

National consortium to lead North Carolina in big data innovation

EurekaAlert!

A new collaboration called the National Consortium for Data Science (NCDS) aims to make North Carolina a national hub for data-intensive business and data science research, a move that will help develop a national strategy to ensure U.S. leadership in the data-driven global economy.

The consortium, launched at RENCI, the Renaissance Computing Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, unites data researchers in academia with data creators and users in business and government. Industry leaders, major research universities, and nonprofit and government organizations are NCDS founding members.

Together they will address the challenges related to collecting, sharing and using large, diverse data collections, or big data. The NCDS will look at ways to harness big data as an economic engine, such as developing data-centric businesses, conducting multidisciplinary data science research and supporting new data science education programs.

"Those who harness the power of big data and use it to develop new data-intensive business sectors will be the winners in the 21st century economy," said Stanley C. Ahalt, director of RENCI and a chief organizer of the NCDS, and professor of computer science at UNC-Chapel Hill. "Our members understand that, want to find solutions to big data problems and put North Carolina on the map as a center of data science innovation."

Big data refers to the large, multidimensional data sets that are used and created every day by scientists, engineers, consumers, social media users, financial institutions, hospitals and clinics and more. These big data take the form of electronic medical records, medical images, financial and business transaction records, and scientific data ranging from genomic sequences to models used in meteorology to data collected by telescopes and environmental sensors.

Representing the private sector are Cisco, GE, IBM, NetApp and SAS. Founding academic members are UNC-Chapel Hill, RENCI, North Carolina State University, UNC Charlotte, UNC General Administration, Duke University and Drexel University. Nonprofit and government sector members are The Hamner Institutes for Health Sciences, MCNC, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, RTI International and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. All founding members have major facilities in North Carolina except Drexel, located in Philadelphia.

In February, the NCDS held its inaugural meeting and agreed to the following initiatives in year one:

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- Capitalize on member strengths to compete for federal data science research funding, including the \$200 million Big Data Research and Development Initiative announced by the White House last year, the National Science Foundation's BigData program, and the National Institutes of Health's Big Data to Knowledge initiative.
- Convene the first invite-only NCDS Leadership Summit April 23-24 in Chapel Hill. Each year, the summit will focus on data issues in a specific field. The 2013 summit, Data to Discovery: Genomes to Health, will bring together genomic and data scientists to draft recommendations on how to translate genomic data into better, more affordable healthcare.
- Host a public lecture by Eric Green, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute and acting director of the new National Institutes of Health Data Science program. Green will speak at 10 a.m. Tuesday, April 23, at the Friday Center for Continuing Education in Chapel Hill just before the start of the Leadership Summit.
- Launch a Data Fellows program that provides internships for students at member companies and visiting scientist positions at member universities for industry employees.

"It is no longer enough for businesses to be big in order to be successful; now success is driven by the amount of knowledge a company possesses," said David Turek, vice president of exascale computing at IBM. "Ninety percent of our planet's data has been created within the past two years, and the demand will grow as businesses look to optimize big data analytics to improve decision making and expand their business operations into cloud, social and mobile environments."

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