Early Group Foundings

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The logistics of putting a speaker in front of an MSDG audience include the availability of meeting space and event promotion. MSDGs may be legally independent or supported by a university or parent society, but 85% of groups are funded by corporate sponsors. Funds may also support other services for students and the membership at large.

79% of active groups serve a membership radius of 60 km. Of those groups, 40% serve a membership traveling within a single city or metro area to attend meetings. 42% of MSDGs host at least one regular joint meeting with other scientific groups or include presentations from students and postdocs. 4% of MSDGs regularly give travel awards for students to attend and present at ASMS.

Defunct Groups

Like anything else, MSDGs change and sometimes die out. The most recent version of the Connecticut MSDG lasted only a few years, but even the metropolitan Bay Area and Toronto MSDGs became dormant after nearly 40 years of regular meetings. Local groups closely tied to a single person or research group are prone to falling apart when that organizer/PIC moves or retires—although rotating leadership is no guarantee of longevity. Some members have been able to re-form a group after a break, perhaps with a reduced number of meetings, or to make an occasional trip to a different group. Once the website is gone, meeting records may only exist in member memories.

Internet discussion groups have been connecting flap-fungling scientists for decades. The first dedicated to MS was the Usenet group sci.techniques.mass, which active from 1995-2010 under a pair of moderators that approved each of 5,000 topics. Like physical MSDGs, the group was a forum for problem-solving, job posts, sales resources, and general inquiry. Posts are archived on the web by founder David Rotzank and in a Google group, a trove of familiar names, students passing through the field, and connections that no longer exist in the same form. Today, those who live too far from an MSDG to attend meetings can access the group via email (1999). Name the Dutch Society, Reddit r/masspeuctrometry, plus streaming videos and podcasts. However, like Usenet those platforms are subject to change.

WHAT MAKES A DISCUSSION GROUP SUCCESSFUL?

There are two essential parts to every MSDG: the membership and the volunteer leaders. A group must maintain a critical mass of members who can attend on a regular basis. Universities and metro areas with diverse labs and a local speaker pool are most likely to sustain a group, but members may interact with communities, meetings after business hours, family obligations, and everything else that fills up the life of a busy scientist. Encouragement from PIs and group leaders makes a large impact on a meeting of fewer than 15 critical regular meeting locations are also helpful. The volunteer leadership must attend meetings at regular intervals, as do other members, in addition to the responsibilities of planning a program, wrangling traveling speakers, contacting members, managing group finances and member services, and recruiting new leaders. They do this without the prestige that comes from election in a national society. Member mailing lists require only the time to send messages (far fewer than now that one has to print flyers or staff envelopes). MSDG websites are important but cost money and effort to maintain do other services like refreshments and travel awards. Sponsorship is vital. Vendor representatives are a common sight at meetings and often offer “vendor nights”, even for groups supported by member dues, parent societies, or universities.

The future of MSDGs: New and Lasting Communities

The initial barrier to creation or re-ignition of an MSDG is low, if someone is willing to organize meetings and a few regulars are able to attend. A small, independent group can gather members and corporate sponsors, growing into a legal nonprofit that manages a budget. Since 2013 ASMS has offered travel awards for assistant professors to be speakers, and other scientific societies are also willing to collaborate in or sponsor meetings.

New groups continue to form – the Central Ohio MSDG (2015), Los Angeles Metro MSDG (2017), and London Proteomics (2020). Some of these new MSDGs have been coined in symposia in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver held for over a decade under the Canadian Forum for Analytical and Biological Sciences.