Keeping Education Honest

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CAHIIM Accreditation brings accountability to the Broad Realm of Health Information Education

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The United States has set a goal to increase the number of college degree recipients by 2018 and has challenged academic institutions to ensure sustained attention to the quality of student learning. The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability states that "awarding more degrees will only be meaningful if those degrees reflect a high level of student accomplishment, with student engagement in learning and learning outcomes that will decrease attrition rates and improve graduation numbers."[1]

The role of programmatic accreditation is important to establish a set of agreed-upon standards, academic competencies, and correlating educational curricula with industry needs to define a profession or a subspecialty within it. Once standards and competencies have been determined, they can then be used to evaluate the content and quality of the educational program delivered by an academic institution. This is the mission and scope of work of the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM).

Why Accreditation Matters

Program accreditation involves a rigorous evaluation process that is voluntary and represents a peer review approach to quality program assessment. A program seeking or maintaining CAHIIM accreditation undergoes this peer review process to ensure that the curriculum offered meets industry standards and expectations for qualified graduates coming into the health information workforce. CAHIIM's scope of accreditation includes associate and baccalaureate degree programs in health information management (HIM) and master's degree programs in health informatics and HIM in the United States and Puerto Rico.

HIM academic programs have been offered at the baccalaureate degree level since the 1940s and at the associate degree level since the 1950s. The master's degree in HIM began in 1998, and CAHIIM expanded its scope to include the master's degree in health informatics in 2010.[2] The HIM curricula historically refers to the management of health data and information captured in medical or health records, increasingly now in electronic form. While it is a distinct area of focus, the field of HIM overlaps some aspects of health informatics.[3] Health informatics is often cited as the field that is concerned with the optimal use of information, aided by the use of technology, to improve individual health, healthcare, public health, and biomedical research.[4]

In 2011, *U.S. News and World Report* named health information/health informatics as one of nine promising careers for 2012.[5] The label "health informatics" is widely used today as a marketing term by colleges, encompassing higher education programs as well as emerging courses in high schools and trade schools. A value of CAHIIM program accreditation is to differentiate the types of programs offered (regardless of label or name) by the curriculum content in which they are evaluated.

For potential students entering the health information/ health informatics fields and current HIM professionals seeking higher education and career advancement, the choices are many and the fields are broad. Without programmatic accreditation, it is difficult to discern which academic program to choose and where it will lead. CAHIIM accreditation provides not only a gateway to the professional certification credentials of RHIT and RHIA, but a guide as well to the types of programs offered based on the established standards and curricula under which each program is evaluated.

It's What You Know

HIM programs at the baccalaureate level focus on some of the following curriculum domains:[6]

- health data management, information requirements, and data standards
- clinical classification systems, reimbursement methodologies, and revenue cycle management
- health statistics and research
- quality management and performance improvement
- privacy, confidentiality, and security of health data
- information and communication technologies
- data analytics, storage, and security
- human resources management, strategic planning, and organizational development
- a strong foundation in the biomedical sciences

A graduate-level program in health informatics, as evidenced in the CAHIIM accreditation curriculum requirements, will have an emphasis in one or more of the following facets.[7] While all three facets and curricular components must be introduced within the curriculum, where a program emphasizes a specific facet, the depth of instruction for those curricular components under that facet can be comprehensive:

- Information systems-concerned with such issues as information systems analysis, design, implementation, and management
- Informatics-focuses on the structure, function and transfer of information, socio-technical aspects of health computing, and human-computer interaction
- Information technology-concerned with computer networks, database and systems administration, security, and programming

The master's in health information management curriculum requirements focus on:[8]

- Health data structure and management
- Data analytics and outcomes
- Healthcare information systems and technology
- Data security, privacy, and confidentiality
- Information management planning
- Leadership, organization, and resource management
- Education and training

Benefits of Being CAHIIM Accredited

Achieving CAHIIM accreditation requires academic programs to successfully complete a voluntary peer review process that evaluates programs based on their ability to meet or exceed the minimum standards set by CAHIIM. The benefits of becoming a CAHIIM-accredited program are numerous-not just for colleges and universities, but for students and employers as well.

For Students

- Quality programs provide professionally required knowledge and skills
- Ability to search for programs in the CAHIIM directory
- Employment and marketability
- Establishes academic eligibility for applicable professional certifications

For Colleges and Universities

- Promotes continuous quality improvement through monitoring and reevaluation
- Provides online assessment tools for outcome metrics and trend data
- Adherence to the Code of Good Practice of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors as a member organization

For Employers

- Assurance that graduates have expected knowledge and skills
- Curriculum relevant to today's electronic health record environment

Source: www.cahiim.org/aboutcahiim.html

The Right Questions

Anyone contemplating advanced education should ask the right questions first: Is the sponsoring educational institution regionally or nationally accredited by an accreditation organization recognized by the US Department of Education? At the undergraduate level, does it participate in Title IV federal grant aid for students?

While there is no national rule on transfer credits, students seeking to move from one academic institution to another should be aware that often credits earned from one institution may not transfer easily to another. Many colleges and universities are restricted by government statutes or local policies to only accept a limited number of transfer credits. Even then, there are often restrictions on the type of institution from which a student graduated or the age of the credits earned. Some institutions are able to offer credit for life experience, while others will only transfer credits from accredited institutions and programs.

While the pursuit of higher education has intrinsic value and may offer increased salary options for the HIM professional, what you bring to the workplace in terms of your skills, knowledge, and abilities will often be the deciding factor to a rewarding career in health information.

Notes

1. New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability. "Committing to Quality: Guidelines for Assessment and Accountability in Higher Education." 2012. Available at www.newleadershipalliance.org/publications.
2. Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM). "Statement of Scope." 2010. Available at http://www.cahiim.org/aboutcahiim.html.
3. Dalrymple, P. "Data, Information, Knowledge: The Emerging Field of Health Informatics." *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 37, no. 5 (June/July 2011). Abstract available at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/bult.2011.1720370512/abstract.
4. Hersh, W. "The Health Information Technology Workforce: Estimation of Demands and a Framework For Requirements." *Applied Clinical Informatics* vol. 1, no. 2 (2010): 197-212. Summary available at http://aci.schattauer.de/en/contents/archive/issue/1062/manuscript/13277/show.html.
5. Gearon, Christopher J. "Nine Hot New Majors." *U.S. News and World Report.* January 2012: pp. 38-40.
6. CAHIIM. 2012 Standards and Interpretations for Accreditation of Baccalaureate Degree Programs in Health Information Management.
7. CAHIIM. 2010 Standards and Interpretations for Accreditation of Master's Degree Programs in Health Informatics.
8. CAHIIM. 2008 Standards and Interpretations for Accreditation of Master's Degree Programs in Health Information Management.

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