THE FACULTY RESEARCH INTERESTS PROJECT: A WEB-BASED RESOURCE FOR AN ACADEMIC HEALTH SCIENCES COMMUNITY

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Background: As an academic institution grows, it is more difficult to keep track of faculty research activities through traditional and informal channels. Yet major features of the research environment, such as the increasing importance of multidisciplinary initiatives, make it crucial for all groups to have such information readily available. For faculty, a research interests resource can identify potential local collaborators in other disciplines and attract students and trainees. For students and applicants, it can identify potential mentors and labs. For administrators, it can inform planning of programs and facilities.

Objective: To create a searchable index of faculty research interests meeting two criteria: 1) It must be easy to use and require a minimum of faculty time and effort. 2) It must be based on a standard vocabulary so that those searching the index can more easily locate people with shared interests.

Method: The Faculty Research Interests Project (FRIP) is a Web-based application that automatically extracts standard MeSH indexing terms from a faculty member’s publications in MEDLINE. FRIP also creates a personalized, password-protected Web site for each faculty member in which his or her extracted MeSH terms are displayed in checklist form. The faculty member visits the personalized Web site and checks off those terms describing his or her research interests. He or she may also add terms that are not on the checklists; these are mapped to the MeSH vocabulary wherever possible for consistency. As terms are checked off or entered, they become part of a central index that can be searched using a public Web site. Faculty whose responsibilities do not include research may use their personalized Web sites to designate themselves as non-researchers for purposes of FRIP.

Results: FRIP was launched in the School of Medicine in June, 2000 and now includes faculty from all six University of Pittsburgh health sciences schools. In the School of Medicine, 1411 of 1698 faculty (83 per cent) have participated. Of these, 1144 have submitted research interest terms to the index, and 267 have been designated as non-researchers. Gauged by technical support requests, use of the personalized Web sites appears to be straightforward for most faculty. While faculty are not prevented from entering non-standard terms, 93 per cent of terms in the index are MeSH.

Discussion: FRIP has filled a variety of School of Medicine needs in the past two years. In recruiting students likely to become academic physicians, the Admissions Committee uses FRIP to match applicants with faculty in applicants’ areas of interest. Department chairs new to the university have used FRIP to build ties with other departments and as an aid in faculty recruitment. Research administrators use it to match external funding opportunities with individual researchers. Automating the large-scale delivery of information to individual faculty based on stated research interests is now being investigated.