Exploring Feasibility of New Models of Telehealth for Older Adults

Background:
Telehealth – the use of technologies to provide clinical services over distance – offers opportunities for seniors to access needed healthcare services at any time, in any place. Once considered unconventional, telehealth is now becoming an increasingly accepted form of care delivery. In particular, seniors can benefit from the advantages telehealth affords, such as eliminating unnecessary and costly visits to one’s healthcare provider or the ER, allowing physicians to detect early warning signs related to chronic conditions, and relieving transportation burdens for caregivers. But, how feasible is it that seniors will be able to even access telehealth portals? Do they own the devices needed to engage in telehealth communities? Beyond ownership, how do they use these devices and what are their perceptions towards accessing health information online? While telehealth provides opportunities to address barriers to healthcare access for a rapidly aging American population, little work has been done to understand how to create telehealth technologies that are suitable for seniors’ needs.

Project goals:
The aims of this project are to use Health and Retirement Study data to understand 1) older adults’ technology access, use, and skills, particularly for low resource seniors; 2) perceptions and likelihood to use telehealth through traditional means, such as tablets and mobile applications. The Health and Retirement Study is the largest and longest-running longitudinal survey of older adults. Designed by researchers at University of Michigan, it provides access to more than 25 years of data across 20,000 older adults on a range of topic areas including health, disability, and technology use.

Student Role:
A student’s contributions to this project will make it possible to understand feasibility of telehealth platforms by older adults, and do so over time to understand if there may be any generational effects. The student should have had at least one quantitative statistics class or be familiar with regression testing. Specifically, a student will:

- Conduct a brief literature review of telehealth research and applications of telehealth programs
- Learn how to develop good research questions by brainstorming questions to ask of the data based on the HRS survey modules and literature review
- Strengthen data analysis skills by analyzing data from 20,000 older adults over time using statistical techniques

Mentorship Role:
I will meet with the student weekly for individual meetings and group meetings as part of a larger team with Dr. Casey Pierce. These meetings will cover both academic and professional skills needed to be a successful researcher. I will work closely with the student to not only address the research goals, but give them the intellectual freedom to ask their own questions of the data. I will give the student constructive feedback on each phase of the research.