
PartnersInResearch Canada

Executive Director Report 2015

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Message from Executive Director

Two Thousand and Fifteen has been a year of significant change and challenge - I hear what Robert Frost is saying.

At the 2014 Partners In Research (PIR) AGM held in Ottawa on May 26, 2015 then Executive Director Kevin Cougler announced his departure from PIR after 7 years with the organization.

In his 2015 year-to-date report at the 2014 AGM, Kevin noted that the biggest challenge of 2015 is financial and that PIR finds itself in a rebuilding year.

The board established an Executive Director recruitment committee and Kevin stayed on with PIR through August. On September 1, 2015 I was handed the reigns of the organization.

The balance of 2015 was focused on making PIR as efficient as possible and 2015 ended with an approved 2016 operating budget and the beginnings of a plan forward.

Human Resources

Staff Report

In January, Cheri Wheeler-Popen was hired as PIR's new Administrative Assistant, replacing Kelly Wood who left in late December 2014. Cheri began a maternity leave of absence in August of 2015 with plans to be off until August of 2016.

At the end of February 2015 Anne Ramsay, Communications Manager resigned her position and in July 2015 Drew Fallowfield, Connected North Program Manager resigned his position. With the departure of Kevin Cougler at the end of August 2015 Brent Peltola, Executive Director, Mel Kern, Sanofi Biogenius Canada Program Manager and Caelan Banks, Part-Time Video Editor staffed the office. Stacey Joyce returned from her maternity leave on a part-time basis in November with plans to return to full-time in January 2016.

Human resources are both the most valuable and most expensive part of the PIR operation. Completing the work of the organization on skeleton staffing was the only option. The question of how to get more work done without incurring new costs was, in part, answered through volunteerism and co-operative education placements.

Volunteer Report

Through years of change at PIR, the volunteer presence had eroded to the point of near total absence. A once vibrant volunteer force had all but disappeared as the PIR business model evolved. In 2015 the volunteer force was re-invigorated through a focused recruitment with a goal to assist in PIR in meeting its mandate. A volunteer social media team was assembled, a group of volunteer clerical personnel were recruited and a volunteer PIR Live Event host was secured. These volunteers were able to take on tasks that had fallen to the remaining staff, allowed the volunteers to gain experience in new fields and lessened the load on the team.

Co-operative Education Report

Co-operative education has been an important part of the PIR business model for many years. Partners has hosted high school, college and university co-op students over the past years. In the fall of 2015 Aron Perry, a high school student from Central High School in London joined us to work on video editing alongside our part-time video editor, and past high school co-op student, Caelan Banks. Also in the fall of 2015 we worked with a team of communications students from Western University on a social media strategy project.

Programming

Updates on Program Changes Noted in Kevin's 2015 Year-to-Date Report

STEM Discovery Days was a pilot project conceived, designed and operated by the Executive Director. The pilot program was focused on having homeschooling parents bring their children to a partnered institution and learn about STEM subjects from teachers and experts. Six pilot sessions were completed but the program dwindled in support from homeschool parents. The STEM Discovery Days sessions scheduled for June were cancelled due to poor enrolment and the program shelved in its current format as too resource intense.

Cisco Canada informed PIR that would be transitioning out of the Connected North Program over a three-year period and that the commitment between Cisco and PIR as part of that program would end at the completion of the 2014/15 program year (August 31, 2015). Cisco announced that Taking IT Global would be operating the program going forward. Taking IT Global has indicated an interest in retaining the VROC platform to deliver parts of the STEM content of Connected North but no progress was made in those discussions.

Live Event

Live Event is a live interview by a PIR staff member of a researcher within the STEM fields. The interview can be joined live through videoconferencing by schools across Canada or through uStream. The uStream is a passive method of participation although schools may pose questions prior to the event or live through Twitter using the #askPIR hashtag.

Success Stories: On April 1, 2015 the Live Event platform was used in partnership with the Ontario Council on University Research (OCUR) to broadcast two panel discussions during the Ontario Research Week events held in Toronto.

Metrics: The data provided is inclusive of all PIR Live Events held between January 1, 2015 and May 21, 2015.

Number of Events - 19

Number of Concurrent End Points - 197

Avg. End Points per Event - 10.4

Total Number of Views (estimated) - 5122

Avg. Views per Event - 269.6

The Live Event page was visited 104 times.

Future: Each Live Event continues to see an increased number of schools participating. In the coming year we expect that Live Events will become more frequent (twice weekly) and will be a foundation for improving the exposure to STEM experts. Partnerships with OCUR and other organizations will provide ongoing access to intriguing research to support STEM education.

Sanofi BioGenius Canada

Summary: The SBC is a national biotechnology competition that seeks to spark scientific interest in Canada's youth. Since its inception in 1993, the SBC program has inspired over 5000 students toward discovery and careers in the exciting field of biotechnology. More than just a science fair, the SBC challenges students to initiate and undertake university-level research projects. Students define a project outline, work with mentors to conduct research, and then present their findings in regional competitions across the country. Regional winners compete at the National level, judged by a panel of Canada's eminent scientists. Finally, national winners go on to the International BioGENEius Challenge in the United States. In 2015 the competition will be held in San Diego, California June 15 - 17.

Success Stories: In September of 2014, in conjunction with the start of the competition year, the Sanofi BioGENEius Challenge Canada was renamed to Sanofi Biogenius Canada (SBC). New branding elements (logo etc.) were launched along with the launch of a new webpage, Facebook page and Twitter campaign. The SBC visibility in the press this competition year has been extraordinary with 9 television spots in the fall and numerous print, radio and television pieces during the regional competitions held in April and May of 2015.

Metrics: The data provided is YTD for the current competition year (September 1, 2014 to May 21, 2015. Competition year is used because of the nature of the program and changes that occur year over year).

Number of Student Project Proposals - 156

Number of Student Projects Competed - 124

Future: The SBC has seen a modest shrinkage this competition year due to an organizational change expected to be valuable in the long-term of the competition. PIR decided to bring the Canadian competition into alignment with the international competition by requiring that all projects be competed by single students (i.e. teams were allowed in the past). Regions where the coordinators resisted the change to single students showed the most significant decline in student engagement whereas in other regions where the coordinator embraced the new model growth was often experienced. PIR believes that this change will benefit the competition in the long run.

Virtual Researcher On Call

Summary: The VROC program, which involves interaction between researchers and classrooms virtually, was established in 2005 and remains the flagship educational program of PIR.

Success Stories: In 2015 there has been significant growth in the number of teachers involved with VROC - in Ontario in particular and especially so in the GTA and surrounding areas.

Metrics: The data provided is for calendar 2015 YTD (January 1 , 2015 to May 21, 2015)

Number of VROC Sessions - 123

Number of Views of VROC Session (student reach) - 3198

Number of Institutions with Experts in ExpertBook - 61

Number of Institutions with an Expert in one or more Session(s) - 26

Number of VROC Experts (total / new) - 463/14

Number of VROC Teachers (total / new) - 927/161

Social media, website (2,621 visitors from Jan. 1 to May 20; 9,689 actions, avg time/visit 5m 22seconds; most popular pages visited included ExpertBook, sign-up and mentorship requests).

Future: VROC is in search of a more user friendly method of communication. Standards-based video communication continues to represent a barrier to engagement across multiple school boards and is identified as one of the biggest hurdles for teachers using the VROC platform. VROC is currently pursuing a model which will allow teachers and researchers to utilize whatever form of video communication they both have in common in the hopes of removing software and hardware as a barrier to program adoption. PIR needs to find a way to “monetize” the VROC program that will ensure its continued support in years to come.

Summary

The biggest challenge of 2015 is financial, as the support from Alberta has diminished significantly as identified in the 2014 report. While cuts have been made and its GIC maturing and being transferred back into its operating account, PIR finds itself in a rebuilding year where significant effort will need to be spent on partnerships and securing its VROC funding. PIR can no longer afford to “front” expenditures on behalf of partners; meaning, monies must be received by partners prior to PIR spending it on behalf of their programs. Efforts are underway to find grants that are a good match to PIR.

PIR’s biggest asset is its programming. All four programs operate efficiently and professionally. In times of financial challenge it is crucial to concentrate on an organizations biggest asset. I view this as a challenge for our Finance Committee or an ad hoc fundraising committee.