



## Building A Planetary Health Club: A Ten-Point Guide

Planetary health is an emerging field focused on the human health impacts of global environmental change. This understanding has particularly resonated with students and young professionals dedicated to working toward a livable and sustainable future.

The Planetary Health Alliance Emerging Scholars Network convened during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Planetary Health Annual Meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2018 to brainstorm ideas and share experiences on how to establish planetary health clubs in colleges and universities around the world. From this convening, ten main points emerged as key principles to guide students in the development of dynamic, successful, inclusive, and impactful planetary health clubs.

**1. Begin with the fundamentals.** The first step in building a planetary health club in your school is to define the fundamentals: vision, mission, objectives (V-M-O), as well as values, identity, and culture. This process must be inclusive and participatory to build a sense of ownership among members from the get-go. To ensure that your organization is committed to planetary health principles, you might find it helpful to review some of the foundational documents of planetary health such as the [2015 Lancet-Rockefeller Commission's report](#), [Planetary health: protecting human health on a rapidly changing planet](#), and the [Planetary Health Education Cross-Cutting Principles](#). Since your organization is part of a broader university entity, it will also be beneficial to identify areas of alignment between your club's purpose and your institution's thrusts. This step will help you gain support from university leaders, identify allies at your campus, find existing programs and projects that you can leverage for collaboration, and generate resources to support your future projects. We encourage you to speak with faculty and staff about assisting your university in applying for PHA membership, if not already members.

**2. Recruit diverse and passionate members.** Planetary health is a transdisciplinary field that addresses issues cutting across a wide range of disciplines and departments. Therefore, a planetary health club must reflect the degree of diversity of interests, expertise, and experiences that characterize the field and the problems it seeks to address. A newly-created club may be based at a specific school such as a school of public health, or it can be a university-wide entity that allows students from all educational levels and disciplines to participate. Organizations should be flexible and open to expanding membership once the club becomes more established. Whether the club is targeted towards a specific group of students or open to the wider community, it is important to have a diversity of views, talents, and experiences that can enrich the club's activities, discussions, and learning.

**3. Establish a flat structure with core leadership.** While traditional organizations adopt a hierarchical structure, several planetary health clubs have chosen to become flat organizations.



This structure encourages healthy collaboration among members, especially with a diverse membership. While officers can be assigned or even elected to oversee operations and ensure accountability, various roles and responsibilities, such as spearheading specific projects or facilitating journal club discussions, can be distributed and rotated among the membership. Members should be encouraged to propose and initiate projects and build sub-committees or working groups. An open environment improves member motivation and cultivates a collective sense of ownership and belonging.

**4. Design meaningful activities and projects.** Student clubs are sustained and student members are motivated when activities are exciting, impactful, and rewarding. There are a wide range of activities and projects that planetary health student clubs may undertake, but it is important to maintain activities that are aligned with the club's vision/mission and accurately reflect the needs, interests, and capabilities of members. Student clubs may conduct internal events that stimulate learning, foster networking, and encourage collaboration, from journal clubs and weekend retreats, to field trips and research projects. Clubs may also organize advocacy and knowledge-dissemination events that target the wider campus and even the outside community through public lectures, academic conferences, and exhibitions.

**5. Obtain faculty support.** Early in the establishment of the club, it is important to identify faculty members who can be vital sources of support. Apart from a main faculty adviser, which is usually required by schools, other professors can be invited as allies. Faculty members can connect you to other thought leaders, potential partner organizations, and even external funders. If your university is already a PHA member, please reach out to Erika Veidis at [erikaveidis@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:erikaveidis@fas.harvard.edu), to be connected with faculty and other university representatives already engaged in planetary health.

**6. Ensure open and regular communication.** Since activities might not be held consistently and members are busy on a day-to-day basis, regular and open communication among members keeps the organization alive. Early in the process, communication lines should be defined. A directory of email addresses always comes handy when calling for meetings or disseminating relevant announcements. The club's leadership may send a monthly newsletter to check in with members and update them about past and upcoming activities. Building a social media presence on Facebook and/or Twitter not only facilitates interaction among members, but also improves visibility to potential recruits, external partners, and university leadership.

**7. Mobilize resources broadly.** If you are looking to fund your club, the first place to find support is at your home institution. Universities usually allocate resources for student-led initiatives on campus. Since planetary health is a new field, funding resources may be limited. Therefore, it is important to assess the general funding landscape at your university and even in the broader community. Effectively communicating the planetary health message, pitching exciting and impactful project ideas, and developing concise, clear, and compelling project proposals and concept notes may increase the likelihood of attracting the attention of funders. Be open to other



forms of support apart from funding, such as free use of venue, catering for events, or transportation for sending delegates to conferences. Finally, launch creative fundraising activities to not only raise funds, but also increase awareness about planetary health and engage your local community.

**8. Sustain member interest.** Participation in student clubs often fluctuates. This trend can be due to a myriad factors, such as fluctuating funding sources or high turnover of leadership. To ensure that student clubs are sustained both within the academic year and into future years, develop a club culture that cares for its members and inspires active involvement and initiative. Many of the steps listed above contribute towards longer-term club sustainability – from constant communication and visibility to regular events that forge bonds and create meaning. Club leaders should welcome members’ needs and feedback.

**9. Reach out to the broader community.** Since planetary health challenges also impact your surrounding community, your club might feel it is important to reach out to people outside of your university. Your club may also serve as the precursor or act as a convener of a broader planetary health movement within your city. You may choose to engage with local politicians and policy-makers, build partnerships with other local organizations such as youth groups and faith communities, support the establishment of other planetary health clubs in nearby schools, or even collaborate with existing planetary health clubs in your area. You can also join established coalitions and networks of organizations devoted to the intersection of environment and health issues. We hope you will utilize the [Planetary Health Emerging Scholars Online Community](#) to interact with other students and clubs from around the world and learn about other institutional efforts in planetary health.

**10. Reflect and evaluate.** In the era of planetary health, social-ecological systems must adapt and iterate – and this also holds true for planetary health clubs. Many things can change even over the course of a year, so club members must constantly reflect, assess, and evaluate their activities to immediately remedy gaps, foresee challenges, and explore opportunities. Whether through face-to-face meetings, anonymous surveys, or active online threads, a culture of openness will also encourage members to speak up and raise suggestions, provide feedback, and propose new ideas. It should also be standard operating procedure to evaluate completed projects and events so as to learn from mistakes, draw new lessons, celebrate success, and plan for the next steps.

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