

## 424 R&R and PHS-398 Specific

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## Project/Performance Site Location(s)

**Project/Performance Site Primary Location**

I am submitting an application as an individual, and not on behalf of a company, state, local or tribal government, academia, or other type of organization.

Organization Name: NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
UEI: HTMVS2JZBS6  
Street1\*: NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
Street2: 360 HUNTINGTON AVE, 177-500  
City\*: BOSTON  
County:  
State\*: MA: Massachusetts  
Province:  
Country\*: USA: UNITED STATES  
Zip / Postal Code\*: 021155005  
Project/Performance Site Congressional District\*: ma-007

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**Additional Location(s)**

File Name:

## RESEARCH &amp; RELATED Other Project Information

<b>1. Are Human Subjects Involved?*</b>	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
1.a. If YES to Human Subjects		
Is the Project Exempt from Federal regulations?		
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No		
If YES, check appropriate exemption number:		
— 1 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2 — 3 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8		
If NO, is the IRB review Pending?		
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No		
IRB Approval Date:		
Human Subject Assurance Number		
00004630		
<b>2. Are Vertebrate Animals Used?*</b>	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No
2.a. If YES to Vertebrate Animals		
Is the IACUC review Pending?		
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No		
IACUC Approval Date:		
Animal Welfare Assurance Number		
<b>3. Is proprietary/privileged information included in the application?*</b>	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No
<b>4.a. Does this project have an actual or potential impact - positive or negative - on the environment?*</b>	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No
4.b. If yes, please explain:		
4.c. If this project has an actual or potential impact on the environment, has an exemption been authorized or an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) been performed?		
4.d. If yes, please explain:		
<b>5. Is the research performance site designated, or eligible to be designated, as a historic place?*</b>	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No
5.a. If yes, please explain:		
<b>6. Does this project involve activities outside the United States or partnership with international collaborators?*</b>	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No
6.a. If yes, identify countries:		
6.b. Optional Explanation:		
Filename		
<b>7. Project Summary/Abstract*</b>	Abstract_Final.pdf	
<b>8. Project Narrative*</b>	Narritive_Final.pdf	
<b>9. Bibliography &amp; References Cited</b>	References_and_Bibliography_Final.pdf	
<b>10. Facilities &amp; Other Resources</b>	Facilities_and_Resources_Final.pdf	
<b>11. Equipment</b>	Equipment_Final.pdf	

## **Abstract**

Traditional health coaching interventions, while an effective and low-cost treatment and prophylaxis for lifestyle related chronic illness, face scalability challenges due to time and effort required by health coaches to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with clients. To expand the reach and productivity of health coaches, we propose a novel Human-in-the-loop Artificial Intelligence (AI) Health Coaching approach, wherein human health coaches are augmented with responses with AI. Previous approaches to AI health coaching have failed as early AI systems lack *personalization* and *adaptability*, reducing their efficacy. We will address these barriers by using a Large Language Model (LLM), specifically Meta's LLaMA 2, which exhibit advanced capabilities in natural language understanding and the ability to meaningfully integrate personal details into responses. To adapt this model to the health coaching domain and reduce the 'hallucination' of inaccurate information we will fine-tune the model with past conversations between health coaches and clients as well as integrate the LLM-Adapter framework. We hypothesize that fine-tuning an LLM with a substantial health coaching message dataset and incorporating an LLM-Adapter to query external knowledge sets and mitigate hallucination will yield an AI model capable of replicating the personalized nature of human health coach responses. In **Aim 1**, we outline the construction of this model and the development of a user interface for health coaches to message participants with AI-generated responses. Fine-tuning the LLaMA 2 model on a 20k-message health coaching dataset and integrating an LLM Adapter to mitigate hallucination are central to this objective. Resource-intensive tasks will be performed on our institution's high-performance cluster. **Aim 2** involves the evaluation of our AI responses through both metric-based testing and user interface usability testing with health coaches. BERTscore, a metric capturing intent and meaning similarity, will assess how closely our AI replicates human health coach responses. Additionally, usability testing with five health coaches will provide qualitative insights, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation. This research aims to bridge scientific gaps by demonstrating the potential of LLMs in replicating human health coaching responses and exploring LLM Adapters in health-centric conversations. Ultimately, this work strives to enhance the productivity and reach of health coaches while maintaining the quality of coaching, offering a promising solution to address the pressing issue of chronic illness.

### **Narrative**

Health coaching works as low-cost prevention and treatment for lifestyle-related chronic illness but is hard to scale as it relies on human health coaches. Using new artificial intelligence (AI) technologies like large language models (LLMs), we plan to build and evaluate an AI health coaching system that works alongside human health coaches to expand their reach and productivity. This work has the potential to expand access to health coaching to many more people while maintaining quality and reducing cost, offering a promising solution to address the pressing issue of chronic illness.

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## **Facilities and Resources**

### **Scientific Environment**

Founded in 1898, Northeastern University is committed to providing the necessary resources for the research to their research active faculty. Northeastern University was ranked #53 out of all National Universities, and #35 for Computer Science in the U.S. News and World Report 2023 rankings. Northeastern University has an enrollment of more than 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students and approximately 4,300 faculty and staff. There are eight undergraduate colleges, eight graduate and professional schools and two undergraduate evening divisions. It is recognized as one of the top universities in the nation for practice-oriented education, which is largely based on the co-operative education program that is required for all undergraduate university students. Northeastern achieved R-1 research activity status in 2015, with \$140.7 million in external research funding. Since then, research funding has increased almost 2-fold, with \$230.7 million in external awards in 2022.

The facilities and resources available to Ethan at Northeastern University include what is required to successfully complete the proposed project. Ethan is currently enrolled in the PhD program in Personal Health Informatics, a joint offering from the Bouve College of Health Sciences and the Khoury College of Computer Sciences. The Health Sciences Department, within the Bouve College of Health Sciences, includes extramurally funded diverse faculty with expertise in the fields of exercise science, population health, health disparities, nutritional epidemiology, social epidemiology, medical sociology, public policy and mental health. As of 2023, the Khoury College of Computer Sciences is home to 190 faculty in a variety of computational fields. Many of the Personal Health Informatics faculty have joint appointment in both colleges, fostering a trans-disciplinary intellectual environment that incorporates academics, research, and practice.

### **Facilities**

#### Laboratory and Office

The Human Performance and Exercise Science Laboratory located within the Behrakis Health Science Center, is equipped with 2 offices for research faculty and graduate research assistants. This laboratory occupies 2000 sq. ft. of space. The laboratory is designed to easily create private enclosures to perform various testing procedures on research study participants. The lab has various equipment to measure aerobic and strength capacity and various health-related outcome measures including body composition, aerobic and musculoskeletal fitness, and blood biomarker analyses. Currently the lab stores wearable computing devices like smartwatches, as well as housing computers and peripherals to deploy wearable devices with participants, download accelerometry data, and visualize activity data. More recently lab has served as a collaborative hub for multiple projects, hosting participant visits and project meetings. Ethan has been heavily involved in conducting various research projects in the lab with Dr. John, Dr. Intille, and other graduate students.

#### Computing

The Khoury College of Computer Sciences at Northeastern University provides exclusive computing resources for both faculty research and teaching purposes. These facilities are constantly being upgraded to keep pace with developments in the computer industry. Khoury's infrastructure is managed by the Khoury Systems team that is dedicated to computing support for the college and consists of five experienced Linux, Windows, Network, and Virtualization administrators with a dedicated Service Desk. Khoury Systems provides enterprise-grade server hosting comprising of network, power, and cooling services. Researchers may utilize these capabilities by staging personal or research group computing systems in the Khoury Systems data center. Khoury Systems will also provide guidance in vendor selection, defining equipment specifications, and assisting in the purchasing process for all computing hardware requirements. Additionally, centrally managed applications such as GitHub Enterprise, WordPress Multisite, and Confluence Wiki are provided as tools for both research and teaching purposes.

#### Research Computing

Northeastern ITS Research Computing provides high-end research computing resources to all Northeastern University researchers and manages Northeastern's involvement in the Massachusetts Green High Performance Computing Center facility. These resources include centralized high-performance computing (HPC) clusters and storage, visualization, software, high-level technical and scientific user support, education, and training. Researchers can leverage these for both HPC and non-HPC research computing use, development, and funding requirements. As of 2023, the shared Discovery cluster provides secure access to over 20,000 compute cores, a mix of 10Gbps Ethernet and 56 Gbps FDR Infiniband network backplane and over 3 PiB of high-speed parallel file system storage. In addition, over 200 GPUs and a 50TB Hadoop experimental environment for big data research are available. **The computational resources available**

**through the Discovery Cluster, specifically the cluster's graphical computing power and storage capability, are integral to the success of this project. Access to the Discovery Cluster's performance GPUs will accelerate the prototyping and development of the machine learning techniques used in this project.** Project storage and other services are available to faculty members, with flexible options for data intensive projects. A dedicated team of research computing staff (and several graduate students) manages the environment and supports researchers in their use of high-performance computing for research and discovery.

Other resources:

The Bouvé College Office of Research (BCORe) assists faculty with the development of research proposals and protocols. The office also provides licensing for Qualtrics, an online secure data acquisition and management system that is available to all faculty, researchers, and students at the Bouvé College. Forms are easily created and can include data checks and skip, display, and branch logic. The program meets general HIPPA regulations and is complaint with standard security protocols. The college supports licensing costs. College faculty also has access to the REDCap (Research Electronic Data Capture) survey and data management system. REDCap is installed behind a secure and monitored firewalled server at Northeastern and can only be accessed via Northeastern's on-campus network or via remote virtual private network (VPN).

The Bouvé College Office of Research also supports the Biostatistics Service Center (BSC) where faculty can get assistance with the development and review of analytic plans and statistical and database support for research projects. Analytic support for projects is performed on a fee-for-service basis with charges and payments coordinated through BCORe. Hourly rates are based on the level of expertise required. Support services are provided by professionally trained biostatisticians and by Northeastern University graduate students with demonstrated expertise in biostatistical applications. Work on all projects is reviewed and monitored by the senior biostatistical staff at the College.

Library

The Snell Library houses close to one million volumes, 2.3 million microforms, 23,000 audio, video, and software titles, and current subscriptions to more than 8,200 serials and newspapers. The Digital Media Commons features an innovative media lab where faculty can utilize a range of technologies and services including support for course design and development, digital scholarship, media creation and integration, digital archival tools, text encoding, geographic information systems tools, software tutorials, and project- management assistance. The facility's data-analysis capabilities and computer-aided design tools, fully supported by librarians and IS technical experts, provide users with the ability to work across disciplinary boundaries to explore innovative solutions to real-world problems. The library also provides access to the Current Contents Connect (Thomson Reuters/Web of Knowledge) that allows faculty to browse tables of contents of scholarly publications within a single web site and to subscribe to tables of contents of journals to receive an update when new issues are published.

Animal: Not applicable.

Clinical: Not applicable.

## **Equipment**

As the goals of this project are to create and evaluate large language models for health applications. Therefore, equipment needed to conduct this research is mostly limited to computing resources.

The Khoury College of Computer Sciences at Northeastern University provides exclusive computing resources geared towards both faculty research and teaching purposes. These facilities, subject to regular upgrades, encompass enterprise-grade server hosting services managed by the Khoury Systems team. This includes network, power, and cooling services necessary for hosting personal or research group computing systems. Researchers can also benefit from centrally managed applications, such as GitHub Enterprise, WordPress Multisite, and Confluence Wiki, offered as tools for both research and teaching purposes.

In conjunction with the college's facilities, Northeastern ITS Research Computing offers high-end research computing resources. The shared Discovery cluster, available as of 2023, has over 20,000 compute cores, a mix of 10Gbps Ethernet and 56 Gbps FDR Infiniband network backplane, and over 3 PiB of high-speed parallel file system storage. Crucially, the cluster is equipped with a select of over 200 NVIDIA K80, P100, V100, and T4 GPUs, **providing substantial graphical computing power crucial for the prototyping and development of machine learning techniques essential to my proposed project.** Storage services are also available, accommodating the substantial data generated by the research projects with flexible options for data-intensive projects.

Aside from physical infrastructure, the Discovery Cluster provides hundreds of software systems and packages. Most notable for this project, Discovery Cluster provides environmental and versioning management systems (Git and Conda), research computing languages (R and Python), SQL/NoSQL database systems, and parallelization packages (OpenMPI and CUDA). Hosting these applications is the Discovery Cluster's operating system, Linux-based CentOS. CentOS Linux is ideal for research computing due to its reliability and speed. Discovery Cluster also provides training and on-demand support for all users. Consulting is also available.

This comprehensive suite of computing resources, spanning wearable devices, laboratory computers, HPC access at the Khoury College of Computer Sciences, and the extensive Research Computing infrastructure, will play a pivotal role in data collection, analysis, and the development of advanced machine learning techniques central to the proposed research. I will additionally benefit from the support provided by a dedicated team of research computing staff, ensuring seamless integration and efficient use of these resources.

**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Provide the following information for the Senior/key personnel and other significant contributors.  
Follow this format for each person. **DO NOT EXCEED FIVE PAGES.**

NAME: Rogers, Ethan B.

ERA COMMONS USER NAME (credential, e.g., agency login) 

POSITION TITLE: Graduate Student Research Assistant

**EDUCATION/TRAINING**

INSTITUTION AND LOCATION	DEGREE (if applicable)	Start Date MM/YYYY	Completion Date MM/YYYY	FIELD OF STUDY
University of Vermont, Burlington, VT	B.S.	08/2013	05/2017	Microbiology
Northeastern University, Boston, MA	Ph.D.	09/2021	05/2027	Personal Health Informatics

**A. Personal Statement**

In high school I took a Python programming class that opened the door to internships at the Center for Addiction Management (CAM). CAM needed data collection tools that could be run in MRI machines to provoke specific states of mind for their research on decision making. I had the knowledge to translate their needs into code, and I spent two summers building these tools and exploring the basics of scientific research. Propelled by this early exposure to scientific research at CAM and a general interest in health, I followed my curiosity to the University of Vermont (UVM) where I earned a B.S. in microbiology, worked with students as a teaching assistant, explored *C. difficile* sporulation in Dr. Aimee Shen's lab, and worked as a data intern for the Vermont Department of Health recording cases of food poisoning and summarizing seasonal trends among age groups. These opportunities gave me a solid foundation in biology and allows me to further explore computing in health applications. After my undergraduate education, I worked at the Vermont Center for Behavior and Health as a research assistant gaining experience working with historically marginalized populations on large clinical trials relating to smoking behavior, before transitioning to the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP). Both principal investigators and heads of their own teams at VCHIP, Drs. Valerie Harder and Charles Mercier saw potential in my ability to apply my programming skills to automate and expedite data reporting and analyses. My work at VCHIP involved building data collection and reporting systems and producing scientific reports detailing the achievements and shortfalls of perinatal healthcare in Vermont. This experience allowed me to apply my problem solving and computing skillset towards a common goal within a group of diverse researchers, which laid a strong foundation for my ongoing doctoral studies. Currently I am a graduate research assistant, in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Northeastern University's Personal Health Informatics doctoral program, advised by Dr. Dinesh John. Although I am no longer harvesting Clostridium spores or asking Vermonters about their smoking behavior, my experience and education allowed me to develop a unique perspective on how computer science can be leveraged to solve health problems, which I apply to my ongoing research. In my work I use my background in biology, strong interest in human health, years of using code to solve problems, and many hours of working with participants to further my research goals: creating research tools which enable greater exploration of human health. Building systems which measure and promote health and wellness is an expression of my creativity and values. For example, during my first two years in my program, I used my technical background and experience building data analysis systems to develop a data processing pipeline to classify activity from 12 person-years of raw accelerometer using activity classification algorithms developed by Dr. Stephen Intille's (co-sponsor) lab. With these raw data transformed into meaningful predictions of activity, our lab found that augmenting exercise programs with socially engaging, and context-aware health coaching reduced sitting and increased standing behavior. This fellowship opportunity will give me the training and experience I need to continue creating and evaluating novel

health systems like that which is detailed in the project, and springboard a career rooted in my values and interests.

## B. Positions, Scientific Appointments and Honors

### Positions and Scientific Appointments

2021 – Present	Graduate Research Assistant, Northeastern University
2018 – 2021	Research Assistant and Program Coordinator, Vermont Child Health Improving Program, University of Vermont Medical School
2017 – 2018	Research Assistant, Vermont Center for Behavior and Health, University of Vermont Medical School
2016 – 2017	Data Intern, Enteric Disease Surveillance, Vermont Department of Health
Summer 2016	Course Assistant, Biology of Parasitism, Marine Biological Laboratory

### Honors

2016	Teaching Assistant of the Year, Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics, University of Vermont
2013-2017	Presidential Scholarship, University of Vermont

## C. Contributions to Science

- High School Research:** For two summers in high school, I was a research assistant at Massachusetts General Hospital, in the Center for Addiction Medicine creating computer programs for data collection. I designed and built an online data collection tool for a study on the effect of *Cannabis* on delay discounting and coded data collection tools in Python. My largest project was an adaptation of the computer game Pong with variable game-play parameters to elicit different mental states for research on fMRI brain activity of cooperation and competition. I created journal templates in LaTeX for research publication and assisted with participant data collection in ongoing research. The work I did these summers was my first introduction to scientific research, bridging my interest in computing and biology.
- Undergraduate:** As an undergraduate I was a teaching assistant for 3 semesters, working with professors to teach and administrate introductory microbiology and genetics wet lab courses. I was hired as a course assistant for Biology of Parasitism at the Marine Biological Institute during the summer of 2016, where I managed the course's wet lab. I did one semester of undergraduate research in a lab run by Dr. Aimee Shen studying them mechanisms of *C. difficile* sporulation but decided to follow my interest in public health and data by spending a year as the data intern for the Enteric Disease Surveillance division at the Vermont Department of Health (VDH). At VDH I cataloged enteric disease case reports, maintained and updated the enteric disease surveillance database, and analyzed historical enteric disease burden across age groups.
- After Undergraduate:** After college I worked at the Vermont Center for Behavior and Health at UVM as a research assistant on an experimental psychiatry study investigating the effect of low nicotine cigarettes on historically marginalized populations. Aside from direct participant data collection, I was the data quality coordinator. I moved within UVM to the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP), where I was a research assistant under Drs. Valerie Harder and Charles Mercier. I provided data and administrative support for projects using insurance claims and electronic medical records to investigate the impact of opioid prescribing policy on opioid overdose (resulting co-authorship of a manuscript) and using Vermont's birth certificate database and VCHIP's relationships with perinatal clinicians to evaluate and improve perinatal care quality at community birthing centers around Vermont.
  - Harder, V. S., Plante, T. B., Koh, I., **Rogers, E. B.**, Varni, S. E., Villanti, A. C., Brooklyn, J. R., & Fairfield, K. M. (2021). Influence of Opioid Prescription Policy on Overdoses and Related Adverse Effects in a Primary Care Population. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 36(7), 2013–2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-021-06831-4>
- Graduate:** I am currently a graduate research assistant at Northeastern University advised by Dr. Dinesh John. My most recent project applied machine learning algorithms to predict activity from accelerometer data collected during a pilot study investigating how activity-aware personalized health coaching affects unstructured physical activity in older adults. I have coauthored a methods manuscript with my colleagues and presented a poster at the *International Conference on Ambulatory Monitoring of Physical Activity and Movement* on this work.

- Arguello, D., **Rogers, E.**, Denmark, G. H., Lena, J., Goodro, T., Anderson-Song, Q., Cloutier, G., Hillman, C. H., Kramer, A. F., Castaneda-Sceppa, C., & John, D. (2023). Companion: A Pilot Randomized Clinical Trial to Test an Integrated Two-Way Communication and Near-Real-Time Sensing System for Detecting and Modifying Daily Inactivity among Adults >60 Years—Design and Protocol. *Sensors*, 23(4). <https://doi.org/10.3390/s23042221>

Aside from using the activity classifications to determine outcomes, I am in the process of publishing a paper on the system I designed track and process the 12 person-years of raw accelerometry data collected as part of my lab's research.

#### D. Scholastic Performance

YEAR	COURSE TITLE	GRADE
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#### UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

2013	Exploring Biology 1	
2013	General Chemistry 1	
2013	Fundamentals of Calculus I	
2013	TAP: Health Care in America	
2014	Exploring Biology 2	
2014	General Chemistry 2	
2014	Fundamentals of Calculus II	
2014	General Psychology	
2014	D2: Prehistoric Archaeology	
2014	Organic Chemistry 1	
2014	Microbiology & Infectious Disease	
2014	Psychology Research Methods I	
2015	Organic Chemistry 2	
2015	D1: Race & Ethnicity Literature	
2015	Intro Recombinant DNA Tech	
2015	Molecular and Cell Biology	
2015	Basic Statistical Methods	
2015	Biochemistry I	
2015	Teaching Assistant (Microbiology 101)	
2015	Introduction to Pharmacology	
2015	Effective Speaking	
2015	Medical Biostatistics & Epidemiology	
2016	Biochemistry of Human Disease	
2016	Immunology	
2016	Undergraduate Research (Microbiology)	
2016	Clinical Microbiology I	
2016	Toxicology	
2016	Genetics	
2016	Elementary Japanese I	
2016	Prokaryotic Molecular Genetics	
2016	Teaching Assistant (Microbiology 101)	
2016	Internship (Marine Biological Laboratory, Biology of Parasitism, Course Assistant)	
2016	Senior Seminar	
2017	Methods in Bioinformatics	
2017	Wilderness First Responder	
2017	Independent Study (Vermont Department of Health, Enteric Disease Surveillance, Data Intern)	
2017	Teaching Assistantship (Intro to Recombinant DNA Technology)	
2017	Emergency Medicine Research I	

YEAR	COURSE TITLE	GRADE
2017	Advanced Topics in EMS Research	
UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT (CONTINUING EDUCATION)		
2019	Climate Change Emergencies	
2020	Calculus I	
2020	Calculus II	
2020	Applied Linear Algebra	
2021	Advanced Bioinformatics	
NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY		
2021	Theory and Methods in Human-Computer Interaction	
2021	Theoretical Foundations in Personal Health Informatics	
2022	Programming Design Paradigm	
2022	Special Topics in Human Centered Computing: Human Sensing	
2022	Empirical Research Methods	
2022	Statistical Methods for Computer Science	
2023	Evaluating Health Technologies	
2023	Readings	
2023	Readings	
2023	Readings	
2023	Teaching Assistantship (Statistical Methods for Computer Science)	
2023	Database Management Systems	(In Progress)

**PHS Fellowship Supplemental Form****Introduction**

1. Introduction to Application  
(for Resubmission applications)

**Fellowship Applicant Section**

2. Applicant's Background and Goals for Fellowship Training\*      Background\_and\_Goals\_for\_Fellowship\_Training\_Final.pdf

**Research Training Plan Section**

3. Specific Aims\*      Specific\_Aims\_Final.pdf  
 4. Research Strategy\*      ResearchStrategy\_Final.pdf  
 5. Respective Contributions\*      Respective\_Contributions\_Final.pdf  
 6. Selection of Sponsor and Institution\*      Selection\_of\_Sponsor\_and\_Institution\_Final.pdf  
 7. Progress Report Publication List  
(for Renewal applications)  
 8. Training in the Responsible Conduct of Research\*      Responsible\_Conduct\_of\_Research\_Final.pdf

**Sponsor(s), Collaborator(s) and Consultant(s) Section**

9. Sponsor and Co-Sponsor Statements      Sponsor\_Cosponsor\_Final.pdf  
 10. Letters of Support from Collaborators, Contributors and Consultants

**Institutional Environment and Commitment to Training Section**

11. Description of Institutional Environment and Commitment to Training      InstitutionalEnvironmentCommitmentTrainingFinal.pdf  
 12. Description of Candidate's Contribution to Program Goals

**Other Research Training Plan Section****Vertebrate Animals**

The following item is taken from the Research & Related Other Project Information form and repeated here for your reference. Any change to this item must be made on the Research & Related Other Project Information form.

Are Vertebrate Animals Used?       Yes       No

13. Are vertebrate animals euthanized?  
 If "Yes" to euthanasia  
   Is method consistent with American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) guidelines?  
 If "No" to AVMA guidelines, describe method and provide scientific justification  
 14. Vertebrate Animals

**PHS Fellowship Supplemental Form****Other Research Training Plan Information**

15. Select Agent Research  
 16. Resource Sharing Plan  
 17. Other Plan(s)  
 18. Authentication of Key Biological and/or Chemical Resources

**Additional Information Section****19. Human Embryonic Stem Cells**

Does the proposed project involve human embryonic stem cells?\*  Yes  No

If the proposed project involves human embryonic stem cells, list below the registration number of the specific cell line(s), using the registry information provided within the agency instructions. Or, if a specific stem cell line cannot be referenced at this time, please check the box indicating that one from the registry will be used:

Specific stem cell line cannot be referenced at this time. One from the registry will be used.

Cell Line(s):


20. Alternate Phone Number:

21. Degree Sought During Proposed Award:

Degree: If "other", indicate degree type: Expected Completion Date (MM/YYYY):

22. Field of Training for Current Proposal\*: 419 Computer & Information Science, Other

23. Current or Prior Kirschstein-NRSA Support?\*  Yes  No

*If yes, identify current and prior Kirschstein-NRSA support below:*

Level*	Type*	Start Date (if known)	End Date (if known)	Grant Number (if known)

24. Applications for Concurrent Support?\*  Yes  No

*If yes, describe in an attached file:*

25. Citizenship\*

U.S. Citizen U.S. Citizen or Non-Citizen National?  Yes  No

Non-U.S. Citizen  With a Permanent U.S. Resident Visa

With a Temporary U.S. Visa

If you are a non-U.S. citizen with a temporary visa applying for an award that requires permanent residency status, and expect to be granted a permanent resident visa by the start date of the award, check here:

Name of Former Institution:\*

26.  Change of Sponsoring Institution

**PHS Fellowship Supplemental Form****Budget Section****All Fellowship Applicants:**

27. Tuition and Fees\*:

None Requested

 Funds Requested

Year 1

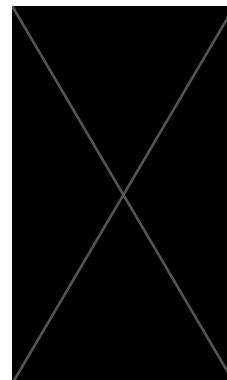
Year 2

Year 3

Year 4

Year 5

Year 6 (when applicable)

**Total Funds Requested:**

28. Childcare Costs\*:

 None Requested

Funds Requested

Year 1

Year 2

Year 3

Year 4

Year 5

Year 6 (when applicable)

**Total Funds Requested:** \$0.00**Senior Fellowship Applicants Only:**

	Amount	Academic Period	Number of Months
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29. Present Institutional Base Salary:

30. Stipends/Salary During First Year of Proposed Fellowship:

a. Federal Stipend Requested:	Amount	Number of Months
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b. Supplementation from Other Sources:	Amount	Number of Months
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Type (e.g.,sabbatical leave, salary)

Source

**Appendix****31. Appendix**

## **Background and Goals for Fellowship Training**

### **Doctoral Dissertation and Research Experience**

#### **Highschool and Undergraduate Research**

My research career began late in high school when I spent two summers working under Dr. Jodi Gilman at the Center for Addiction Medicine at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Working with other research assistants and principal investigators, I built software solutions by incorporating feedback on the needs of our research team from both a scientific and UX/UI standpoint which made the data collection process more accurate and efficient. For example, I built data collection tools/packages designed to elicit states of competition or cooperation to measure the resulting brain activation in participants with and without substance use disorders.

Although I enjoyed the role of a technology specialist in the research team, I went on to earn a Bachelor of Science in microbiology at the University of Vermont (UVM). While at UVM, I worked as a teaching assistant for three semesters, conducted research with Dr. Aimee Shen on the mutations to the cleavage site of *Clostridium difficile*'s primary germination lytic transglycosylase, and worked to record and analyze case reports of enteric disease at the Vermont Department of Health. In the latter part of my time at UVM, I worked under senior epidemiologist Bradley Tompkins at the Vermont Department of Health. In this role, I entered epidemiological reports from laboratory-confirmed cases of the four most common enteric diseases in the state. This opportunity, along with my previous experience in academic labs, cemented my interest in research and helped me to secure my first job after graduation. However, my experiences while obtaining my bachelor of science were instrumental in charting my future career path as, I realized that, though I am interested in the material of microbiology and health, I prefer computation and programming and interacting with human subjects and behavioral research over wet lab work.

### **Early Career Experience Working on Clinical Trials**

After graduation in 2017, I was hired as a research assistant for a large clinical trial at the Vermont Center for Behavior and Health (VCBH). Under the direction of Dr. Stephen Higgins, this clinical trial studied the effects of low-nicotine cigarettes on the smoking habits of historically marginalized populations, particularly women, people with opioid use disorder, and people with mental health conditions. Though it has the authority to do so, the FDA had never regulated the amount of nicotine in cigarettes, primarily because the effects, especially on people more susceptible to the disruption caused by nicotine withdrawal, had not been fully examined. My responsibilities at VCBH included completing weekly check-ins with participants who volunteered to use low-nicotine cigarettes, at which we would discuss and record their cigarette use, substance use, health, and their experiences in the study. Working with historically marginalized populations is challenging and taught me the importance of staying level-headed and maintaining the ability to communicate effectively and with empathy for the participant. Working closely with participants and completing my other responsibilities at VCBH enabled me to develop a broad collection of research experiences: designing tools for research, working in a wet lab, analyzing previously collected data, and now working directly with study participants.

### **Vermont Child Health Improvement Program**

After working for a year at VCBH, I transitioned into a role as a research assistant at the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP), a community-focused organization part of UVM's Larner College of Medicine tasked with bringing together healthcare providers, state health officials, and community leaders to improve healthcare for Vermont's children. Working in my role at VCHIP was the first time that I was able to fully utilize my unique combination of skills and background knowledge to further the work of my team and our research.

I worked on several projects at VCHIP, of which, two of the most consequential projects were the Vermont Regional Perinatal Health Project (VRPHP), under Dr. Charles Mercier, and a study on the effects of legislation meant to curb opioid addiction, under Dr. Valerie Harder. Both projects allowed me to draw upon and expand my knowledge of computing and health. For example, I collaborated with state partners and the VRPHP team to combine the Vermont birth certificate registry with VRPHP's existing hospital statistics reporting system, expanding the scope of the project's perinatal health quality improvement efforts. Using the birth certificate registry, I released the first-ever statewide homebirth report, which compared the perinatal outcomes of home deliveries with those of hospital births. While working on the opioids study, I learned that it was possible to probe Vermont's all-payer claims database and the UVM Medical Center's electronic medical records to answer questions about opioid overdose, emergency room visits, and complications related to substance use

disorder. Using these data, my team and I conducted an analysis, which revealed that although overdose among primary care patients did not decrease after the implementation of opioid prescribing limitations, adverse effects from opioids fell 78% from pre-policy levels. Our paper detailing this finding, my first publication, was published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine [1].

During my tenure at VCHIP, I developed other important skills, such as how to present information to a new audience and how to work closely with clinicians and other professionals who were unfamiliar with statistics and computing. I also gained experience with the procedural aspects of scientific communication: narrowing the scope of one's analysis, defining a research question, documenting your analysis and conclusions, and preparing manuscripts for publishing. The freedom to explore potential solutions and the faith my team members had in my ability to achieve our shared objectives, empowered my success at VCHIP and laid the foundation for my transition to my current doctoral program at Northeastern University. I left VCHIP with specific knowledge of opioid addiction, population-level data collection systems like the birth certificate registry and insurance claims database, and the practice of healthcare quality assessment and improvement. My career has benefitted from the experience of working with a diverse set of partners in government, the healthcare system, and academic research.

### **Interest in Computing**

I have integrated computing and programming into every research position I have held. While working at the Vermont Department of Health as an undergrad, I used SAS macros to examine seasonal fluctuation in *campylobacter* infections and to perform data cleaning and schema updates on the case reports database. At VCHIP, I built an entire reporting system and database to fully transition data collection at our partner hospitals from faxed paper forms to a secure online portal, accelerating my team's access to data and availability of automatic analyses— all while maintaining the strict standards of confidentiality needed when working with HIPAA protected PHI. This task involved collaboration with stakeholders at hospitals, representatives from the Vermont Department of Health, downstream users of our data, and other teams at VCHIP. I had to identify and push for the change to our reporting infrastructure, then design and build multiple systems; each for a different end user with different needs. Finally, I had to manage the transition, educate my colleagues, and when I left for graduate school hand off administration to the rest of my team.

In each of my positions, I was the only programmer on the team. As a result, I almost always took on these tasks alone with only my own. This meant that until my first semester of Northeastern University's Personal Health Informatics doctoral program, everything I knew about programming, designing databases and data collection tools, and creating analysis pipelines and reporting systems was self-taught. I believe that my experiential background in programming and formal education in biological science gives me a unique perspective on computing and health. Combined with my experience at multiple levels of clinical research, from working with participants to analyzing previously collected datasets, I believe I am uniquely suited to explore questions at the interface of health and computer science.

### **Companion Trial and Northeastern University**

I began Northeastern University's doctoral program in Personal Health Informatics in 2021 with Dr. Dinesh John as my mentor. I started work on an ongoing clinical trial, the Companion trial, studying the effect of personalized health coaching on reducing sedentary behavior in older adults. My programming skills, along with my previous experience working with participants, meant that I could assist with the daily operations of the Companion trial while designing a system to process terabytes of accelerometer data. Preliminary results from the companion trial indicate personalized context-aware health coaching motivates participants to sit less in favor of light physical activity [2]. I presented a poster of my work at the International Conference on Ambulatory Monitoring of Physical Activity and Movement 2022, which detailed the creation of an activity classification and data processing pipeline to receive, store, and analyze raw accelerometry data collected as part of Companion into high-level metrics. I am now in the process of submitting a manuscript based on this work for publication in the Journal of Medical Internet Research.

At Northeastern University, under Dr. John's mentorship and guidance from Dr. Wang and Dr. Intille, I have proposed this project as a continuation of the research explored with the Companion trial. My patient-facing experience conducting clinical research, my background in health and biology, and my demonstrated expertise

in research computing have positioned me well to bridge the gap between technology and health and given me a strong knowledge base to successfully conduct the proposed research. This project will guide and enhance my scientific training while exposing me to new ideas and offering opportunities to share my work.

### **Training Goals and Objectives**

Currently, I am on track to finish the required coursework, teaching obligations, and qualifying exams by early summer of 2024, at which point I will be a PhD candidate. My coursework so far has focused on core components of Personal Health informatics, mainly theories of behavior change, statistics, research methods, human-computer interaction, and computer science.

This award will allow me the focus and resources to further develop and actively practice my skills in applying computer science to health on a project I had a role in designing and an area of research in which I have great interest. To date, my research and course work have focused on identifying health problems and developing technological solutions that improve understanding of one's personal health, access to health information, and agency to seek treatment. During my time at Northeastern, I have used my programming skills and experience with clinical trials to implement a data analysis pipeline that provides rich, high-level summaries of participant activity enabling personalized, activity-aware health coaching. With this fellowship, the guidance of my sponsor team, and the research outlined in this proposal, I will be able to craft a research foundation based on novel technologies with the power to vastly increase access to behavioral health interventions. I will have training opportunities to learn more about behavioral interventions, experimental design, and language models; resources and time to disseminate my work; and a strong research foundation on which to build my career.

The proposed project will involve the use of a previously collected text-message dataset focusing on physical activity between health coaches and participants to fine-tune a large language model (LLM) within an LLM-augmenter framework, a conceptual framework that layers additional models and prompt engineering to constrain LLMs from producing non-factual information. Working with LLMs requires the use of high-performance computing (HPC) systems, such as Northeastern's Discovery cluster. Although I have previous experience working with HPCs, including as part of the construction of an analysis pipeline to run activity classification algorithms on raw accelerometer data on HPCs, machine learning applications like LLMs require new technical skillsets such as scheduling and managing large resource-intensive jobs, using machine learning frameworks for graphical processing units, and storing and evaluating fine-tuned machine learning models. Northeastern's Discovery cluster provides resources and training for these skillsets, as well as on-demand support for all users. Aside from technical skillsets, this project will provide opportunities to learn about conceptual approaches like model selection, fine-tuning, prompt testing, and evaluation. LLMs are very diverse, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. LLMs also produce qualitative outputs that are hard to easily measure or quantify and can be fine-tuned to focus and extend the capability of a model for a specific task. Selection of the correct model and the correct evaluation schema requires experience working with these models and evaluation metrics, as well as a detailed understanding of the intended use. The proposed project will allow me to gain experience selecting, fine-tuning, and testing LLMs for health applications, all under the supervision and expertise of Dr. Wang of the Northeastern Human-Centered AI Lab.

Aside from the technical components of this research, this research will involve meeting with stakeholders, designing the evaluation, performing human subjects research, and data analyses. With his experience and connections in the field of health behavior change research and his work designing clinical trials, Dr. John's expertise and guidance will be essential when performing these research activities. Dr. John will guide and advise on the recruitment of health coaches, the experimental design of the evaluations, and the statistical analysis of the collected data. Dr. John will also help troubleshoot issues that will inevitably arise when conducting human subject research.

Dr. John and Dr. Intille also have extensive experience with theories of behavior change – the building blocks of effective interventions. The use of behavior change theories is necessary when crafting effective interventions, and to successfully build a useful language model for health coaching we must integrate behavior change theories like Self Determination Theory and Motivational Interviewing (MI). Self Determination Theory is a psychological framework that emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and the fulfillment of basic psychological needs in driving human behavior, while MI is a client-centered counseling approach that helps individuals explore and resolve ambivalence about behavior change by eliciting their own motivations

and goals. These theories were used in the original research, and therefore their approach and implementations are carried out in the conversations I will use to train the health coaching model. As MI/SDT is a fundamental component of health coaching, I will need MI/SDT expertise to communicate effectively with health coaches and understand the feedback they provide during the project evaluation. To accomplish this, I will be completing a *Certificate of Intensive Training in Motivational Interviewing* at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. With this training and guidance from Drs. Intille and John, I will be better able to understand and integrate the health coaches' feedback.

Beyond the skills needed to conduct this research are the experiences to share and communicate my findings. Under the direction of my advisor, Dr. John, I have previous experience writing scientific papers and presenting my work at poster sessions. In his work and his mentorship, Dr. John emphasizes the importance of strong scientific communication skills. With his guidance, my scientific writing has matured, and my scientific thinking has become more precise. We regularly meet where he offers both specific and abstract feedback on my writing as well as guidance with research planning and research activities. As an interdisciplinary program, personal health informatics students must possess complementary expertise in the fields of health and computer science. We must be experts in health and biology, human subjects research, and behavior change; all while being experienced programmers capable of building user-facing systems with iterative design and development. This is reflected in our coursework, diverse faculty in both the Bouvé College of Health Sciences as well as the Khoury College of Computer Sciences, and our three qualifying exams – one for health, one for computer science, and the requirement we publish our work in a peer-reviewed journal before candidacy. This project will allow me the opportunity to present my work to a diverse audience comprised of other interdisciplinary scientists. It will allow me to work closer with my sponsor team, Dr. Intille and Dr. Wang, as well as the opportunity to continue improving my scientific writing. Dr. John's guidance, the support from other faculty in my program, and the opportunities afforded through this grant will enable my future career goal of doing translational research that applies technical solutions to health problems. I plan to seek a post-doctoral position that will enable me to continue my research building and evaluating AI health coaching systems.

### **Activities Planned Under this Award**

#### **Year 1 (2024 Q3 – 2025 Q3) Northeastern University**

**Breakdown:** Research 90%, Conferences/manuscript writing/Career Development: 10%

**Research:** Complete Specific Aim 1a using methods outlined in the research strategy. Build and deploy working prototype of Companion 2. Complete majority of Specific Aim 1b – the backend and user interface for the health coach messaging system with candidate responses. Start metric-based evaluation with of Companion2 responses (Specific Aim 2a).

**Conferences/manuscript writing/Career Development:** Complete UMass Dartmouth's *Certification in Intensive Motivational Interviewing*, if not finished already. Propose dissertation. Attend *International Conference on Ambulatory Monitoring of Physical Activity and Movement* with oral/poster presentation.

#### **Year 2 (2025 Q3 – 2026Q3) Northeastern University**

**Breakdown:** Research 70%, Conferences/manuscript writing and submission/Career Development: 30%

**Research:** Complete Specific Aim 1b and Specific Aim 2a, including all metrics-based evaluation, and recruitment for user studies. Complete majority of Specific Aim 2b, usability testing with health coaches.

**Conferences/Symposia/Career Development:** Begin dissertation. Submit paper and attend *Association of Computing Machinery Conference on User Modeling, Adaptation, and Personalization 2025*.

#### **Year 3 (2026 Q3 – 2027Q3) Northeastern University**

**Breakdown:** Research 50%, Conferences/manuscript writing and submission/Career Development: 50%

**Research:** Conclude specific aim 2b, finishing user studies and analysis.

**Conferences/Symposia/Career Development:** Complete dissertation. Submit paper and attend *Association of Computing Machinery Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems 2026*. Apply for post-doctoral positions.

### **References**

- [1] V. S. Harder *et al.*, "Influence of Opioid Prescription Policy on Overdoses and Related Adverse Effects in a Primary Care Population," *J. Gen. Intern. Med.*, vol. 36, no. 7, pp. 2013–2020, Jul. 2021, doi: 10.1007/s11606-021-06831-4.
- [2] Diego Arguello, "Detecting and modifying daily inactivity among adults over 60 years using an integrated two-way communication-based near-real-time sensing system: A randomized clinical trial," presented at

the 8TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AMBULATORY MONITORING OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND MOVEMENT, Keystone, CO, USA, Keystone, CO, USA, Jun. 22, 2022. [Online]. Available: [https://ismpb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ICAMPAM-Program-2022\\_post-updates-1-1.pdf](https://ismpb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ICAMPAM-Program-2022_post-updates-1-1.pdf)

## **SPECIFIC AIMS**

Lack of physical activity (PA) contributes to preventable chronic illness among 51% of Americans [1]. Interventions like health coaching, that increase PA and general wellness, are potential solutions to reduce associated disease risk. Health coaching leverages the personal relationship between the coach and the client to establish goals, increase accountability, troubleshoot barriers, and celebrate achievements to motivate behavior change. But establishing this relationship and being responsive takes time and effort, limiting the scalability of health coaching. Human-in-the-loop artificial intelligence (AI) health coaching, where an AI health coach generates responses that are reviewed as needed by human health coaches prior to delivery, expands the reach of human health coaching to more clients by partially automating the generation of meaningful responses. Early health coach chatbots had limited ability to respond to **unexpected responses or parse personal information** from a client's responses, leading to rigid and unengaging dialog where personal details were lost or underutilized. This limited the chatbot's ability to reproduce the coach-client relationship, thus reducing its efficacy at promoting behavior change [2]. As AI has matured, new AI technologies better suited to natural dialog have emerged. Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT and LLaMA have demonstrated emergent capabilities in question answering, sentiment analysis, and text completion. These models produce sophisticated, meaningful, responses to open ended prompts and under the right conditions, appear convincingly human, making them excellent candidates for AI health coaching. However, LLMs are not without limitations. LLMs must be fine-tuned with training datasets to adapt them to specific tasks. Acquiring a health coaching dataset for model fine tuning is cited as a barrier to adoption of LLMs for health coaching applications [2, 3]. Through previous research my lab has amassed a 20k-message dataset between health coaches and 23 clients suitable for model fine tuning. Another major concerning limitation for health applications, is the propensity of LLMs to 'hallucinate' or generate non-factual statements. Using LLM-Augmenter that query external databases for up-to-date external knowledge and focus the scope of model's response, is a potential way to reduce hallucination and add factual information [4]. I hypothesize that combining an LLM fine-tuned with our health coaching message dataset with an LLM-Augmenter will create an AI model that accurately captures the quality and personalization of human health coaches. This model could then increase the productivity and reach of a health coach to several clients, while maintaining quality of the coaching. This work will address two scientific gaps: (i) determine the extent to which LLMs can be used to replicate the responses of a human health coaches, and (ii) explore how LLM-Augmenters can be applied to chat applications in the context of health-centric conversation.

**Aim 1A: Fine-tune an LLM and LLM-Augmenter to construct a model to deliver messages that emulate the personalized relationship of a health coach and client. 1B: Construct a system backend and user interface that enables health coaches to visualize and review AI generated responses for human-in-the-loop health coach messaging.** I will fine tune a LLaMA 2 model [5] using our existing tuning data set described earlier. To integrate external knowledge and reduce hallucination I will use the LLM-Augmenter framework [6, 7]. This framework layers additional LLMs which determine 1) what external information is needed to respond to user input, 2) retrieve that information from a curated database and, 3) provide that context with an appropriate prompt to the fine-tuned (on the 20k health coach message set) model for its final response to the user. This chained architecture has shown to mitigate hallucination in medical chatbots [7]. Resource intensive fine tuning will be done on our institution's high-performance cluster, and the model will be hosted on a local server. The user interface will be based on previous human-in-the-loop approaches and will use open-source frameworks for accelerated design and prototyping.

**Aim 2A: Evaluate the approach to determine the extent to which it replicates the experience of a human health coach. 2B: Conduct health coach usability testing (N=5).** Evaluation will be done with two methods: using BERTscore [8] to test the similarity of the human and AI health coaches' responses, and conducting a usability study and qualitative interviews with health coaches and the health coaching interface. Ten percent of our message set will be withheld from fine tuning for metric-based testing, specifically BERTscore [8]. BERTscore can capture the intent and meaning similarity between two text inputs, allowing us to compare the semantic similarity between a health coach message from our message set and the AI health coaching model's response when given the same conversation history. For Aim2B, five health coaches will be recruited to participate in user interface testing of the human-in-the-loop system. Qualitative data from surveys and interviews with these coaches will provide experiential guidance for future work.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY**

**1. Significance.** Less than a quarter of Americans get the minimum amount of PA laid out in the 2018 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Physical Activity Guidelines [9]. The failure to get enough daily PA contributes to the U.S.'s chronic disease burden, where over half of Americans suffer from one or more chronic illnesses [1].

**1.1. PA and chronic illness.** Daily PA is a method of prevention and treatment for many non-communicable chronic diseases [10–13]. PA can reduce risk of cancer [14, 15], cardiovascular disease [16], stroke [17], and diabetes [18]. There is clear evidence that daily moderate-to-vigorous PA decreases risk of chronic disease and that any intervention which decreases sedentary behavior benefits health outcomes [19, 20]. Therefore, interventions which increase any form of PA reduces risk for several chronic diseases. Daily PA can also act as a supplemental treatment for some mental health conditions [21], and chronic pain [22]. Unfortunately, the rate of chronic disease in the US is projected to continue increasing [23]. Thus, interventions that aim to prevent or slow the progression chronic illness outside of the context of expensive interventions delivered through the healthcare system are necessary to tackle this problem.

**1.2. Tailored health coaching as an effective intervention for chronic illness.** One such intervention is health coaching; an abstract term defining the practice of health coaches building relationships with clients to give knowledge, foster accountability, provide motivation, set goals, and realize achievements relating to client health. There are many approaches to health coaching, making generalization difficult, however, in aggregate, health coaching promotes PA [24, 25]. The efficacy of health coaching to promote behavior change is mediated by several factors: communication medium, theoretical approach, duration of coaching, and recruitment strategies [26]. In general, approaches which are tailored to individual needs, personal preferences, and outcomes of interest have greater likelihood of promoting PA [27]. Personalized health coaching can significantly increase PA [24, 25], and has the potential prevent and treat many forms of chronic illness. However current models of health coaching rely on the labor of health coaches – which is costly and has limited scalability. AI health coaching systems do exist, with some promising results [28–30], but are not technologically mature to replace health coaches. Key limitations include the lack of adequate health-focused training data to adapt complex models to health coaching applications [2, 28, 29, 31, 32] and the difficulty reproducing sophisticated conversational ability and thus, meaningful tailoring of health coaching interventions.

**2. Innovation.** *The core innovation of this project is the ability of the system to generate conversationally flexible and human-like responses, while simultaneously minimizing the LLM's propensity to generate non-factual information.* We achieve this by fine-tuning LLMs with health coaching conversations and implementing the LLM-Augmenter framework to incorporate external knowledge and reduce hallucination leading to personalized and effective health coaching PA interventions to participants' that can improve chronic PA-related illnesses. This approach addresses the current *barriers* to sophisticated conversational flexibility and humanness – lack of adequate fine-tuning data for LLMs, thus favoring use of constrained/rule-based systems with reduced flexibility, while simultaneously reducing the tendency of LLMs to hallucinate information. This innovation will confer greater ability to tailor coaching to individual needs and circumstances, thus addressing the deficiencies of previous systems that negatively impacted intervention efficacy.

**2.1. Difficulty of providing high quality tailored health coaching.** Tailored health coaching from a professional health coach takes time and effort to build client-coach relationships, provide consistent communication, and remain attentive to the client's changing needs. Health coaches cite basing responses on clients' lived experiences, rather than just behavioral information, as essential to successful health coaching [33, 34]. Centering client's lived experiences requires the ability to understand and formulate a response to a broad range of possible situations. As most chatbots are rule-based or scripted, their responses are more likely to place emphasis on behavioral information as they are unable to respond to a broad range of possible situations, to the detriment of the client experience. Rule-based and scripted systems are also likely to produce ridged and repetitive responses leading to client disengagement [33, 35]. Multiple systematic reviews on health focused chat bots and conversational agents [28, 31, 32] suggest that conversational flexibility and the ability to reply naturally to unconstrained input are crucial to a chatbot's ability to engage users and maintain engagement over longer periods of time. *These requirements mean that approaches to scale health coaching must retain its human-like focus on client experience and respond dynamically and accurately to any input if they are to provide equivalent coaching, and thus the possibility of equivalent behavior change.* Rule-based and constrained systems are easier to create and control relative to unconstrained systems; this and the need for large training datasets remain major barriers [2, 28] to adoption of newer and more sophisticated approaches to health chatbots such as LLMs. LLMs can better handle a wide range of inputs and provide more sophisticated responses. But these models require large training datasets that are difficult and expensive to obtain in health-

related applications like health coaching [2, 3, 35]. Additionally, the flexibility of these models can lead to delivery of incorrect information, deemed ‘hallucinations.’

## **2.2. Benefits of AI Health Coaching and a Path to Achieving a Scalable AI Health Coaching System.**

Despite their drawbacks, AI coaching systems have several inherent advantages over their human counterparts. As they do not fatigue, AI systems can consistently generate high quality responses, at any time, for many clients. They are capable of instantaneously extracting data from previous conversations and cannot mix-up details between clients. To build a system that addresses the insufficiencies of a lack of focus on client experience and inability to dynamically respond to any input while fully harnessing the speed and availability of computer systems, AI coaching systems must begin as human in the loop systems and evolve greater automation capabilities over time as they accumulate more conversation data. Our approach represents the first step in this path; a LLM combined with an LLM-Augmenter (to retrieve external data and limit hallucination) that will summarize previous conversation and provide LLM-generated responses for health coaches to edit and send. This approach scales the number of clients a single health coach can handle by providing a high-quality candidate response from the LLM combined with an LLM-Augmenter that the coach can edit as necessary and send. Coaches essentially become trainers, tweaking the LLM’s responses only when needed. These tweaks are then propagated back to the LLM to improve future responses through additional rounds of fine tuning.

**2.3. Summary.** Health coaching is an effective way to increase PA. AI health coaching has seen some success, but an overfocus on behavioral information rather than lived experience combined with ridged systems unable to respond to all inputs has limited their efficacy. New systems based on LLMs can address these insufficiencies but require large training datasets and systems to curb delivery of inaccurate information. Our system will harness the utility of LLMs by fine-tuning an open-source LLM with a dataset of previous conversations between health coaches and clients while using the LLM-Augmenter framework [4] to provide curate external knowledge and reduce hallucination. Our system will be designed to work alongside health coaches, providing candidate responses for coaches to edit if needed and send to clients. Health coaches’ edits to the system’s candidate responses will be used to further fine tune future versions of the system, ensuring improvement over time. This proposal is the start of my effort to automate health coaching, with the long-term goal of developing fully automated health coaching systems to increase PA and improve chronic disease.

**3. Approach.** This project proposes to build and evaluate a human-in-the-loop message-based AI health coaching chat system, Companion2. Companion2 integrates a fine-tuned LLM with an LLM-Augmenter framework to generate high-quality, tailored responses to clients for health coaches to edit and send; thereby increasing the scalability of human health coaching and reach of a single health coach. Evaluation will consist of, 1) a metric-based approach comparing the meaning similarity of AI generated health coaching responses to those from a reserved testing portion of our health coaching message set, and 2) usability testing and qualitative usability interviews with health coaches on the use of the human-in-the-loop messaging.

**3.1. Specific Aim 1a: Design and Implement Companion2.** Companion2 – named after the initial pilot project Companion that served as a data collection testbed to generate our health coaching training dataset and test health coaching approaches – will consist of an LLM embedded in an LLM-Augmenter framework.

**3.1.1. LLM’s Propensity to Hallucinate.** Unlike humans, which can pull specific pieces of information from their memory, LLMs produce responses using the predictive probabilities of words occurring together. With a large enough training dataset, these occurrence probabilities can produce responses with sophisticated meanings and create the perception of understanding. Today’s newest models are capable of high-quality responses, including recognition and recall of their chat partner’s personal details, out of the box. But to fully take advantage of their capabilities, LLMs should be fine-tuned to adapt their responses to a specific task. Fine tuning involves providing the model with examples of what it should do – in our case, 20k messages between human health coaches and their coaching participant. It can encode process information, and some knowledge; the equivalent of having only experience, but no formal knowledge on a subject. Fine tuning with a health coaching-focused dataset can encode how the LLM will respond to a health coaching message, the tone of the response, the style of feedback, and general information about health. It is the combination of an already capable model with fine-tuning using our health coach conversation dataset that will confer the traits of humanness and personalization to Companion2. Unfortunately, the same mechanisms that make LLMs flexible and dynamic also contribute to the propensity to hallucinate. When generating a response, the model is unable to determine the difference between synthesized information and learned information, leading to responses which are a composite of the training data. Thus, the more specific the information needed to answer a request, the more likely the model will hallucinate. The strength of these models is their ability to manipulate information and text – such as forming cohesive responses; extracting or summarizing information, sentiment, or tone; and transforming or editing text. If the LLM needs to produce specific information, such as how to respond to a specific type of knee injury, the AI

is likely to hallucinate information. Clearly in medical and health applications, LLM hallucination is unacceptable. However, there are design strategies, like the LLM-Augmenter framework, that can reduce hallucination.

**3.1.2. The LLM-Augmenter Framework as a Method to Incorporate Knowledge and Reduce Hallucination.** In abstract, the LLM-Augmenter framework detailed in Peng et al. 2023 [4] constrains the context of an LLM to only information from a curated source, thus integrating external knowledge into its responses while reducing hallucination. In a previous implementation, a system using an LLM-Augmenter eliminated hallucination in the models responses during a medical Q&A task [7]. The augmenter framework uses a system of linked text-to-text models (augmenter) to interface with a static LLM. It works in cycles – a requester submits a query (such as a client's response in a health coach/client conversation), the LLM-Augmenter attaches external knowledge to the query, asks the static model for a candidate response, and evaluates the candidate response. This cycle of appending evidence, gathering a candidate response, and evaluating the candidate response continues until a quality threshold is reached and the final response is submitted back to the requester. Peng et al. 2023 tested this framework on two scenarios - open-ended question answering and task-oriented dialog. In both scenarios the augmented system maintained fluency and informativeness of its responses while significantly reducing hallucination when compared to an unaugmented static LLM [6].

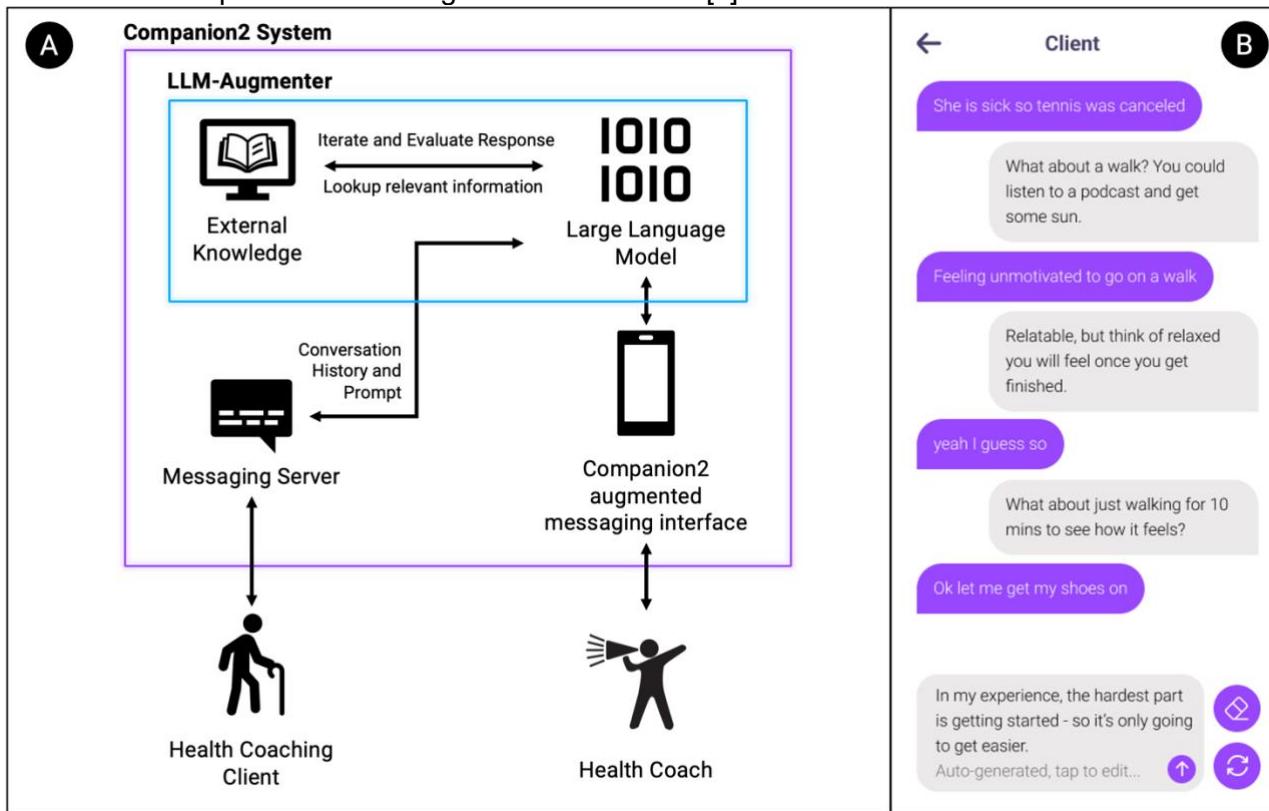


Figure 1a: Overview of the Companion2 system, 1b: Health coach messaging user interface mockup.

**3.1.3. Building Companion2 with the LLM-Augmenter framework.** The LLM-Augmenter framework links a static LLM with the augmenter – a set of specialized sub models, with access to a shared working memory database [4]. The LLM-Augmenter system has five components: the policy module, utility module, action executor module, the static LLM, and the working memory module. Each component performs a specific function.

- Queries from the coaching client are evaluated by the policy module, which can 1) direct the action executor to add external knowledge to the client input, 2) direct the action executor to generate a candidate response by submitting a request to the static LLM, or 3) release a response that has been favorably evaluated by the utility module to the overseeing health coach. The policy module and utility module are text2text neural networks that require adaptation via transfer learning to specific applications.
- The utility module provides common language feedback, which is integrated into the prompt used to generate the next candidate response. Feedback is based on the consistency with the evidence pulled from the knowledge retriever and the fluency of the response given the input; similar to Langchain's LLMCheckerChain, which asks the LLM to list assumptions made to answer a question, and if those assumptions are correct [36] in the context of the question. Each candidate response from the static LLM is evaluated by the utility module before being returned to the policy module.

- The **action executor** consists of an external knowledge retriever and a prompt engine. The external knowledge retriever uses an embeddings model with vector database, specifically the Sentence-BERT embeddings model [37] with Chroma database [38]. This set up will furnish documents most highly related to a query from a curated document store. Our document store will consist of documents related to 1) statistical information and health promotional materials, e.g., 2018 HHS Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2) activity related informational materials, 3) practice-based informational resources, e.g., the Open Textbook Library's Essentials of Exercise and Sport Psychology: Open Access Textbook, and 4) theoretical behavior change informational materials, e.g., Motivational Interviewing for Nutrition and Fitness [39]. These documents contain accurate external information that a health coach would use to respond to a client, such as benefits of PA, recommendations and guidelines for PA, knowledge of how to perform specific exercises, and scientific information about physical and mental processes relating to PA and behavior change. To eliminate health-related misinformation, these documents would be sourced from topic experts such as government organizations, national medical academies, regulatory organizations, and university programs. Once relevant external knowledge is obtained, the knowledge retriever summarizes the relevant evidence. The prompt engine combines the client input with the conversation history and, if either exist, any evidence generated by the knowledge retriever and any feedback from the utility module generated from the previous candidate response.
- The **static LLM** is a general purpose, instruction pre-trained LLM. Open-source models like Llama 2 can be further fine-tuned with an appropriate training dataset to cement basal characteristics of its responses, such as semantic tone of responses or reading level. I will use Meta's Llama 2's 13b parameter model [5] as its existing question answering capabilities will reduce the needed size of the fine-tuning dataset [40] and it has a large context length. Llama 2 will be further fine-tuned with 20k messages collected from the original Companion project between health coaches and coaching participants [41]. The size of this dataset is roughly similar to those used in fine-tuning of other chat focused LLMs [42, 43]. This will confer the health coach's tone, general knowledge, coaching approach, and other messaging characteristics to Llama 2.
- The **working memory module** stores conversation history, previous inputs, every candidate's response with utility module feedback and metric scores, and diagnostic information about model performance. The working memory module is accessible from all other modules.

Together, these modules start with an input and iterate through candidate responses, combining external knowledge and feedback to generate the next response. When a response passes a final quality threshold as determined by the utility module's score, that response is passed back to the health coach. This iteration and feedback cycle minimizes hallucination while preserving the fluency and relevance of the response [6]. Since each module performs a specific function, each can be updated and tested separately. This method confers greater troubleshooting flexibility as it isolates components of the response. If conversations are lacking in external knowledge, more documents can be added to the external knowledge cache, or models with different embeddings can be tested. As newer LLMs are released, I can swap static LLMs to evaluate differences in performance and response quality.

**3.1.4. Challenges Implementing the LLM-Augmenter Framework.** This approach is not without its challenges, specifically the implementation of the text2text models, which power the utility and policy modules. Peng et al. 2023 used a pretrained T5 model from Google [44] with language model-simulated conversations from If-Then statements generated by domain experts for the specific application (e.g., customer service chatbot). Use of transfer learning with the pretrained T5 model drastically reduces the size training dataset needed to adapt T5 as the policy module but it takes trial and error to develop a comprehensive model. Another possible approach would be to use the same static LLM with a chain-of-thought prompting system – a system that uses prompts to walk the model through intermediate steps of reasoning - such as LangChain. Use of chain-of-thought has been shown to elicit reasoning and self-correction in LLMs [45]. I plan to try both approaches (Peng et al. 2003 and Langchain) and test each to determine which to continue using. Implementation of the policy and utility modules will be the major challenges of specific aim 1a. Another concern is the ethical implication of using health coach-client conversations from Companion to train Companion2. The initial Companion study obtained informed consent from study participants to collect their conversations to improve future interventions. Conversations have already been deidentified – names of study participants replaced with identifiers. This, combined with the fact that Llama 2 is trained on billions of documents from across the internet, will obfuscate any information that could be used to reverse identify the original subjects.

**3.1.5. Specific Aim 1b: Implementation of a Backend and UI to Access Companion2.** Health coaches message participants over a variety of media such as WhatsApp, Signal, or SMS. Coaches can review conversation histories, message multiple participants, and access their messages from a variety of applications and devices. These systems require a front-end user interface and a back-end system to process requests made

to Companion2 and store data. In addition, a fully functional system requires a messaging provider to receive and send messages and a database to store information. (See figure 1A.) Technological development of these components over the past 20 years has led to an abundance of easy to implement templates and low-cost messaging services. As this project will only require a few users, our laboratory computer can be the backed and UI server. Web-based frameworks like React will be used to create a messaging UI that is web accessible from any device, while the backend will run on Python's Django framework. Database functionality will be MySQL and messaging with the participant will be done with Telegram's Bot API. For the scale of this project, all these components and services are free, and can be configured to use end-to-end encryption.

**3.1.6. Description of UI to Access Companion2.** The primary focus of aim 1b is the development of a messaging UI for health coaches that supplies them with candidate responses. All health coaches have prior experience with messaging applications. Most messaging applications look relatively similar; messages stacked in ascending order by time of receipt, with the users' messages on the right and a response box at the bottom of the screen. The goal of the system UI is to integrate the candidate responses in the least intrusive manner as possible – thus minimizing disruption of health coaches' pre-existing affordances relating to messaging apps. Minimizing the difference between existing messaging applications will minimize the learning curve of the user interface. To achieve this and encourage the health coach to engage with the candidate message, the candidate response will be auto filled into the response box. If a coach is actively typing or editing a response as a new message arrives, the system does not override their work. Two buttons relating to the candidate response will always be available to the health coach – “clear” (to clear the response box) and “regenerate” (resubmit conversation history to Companion2 and regenerate candidate response.) (See figure 1b)

**3.2. Specific Aim 2: Evaluation of Companion2.** The evaluation scope of this project is confined to the quality of responses yielded by Companion2 and the basic user experience of the health coaching client. Per AbdAlrazaq et al. 2020 [46], a systematic review of technical metrics used to evaluate health chatbots, evaluation of a system's classifier performance with metrics such as AUC or F1, that empirically assess response quality compared to ground truth responses, can establish health chatbot functionality. Only after functionality is established can self-reported measures of usability and social engagement meaningfully describe a health chatbot's performance with users, and only after a system is found to be functional, engaging, and useable by coaching clients can researchers begin to ask the question of its behavior change efficacy. The scope of this project to evaluate the quality of Companion2's responses, not Companion2's ability to engage users, efficacy at producing behavior change, or ability to increase health coach productivity. Evaluation will be done with response quality metrics (BERTscore between Companion2 and reserved test messages, BERTscore between candidate responses and health coach edited responses), performance metrics (time to generate response for health coach, proportion of messages needing alteration, etc.), user experience interviews with health coaches. Insights gained from the initial evaluation will be used to improve Companion2 for future efficacy and usability testing; to determine if Companion2 can engage users beyond casual interest and increase PA.

**3.2.1. Comparison-Based Evaluation of Health Coach Candidate Responses Using Reserved Test Conversations.** There are many ways to measure the performance of a health chatbot; one survey of found 26 different metrics used to measure performance of research health chatbot systems [47]. I plan to compare the sentiment and similarity of human and chatbot responses to the same input. To accomplish this, around 5% (~1000 messages, or ~150 conversation histories 5-10 messages long) of the health coach-client conversation dataset will be randomly selected and reserved as test data. Conversation histories will be submitted as input to Companion2, which will generate a response message. Companion2's response can then be compared to the actual human health coach's response. No two messages will ever likely be the same, even if the AI generated message is from an LLM trained on the health coach's conversation; and nor should they be, as there are many valid ways to convey the same information and response diversity promotes engagement. However, the fluency of the response, the consistency with the previous conversation, and the sentiment of the response should be similar. With so many possible metrics, the resulting lack of standardization complicates comparison between systems [46], therefore our goal is to use metrics, which are shared among other similar implementations. BERTscore [8] compares the meaning similarity between two texts. It is often used to evaluate translation algorithms, as meaning similarity is more important for language translation than word similarity. BERTscore will compare the meaning similarity between the health coach's message and Companion2's response to the same conversation history. The meaning similarity (BERTscore) between Companion2 and health coach responses' is arbitrary unless it can be compared to a control conditions. Therefore, I will also test the meaning similarity (BERTscore) of the static fine-tuned Llama 2 model (equivalent to just Companion2's static LLM fine-tuned on health coach conversations, without the LLM-Augmenter), and the off-the-shelf Llama 2 model. By comparing the BERTscores of each of these models (Comapnion2, conversation fine-tuned LLM, base LLM) when

attempting to replicate a human health coach's response to a conversation history, I will isolate the performance improvements conferred by each component of Companion2. I hypothesize that average BERTscore of Companion2's responses will be higher than that of either the fine-tuned LLM or base LLM.

**3.2.2. Human Evaluation and Qualitative Usability Study.** Aside from automated metrics, human evaluation of Companion2 will consist of a health coach user experience interview (n=5). *The purpose of this study is to evaluate the usability of the human-in-the-loop UI and gather feedback for future improvement. The goals of this user study are to 1) deploy and test a beta version of Companion2 with actual health coaches and simulated participants, 2) conduct usability testing on health coaches to evaluate the ease of use and utility of the UI.*

Importantly, this user study is not a clinical trial, and will not have experimental groups or measure behavior change; future work will evaluate Companion2's ability to elicit behavior change. Five health coaches with backgrounds in motivational interviewing and self-determination theory be recruited from Northeastern University's exercise physiology community – to which we have existing professional connections. After consent, health will use the human-in-the-loop Companion2 UI in 3 mock scenarios designed to emulate common health coach conversation: goal setting, assistance overcoming barrier, and celebrating accomplishments. At the culmination of the study, health coaches will be interviewed and compensated for their participation with a \$20 gift card. The interview will touch on usability (ease of use, barriers to usage, etc.), quality of responses (characteristics of response, quality of the health coach edited responses, fluency of the conversation), and general wants and recommendations based on their use of Companion2. This research will be conducted with approval from Northeastern University's IRB.

**3.2.3. Other System Performance Evaluation.** Quality of responses and usability are not the only factors that govern Companion2's performance. The LLM-Augmenter framework requires active models. These models, especially LLMs, require computing resources and time to generate responses. As time to generate a candidate response directly impacts the experience, it is important to measure response time, especially under the load of multiple simultaneous participants. Besides time to generate a candidate response, I will measure memory usage and number of LLM-Augmenter cycles needed to generate candidate response. Together, these measurements will create a performance baseline for future iterations of Companion2 for comparison.

**3.3. Future Directions.** The scope of this project is limited to the creation and initial evaluation of Companion2; future work will focus on usability and efficacy testing to determine if it can increase daily PA and health coach productivity. Future technical changes to Companion2 will include expansion of its automation, such as automation of routine responses, like social conversation and basic question asking. Using policy rules implemented in the policy module, the system will be able to determine what messages need to be elevated for human health coach for review. Additionally, our future system will include integration of real time PA data from wearables to better inform health coaching and provide just-in-time responses.

#### **3.4. Summary of Specific Aim 1: the Design and Implementation of Companion2.**

- Fine-tune a Llama 2 LLM with previously collected messages between health coaches and clients.
- Implement LLM-Augmenter framework. Experiment with text-to-text models and chain-of-thought for utility and policy modules to determine method that yields responses closest to human health coach responses. Integrate external knowledge with curated document store to assist the LLM in providing fact-based responses.
- Build a UI that minimally integrates Companion2's candidate responses into a messaging application.
- Construct a back-end system using open-source frameworks to support messaging and response generation.

#### **3.5. Summary of Specific Aim 2: the Evaluation of the LLM-Augmenter-based Approach:**

- Use BERTscore to determine semantic similarity between AI-generated responses and the gold standard human health coach responses from reserved test conversations.
- Compare BERTscores between Companion2, just the fine-tuned LLM, and the base LLM. Differences in BERTscore will reveal the contribution of each component (LLM-Augmenter, Fine-tuning) to the similarity of the final response to a response from a human health coach.
- Conduct usability testing with health coaches and the Companion2 messaging interface with mock scenarios and qualitative interviews to determine usability, subjective quality of responses, and recommendations of the health coaches.
- Collect system performance metrics such as response time, memory usage, and the number of cycles needed for future improvements to system efficiency.
- Future evaluation of Companion2 will focus on productivity and efficacy testing.

## **Respective Contributions**

### **Prior Work**

This project is based on prior work and data from the Companion project conducted by Dr. John (primary sponsor and advisor), Dr. Arguello (referee), and me. Dr. Intille (sponsor) participated in the design of Companion and provided technical support. The Companion project explored the impact of real-time activity-aware health coaching on the sedentary behavior of older adults. The text conversations generated from Companion form the basis of the fine-tuning dataset for this project.

### **Conceiving the Project**

This project is the logical next step to Companion and was born from discussions with two of my sponsors – Drs. John and Intille. During Companion, we recognized the utility that partial automation of responses could bring to the productivity of individual health coaches. We also recognized the advances in language models combined with our amassed dataset of health coach-client messages could address the barriers of previous AI health coaching systems. Although I did not have much experience with language models, I was interested in pursuing this work for my dissertation. Dr. Intille introduced me to Dr. Wang, who was integral to the technical development of the AI system design. With their guidance and feedback, I designed the aims for this project and the research strategy.

### **Executing the Project**

I will conduct and manage all aspects of the project. During the project, I will be co-mentored by Drs. John, Intille, and Wang. Dr. John will primarily oversee my research. For Specific Aims 1a and 1b, Dr. Wang will provide feedback and guidance on the development of the AI model and the backend system. Drs. John and Intille will provide feedback and guidance on the evaluation of the model (specific aims 2a and 2b). Dr. John will assist with the recruitment of health coaches from previous work. All sponsors will assist and provide feedback on the dissemination of my work. I plan to meet with my primary sponsor and advisor, Dr. John, weekly to retrospectively examine my progress and modify tasks for the following week, as necessary. I will meet with Dr. Intille and Dr. Wang monthly during the completion of the specific aims. The high frequency of contact with my sponsor and co-sponsors will ensure constant feedback and monitoring of my progress towards achieving the objectives of my research project and enable necessary modifications to improve my project.

### **Selection of Sponsor and Institution**

I applied to Northeastern University's doctoral program in Personal Health Informatics because of its interdisciplinary focus on health and computing. The equal emphasis placed on understanding the causes and systems that affect one's health and the experience using computing tools that can measure and intervene in health-related problems was appealing as I have a formal background in biology and many years of experience programming. Furthermore, the experience of being a graduate student at Northeastern University is best described by a fellow student I interviewed with during the admissions process. He described his doctorate at Northeastern as "a professional experience" rather than schooling, and that he was a respected contributor whose opinion was taken seriously by his advisor and colleagues. Three years into my PhD in Personal Health Informatics, studying under the same advisor and my sponsor for this project, **Dr. Dinesh John**, my experience has been consistent. Dr. John is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Northeastern University. When I joined Dr. John's lab, I immediately began work on an ongoing NIH-funded clinical trial studying the efficacy of activity-aware health coaching on sedentary behavior of older adults. I worked closely with Dr. John on this project and have enjoyed Dr. John's approach in training graduate students. He has given me structured autonomy to experiment with new solutions to issues we had with computation of activity classifications from accelerometry data, follow my scientific intuition, and determine what classes I needed to take to strategically advance my knowledge base to enhance my research capabilities. Dr. John's guidance on when to focus on the bigger picture, how to become a better writer, and how I should disseminate my work to build my career has resulted in me co-authoring a manuscript in *Sensors*, and presenting a poster at the *International Conference on Ambulatory Monitoring of Physical Activity and Movement*.

Northeastern University's research is centered on practical, experience-driven exploration; fostering scientific breakthroughs that directly address pertinent societal challenges, particularly in the fields of health and computing. I believe that Northeastern University's environment of collaboration led to the circumstances by which I came to know my two co-sponsors, Dr. Stephen Intille and Dr. Dakuo Wang. I met **Dr. Stephen Intille**, a Professor with a joint appointment in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and Bouvé College of Health Sciences, and the director of the Northeastern University mHealth lab, while I was working on the Companion project - an NIH funded clinical trial on the effect of activity aware personalized health coaching on sedentary older adults. As much of Dr. Intille's work involves using machine learning to understand and quantify health-related behavior to effect positive health outcomes, he was directly involved in the planning and ideation of Companion; providing the algorithms we used to classify behavior from wrist-worn accelerometers. A quality about Dr. Intille that stood out to me was his emphasis on 'practical' and intuitive solutions, and his focus on the process of iterative design and evaluation that is needed to identify and create those solutions. Dr. Intille has a history of such initiatives funded by the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Most recently his work on the Temporal Effects on Movement and Exercise (TIME) study used micro-ecological momentary assessment and smartphone-based sensor monitoring to better understand individual variation of activity with the goal of building more predictive theories of health behavior. He has been an involved member of my doctoral studies since I matriculated and will continue to support my work as I progress through the program.

**Dr. Dakuo Wang** is an Associate Professor jointly appointed in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and the College of Arts, Media, and Design. I had the privilege of working with him and one of his students over the summer on a project examining how smart-speaker based voice assistants can facilitate information sharing between patients and their clinical care team. Dr. Wang's welcoming and collaborative spirit, and our shared interest in leveraging large language models to solve health-related problems have sparked engaging discussions and helped me understand the complexities of this project. Our collaboration so far has showcased his commitment to teamwork and the mutual benefit of our professional relationship. I look forward to working with him more closely.

The guidance, training, and resources available from my sponsors - Dr. Dinesh John, Dr. Stephen Intille, and Dr. Dakuo Wang - as well as the collaborative environment of Northeastern University's research community, have been critical to my success in my program thus far, and will drive the success of this project, my scientific training, and future career.

## **Responsible Conduct of Research**

My formal training in Responsible Conduct of Research will be supplemented with informal instruction through mentoring by my co-sponsors during my doctoral training at Northeastern University. Northeastern University is committed to professional practices of scholarly and research integrity that promote and provide instruction in Responsible Conduct of Research for all faculty, students, and staff.

I completed the *Human Subjects Research for Social Behavioral Scientists Refresher Course* offered by the Collaborative Instructional Training Initiative in August 2023. Completion of these courses is required by Northeastern University prior to engaging in human subjects research. The following modules were completed as part of the *Human Subjects Research for Social Behavioral Scientists Refresher Course* include:

Refresher Course 1 – History and Ethical Principles

Refresher Course 1 – Informed Consent

Refresher Course 1 – Defining Research with Human Subjects

Refresher Course 1 – The Federal Regulations

Refresher Course 1 – Assessing Risk

Refresher Course 1 – Informed Consent

Refresher Course 1 – Privacy and Confidentiality

Refresher Course 1 – Unanticipated Problems and Reporting Requirements in Social and Behavioral Research

I will continue to engage in refresher courses on Responsible Conduct of Research, as necessary. In addition, my training in Responsible Conduct of Research will continue with informal instruction throughout my doctoral education. I will engage in informal instruction with my advisor (Dr. Dinesh John) every week and with co-sponsors (Dr. Stephen Intille and Dr. Dakuo Wang) monthly. In addition to discussion of project progress, we will discuss various issues pertaining to data collection, management, and storage. My sponsor and co-sponsors have extensive training in the ethical conduct of research. I also plan to attend regularly scheduled research ethics seminars offered by the Northeastern University Office of Research and Finance.

As part of the PhD program, I completed CS6350, Graduate Empirical Research Methods Course in the spring of 2022. This in person, four-credit course covered many topics relating to responsible conduct of research, specifically: how to properly analyze experimental data; how to avoid scientific misconduct; ethics of human experimentation; informed consent; the reasons and processes whereby research institutions comply with governmental regulation, including human subject; and the history and development of scientific ethics.

## Section II -- Sponsor and Co-Sponsor Information.

### **1. Research Support Available**

Dr. Dinesh John

Funding Source/ID Number	PI/PD Name, Project Title	Start Date – End Date projected	Amount

Dr. Stephen Intille

Funding Source/ID Number	PI/PD Name, Project Title	Start Date – End Date projected	Amount

Dr. Dakuo Wang

Funding Source/ID Number	PI/PD Name, Project Title	Start Date – End Date (projected)	Amount

### **2. Sponsor's/Co-Sponsor's Previous Fellows/Trainees**

Dr. Dinesh John: Over the past several years at Northeastern University, Dr. John has been the primary advisor and/or mentor to several masters and doctoral students. He is currently mentoring two Doctoral students and his previous students have assumed professional positions in various clinical and research settings and a sample of students and their current affiliations are listed below:

Training period	Name	Description
2021-current	Hoan Tran	Doctoral student in Personal Health Informatics at Northeastern University. Mr. Tran is currently working on Dr. John's NIH funded project that is

		gathering a novel data set on 24-hour behavior to develop novel algorithms to predict various aspects of waking and sleep behavior.
2021-current	Ethan Rogers (applicant)	Doctoral student in Personal Health Informatics at Northeastern University. Mr. Rogers is currently wrapping up data analyses on a recently conducted NIH funded clinical trial on which, he developed various technology solutions that were deployed over the 2-year project. While continuing to work on data analyses from this project, he is currently supported via a teaching assistantship, which is part of the training plan for PhD students in the personal health informatics program. Commencing Fall 2024 till the completion of his PhD, he will be supported by a graduate research assistantship that is available to Dr. John, which is made possible by the University to support promising students conducting research on Health AI.
2015-2022	Diego Arguello	Dr. Arguello received a PhD in Population Health Science from Northeastern University and was mentored by Dr John during his PhD. Dr Arguello is currently an Associate Director and Clinical Development Scientist at Alexion Pharmaceuticals in Boston, MA.
2019-2021	Elise Ackermans	Ms. Ackermans received an MS in Exercise Science from Northeastern University and was mentored by Dr John. She is currently employed as a full-time Exercise Physiologist at Boston Children's Hospital in Outpatient Cardiology. In her role, she conducts cardiac stress tests for adult and pediatric patients with congenital heart disease as well as working with patients in the BCH Cardiac Fitness program.
2016-2018	Alvin Morton	Dr. Morton completed an MS degree and thesis under the mentorship of Dr. John and later completed a PhD from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He currently an Assistant Professor at Merrimac College.

Dr. Dakuo Wang: Dr. Wang currently advises two doctoral students and has mentored a third student who completed their doctoral program in 2022. A sample of his advises students and their current affiliations is below.

2023-current	Yuxuan Lu	Doctoral student in Computer Science at Northeastern University. Mr. Lu is currently working on Dr. Dakuo Wang's NIH funded project that is developing novel LLM-based algorithms and systems to support patient-provider communication to achieve better post-surgery recovery outcome.
2020-current	Bingsheng Arthur Yao	Doctoral student in Computer Science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Mr. Yao is mentored by Dr. Dakuo Wang since the beginning of his PhD. And he is currently working on Dr. Dakuo Wang's NSF-funded project that is developing novel LLM-based algorithms and systems for K-12 education scenarios.
2020-2022	April Yi Wang	Dr. Wang received a PhD in Computer Science from University of Michigan and was mentored by Dr. Dakuo Wang during her PhD. Dr Wang is currently an Assistant Professor at ETH Zurich in Switzerland.

Dr. Stephen Intille: Dr. Intille is currently advising seven doctoral students. At Northeastern he has been primary advisor for two doctoral students who completed their degrees. At MIT, he was primary advisor to one student who received a PhD and two postdoctoral researchers and several students in a research-based MS program. A sample of Northeastern students and their current affiliations are listed below.

2021-	Tinashe Tapera	Doctoral student in Personal Health Informatics at Northeastern University. Co-advised with Prof. Varun Mishra.
2019-	Rithika Lakshminarayanan	Doctoral student in Personal Health Informatics at Northeastern University.
2016-	Binod Thapa Chhetry	Doctoral student in Personal Health Informatics at Northeastern University.
2014-2021	Aditya Ponnada	Received PhD in Personal Health Informatics from Northeastern University. Currently Research Scientist in the Human in the AI lab at Spotify Research.

2014-2021	Qu Tang	Received PhD in Personal Health Informatics from Northeastern University. Currently Senior Research Scientist at Zepp Health, Shanghai, China.
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### 3. Training Plan, Environment, Research Facilities

Mr. Rogers' training plan was developed collaboratively by his sponsor, co-sponsors, and the applicant. Mr. Rogers' short term goals from the project include (i) building an AI system using large language models (LLMs), LLM-augmenter framework, and previous conversations between health coaches and clients that produces high-quality candidate responses for health coaches, and (ii) building a user interface and backend system that integrates candidate responses into a messaging system used by health coaches to message clients, and (iii) evaluating the quality of the candidate responses and usability of the health coaching user interface. These were carefully developed and integrated into the application and training plan so that the short-term goals serve as the foundation to achieve Mr. Rogers' long-term goal of becoming a leader in multidisciplinary team-science aimed at developing and delivering effective, stratified, and personalized intervention strategies to prevent/improve chronic health conditions. A major gap in the delivery of health interventions that harness the one-on-one personal support paradigm is scalability, which allows an interventionist to simultaneously provide individual attention/care/support to multiple individuals in need. In this application, Mr. Rogers aims to leverage and integrate cutting edge innovations in AI (i.e., LLMs) with proven behavior change theory to develop an intervention approach that can be deployed using digital technologies to several individuals, while maintaining the perception of personalized attention. This application will operationalize a necessary and key initial step when leveraging an LLM-based intervention strategy to address the unsolved problem of scaling personalized real- to near-real time digital health interventions. Each sponsor was purposefully chosen to provide Mr. Rogers with comprehensive knowledge and rigorous training in the domains of preventive health, behavior health informatics, ubiquitous computing, and human-centered AI systems. Mr. Rogers will continue to leverage the curriculum of the Personal Health Informatics Program at Northeastern University to gain multidisciplinary foundational knowledge required to develop digital technologies for preventive health, and to gain exposure to expertise in theoretical and technical knowledge necessary to develop digital health solutions through seminar experiences. Potential seminars that Mr. Rogers will attend include the Personal Health Informatics seminar (monthly) and the seminar series hosted by Northeastern University's Institute for Experiential AI (fortnightly). These seminars involve invited interactive presentations from renowned experts in digital health, AI, and behavioral science, and are open to the Northeastern University community. The PHI program and other opportunities at Northeastern University enables Mr. Rogers to be part of a diverse and collaborative group of faculty and students conducting various kinds of health informatics and digital health research, which allows him to incorporate fresh perspectives in his research.

Achieving training milestones and project goals: As part of his training plan, Mr. Rogers will meet with his advisor (Dr. John) weekly and co-sponsors on a bi-weekly basis one-on-one, and in a separate team meeting that will be held once a month. The goal of these meetings is to ensure that the necessary progress in achieving training objectives and project goals is achieved in a timely manner. These meetings will allow Mr. Rogers to discuss both broad learning goals and specific details of the project, discuss issues and troubleshoot them collaboratively, and discuss optimal avenues to disseminate research output. Currently, Mr. Rogers meets with Dr. John on a 1-on-1 basis each week. Currently, he interacts with Drs. Intille and Wang as required; for example, he has presented in Dr Intille's summer lab retreat and has assisted Dr. Wang in recruiting and study design for a project investigating the potential for LLMs to facilitate asynchronous provider-patient communication.

Research dissemination, networking, other training: Mr. Rogers is committed to a comprehensive approach to his professional development that includes rigorous training in addition to academic coursework. The research proposed here will help him develop advanced skills in integrating artificial intelligence, digital health, and prevention research to yield solutions that are meaningful in preventing chronic disease. The project will enable him to develop research communication and dissemination skills, and it will create opportunities to develop a network of collaborations that will be instrumental in furthering his research agenda and career. Mr. Rogers is already experienced in presenting at international scientific conferences (e.g., ICAMPAM- see biosketch), and

has co-authored and authored papers that are published or soon to be under review (see biosketch). This project will allow him to actively seek new opportunities and avenues to present his work and establish himself as a promising researcher in the field of health informatics. He has already identified the Association of Computing Machinery's *User Modeling, Adaptation, and Personalization (UMAP)* and *Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI)* as conferences to present his ongoing work, as well as *Journal of Measurement of Physical Behavior* and *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* as possible journals for his research.

In addition, Mr. Rogers will assist with the data analyses of my (Dr. John) ongoing and completed studies to gain experience in analyzing high-dimensional mHealth data, including data management strategies, coding, and conceptualizing statistical models for analysis. To gain comprehensive experience on top of his existing coursework in facilitating health behavior change, Mr. Rogers will complete the Certification in Intensive Motivational Interviewing at University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Such course work and certification will provide Mr. Rogers with a strong understanding of the principals and practices of motivational interviewing and self-determination theory, and the knowledge necessary to integrate these behavior change techniques into his work with AI.

The training program proposed here will build on Mr. Rogers' ongoing training in personal health informatics and public health and his previous experience assisting with multiple acceptability/feasibility and efficacy trials targeting mechanisms of health behavior change (e.g., smoking cessation). With the completion of his Ph.D., Mr. Rogers intends to obtain a post-doctoral position during which he can further develop his research that will allow him to customize the research output generated from the current application and establish its technical and translational merit through well designed efficacy trials. Mr. Rogers has a clear academic/career objective that is supported by a high research acumen. As his sponsor and advisor, I and his co-sponsors aim to harness this potential via the opportunities that the award will present to Mr. Rogers and help him to transition to a career as a successful independent researcher.

Sponsor (Dr Dinesh John): Dr. John is an associate professor in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences. He is the primary mentor of Mr. Rogers and sponsor of this application. He will oversee Mr. Roger's management of the project, guide Mr. Rogers in planning, organizing, and prioritizing various tasks and components of his training, academic responsibilities, and activities to periodically disseminate research findings that will be generated during this project. Dr. John is appropriate to fulfill this role as the primary mentor to Mr. Rogers because he is a recognized expert in the field of exercise science and has extensive experience in developing and applying digital health and technology-based interventions to measure and modify physical activity and sedentary behaviors. Dr. John has served as the Program Director for the MS in Exercise Science Program, is a core faculty of the PhD in Health Informatics program at Northeastern University, and has mentored several Masters and PhD students during his 11 years as a faculty member at Northeastern University. His lab currently consists of two PhD students, two full-time undergraduate co-op students, and two undergraduate interns. Dr. John has also detailed at the National Institute on Aging (2022-2023) and conducted a portfolio analysis that is enabling the Institute to develop new initiatives in the field of digital health for aging. The experiences have enabled Dr. John to develop a tailored approach to mentoring and training individual students while ensuring broad goals of the program and student are achieved in a timely manner.

Co-sponsor 1 (Dr. Stephen Intille): Dr. Intille is a jointly appointed professor in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and the Bouvé College of Health Sciences. He will co-mentor Mr. Rogers, providing guidance on the design, development, and evaluation of mobile health applications that support health behavior change and maintenance, especially using advanced AI and sensing. Dr. Intille has over 15 years of experience in the measurement of behavior and the use of real-time behavior measurement from mobile devices to explore new just-in-time adaptive interventions. Dr. Intille is the Program Director for the Personal Health Informatics Doctoral Program and the Area Chair for Human-Centered Computing in Khoury College. He has ongoing NIH-funded projects that focus on the longitudinal measurement of physical activity, sedentary behavior, and sleep, and on real-time interventions that use mobile sensor data to support behavior change. He currently advises five doctoral students and co-advises two additional doctoral students, each of whom works on projects that involve use of mobile sensing technology to understand and respond to behavior. Dr. Intille also collaborates closely with Dr. John on a major project designed to collect data to permit the evaluation of new algorithms for

accurate detection of physical activities, sedentary behaviors, and sleep, and he has multiple students current working on the use of AI, such as deep neural networks and large-language models, for modeling behavior. Mr. Rogers will be encouraged to interact with and learn from Dr. Intille's students and to participate in group and project meetings to advance his learning.

Co-sponsor 2 (Dr. Dakuo Wang): Dr. Wang is jointly appointed associate professor in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and the College of Arts, Media, and Design. He will co-mentor Mr. Rogers, advising and providing guidance on the design, fine-tuning, and evaluation of the language models being used in this project. As a former principal investigator at the MIT-IBM Watson AI Lab, Dr. Wang has extensive experience with human centered computing and AI. His research focuses on the challenge of transitioning health-focused AI technologies from labs to real-world clinical settings, patient perspectives on AI systems in clinical settings, and how AI systems can enhance and engage patients outside of the clinical settings. Dr. Wang currently advises 2 students. Mr. Rogers has experience working collaboratively with Dr. Wang's students and is encouraged to share and present his work with them to practice his scientific communication skills and gain feedback from his peers.

#### **4. Number of Fellows/Trainees to be Supervised During the Fellowship:**

Dr. Dinesh John: Dr. John is currently the primary mentor for 2 PhD in health Informatics students at Northeastern University, Mr. Ethan Rogers (applicant), and Mr. Hoan Duc Tran (anticipated graduation, 2026). Along with Mr. Rogers, Dr. John will continue to mentor Mr. Duc Tran during the Fellowship. Additionally, Dr. John plans to enroll an additional PhD. student under his mentorship in the fall of 2025.

Dr. Stephen Intille: Dr. Intille is currently the primary mentor for five doctoral students at Northeastern University and co-mentor for two additional doctoral students. One will graduate in 2024, and he is likely to accept one new doctoral student to enter in September of 2024.

Dr. Dakuo Wang: Dr. Wang is currently the primary mentor for two doctoral students at Northeastern University and co-mentor for two additional doctoral students. One will graduate in 2024, and he is likely to accept two new doctoral student and one postdoc to enter in September of 2024.

#### **5. Applicant's Qualifications and Potential for a Research Career.**

Mr. Rogers has demonstrated the potential to become an exceptional independent investigator. In his time as a student in the Personal Health Informatics Program at Northeastern University, he has shown initiative, dedication, and a high level of teamwork. He has gained experience on multiple research teams:

- A project on development of technology solutions for a clinical trial aimed at reducing sedentary behavior in older adults where he assisted in data collection, analysis, and dissemination.
- A project developing tools that use existing heart monitoring technologies for real time monitoring of participants engaged in virtual exercise classes where he designed and constructed a prototype system.
- A project conducting evidence synthesis exploring the possibility of using wearable technologies to classify cognitive engagement, as part of a broader system to classify Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias.
- A project exploring the use of smart speakers to facilitate asynchronous communication between patients and clinicians where he assisted in development and recruitment.

Prior to his doctoral studies, Mr. Rogers developed strong methodological experience through his work on a team testing behavior change interventions targeting smoking cessation resulting in three peer-reviewed publications. In my role as his mentor over the past two years, I have found that Mr. Rogers possesses a high capacity to independently take on multiple and complex responsibilities. For example, in his first year he completed his academic course requirements earning A's well while fulfilling his responsibilities on my research team managing and analyzing data for our ongoing clinical trial, presenting his work at an international conference, and developing a manuscript for publication. The latter outlines an open-source pipeline to receive and process 24-hour sensor data for real/near-real-time physical activity interventions. Mr. Rogers demonstrates a curiosity, passion, and dedication to this work that enhances our lab's dynamic, and he has become a critical part of our research team. He is always bringing up new questions regarding methodology, demonstrates a high capacity to understand and apply knowledge, and is driven to investigate issues and problem-solve innovatively. Without reservation, I believe that Mr. Rogers' work has been instrumental in the success of his lab's recently completed clinical trial in older adults, which is the basis for the

current application. Mr. Rogers is currently working on two research questions utilizing the data generated in this clinical trial: (i) using mixed effects models to better characterize the effect and variation of health coaching on types of non-sedentary activity, and (ii) investigating the temporal relationship between just-in-time messaging during activity aware health coaching and client participation in non-sedentary activity.

Mr. Rogers is on track to complete all course requirements and qualifying exam components of his doctoral program by early summer 2024, which will allow him to concentrate on the research portion of his training for the remainder of his program. His coursework and research responsibilities, along with the training proposed under this award, will enable Mr. Rogers to gain the research experience and expertise, and develop the professional network required to develop evidence-based AI/digital health technology solutions to alleviate the increasing burden of chronic disease attributable to reduced physical activity.

Mr. Rogers has the attributes to become a successful independent investigator; he demonstrates a strong attention to detail, an ability to collaborate across multiple research teams, dedication, and curiosity, and he has a focused and potentially high-impact research agenda. While Mr. Rogers is fully capable of becoming an independent investigator designing, studying, and implementing digital health technologies as integrative components of intervention aimed at improving physical activity and health, he has limited experience with the implementation of client-facing behavior change techniques, adapting LLMs to health applications, and disseminating his work to interdisciplinary audiences. The sponsor and co-sponsor team, the training plan, resources in and around Boston, and protected time outlined in this fellowship proposal will provide critical training and tools and resources in these areas to enable him to develop into a well-rounded and independent investigator. Representing Mr. Rogers' mentorship team and cosponsors of this project, I have complete confidence in his ability to complete the proposed research training activities and to contribute the highest quality research to the fields of preventive health and computer science.

## **Institutional Environment and Commitment to Training**

Ethan Rogers is a third-year student (rising 4<sup>th</sup> year student at the potential time of this fellowship award) in the Personal Health Informatics (PHI) doctoral program at Northeastern University. The PHI doctoral program is a joint program between the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and the Bouvé College of Health Sciences. With a focus on interdisciplinary research, the PHI program prepares students to discover transformative solutions to global health challenges through technology and computing. Ethan has completed most of his coursework and teaching requirements as a TA for a graduate statistics class, and has started the qualifying examinations. PHI qualifying examinations take the form of a research paper requirement and two area exams; Mr. Rogers has started his paper requirement and technical exam, and will begin his health exam in January of 2024. Ethan will complete his remaining obligations for candidacy by early summer of 2024, the potential start date of this award. Although Ethan's thesis committee has yet to be fully assembled, his sponsors - Dr. John, Dr. Intille, and Dr. Wang - will be members.

### **Personal Health Informatics Doctoral Program**

The PHI Program is an interdisciplinary program that educates students to conduct and lead personal health informatics research, with the goal of training the future leaders of healthcare technology. In recognition of technology's impact on the structure and delivery of healthcare, PHI faculty are committed to ensuring the next generation of health technology leaders have the skills, background, and relationships necessary to conduct research evaluating person-facing health and wellness systems. PHI graduates are focused on creating innovative, data-driven solutions to problems of healthcare, health inequity, and health access and applying those changes to systems patients and people use directly.

PHI students receive a rigorous, transdisciplinary education preparing them to conduct and lead personal health informatics research. The program accepts students of varying scientific backgrounds and disciplines. Students receive technical training in software development of computer applications for health, evaluation methodologies for health technologies, iterative and user-centered design, theory and practice of health behavior change, and experimental design and statistics. Students are encouraged to take elective classes that best align with their research needs creating a unique, research-driven experience for each student. Aside from highly knowledgeable computer scientists, PHI students are trained to be precise and adaptable scientific communicators, capable of proficient technical writing, collaboration with medical practitioners, and fostering empathetic connections with patients and end-users.

### **Doctoral Training**

Students are trained to be strong independent researchers. To achieve this, students must publish high-quality research in rigorous academic journals and direct their own research goals at the conclusion of their studies. Students learn primarily via their research, collaborations with their peers, and experiences at conferences and internships. Coursework is useful to address gaps in knowledge but is not the primary focus of the program. PHI students are expected to seek guidance from their advisors, self-direct their learning, and pursue their academic interests – all with curiosity and a strong tolerance for failure. At the culmination of their training students should be able to independently identify pertinent research questions, design experiments, conduct research, and compellingly disseminate their findings.

### **Key Academic Requirements**

The program, which began in 2011, currently includes 11 full-time doctoral students. Students are selected who have demonstrated technical expertise, research experience, and substantial interest in personal health informatics. The timeline of graduation is different for every student, but students generally take five to six years to complete their degree.

#### **Requirements for Graduation**

- 36 credit hours of core courses in human-computer interaction, statistics, programming, research methods, and personal health technology and evaluation. 12 credit hours of electives pertinent to the student's research. 48 total credit hours of coursework at a B average or above.
- One semester of teaching (as a teaching assistant or instructor of record).
- Students must pass their qualifying examinations, consisting of three parts:
  - *Research Component:* Students must submit original research to a high-quality peer-reviewed journal where they are the lead intellectual contributor. Their advisor must endorse this work, and students must do a public presentation on their work for the PHI community.
  - *Health Exam:* Students complete a health-focused exam created by a faculty member with a health background. The format and health topic of the exam is variable.
  - *Technical Exam:* The technical exam is developed in collaboration with a faculty member. Like the health exam, the format and health topic of the exam is variable.

- Once the above requirements are satisfied students achieve candidacy and begin their dissertation. Their dissertation is composed of a proposal and defense before the student's Doctoral committee.

### **Advisor**

Each student accepted into the PHI program will be assigned one or more mentors. In general, a student's mentor will become their official thesis advisor. Advisors may hold a faculty appointment in either the Khoury College of Computer Sciences or the Bouvé College of Health Sciences at Northeastern, so long as they are core or affiliated faculty within the PHI program.

### **Dissertation Committee**

Comprised of three faculty, a student's dissertation committee must include their primary advisor, an additional Northeastern PHI faculty member, and an external expert in the research topic. Students may consider an extra internal or external member. Committee members should possess a Ph.D. or M.D. (or equivalent) and be actively engaged in research and publication.

### **Dissertation Proposal**

Upon approval of the dissertation committee, students collaborate with committee members to finalize their dissertation proposal. Their proposal should outline the proposed research, relevant literature, research problems, techniques, pilot data, and a realistic schedule. Students present their proposal, limited to around fifteen pages in conference paper format and 40 minutes of presentation time, for an oral defense before the dissertation committee. This process allows students the opportunity to practice defending their work, and to integrate their advisors' feedback, strengthening the research.

### **Dissertation Defense**

The capstone of the PHI doctoral program is the student's completion and defense of their dissertation. Their dissertation, including the manuscript and related publications, along with the oral presentation, should demonstrate the candidate's ability to conduct independent research. The research described should meet publication standards in a reputable journal or conference. Throughout the dissertation process, students work closely with their Dissertation Committee, holding regular meetings and sharing results. During the defense, students address questions from their dissertation committee and research community members about their work, related work, and future directions.

### **Estimated Timeline**

#### **• Year 1**

- *Core Courses.* Students begin the program by taking introductory core courses on health behavior change and personal health technology.
- *Research.* Students should begin integrating themselves into their advisor's work, attending seminars, and exploring their academic interests.

#### **• Year 2**

- *Core and Elective Courses.* Complete core courses and begin taking elective and readings courses.
- *Research.* Students should be well integrated into their research and actively working on their research paper requirements.
- *Candidacy.* Students should begin satisfying the requirements of the three qualifying exam components.

#### **• Year 3**

- *Complete remaining courses/electives.* Students can take additional courses beyond year 3, if agreed to by their advisor.
- *Candidacy:* Students should achieve candidacy by completing their comprehensive exams and begin their dissertation. Students should complete their teaching requirements.
- *Research,* including submission of papers to peer-reviewed journals and active dissemination at conferences.

#### **• Year 4**

- *Complete remaining courses/electives.* Students can take additional courses beyond year 3, if agreed to by their advisor.
- *Continue research,* including submission of papers to peer-reviewed journals and active dissemination at conferences.
- *Dissertation Proposal.* Students should complete and defend their dissertation proposal and begin their dissertation work.

#### **• Year 5**

- *Dissertation Defense.* Students should complete the dissertation and pass the dissertation defense. At this point, students should be actively seeking their next opportunity.

**Prepared by:** Ethan Rogers in consultation with Dr. Stephen Intille. Edited by Stephen Intille.

## PHS Human Subjects and Clinical Trials Information

OMB Number: 0925-0001

Expiration Date: 01/31/2026

### Use of Human Specimens and/or Data

Does any of the proposed research in the application involve human specimens and/or data \*

Yes       No

Provide an explanation for any use of human specimens and/or data not considered to be human subjects research.

Are Human Subjects Involved

Yes       No

Is the Project Exempt from Federal regulations?

Yes       No

Exemption Number

1     2     3     4     5     6     7     8

Other Requested Information

**Human Subject Studies**

<b>Study#</b>	<b>Study Title</b>	<b>Clinical Trial?</b>
1	Building and evaluating scalable health coaching system with large language models to promote physical activity.	No

## Section 1 - Basic Information (Study 1)

### 1.1. Study Title \*

Building and evaluating scalable health coaching system with large language models to promote physical activity.

### 1.2. Is this study exempt from Federal Regulations \*

Yes  No

### 1.3. Exemption Number

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

### 1.4. Clinical Trial Questionnaire \*

1.4.a. Does the study involve human participants?  Yes  No

1.4.b. Are the participants prospectively assigned to an intervention?  Yes  No

1.4.c. Is the study designed to evaluate the effect of the intervention on the participants?  Yes  No

1.4.d. Is the effect that will be evaluated a health-related biomedical or behavioral outcome?  Yes  No

### 1.5. Provide the ClinicalTrials.gov Identifier (e.g. NCT87654321) for this trial, if applicable

## **Section 2 - Study Population Characteristics (Study 1)**

### 2.1. Conditions or Focus of Study

- Mentoring

## 2.2. Eligibility Criteria

Individuals with experience health coaching and a theoretical background in behavior change.

2.3. Age Limits	Min Age: 18 Years	Max Age: N/A (No limit)
2.3.a. Inclusion of Individuals Across the Lifespan	Inclusion_of_Individuals_Across_the_Lifespan.pdf	
2.4. Inclusion of Women and Minorities	Inclusion_of_Women_and_Minorities-Final.pdf	
2.5. Recruitment and Retention Plan	Recruitment_and_Retention_Plan.pdf	
2.6. Recruitment Status	Not yet recruiting	
2.7. Study Timeline		
2.8. Enrollment of First Participant	09/01/2025	Anticipated

### **Inclusion of Individuals Across the Lifespan**

Individuals under that age of 18 (children) are not included as they will not have had time to gain health coaching experience or an educational background in theory of behavior change. There is no upper age limit.

Study personnel have experience working with adults in human subject research. The PI, Mr. Ethan Rogers, has 5+ years of research experience with adults, including older adults and people diagnosed with mental health disorders. The facility where the research will be conducted is an exercise physiology lab. This site routinely handles human subject research with multiple age groups.

## INCLUSION OF WOMEN AND MINORITIES

The targeted distribution of the subjects' racial and ethnic makeup is anticipated to match the demographic distribution in the state of Massachusetts based on data obtained from United States Census conducted in 2010. According to census data, the distribution of minorities in the general population in Massachusetts is 13.1% Hispanic or Latino of any race, 9.5% black or African American, 0.5% American Indian or Alaska native, 7.7% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 2.7% identified as having another race from these categories. White adults are the majority at 69.6%. We will ensure that recruitment will satisfy the NIH requirement of at least 50% women and 20% minorities.

This study will be recruiting adult health coaches with backgrounds in behavior change theory. We have existing connections to the physical activity research community at the University where the proposed research is being conducted and from where we plan to recruit. This community is diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity; we do not anticipate needed to conduct special recruitment efforts for women and minorities.

This study will use data to train machine learning models to be tested by the recruited health coaches. These data include anonymized conversations between a health coach and 44 coaching clients, collected with consent as part of a previous clinical trial. 30 (68%) of these participants were women, and 13 (30%) were minorities.

## **Recruitment and Retention Plan**

This usability evaluation of a health coaching messaging system will recruit individuals with health coaching experience and educational backgrounds in theories of behavior change. Through previous research we have established connections with practicing health coaches, who we plan to recruit by word of mouth. These coaches come from a diverse physical activity research community encompassing personal trainers, personal training students, and exercise physiology researchers and educators. We will start by asking known health coaches from previous work. Once recruited, we plan to continue recruitment by asking them to disseminate our study contact information. As our sample size is very small ( $n=5$ ) we believe this to be adequate. In the scenario word of mouth is inadequate, our contingency plan is to post flyers in recreational spaces (specifically gyms and recreation facilities) and request inclusion of our usability study in the weekly bulletins of health-affiliated departments.

Once recruited, the study requirements include a single hour long visit to the exercise physiology lab to use a prototype interface developed by our team and a qualitative interview about the user interface. We plan to offer compensation in the form of \$20 gift certificates. The minimal requirements of the study and compensation will retain participants.

2.9. Inclusion Enrollment Reports

IER ID#	Enrollment Location Type	Enrollment Location
Study 1, IER 1	Domestic	Northeastern University

## Inclusion Enrollment Report 1

1. Inclusion Enrollment Report Title\* : Inclusion Enrollment Report for Building and evaluating scalable health coaching system with large language models to promote physical activity.
2. Using an Existing Dataset or Resource\* :  Yes  No
3. Enrollment Location Type\* :  Domestic  Foreign
4. Enrollment Country(ies): USA: UNITED STATES
5. Enrollment Location(s): Northeastern University
6. Comments: This qualitative usability study will only be recruit 5 subjects, thus exact racial minorities may vary.

### Planned

Racial Categories	Ethnic Categories				Total	
	Not Hispanic or Latino		Hispanic or Latino			
	Female	Male	Female	Male		
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian	0	0	0	0	0	
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	
Black or African American	1	1	0	0	2	
White	1	1	1	0	3	
More than One Race	0	0	0	0	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	

### Cumulative (Actual)

Racial Categories	Ethnic Categories									Total	
	Not Hispanic or Latino			Hispanic or Latino			Unknown/Not Reported Ethnicity				
	Female	Male	Unknown/ Not Reported	Female	Male	Unknown/ Not Reported	Female	Male	Unknown/ Not Reported		
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Black or African American	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
White	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
More than One Race	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Unknown or Not Reported	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	

### **Section 3 - Protection and Monitoring Plans (Study 1)**

3.1. Protection of Human Subjects

Protection\_of\_Human\_Subjects.pdf

3.2. Is this a multi-site study that will use the same protocol to conduct non-exempt human subjects research at more than one domestic site?

Yes      No      N/A

Single IRB plan attachment

3.3. Data and Safety Monitoring Plan

3.4. Will a Data and Safety Monitoring Board be appointed for this study?

Yes      No

3.5. Overall structure of the study team

## Protection of Human Subjects

### Overview

This research uses human subjects in two ways, and we claim both fall under the 2018 exemptions for human subjects' research. Briefly, the research in this proposal has two aims. First, using conversations collected between health coaches and adult clients in previous work, fine-tune a large language model to generate candidate responses for health coaches via a health coach messaging interface. Second, evaluate the usability of the user interface with health coaches through qualitative interviews. Human subjects' factor into this research in two ways, 1) as subjects of interview research, and 2) as secondary research information collected from previous work.

### Research Activities Covered Under Exemption #2

Among other derivatives, exemption #2 covers research consisting of interview procedures that collect information about the subjects where their identity cannot be ascertained or the information collected would not place the subjects in criminal or civil liability or be damaging (specifically to the subjects financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation). In our research we plan to conduct interviews with health coaches on their opinions about a prototype user interface designed to supply them with artificial intelligence (AI) generated candidate responses. Although not directly of interest, this interview may touch upon their personal information (including employment, previous experience health coaching, phone habits) in a manner that, although unlikely, could potentially allow them to be indirectly identified if not censored. However, regardless of the censorship status of the interview content, the data collected – thoughts, opinions, feelings about health coaching, the quality of the AI responses, the usability of the messaging interface, and their recommendations for future alterations – would not be damaging were subjects to be indirectly identified. As such we are claiming that this use of human subjects in our research is exempt under exemption (2.i.).

### Research Activities Covered Under Exemption #4

Exemption #4 covers secondary research use of previously collected information and biospecimens for which consent is not required, provided it meets one of four sub criteria. To create a large language model capable of crafting candidate responses of adequate humanness to be useful for health coaches, it must be fine-tuned on data specific to the task at hand, in this case, conversations between health coaches and adult clients. These conversations were previously collected as part of an NIH funded clinical trial investigating the effect of activity aware personalized health coaching on sedentary behavior of older adults [Grant: 5P30AG048785-07]. As part of the data safety and monitoring plan of the previous work these conversations have been censored to remove identifiable information, including but not limited to names, address, phone numbers, and email address. The conversations do not contain any indirect identifiers (including participant ID). We believe this use meets the requirements of exemption (4.ii.), as 1) our use of the conversations is a secondary use of an existing ("off-the-shelf") dataset, 2) the conversations do not contain any directly or indirectly identifiable information that could allow subjects' identities to be readily ascertainable, 3) we will not contact the subjects, and 4) we will not re-identify the subjects.

## Section 4 - Protocol Synopsis (Study 1)

### 4.1. Study Design

#### 4.1.a. Detailed Description

#### 4.1.b. Primary Purpose

#### 4.1.c. Interventions

Type	Name	Description
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#### 4.1.d. Study Phase

Is this an NIH-defined Phase III Clinical Trial?  Yes  No

#### 4.1.e. Intervention Model

4.1.f. Masking  Yes  No

Participant  Care Provider  Investigator  Outcomes Assessor

#### 4.1.g. Allocation

### 4.2. Outcome Measures

Type	Name	Time Frame	Brief Description
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### 4.3. Statistical Design and Power

### 4.4. Subject Participation Duration

4.5. Will the study use an FDA-regulated intervention?  Yes  No

4.5.a. If yes, describe the availability of Investigational Product (IP) and Investigational New Drug (IND)/Investigational Device Exemption (IDE) status

4.6. Is this an applicable clinical trial under FDAAA?  Yes  No

### 4.7. Dissemination Plan

**Delayed Onset Studies**

Delayed Onset Study#	Study Title	Anticipated Clinical Trial?	Justification
The form does not have any delayed onset studies			