

An InfoReady Business Case: A Conversation with the University of Maryland's Hana Kabashi

Using InfoReady to Maximize Research Volume and Visibility



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With 41,000 students, 14,000 faculty, and 250 academic programs in 12 academic colleges, it comes as no surprise that the University of Maryland (UMD) is an R1 institution with a correspondingly massive research enterprise – one that garnered \$570 million in grants and awards in 2019.

How UMD organizes its research office, structures opportunities and competitions, and utilizes (and disseminates) InfoReady to advance its efforts is a story worth telling – and one told best by a key administrator, Hana Kabashi, Program Manager, Division of Research.

How UMD's Research Division is organized

According to Hana, the University's Division of Research is centralized and works with colleges and units all across campus. The Division encompasses Research Development, where Hana is housed, as well as Research Administration, an office for Innovation and technology commercialization, and an University Affiliated Research Center (UARC) that deals with applied research in the intelligence and security community. There's also a center that studies terrorism and responses to terrorism. And let's not forget the hundreds of other center, institutes and programs that produce significant and impactful research throughout the university. So, clearly, UMD's research operation is large, complex, and multifaceted.

Hana explains that while her shop, Research Development, "isn't a big office, we try to work with all of UMD's colleges to enable faculty to pursue funding opportunities and we do that in a myriad of ways – including the Maryland Catalyst Fund; our Independent Scholarship, Research, and Creativity Awards (IRSCA); Limited Submissions; AIM-HI Challenge Awards in medicine; a Coronavirus Research Seed Program. Plus we have workshops, lists of funding opportunities, proposal writing resources and development services, a proposal library, and others. So we really try to offer a comprehensive menu of opportunities and services while at the same time promoting collaborations between all the campuses within the University of Maryland system."

Promoting education and gathering intelligence

“Since our objective,” Hana continues “is to essentially grow the volume and visibility of UMD’s research enterprise, we need to ensure our researchers have a detailed understanding of the funding landscape. Correspondingly, that involves hosting webinars or hosting visits from program officers or foundation managers, helping faculty reach out and to give young faculty support, utilizing all of the resources we have on our decentralized campus.

“That sometimes means running from college to college and department to department to understand the what, who, and how so we can leverage our depth of knowledge and materials. A lot of that task is brokering introductions, helping initiate collaborations, and then providing the seed funding and support to cultivate new research and develop new teams.”

UMD’s internal expansion of InfoReady

The University of Maryland began using InfoReady in 2014. Hana wasn’t yet in her current role and she described her efforts to get the system used more widely across campus for a greater range of processes.: “When I started in this position about three years ago, we were using InfoReady – but just in the Research Development office and only for external limited submission programs. It was a really good tool so I didn’t understand why we weren’t using it to work more with colleagues throughout the University and why there wasn’t greater awareness of InfoReady and its benefits. Part of what I’ve been doing over the last year is reaching out to colleges across campus where I’ve been working with their administrators to use InfoReady and they’re now able to host their own internal fellowship, poster, or abstract competitions. We’ve successfully launched programs and competitions in number of colleges such as: Agriculture and Natural Resources; Arts and Humanities; Behavioral and Social Sciences; Computer, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences; Education; and the A. James Clark School of Engineering.”

Added advantages of using InfoReady across campus

“What InfoReady provides our Division is insight into the kind of work these colleges and units are doing. For example, with a little bit of data mining in InfoReady, we can study research processes and outcomes at these colleges we may not see in other ways, and that in turn not only improves our overall research efforts but helps develop collaborative ideas and teams these colleges can draw on to work together.

“I also think it gives our research faculty and administrators an introduction to our central office and a degree of familiarity so they’re comfortable coming to us for more

institutional competitions. My hope is that we'll continue to further grow limited submissions, internal funding, faculty incentives, seed and pilot grants, and research initiatives. The idea is that we're using InfoReady to both help facilitate these internal competitions and serve as their central repository. InfoReady also retains materials so I can go back months or years to see what was done previously, who was nominated, and who won nominations or awards. Another great benefit is that it standardizes the competitions process so you're able to repeat competitions and copy data for new competitions easily, which saves building from scratch every single time, and that obviously helps with workload. And if faculty members are seeing this over and over again, they become more familiar with where to find information, how to read these competitions, and how to look for information.”

Using InfoReady to promote UMD's specific funding opportunities

According to Hana Kabashi, the Maryland Catalyst Fund “is a large program and within it are several smaller or sub-programs. The concept is that the Research Development Office and the Division of Research receive a small percentage of the designated funding awarded, which goes back into and ‘catalyzes’ further research.”

New incentives for new partnerships and collaborations

As part of the Maryland Catalyst Fund, “InfoReady has been instrumental in helping us incentivize faculty to continue their research efforts through our twice-yearly new directions fund, which has two different tracks. The first is about proof of concept and developing new partnerships. These awards are perfect for exploring new research lines where investigators see potential but can't get there without a little bit of support – and we're going to try to provide that via seed funding for pilot data, travel, and grad student support.

“The second track is what we're calling the field limited external grant opportunity. This tends to be more humanities-based research that could have difficulty finding external support for their kinds of research and efforts. Using InfoReady makes it easier for researchers to access opportunities using integrated single sign-on so it works for faculty, and even students, in all colleges.”

Bringing disparate groups together

Another part of The Maryland Catalyst Fund: “Often, we find a topic that several departments or colleges on campus are talking about but just within their unit. To foster cross-unit discussion and collaboration, we developed a discretionary fund to support meetings where we bring faculty together to share ideas and see if a multidisciplinary team makes sense. The funding isn't extensive; sometimes, it just covers the cost of

coffee, food, and space. But we don't want the lack of those to be a deterrent, because the objective is to build teams where we think there's potential and strength unique to this University. “

Opening the funding doors to underserved faculty and departments

“The Independent Scholarship Research and Creativity Awards – we refer to it as the Indies -- is for those fields that don't have many external opportunities. We have a large number of faculty members in many colleges who are working on more humanistic approaches and they need support of some kind. They're not going to necessarily go out and pursue a two million or three million dollar grant, even were those more available. So last year we were charged by the Provost's office to create a new program.

“We began researching and drafting this new opportunity with the office. The Associate Deans became major partners to our Division and my office specifically and that allowed us to reach an entirely new set of humanistic faculty and departments we haven't worked with before. New faculty began coming to us with ideas and questions, excited about the new opportunity. I would introduce them to this new program as well as to other programs and resources we provide and demonstrate what InfoReady and how it works. I would encourage them to explore the landscape. I'd also share announcements with them through InfoReady because I post almost everything relevant on the platform -- literally hundreds of competitions yearly -- and this gave us an opportunity to show faculty what it is, what it does, what we do, and how they can easily access opportunities. Today, the Indies Awards are up to ten thousand dollars per award and support teaching, summer salary, and research related expenses.”

Creating a new space for AI + medical research

“Our AIM-Hi Challenge Awards are designed to foster collaboration between our flagship campus at College Park and the University of Maryland at Baltimore, and the award is specifically for artificial intelligence-plus-medicine research that will contribute to major scientific discoveries, secure sizable extramural funding, and lead to meaningful improvement in patient care and treatment. The award requirements are especially interesting because not only is inter-campus collaboration key, but it requires mixed teams of junior and senior faculty. The award further stipulates that applicants identify external funding opportunities to best leverage these seed funds.

“The University of Maryland system has the capability to pursue big research initiatives and correspondingly big funding opportunities, and we felt that with the unique artificial intelligence and machine learning strengths we have in College Park in, aligned with the research and clinical strengths of the colleges and grad programs in Baltimore, the potential for big research with big funding was significant.

“InfoReady allowed us to perform the reviews with faculty and staff from both campuses. Part of the background work was done via email and in meetings where I could inform faculty – of different backgrounds and degrees of familiarity with our sites and portals – how to use InfoReady as a reviewer. That was kind of a learning lesson for all of us in how to socialize participants using applications InfoReady has developed.”

Formulating an immediate research response to the COVID-19 threat

“Just a few days before most of us at UMD were asked to work at home due to the Coronavirus, we were tasked with getting a competitive internal research grant program up and running. That meant detailing the program elements, developing an RFP, and putting into place an entire review and evaluation process, literally in days.

“We knew that researchers needed to be able to access the information and application from anywhere because the University was about to restrict working on campus. So we immediately brought people together, produced a draft competition on InfoReady, and had key staff reviewing the RFP and competition details for accuracy and feasibility.

“Thanks to near-immediate buy-in and support from leadership at a number of UMD colleges, we were able to quickly launch the coronavirus research seed program and ensure UMD could advance research responses to help counter the pandemic.

“To make all this happen, InfoReady was imperative. It provided access to all interested parties, made it easy to share announcements and send updates, and with the pressure of a weekly rolling deadline, I was able to track what had been submitted. How well did this last-minute effort work? Just 16 days after the competition opened, we received over 40 applications for the limited funding award, which is really quite remarkable.”

How UMD's Hana Kabashi approaches competitive review processing and reporting

“Once we reach a review deadline, I download all the results into a macro we've developed that helps take data from an Excel spreadsheet and “magically” transform it into a report that looks a little bit more manageable. That's especially important when I'm trying to bring up to 40 pages of data to leadership, so the macro sorts the data into easy-to-read tables, formats the reviews, and even creates an anonymized download of the reviews that I can share with the faculty for feedback toward future proposals.

“We then go into a second tier of review with the Vice President of Research, the Associate Vice President for Research Development (who's my direct supervisor), myself, and other relevant faculty or administrators, for example, if the funding organization is a foundation, we have someone from our University's Corporations and

Foundations Office. We then look at the proposals and reviewer scores and evaluations, discuss the program as a whole, and reach decisions. There's no question this takes a lot of time, but we find that it allows us to make decisions based on evidence-based information and feedback.

"We don't share reviewer names outside of our office, so there's usually only three of us privy to that knowledge. That's the idea – we're trying to ensure there's an equitable process of researchers receiving awards, that we're putting our best foot forward at UMD, that we're not shortchanging any particular departments, and that we're looking at things like gender and race equity. This approach also addresses concerns from previous eras that decisions were perceived to be based more on personal relationships than merit. So again, this kind of effort, although time-consuming, has become our gold standard for both limited submissions and internal programs."

UMD's managerial communications approach

"With UMD's vast and physically dispersed research enterprise, communication is obviously critical to success. I can email as much as I want but everyone's emails are inundated and I joke that when people say hey, I've seen your name before, I'm like, yeah, am I in your spam folder yet?

"So we supplement email with regular meetings with the Associate Dean for Research of every college on campus or his or her proxy. We also have monthly meetings with the Research Development Council, which includes all of our Associate Research Deans as well as other administrative individuals from units such as University Relations. In those meetings I provide updates on limited submissions and internal funding competitions that were completed and share data from InfoReady. The Council – along with anyone who chooses to sign up for the updates - also receives email updates and weekly notes from me, which include links to the various competitions so they can share these with their faculty.

"Because I work with research administrators and business officers in most of UMD's colleges, I've made it a point to reach out to them through presentations on InfoReady to demonstrate what the software does and how it works – the objective being to help them build competitions and reporting structures in their own units.

"I also do presentations across campus – I call it my Roadshow – for new faculty orientation as well as within Faculty Affairs. And whenever requested by deans, chairs, administrators, or groups of research faculty, I present a research development show on what we do. That presentation always includes something about InfoReady and limited submissions in our internal programs."

How UMD stimulates new research and new collaborations

“When I see a new opportunity that I think can really develop into something significant, I share it with colleagues and faculty and staff that might find it relevant. My colleagues in Research Development will reach out to faculty to begin a discussion, to see where connections across campus can be made. Again, it's all about developing relationships, learning what's happening in specific colleges, and then having those people come together. Incentives for collaborating are important, too, whether it's through the different seed funds or the Maryland Catalyst Fund program. The overarching goal is always to bring as much of the research potential here at UMD to fruition as possible, and InfoReady has been instrumental in helping us maximize our research impact.”

To learn more about InfoReady, schedule a demo, or get in touch with current InfoReady users, contact Amanda or Max at the contact info below.

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