

Distance Learning: Getting Closer all the Time

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by Laura Lane

In recent years, distance learning has become an increasingly viable option, and HIM students have benefitted. How does this new way of learning work, and is it working for students? Some instructors and students tell their success stories.

Five years ago, the concept of distance learning was just catching on. Today, it has taken hold as more and more students discover the advantages of online learning, where classes fit into the busy lives of students who might not be able to advance their education and careers otherwise.

Since 1997, an increasing number of secondary and post-secondary colleges and universities have begun offering distance learning classes. Students are demanding far-away access through technology.

The surge in interest in distance learning is evident in at the associate, baccalaureate, and master's levels of health information-related programs around the United States. Among accredited schools, AHIMA estimates that at least 13 baccalaureate and 38 associate degree programs offer some distance learning opportunities. (For more information, visit AHIMA's Web site at www.ahima.org/careers/.)

How is this new way of learning working? In this article, some instructors and students will tell their stories.

A New Alternative

The University of Alabama at Birmingham's (UAB) health information administration (HIA) program is an example of how distance learning becomes reality. Enrollment was down and school officials looked for ways to attract new crops of students.

"We just felt like we had no alternative," says program director Sara Grostick, MA, RHIA. "We're a public university and our numbers were really falling. So we started talking about distance learning in 1998."

Words quickly evolved into action. The university saw distance learning as a way to meet student needs and bring them back to learning. "We realized that potential students who already were working could not just quit their jobs and come back to school," Grostick says. "So we started looking at offering classes at night or doing something on the Internet."

Her division director wrote a grant and secured funding through the university. With that, they hired a computer technician who helped the faculty transfer course information to software that could be accessed by students.

"Without having someone to do that, we could not have gone forward," Grostick says. "But the technician set it all up and is there to deal with any technical problems our staff or students might encounter. It's crucial to find someone committed to the program who has the necessary computer knowledge."

Grostick says it was no easy task to transfer course work to an online program. And instructors have to change the way they think and deal with teaching and students to make it all work. "You have to get past the mentality that you are teaching a class that meets three times a week at certain times," she says. "Instead of a 12-week quarter, you have to begin thinking in modules and units. Students can complete the work at any time-at midnight, if they want to. So you can't be thinking about this class that meets on Monday, because the student may come in to the class on a Wednesday night."

While she feared losing a personal connection with students because they are not present in a classroom, Grostick says she finds she has more interaction with online students than she does with those in a traditional lecture class.

That surprised her. "The only way you communicate is by e-mail, telephone, chat room, or bulletin board," she says. "If a student asks a question, you have to turn it around and give an answer right then. I check e-mail several times every day and have a lot of messages to return to students. Because there are sometimes more than 20 students in a class, I find myself checking in and responding all the time. I think that if students take advantage of what's offered, they can get more one-on-one attention online than in a lecture class."

Welcome to the Virtual Classroom

Distance learning is something Grostick never would have imagined when she started her career nearly 30 years ago. And while she embraces the possibilities distance learning offers, she misses seeing the faces of her students, who are located as far away as Oregon and California. She misses classroom interaction and discussions, although there are ways to make those things happen across the miles.

"We were trying to think of ways the students could get to know each other," she says. This past quarter, distance learning instructors introduced themselves to students via a Web page. They encouraged students to do the same.

"We wanted them to feel comfortable in this 'classroom' so we asked them to share a little bit of information about themselves," she says.

She creates discussion venues through chat room assignments. "We role play a lot," she says. For instance, in a recent data management class, Grostick assigned roles to players who were to pretend they were in a committee meeting. They assembled in the chat room at the same time and carried out the assignment. The event was archived for later review.

With the proper equipment and software, students are able to access Power Point presentations and class lectures whenever it is convenient for them.

Next fall, the program hopes to integrate an instructor's real audio with the Power Point presentation. "That way, it really is like being in class," Grostick says. She says instructors teaching a class in both the traditional setting and online have to be careful to incorporate anything they say to students in the classroom into the distance learning program. "We're getting used to making sure we do that," she says.

Grostick says many students embrace the option of studying and learning online. Others are more comfortable with a traditional classroom with the instructor at the helm and students in chairs listening.

"Some students don't like online courses," she says. "I think it is the older student who often is not used to the technology. And sometimes there are so many problems with the technology that it is better to be in the class taking notes."

She says some students who were initially uncomfortable with the technology now thrive with a mouse in hand. "I have had students who did not know much about the technology who were forced to use it and are now grateful to have the skills they would not have developed otherwise," she says.

The distance learning program started small at the end of 1998. Today, 40 students are enrolled, some taking a combination of online and campus courses. Fourteen of those students will graduate this year.

"We have gotten such interest, and we don't even advertise. I get inquiries, though, all the time, from as far away as Australia, England, and Sicily," Grostick says.

Students enrolled in the bachelor's degree program can take up to 70 hours of classes online toward their degree. The only traditional courses they have to take are 10 hours of clinicals, which they can complete at sites close to home located all around the country.

"It's a whole new frontier," says Grostick, who has been in health information education since 1972. "I think it keeps me in education because it's so interesting. I embrace it."

She says distance learning offers students and parents a way to advance their education and get a four-year degree. "They can't just go off to school," she says. "This way, they can stay in the system, better educate themselves, and move up to better jobs while staying an asset to their profession."

She sees a different kind of student, too. "I think we are getting a more motivated student," she says. "You have to be motivated to want this on your own, to put your kids in bed at night and then spend two or three hours learning."

A Motivated Student

Paula Demby, RHIT, of Nashville, TN, is one of those motivated students. An outpatient reimbursement auditor for HCA-The HealthCare Co. and a manager in internal audit and consulting services, she travels the country. She graduated from UAB's HIT program and has been an RHIT since 1994. She loves the work, but wanted to complete her bachelor's degree. "Distance learning works well for me," she says. "It truly was an answer to my prayers. My job requires that I travel all over the United States, so without distance learning I could not complete my bachelor's degree."

For Demby, says correspondence classes were not an option. For years, she badgered Grostick to get a distance learning program in place.

"I needed a program structured more like the classroom setting where I can stay on track to complete assignments," she explained. "I am able to go to my hotel room after work wherever I am, get on the Web, and complete my assignments anywhere I travel."

Her latest class was financial management. She had chat sessions with the instructor on Saturday or Sunday mornings. She recalls a class meeting in a chat room and creating a spreadsheet for a capital budget while the professor walked them through the process. "Five or six years ago, who would have thought this would be possible?" she says.

Demby does miss the interaction of a classroom, valuing the face-to-face contact, interaction, and friendships that form. But distance learning is a close second in her world. "The benefit is that I have the ability to take the classroom with me anywhere I go or to the comfort of my office at home," she says. "The only drawback is that we all have computer problems at one time or another." Sometimes, she finds herself at hotels where she cannot access the Internet or where phone lines don't accommodate computers.

Distance learning allows for different kinds of instructors, who often are working in the field they teach. Grostick has an expert in medical coding based in Cincinnati teaching an online coding class. The instructor authored the text used in the class and meets weekly with the students in a chat room where she tosses out questions and expects quick responses. Another, an attorney who was teaching a legal issues class, moved to Tennessee, but still teaches online. "It's worked out really well," Grostick says.

In the beginning, Grostick says some students' computer systems were not as advanced as they needed to be. But they quickly upgraded.

Now, just a few years later, "We've had to upgrade our systems just to keep up with them," she says.

Meeting Many Needs

Sue Watkins, RHIA, CTR, is program director of the health information technology program at Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) in Santa Barbara, CA. As at other places, distance learning started out small and has exploded since. Currently, 215 students are enrolled all over the United States.

The college initiated its HIT two-year associate's degree program in the fall of 1997. The next year, it implemented medical reimbursement specialist and medical coding specialist certificate programs.

Seven students graduated from the HIT program in the spring of 1999, and 11 more graduated a year later. Students scored so well on the RHIT exam that SBCC's HIT program in October 2000 ranked fourth out of 176 HIT programs nationwide according to national testing results, Watkins proudly reports.

The program is totally online; no on-campus classes are required. Last fall, the college implemented a distance learning associate's degree program in cancer information management.

"Our programs meet the needs of students who are unable to attend traditional programs, who work full-time, or who have children or other obligations that make demands on their time," Watkins says.

"The distance education option also meets the special needs of many physically handicapped students," she adds. "We have a number of hearing-impaired students who have found the online education format provides them with an education in HIM that would not be available otherwise."

A Different Kind of Challenge

Count Donna Clendennin among those students. She's a single mother of three school-aged children who is hearing impaired. She struggles to make ends meet and to find time for learning.

"I am taking HIT classes while I take care of my children," says Clendennin. Distance learning has allowed her to continue her education from her home in Healdsburg, CA, a 90-minute drive north of San Francisco.

"I am able to stay home and be available to my children if they need my time," she says. "Distance learning helps me relieve the stress of having to fight traffic to get to school, finding a parking space, and being away from my children."

The benefits extend beyond that, though. "The best part is that even though I am hearing impaired, I am very much involved with my classmates and instructors by e-mailing to one another and chatting with each other in one of the HIT rooms," she says.

In a traditional classroom, Clendennin needed an American Sign Language interpreter in every class. "It made me feel like a third wheel when I tried to communicate with the instructor and my classmates," she says.

She likes doing the course work at her own pace and being able to manage her time and other commitments. Computer problems are a drawback, she says, but they can be worked out with patience. She prints out assignments and lecture notes and meets with others in online study groups.

She says distance learning is as challenging as being in the classroom. "This online learning requires a lot of reading as well as keeping in touch with classmates and the instructor," she says. "You have to manage your time well."

A Long-distance Master's

The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN, offers a master of arts degree in HIM. Program director Shirley Eichenwald, MBA, RHIA, says the program is uniquely designed "to meet the needs of working professionals across the nation who are seeking advanced education to facilitate their career development in an increasingly computerized data- and information-intensive healthcare environment."

The program began in the summer of 1997. The first 15 students received their master of arts in HIM degree last December. They are diverse in background and location, engaging in distance learning from Arkansas, California, Illinois, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Puerto Rico.

The MA in HIM curriculum is structured for delivery through a combination of four intensive two-week on-campus summer sessions, coupled with Web-based courses each fall and spring semester.

Eichenwald says students generally take three courses during the two-week, on-campus summer session. They usually take one online course during the spring and one during the fall semester. The program requires 36 credits.

"Students continue to work full time," she says. "They study with faculty who are qualified to guide their learning. They are engaged in collaborative learning activities while on campus. They experience the flexibility and power of the virtual classroom. They are assessed on their ability to apply their knowledge to practice-based problems and projects."

Master of arts student Liz Bechtle, RHIA, searched three years for a program that would suit her needs. She found it at St. Scholastica. The married mother of two is director of health information and the privacy officer at St. Elizabeth Regional Medical Center in Lincoln, NE.

She's worked her way up in the healthcare industry, working as everything from an information desk clerk to a utilization review technician. She started with an associate's degree in 1985 and received a bachelor's degree in HIA in 1989. Today, Bechtle finds her skills in demand in a growing field.

But with two young children, the MA she wanted took the sidelines until distance learning brought her back to the classroom.

"The schedule definitely fit my needs while balancing a very busy work and family life," she says. "There is no way I could do the classroom traditionally and get this done."

Some nights, she chooses to read to her kids or play a game with them instead of reading a class assignment. But with distance learning, she can log into instruction or study later. She embraces the flexibility while recognizing the importance of having discipline and keeping up with the class.

Bechtle mentioned another advantage of online learning: a new diversity, a broader mix of students. "The program I am in is definitely drawing more than just traditional HIM students," she says. "The mix in classes has broadened my knowledge and thinking."

Some distance learning classes are Internet-based; others are viewed on videotapes. Bechtle says she gets to know fellow students during the summer campus session, and they keep in touch by e-mail. And because the program stretches out over four years, long-time bonds can form.

She offers a bit of advice for anyone considering distance learning. "You gotta 'wanna'," Bechtle says. "If you are not internally driven to start and complete this while dealing with your ongoing regular life, don't do it. It takes serious self-discipline."

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Better Learning via Technology

Here are some tips for learning from afar, from veteran distance learners to potential distance learners:

- Make a commitment to complete assignments on time so you don't fall behind.
- Get involved in study groups and other interactive activities.
- Take all quizzes to assess your progress.
- Recognize the importance of managing your time.
- Keep up with reading.
- Have frequent one-on-one contact with the instructor.
- Be self-disciplined and self-motivated.
- Know that some classes are better if not taken online.
- Anticipate using a lot of paper and ink cartridges to print class materials.

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