

# Are HIM Programs Going the Distance

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by Robert L. Garrie, MPA, RRA

As the Internet booms and technology proliferates, distance education, like other innovations, has become a hot property. A few years ago, forecasters predicted that by 1998, more than half of higher education institutions nationally would be involved in distance education. According to the results of a study conducted by AHIMA, the development of distance learning HIM programs is right in line with these trends.

In the 1990s, distance education has gained significant prominence in higher education. Experts anticipate that in the new millennium, distance learning will become as common as traditional classroom instruction. Increasingly, professional, general education, and support courses are among the variety of distance education courses available to students. Some colleges and universities are participating in university systems and state networks, while others are joining cooperatives and consortiums to accommodate and attract distance education students. Even "virtual universities" are being developed.

In January 1999, AHIMA's Education/Accreditation department mailed surveys to the 220 AHIMA-accredited HIM programs (51 health information administration [HIA] programs and 169 health information technology [HIT] programs). The survey asked about the program's level of involvement—both at the programmatic and institutional level—with distance education. This article shares the results gathered from the survey, provides a comparison with national data, and highlights the programs and institutions that are at the forefront of providing distance education in HIM.

## What Is Distance Education?

Distance education is "education or training courses delivered to remote (off-campus) locations via audio, video, or computer technologies."<sup>1</sup> Distance education is not limited to a particular delivery method, as there are many to choose from. Print self-learning packages and correspondence study continue to be a major component of distance education. However, today's distance education uses many electronic or telecommunications-based options. For example, audio teleconferencing, similar to a telephone conference call, can link individuals together for interactive programs. An audiographics system adds a graphics component to a telephone conference. Video systems are a lot like television; some enable the instructor and students to both see and talk to each other. Finally, computer technology offers many options for self-paced learning at the desktop or through online programs via the Internet and World Wide Web.<sup>2</sup>

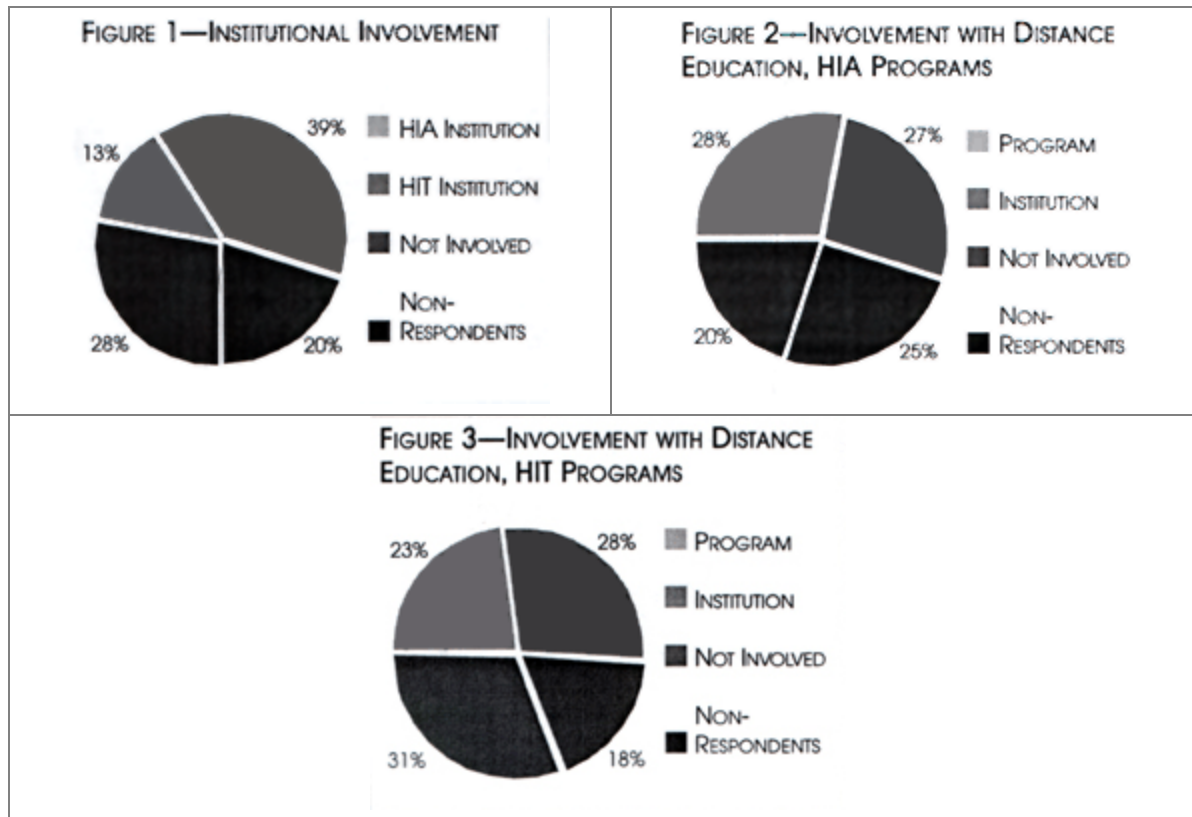
Many people think two-way video is the ultimate distance education method, as it resembles the traditional classroom. But the kind of method chosen for a distance education program is often dictated by subject matter. In general, all delivery modes can be effective, though some material lends itself to certain systems better than others. Research studies have found no significant difference between the type of media used or between the media and the classroom. In almost all cases, people learn as much using one medium as another, and they learn as much in distance education as in classroom education.<sup>3</sup>

## Are HIM Programs Keeping up with the Times?

AHIMA mailed surveys to all 220 accredited HIM programs. 158 surveys were returned, providing a 72 percent response rate. We found that 24 percent of the programs were involved with distance education, while another 28 percent indicated that they were not, but their institution was. Thus 52 percent of institutions housing HIM programs are involved with distance education to some degree. A total of 44 programs reported no involvement at all, and 62 programs did not return the survey. For a breakdown of the responses, see table below.

<i>survey responses</i>					
Level	Involved with distance education		Not involved	No response	Number mailed
	Program	Institution			
HIA programs	14	14	13	10	51
HIT programs	39	47	31	52	169
Total	53	61	44	62	200

Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate involvement by program level for the baccalaureate health information administration (HIA) and the associate degree health information technology (HIT) programs.



## What the National Trends Say

How do AHIMA accredited programs compare with national trends? The most current data for comparison comes from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). An NCES survey conducted in 1995 found that a third of the institutions surveyed offered distance education courses, another quarter planned to offer such courses in the next three years, and 42 percent did not offer (and did not plan to offer) such courses in the next three years.

Thus, NCES estimated that by fall 1998, 58 percent of higher education institutions would be involved in distance education. As our study was conducted approximately three years after the NCES survey, our results (52 percent) appear to be in line with national trends. While the NCES study did not examine the level of programmatic involvement, it did note that the number and types of courses being offered varied by the type of institution (public/private, four-year/two-year), institutional size, and geographic region.<sup>4</sup>

Reporting programs indicated that at the institutional level, general education and support courses were the most commonly offered types of courses. Respondents with programmatic involvement were asked what percentage of the program could be completed via distance education. Completion levels ranged from 5 to 100 percent, with the average floating in the 25 to 30 percent range.

## Leaders of the Pack

HIM programs that offer all professional courses through a distance education format are:

## HIA Programs

**Medical College of Georgia**—Offers HIA curriculum on a part-time basis in the evening in the Atlanta area. The part-time curriculum is eight semesters long and includes practice in Atlanta-area hospitals. Instruction is transmitted using multimedia delivery systems, including the Georgia Statewide Academic and Medical System (GSAMS), a video conferencing network. Contact **Carol Campbell, DBA, RRA, Medical College of Georgia, Health Information Management Program, School of Allied Health Sciences AL-122, Augusta, GA 30912; telephone (706) 721-3436.**

**Stephens College**—HIA curriculum provided in a guided study format allows students to study at home, as opposed to attending regularly scheduled classes on campus. Faculty provide students with a syllabus, assignments, readings, and the name(s) of required textbook(s). Students may begin a guided study course at any time during the year. Contact **Joan T. Rines, PhD, RRA, Stephens College, Health Information Administration Program, Campus Box 2083, 1200 East Broadway, Columbia, MO 65215; telephone (573) 876-7283; e-mail joanr@wc.stephens.edu.**

**Weber State University**—The program is offered in both a traditional classroom and online Internet format. The HIA online program is a progression program, allowing accredited record technicians (ARTs) throughout the country to earn the baccalaureate degree in HIM. It has all required components for the current curriculum model. Distance students must complete the course within the time frame as traditional classroom students. Contact **Chris Elliott, MS, RRA, Weber State University, Health Information Administration Program, College of Health Professions, 3911 University Circle, Ogden, UT 84408-3911, telephone (801) 626-7298, e-mail celliot@weber.edu.**

## HIT Programs

**University of Alaska Southeast**—HIT curriculum is delivered via audio conferencing. The program is available in several states and has been endorsed by state professional associations and the Western Interstate Consortium on Higher Education. Contact **Carol Petrie Liberty, MS, RRA, University of Alaska Southeast, Health Information Technology Program, UAS Sitka Campus, 1332 Seward Ave., Sitka, AK 99835-9498; telephone (907) 747-7718; e-mail tfcpl@aca01.alaska.edu.**

**Weber State University**—Program offered in both traditional classroom and online Internet settings, providing students with technical HIM instruction and allowing them to progress into the online HIA program. Distance students are required to obtain a professional mentor. Contact **Chris Elliott, MS, RRA, Health Information Administration Program, at address above.**

## Master's Program

**College of St. Scholastica**—A master of arts program in HIM offered in a format that allows students to maintain current employment status while enhancing their knowledge and skills. Approximately 30 percent of the program can currently be completed through distance education. The majority of course work is offered in three-week summer sessions, complemented with independent study and applied projects conducted during the academic year. Students use technology (Internet, electronic bulletin boards, online courses) to complete course work and to communicate with each other and with the faculty during the off-campus component of the program. Contact **Shirley Eichenwald, MBA, RRA, Health Information Management Department, The College of St. Scholastica, 1200 Kenwood Ave., Duluth, MN 55811; telephone (218) 723-6448 or (800) 447-5444; e-mail seichenw@css.edu.**

This article lists all programs reporting professional courses offered via distance education (see below). For information regarding these programs, please contact the program directly or find more information about these schools in the "Careers" section of AHIMA's Web site at [www.ahima.org](http://www.ahima.org).

**HIA programs offering distance education professional courses**

State	Institution
AL	University of Alabama, Birmingham
AR	Arkansas Tech University
CA	Loma Linda University
GA	Medical College of Georgia
KS	University of Kansas
LA	Louisiana Tech University
MI	Ferris State University
MN	College of Saint Scholastica
MO	Stephens College
NY	State University of New York, Utica
SD	Dakota State University
TX	University of Texas Medical Branch
UT	Weber State University
WI	University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

**HIT programs offering distance education professional courses**

State	Institution
AK	University of Alaska Southeast
AR	University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences
AZ	Phoenix College
CA	Chabot College
FL	Polk Community College Miami Dade Community College
IA	Kirkwood Community College Northeast Iowa Community College
IL	Southern Illinois Collegiate Common Market Indian Hills Community College
IN	Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne Vincennes University
KS	Hutchinson Community College
KY	Western Kentucky University
MA	Fisher College
NC	Pitt Community College Edgecombe Community College Central Piedmont Community College Catawba Valley Community College
ND	United Tribes Technical College
NE	Central Community College
NV	Community College of Southern Nevada
NY	Alfred State College Mohawk Valley Community College
OH	Sinclair Community College Columbus State Community College
OR	Portland Community College
SD	Dakota State University
TN	Volunteer State Community College
TX	St. Philips College Tyler Junior College South Texas Community College
UT	Weber State University
WA	Shoreline Community College
WI	Chippewa Valley Technical College Western Wisconsin Technical College Moraine Park Technical College

It is anticipated that over time, programs offering 5 to 10 percent of their professional curriculum via distance education will develop more courses in this format. Similarly, it is anticipated that the number of institutions involved in offering distance education will increase. AHIMA's Education/Accreditation department will continue to monitor the state of AHIMA-accredited HIM programs regarding distance education.

## Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics. *Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions: Incidence, Audiences, and Plans to Expand*, February 1998. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98132.html>.
2. Ostendorf, Virginia. *Distance Education Technology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998, p. 2.
3. *Ibid*.
4. National Center for Education Statistics. *Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions, Statistical Analysis Report*, October 1997. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/distance/index.html>.

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