide for the Mental Health and Substance Use Sector

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Developed by the Provincial System Support Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

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About this Guide

Many conference organizers are recognizing the need to ensure their events are inclusive.[1] Why is it important to be intentional about who we are giving a platform to when planning and hosting events for Ontario's mental health and addiction sector?

Diversifying (eg, in terms of race, cultural background, gender, faith, stage of career, and type of expertise) the groups of colleagues and subject matter experts we work with increases exposure to new knowledge and viewpoints, generates new ideas, and helps eliminate stereotypes and bias.[2] In addition, equitable presenter selection practices result in events that better reflect the breadth of perspectives that make up the mental health and substance use sector. Implementing equitable speaker selection practices may also increase event attendance.[3]

The choice of presenter will shape not only an organization's culture but also the learning, prejudices and biases, and civic engagement of those who attend their events.[2] When we embed equity considerations in the presenter selection process, we put an emphasis on health equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression as core values.[4]

This guide provides an overview of equity considerations for the selection of presenters for a variety of events hosted by the mental health and substance use sector (eg, training and educational sessions, knowledge mobilization and system planning events, quality improvement activities, conferences and symposia). Out of scope are clinical events, such as group psychotherapy.

The aim of this guide is to describe practices that will help make your events more reflective of both people who provide mental health and addiction services and the people who receive these services.

This guide provides the following:

- An opportunity to reflect on power dynamics in event planning.
- Best practices for equitable inclusion of diverse presenters.
- Prompts to help you design presenter lineups that represent the diversity of identities, experiences, and perspectives across the mental health and substance use sector.
- Suggestions for making your events more inclusive for people with lived and living experience of mental health and substance use challenges, and/or those experiencing intersecting forms of structural marginalization.

We based the content of this guide on an environmental scan of resources for diversifying presenter lineups and the authors' own collective experiences. We also obtained input from subject matter experts with lived experience.

This guide is a companion to the following resources:

- Planning and Hosting Accessible Online and In-Person Events: A Good Practice Guide for the Mental Health and Substance Use Sector.
- Equitable & Anti-Oppressive Facilitation for Online and In-Person Events: A Good Practice Guide for the Mental Health and Substance Use Sector.

For definitions of commonly used terms, see the glossary.

Presenter Diversity 101

Principles for Diversifying Presenters

This section presents seven principles for diversifying your event's presenter lineup.

1. Seek presenters beyond your personal network

Most people have social networks that are fairly homogenous in terms of sociodemographic characteristics (eg, race, ethnicity, age, religion,

education, etc.). You can diversify your network by building relationships with a variety of individuals in your community as well as through mentoring and interdisciplinary collaboration.[4]

Ideally, the group organizing the event would also reflect the demographics of your event's intended audience. Rotate organizing roles so that different people on your team, advisory board, or working group have an opportunity to select presenters and topics. Dedicate a portion of a meeting to brainstorming topics/presenters.

Although it is important to bring in diverse experiences and perspectives when planning events, it is also important to avoid placing the onus only on individuals from structurally marginalized groups (eg, women, racialized, disabled, 2S/LGBTQIA+ people) to ensure a diverse presenter line-up. Individuals, both from structurally marginalized groups and those who hold more social privilege, should equally share the commitment to diversify presenter line-ups.

2. Seek presenters from impacted groups

Align the presenter line-up with the event topic. For example, if the event will focus on the mental health effects of police violence, find presenters who represent communities or groups that are over-represented among recipients of this violence, such as Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups, and disabled groups.[4] Seek presenters from underrepresented groups who bring an intersectional lens.

Identify and invite people from communities or groups that often go unrepresented in conference panels and other event presentations. To prioritize their participation, identify their availability before reaching out to other potential presenters. For example, look for presenters within diverse cultural groups, activists, artists, and students, as well as from interdisciplinary and social justice fields, such as Black Studies, Indigenous Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Critical Disability Studies, Critical Health Humanities, and Narrative Medicine.

3. Engage people with diverse lived experiences

"Nothing about us without us" is a slogan from the disability rights movement that expresses the idea that services and policies should not be developed without the engagement and participation of members of affected groups and communities.[5] Seek qualified presenters with diverse lived experiences and identities who can bring an intersectional, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive lens. It is a good idea to ask such presenters how they would like to be paid, as people with lived experience often prefer cash as the payment method.

Recognize that lived and professional experience are not mutually exclusive. When seeking presenters who are clinicians, researchers, and leaders, aim to include those who bring both lived and professional lenses to a topic.

4. Make space for presenters who are less well known

A focus on reputation or prominence is often used to justify inviting certain presenters and/or paying them at a higher rate than others. Reputation is garnered in part through inherent and unacknowledged privilege, such as whiteness, maleness, and citizenship, rather than merit alone.[6,7] Make a point of seeking qualified presenters who have different lived experiences and identities, who are less well known or early in their career, and pay them equitably.[8,9]

5. Expand diversity beyond equity-related topics

Avoid relegating presenters with lived experience of structural marginalization to equity-related topics. Select diverse presenters to speak about a broad range of topics on the event agenda.

6. Avoid tokenism

In efforts to diversify workplaces, panels, committees, and other spaces, organizations sometimes select one individual to represent a whole minoritized or marginalized group. This practice, called tokenism, often unintentionally puts a burden on already marginalized individuals. Additionally, it is not respectful or appropriate to expect a presenter to speak on behalf of an entire community or form of lived experience. A power imbalance can make it difficult for the tokenized

person to speak up about inequities and oppression, and against tokenism itself, and even when they do, the socially dominant voices and perspectives may drown out their perspective.

To avoid tokenism, individuals who are planning events must ensure that any presenter from a structurally marginalized group is not the only marginalized person presenting on an otherwise privileged (eg, white, male, able-bodied) panel. Content development for the event also needs to guard against framing a topic in a tokenizing or stereotypical manner.

7. Broaden the concept of what a presentation can look like

A formal presentation structure may not be culturally relevant, accessible, or safe for some individuals whose voices are often not represented in presentations, such as Mad, disabled, and neurodivergent people, and people from some non-Western cultures.[8] Make space for presenters who might feel more comfortable sharing knowledge through means such as storytelling, performance, interviews, and conversations.

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Tips for Diversifying Your Presenter Lineup

- Give yourself time (ideally 6 months) to identify and invite qualified and diverse presenters.
- Reflect on your own unconscious biases and put mechanisms in place to mitigate them.
- Build a shared commitment within the planning team to go beyond their own networks to find qualified presenters with diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives.
- Provide opportunities for brainstorming a diverse lineup of presenters by including discussion time in team meeting agendas.
- Invite event participants to suggest topics and presenters (eg, by email, a web form, or survey).
- Seek out presenter suggestions from relevant professional associations (eg, associations for 2S/LGBTQIA+ people, women, or racialized people in the field).
- Ask those who decline your invitation for presenter recommendations.
- Following an event, reflect on who was missing from the room and how you might build relationships with those individuals and communities to ensure you include them in the future.

Final Thoughts

We thank you for reading this resource and hope you found it helpful. We encourage you to make every possible effort to diversify the perspectives and individuals you feature at your event. We hope you will keep learning and improving on your planning practices, and advocate for conditions that enable equitable distribution of labour and presenter compensation.

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Glossary

2S/LGBTQIA+: This acronym stands for 2 spirit (sometimes called two spirit, two spirited, or 2 spirited), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual. The plus sign indicates additional identities that may not be specifically included in the acronym but which are also part of the community. The 2S is first and is bracketed off to recognize that two-spirit people, who predate LGBTQIA+ communities on Turtle Island (North America) have culturally distinct ways of understanding gender and sexuality that precede colonial understandings.[9]

Accessibility: The ability of products, devices, services, or environments to be free of barriers for disabled people so that they may participate fully in all aspects of life).[11] Accessibility "implies conscious planning, design and/or effort to make sure something is barrier-free". [11] The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act outlines the principles of accessibility as independence, dignity, integration, and equality of opportunity.[10]

Equity: "Unlike the notion of equality, equity is not about sameness of treatment. It denotes fairness and justice in process and in results. Equitable outcomes often require differential treatment and resource redistribution to achieve a level playing field among all individuals and communities. This requires recognizing and addressing barriers to opportunities for all to thrive in our society."[11]

Inclusion: The practice or policy of welcoming individuals with unique differences in identities, experiences, and challenges; making space for them to utilize their talents, ideas, and strengths; and seeing diversity as an organizational strength.[11,12]

Intersectionality: A term coined by the Columbia Law School professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw, which "considers how systems such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination overlap and interact with one another to advantage some and disadvantage others at an individual and social-structural level." [13]

Mad: A term that was reclaimed by activists in the psychiatric survivor movement in the 1970s as an alternate word to describe experiences of emotional distress and difference (typically labelled mental illness) outside of the medical model.[14] "A mad individual is a person whose identity and selfhood are contrary to convention, subverting, defying, disrupting, and liberating oneself from what is considered 'sane.' To be mad is to take pride in the mental states that have been deemed criminal and deficit."[15] The term is often capitalized, similar to Deaf, in recognition that it is not just an identity, but a community with unique values, norms, culture and history.

Marginalization: Exclusion of an individual or group based on characteristics, such as race, gender, sexuality and social class. When people are marginalized, they experience inequitable distribution of social, economic, physical, and psychological resources.[16]

Tokenism: The policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort at providing a more diverse, equitable, or inclusive environment. Such token gestures are performed to avoid criticism and/or give the appearance of fairness without actually changing the existing system.[17]

Neurodivergent: Coined by neurodiversity activist Kassiane Asasumasu, this term refers to "having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal'."[18] The term emerged from the term neurodiversity, the concept that there is no "normal" human brain and that what we might label "neurodevelopmental disabilities" (eg, autism) or mental illnesses are normal variations in human neurology, just like there is diversity in skin colour, gender, etc.[19]

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