

# Going the Distance: Balancing Work and Education in a Distance Learning Program

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by Michelle Dougherty, RHIA, CHP

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*Distance education is a popular choice for HIM professionals looking to advance their education while working full time. Here, students discuss the advantages and challenges and how they manage busy schedules.*

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Distance education offers flexibility that's hard to beat for busy professionals looking to extend their education. It also connects students with programs that fit their needs, wherever they are located. However, a distance program requires self-direction and self-discipline, and even without a commute or the rigidity of classroom schedules, it still competes with a busy work and home life.

If you are toying with the idea of going back to school but can't quite make the leap, the insights of four HIM professionals in different career stages who returned to school while working full time may help. They discuss their decisions to go back to school, how they made it work, and how it wasn't as hard as they thought it might be.

**Lori Fermanich**, CPMSM, RHIT, CPHQ, has worked in healthcare for 25 years. Five years ago she received her RHIT through an independent study program; currently she is working on her bachelor's degree in HIM. Fermanich is risk management consultant at a Wisconsin hospital. **Maida Reavis Herbst**, MA, RHIA, has been in the HIM profession for 25 years. She is part owner of an HIM consulting company and until recently was director of health information services at a hospital in California. Herbst has completed a master's program and now is a faculty member for a distance-education master's program. **Amy Watters**, RHIA, has eight year's experience in HIM and is enrolled in a master's in HIM program. She most recently worked as a product manager for a software and consulting firm in Texas. **Michelle Dougherty**, RHIA, CHP, has 17 years of experience in the HIM field and is currently enrolled in a master's of HIM program. She works at AHIMA as a manager in practice leadership. Their discussion began with their decisions to return to school.

*What led you to continue your education?*

**Fermanich:** I had been working in medical staff services for a very long time. When I was in the RHIT program, I was really excited about the move toward the electronic health record. I thought that whole aspect of HIM was so interesting that I wanted to be a part of it.

**Watters:** I wanted a new challenge. I always knew when I finished my undergraduate degree that I would go back to school. In the last couple of years I started thinking about it and investigated different programs. The HIM field changes so much, and there are new things happening every day. I really wanted to learn more about what's happening—for my own marketability in the field and for possible opportunities in the future.

**Herbst:** I am a perennial student, so it was natural for me to go on to get a master's degree. I had been looking for a master's program since 1991 but was never entranced by the local university offerings—none were specifically focused on HIM. Then I saw a distance learning program I knew was right.

**Dougherty:** It was evident the profession was changing and the skills needed for e-HIM<sup>TM</sup> and the electronic health record were changing, too. I felt that I could keep up but only to the degree it related to my job. Going back through formal educational programs ensured that I would have a well-rounded picture of what is happening in the field today.

**Fermanich:** I think I've been very lucky that I actually got in this as late as I did in my life. My program incorporates a lot of the IT information in the curriculum, and I'm getting really up-to-date training. I find that very valuable.

*Was there a specific event or motivation that had you finally filling out the application and registering for that first course?*

**Fermanich:** I attended my first Wisconsin Health Information Management Association conference and thought it was very exciting and certainly different from the conferences I typically attended. I saw a brochure for a progression program out on the table during a break and thought, “I want to do this.”

**Watters:** For me there wasn’t really a specific thing or event. I had been looking at different programs, even outside of HIM, trying to figure out which direction I wanted to go next. Once I found the program, the structure, and the courses that I was looking for, it helped me decide.

**Dougherty:** I also had been thinking about the various options available and looked at curriculums in and out of HIM. The event that triggered my enrollment was meeting with faculty and college admissions staff at a national conference. My questions about entrance exams, course load, and tuition options were answered. It was much easier than I thought. I enrolled the month after the conference.

*Why did you choose a distance program versus a face-to-face, more traditional program?*

**Herbst:** I chose the distance program because I could attend a prestigious school half a continent away while working full time.

**Watters:** I didn’t go into this thinking I was going to do a distance program. I was investigating a lot of different avenues and trying to figure out which program would work best for me. That it was a distance program was an added bonus, because I wasn’t sure that I wanted to spend hours in a classroom.

There were some programs that had weekend courses, but the thought of working all week and then going to school all weekend just seemed overwhelming to me. So the structure of a distance program, I realized, was perfect for me. I knew that I would have the discipline to be able to do it on my own.

**Dougherty:** I never thought of any other option but distance because I knew that my number-one need for a program was flexibility. Like Amy, I had no desire to spend every weekend in a classroom. Unlike Amy, I worried that I would not be disciplined enough for a distance learning program. But I found distance programs can provide both flexibility and structure to stay on track.

*What do you expect an advanced degree will do for your career?*

**Herbst:** A master’s degree assists one in obtaining a job and advancement. Many hospitals are requiring a master’s for nursing administration positions; I see the possibility of this in other departments, including HIM.

**Watters:** My hope for pursuing an advanced degree is that it will make me even more marketable in the health information field and provide new career opportunities.

**Fermanich:** I’m confident that an advanced degree will allow me to move into management in HIM or a related field. RHIA certification and a bachelor’s degree are frequently listed as desired, and occasionally required, in many HIM positions. Management of a department is the focus of my program’s curriculum, and I am quite prepared to perform in that role now.

*What are some of the advantages to a distance program?*

**Watters:** I think the biggest advantage is exactly what you said earlier, Michelle, and that’s flexibility. I can work ahead of time to try and get things done so I don’t have to worry about it while I’m on the road. If I’m going to be on vacation, I can work around that. It’s really nice to have flexibility, complete work when I’m able, and take the time I need to do the best I can.

**Dougherty:** Flexibility is definitely one of the biggest advantages, and yet there’s still structure to the courses. One of my biggest concerns was that life would get in the way of school. To have flexibility yet structure helps keep me accountable and on track. I can lay out the quarter and look at my family schedule, work schedule, and school schedule to figure out when to start and complete assignments and juggle the different demands. I have had to ask for extensions on due dates when my schedule gets too tight. Faculty have been very accommodating—they understand the demands of balancing work and school.

**Fermanich:** The bachelor's program that I am in is set up differently. I have to be on chat lines at certain times for some classes and take exams at exactly the same time as everybody else. I could get permission if I knew in advance I wasn't going to be available, but there was a lot more structure to some of these classes than I had thought there would be.

*Was the program easier or harder than you expected?*

**Watters:** It's actually been easier than I expected. I think that's because the classes are so interesting and I am enjoying the course work. Everything that I have learned I have been able to apply directly to what I'm doing in my daily work. It all seems to fit together, and that has made it much easier for me.

**Fermanich:** It actually has been harder for me up until this year because a lot of it was repeat information from my RHIT or things that I had already done in college. I like to be challenged. Now in the last two semesters it has been much more interesting. I've gotten to the IT classes and those I find very interesting—I didn't have a lot of background in technology.

**Herbst:** It was both. I remember one of my first courses where I wondered if I could read fast enough to get through all the material. I was grateful that I knew computer technology, having worked at a very advanced facility in the recent past.

**Dougherty:** I thought it was easier. I thought it was going to be hard to buckle down and juggle a busy job and busy life. I found that with good scheduling it was easier to stick with it and put a system in place. The classes have been interesting. Now I have a much more well-rounded understanding of the course topics.

*What are some of the challenges that you found?*

**Watters:** I think that the biggest challenge is just staying on top of things. This semester is the first semester I've had three classes, and juggling all three has been a challenge.

**Herbst:** The challenge is self-discipline. You must keep up with reading, research, and assignments while work and personal life go on at the same time.

**Dougherty:** One of the challenges that I have every semester with each class is getting reoriented. Faculty set up the Web portal differently. Information about the classes, structure, assignments, reading, bulletin board posting expectations, communication with instructors, et cetera, may be laid out a little differently on the Web site. Each semester I find myself floundering a bit until I get organized and feel that I understand the expectations for the course.

I also agree that it is a challenge to keep up with the readings and assignments. I carry around my readings and take advantage of down time whenever I can. It is not unusual for me to read in the lobby of the pediatrician's office or catch up on a three-hour cross-country flight.

*What adaptations did you find necessary in adjusting your life to accommodate a distance learning program and going back to school?*

**Fermanich:** It is just having to discipline yourself, watch the calendar, organize yourself, and plan the time. But it truly wasn't difficult—I have to be very organized at my job.

**Watters:** I agree. The biggest thing I had to do to adapt was being disciplined about setting aside the time. Now when I get home from work I have to make sure and set aside a block of time to check in, read through things, do my readings, or whatever the case may be.

**Dougherty:** I adjusted by integrating my class schedule into my work schedule. Every day I look at my planner and what I have due that day and week. It's all integrated in one place. It helps me figure out when to start working on an assignment or reading and decide when it is necessary to stay up late to get schoolwork done.

**Watters:** I think one of the things that I have learned is that if I don't understand something I have to go back and figure it out. I can e-mail the instructor and ask any questions of the rest of the class through our bulletin-board postings, but I really learned to push myself to make the extra effort and work through the question.

**Dougherty:** In the past when I was in school I depended on lectures for learning and considered reading as supplementary. With a distance program I've had to flip my learning style. The readings are one of the main ways to learn, supplemented by the discussion board and assignments.

I think the discussion board is also a useful learning tool. The discussions have helped to supplement my understanding of a topic or provide a place to ask questions. Students have a variety of backgrounds and come at topics from different perspectives—it gives me a better perspective on issues discussed in class.

*What advice would you give on succeeding at distance education?*

**Fermanich:** I would say you need to organize yourself, schedule yourself, plan, and plan alternatives when the original plan doesn't work.

**Watters:** First of all, don't be intimidated. It can be intimidating to post an opinion or a question to the bulletin board for all the world to see. But generally it's great to get other people's opinions and to get their experience, and everybody learns so much from that. Most of the time when you have a question, someone else probably has the same question.

My other tip is to make friends with people in your classes. It's great to pick up the phone and say, "I just need to talk through something." Or if I'm not sure about an assignment, having someone else to bounce ideas off of is really helpful.

**Herbst:** Establish a home office location for study. Schedule reading throughout the week. Exercise, even if it is a 15-minute walk—studying is a sedentary occupation, and stress eating, while soothing, can contribute to weight gain.

**Dougherty:** I echo the organization and planning. Your planner is your friend. A good planning tool becomes critical.

*Finally, how do you balance work, life, and going back to school?*

**Fermanich:** My husband and I could come and go as we pleased before I went back to school. Now I make sure that we can still take vacations together and take time off. I plan that around school or take schoolwork with me when I go. I haven't had as hard a time as I thought fitting school into my schedule. I'm actually wondering what I'm going to do with all the time when I am finished.

**Watters:** Because of the structure of the program, it's fit into my life very well. But I do think that I've had to make a more proactive, conscious effort to take time for the other things that I enjoy outside of work and school.

**Herbst:** I took an additional year to finish my master's. I very much wanted to graduate with the class, but reality set in, so my advisor helped me spread the classes out.

**Dougherty:** I think Amy said it well—you need to make sure that you're not just giving up the other aspects of your life. I still volunteer. I stay active with the kids, work full time, and go to school. I think the important thing is making sure that you take time for yourself, your family, and your interests. Like Maida, I am going to take an extra year. Finishing in two years wasn't that important—I was going to have to give up too much.

It is funny now looking back. I have to wonder if I was really as busy as I thought. Every now and then I think, "What did I do with my time before school started?"

## Tips for Distance-education Learners

Online learning requires self-discipline, commitment, motivation, and a serious investment of time. Determining whether distance education is right for you will be key to your success.

Faculty in the bachelor of science HIM program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the HIT/CIM department at Santa Barbara City College, the HIM program at Dakota State University, and the department of healthcare informatics and information management at the College of St. Scholastica shared the following tips for success.

### Self-Direction

Keeping studies on track requires self-direction and organization. Gauge your ability by asking:

- Are you self-motivated and can you work independently?

- How organized are you?
- Are you able to stay focused and on task, or are you easily distracted by other commitments and interests?
- Can you successfully take a class without the structured setting of a classroom? Do you meet deadlines without requiring frequent reminders?
- How good are you at following directions? Do you read material closely?

### **Time Commitments**

Online classes offer more flexibility about how and when you use your time, but they do not require less time than face-to-face classes. Realistically assess your family, work, and other commitments.

- How good are your time management skills?
- Can you develop and handle a time management calendar that allows for study on a regular basis?
- If necessary, can you adjust your work and family schedules to communicate with coursemates and instructors as required by the course? Team or group work is often a part of distance classes, and time differences from coast to coast can be challenging.
- What is a reasonable course load for you, given your other commitments? Santa Barbara City College recommends that students who work full time and have family and personal commitments limit enrollment to six units per semester, which represents an estimated 18 hours of work per week.

### **Computer Skills**

Evaluate your personal computer skills and assess your familiarity with current computer technology. Programs typically offer some level of computer support, but you must be capable of managing and using the necessary hardware and software yourself.

- How comfortable are you with computers, the Internet, file management, and troubleshooting?
- Can you manage a WebCT or Blackboard application using e-mail, chat, exam icons, drop boxes, and other features?

### **Computer Capacity**

Your computer and your connection to the Internet will also have to meet minimum requirements.

- Is your computer capable of running the applications necessary to participate in the program?
- Do you have access to a high-speed Internet connection? If not, can you live with the slower, more ponderous pace of a dial-up connection?
- Do you have access to the commonly required software applications such as Word, Access, PowerPoint, and Excel? Will you need to purchase any special software, such as SPSS?

### **Testing Your Online Compatibility**

Many programs offer tests that help you evaluate if online learning is right for you. Dakota State University offers a test at [www.departments.dsu.edu/disted/NEWSITE2005/E-Education/Orientation/selfReadiness\\_Guest.htm](http://www.departments.dsu.edu/disted/NEWSITE2005/E-Education/Orientation/selfReadiness_Guest.htm). Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, CA, offers a test at [http://foothillglobalaccess.org/orientation/pre\\_assessment.htm](http://foothillglobalaccess.org/orientation/pre_assessment.htm).

### **Tips for Assessing Programs**

There are many factors to weigh when choosing a program. The first consideration, however, should be whether the program is accredited by the appropriate agencies. Baccalaureate and associate degree programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education, which is the accrediting body for degree-granting programs in health informatics and information management.

In addition to academics, be sure the program provides all the services you'll need, such as registration and payment, orientation to online learning, bookstore and library services, technical support, and training for software and course management tools. Remember that since you're unlikely to live near the campus, all your administrative issues must be resolved from a distance, also.

Assess your comfort level in communicating with the program. Is the information and registration process smooth? Problems with these processes may foreshadow problems with the courses. You will need to be realistic about responsiveness, however. There are times such as weekends when your e-mail may go unanswered for one to two days. Clear expectations are necessary.

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