Innovation Reports: Guidance From the Editors

Innovation Reports were introduced in Academic Medicine in 2013 by David Sklar, influenced in part by past editor-in-chief Steven L. Kantor’s call for better descriptions of innovations. Innovation Reports are brief, uniquely structured reports that describe (1) a problem, (2) an innovative approach to that problem, (3) outcomes, and (4) next steps. Here, we reflect on Innovation Reports to provide authors and reviewers with additional guidance on this article type. We share what we look for in submissions and explain how Innovation Reports differ from other peer-reviewed article types. We also offer suggestions for authors regarding when they should submit work to Academic Medicine as an Innovation Report and future opportunities for Innovation Reports.

What Are Innovation Reports?

Innovation Reports disseminate new ideas that have the potential to improve the quality of education and health care by addressing common problems in novel ways (e.g., pedagogically, programatically, methodologically). They present creative solutions to challenges related to education, clinical care, research, or areas such as communications or professionalism. Since 2013, more than 1,000 Innovation Reports have been submitted and more than 150 have been published. Citation metrics suggest Innovation Reports are widely read, have value and potential influence, and may help advance authors’ career goals.

Innovation Reports usually describe a pilot project or early-stage initiative at a single institution. They discuss what happened during implementation of the innovation so others can replicate the innovation or build upon the experience. Some Innovation Reports provide data and describe preliminary outcomes that indicate whether the innovation worked as expected, while others discuss anticipated outcomes that can be evaluated later. The Innovation Report is an intentionally flexible category, covering a wide range of topics from program evaluations to conceptual contributions. Not every innovation is a good fit with this article type, though.

What We Look for in Innovation Report Submissions

We appreciate the contributions of the many reviewers and authors who have substantially improved the quality, clarity, and impact of Innovation Reports over the past 7 years. After reviewing previously published Innovation Reports—and as we look ahead to anticipated changes for the journal—we offer some guiding principles on this submission category for reviewers and aspiring authors.

Innovation Reports should clearly state the problem and why it is generalizable

Clearly stating the problem addressed by the innovation provides a foundation for the potential importance of work described in the Innovation Report. The problem can be effectively framed in a number of ways. How is the problem situated in the local organization? How might it fit into a conceptual or theoretical framework? Explicitly stating how the problem is generalizable is also important. Does the problem apply to multiple departments, multiple institutions, and/or across the spectrum of health professions education?

Innovation Reports, by definition, should focus on the innovation

The innovation should be the primary message. Authors should state what makes the innovation novel. Authors should also specify how the Innovation Report will improve on or fill a gap in the existing literature. If the innovation is not the emphasis of the paper, authors should consider submitting the paper as another article type (see Chart 1). Outcomes—or answering the question “Did the innovation work?”—should not be the focus. Authors must frame outcomes in terms of the innovation, for example, by providing clear logic and evidence that (1) the innovation was delivered as intended and (2) the innovation informed the actual (or anticipated) outcomes.

Innovation Reports are not brief Research Reports

While many Innovation Reports have a research component, papers that emphasize the research at the expense of the innovation are not well suited for publication as Innovation Reports. In addition, study designs using qualitative or advanced statistical methods often require more lengthy explanations than the Innovation Report format allows and can divert attention from the innovation. (An Innovation Report in which the innovation is a new methodology is an exception.) Successful Innovation Reports describe the principles (e.g., theory or other framework) that guided the outcomes that were sought, any barriers that were encountered, and at least a sense of what worked and what did not. Manuscripts that emphasize specific research questions and study designs should be submitted as Research Reports, which allow more space for reporting. Innovation Reports are a place to present methodologically sound pilot research on an innovation. They are not a path for publishing suboptimally conducted research.

Innovation Reports should stand alone

An Innovation Report should not present research data from a larger project or rely heavily on references to other work by the same authors to describe the innovation. An Innovation Report is unlikely to be accepted if the intent is clearly to collect data to move beyond the pilot project to a larger study.

Innovation Reports should discuss how success was evaluated

Innovation Reports do not need to include a full evaluation, but the authors should explain how they determined whether the innovation was implemented as intended and to what extent the innovation addressed the problem and achieved the expected outcomes.

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Innovation Reports should describe next steps

In the Next Steps section, authors must discuss what is next for the initiative. Authors should describe what they learned and place their findings within the context of the existing literature. The Next Steps section may outline practical, theoretical, and/or research implications of findings and how the authors plan to pursue these implications. Implications in Innovation Reports are typically less definitive than in Research Reports. Authors should be careful to not overstate the implications of their work.

When to Submit Work as an Innovation Report

When submitting to Academic Medicine, authors should consider which article type will allow for the best representation of their work. Innovation Reports differ from Research Reports, Articles, AM Last Pages, and Letters to the Editor, as described below and summarized in Chart 1.

- **Innovation Report versus Research Report**: Innovation Reports focus on the innovation while Research Reports focus on the study design and results. Innovation Reports may report preliminary outcomes or describe anticipated outcomes given the time-sensitive nature of innovations. Authors should submit manuscripts with a research focus as Research Reports.

- **Innovation Report versus Article**: Articles, which are primarily descriptive, can represent a middle ground between Innovation Reports and Research Reports. Authors describing well-established innovative programs should submit their work as Articles rather than as Innovation Reports, which focus more on pilot or early-stage initiatives. While Articles can include a research element and report findings, the research is not the focus like in a Research Report.

- **Innovation Report versus AM Last Page**: If the idea can be described effectively with a 1-page graphic that is not text-heavy, then the best venue would be a Last Page. Very brief Innovation Reports (that may be covered adequately in a Last Page) are unlikely to survive peer review.

- **Innovation Report versus Letter to the Editor**: A Letter to the Editor may briefly focus on a problem and present constructive actions that may be undertaken in response. Innovation Reports allow for more complete description of the problem, approach, outcomes, and next steps associated with an innovation than is possible in a letter.

**Future Opportunities**

There are a number of opportunities for Academic Medicine to support the academic medicine community’s continued interest in Innovation Reports. Below we offer some additional ideas for authors to consider; we would entertain such submissions for publication as Innovation Reports.

**Innovation failures or disappointments**

An innovative solution to a given problem may require multiple iterations. Reflecting and reporting on what did not work provides an opportunity for others in the academic medicine community to learn from and avoid similar disappointments and failures.

**Innovation replications**

Journals typically provide little space for replication of findings. We believe there may be a role for replication of innovations, particularly the smaller-scale innovations often described in Innovation Reports. Larger-scale replications (i.e., research studies) should be submitted as Research Reports.

**Multi-institution innovations**

An innovation attempting to address a common problem could extend to more than one institution. Innovation Reports describing multi-institution innovations would enhance generalizability.

**Theory-informed Innovation Reports**

We occasionally receive Innovation Reports that focus on building theory in medical education. As theory typically draws from larger bodies of research, theory-informed Innovation Reports could be an additional way to make small-scale innovations and pilot research more generalizable.

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**Chart 1**

**Key Characteristics of 5 Academic Medicine Article Types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Innovation Report</th>
<th>Research Report</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>AM Last Page</th>
<th>Letter to the Editor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- **Purpose**
  - To describe a new approach or novel solution to a common problem or challenge facing the academic medicine community
  - To describe a complete study with rigorous design, methodology, and results
  - To describe topics of broad concern to academic medicine or directly and practically relevant to medical education; may include elements of research
  - To provide a 1-page description of a concept, idea, theory, or methodology using graphics and text
  - To respond to articles in the journal, to reply to other letters, or to communicate about issues of importance in academic medicine

- **Structure**
  - Problem, Approach, Outcomes, Next Steps
  - Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion
  - Descriptive headings for key content
  - Must include a combination of graphics and text
  - —

- **Word Count**
  - 2,000
  - 3,000–4,000
  - 3,000
  - 575
  - 400

- **Abstract**
  - 300 words
  - 300 words
  - 300 words
  - No abstract
  - No abstract

- **Exhibits**
  - Up to 3
  - Up to 5
  - Up to 5
  - 3 graphics
  - No exhibits

- **References**
  - Up to 10
  - Up to 50
  - Up to 50
  - Up to 4
  - Word count includes references

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*For more information and the requirements for each type of submission, see Academic Medicine's Complete Instructions for Authors at https://journals.wws.com/academicmedicine/ Pages/InstructionsforAuthors.aspx.

*The suggested word count for quantitative studies is 3,000 and for qualitative studies is 4,000.*
Inclusion of early-career authors

Innovation Reports are a great way to get started in health professions education research, and we encourage junior faculty and learners to participate in Innovation Reports as authors. Early-career authors may be particularly well suited for writing Innovation Reports, as these individuals may have less entrenched views and thus may be more likely to come up with innovations to resolve perceived problems in their practice or context.

Cross-journal partnerships

Innovation Reports may represent a way to disseminate innovations across journals. For example, authors could publish a tool or a teaching or assessment approach in MedEdPORTAL and also publish an Innovation Report in Academic Medicine in which they discuss the initial outcomes and the theory of action behind the innovative tool or approach. Time-sensitive innovations (e.g., the educational implications of the COVID-19 outbreak and different approaches around the world) could potentially be communicated to a wider audience through cross-journal partnerships.

Looking Forward

We are excited about the success of Innovation Reports to date. We are committed to creating and refining journal features to meet the needs of our growing community, and we look forward to continuing on this journey with you.

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Steven J. Durning, MD, PhD
Deputy editor, Academic Medicine.

Bridget C. O’Brien, PhD
Associate editor, Academic Medicine.

Colin P. West, MD, PhD
Associate editor, Academic Medicine.

John Coverdale, MD, MEd
Associate editor, Academic Medicine.

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References