

# Key to HIM's Future: Education Plays an Integral Role in Expanding and Developing the HIM Work Force

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*by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA*

Education is a hot topic in HIM circles, especially within AHIMA and its component state associations. We often use education as a means to advocate for HIM principles, practices, and expansion of the work force. This article discusses the various HIM education and work force activities under way at the federal, state, and association levels.

## Work Force Recognition and Legislation

For several years, AHIMA has stressed the need for an expanded HIM work force. We are now beginning to see productive discussions on this issue. These discussions are taking place in relation to the push for health IT and the healthcare industry's recognition of the impending shortage of HIM professionals, which was reflected in the Department of Labor's research, as well as AHIMA's own.

A number of Health and Human Services agencies are now looking for staff to help with their various health IT projects. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for instance, include work force as a priority in their three-year strategic plans.

How this might translate into the 2009 fiscal year budget remains to be seen, but we are pleased to see the government take these first steps. AHIMA will be working with these agencies to promote a response to the HIM shortage.

## 10,000 Trained by 2010

In late spring the US House of Representatives passed the 10,000 Trained by 2010 Act (HR 1467), which was introduced by Representative David Wu (D-OR). The bill's title was taken from an American Medical Informatics Association campaign established in 2005 to train 10,000 physicians in informatics by 2010.

Wu's bill is not limited to physician training. It also calls for basic research, conducted under the auspices of the National Science Foundation, to improve information systems. Research may include information studies, population informatics, translational informatics, and data security, integrity, and confidentiality.

The bill also calls for the establishment of multidisciplinary centers for informatics research at institutions of higher learning as well as grants to higher education institutions to establish or improve undergraduate and master's degree information programs. Funding would be allocated to improve education programs through curriculum development and revision, establishing new degree programs, increasing opportunities in information research, and a variety of other education aspects.

The language from the House bill now sits in the Senate, where it will either be combined into one of the larger health IT bills or be taken up as a separate bill in one of the science committees.

## Wired for Healthcare Quality

In July the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee passed its Wired for Health Care Quality Act (S 1693). Section 3009 of the act calls for Health and Human Services to award grants for demonstration projects that would be charged with developing academic curricula that integrate qualified health IT systems into the clinical education of health professionals.

Just how this bill might affect HIM is unclear. At the time of publication, there is discussion about replacing this section with the House legislation or initiating a separate sponsorship and debate on the House legislation in another Senate committee. Formal action is expected this month.

It also appears that Congress will not be adding to the administration's budgeted funds for Public Health Title VII. Title VII previously carried funding for allied health education, but neither the administration nor Congress has established funding for allied health in recent years.

## **AHIMA Statement and State Activities**

AHIMA's recently approved position statement, "Take Action to Educate and Expand the Health Information Management Professional Workforce," calls on decision makers in healthcare, government, and higher education to acknowledge HIM professionals' essential contribution to electronic health record (EHR) and health information exchange (HIE) implementations and the need for an expanded HIM work force by:

- Funding the educational and academic needs of the profession that facilitate:
  - Recruitment, preparation, and retention of educators in the HIM field
  - Ongoing evolution of curriculum, including continued changes in HIM and informatics
  - Expansion of HIM programs for master's and doctorate-level education
  - Provision of loans and scholarships to students who enter the HIM field and to current practitioners who want to further their education to advance the transformation of the profession
- Providing support for the continued education of HIM practitioners engaged in managing the healthcare industry's transition from paper to an electronic environment
- Funding research related to:
  - HIM best practices for EHR implementation and management
  - Information quality assurance methodologies for HIE
  - The socioeconomic impact on providers, organizations, and patients related to the use of health information through EHR technologies, while identifying the issues that inhibit effective implementations<sup>1</sup>

Many HIM programs in state universities, colleges, and community colleges depend on state funding. With higher education funding stagnant or reduced, many HIM programs are competing to attract faculty and students. These programs need support from HIM professionals to meet academic and student recruitment goals as well as to educate state and local policy makers on the value of supporting HIM education during the transition to EHRs and HIE.

The statement notes that work force issues will have been addressed when:

- The capacity of academic programs at the associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree levels meets the demand forecasted for HIM workers
- There are adequate numbers of qualified faculty to teach HIM programs and programs for ongoing faculty development
- Accessible and flexible baccalaureate and master's level education is available to HIM professionals wishing to continue their professional development
- Healthcare and academic leaders acknowledge the unique contribution and essential skills of HIM professionals and their importance to the health IT infrastructure
- HIM professionals take leadership roles in managing EHR systems
- Academic programs are filled with enrollees from among the best and brightest college students
- There are adequate resources to support high-quality HIM functions at all healthcare provider organizations and health plans
- Adequate grants, scholarships, and other aid are available to qualified students
- The HIM work force is well prepared to be effective in an electronic environment

The statement also calls for HIM professionals to make themselves known to policy makers by explaining what HIM is and does and how an expanded HIM work force can meet the needs of an e-health environment by educating and training those already in the field as well as those considering entering the field.

## Expanding Our Horizons

The IT profession is well known among the public; however, few people understand the role of the HIM professional. As the industry moves from paper to electronic, our profession becomes more difficult to explain. Rows of color-tabbed health records are easy to picture, but the concept of electronic records made up of different records, files, and data scattered among systems is hard to conceive. It's even harder to conceive the various information management tasks that come with health record management.

The differences between HIM and e-HIM® were apparent this summer at AHIMA's Legal EHR Conference. The session brought home the expertise needed for any institution that has or will have electronic records. It was also clear that any organization that has a computer or Internet connection has some form of electronic records under the e-discovery rule. We all need more education to stay abreast of our ever-changing industry, but we also must educate and ensure the education of those we need to assist in the healthcare transition and carry on the work of the profession in years to come.

### Note

1. AHIMA. "Take Action to Educate and Expand the Health Information Management Professional Workforce." June 2007. Available online at [www.ahima.org/dc/positions](http://www.ahima.org/dc/positions). [web page no longer available]

Read AHIMA's position statement on HIM work force education at [www.ahima.org/dc/positions](http://www.ahima.org/dc/positions). [web page no longer available]

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**Article citation:**

Rode, Dan. "Key to HIM's Future: Education Plays an Integral Role in Expanding and Developing the HIM Work Force" *Journal of AHIMA* 78, no.8 (September 2007): 18,20.

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