

***Centering Community in Health Behavior Research and Practice:
American Academy of Health Behavior Presidential Note***

I am honored to serve as the 2025-2026 President of the American Academy of Health Behavior. Over the next year, together, we will deepen member bonds and amplify member scholarship. We will cultivate cross-cutting team science, support trainees and early career scholars, and promote the scholarly impact of our membership. Building off these strengths of AAHB, our 2026 conference theme is “Centering Community for Health Behavior Research and Practice,” taking place March 29 – April 1, 2026, in the vibrant community of Austin, Texas.

We have a strong scientific community at AAHB, and team science is at the heart of this strength. We are at our best when we collaborate, across disciplines, geographies, and ideologies. As health behavior researchers, we often work with diverse disciplines, highlighting and integrating various methods and perspectives to tackle complex challenges. This is part of our DNA at AAHB, as evidenced by our programming offered throughout the year and our annual conference. We support activities to strengthen team science among our membership, including professional workshops, mentoring opportunities, and peer exchanges.

AAHB is committed to supporting early career scholars and trainees, and our community is more robust and resilient because of this dedication. The next generation of scholars will find a home here at AAHB and are vital to the life of our academy. AAHB offers incredible programs such as the Research Mentorship & Scholars Program and will continue to implement strategies to support early career scholars and to recruit and retain trainees and graduating students.

The AAHB community of scholars bolsters our national reputation and recognition. Our membership represents the top researchers in our respective fields. Yet, the size of AAHB allows for valuable mentoring and networking, and opportunities to share knowledge and experiences. By amplifying and sharing what we do as an academy – either through programming during the year, at our annual conference, or other intellectual exchange – we deepen our impact as an organization and community of scholars.

As we look to the 2026 annual conference and the theme of centering community, we will work to uphold our values of excellence, inclusivity, collaboration, evidence, and integrity while navigating our current reality. Over the past decade – with COVID shining a particularly gruesome light on the matter – and continuing through today, it seems as though people and communities are living in parallel worlds. Scientific evidence is just one piece of evidence. False information is rampant not only on social media but now on mainstream media. We have become isolated and siloed and have lost the sense of belonging and our connections to one another.

Now, more than ever, we need to remember and re-center what makes us whole. We must remind ourselves that we share much more in common with one another than we often acknowledge – like wanting the best for our children, navigating our aging parents, struggling with depression, or celebrating those milestones like a graduation, a birth of a child, a job offer, or another month sober. Community has and will remain the backbone to our sense of belonging and higher purpose. We struggle together, we find solutions together, because we want a better future, for all of us.

Centering community is not just about acknowledging communities that we feel are deserving – it’s about understanding and appreciating that communities consist of diverse individuals and families who may be united by shared values and common hopes for the future. Centering

community emphasizes the importance of lived experience in driving social change and improving health behavior and outcomes. Evidence shows that when we engage with communities and center their experiences, this not only positively impacts health behaviors, but also public health planning, health service access, health literacy, and a host of other health outcomes.¹ This approach has demonstrated positive impact across diverse groups, with various models of community engagement showing promise.²

Over the next year and into our 2026 annual conference, we will explore opportunities and research to center community. We will discover evidence-based models that center community in dissemination and implementation approaches, examining constructs such as communication, partnership, capacity building, leadership, and collaboration.³ We will investigate ways to build and sustain trust in science, as community confidence has slipped in recent years, with 76% of U.S. adults expressing confidence in science in 2024, down from 87% in 2020.⁴ We will explore ways to strengthen health communication – fewer than half of U.S. adults think scientists are good communicators (45%)⁴ – learning about approaches in storytelling and other avenues to talk and discuss in plain language. Finally, we will discover ways to better mobilize community health for action and policy, drawing from approaches like the Community Action Model,⁵ embracing the underlying social, economic, and environmental forces that create health and social differences while also identifying shared experiences that ultimately unite us.

We have a strong community here at AAHB, and we need each other now more than ever. Look for ways to be an active part of our community, whether it is through webinars, member spotlights, mentorship and scholarship programs, or something else entirely. I can think of no better focus for us, as health behavior scholars, than to center community in all that we do.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Massey'.

Philip Massey, PhD, MPH, FAAHB
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References

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