Featured Member Interview: Kristin Bacon

Tags: IRB administration, MAM, Member Appreciation Month, member interview

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As we wrap up Member Appreciation Month, PRIM&R would like to highlight some of our members—individuals who work daily to advance ethical research on a daily basis. Today, we highlight Kristin Bacon, MPH, CIP, who works as an IRB Coordinator at the University of Hawai‘i.

PRIM&R: Tell us about how you got started in the research ethics and oversight field and what motivates you to stay involved?

KB: Aloha! I am honored to be selected to be interviewed for PRIM&R’s blog, Ampersand! I appreciate this opportunity to share and connect with the PRIM&R membership community. Mahalo nui loa!

What got me started in the research ethics and oversight field is a love of ethics, learning, research, and service in higher education. Beginning at the University of Washington, Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, WA, and now for the University of Hawai‘i System for over 12 years, educating about and upholding excellence in research ethics is a passion.

The University of Hawai‘i’s flagship campus, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, is one of only a few land-, sea-, sun- and space-grant universities in the United States and has been classified as one of 131 Research 1 (R1) universities in the United States, meaning “very high research activity” in the Carnegie classification of Institutions of Higher Education 2018 update. Founded in 1907, the University of Hawai‘i is a public higher education system of 10 campuses on four islands serving over 51,000 students from all over the world through coursework offered at the Hawai‘inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge, the only college of indigenous knowledge in a R1 institution in the United States, the John A. Burns School of Medicine, the University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center, the College of Education, and the William S. Richardson School of Law, to name a few. The Human Studies Program serves the entire University system, through oversight, detailed review, and
management of over 1,800 biomedical and social and behavioral sciences applications each year. This is a tremendous and exciting opportunity to both learn and to teach about research ethics.

This is a dream job! My motivation to stay involved stems from an inner dedication and pivotal support of Human Studies Program leadership and colleagues, university administration, university unions, and warm collegial working relationships with dedicated, exceptional, and inspiring IRB members. The experience of working with innovative and intelligent faculty and student researchers to help achieve academic and life goals is genuinely rewarding. I relish the opportunity to learn about new research; there is always something new and interesting being proposed.

Being a kama'aina whose family has been rooted in Hawai‘i for generations, I feel dedicated to and grounded in rich Hawaiian perspectives as I work with researchers and colleagues, while respecting and cherishing this precious and beautiful Hawaiian place of learning that we are so fortunate to call home.

**PRIM&R: What is one tool or resource that you use every day that you could not do your job without?**

**KB:** One resource that I appreciate every day is our exceptional and dedicated IRBs. Our program has three boards with approximately 12 members each, both regular and alternate: Biomedical, Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Cooperative. Our IRB members are volunteers, with several members serving for more than 15 years. Our IRB not only offers the service our program depends on to function—such as regular application reviews and meetings—but our IRB members have also stepped in when needed to support conversion to a complex online application system, and the revision of operating policies and procedures to qualify for and earn accreditation from the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs, Inc., (AAHRPP). I am endlessly grateful for and impressed with the excellence, intelligence, and dedication of our IRB members. Mahalo piha, IRB members!

**PRIM&R: Tell us the one thing you wish the general public knew about human subjects research/animal research?**

**KB:** One thing I wish the general public knew about human subjects research is that conducting human subjects research in alignment with ethical guidelines is not only the right thing to do (and a federal requirement), typically, this additional level of review and revision also helps to create better research outcomes. Numerous researchers over the years have shared their gratitude for the IRB application process because it encouraged deeper reflection in terms of research design, which then ultimately led to outcomes that were more powerful.

**PRIM&R: What is the professional accomplishment that you are most proud of?**

**KB:** The professional accomplishment I am most proud of is serving to reduce fear in our researchers. When I first started working in this field, I recognized that to many researchers, the
IRB appears to be a frightening and daunting barrier to researcher goals. I realized that one of the best things I could do in my job is to serve to reduce and eliminate that fear through robust and thoughtful educational interventions and pedagogy on a regular basis.

Through an education outreach program that I conceived, design, and manage, daily consultation with researchers, and working with a team to develop our website and online application, I strive to give researchers the needed tools and empowerment to more fully understand how to conduct research ethically, and submit an application that will be approved. To provide this information in a consistent, clear, and comprehensible way, I had to become a subject-matter expert.

To become a subject matter expert, I read and studied numerous research ethics publications and took the Certified IRB Professional (CIP®) exam. I have maintained this certification for the past eight years. At the time of initial certification, I was one of three people in the entire state of Hawai'i to hold a CIP.

When recertifying, my continuing education credits were predominately earned through pursuing and earning a Master in Public Health (MPH) degree in December 2017. The MPH provided me with the valuable experience of research methodologies and protocols, among numerous other competencies. This direct engagement with the research cycle emboldened a richer daily praxis in the IRB discipline, which then further enabled me to provide support to researchers that is more comprehensive.

I also regularly participate in PRIM&R and AAHRPP webinars to maintain and enhance current knowledge bases and foundations. I am profoundly grateful for the support I have received to earn and maintain the CIP, earn the MPH, achieve AAHRPP accreditation with my team and leadership, participate in and learn from the postings on PRIM&R’s SBER Network, and serve as a PRIM&R mentor for the Mentoring Program. Through these opportunities I have built a foundation from which I serve to directly contribute to researcher success. This is my ultimate goal and intention. I am very proud to provide the education, guidance, and information researchers need to replace a fear of the IRB process with confidence that human subjects research protection requirements will not only be met and upheld in their own research, but serve to improve that same research with powerful results.

**PRIM&R: What is one PRIM&R resource or event you would recommend to another professional in your field?**

**KB:** The PRIM&R event I would recommend to another professional in my field is the annual Advancing Ethical Research (AER) conference, which I have attended in the past. The AER conference provides updated information on a wide variety of topics, and networking with peers. There is so much to be learned at this conference that can be brought back to improve programming, and to make powerful and useful connections. Definitely not to be missed!