

75 Years of HIM Education: Remembering Our Legacy, Celebrating Our Future

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By Shirley Eichenwald Maki, MBA, RHIA, FAHIMA

Seventy-five years ago—in 1934—the first Masters golf championship was played in Augusta, GA; the first Donald Duck cartoon was released (“The Wise Little Hen”); the first x-ray photo of the entire body was performed in Rochester, NY; and Sister Patricia Thibadeau received conditional approval to establish the St. Mary’s Hospital Training School for Medical Record Librarians in Duluth, MN.

The letter was sent by Edna K. Huffman, president of the Association of Record Librarians of North America (today AHIMA), and dated November 9, 1934: the moment in history in which HIM’s unique contribution to the healthcare industry was first recognized as a professional discipline with an academic foundation.

Within the next year, the St. Mary’s Hospital program was one of four new programs to be surveyed by ARLNA: Massachusetts General Hospital (Boston, MA), Rochester General Hospital (Rochester, NY), and St. Joseph’s Hospital (Chicago, IL) were also surveyed. At that time, the St. Mary’s Hospital Training School for Medical Record Librarians, which was associated from the beginning with the College of St. Scholastica, became the first program in the nation to offer a baccalaureate degree.

The first class of students included five young women pursuing a curriculum with the stated purpose of “preparing young women for the scientific transcribing and handling of hospital and medical records and for the assistance in medical research.” The 180–89 credit curriculum included zoology, Latin, human physiology, shorthand, psychology, typewriting, bacteriology, ethics, library science, and statistics. Practical experience in the medical record department at St. Mary’s Hospital included laboratory and x-ray records, operating room dictation, admitting office, indexing, and outpatient records.

The tuition was \$10 a month, not including board and room. The college catalog also described the dress code of the day: “Simplicity is always elegant and in good taste, therefore simplicity should guide the college girl in her choice of dress, and the charm of modesty should be her one distinctive ornament.”

In a survey of St. Mary’s program alumni who graduated between 1941 and 1951, 80 percent indicated that they had selected the program of study because “it was thought that the work promised to be interesting.” Nearly nine in 10 (88 percent) held professional association membership. The majority reported a salary in the range of \$2,500–3,500 annually, with 8 percent reporting annual salaries between \$4,500 and \$6,500.

In 1953 the first medical record technician programs were approved at St. Francis Hospital (Breckenridge, MN), Marymount Hospital (Garfield Heights, OH), and St. Benedict’s Hospital (Ogdon, UT).

An article in the October 1961 issue of the *Journal of the AAMRL* (now the *Journal of AHIMA*) featured the College of St. Scholastica program and described a student at that time: “Now she is a white-uniformed embryo-professional, absorbing, even as she is being taught the ideas, the attitudes and the responsibilities of the member of the health care team.”

While *she* and *white-uniformed* are no longer accurate or complete descriptors of today’s students, it is clear that our academic programs continue to be entrusted with the responsibility of instilling in our students the ideas, attitudes, and responsibilities of HIM professionals and, in that role, how to be an effective and key member of the healthcare team.

In 1999 the Council on Accreditation (now CAHIIM) approved the first master’s degree in HIM, offered by the College of St. Scholastica. Today there are five additional approved graduate programs across the nation: Claremont Graduate University in California, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Pittsburgh, Oregon Health and Science University, and University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center.

Over 75 years there have been significant advancements in HIM educational curricula to address the significant changes demanded of changing practice. Curricula now prepare students at colleges and universities across the nation with specialty certificates as well as associate, baccalaureate, and master's degrees. Today there are 36 approved coding certificate programs, 218 accredited associate degree programs, 55 approved baccalaureate programs, and six approved master's degree programs.

While the challenges and opportunities in both HIM education and practice continue—in fact, these are the most demanding and exciting times we have ever faced—still we should pause at least this one moment on the occasion of our profession's seventy-fifth anniversary as an academic discipline to remember our legacy and celebrate our future.

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