

Creating a Diverse HIM Work Force

Save to myBoK

by Jackie Moczygemba, MBA, RHIA, and Ruth B. Welborn, PhD

Increasing information technology, external billing audits, and federal legislation continue to heighten the demand for HIM professionals. At the same time, there's a critical need for improved cultural diversity in the allied health professions. To tackle both these issues, the HIM program at Southwest Texas State University (SWT) offers the Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP).

Funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), SWT-HCOP aims to recruit and graduate educationally and economically disadvantaged community college students. The university collaborates with seven two-year colleges in the area to recruit students for its HIM program, one of three allied health professions targeted by HCOP. Already, SWT-HCOP has been successful in attracting a diverse student population to the HIM profession to help meet the demands of a rapidly changing healthcare market.

Help Wanted

Today's thriving labor market demands the skills HIM professionals possess. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, professional and technical occupations, which include health information technicians, are expected to grow faster and gain more jobs than any other occupational group. While the majority of health information technicians will work in hospitals, more rapid job growth is expected in physicians' offices, clinics, nursing homes, and home health agencies. The expected rapid growth rate (44 percent) can be attributed to the increase in medical tests, treatments, and procedures available.

A 33 percent growth rate is expected for health information administrators, who fall into the executive, administrative, and managerial sector. The Bureau predicts the fastest growth for health information administrators will also be in home health agencies, residential care facilities, physicians' offices, and clinics.¹

Industry Need for Diversity

Coupled with a favorable market demand for HIM professionals is the need for greater diversity in the student, member, and leader populations of HIM professional groups. See "[National HIA and HIT Enrollment Figures, 1994-95](#)" below for enrollment figures by occupation and race/ethnic origin.

The health information administrator (HIA) figures represent enrollment in four-year bachelor degree programs while the health information technician (HIT) numbers reflect enrollment in two-year associate degree programs.² These numbers illustrate the need to enhance diversity of students in health information education programs.

SWT tracks fall enrollment of students by race/ethnicity across the university and by department. "[SWT HIM Program Enrollment, 1995-2000](#)" reflects race/ethnicity of SWT students enrolled in the HIM program during the last five years.³ SWT offers a four-year bachelor program in HIM, which can be compared to national HIA enrollment numbers.

SWT's numbers are quite similar to the national numbers for white, Asian, and American Indian students enrolled in HIA programs. The numbers are slightly higher nationally for black students and slightly lower for Hispanic students. One of SWT's strategic goals for 1999 through 2004 is to ensure that the campus climate represents diverse stakeholders. To that end, the university plans to recruit, retain, and maintain faculty and staff representative of the state's diversity. Enhanced funding for student scholarships and endowed professorships through the SWT Development Foundation with corporate and foundation support is one way of meeting this goal.⁴

AHIMA is addressing the same issue at the Association level. In 1996, an AHIMA Board of Directors subcommittee began collecting data on members and HIM students for a study of diversity. AHIMA then initiated a Diversity Task Force in early 2000 to design a multifaceted program to enhance the diversity of AHIMA's membership. The program will address

networking, mentoring, and leadership opportunities, and make recommendations on promotional activities such as scholarships, and recognize and appreciate the differences among AHIMA members. [5,6](#)

SWT-HCOP Objectives and Components

The SWT-HCOP received federal funding originally for a three-year period in 1995 and renewed funding for another three years in 1998. The SWT-HCOP program has five objectives:

1. **Recruit and select 100 applicants** from the seven participating community colleges. A committee composed of allied health professionals of diverse backgrounds and SWT-HCOP coordinators from the community colleges selects 20 students from this pool. Of the 20 students selected, it is estimated that six or seven will receive HIM instruction and the remaining students receive allied health instruction in either respiratory care or clinical lab science.
2. **Provide preliminary education** to HIM students through a six-week summer enrichment program. Upon completion of this program, students demonstrate competencies in mathematics, science, reading and writing, and HIM by performing laboratory assignments, giving oral presentations, completing writing projects, and taking examinations.
3. **Facilitate HIM students' entry into the College of Health Professions** by improving their academic preparation and providing an SWT faculty mentor to help guide them through the steps needed to enter the HIM program at SWT.
4. **Provide HIM students the opportunity** to complete their bachelor's degree requirements in HIM at SWT.
5. **Assist students in completing applications** for financial aid to attend SWT.

Selecting the Best

Throughout the year, the SWT-HCOP grant coordinator visits the area community colleges that participate in the program to ensure that a pool of 100 applicants from which to select 20 highly motivated and capable students will be available. A contact at each campus works closely with the grant coordinator to identify potential applicants.

During the campus visits, the grant coordinator and campus coordinator introduce students to the allied health professions and answer questions about HIM careers, clinical lab science, and respiratory care. Then, they explain how SWT-HCOP can help students reach their goals of becoming allied health professionals. Brochures about SWT-HCOP and the College of Health Professions, course catalogs, and application packets are provided. Finally, the application process and selection criteria for the summer enrichment program are explained and the SWT-HCOP toll-free number is provided.

Interested students then submit application materials that document academic qualifications, commitment to one of the three targeted allied health careers, and disadvantaged status. In addition, the students are required to submit a short essay on "My Desire to Enter a Health Profession." A selection committee with diverse faculty representation reviews the applications and ultimately chooses 20 students from economically or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

Preparing for the Future

SWT-HCOP students enrolled in the summer enrichment program participate in an integrated learning experience that encompasses the components of mathematics, science, reading, writing, and instruction in their selected concentration. The integrative curriculum allows students to see practical applications for math, science, reading, and writing in their chosen allied health track.

The objective of the HIM track is to provide an introduction to the field of HIM and medical terminology along with an opportunity to use the information in "real-world" situations. The technical as well as management aspects of HIM are studied so students can learn to perform basic tasks using patient records, various other source documents of health information, medical record management software on the HIM lab network, and other computer applications such as word processing, spreadsheets, and graphics.

Off to a Strong Start

Although SWT-HCOP is still a work in progress, the program is already enjoying success. To date, 81 students have successfully completed the summer enrichment program, including 19 students completing the HIM track. Fourteen of these HIM students are of Hispanic origin. Five SWT-HCOP participants, four of whom are Hispanic and one who is

Asian, have graduated from SWT in their targeted allied health profession, including one graduate in HIM. Three additional SWT-HCOP participants, two of whom are Hispanic, are currently enrolled in the HIM program and expected to graduate. The HIM program itself is experiencing a growth in student diversity, which cannot be directly attributed to the SWT-HCOP. However, SWT-HCOP has helped market the HIM program to a diverse student population from area community colleges. As the program progresses, diversity of the student body is expected to increase.

The grant coordinator continues to monitor the progress of all students who complete the SWT-HCOP enrichment program. Recruitment has intensified with a focus on increasing the awareness of the HIM profession. During recruitment for the summer 2000 program, the grant coordinator made extensive use of the AHIMA video, "Where The Future Clicks: Your Health Information Career," and reported increased interest in the HIM track.

SWT-HCOP is leading the way in addressing goals established by the US Department of Health and Human Services: to improve the cultural diversity in the health professions and promote a healthcare work force with a mix of competencies and skills needed to deliver cost-effective quality care. In addition, SWT-HCOP is helping to meet the market demand for HIM professionals, particularly in Texas, where vulnerable populations exist with expanding healthcare needs.

References

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6. AHIMA Diversity Management Program brochure. Available at www.ahima.org.
7. American Health Information Management Association. "White Paper on the Health and Well-being of Professional Education in the Health Information Management Discipline." Presented at Assembly on Education Summer Symposium, Minneapolis, MN, June 2000.
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National HIA and HIT Enrollment Figures, 1994-95

	White	Black	Mexican American	Puerto Rican	Other Hispanic	Asian Or Pacific Islander	American Indian Or Alaskan Native
HIA	1,891	577	22	26	60	84	21
%	70.5%	21.5%	0.82%	0.96%	2.23%	3.13%	0.78%
HIT	4,648	955	199	106	117	204	50
%	74.0%	15.2%	3.17%	1.69%	1.86%	3.25%	0.80%

SWT HIM program Enrollment, 1995-2000

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	American Indian
Year					
1995	57	8	13	4	0
%	69.5	9.8	15.9	4.9	0
1996	68	5	20	4	2
%	68.7	5.1	20.2	4.0	2.0
1997	57	5	12	3	2
%	72.2	6.3	15.2	3.8	2.5
1998	53	4	15	1	2
%	70.7	5.3	20.0	1.3	2.7
1999	45	5	13	3	1
%	66.2	7.4	19.1	4.4	1.5

Program targets educational reform for health careers

AHIMA's recent white paper on the health and well-being of professional education in the HIM discipline discussed the need for educational reform in academic programs. Some of the issues that have challenged the growth and viability of HIM programs are professional image problems, insufficient program and profession marketing, and lack of strong applicant pools. In every field, economic constraints, increased public pressure for accountability, changes in student demographics and population, enrollment and accessibility issues, adaptation of information technologies to education, and total educational reform required for the information age are working against higher education. These issues are complex and largely interdependent.⁷ At SWT, the solution was the HCOP grant, funded by the Federal Health Resources and Services Administration.

The legislative purposes for which HCOP funds may be awarded are:

- identifying, recruiting, and selecting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds for education and training in a health profession
- facilitating the entry of such individuals into such a school
- providing counseling, mentoring, or other services designed to assist such individuals to successfully complete their education at such a school
- providing, for a period prior to the entry of such individuals into the regular course of education of such a school, preliminary education, and health research training designed to assist them to successfully complete such regular course of education at such a school, or referring such individuals to institutions providing such preliminary education
- publicizing existing sources of financial aid available to students in the education program of such a school or who are undertaking training necessary to qualify them to enroll in such a program
- paying scholarships, as the secretary may determine, for such individuals for any period of health professions education at a health professions school
- paying such stipends for such individuals for any period of education in student-enhancement programs (other than regular courses), except that such a stipend may not be provided to an individual for more than 12 months
- carrying out programs under which such individuals gain experience regarding a career in a field of primary health care through working at facilities of public or private nonprofit community-based providers of primary health services
- conducting activities to develop a larger and more competitive applicant pool through partnerships with institutions of higher education, school districts, and other community-based entities⁸

For more information on HCOP grants, visit HRSA's Web site at www.hrsa.dhhs.gov.

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