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Commentary

Advancing the Discourse Around Cancer Center Catchment Areas

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Commentary Overview

- In December 2023, VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center hosted a first-of-its-kind catchment area data conference.
- The conference agenda was designed to steer conversation toward a more nuanced and intentional engagement with the data catchment areas yield, the programs they inform, and the communities they serve.
- Driven by the rapid speed at which the field of data science moves, the conference set a new standard for transparent, accessible tools and shared data practices.
- The path forward involves collaboratively developing research methodologies and data technologies tailored to communities' unique and dynamic needs.

In December 2023, VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center gathered preeminent experts in cancer catchment area data analytics from 65 cancer centers across 37 states and Puerto Rico, for the [Catchment Area Data Conference: Beyond Definition](#), a first-of-its kind conference strategically designed to advance the discourse surrounding cancer center catchment areas.

The event was hosted in collaboration with 28 industry leaders and key federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, the National Cancer Institute (NCI), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, North American Association of Central Cancer Registries, American Cancer Society, Association of Community Cancer Centers, and AACI. Grounded in its

historical context, the meeting agenda aimed to steer the conversation beyond merely delineating catchment areas toward a more nuanced and intentional engagement with the data they yield, the programs they inform, and the communities they serve.

At the heart of the conference was the understanding that the catchment area forms the foundational bedrock for strategy development at NCI-Designated Cancer Centers. But sometimes at cancer centers, thinking about the “catchment area” becomes an exercise for reporting and justifying strategies, rather than a compass that guides our day-to-day work. Further, outside cancer centers, most people—and most patients—don’t know what a catchment area is, what it really means, or why it matters. That is what brought the Catchment Area Data Conference into being.

Supported by AACI and SAS, a data analytics platform, in partnership with Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center Research Consortium and UK Markey Cancer Center, the event highlighted the crucial roles of data scientists—often distal to the communities, clinics, and labs—and program leaders, who are frequently disconnected from the data and its sources. This divide can lead to data without context and queries without a clear intention or purpose. Through sophisticated tools and open dialogue, this conference bridged that gap and enhanced an overall understanding of the context and purpose of analyzing cancer catchment area data.

While cancer center program leaders have access to dedicated forums, including AACI’s Catchment Area Research Data Science (CARDS) [listserv](#) and recently-launched CARDS [webinar series](#), to discuss and refine their community initiatives, the data specialists have lacked such a collaborative space. The conference stepped in to fill this critical gap, creating a much-needed space for these specialists to engage in integrated and holistic dialogue. Such communication is key to fully harnessing the potential of our research and outreach efforts. To that end, a significant portion of the event was dedicated to identifying shared challenges and opportunities for collecting data, developing tools, and measuring impact.

Speakers represented several AACI cancer centers, as well as government agencies and cancer advocacy organizations. Numerous tech companies were on hand to share how their platforms are helping cancer centers improve the way they collect and share catchment area data.

More than a meeting of the minds, the conference was a call to action, emphasizing the need to unite in understanding and addressing community needs. Driven by the rapid speed at which the field of data science moves, this conference set a new standard for transparent, accessible tools and shared data practices, marking a step toward a future where science transcends academic silos to intertwine with people and communities.

Our path forward involves collaboratively developing research methodologies and data technologies tailored to our communities' unique needs. We recognize that catchment areas are dynamic entities, shaped by complex societal and environmental factors. Our goal is to build tools that are transparent, fair, and accessible, fostering a platform where best practices in cancer data management can be developed and shared across disciplines. This approach allows us to tailor solutions to the diverse needs of our communities, ensuring no community is invisible. This is the essence of translational and equitable science.

The urgency of this mission cannot be overstated – it is about impacting lives and transforming communities. We are committed to making this an annual event, continually evolving and expanding with the support of all cancer centers. Stay tuned as we continue this journey, committed to making a difference where it truly counts.

Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, a monthly editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.



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