

Professional Practice Experience: Internships open the door to Real-World Lessons

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By Chris Dimick

For senior HIM students, a professional practice internship offers real-life experience and a firsthand look at future careers. But PPEs require sites that volunteer as hosts and HIM professionals to serve as mentors.

The HIM department was buzzing. A physician at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago had tested positive for tuberculosis, and the facility was notifying patients who had contact with her.

The work fell to the HIM department, and Children's HIM director Kara Hollis, MBA, RHIA, had all available hands helping identify patients and prepare and send notifications. This included intern Queen Okpaleke, 22, a senior at the University of Illinois at Chicago who was conducting her senior class professional practice experience at Children's.

Okpaleke was excited to help and grateful she could learn firsthand what to do if a similar situation arises when she becomes an HIM director.

Even though it was hectic, Hollis made sure to include Okpaleke and put her to work. Hollis knew a student could learn valuable lessons from the situation, and a professional practice experience cannot be paused during extraordinary circumstances.

Senior professional practice experiences, or PPEs, offer HIM students a chance to gain valuable experience in a real HIM working environment. The internships, usually one month long and conducted in a wide range of HIM-related settings, give senior HIM students critical experience just before heading into the workforce. A PPE offers students a chance to test their education and refine their skills and behaviors.

"For us, it is our capstone opportunity," says Melanie Brodnik, PhD, RHIA, director of the health information management and systems baccalaureate degree program at The Ohio State University. "Everything they have learned to date they then have the opportunity to put into action. So it is really a structured field experience that provides them the opportunity to experience real-life responsibilities, actions, environment in the working world."

But PPE coordinators in HIM colleges and universities around the country say it has become more difficult to find volunteer organizations willing to host PPE students. The lack of volunteer sites has caused some educators to freeze the growth of their HIM programs or send students to settings they do not necessarily have an interest in.

Others have started offering "virtual PPEs" instead, where students work with HIM software on campus instead of interning in live facilities. A few institutions have placed their PPE programs on the chopping block because of the difficulties. That is a hard decision when best practice standards from the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education require HIM professional programs to offer multiple PPEs during a two-year degree program.

A Professional Obligation

The number and length of PPEs a student completes varies by school. Many HIM programs offer at least one junior class and one senior class PPE. The junior PPE most often places students in an acute care facility where they experience HIM essentials such as coding and record filing. This PPE is stretched over 15 weeks, with students visiting the facility once a week.

During the senior experience, students learn the managerial side of HIM, working on higher-level department projects and shadowing HIM management. This PPE typically lasts a month, with students attending their PPE facilities five days a week.

Students are assigned a PPE supervisor at each facility who mentors the students and issues work assignments.

Hollis has been mentoring PPE students for 10 years at various facilities. She says it is an experience she not only enjoys but feels professionally obligated to offer.

“My profession is really important, and I want to make sure that the people coming into it have the support they need,” she says, “that they are getting good jobs and they have the opportunities that I did, because I had some really good mentors as well.”

Beyond Acute Care Settings

While some complete their senior PPE in hospital HIM departments, many students also intern in a variety of healthcare organizations including insurance companies, EHR vendors, software developers, and even state departments. At The Ohio State University—which requires two, month-long senior PPEs—many HIM students travel to other states to complete their internships.

Since it is common for OSU students to work at a local hospital during school, they may request PPEs in nonacute care settings, Brodnik says.

Past OSU students have interned in the Medicaid department of the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, as well as the clinical data management department at Abbott Laboratories, a medical and nutritional product development company based in Columbus, OH.

The latter is a surprise to people who do not realize that in HIM the word management means just as much as the word information, Brodnik says. OSU graduates work in all aspects of healthcare administration, operations, and management, she notes, not just the HIM department.

Health information technology company HDI Technologies has been hosting PPE students for nearly 10 years. The Chicago-based firm, which offers transcription software, computer-assisted coding implementations, and EHR and practice management systems, provides PPE internships exclusively to nearby UIC HIM students.

Tom Spees, managing director of HDI, serves as the PPE mentor. He aims to assign PPE students projects that benefit the company while teaching students about health information technology. “We do our best to provide a meaningful experience that illuminates what it is like to work in a technology group that is HIM focused,” he says.

The Impact of a PPE Mentor

During her PPE, Okpaleke shadowed Hollis in her various in-house meetings. Several meetings centered on Children’s recent move to upgrade its EHR. These provided valuable lessons to Okpaleke, she says, about how a facility deals with a software upgrade and the different departments and processes that need to be adapted.

After any meeting, Hollis discussed various points of the meeting with Okpaleke and fielded any questions she had about the HIM director role.

Okpaleke requested that her PPE take part in a hospital, so she could learn firsthand what it is like to be an HIM director. Since conducting her PPE at Children’s, Okpaleke has become convinced that she wants to work at a hospital after graduation.

Hollis made a big impression on Okpaleke and inspired her to work toward one day being a respected HIM director in a large hospital. She noticed how her mentor was always prepared for meetings and could answer unexpected questions lobbed her way.

“You go to meetings, and everyone is like, ‘We need Kara’s input on this.’ I think her job is awesome, and she is a great person herself,” Okpaleke says. “She is really smart and quick, knows what she is doing. Someday I want to be like her—an HIM director.”

Providing Real-life Experiences

Hosting a PPE does take some time from a manager’s schedule. A person hosting a PPE should be willing to spend time with the student and offer enriching work that benefits both parties, Spees says.

“It is very important that you think about what needs to be done in advance, so a structured project assignment is ready on their first visit to the office,” Spees says. “Have a good list of objectives for them. These kids are smart. Get them focused and give them a good project to work on, and they are fine.”

Most PPE sites receive a PPE handbook from the college that answers questions and orients new PPE mentors to the program. Mentors are expected to develop projects for the student that demonstrate managerial work. Mentoring time should be spent with the student, both through inviting them to meetings and having one-on-one conversations. At the end of the month, mentors fill out an evaluation on the student’s performance, which is used to determine the senior’s grade for that semester.

“I think what is expected of me [as a mentor] is to give the student a real-life experience and help prepare them for what they are really going to encounter when they get out of school,” Hollis says.

But the time spent mentoring is not intrusive on other responsibilities, Hollis says. Once a student is oriented to the facility and begins his or her projects, the time spent is the same as with any staff.

A facility is not going to have the perfect student every time, and some might need more direction than others, Hollis says. Typically, though, students come prepared to learn and work. Children’s usually hosts five different PPE students a year.

HIM professionals have an ethical responsibility to help develop the next generation of workers, Brodnik says.

“I think people need to step forward and host seniors as a professional responsibility for the future of our profession,” Brodnik says. “You feed your young. Mentors bring the nurturing that is necessary for the profession to survive.”

Hosting PPE students is a rewarding experience, Hollis says. All HIM professionals in the position to host a PPE should jump at the chance, she says.

Those who have never hosted a PPE should at least try it once, Spees says. Sit down with your staff and discuss how an intern could contribute to the organization, he recommends.

Creative Placements

PPEs outside of traditional acute care settings can expand a senior's horizons and improve his or her chances at finding employment. Attendees at AHIMA's July 2009 Assembly on Education conference shared some of their less-expected placements:

- Veterinary schools and zoos, which have extensive medical records on animals
- Prison systems, which have medical records on inmates
- Hospice centers, which have a great need for HIM skills in establishing better record keeping
- Community clinics such as mental health, substance abuse, and county health clinics
- Registry offices, including birth defects, trauma, cancer, and transplant registries
- Payers, such as insurance companies, Department of Health and Human Services Medicare fraud units, and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services regional offices

Source: *AHIMA Academic Advisor*. "From Student to Employee: That Difficult Transition." [Summer 2009](#).

Facilities Benefit, Too

Students are not the only ones who benefit from a PPE, Hollis notes. Organizations get a well-educated student who can perform much-needed work and provide suggestions that can modernize workflow processes and operations.

Senior PPE students have more self-direction during their internship than do junior PPE students. They have a solid education under their feet and can walk through the door ready to work on complex projects, Brodnik says.

"What a PPE offers a clinical site is fresh blood and fresh ideas," she says.

Many facilities put PPE students to work on projects that have long needed attention but were too time consuming for hired staff to complete. PPE students have consistently done great work at Children's over the years, Hollis says. In return, students get much needed experience that can help them land a job.

"In my perspective it is a win-win," Hollis says. "We had [Queen] do some work for us that we have not been able to do—some things that have been put on the back burner but are very important."

For smaller companies like HDI, interns are very useful in building research, collecting data, and even helping in the field, Spees says.

This spring, senior UIC student Ashley Williams, 22, conducted her PPE at HDI. With recent federal initiatives increasing physician interest in EHRs, HDI was considering expanding into EHR sales at the time Williams arrived.

Spees had Williams evaluate EHR vendors in the marketplace. She searched for companies that offered ambulatory certified EHR products, compiling a detailed list of the top companies based on criteria Spees identified. HDI used Williams' research to narrow down potential EHR developers to partner with.

Williams chose HDI for her PPE because she has considered working for a health information vendor upon graduation. Her experience was an enlightening preview of a possible future career, she says.

Most of the skills Williams used to do her projects came from on-the-job training. She learned about EHRs in class, but working on this project opened her eyes to aspects such as the selection process that were not covered in college. Researching existing systems "broadened my knowledge base," she says.

At Children's, Hollis usually has her PPE students work on an analysis project, which teaches how to analyze a situation and make recommendations for change.

During her PPE, Okpaleke worked on developing an HIM workflow chart, researched and updated several job descriptions, and conducted an analysis project regarding what it would take for the facility to reintegrate currently outsourced release of information and scanning functions.

“The work that has come out of these students has been quality to the point that it helped the department,” Hollis says. “We have used it firsthand.”

PPE host facilities can get just as much or more out of the experience as students.

For the workflow project, Okpaleke plotted out the entire HIM workflow from patient admittance to postdischarge. She then recommended ways to make the process more efficient.

To create her recommendation, Okpaleke moved through the workflow system herself, interviewing each person in the process. Not only did it give her a hands-on look at workflow, she also got to personally interact with the entire department and learn how to deal with different personalities.

The project provides two things for Children’s: a chart for improving the workflow and a visual to show employees how their jobs are connected and have changed over time due to recent EHR implementation. Okpaleke was an ideal person to do the project, Hollis says. She has visited multiple facilities over her last few years in college and has seen how different healthcare entities design their workflow.

Past PPE student projects at Children’s run the gamut of HIM issues. Students have organized the hospital’s HIPAA week, conducted a search for a coding compliance coordinator position, and revised a documentation standards grid by reviewing standards from organizations including the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Joint Commission.

At HDI past PPE students have helped market a new computer-assisted coding technology model and even helped implement a voice capture system at a healthcare facility.

Both Hollis and Spees have always seen productive work come from the PPE students.

“So far a majority of them have been able to handle [the work],” Hollis says. “I have just provided guidance on a one-on-one basis to see how they are progressing and just maybe directing or redirecting them a little bit.”

Hands-on Learning

After years of college, Okpaleke experienced things in her PPE that she never saw in a book. She has gained problem-solving and organizational skills from the experience that will be helpful both in work and in her personal life, she says.

The PPE is a vital experience for a student, she says, because it provides real-life practice for an aspiring HIM professional. In the PPE, a student finally understands what Joint Commission audits really mean and how an EHR implementation can modify workflow.

“In class, when you learn about HIM it is like, you study, you take a test, and after a while it is gone,” Okpaleke says. “You don’t even have a chance to practice it. When you come to the hospital, it is like you get to do it hands on. And you will always remember that.”

The PPE makes students more employable; they can point to their PPEs as experience they have gained in the field, Brodnik says. The PPE can also be an extended interview. It is common for students to complete their PPE and get offered a job by their PPE host, Brodnik says.

Hollis says, “The PPE gives you a good opportunity to see what the student can and can’t do and if you might want to hire them either now or in the future.”

A 2009 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers offers supporting evidence. It found that 73 percent of graduating students who had worked internships found jobs. The internships either led directly to job offers or provided students with the industry contacts they need to land jobs. A separate NACE survey from the same year found that fewer than 20 percent of 2009 graduates who were looking for a job found one.

A PPE also serves as a reality check for students who have studied HIM but not experienced it.

“It is an experience where we get to take a step forward and really see how it is in the real world, get hands-on experience in a management position,” Williams says. “And we can get a feel for the type of work that we may or may not venture off into once we graduate. It is just a good experience to step out of our safe zone and experience something we may never be able to experience ever again.”

Some may decide an aspect of the profession is not for them. Some fall in love with their work during the PPE. In the end, both are better for their realizations, Spees says.

Ready to Work

The TB incident at Children’s taught Okpaleke several lessons. Hollis did not panic; she organized her staff and assigned them portions of the work. In a meeting held after the crisis, staff discussed the organization’s response and ways to improve should another incident occur.

“If I just had school, I wouldn’t know how to deal with such a situation. The TB thing was not in my notes,” she says. “I would be like, ‘TB? What am I going to do now, what happens?’ But being here, I saw what happens, and in the future if I work somewhere else that has a similar problem I’ll know what to do.”

“This whole thing was just an eye-opener,” she says. “It is like the icing on the cake, actually. You can’t go out without any kind of experience at all.”

For a look at junior PPEs and the struggles programs face in placing students, see “[Help Wanted](#)” in the September 2009 issue.

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