

# Join the Association's Celebration of Diversity

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by Barbara Odom-Wesley, PhD, RHIA

I am so proud to be a part of an organization that celebrates and promotes diversity. One of the Association's recently refined values statements is: "The celebration and promotion of diversity." AHIMA is committed to respecting our members and all individuals with whom we work and collaborate.

## Recognizing the Differences

The Association's diversity initiative began in 1996 with a subcommittee organized to explore ways to bring the issue of diversity to the forefront. It began by initiating the collection of data to help understand membership trends. A diversity task force was appointed in 2000 to enhance AHIMA members' ability to celebrate and promote diversity within the Association through education, mentoring, recognition, leadership, and other programs.

The task force developed this definition for diversity management: **Recognizing and appreciating the differences among the members of a group, namely AHIMA, and highlighting those differences to maximize the effectiveness and success of the group.** It includes:

- promoting opportunities for those entering the HIM field
- supporting and affirming all members
- developing, encouraging, soliciting, and using the talents and contributions of all members

Building awareness was the first step for the task force. The focus is recognizing and appreciating differences among the members of AHIMA and promoting those differences to maximize the effectiveness and success of the Association. The components of the program are leadership development, education, recognition, and communication.

Leadership development includes a mentoring/nurturing program. It also invites members to seek leadership positions. Education initiatives include recruitment and retention of students in HIA/HIT programs so that the HIM work force reflects the diversity of the US population.

## Making a Difference

Diversity scholarships were offered for the first time in 1997. Additionally, under the leadership of Wanda Heath, the Esther Mayo Sherard Foundation awarded its first scholarship in 2000. Sherard was the first African-American to be credentialed as a Registered Record Librarian with the American Medical Record Association. Overcoming racial barriers to get her education, Sherard began her teaching career at Shaw University in Raleigh, NC. She established the Homer G. Phillips School of Medical Record Library Science, which was dedicated to training people of all races.

Articles on diversity have been published in the *Journal of AHIMA* and presentations on diversity have been included at National Conventions. Diversity management sessions were a part of the 2001 Leadership Conference and were also featured at some state conventions.

The task force is in its third year and is completing its work by converting to a Community of Practice. Posted materials and activities are available to support diversity at the state and local association levels as well as for the individual member. Diversity management begins with each individual. Self-assessment is the first step to diversity competence, followed by acknowledgment, commitment, and willingness to change.

## Celebrating the Differences

Now that the national leadership has laid the foundation to promote and celebrate diversity, it is time for the component state associations to use the AHIMA model to ensure each state reflects diversity in its volunteer leaders and program activities. Individual members should seek opportunities to celebrate and promote diversity within our profession. Ask yourself: What is the best thing that could happen if we embrace diversity? And what could happen if we do not embrace diversity?

AHIMA has made the commitment and provided the framework. Now it is up to each one of us to put the plan into action.

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**Article citation:**

Odom-Wesley, Barbara. "Join the Association's Celebration of Diversity." *Journal of AHIMA* 73, no.8 (2002): 8.

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