

Criterion V.H – Nontraditional Degree Program

If the school offers degree programs using nontraditional formats or methods, these programs must: a) be consistent with the mission of the school and within the school's established area of expertise; b) be guided by clearly articulated student learning outcomes that are rigorously evaluated; c) be subject to the same quality control processes that other degree programs in the school and university are; and d) provide planned and evaluated learning experiences that take into consideration and are responsive to the characteristics and needs of adult learners. If the school offers nontraditional programs, it must provide needed support for these programs, including administrative, travel, communication and student services. The school must have an ongoing program to evaluate the academic effectiveness of the format, assess teaching and learning methodologies and systematically use this information to stimulate program improvements.

Expected Documentation

1. Identification of all degree programs that are offered in a nontraditional format, including those offered in full or in part through distance education in which the instructor and student are separated in time or place or both. The matrix in V.A may be referenced for this purpose.
2. Description of the nontraditional degree programs, including an explanation of the model or methods used, the school's rationale for offering these programs, the manner in which it provides necessary administrative and student support services, the manner in which it monitors the academic rigor of the programs and their equivalence (or comparability) to traditional degree programs, and the manner in which it evaluates the educational outcomes, as well as the format and methodologies.
3. Assessment of the extent to which this criterion is met.

Criterion V.H – Nontraditional Degree Program

1. Identification of Nontraditional Programs

The SPH offers an online MPH in public health informatics through the division of Health Policy and Administration. This degree is a cooperative effort between SPH and the department of Biomedical Health Information Sciences in the College of Applied Health Sciences. (See matrix V.A.)

2. Description of Nontraditional Degree Programs

Program Structure

The MPH in public health informatics consists of three components:

- Six schoolwide MPH core courses
- Eight informatics courses (required for the track)
- MPH practicum and capstone experience.

All courses are taught online. A minimum of 48 credit hours must be earned over a maximum period of five years. Students normally complete the degree in three years by taking five courses a year (two in the fall and spring and one in the summer). A field practicum performed in an approved health agency is required. The academic advisor and a supervisor develop the structure of the practicum in order to satisfy the student's needs.

A capstone experience requires the student to synthesize and integrate knowledge acquired in course work and other learning experiences. A field practicum may be the basis of a capstone requirement. The field practicum and capstone experience must address a practical informatics problem in an agency or organization.

Program Rationale

The key role of health surveillance and analysis systems in public health investigations requires that public health professionals have not only an understanding of core public health principles but also of the design and use of information systems. Business management and information management degrees alone do not provide the professional with knowledge of the principles and analytical tools of public health that are needed to direct the development of public health-related information systems. This program is designed to meet the needs of experienced health professionals within the United States and internationally. It is completely Internet-based and is offered in a three-year, part-time format. The program is designed to benefit the following market:

- State and local public health agency personnel
- Managed care organization staff

- International health agency personnel and nongovernmental organizations
- Federal health officers

Learning Objectives for the MPH in Public Health Informatics

Additional learning objectives for the MPH degree in public health informatics are described in Criterion V.C.

Administrative Structure

The MPH program in public health informatics, a completely online program, was developed jointly with the department of biomedical and health information sciences of the College of Applied Health Sciences. It currently has 85 students from 24 states and seven foreign countries. It has an administrative structure consisting of the program director and two co-directors. The program director is from the School of Public Health, division of Health Policy and Administration. One of the co-directors is from the School of Public Health while the second is from the College of Applied Health Sciences. The division of Health Policy and Administration serves as the administrative home of the program. The program has developed a procedures manual that specifies all student activities from inquiries about the program to student applications, admission process, registration, orientation and graduation.

The academic coordinator of the division of health policy and administration is responsible for most academic issues involving the public health informatics students while the technical coordinator is responsible for addressing the technology-related problems that online students may encounter. The academic coordinator coordinates her activities with the Office of the Dean of the School of Public Health and the College of Allied Health Professions. The technical coordinator of the program also coordinates his activities with the UIC Academic Computing Center personnel. The academic and technical coordinators compile weekly problem lists for the program directors. Once a month the program directors meet with the director of the division of health policy and administration to address all problems that have been identified by the academic and technical coordinators.

Student Support Services

- The program collects new student applications for the informatics program and tracks each application to insure that all documents have been received. The PHI Admissions Committee reviews each application package. Packages of admissible students are presented to the departmental admission committee.
- PHI manages an online orientation for new students each semester so that students can introduce themselves to one another and gain working familiarity with Blackboard before the semester begins.
- In coordination with UIC Academic Computing Center, the program assists new students with the creation of UIC NetId's & Enterprise IDs so that correct mechanisms are in place in the event passwords are forgotten, and to ensure that UIC electronic mail is forwarded where appropriate.

- The PHI technology coordinator assists students with installation and use of course software.
- In coordination with UIC Academic Computing Center, PHI reviews data for every PHI student in Banner at the beginning of each semester for incorrect program codes, courses which may not have actually been taken, incorrect or missing grades, etc.
- General registration problems are addressed by the academic coordinator of the Health Policy and Administration division. In addition PHI develops and distributes individualized registration instructions to every student for each semester based on that person's academic history and position in the program.
- The academic coordinator of the division of health policy and administration works with the campus Office of External Education to resolve any outstanding issues with respect to academic records, immunization, and financial holds. Academic holds may result from incorrect student histories in Banner. Immunization holds arise on occasion, even though many PHI students do not live in Illinois.
- The program coordinates with the coordinator for academic programs of the School of Public Health to establish correct Blackboard sites each semester.
- The program verifies and distributes the PHI booklist for each semester, assuring that the latest versions of texts are being used and that the books are available from online booksellers or the publishers.
- The program ensures the availability, reliability and quality of weekly online PHI tutorial sessions for selected classes in biostatistics, epidemiology, geographic information systems, data mining and online health applications development. These are technical courses that the program has identified as likely to present difficulties to online students. The program therefore decided to provide students with online synchronous tutorial services to ensure successful completion of the courses. PHI employs an 800 phone service from Unlimited Conferencing, provides a NetMeeting host PC for the Internet whiteboard used by PHI tutors to display equations, graphs, etc., to online students, and equips all new tutors with a telephone headset and pen mouse. The program also assists the tutors and students with any technical problems that may arise. Teaching assistants and tutors are all UIC PhD students.
- The program scans in and posts book chapters for students who are having difficulty with their book orders. In a few cases the program has produced CDs of the courses for delivery to students as a backup when they lose Internet connectivity. In all instances the program seeks advice on copyright laws from the UIC Library of Health Sciences.
- PHI maintains course currency in terms of reviewing new books and articles where appropriate and monitors technological advances in areas that the courses address.
- The program maintains a PHI Web site (<http://www.uic.edu/sph/phi/>) to inform students of enhancements, curriculum revisions, changes in program and academic requirements, new application procedures, etc.

Academic Advising

The core PHI faculty, Drs. Edward Mensah, Kevin Croke, Annette Valenta, and Michael Cailas, are responsible for the academic advising. As all PHI students take a prescribed set of courses (no electives) the course advising is simplified. Students begin with HPA 465 and HPA 400 followed by the remaining courses in lock-step fashion.

Problems relating to technology utilization are covered primarily by a SPH staff member, with back-up support provided by the campus Academic Computing Center (ACCC). ACCC provides support when difficulties with Blackboard are encountered. Admissions and registration problems are initially handled by the academic coordinator of the health policy and administration division. Students receive assistance in accessing library material from instructors and the UIC library of health sciences staff. The UIC Office of External Education assists students in navigating the financial landscape. The vast majority of advising is conducted online via email.

Because public health informatics, ‘the application of information science and technology to public health practice, learning, and research’, is a relatively new field, the program does not grant field practicum waivers. As PHI students are already working in public health agencies, clinics and hospitals, and other healthcare organizations, their first choice for a preceptorship is typically their supervisors or people suggested by their supervisors. The PHI program assists students in selecting a topic, working in conjunction with the selected preceptor. A Practicum and Capstone Blackboard site has been developed which enables advisors to follow the students' progress until completion.

Regarding job placement, most of the PHI students are already working in the healthcare field. Out of the 15 graduates only 3 requested the program's assistance in finding jobs.

Monitoring Academic Rigor

The public health informatics program consists of eight core public health courses and seven public health and health information management courses. All faculty members are full-time University of Illinois professors who teach most of the courses in the traditional face-to-face format and are subjected to review by students each semester. Each faculty member is responsible for updating his or her courses to ensure that the materials are current. The pure public health courses are updated at the departmental levels based on input from each department's academic committee. The public health information management courses are reviewed and updated by the individual faculty members from the College of Applied Health Sciences and the School of Public Health.

PHI is developing a program advisory board that will consist of five experts from the Public Health Informatics Fellowship Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, selected schools of public health, American Medical Informatics Association and American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA). These individuals will meet in summer 2006 to review academic structure of the program. The director of the CDC Public Health Informatics program and the vice president of academic affairs and accreditation at AHIMA have agreed to serve on the advisory board. These two individuals reviewed the information management courses before the beginning of the program.

Evaluating Academic Effectiveness of the Learning Format and Teaching Methodologies

Each semester students fill out a course evaluation questionnaire (CEQ) where issues concerning academic effectiveness of the learning format and teaching methodologies are raised. The CEQs are processed as described in the response to Criterion VIII.B.4. The teaching assistants also are reviewed. Based on the results from the CEQs, each instructor is advised by the department chairpersons to modify their respective courses to ensure the effectiveness of the learning formats and teaching methodologies. The program directors, teaching assistants and tutors also monitor the progress of the students weekly in order to ensure that very few students encounter serious problems that will result in dropping out of the program. The success of an online program depends not only on the quality and speed of the faculty responses to students' problems but also the quality and frequency of technical support received by the students. The PHI technical coordinator works very closely with the teaching assistants, tutors and personnel from the UIC ACCC to ensure that the course delivery technologies do not pose any serious constraints to students' participation in the program. The program has excellent technical support.

List of Practicum Placements is available in the Resource file.

3. Assessment

The school offers a completely online MPH degree in public health informatics which targets individuals already working in a health organization. The program is consistent with the school's mission, has clearly articulated learning objectives and is subject to the same quality control as all traditional programs in the school. This criterion is met.