

Reengineering the Professional Practice Experience: With Participation Declining, One HIM Program Decided to Revamp its PPE Offering

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Educators are facing challenging times in placing students in professional practice experience sites (PPE). These challenges are brought on by changes in the health industry work settings and demands, as well as the change in student demographics and personal commitments. Faculty in the health information management program at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey (formerly the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey), have reengineered all of their professional practice requirements with these challenges in mind to provide a positive experience for both the practice site and the student.

Maintaining PPE Tradition Now Difficult

For years it has been a tradition of many HIM educational programs to place students in a real world professional practice site for their final capstone course. This was done to help students apply the theoretical knowledge they learned in school to a real world setting. Over time the industry has drastically changed, making it more challenging to find practice sites that will not only be willing to take a student but will be able to dedicate the time needed for a meaningful experience. There has also been a significant change in the demographics of the typical student, with more students having commitments outside of school such as full-time employment and family. These competing issues present many obstacles that only increase the difficulty in providing a quality professional practice experience.

The HIM program at Rutgers has been structured like most accredited, in-person HIM programs. For years the Rutgers program consisted of three professional practice experiences: directed practice, HIM seminars, and management affiliation (see Table 1).

It became apparent that this set up was no longer the optimal scenario for the sites or the students, and Rutgers began exploring ways to improve the experience for all.

Identifying the Issues

Information was gathered from several sources in order to revamp the PPE, mainly through evaluating students' and sites' past PPE experiences. This information was analyzed to identify any shortcomings to avoid in the new program. In addition, a focus group was held consisting of graduates and program seniors that had already completed a PPE. These two sources identified several issues.

From the students' point of view the experiences varied considerably. Some issues raised include:

- Better student knowledge and prior experience would have improved the experience
- Sites were not always well coordinated and organized in dealing with students
- The site supervisor and student were not well-matched regarding expectations
- The sites did not have meaningful projects that coincided with the PPE schedule
- The managers were far too busy to spend quality time with the students

Another pervasive issue for interviewed students was the increased inability to alter their work schedule to accommodate the required PPE time on-site. As an evening, in-person program, a majority of students work full-time and employers are becoming less willing to alter work schedules. Many students also expected the educational program to adjust to their

schedules. In prior years, for example, Rutgers was more willing to stand fast with its requirements, but in today's economy the school recognized the need to minimize the risk of the student losing his or her job by offering flexible education schedules.

PPE sites also had issue with the traditional model. Problems included:

- Sites often did not have time to prepare for the student's arrival, which often made the student feel that they had not been expected
- Despite the two off-site PPEs being scheduled at different times during the semester, sites were only willing to take on one student a year, either a junior PPE or senior PPE but not both
- Some PPE site supervisors were not convinced that taking on a student was beneficial to them
- Sites did not always have a good project for the student that coincided with the schedule
- Almost every site expected to get the "best" student in the program, who could work independently with little oversight

In summary, the main issues came down to timing, assignments, and expectations of all involved.

Table 1

The PPE options at Rutgers originally consisted of three different experiences.

Directed Practice	HIM Seminar I (formerly Directed Practice II)	Management Affiliation
Junior PPE	Junior PPE	Senior PPE Capstone
8 Thursdays (Jan–March)	7 Thursdays (March–May)	5 F/T Weeks (April/May)
Off-site-Acute Care	On-site-Speakers/Case Studies	Off-site-Acute Care/Alternate Sites

Finding a Solution

Hoping to fix the PPE for all involved, Rutgers officials took what they had learned from the students, graduates, and practice sites to develop a solution that would be a win-win for all using available technology and flexible scheduling as key components. After much deliberation by HIM faculty, the following set up was determined to be the best alternative for Rutgers' PPE program.

Junior PPEs – Directed Practice

The program would still have two PPEs for junior students since this was recognized as being essential to provide an initial orientation into the profession, particularly for those who do not currently work in the industry. Directed Practice PPEs would still be scheduled for eight Thursdays during the day, but would be held on campus rather than at clinical sites, using the AHIMA Virtual Lab and other technology to create a simulated experience. Also included would be a requirement for small groups of students to visit different health information departments in acute care and compare findings upon returning to campus. Sites would be selected based on Rutgers' knowledge of variances in processes and technology. This first PPE would also be spread out throughout the semester on alternate weeks and end the semester on campus to facilitate joint activities with senior HIM students.

Junior PPEs – HIM Seminar

The HIM Seminar PPE would be moved to the evening schedule to immediately precede a Rutgers class on data and record management. Various speakers would be scheduled to discuss documentation practices in the venue/discipline which would then be covered in the didactic portion of the record management class. This would bring the real world experiences in and give students the opportunity to interact with multiple professionals. By scheduling the seminar classes in the early evening, the university would also have more flexibility in speaker selection as the HIM faculty found scheduling speakers during the day had become more challenging due to the disruption in the speaker's work schedule.

Senior PPE – Management Affiliation

The management affiliation presented the greatest revamp challenge as Rutgers faculty were still facing issues of sites being too busy to accommodate students. Sites were also stating that they didn't always have a great project for the student that coincided with the program's April schedule. To address these issues, Rutgers reorganized the capstone experience in the following ways:

- Opened the capstone course to be available throughout the senior year
- No longer required the entire experience to be scheduled at one site and one time
- Allowed students to "bank" hours when working on various projects throughout the senior year

These changes greatly increased the flexibility of the experience and was beneficial to both the student and the site, Rutgers faculty found. Sites would be able to request a student for short-term or long-term projects and then work out the scheduling for those projects directly with the students.

Putting the Plan in Motion

Before Rutgers could consider placing the students in a clinical site in an alternate semester, HIM faculty had to develop a plan for the student's inclusion in the university liability insurance, which would only be applicable during the period of time that the student was registered for the course.

Since the project work might span two semesters, it was decided in consultation with the registrar's office that faculty would schedule a one-credit Management Affiliation course in the fall semester for those participating in projects. They would then register for a two-credit course in the spring semester to complete any remaining project hours. Those not participating in a split semester project would register only in spring semester for a three-credit Management Affiliation. This required submission and approval of the course from the university as a one, two, or three credit option.

In order to show site supervisors that this could be beneficial to them, Rutgers promoted the student as an extra set of hands to work on projects large and small at any time during the senior year. The university began promoting the fact that if sites needed a hand with a project, the HIM program had a solution in a PPE student. The program was promoted in this manner at the 2012 New Jersey annual CSA meeting in Rutgers' exhibit hall booth, which was shared with other programs in New Jersey. The university also handed out fliers announcing the changes at the meeting. Since PPE site representatives had often stated they could not accept a student because the staff was too busy, Rutgers' staff discussed how the best experience for the student was often during the busiest times for the site, which also provided the greatest benefit to the site. Also distributed was a list of potential projects to highlight what the university's students might offer. Some of the past projects included on the list were:

- Corporate integrity agreement – annual report
- Design educational materials for senior management meetings
- Flowcharting portions of the EHR
- Create database for coding audits
- Archive project; financial return on investment
- Employee engagement (career ladder)
- Evaluate Discharge Not Final Billed report (DNFB)

Rutgers faculty also pointed out that the AHIMA Code of Ethics stated that HIM professionals were to “recruit and mentor students,” and that the number of continuing education credits available for taking a student had increased to 5 CEUs (per cycle).

Student Support Mixed

Many sites were very supportive of the plan at this initial unveiling. Rutgers continued sending information periodically to the sites throughout the summer of 2012 so that they would keep this plan in mind when potential projects came to light.

The university also surveyed the juniors at the end of the term to determine how many would be interested in this alternative plan. About one-third of the students thought the changes would work better for them, while the remaining two-thirds wanted to be scheduled in the traditional five-week PPE scenario. Rutgers’ faculty found this somewhat surprising, but then learned that many had already arranged for the time off at their places of employment and didn’t want to go back and risk losing the support of the employer for a schedule exception.

By summer’s end the university had a handful of willing students and a somewhat equal number of projects submitted by the sites. An effort was made to match the student skills to the project, however there were issues of travel and availability that continued to surface. Several students felt that they should be able to do this at their own convenience and not necessarily when the site was willing to work with them. Communication between the site and the student was also an issue. Some students found it frustrating that sites were not as responsive as they hoped with further information regarding project details and scheduling.

Hopes High for Revamp Success

The entire process has had some growing pains as both students and sites adapt to the change. But Rutgers staff have discovered that the PPE sites are finding the experience more beneficial as specific projects are completed at the time most needed, and the students who are participating are getting an experience more suited to their interests and needs. Sites are only willing to participate if the students involved are high-caliber, capable, and independent workers. For this reason Rutgers will be developing criteria for participation in early PPE assignments, such as a minimum GPA requirement, and develop an application that will assist the university in matching the student to the project.

Although the early revamp option started off with a small number of participants, the HIM faculty is confident that it will grow since it offers greater flexibility to both the students and the PPE site. Although the feedback has yet to be collected from participating sites, students are expressing higher levels of satisfaction as they now feel they are truly contributing and completing meaningful tasks.

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