

Best Practices for Successful Student Professional Practice Experiences

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College students across the country recently started their 2019 spring semester Professional Practice Experiences (PPE), with educators and health information management (HIM) professionals now turning to preparations for summer semester PPEs. Such is the case at Illinois State University (ISU), where educators have worked year in and year out following a well-proven process to ensure students are as successful as they can be at their host facilities. This article details ISU's process—which prepares both ISU's junior and senior students for their PPE—sharing best practices and lessons learned that can be applied in other programs.

To prepare junior-year HIM students for a successful PPE outcome, ISU requires students to attend an orientation where they are provided the Professional Practice Handbook that they will use as a guide throughout their PPE. To ensure there is clarity around just what a PPE is, the handbook provides the university's formal definition:

The Professional Practice Program in Health Information Management at Illinois State University is designed to prepare the student to enter the health information management field upon graduation. It exposes students to the qualifications and requirements of the various employing organizations and gives them the experience to meet these requirements.

It is intended that the student will correlate theory and practice and be stimulated not only to observe and examine, but also to analyze and evaluate their respective organizations and recommend areas of change. In this regard, it is not only recommended, but expected, that the students will become sufficiently involved in the work of the organization and, when possible, be permitted to make contributions.

The handbook includes detailed information about grade point average requirements (2.25 or C average) that students must maintain to participate in the PPE—as well as remain in the HIM program at ISU. Also provided is a list of immunizations students are required to have before they arrive at their designated facility. The university has also contracted with a firm to conduct criminal background checks, and students are notified it is their responsibility to pay for and complete the background check and be prepared to share this information with the host facility upon request.

During the orientation, the university addresses overall performance expectations that educators want students to display, as they are not only representing themselves as future professionals but are representing the HIM program at ISU as well. Some of the basic expectations include dressing according to facility dress code and not using cell phones while on the job.

The orientation also discusses behaviors that will result in the student receiving a reduced letter grade or even, in rare instances, failing the PPE and thus not continuing in the program. Actions that would result in a reduced letter grade include chronic tardiness, unprofessional conduct, or inappropriate dress. Other examples given of what could lead to a student receiving a failing grade include a review by the site supervisor of marginal or inadequate performance, a HIPAA violation, or being asked to leave and not return. These incidents would also result in a student being removed from the HIM program altogether. Educators are frank with this information since they feel students must be aware of the consequences should they not abide by the rules and regulations that are put in place by the university and the host facility.

These conversations and expectations also apply to senior ISU students who complete their final PPE during the spring semester. When the time comes for the students to select their PPE sites, the process changes between the junior and senior students. Junior students complete their PPE in a traditional healthcare setting, such as a hospital, and ISU senior students work in non-traditional sites (or, ideally, not in an HIM department) so they can experience another type of work setting where they can utilize their HIM knowledge. The selection process is different for both groups.

The junior students select their sites during a lottery draw. Initially, the professional practice coordinator gathers a list of facilities that are willing to host ISU students during one, two, or all three of the PPE's designated time frames during the summer months. Students are divided up in three-week increments taking place in the facility they have chosen. Some of ISU's facilities will host students for all three sessions, or maybe only once, depending on the amount of time they can dedicate to hosting students. A complete list of sites is collected near and around where students will be living during the summer months. To do the selection, students draw a number out of a bowl. This number determines the order in which the students select their site for their clinical professional practice. This can go smoothly, with students selecting a site close to their home that they have wanted to go to, or sometimes can be a little frazzled, with students pulling up maps to see which site is closest to their summer residences. Tears sometimes follow. All in all, the students each select the sites in which they will complete their clinical professional practice. The hosting facility is contacted by the PPE coordinator and the students to finalize the start date and time in which the student will begin their PPE.

ISU's senior students, on the other hand, have a more active role in selecting their PPE sites. A class is offered in the fall semester for the senior students, Trends in Healthcare, where speakers from a variety of HIM career settings visit the classroom—including behavioral health centers, detention centers, and even health information exchanges. These presenters open the student's eyes to what is out there for them in the future. Quite a few of these presentations have led to students completing their final PPEs at the presenter's site. For example, one ISU student thoroughly enjoyed a speaker from Symphony Healthcare Services—the student spoke to her after class, initiating the PPE conversation with the speaker. She went on to complete her PPE at Symphony and now works for that exact company. This is the reason ISU wants students to initiate the conversations for their senior PPEs. The student knows what they are interested in, and they will be entering the job force at the conclusion of the PPE, so they should control their direction.

The senior PPE is project-based, so any location and project in which they can apply their HIM education is fair game. ISU wants the students to take the initiative and have the conversations with the sites, explaining what HIM is and what their interests are. Reaching out to potential sites gives the student an opportunity to talk about themselves and find the experiences of which they want to be a part. This semester alone, half of ISU's seniors have had their PPEs determined with no assistance from the PPE coordinator on campus. They researched the sites, projects, and possible jobs to which the experience could lead. The students "sell" themselves to the sites. Typically, the students are excited to go out on their final professional practice experience before graduation. The student and the site coordinator both agree on the project and hours in which the student will be at their site.

As illustrated, the PPE at ISU has several layers of processes. This system has been tested and designed with a singular goal—to ensure graduates represent the ISU HIM program well and gain the right experience in order to successfully leap from college to the working world with confidence.

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