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Embracing Diversity and Adapting to the Shifting Landscape of Health Behavior Research: American Academy of Health Behavior Presidential Note

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Abstract

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**Embracing Diversity and Adapting to the Shifting Landscape of Health Behavior
Research: American Academy of Health Behavior Presidential Note**

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**Adapted from my inaugural speech at the 2023 American Academy of Health Behavior Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA.*

Dear Academy Members,

I am both absolutely delighted and profoundly humbled to become president of the American Academy of Health Behavior. This is the organization that I care deeply about. I joined AAHB in 2011 which was the same year that I joined Indiana University as a green Assistant Professor. I vividly recall attending my first AAHB conference in Charleston, SC in 2014, where I immediately felt at home, and I have never missed a conference since. The unwavering support that I have received over the years from all of you, my friends and fellow academy members, has helped me grow academically. As someone who was originally trained in health services research and had little knowledge about health behavior research, joining the Academy and receiving support and encouragement has meant a lot to me. Thanks to all of you, but especially to Dr. Dong-Chul Seo and Dr. Mohammad Torabi who invited me to join the academy back in 2011. And thanks to now immediate past president, Dr. Annie Nguyen, whom I have had the opportunity to shadow for the last year.

Public health is at a moment of great promise and great uncertainty. On one hand, we are emerging from a worldwide pandemic in which science triumphed in the form of vaccines that were created at lightning speed and behavioral policies like masking and social distancing which may have saved millions of lives. But on the other hand, we continue to face the great enduring epidemics of obesity, addiction, HIV, gun violence, and so on. And while we are moving past COVID, the spread and fears of monkeypox remind us that most countries, including ours, may not be ready for the next pandemic. Meanwhile, the community of health behavior research – and science in general – is also at a crossroads. Never before in human history have we had such powerful scientific tools at our disposal, including highly refined understanding of medicine, health, and epidemiology, massive datasets, novel sensing and data collection paradigms, and advanced analysis tools including machine learning and artificial intelligence. And yet much of

the public remains skeptical of the work we do, suspicious of science-based health and public health recommendations, for example, face masking and vaccination. We are the scientists who can steer the community of health behavior to understand these emerging and ongoing health challenges.

To achieve this goal, the Academy must continue to evolve and adapt to the changing academic environment. While we must maintain the scientific rigor and traditions that have shaped us into what the Academy is today, we must also develop strategies to enhance the Academy's ability to adapt to these changes, ensuring that we remain sustainable and capable of providing proper services to our members. With this in mind, I would like to propose two key initiatives that I plan to champion during the next year.

First, we are a small but unique organization with a distinct identity, but we must continue to grow our membership, which forms the foundation of this member-led organization. I hope to grow the diversity of the membership in terms of racial/ethnic representation, students and non-students, career stages, and so on. This will not only attract new and bright minds to health behavior research but also create an inclusive environment that values diversity and promotes inclusion in our research and professional communities. It will also help to make our Academy more sustainable in the long term. Additionally, retaining current members is equally important. I will collaborate with the board of directors and councils to foster better member engagement and professional development opportunities.

Second, we must continue to adapt to the emerging challenges and trends in health behaviors and health behavior research. As the research home for many of us, the Academy should play a critical role in facilitating our understanding of these new fields and also research collaboration. For example, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is predicted to revolutionize many fields, including health behavior research. At the very recent AAHB conference in San Francisco, we saw examples of this in action. Dr. Danny Valdez, Dr. Eric Walsh-Buhi, and their colleagues presented a poster demonstrating the use of natural language processing on Twitter data to underpin longitudinal discussions about monkeypox. Additionally, Dr. Ruopeng An and his colleagues presented a poster showcasing how chatbots, powered by computer AI, respond to validated questions about body image. These examples demonstrate the potential for AI to transform health behavior research. There has been a surge in both excitement and concern regarding AI especially since the introduction of ChatGPT, an AI-powered chatbot that anyone

can use to write almost anything beautifully, including an email, a statement, an essay, a speech, and so on. Emerging technology like AI introduces novel tools that can be used to enhance the understanding and study of health behaviors, but they can also be weapons that exacerbate existing issues such as health misinformation.

With that in mind, we have carefully selected the theme for the 2024 AAHB conference in Savannah, GA, which is “Health Communication, (Mis-)Information, and Behavior: Leveraging Technology for Behavioral Interventions and Health Behavior Research”. This theme aims to explore the latest developments in health communication, interventions, misinformation, and digital technologies. The conference will bring together experts to share insights and discuss various topics, such as the impact of social media and misinformation on health behaviors, designing effective health communication campaigns, strategies for addressing misinformation, and evaluating the effectiveness of health communication and behavior change programs. Our ultimate aim is to foster collaboration among researchers to promote evidence-based solutions to improve public health.

As many of you do, I have a deep affection for our Academy. Its uniqueness, people, and traditions are some of the admirable aspects of our organization that have kept me engaged. While I welcome innovative ideas and recognize the need for our academy to adapt to the ever-changing academic landscape, I remain committed to preserving the core values of AAHB.

In closing, I would like to assure you that I am committed to leading our Academy with enthusiasm, integrity, and a deep respect for the voices of our members. It is my vision to foster a culture of collaboration and innovation, where all voices and diverse perspectives are embraced. Together, we will work to grow the Academy and make strides to advance the field of health behavior research. I acknowledge that I will not be alone driving the vehicle; rather, it is all of you who will be joining me on this journey, sharing your ideas, and helping to steer us towards our desired destinations. I look forward to the opportunity to work with you all in the coming year.

Thank you for your trust and support.



Hsien-Chang Lin, PhD, FAAHB

2023-2024 President, American Academy of Health Behavior