HIM Curriculum Must Be Revamped to Include Information Governance

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By Chris Dimick

Data and information governance practices have been recognized by industry thought leaders as the future of the HIM profession. As healthcare continues to implement electronic health record systems and other health IT, the importance of health information as a clinical and financial asset has increased. Healthcare employers are beginning to realize that data and information governance initiatives are the key to maximizing this asset, and have begun looking for employees who can manage and run these initiatives.

Educators have also taken notice of the industry move toward data and information governance and have begun adapting their HIM programs to ensure students graduate with skills that enable them to thrive in this new industry environment. Hoping to help other educators ensure data and information governance is integrated and highlighted in their higher education HIM programs, Ohio State University's (OSU) HIM Systems Division educators Susan White, PhD, RHIA, CHDA and Laurie Rinehart-Thompson, JD, RHIA, CHP gave the presentation "Integrating Data and Information Governance throughout the HIM Curriculum" on Tuesday at the 2014 Assembly on Education Symposium, taking place in Chicago, IL.

Foundation for Governance Education Already Present

For those nervous HIM educators scrambling to update their curriculum to include content related to information governance and data governance, there is some good news, White said. Data and information governance principles are likely already within the curriculum of HIM programs, it is just "a matter of pulling it out, giving it a name, and cultivating it" into structured education, White said.

"We didn't see information governance coming, but when we looked we found these pieces were in the curriculum," White said.

During their presentation, White and Rinehart-Thompson illustrated how OSU adapted their HIM program to ensure it taught the principles and practical applications of data and information governance.

Ohio State educators first conducted an audit of their HIM curriculum, searching for elements of data and information governance inherently within the current program. During this audit they developed a "heat map" that showed which classes contained governance content, and in what form. They found that not only were governance principles and best practices already being taught, they were also cutting across curriculum domains and courses.

Doing this audit allowed OSU the ability to see where their strengths and gaps existed in their governance curriculum. Using this information, the university has been updating its curriculum to ensure governance elements are included in all of its courses.

"We need to be continuously moving to keep students in line with industry needs," Rinehart-Thompson said.

In general, data governance was being taught in the introductory HIM classes, such as form management, what goes into an index, and record ID management –management of data going into a system. Information governance was being taught in the more advanced HIM classes, such as data mining, statistical analysis, and record lifecycle management.

For example, in OSU's CPT/ICD-9/ICD-10 coding courses, instructors were teaching the proper use of codes and how to ensure documentation supports the level of coding. In other words, they were teaching how to use data in the record and assign a proper code, which falls in line with data governance principles, Rinehart-Thompson said.

One class where OSU educators found instruction on information governance principles was the Healthcare Reimbursement Systems class, which teaches students how to manage and use clinical data for proper payment as well as analyze and use information in the record to meet various governance and private payment models. Classes teaching how to meet quality measures also touched on information governance principles, focusing on how to use data and information to measure if a facility is meeting mandated goals.

The audit "gave us a sigh of relief" that the fundamental elements of data and information governance principles and practices were already in the curriculum, said Rinehart-Thompson, "not that we don't have more to do."

HIM Must Sell Their Governance Contribution

White said that all HIM educators should adapt their programs to highlight data and information governance, and teach their students to be advocates for governance in vendor and provider work settings. Students need to sell their worth as HIM professionals within organizations, and part of that sell is showing how data and information governance will ensure information is accurate to the point that it becomes a clinical and financial asset.

This starts with ensuring both educators and students change their vocabulary around these governance concepts to ensure they are meeting the industry need. OSU instructors drill into students that they need to talk the talk of the industry and understand the concepts of data and information governance. While governance as a justification and selling point of HIM is fairly new, the HIM practices related to governance have been around for decades.

With data governance, delivering accurate, timely, clean, non-ambiguous data and information is central to HIM, as well as data and information governance. Policies around information availability, creation and confidentially are "all old HIM traits that are renewed through information governance," Rinehart-Thompson said. "We are stewards of a very valuable asset. That asset's value needs to be shared with students."

Common healthcare challenges such as copy/paste, defining the legal health record, HIPAA compliance, medical identity theft, and eDiscovery can also be overcome with data and information governance practices. "What is included and excluded from the record, this is an information governance issue," Rinehart-Thompson said.

Industry Feedback Should Shape Governance Curriculum

When adapting a curriculum to feature data and information governance education, educators should perform an environmental scan to see what governance needs are there in the field. This can be done with an advisory committee, recent graduates, long time alumni, and adjunct faculty that also work in the HIM field. Educators should also stay current with the AHIMA HIM Body of Knowledge, Rinehart-Thompson said, reading everything they can on governance issues and education.

"HIM professionals can be the bridge between clinicians and IT to ensure data integrity and that data is managed the right way," White said.

HIM professionals are in charge of a "goldmine" through their work with data and information, Rinehart-Thompson said. The next generation of HIM work will be focused on governance, and in order to thrive in healthcare HIM professionals need to learn governance skills and recognize and promote the strategic asset of information, which will elevate the profession.

"Information and data governance are fast moving and will continue to evolve as technology and legal requirements change, creating new challenges," Rinehart-Thompson said. "But it is an exciting time, too."

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