

# Learn More to Earn More ... How to Further Your HIM Education, and What It Gets You

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By Lisa A. Eramo

Determining what to do with one's life is a daunting task. Even once you've chosen the field of HIM, the sky is the limit in terms of the roles in which you can serve. As HIM evolves commensurate with the electronic health record (EHR), the options only continue to grow—and require skills and education to seize them. Many HIM professionals are starting to feel the push for an advanced degree or credential in what has become an increasingly competitive job market saturated with talented and tech-savvy individuals.

With all of the choices available, however, it can be overwhelming to determine what educational requirements are needed to accomplish professional goals and aspirations. How do you know what educational endeavor to tackle after you obtain your first HIM degree? Is it truly worth it to obtain an advanced degree or credential? How can HIM professionals ensure a return on investment?

## Heed This Advice When Seeking Additional Education or Credentials

Not sure where to begin in terms of pursuing your next educational endeavor? AHIMA has created an interactive Career Map (available at [www.hicareers.com/CareerMap](http://www.hicareers.com/CareerMap)) that provides job descriptions and responsibilities as well as skills and education required for a variety of current and emerging HIM roles. Prospective career advancement advocates can also consider these tips provided by HIM professional experts.

**1. Ask yourself, “What is it that I really want to do?”** Do you like to work with other people? Do you gravitate toward leadership positions? Do you enjoy working with a team in the trenches? Do you prefer to work independently? What is your dream job in HIM? The answers to these questions will help determine the type of position for which you should strive. For example, those who enjoy working in the trenches may consider a coding route. Those who prefer to work independently may enjoy working as a data analyst. Those who specifically seek a raise in salary may want to consider management-level positions.

“Know yourself, and then move in the direction that best suits your skills,” Parker says. “There’s a fallacy that if you’re not in a management position, you’re not using your full potential. In HIM, that’s just not true.”

Many HIM professionals pursue additional credentials because they want to move in a new direction, increase their knowledge as their current position evolves, or simply prove their proficiency in a particular subject area, Marc says. “I think we’re going to see more credentials over the next 10 years,” he says. “There are many individuals who are working in the profession who need to be able to identify themselves as having particular skills.”

Marc, who helps teach the College of St. Scholastica’s CHDA exam prep course, says he pursued the CHDA credential because of his knack for analytics and to identify himself as an expert in this area.

**2. Interview others in the profession and within the organization to get your bearings and hear real stories.** Talk with other professionals before making the leap into higher education or pursuing a specialty credential. Most HIM professionals are very approachable and more than happy to share their educational and professional journeys, Parker says. Ask them if you can shadow them for a day. Also consider asking management staff about the types of credentials and degrees that could benefit you the most within the organization, she adds. Are there any upcoming organizational changes for which a credential might be helpful?

**3. Move at your own pace.** Pursuing additional education or credentials can be extremely difficult for those with family and work obligations. “It’s a lot to juggle,” Marc says. “Not everyone can hammer out a degree in one or two years. Take the time you need to get it done.” Edmonson agrees. “As long as you’re working toward it and taking one class at a time, you’ll get there eventually,” she says.

However, it’s important to stay focused and not use a lack of free time as an excuse to delay education, says Lusk. “We need to encourage people that there’s never going to be a good time to do it. You just need to get started,” she says.

**4. Never forget the importance of networking.** Even once you’ve got the credential or degree, you’ve still got to work at finding and maintaining professional connections. Networking essentially enhances the return on investment of the degree or credential, Parker says. It’s not just about what you know—it’s about who you know as well. It’s incredibly important to engage in internships and attend AHIMA’s local and national meetings, she adds.

## Times, They are A-changin’

There’s no doubt that the healthcare environment in which today’s HIM professionals work is far different from the one that existed 10 or more years ago, says Susan Parker, MEd, RHIA, owner and recruiter at Seagate Consultants, based in Wilmington, NC.

Parker, whose company focuses on recruiting individuals for both traditional and emerging HIM roles, says having a credential and/or degree in higher education is becoming far more common—and even expected—in today’s job market. Having an associate’s or bachelor’s degree is a helpful start; however, employers are increasingly looking for more specialized knowledge or even a master’s degree. This is particularly true for HIM director and manager positions, she says.

“I think we’ll find that having a master’s degree will be the baseline for management-level positions. We’re not there yet, but I think we will be,” Parker says, adding that this transition could occur in the next five to 10 years given the rapid evolution of the profession.

Specific master’s degrees that may appeal to HIM professionals run the gamut. There’s the traditional master’s degree in health services management, but there are also master’s degrees in education, strategic leadership, organizational leadership, health administration, or health informatics. Some HIM professionals are even pursuing a master’s in business administration. Others may pursue a legal degree or master’s degree in Juris Prudence, or even a PhD.

## Some Cross the Bridge

A working professional doesn’t necessarily need to go to a college campus to get a higher education. HIM professionals are increasingly pursuing their degrees online, which makes it easier to balance their education with a full-time job and other commitments, Parker says. Another cost- and time-effective option is to pursue a “bridge program.” These programs target those with an associate’s degree or RHIT credential and provide advanced standing so students only need to focus on the necessary core classes to obtain the new degree.

Some opt for advanced degrees directly unrelated to HIM. Parker originally obtained her own master’s degree so she could work in higher education. The degree ultimately allowed her to serve as the director of an RHIA program for more than a decade before she founded the recruiting company that she now oversees. She says having a master’s degree in adult education gave her a greater appreciation for how adults learn and function in the workplace as well as what motivates adults. All of this insight is helpful when recruiting HIM professionals, she says.

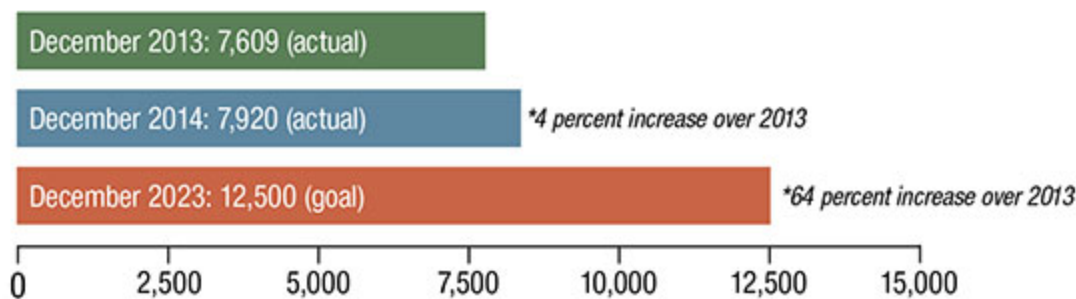
However, not everyone aspires to become a manager or work in higher education, and there are certainly plenty of other avenues to pursue. “Getting a master’s degree isn’t for everyone. It makes sense for people who are moving into those

management positions,” Parker says. “For those who aren’t moving into these positions, having an additional credential makes all the difference.”

## Moving HIM Toward Advanced Degrees

A goal of AHIMA’s and the AHIMA Foundation’s Council for Excellence in Education (CEE) is to increase the number of AHIMA members who hold master’s and doctoral degrees. The point of this goal is to attract new members who hold higher education degrees as well as help current AHIMA members obtain advanced education in order to better utilize their skills and role in the workforce. The CEE Strategic Action Plan includes a goal to increase the number of members holding master’s and doctoral degrees to 12,500 by the year 2023, an increase of more than 60 percent over December 2013 numbers.

### Number of AHIMA Members with Master’s and Doctorate Degrees



## Adding Credit to Your Name—Literally

Credentials speak volumes to a potential employer because they help capture one’s proficiency and expertise in a particular area. “A credential says that someone’s knowledge is not tied to their individual experience,” Parker says. “Their knowledge is certified and proven. Whether you’re in North Carolina or California, your knowledge applies.”

The good news is that HIM professionals have a whole slew of credentials from which to choose. For those interested in clinical documentation improvement, consider the Certified Documentation Improvement Practitioner (CDIP) credential. For those interested in coding, consider the Certified Coding Specialist (CCS) or Certified Coding Specialist—Physician-Based (CCS-P) credentials. The Certified in Healthcare Privacy and Security (CHPS) credential is great for those interested in HIPAA. Those who are interested in health IT might consider the Certified Healthcare Technology Specialist credential (CHTS). Finally, there’s the Certified Health Data Analyst credential (CHDA) geared toward those who enjoy working with and analyzing Big Data.

What credentials and degrees are in the most demand right now? Parker says it depends on the position. As a recruiter, however, she has seen an increased demand for those who can work with and manipulate healthcare data. Overall, employers are increasingly looking for those with the unique combination of work experience, an advanced degree, and a specialty credential. She says there is also a demand for project management credentials and experience, given HIM’s role in overseeing ICD-10-CM/PCS and EHR implementations.

## Graduate Degrees Allow Professional Mobility

David Marc, MBS, CHDA, knows the value of higher education and specialty credentials. After graduating from college with a bachelor’s degree—double major in biology and psychology—he got a job working in a lab using data analytics to develop predictive models for diseases. He decided to obtain his master’s degree in biomedical sciences with a minor in biomedical informatics to advance his position from that of clinical researcher to senior clinical researcher.

After realizing that he wanted to perform his own research rather than assist others with their projects, he decided to take some time off work to pursue his PhD in health informatics with a minor in cognitive science. Ultimately, his passion for teaching landed him his current job as an assistant professor in the department of health informatics and information management at the College of St. Scholastica, where he says having a PhD will help him pursue tenure track. Marc, who also serves as the health informatics graduate program director, says many students view a graduate program as a way to explore different job opportunities.

“What I think an advanced degree does for you is expose you to the depth and breadth of the profession so when you leave the program, you understand all of the angles and components,” he says. “When you graduate, you have more confidence in terms of knowing where you want your career to go.”

Oftentimes, new graduates become pigeonholed within one aspect of HIM and may not even realize what other opportunities are available, Marc says. Other professionals may feel as though they’ve hit a plateau in their careers. Despite their frustration, they may feel as though they don’t have the ability to move in a new direction—particularly in the direction of the emerging field of healthcare analytics. “Statistics and analytics are terms that scare a lot of people,” Marc says. “But I’ve had students who go through these classes, and it just clicks. They get it. They say, ‘I can see myself doing this.’”

Marc says he often tells his students that having an advanced degree helps the most with career mobility. “Students could probably pursue a job and get an entry level position in the field, but if they want to progress within that position faster or get the manager or director type of role, that’s where the advanced degree really helps. You can come into this profession with an advanced degree,” he adds. This is particularly true for career changers or those who may not have a whole lot of direct HIM experience.

Katherine Lusk, RHIA, MHSM, had been working as an assistant vice president of patient information services when the large health system in which she worked purchased 12 physician practices. Although her RHIA credential provided her with valuable skills related to registration and scheduling, she says she needed a different breadth of knowledge when it came time to integrate the physician practices. Lusk thought about pursuing an MBA but was more interested in the system integration. “I thought it was important for me to understand from a big picture the integration with external provider groups,” she says. “I really didn’t have a core understanding of how those clinics worked and how the financial integration and referral patterns would occur.”

Lusk, who went on to hold various director positions in different settings, currently serves as the chief health information management and exchange officer at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas, TX—a job she says she couldn’t have landed without first obtaining her master’s degree. “The degree establishes a baseline for people to understand your knowledge so you don’t need to work so hard to prove yourself,” she says.

## Ensuring Job Security

Donna Edmonson, BS, RHIA, suspected that the standalone hospital in which she worked might be bought out by another organization, forcing her to look for another job. Her fears became a reality when the organization closed, moved to another location, and became part of an entirely different healthcare system. At the time, she had been working as an HIM director there while also pursuing her bachelor’s degree so she could advance from having an RHIT credential to an RHIA. “I’m thankful that I was already in the process of going back to school because the RHIT would have limited me in terms of what I’d be able to do in larger organizations,” she says.

Edmonson’s bachelor’s program—an online program—was designed for working adults. “I could make it fit around my schedule,” she says. “There’s just no way that I could have commuted.” Although she had initially been apprehensive about going back to school after 20 years, she said her work experience helped her get through classes more easily.

Shortly after graduation, UC Health, based in Cincinnati, OH, contacted Edmonson via LinkedIn regarding a position that would oversee RAC audits. Shortly thereafter, she landed a job as a director of government audits and currently oversees all policies, procedures, appeals, and trends related to RAC and other third-party audits. She is also a manager of HIM, overseeing all scanning, indexing, and release of information as well as the opening of a brand new maternity unit. “I got my return on investment the moment I got that job,” she says. “It was probably a combination of my degree and work experience, but had I not had that credential, I don’t know that they would have really looked at me.”

Edmonson says the return on investment for her degree can also be measured in terms of its usefulness to her current role. “It has definitely helped me become more aware of time management and project management. It also helps me communicate with higher level management. I understand the workflow and processes, and I know how to interject and give suggestions for how to make things better.”

In addition to working full-time at UC Health, Edmonson also teaches classes online and in person. She hopes to eventually pursue a master’s degree in the event that she decides to teach full-time in a university setting.

## Climbing the Career Ladder

Erin Head, MBA, RHIA, CHTS-TR, the director of HIM at Parrish Medical Center in Titusville, FL, says the convenience of not having to travel to a campus is what made it possible for her to continue her HIM education. At the time she had been working as an HIM operations manager at a hospital and knew she eventually wanted to land an HIM director position. Having only an RHIT credential, she decided to attend a CAHIIM-accredited college to obtain her bachelor’s degree and RHIA credential entirely online. “I didn’t need to leave work early for any classes, and I also liked the self-paced aspect of it,” Head says.

After realizing that most HIM director positions were starting to require a master’s degree, Head decided to continue her education. “I knew that I needed to [get the advanced degree] for my future. I knew it would be a good investment,” she says. “Also, with the MBA, I think it opens up other doors for other departments within the hospital, such as an executive director or vice president level of several different areas that function together with HIM such as finance, IT, case management, or patient registration.”

Head says she chose the MBA rather than another type of master’s degree because it would give her exposure to the bigger picture budgetary and operational aspects of healthcare’s business side. Her degree also included a specialization in healthcare management that she says helped her understand community and public health.

Even though she has landed an HIM director job, she isn’t stopping her education. Head decided to become credentialed as a Certified Healthcare Technology Specialist Trainer (CHTS-TR) after having performed EHR validation, testing, and training at a previous job.

“With the EMR, you’ve got to have people who are trained to troubleshoot, train physicians and caregivers, and understand the data that’s coming into and out of the system. Having that credential shows that I have additional competencies in healthcare technology,” she says.

## Best to Move Out of Your Comfort Zone

Elit Gonazlez, MBA, RHIA, began her healthcare career at the age of 17, working her way up from a file clerk to a coordinator position—the highest position in which she could serve without an academic degree or credential. She decided to obtain her RHIT credential and eventually got a job as a night shift HIM supervisor at MD Anderson Cancer Center. “At that point, I noticed that all of my peers had their bachelor’s degrees and RHIA credential,” she says. “I really wanted to obtain that level of education and felt like I needed to make it happen.”

Like many other working adults, an online program seemed like a viable option. Gonzalez and one of her colleagues both enrolled at a CAHIIM-accredited college’s online bachelor’s program, and says “it was so much easier than having to leave my kids and my family and go to a campus for several hours.”

She also enjoyed the exposure that her online program gave her to other professionals around the country, many of whom she continues to network with today. Gonzalez says many HIM professionals may feel as though they just do not have the time for an additional degree or credential. Others may feel intimidated going back to school as an older adult. However, these should not be excuses, and only stifle ambition. “Some people may be scared because they’ve been out of school for so long. I say, ‘I’ve been there and done that. I’m that person who was scared to go back, and I did it,’” Gonzalez says.

After obtaining her bachelor’s degree, she didn’t stop there. Just two months after graduating Summa Cum Laude from her program, Gonzalez began a master’s program to obtain her MBA. Fourteen months later, she again graduated Summa Cum

Laude.

She says she chose an MBA because she wanted to be able to teach HIM and other courses at the university level. "I wanted to broaden my horizons. I had been in HIM for 29 years and wanted to try something different in addition to my current job. The MBA took me out of my comfort zone," she says.

Gonzalez is currently pursuing adjunct HIM instructor positions and is going to teach her first college course this spring. She also works as an assistant director of HIM administration at MD Anderson Cancer Center, where she oversees document imaging, forms management, and 32 staff members. Gonzalez also assists with the development and implementation of the EHR.

Prior to her education, she was unable to obtain a management position. Gonzalez says that her education provided her with the knowledge she needed to become a successful manager.

"In my master's program, I learned so much about the management aspect of HIM. I focused more on business leadership, ethics, managerial decision making, management operations, management organization, and finance. Obtaining my MBA was the best decision for me," she says.

## Link

### Earning HIM Cred

[journal.ahima.org](http://journal.ahima.org)

This web-exclusive series focuses on just what career-cred AHIMA's credentials earn HIM professionals in the real world. First up, the CHDA credential. Just what professional leverage does one get with this data analytics-focused certification?

Lisa Eramo ([leramo@hotmail.com](mailto:leramo@hotmail.com)) is a freelance writer and editor based in Cranston, RI, who specializes in healthcare regulatory topics, HIM, and medical coding.

#### Article citation:

Eramo, Lisa A. "Learn More to Earn More ... How to Further Your HIM Education, and What It Gets You" *Journal of AHIMA* 86, no.4 (April 2015): 28-34.

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