Education: The Key to HIM Transformation

Save to myBoK

by Shirley Eichenwald, MBA, RRA

Vision 2006 is pointing the way to the transformation of HIM practice. But without individual action, the vision will not bear fruit. Education and professional development are the keys to making the transition to HIM professionals' roles and responsibilities in the next century.

Many years ago, a small wooden plaque mysteriously appeared on my desk at work. Put there by some anonymous hand, the sign is still my constant desk companion, reminding me each day that "Education is man's going forward from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty."

At some time in my youth, I believed education was only intended to help me "get a job." Now, as I reflect on the key role education will play in the transformation of the health information management profession, I have fully embraced the idea on my plaque—that the real value in education is the way it strengthens one's abilities to accept uncertainty and adapt to change.

Through education, one is increasingly liberated—free to grow in appreciation of the ways others think and perceive, and free to become more diverse in one's own way of thinking about and perceiving situations. This liberating factor makes uncertainty and change in our lives seem less threatening and more natural-and makes it easier for us to adapt.

For all HIM practitioners, no matter what their current level of education, uncertainty and change exist in the present and the future. The degree of uncertainty is significant, and the change is fundamental. The successful adaptation of HIM practice from a paper-based, acute-care focused environment to an electronic, integrated delivery system environment requires that practitioners engage in liberated thinking and create new paradigms for roles and functions.

The 1990s mark a significant point in the life cycle of this profession: it is the decade of transformation. The advances made, individually and collectively, in this decade to adapt critical HIM professional competencies to the electronic information environment will determine the success of our transformation. HIM practitioners who want to fully enjoy the benefits of emerging career opportunities must aggressively pursue focused educational goals.

AHIMA's Vision 2006 initiative shows the way to transforming HIM practice. The following information about HIM core competencies and model curriculum content may be useful to individual practitioners who are planning to embark on an educational journey through an academic program or through a self-designed program of professional development.

HIM Core Competencies and Knowledge Base

In 1943, the HIM profession embraced formal educational standards and guidelines for baccalaureate education. Ten years later, formal standards and guidelines for associate degree education were created. Since then, these educational standards have been regularly revised to incrementally advance the quality of the educational process and enhance the content of each of type of professional program, as changing roles and responsibilities required for HIM professionals within the healthcare job market.

In 1990, AHIMA initiated a futures discussion to focus on the impact of both emerging information technologies and increasing demand for individual and aggregate patient information. Since then, AHIMA's continuing futures discussion efforts and actions have been driven by the belief that the impact of these trends on the profession will no longer bring only incremental change, but will instead bring fundamental change to the profession. Vision 2006 was created to focus and communicate AHIMA's strategic commitment to position the profession for an effective transition into the envisioned, but admittedly uncertain, roles and responsibilities of the 21st century.

Significant aspects of this effort have been led by the Assembly on Education (AOE), which has developed curriculum models for associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree programs in HIM. Figures 1 and 2 are a part of the published model curriculum for entry-level associate and baccalaureate degree education, respectively.[1,2] These figures highlight the curriculum's core knowledge clusters, as well as the impact of general education requirements and transcurricular content on achieving the desired competency outcomes from that type of academic program.

General education requirements are components of an academic program that are intended to prepare students to function effectively in society. Oral and written communications, social and behavioral sciences, humanities, microcomputer literacy, general sciences, and mathematics constitute the general education requirements these curriculum models identify.[3] Transcurricular requirements are essentially the part of the curriculum focused on achieving specific behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. To a degree, all activities within the curriculum are designed to support the student's achievement of the transcurricular requirements. Critical thinking, personal initiative in education and career planning, communication, customer service orientation, leadership and collaboration, sensitivity to cultural and community needs, sensitivity to the healthcare delivery environment, and professional behavior are some of the important elements identified as transcurricular content in these curriculum models.[4]

A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 reveals the commonalities within, as well as the uniqueness of, associate and baccalaureate degree professional education. These qualities are described in the published model curriculum manuscript: "It is important to note that while the associate and baccalaureate curricula share common curricular foundations, they seek to accomplish significantly different outcomes ... The expertise of the associate degree graduate lies in the application of information technologies to support healthcare information operations. The expertise of the baccalaureate degree graduate lies in the interpretation, analysis and design of information systems, and the management of healthcare information resources and services."[5]

In October 1997, AHIMA's House of Delegates adopted revised standards for accredited educational programs. These incorporated the content framework of the associate- and baccalaureate-level curriculum models for health information technician and health information administration programs, respectively. These revised standards become effective for accreditation purposes in September 1998.

Moreover, this fall—45 years after standards for baccalaureate level education and 35 years after standards for associate education were first initiated—the model curriculum for master's degree education in HIM is scheduled to be published to encourage the further development of both entry-level and advanced practice-level graduate programs. This marks the beginning of a significant new era for the HIM profession.

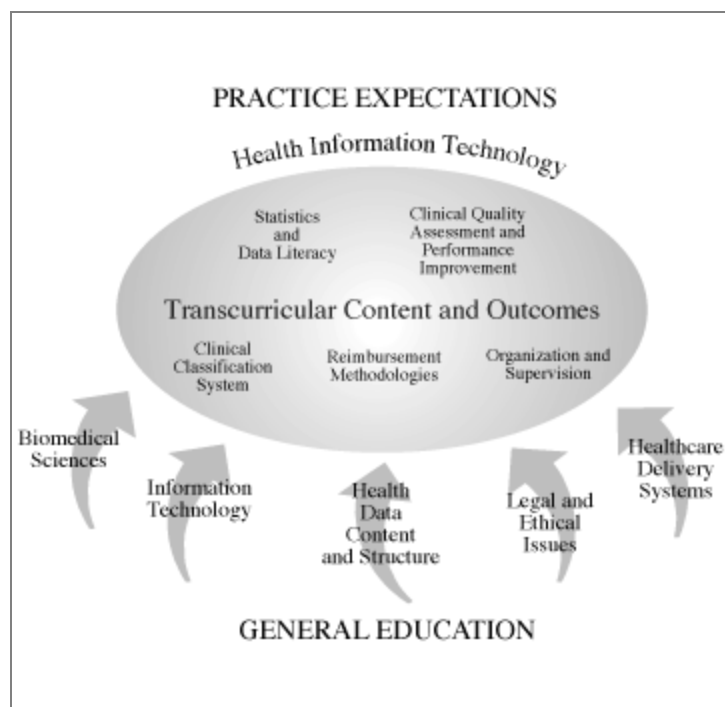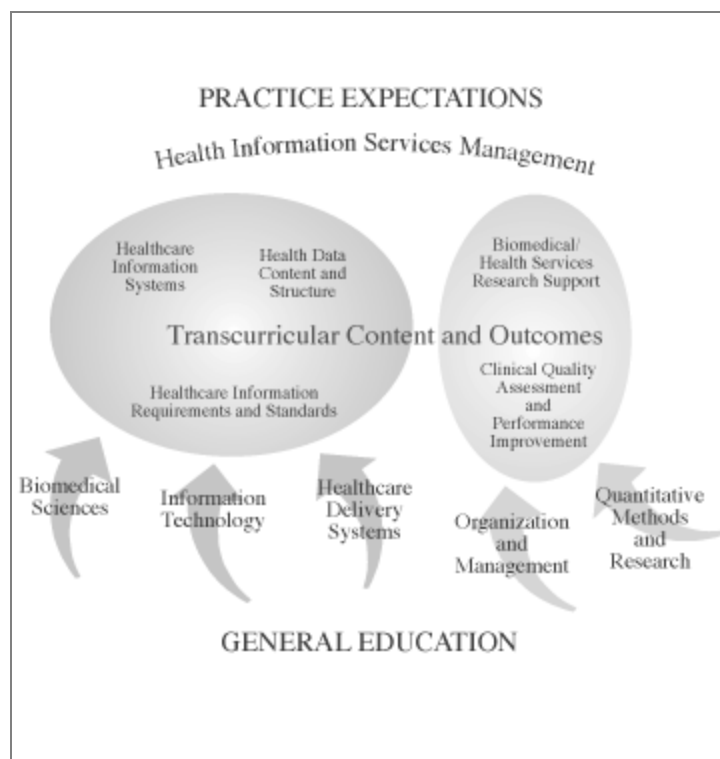**figure 1—Health Information Technology Model Curriculum, 1995**

**figure 2—Health Information Administration Model Curriculum, 1995**

Another Professional Development Benchmark

As transformational changes occur in the educational standards for our profession, practicing professionals can find several benchmarks to use in assessing their own readiness to change with the profession. Certainly the core HIM competencies and knowledge clusters, the general education content, and the transcurricular content identified in each of the model curricula are excellent guides for practicing HIM professionals to use. In addition, the mission statement for HIM education, included in AHIMA's model curriculum documents, provides insight into the competencies and attributes that the HIM professional of the 21st century will bring to the healthcare industry. It, too, is a professional benchmark. The mission statement describes HIM professionals as "confident, innovative, and contributing professionals who can identify and use a variety of information resources and technologies to accomplish the objectives of diverse practice environments."[6] The statement delivers an important message to all HIM professionals about the importance of leadership abilities, systems thinking, ethical values, commitment to lifelong learning, and being a self-directed learner. These are all key elements to adapting one's career in a changing environment.

What's Next for HIM Professionals?

AHIMA's Vision 2006 initiative has produced and widely disseminated a model of emerging roles in health information management practice. Figure 3 depicts these roles, which include that of the clinical data specialist, data quality manager, research analyst, patient information coordinator, document and repository manager, security manager, and the health information manager, along with roles in consulting, education, and applications design.[7]

figure 3—Emerging HIM Roles
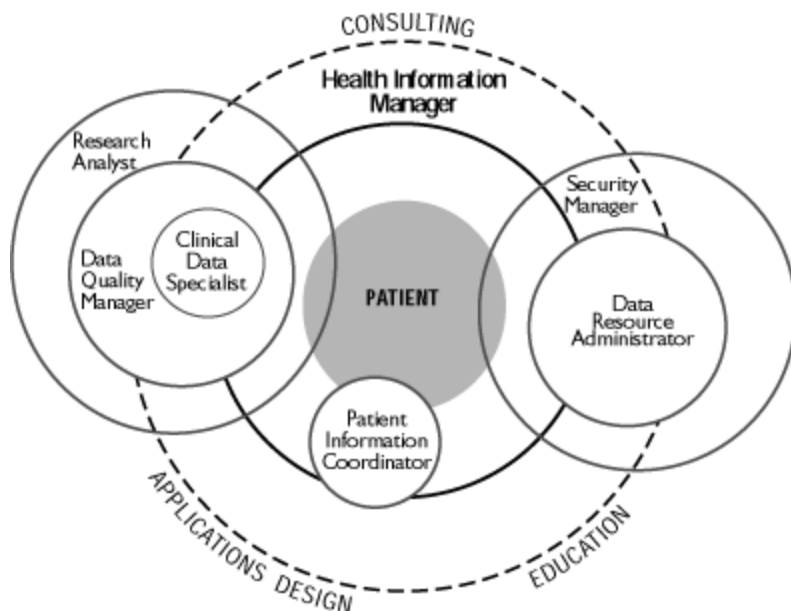
A recent AHIMA brochure, "A Blueprint for the 21st Century," highlights the basic nature of the transition occurring in HIM practice. Changes include the diminishing focus on department management and increasing focus on information management; the diminishing focus on the paper record and the increasing focus on the electronic database; the diminishing focus on forms and physical record design and increasing focus on construction of data flows and designing computer applications for handling clinical and administrative data; and the heightened focus on design, implementation, and maintenance of security controls to assure data integrity and confidentiality.[8]

For each HIM professional, these components of Vision 2006—the model of emerging roles and the transition chart, in addition to the model curricula—when reviewed carefully and reflectively, provide considerable food for thought and significant impetus for action among HIM practitioners.

While the educational community engages in the work of curriculum implementation based on new and unique visions for associate, baccalaureate, and graduate education, HIM practitioners everywhere have their own work ahead. HIM professionals must focus on translating emerging role and curriculum models into an individual professional development program in a way that is appropriate to their near-term and long-term career aspirations.

figure 4

HIM Practices: Traditional and Emerging

Vision 2006 actions include comparing traditional HIM practices to emerging ones.

Traditional Practice	Emerging HIM Practice
Department-based	Information-based
Physical records	Data item definition; data modeling; data administration; data auditing
Aggregation and display of data	Electronic searches; shared knowledge sources; statistical and modeling techniques
Forms and records design	Logical data views; data flow and reengineering; application development; application support
Confidentiality and release of information	Security, audit, and control programs; risk assessment and analysis; prevention and control measures

For some, this may mean making a decision to return to academic life on either a part-time or full-time basis—to pick up a few courses or to progress through an entire curriculum in an associate, baccalaureate, or master's degree program. For others, this means seeking out and selectively investing in specialized short courses, seminars, or self-study packages that meet a self-identified area of need for advancing a competence or knowledge base. Fortunately, educational programs are available at all levels, creating flexible methods of delivering content. Furthermore, HIM professionals can turn to a professional association, AHIMA, that is actively involved in the creation of professional development products and services.

While getting an education, by its very nature, is always a do-it-yourself project, educational resource partners such as these are highly valued benefits for all HIM professionals. Their existence supports the conviction that in times of uncertainty and change, education can and will be our liberator.

Notes

1. Assembly on Education. "Entry-Level Associate Degree Education in Health Information Management: Reform for the 21st Century." Chicago: AHIMA, 1995, p.11.

2. Assembly on Education. "Entry-Level Baccalaureate Degree Education in Health Information Management: Reform for the 21st Century." Chicago: AHIMA, 1995, p. 12.

3. Assembly on Education, p. 11.

4. Assembly on Education, p. 9.

5. Brodnik, M., M. McCain, J. Linck, B. Bowman, C. Elliott, M. Johns, C. DeBerg, and M. St. Leger. "A Summary of the Associate and Baccalaureate Degree Curriculum Models for Health Information Management, Part I." *Journal of AHIMA* 68, no. 4 (1997): 61.

6. Assembly on Education, AHIMA. "Entry-Level Baccalaureate Degree Education in Health Information Management: Reform for the 21st Century." Chicago: AHIMA, 1995, pp. 6-7.

7. AHIMA. "Inventing the Future: Vision 2006—The Vision Continues." Brochure. Chicago: AHIMA, 1996.

8. AHIMA. "A Blueprint for the 21st Century." Chicago: AHIMA, 1998.

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Article Citation:

Eichenwald, Shirley. "Education: The Key to HIM Transformation." *Journal of AHIMA* 69, no. 7 (1998): 42-45.

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