

Great Expectations: Program Director Provides Education for Tomorrow's HIM Professionals

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by Anne Zender, MA, vice president of communications

When Abby Cooper, MHIM, RHIA, became a college instructor, she expected to teach, grade, and advise students. What she didn't expect was that for many students, she'd come to represent the HIM profession. "You have to spend a lot of time selling the program and the profession," says Cooper, who is program director and instructor in health information technology at Volunteer State Community College in Gallatin, TN.

"I loved HIM and was good at it, but I felt there was something missing--the opportunity to impact someone else's life.."

—Abby Cooper, MHIM, RHIA

As an instructor, Cooper teaches online and on-campus courses, revises curricula, and helps students find sites for clinical rotations. But that's only part of her job. As director, she is also responsible for her program's budget and marketing. Cooper also advises numerous students—the 25 people accepted into the program each year—as well as the undecided students interested in entering the HIM program.

Unexpected Benefits

Cooper made the switch from a role as an HIM director at a hospital to educator in 2005. She says she'd always thought about making a transition to academic work, but attending AHIMA's Assembly on Education and Faculty Development Institute a few years ago helped her confirm that it was time to make the change.

She heard about an opening at her alma mater, Volunteer State, at about the same time she was starting to study for her master's degree. She applied and got the job. "It just fell into place," she says.

Cooper says she most enjoys helping students. "It's wonderful to see students flourish," she says. She also enjoys developing courses and what she calls "academic freedom." She says this means "you can make a topic your own. I love to incorporate new ideas into my teaching."

Education for Tomorrow's Jobs

The key to preparing students to work in the current HIM environment, Cooper says, is to help them develop skill sets that are sufficiently varied so that they can get a job in any setting or facility. It's a challenge, she says. "We need to make sure [students] are prepared, regardless of the setting they get a job in," she says. "We need to make sure they are as well rounded as possible."

Cooper also works hard to equip her students to cope with the age-old problem of landing a first job without having experience. "We put a lot of focus on professional practice experiences," she says. "We also encourage students to get a part-time or entry-level job while still in school. That's how I did it, and it made a big difference for me in terms of my career."

Cooper also emphasizes the importance of interviewing skills and résumé writing, as well as having a healthy dose of perspective during the job search. "You're not always going to get your dream job," she tells her students. "You may need to move to a different location. Try to see the big picture. You can always move back later."

Despite the challenges, Cooper says her biggest reward is the satisfaction of encouraging and nurturing future HIM professionals. "At the community college level, a lot of individuals have never been encouraged [in terms of education]," she

says. "No one has said to them, 'you are capable of doing more.' They just need one person who is honestly interested in their success. That, to me, is the most rewarding thing—to be the one person who tells them they can succeed."

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