The logistics of putting a speaker in front of an audience also 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 within 35 miles. 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 groups. Such meetings can include presentations from students and postdocs; 47% 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 fall apart when that organizing PI waves 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.

Defunct Groups

Early Group Foundings

Government scientists in the DC region Joseph D’Amico (FDA), Henry Fales (NIH), Henry Rosenstock (NSIST), and Fred Saalfeld (NRL) started the Washington MSDG in approximately 1982, which later expanded to include meetings hosted by Catterall Francis in Baltimore. In 1984 Piet van der Haak and Henk Hofman at the University of Amsterdam began an MSDG with 38 active members. Up North, in 1982 Charles Speechley founded the Michigan MSDG. In 1983, Robert Hahn founded the Oregon MSDG.

The regional discussion groups are a critical venue for the membership of ASMS as they provide a regular touchstone to stay tuned into the science. I consider the discussion group not only as a place to network, but to learn more of this fascinating field. Some of these are “vendor events”, only for groups supported by member dues, parents societies, or universities.

The future of MSDGs: New and Lasting Communities

The initial barrier to creation or re-organization 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 2013-14, the MSDG has offered travel awards to assistant professors to be members, and other scientific societies are also often willing to collaborate or in sponsoring meetings.

Defunct groups also have joined in symposia in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver held for over a decade under the Canadian Forum for Analytical and Biological Sciences.

WHAT MAKES A DISCUSSION GROUP LIST?

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 more remote groups with commutes, 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 50! Regular central meeting locations are also helpful.

The volunteer leadership must attend more than 60% of meetings regularly than other members, in addition to the responsibilities of planning a program, writing travel speakers, contacting members, managing 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 shorter now than one has to print flyers or stuff envelopes). MSDG websites are important but cost money and effort to maintain so do other services like refreshments and travel awards. Sponsorship is vital. Vendor representatives are a common sight at meetings and often recognized with “vendor events”, even for groups supported by member dues, parent societies, or universities.

The founding father of the MSDG is the late Robert Hahn. He had the vision of setting up discussion groups and bringing together mass spectrometrists around the US. He is deeply missed.