Bootcamp and Beyond: A Research Journey

Save to myBoK

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The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
-Proverb

With the current whirlwind of changes taking place in HIM, along with the increasing volume of evolving roles and functions that are becoming a part of the HIM domain due to the enhanced use of data, HIM opportunities are limitless. Research is needed to validate current practices, identify emerging roles for HIM professionals, establish best practices, and enhance the HIM knowledge base. It's a great time to make the journey of the HIM researcher.

Aspiring researchers must realize that much effort and time is required to get started, with the rewards to follow. This article describes the journey of two researchers as they worked to encourage fellow colleagues to join them in their exciting work to expand HIM research knowledge.

In May 2008, the AHIMA Foundation Research Committee authored a practice brief outlining the need for HIM research to "base its practices for the proper education of HIM students and to establish its credibility within the broader healthcare and clinical informatics community."[1] One of the authors of that brief, Shirley Eichenwald-Maki, MBA, RHIA, FAHIMA, assistant professor of health informatics and information management at the College of St. Scholastica, was the inspiration behind the initial HIM Research Training Institute courses that began in 2008. Susan Fenton, PhD, RHIA, FAHIMA, was then the director of research for the AHIMA Foundation and helped lead the first course, which Sue Biedermann attended. Biedermann and Fenton are now both professors in the HIM department at Texas State University with interest in conducting, promoting, and supporting others in research. They wanted to modify the original course content while retaining some of the same goals. The AHIMA Foundation generously agreed to support the project.

Since Fenton joined the Texas State HIM Department, she has successfully obtained grant funding and is currently managing two major grants while also mentoring and working with the HIM faculty on various projects.

Hands-On Experience

Biedermann and Fenton have had continued discussions with many colleagues on the need to build up the research capabilities of the HIM profession. There is the recognition that many HIM professionals, regardless of education level-including doctorally prepared individuals-may have knowledge and experience with research, data analysis, and presentation methodologies. However, fewer may have experience finding funding opportunities, critically reading a research proposal announcement and requirements, or writing a strong proposal that addresses all necessary items and will be successfully reviewed and funded.

The previous HIM Research Training Institute was an intensive one-week in-person training event regarding methods for conducting research, writing a literature review, reading funding announcements, identifying and refining a potential project or hypothesis, and drafting a proposal. At the conclusion of the training it was expected that participants would continue to work with a mentor via e-mail and phone to foster the development of the project and find an appropriate potential funding agency to submit their project during the next year. While some success was achieved, it was difficult for many of the participants to continue with the process and reach the point of proposal submission.

Getting Started

To become an active participant in conducting research, HIM professionals should:

- Seek formal training in research methods and statistics (often in pursuit of a PhD)
- Identify a well-qualified research mentor
- Establish collaborative relationships with people who are knowledgeable in your area of interest
- Write a literature review on your topic
- Don't procrastinate; get started

Bootcamp 2.0

To redesign the program for 2012, Biedermann and Fenton analyzed the previous experience and tried to fill the gaps. The program was redesigned to be very hands-on. Instructional sessions were conducted prior to the in-person session. Over several months the participants learned about research, chose and refined their topic, wrote their literature review, found a funding source, and drafted an application for the funding announcement. A course management system project site was utilized to manage the materials and learning activities. Bi-weekly conference calls and webinars were also used to discuss assignments, continue discussions on the research process, and for each participant to present their individual topics. A final assignment was issued to participants to draft a proposal based on an actual funding announcement.

The group members met at Texas State in June 2012 to present their proposals to the entire group of participants, faculty, and mentors. In addition to providing dedicated and intensive work time, the on-site bootcamp included a day-long funding proposal review session, with critique and suggestions for rewrites. The ultimate goal was for each participant to leave the bootcamp with a completed proposal ready for submission that calls for proposals from the identified funding agency.

All projects currently being proposed by the participants are HIM related and will contribute to the official AHIMA Body of Knowledge, as well as the general body of knowledge in HIM, in subjects ranging from curriculum development for educators to exploring best practices for tasks such as EHR data conversion costs and the impact of "cut and paste" on patient quality.

Inventing the Institute

The rebirth of the HIM Research Bootcamp was facilitated by the recent creation of the Institute for Health Information Technology (IHIT), an entity within the HIM academic department at Texas State University–San Marcos. At Texas State, the definition of centers, institutes, academies, and similar organizational structures are special units created to provide a focal point for particular research, education, or service programs.

The key to establishing a center or institute is to demonstrate a clear need for the long-term association of faculty and students on a certain project or program. The many changes in the health information field and the opportunities that were becoming increasingly apparent, as well as the opportunity to work on many projects outside the confines of academic departmental resources, made creating this entity a must. In addition, it would provide much needed recognition to HIM research.

The IHIT's mission is to serve as a leading resource for health information management and technology practice, education, training, and research in addition to scholarly activities for faculty, students, and the community. Its objectives are to:

- Assist the healthcare industry with the implementation and use of electronic health records, health information technology, and the meaningful use of health information to support high quality patient care
- Provide educational programs and continuing education to support workforce needs in the rapidly expanding field of health IT and the associated professional roles
- Provide a means of financial and expert support for research and scholarly activities in health IT
- Support the development of skills and abilities of HIM graduates to assume leadership roles in health IT initiatives

The research bootcamp is consistent with the stated goals, specifically, the provision of financial and expert support for research and scholarly activities in helath IT.

Other IHIT-backed programs include a HIM spring leadership conference planned by current senior students in the HIM bachelor's of science degree program. The conference is attended by HIM credentialed professionals in the area, earning

seven CE hours. An RHIA/RHIT exam review workshop took place in June 2012, and several other conferences and meetings are being planned to help meet the educational needs of HIM professionals and those from other disciplines on such topics as security, HIPAA, and management.

In addition, the IHIT has funded financial support for three Texas State students to participate in a student exchange program with a university in Hanover, Germany. Other potential uses of the funds are to support departmental needs and faculty research efforts, continued support for the established foreign exchange program, and faculty development and travel needs. Watch the AHIMA and AHIMA Foundation Web sites for information on the 2013 research bootcamp.

Note

1. AHIMA. "Building an Evidence Base for High-Quality HIM." *Journal of AHIMA* 79, no.5 (May 2008): 61-63. Available online in the AHIMA Body of Knowledge.

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