

## Using data to inform decision making in recruitment of prospective public health students

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to compare recruitment methods for prospective students to the public health programs at the CUNY School of Public Health. recruitment data on prospective Masters and Doctoral Public Health students were gathered during the period of July 2014 to July 2015, using 4 recruitment methods: Schools of Public Health Application Service (SOPHAS) virtual chats, CUNY SPH virtual chats, CUNY SPH website, and face to face information sessions. Data gathered included: recruitment event dates, student registration for recruitment events, attendance status, student engagement with recruiter, recruitment outcomes, and frequently asked questions. Secondary data analysis was conducted during December 2015, using SAS v9.4. Results showed that 152 recruitment sessions were held including: SOPHAS virtual chat sessions (n=5), CUNY SPH virtual chat sessions (n=115), and face to face information sessions (n=32). The fourth method consisted of an electronic form made available on the CUNY SPH website (n=516). Overall, there were 298 applicants to various programs across these recruitment methods. Majority of the applicants (n=144) were prospective students who were engaged with a recruiter (n=597) in the sessions. This study identifies the gaps in aggregating standardized data across different sources in order to facilitate optimal data driven practices in recruitment.

Key words: Recruitment, Public Health, Technology, Virtual Chats, Higher Education

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## INTRODUCTION

Student recruitment should be recognized as a key element in the sustainability and success of an institution and must be a priority in an institution's strategic plan. Recruiting high quality students is critical to the long-term sustainability of an institution. In-person campus tours, open house, bulk e-mail announcement, print and electronic publicity and high school visits are traditional recruitment methods used in student recruitment (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010; Hanover Research, 2014). Although the use of social media and technology for recruitment is on the increase, these traditional recruitment methods are still popular and successful (Hanover Research, 2014). However, the success of any recruitment method is highly dependent on the use of fundamental data to reach the target population. For instance, the use of automated reminders to prospective students who signed up for an information session is critical to increased attendance (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010).

Prior research has shown promising findings on accessibility and ease of finding information on an institution's website in persuading prospective student's selection of an institution to attend (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010; Hanover Research, 2014; Smith 2015). The percentage of students who gathered information about programs through the institution's website has increased over the years (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010; Hanover Research, 2014; Smith 2015). A survey of students conducted in 2002, showed about 50 percent of students searched prospective departments online through their website, this percentage increased to nearly 88 percent by 2007 (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010). Interactive website approach providing virtual tours personalize students' interactions and create a sense of community in the virtual world resulting in great success in new generation of students (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010). The belief is that technology applications need to be integrated into recruitment processes to improve or develop this feature-rich functionality to enhance prospective student's experience and sustainability (Hanover Research, 2014; Smith 2015). The trend in social media fascination observed in the upcoming generation of students must be leveraged in facilitating student engagement and recruitment. Although the primary purpose of student recruitment is the quality of student population, academic profiling and institution's funding base, the most crucial purpose still remains sustainability of this student population (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010).

Despite the new era in the use of technology and social media in student recruitment, informatics as a tool to strategize recruitment process across the various methods has not been adequately explored (Davis et al, 2012). It is also important to note that recruitment decision making is highly multifaceted, hence the various determinants including student's choice to pursue higher education, the information available to them in the course of their search, satisfaction derived from choices, need to be carefully considered in successful recruitment strategies (Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza, 2012; Gordon, & Steele, 2015;). Findings of the marketing in higher education poll conducted by Noel-Levitz in 2013 showed that only about one-third to one-half of recruiters have a high quality enrollment plan strategy (Hanover Research, 2014). The objective of this exploratory study was to compare various approaches to recruit prospective students to the public health programs. The findings of this study will help to develop a data driven evidence based framework of student recruitment to Public Health programs. To the best of our knowledge this is the first study to compare different recruitment approaches to enroll public health students.

## METHODS

Recruitment data on prospective Masters and Doctoral Public Health students were gathered during the period of July 2014 to July 2015 at the City University of New York School of Public Health (CUNY SPH). Secondary data analysis was conducted during December 2015. The various recruitment data sources included (a) Schools of Public Health Application Service (SOPHAS) virtual chats, (b) CUNY SPH virtual chats, (c) CUNY SPH website, and (d) face to face information sessions. The data sources and elements gathered for each recruitment method are further explained below:

- (a) **SOPHAS Virtual Chat:** The SOPHAS virtual chat sessions are organized by Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH). The recruitment and admission specialist of the CUNY SPH used a platform known as 'Career Echo', on those days when the SOPHAS virtual chat sessions were held. The sessions were conducted from July 2014 to July 2015. Analysis of the SOPHAS virtual chats was conducted to identify themes that were most commonly discussed during these chats.
- (b) **CUNY SPH Virtual Chat:** These virtual chats were conducted by CUNY SPH three times a week using an Adobe Connect platform. The chat transcripts were gathered during September 2014 to July 2015.
- (c) **CUNY SPH website:** An online form using formstack was available on the CUNY SPH website to gather data on prospective students interested in public health. The data was gathered from July 2014 to July 2015.
- (d) **Face-to-face Information Sessions:** Information sessions were conducted in person. Data was gathered on the number of participants that signed up for these sessions and those that actually attended the sessions. The sessions were conducted during August 2014 to July 2015.

### Variables description

- The following variables were gathered using various recruitment data sources (Figure 1).
- a) **Recruitment event dates:** Information was gathered on the dates for which the SOPHAS virtual chat, CUNY SPH virtual chats, and face-to-face information sessions were conducted, as well as the dates on which an online electronic form on the CUNY SPH website was also recorded.
  - b) **Sources of Information about CUNY SPH programs:** Information was also gathered to determine the sources of information of public health programs offered at CUNY SPH. The various options included internet search, program flyers, colleague/friend, current/former student, graduate fairs, SOPHAS and its virtual fairs, American Public Health Association (APHA) annual meeting, advertisements from Nations health, city limits and Metro NY recruitment events, food conferences, communication with recruiter, and information sessions.
  - c) **Prospective student questions:** Inquiries related to several topics were made during the virtual chats by the prospective public health students. These included information related to: Standardized tests (GRE, TOEFL, and WES), letters of recommendations, scholarships/funding, concerns on cut-off points for GPAs and standardized tests, acceptance rates, and personal statement questions, tuition and fees, housing options, career options, faculty members research, research opportunities, focus on global health, study abroad

options, degree programs and their duration, distance learning options, current students and alumni, accreditation status, work study programs, non-degree applicant, course schedule, part time/full time options, and certificate programs offered. Additional questions from prospective public health students were gathered using an electronic form available on the CUNY SPH. These questions were related to academics, alumni, career services, dates and deadlines, events, financial aid, general admissions, prospective student advising, SOPHAS, transfer, and others.

- d) Program of interest: Public Health programs of interest among the prospective public health students were also recorded. These included Masters (MPH/MS) and doctoral level (DPH) Public Health programs with concentrations in: Epidemiology, Biostatistics, Nutrition, Health policy and management, Environmental and Occupational sciences, Community health education, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and General Public Health (GPH).
- e) Student Sign up (Yes/No): Information was recorded on the number of students that signed up for the various virtual chat sessions. SOPHAS virtual chats and face to face information sessions required a prior sign up. Sign up was not required for CUNY SPH virtual chats.
- f) Student Attendance status (Yes/No): Information was also recorded on the number of participants who attended the virtual chats.
- g) Student Engagement status (Yes/No): Information was also gathered on the number of students who actively engaged during the virtual chat sessions. Participants were categorized as 'yes' if they engaged or communicated with the school representatives, and 'no' if otherwise (Figure1).
- h) Recruitment outcomes: Student data was also gathered on the outcomes of the recruitment approaches and included;
  - Application status (Yes/No): Information was gathered to determine the number of applicants who actually applied after participating across various recruitment events.
  - Admission status (Yes/No): The admission status of these participants who applied to any of the CUNY SPH Public Health programs was also recorded
  - Enrollment status (Yes/No): Admitted students were tracked to verify their enrollment status upon application.

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Descriptive analysis was performed to report frequency distributions for all the variables. Content analysis was performed on the qualitative data gathered from chat transcripts to explore themes relevant to the prospective Public Health students. All analysis was performed using SAS v9.4.

## RESULTS

Results on 8,414 prospective public health students showed that more than half of the students signed up through the SOPHAS virtual chats (78%, n=6559), followed by CUNY SPH virtual chats (10%, n=875) and face to face information sessions (6%, n=464). About 6% (n=516) of the students filled an electronic form on the CUNY SPH website. Of all the students who signed up for SOPHAS virtual chat, only 6% (n=417) of them actually attended them compared to the face to face information sessions where 100% (n=464) of them actually

attended. Eight hundred and seventy-five prospective students attended the CUNY SPH chats. There was no sign up needed for the CUNY SPH virtual chats. (Figure2).

### **Number of sessions across various recruitment methods**

A total of 152 recruitment sessions including: 5 SOPHAS virtual chat sessions, 115 CUNY SPH virtual chat sessions and 32 information sessions were conducted between July 2014 and July 2015. There was no specific recruitment session for participants through the CUNY SPH website. The table below shows the distribution of the number of prospective public health students that responded to each of the recruitment sessions held. Similar number of attendees were observed between 2014 (n=1137) and 2015 (n=1135). There was a decrease between 2014 and 2015, in the prospective students who attended the SOPHAS virtual chat sessions (242 vs. 175), and the information sessions (284 vs. 180) while an increase was seen in the CUNY SPH virtual chat attendance (285 vs. 590) (Table1).

### **Student-Recruiter engagement during recruitment events**

Among the prospective students who attended the recruitment sessions (n=1756) (Table 2), and were engaged with a recruiter (n=597), results showed that those who participated in the SOPHAS virtual chats were more engaged (n=233; 56%) with a recruiter as compared to those in the info sessions (n=221; 48%) or CUNY SPH virtual chats (n=143; 16%) (Figure3).

### **Prospective applicants to CUNY SPH Public Health programs stratified by engagement status**

Overall, there were 298 applicants to the CUNY Public health programs across all the various recruitment methods. This included 205 applicants who attended either of the 3 recruitment sessions (Table 2), and 93 applicants from prospective students who filled out the electronic forms on the CUNY SPH website (n=516).

Of all the applicants who attended either of the 3 recruitment sessions (n=205), and were engaged with a recruiter (n=144), majority came from the face to face information sessions (38%, n=55) followed by the SOPHAS virtual chats (33%, n=47), and the CUNY SPH website (29%, n=42) (Table 2). Among the applicants who attended the sessions but were not engaged with a recruiter (n=61), majority came from the face to face information sessions (74%, n=45) followed by the SOPHAS virtual chats (26%, n=16). None of the prospective students who did not engage with a recruiter at the CUNY SPH virtual chat session actually applied to the programs.

### **Information seeking behavior of Prospective Public Health applicants**

#### **(i) Sources of CUNY SPH programs**

The most common sources of information of the CUNY public health programs among prospective applicants included Internet (59%; n=723) colleagues/friends/students (14%; n=167), and SOPHAS virtual fairs (9%; n=105). CUNY SPH website (95%; n=687) was



the predominant source of information for the prospective applicants. Conferences and graduate fairs (2%, n=25) and advisor/faculty/staff (2%, n=22) were other less common sources of information.

## **(ii) Topics of interest indicated**

Academic programs (35%, n=179), student advising (13%, n=66), and general admission (11%, n=59), were the most common topics of interest. Some of the other topics of interest were related to student transfer, financial aid and related to SOPHAS application system. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) by prospective students included: Application related questions (application status, GPA concerns, transfers, Non degrees), Standardized tests (GRE/TOEFL), Tuition and fees (fees, scholarships, waivers), Class locations and pre-requisites, Careers (assistantships, job opportunities, research), meeting with current students, and some of the concerns of the International students (I20/Visa) (Table3). One thousand one hundred and twenty one questions (n=1121) were asked by the prospective applicants across all recruitment methods. The most common questions were related to applications (Table3). Other less frequently asked questions (n=140) included: employment opportunities (2%, n=19), personal statement (2%, n=18), career related questions (2%, n=17), dual degree programs (1%, n=13), certificate programs (1%, n=11), recommendation letters (1%, n=10) and housing (1%; n=6).

## **(iii) Programs of interest**

Seven hundred and thirty nine prospective students indicated their program of interest using two of the recruitment methods: CUNY SPH website (n=305) and face to face information sessions (N=434) (Table4).

## **(iv) Program enrollment by recruitment methods**

Among the applicants who enrolled in CUNY SPH programs (n=85), majority were recruited through the Information sessions (39%, n=33), followed by the CUNY SPH website (35%, n=30), SOPHAS Virtual Chats (15%, n=13), and CUNY SPH chats (11%, n=9) (Figure). The programs with the highest frequency of enrollment included: Masters in Nutrition (27%, n=9), Masters in Epidemiology (24%, n=8), based on the information sessions. The Master's program in Community Health Education had the highest enrolment using the SOPHAS Virtual chats (54%, n=7), while the Healthcare policy and Administration program had the highest enrolment using the CUNY SPH website (23%, n=7).

## **(v) Program applications, admissions and enrolment**

Of all the applications received (n=298) across the various recruitment methods, 200 applicants were admitted including: SOPHAS virtual chats (25%, n=49), CUNY SPH virtual chats (17%, n=34), face to face information sessions (25%, n=50) and CUNY SPH website (34%, n=67). Of the 200 applicants admitted, 43% (n=85) students were enrolled in their various programs (Figure4).

## DISCUSSION

Critical gaps exist in the recruitment methods used across higher education institutions (Noel-Levitz, 2011). A web-based poll conducted by a higher education recruitment firm to assess recruitment practices across 277 public and private institutions in the United States, reported that the top 10 most effective recruitment strategies identified by higher education institutions, out of a total of 78 strategies were used by less than half of the respondent institutions in 2011 (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Some of these strategies included: initiatives to address cost concerns, interaction with students and online applications (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Majority of the higher educational institutions surveyed reported not having strategic recruitment plans or any effective processes for evaluating these plans (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Only 21.5% of the four-year public institutions surveyed reported having a standard committee for addressing marketing and recruitment planning and implementation (Noel-Levitz, 2011). The field of recruitment in higher education is one which has not received significant attention in empirical literature. The relevance of effective, data driven evidence-based recruitment strategies and evaluation procedures are thus invaluable in higher education recruitment.

Our study attempts to compare four different approaches to recruit prospective public health students. Results of our analysis showed that there were a total of 152 recruitment sessions held that included SOPHAS virtual chat sessions (n=5), CUNY SPH virtual chat sessions (n=115), and face to face information sessions (n=32). The fourth approach was to gather prospective applicant data online through an electronic form available on the CUNY SPH website (n=516). Of the total 8,414 prospective students, more than half of them signed up through the SOPHAS virtual chats (78%, n=6559), followed by CUNY SPH virtual chats (10%, n=875) and information sessions (6%, n=464). Of all the prospective students who signed up for SOPHAS virtual chat, only 6% (n=417) of them actually attended the chats, compared to the information sessions where all participants who signed up were in attendance (100%, n=464). There was no sign up needed for the CUNY SPH virtual chats and 875 prospective students attended the virtual chats.

There were 1,756 students who attended the 3 recruitment sessions including SOPHAS Virtual chats (n=417), CUNY SPH virtual chats (n=875) and face to face Information sessions (n=464). Results showed that 298 students applied to the various CUNY SPH Programs across the various recruitment methods. This included 205 applicants across 3 of the recruitment sessions (SOPHAS virtual chat, CUY SPH chat and Face to face information sessions), and 93 applicants from prospective students who filled out the electronic forms on the CUNY SPH website. Of the total prospective students who attended the recruitment sessions (n=1756), 597 prospective students were actually engaged with a recruiter in the various sessions which included: SOPHAS virtual chats (56%, n=233), CUNY SPH virtual chat (16%, n=143) and face to face information sessions (48%, n=221), while 1159 prospective students were not engaged with a recruiter across the sessions. Among all those engaged (n=597), a total of 144 prospective students applied to the program, and from those not engaged (n=1159), a total of 61 prospective students applied to the programs.

Our findings reflect the relevance of student-recruiter interactions corroborated with the top three identified effective marketing and recruitment strategies among colleges (Noel-Levitz, 2011), which facilitate student-recruiter interactions in one way or the other. These strategies included: hosting open house events (77%), campus visit days (76%), and encouraging students to apply on the website (65%) (Noel-Levitz, 2011). However, the use of “chat rooms”

which constituted the majority of our recruitment strategies at CUNY SPH were identified as “very effective” (Noel-Levitz, 2011). However, only 8.7% out of 37.1% of institutions which have reported using this method of recruitment (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Innovative techniques using modern technology are invaluable in decision making, as supported by our study (Barneveld, Arnold, & Campbell, 2012; Picciano, 2012).

In addition, our report indicated that of all the applicants (n=298), 31% (n=93) were from prospective students who filled out an electronic form on the CUNY SPH website (n=516). Interestingly, the use of online surveys have been categorized as one of the five least utilized recruitment strategies among four-year public institutions (20.6%), the others included: mailing course schedules to residents in the area (14.1%), text messaging with prospective students (16.1%), routine contacts by financial aid offices to address cost issues (23.8%), mobile apps (24.6%), and telephone directory adds (24.6%) (Noel-Levitz, 2011). However, it is recognized that the least utilized recruitment strategies may not reflect the “least effective” ones (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

The number of students admitted compared to the number of students enrolled across the CUNY SPH recruitment methods included: Info sessions (n=50 vs.33), SOPHAS virtual chats (n=49 vs. 13), CUNY SPH website (n=67 vs 30) and CUNY SPH virtual chat (n=34 vs. 9). These findings reflect the need to explore strategies to facilitate follow up of admitted students. Prior literature has identified an increase in communication with prospective students by institutions as they move from the stages of recruitment through applications, but no emphasis is laid on post-admission communication with students (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Hence, the need for strategic enrollment plans that address various determinants of recruitment and retention is critical in completing the pathway of student recruitment to enrollment in higher institutions (Becker, & Kolster, 2012).

### **Data source challenges in recruitment**

- **Data entry:** Data collection at the various stages of recruitment including prospective student enquiries, email exchanges, and recruitment sessions, was done by multiple administrative personnel. The absence of a standard data collection tool in moderating the recruitment sessions allowed the use of diverse vocabulary during interaction with prospective students, leading to inconsistency in the way the data was collected. This reflects the need for a taxonomy to be utilized in data collection tools for recruitment.
- **Missing data:** data collection from prospective students was not carried out consistently from the early stages of recruitment to the point of admission and enrollment, leading to the occurrence of missing data across different stages of recruitment, and inability to trace all prospective students from the point at which they inquired about the program, attended recruitment sessions, or were admitted/denied by the school.

### **Study limitations**

One of the limitations of this study included the absence of data to track the pathway of prospective students who did not attend the various recruitment sessions but applied to one or more CUNY SPH programs. This data could provide essential information on the factors facilitating student applications to our programs, other than the recruitment strategies mentioned. In addition, the absence of an integrated system of collecting the various data sources from the



point of interest indication by prospective students to the final stages of application and enrolment made pooling of data for this study challenging. This can be addressed through the design and development of recruitment tools and technologies that can capture data across various sources of recruitment so that informed decision can be made in comparing best practices in recruitment of students into the various public health programs.

## CONCLUSION

This study identified the gaps in aggregating standardized data across different sources in order to facilitate optimal data driven practices in recruitment of prospective public health students. It also supported findings that recruitment of students is dependent on a combination of several factors such as student's choice to pursue higher education, the information available to them in the course of their search, satisfaction derived from choices made among others. Hence, successful recruitment strategies need to be multi-faceted, employing a variety of tools that target these various determinants. The use of data and analytics in recruitment decision making is an invaluable tool as it provides evidence showing what works and what does not. Hence, further research is critically needed in these areas to explore the various determinants in recruitment and how to address the challenges encountered in managing and utilizing recruitment data.

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APPENDIX

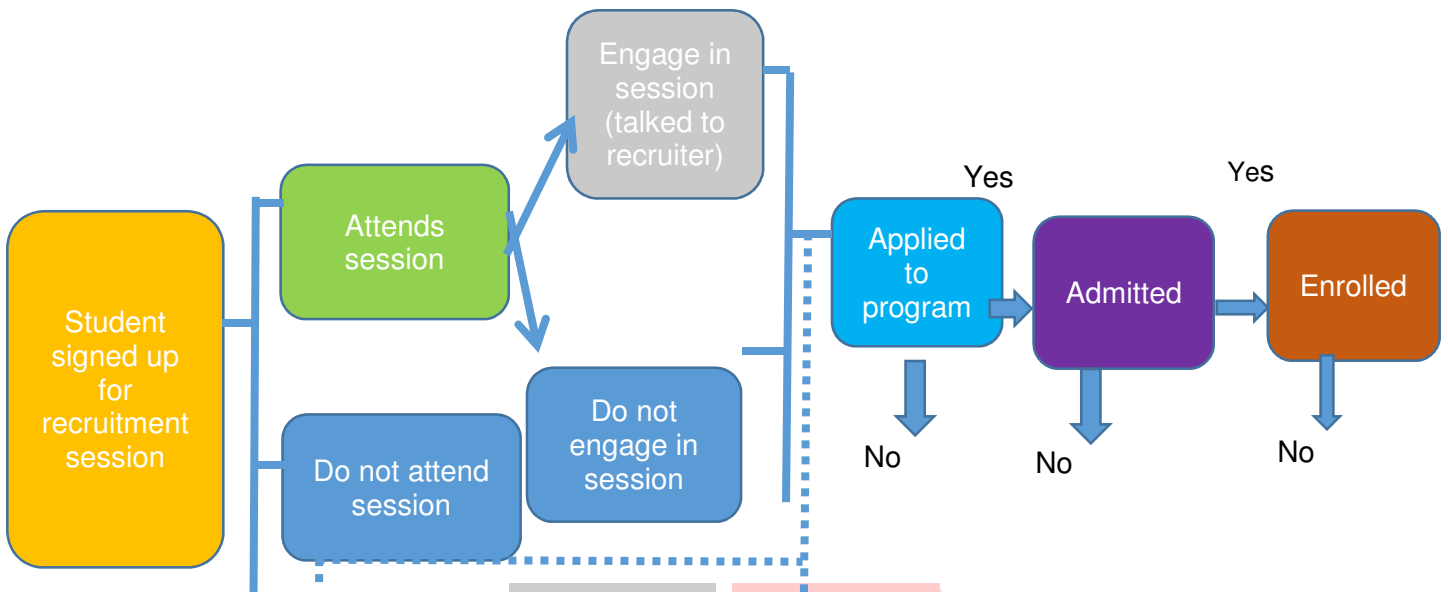
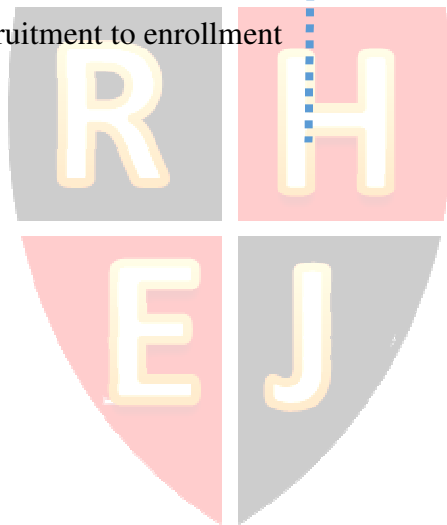


Figure1. Student path from recruitment to enrollment



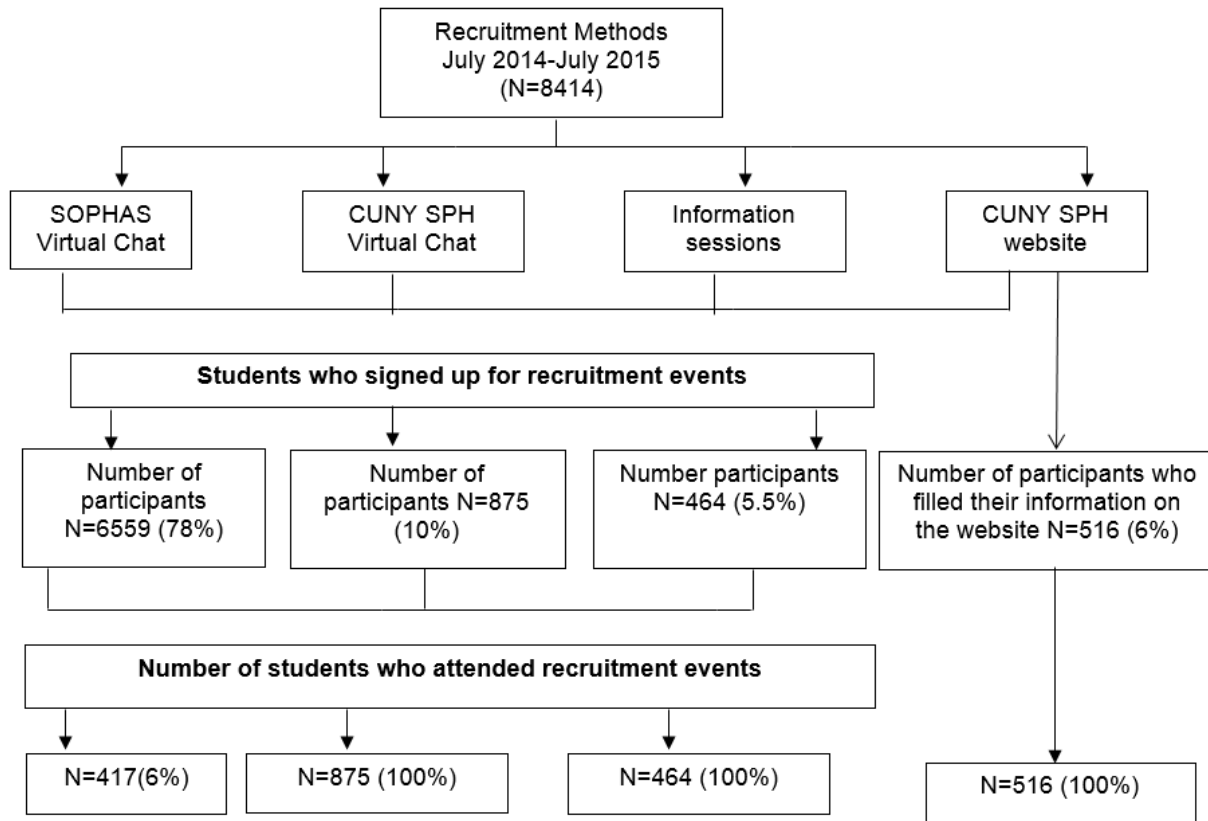
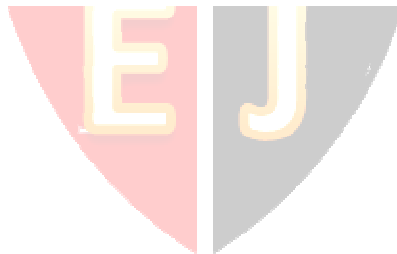


Figure 2. Recruitment methods of prospective Public Health students



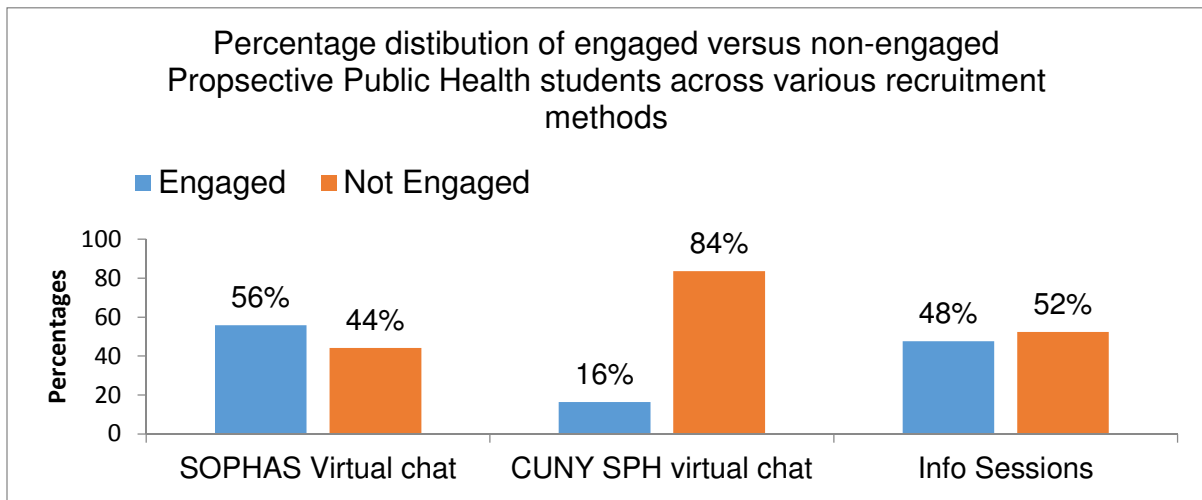
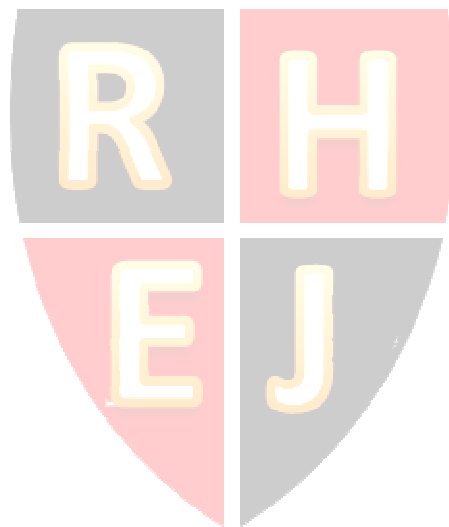


Figure3. Percentage distribution of engaged prospective applicants across various recruitment methods





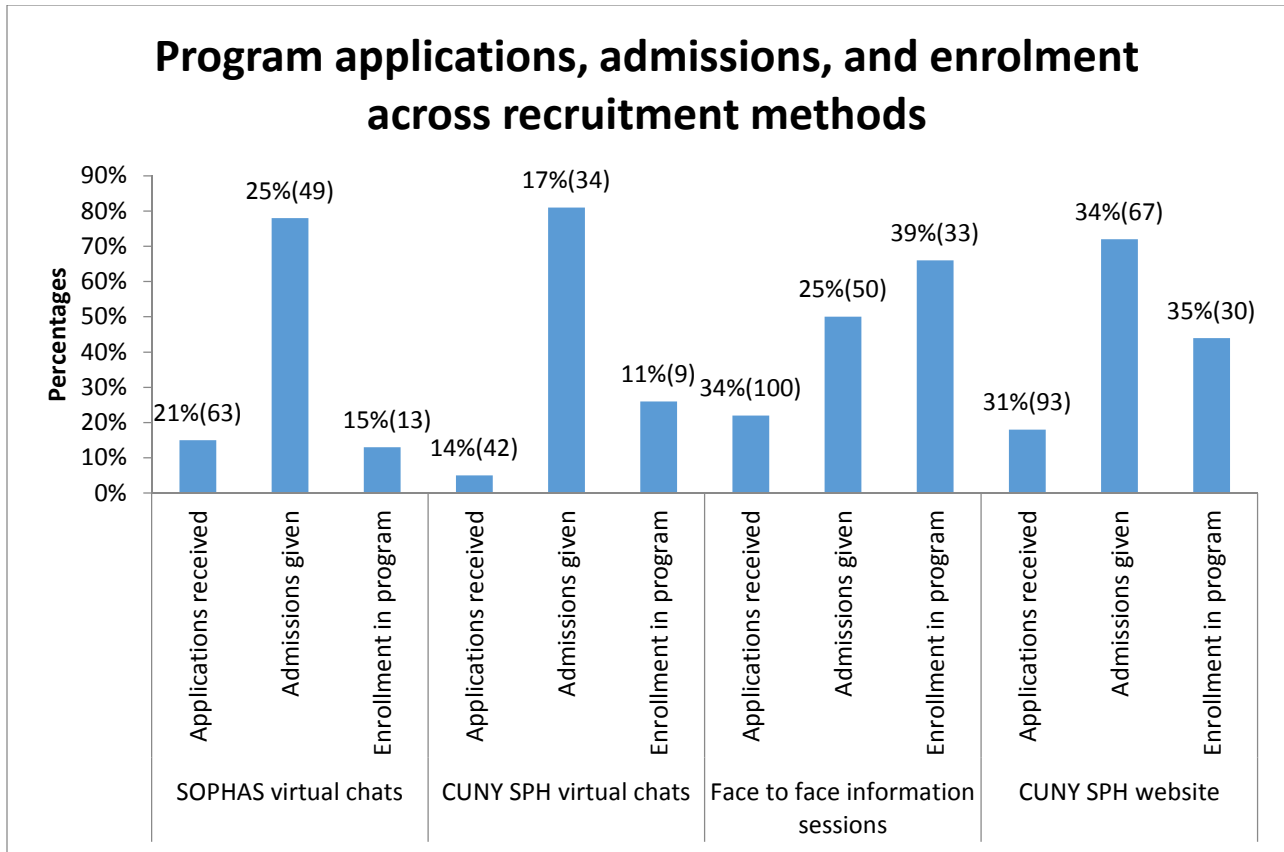
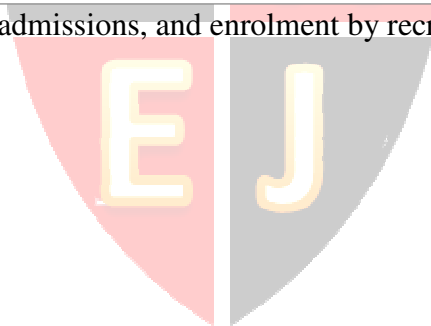
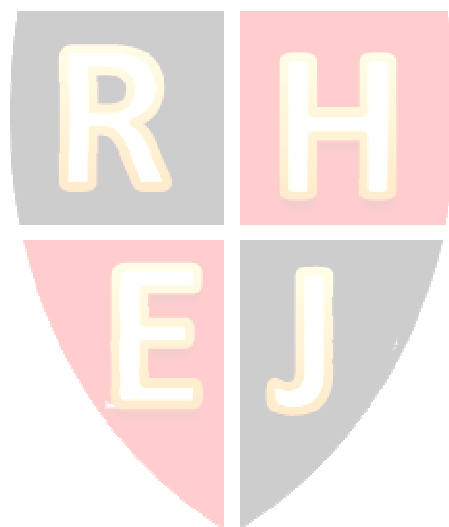


Figure4. Program applications, admissions, and enrolment by recruitment method



Recruitment Methods	Total Number of session attendees (N=2272)	Year 2014 N=1137		Year 2015 N =1135	
		July-Sep N=456	Oct-Dec N=681	Jan-March N=629	April-July N=506
SOPHAS Virtual chat	417	118 (28%)	124 (30%)	72 (17%)	103 (25%)
CUNY SPH virtual chat	875	21 (2%)	264 (30%)	355 (41%)	235 (27%)
Face to face Information sessions	464	149 (32%)	135 (29%)	85 (18%)	95 (20%)
CUNY SPH website	516	168 (33%)	158 (31%)	117 (23%)	73 (14%)

Table1. Frequency of sessions held across each recruitment method



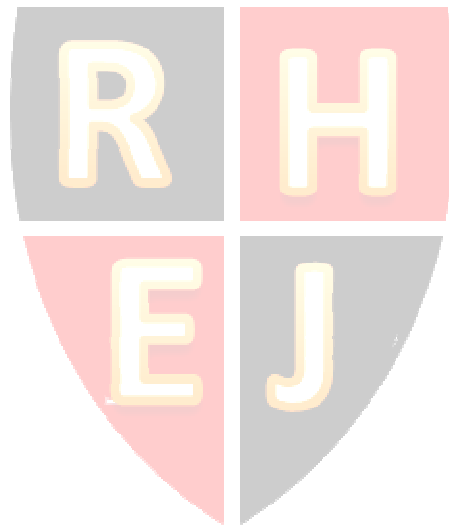
Attended Recruitment Session (Total N=1756)	Engaged (N=597)	Applied to program (N=144)	Did not engage (N=1159)	Applied to program (N=61)	Total applications (N=205)
SOPHAS virtual chat (N=417)	233 (56%)	47(20%)	184(44%)	16(7%)	63
CUNY SPH virtual chat (N=875)	143(16%)	42(29%)	732(84%)	0	42
Face to face Information sessions (N=464)	221(48%)	55(25%)	243(52%)	45(20%)	100

Table2. Virtual and face-to-face recruitment sessions



Frequently asked question categories (N=1121)	SOPHAS Virtual (N=487)	CUNY SPH Website (N=378)	CUNY SPH CHAT (N=256)
Applications(N=362)	22%(107)	34%(130)	49%(125)
Standardized tests (N=147)	15%(74)	14%(52)	8%(21)
Tuition (N=99)	13%(64)	6%(21)	5%(14)
Career opportunities (N=92)	11%(54)	7%(27)	4%(11)
Prerequisites (N=186)	8%(40)	25%(93)	21%(53)
International Student concerns (N=49)	6%(27)	5%(19)	1%(3)
Meeting with current students (N=46)	2%(11)	6%(22)	5%(13)

Table3. Frequently asked questions by prospective students



	Total (N=739)	CUNY SPH Website (N=305)	Information Sessions (N=434)
<b>Bachelors</b>	18%(96)	15%(43)	11%(53)
NUTR	10%(73)	7%(20)	11%(53)
COMHE	4%(12)	4%(12)	
BS/MS NUTR	4%(11)	4%(11)	
<b>Masters</b>	67%(542)	48%(161)	88%(381)
COMHE/GPH	16%(121)	12%(36)	20%(85)
EPIBIOS	11%(81)	11%(33)	11%(48)
HPM	9%(63)	10%(31)	7%(32)
NUTR	30%(221)	6%(32)	44%(189)
MPH/MSW	1%(11)	2%(7)	1%(4)
CBPH	2%(8)		2%(8)
EOHS	4%(27)	4%(12)	3%(15)
MS/MPH Nursing	2%(7)	2%(7)	
GIS	1%(3)	1%(3)	
<b>Doctoral, DPH</b>	33%(101)	33%(101)	
HPM	9%(28)	9%(28)	
EPIBIOS	6%(18)	6%(18)	
EOHS	3%(10)	3%(10)	
CSH	15%(45)	15%(45)	

Table 4. Programs of interest indicated by prospective students

