Mastering HIM: An Expanding Field Sparks Interest in Graduate Degrees

by Gina Rollins

Changes in technology and management are increasingly requiring—and rewarding—advanced degrees for HIM professionals.

Cheryl Hammen, RHIA, has been in the HIM profession since 1979. She has gained a lot of expertise in those years, but recently she decided to pursue a master's degree in health informatics and information management. "I felt it would be beneficial for me and the company," explains the vice president of HIM at Franklin, TN-based Community Health Systems.

Community Health's impending acquisition of 50 Triad hospitals—a deal completed in 2007—and the subsequent implementation of an electronic health record (EHR) system across the enterprise prompted Hammen's decision. "My overall management of the project from an HIM perspective has been enhanced because of the education I've received thus far," she says. Hammen is about two-thirds through the graduate program at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis.

Hammen is typical of many in the HIM field who are seeking master's level education to deal better with the development and widespread adoption of health IT and management of digitized information. "All of our students are working healthcare professionals who found themselves in a position where they need to know more about data standards or what to do with data. They are in our program to be able to perform their current jobs more effectively and efficiently," says Rebecca B. Reynolds, EdD, RHIA, associate professor at the University of Tennessee.

With EHRs has come the need to better understand and explain how data are defined, analyzed, and interpreted. That includes everything from the ins and outs of relational databases, the evolving definitions of the legal medical record, and the ability to reproduce data consistently. There also is a burgeoning body of standards, vocabularies, and terminologies, as well as the human factor of managing the transition from paper to electronic media. The list goes on.

"It's almost the perfect storm," says Kathy LaTour, MA, RHIA, FAHIMA, chair of the healthcare informatics and information management department at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN. "The HIM body of knowledge has grown so dramatically, and much of it relates to EHR and the need to implement [the systems] in all kinds of facilities."

A Key to Advancement

HIM professionals also are finding master's degrees to be the key to professional advancement. Cheryl Martin, MA, RHIA, is chief information officer at Tuomey Healthcare System in Sumter, SC. She was on the verge of completing her master's through the College of St. Scholastica when her predecessor resigned. She approached Tuomey executives and threw her hat in the ring for the CIO position.

The graduate school experience "gave me the confidence to believe I could do the job, and I think it had a lot to do with the decision to give me the opportunity," she says. Martin also believes her advanced study "gave me the ability to think globally. The program and course work were designed to help us think at an organizational rather than departmental level."

With new opportunities often come economic rewards. The 2008 AHIMA salary study found that the average annual salary of directors with master's degrees was approximately $14,000 higher than those with baccalaureate degrees.

Increased compensation is a fair trade-off for the investment in time and money required to obtain a master's degree, according to Keith Olenik, MA, RHIA, CHP, principal of the Olenik Consulting Group in Kansas City, MO. Like Martin, Olenik believes having a master's degree played a role in his career advancement.

"I applied for and was given a fairly high-level position at the hospital where I was working at the time. Because I had the degree I was able to warrant the position and the salary that went with it," he says. Olenik holds a master of art in health services management with a specialization in computer resources and information management from Webster University in Kansas City.

Olenik and Martin agree that employers tend to place higher value on those staff members who go the extra mile to obtain an advanced degree. "There's only so much you can learn through the occasional continuing education course. A graduate program is a structured environment that forces you to do more, and that gives you a fair amount of credibility in the marketplace," says Olenik. Martin notes, "Whether it's fair is debatable, but there is an outside perception that a graduate degree gives you more credibility and opens doors."

The opportunities associated with digital health information are also drawing people from outside HIM—and, indeed, outside healthcare—to pursue master's-level HIM and health informatics degrees. The College of St. Scholastica anticipated that all its master's students would be HIM professionals with bachelor's degrees seeking additional education to advance their careers. That was the case initially, but after 11 years the percentage has declined. It now accounts for about one-third of each class, according to LaTour.

The majority of St. Scholastica's graduate students now come from other health professions—including nurses, administrators, and physicians—and other fields. Current students include individuals changing careers from secondary education and computer security professions. "We've had inquiries from many people who have bachelor's or master's in other fields and either have already moved into or are interested in HIM and want to get credentialed, but they don't want to pursue a second bachelor's," explains LaTour.

The growth of the HIM body of knowledge has boosted demand for graduate-level preparation in a separate but related field: health informatics. Definitions vary, but in essence health informatics is focused on the actual design and technical development of information systems, whereas HIM is concerned with the quality, accuracy, privacy, and confidentiality of the information within the systems; how to implement and use technology; the workflow within and across healthcare organizations and providers; and the regulatory and legal environments surrounding EHRs. Informatics is a very broad term that encompasses many healthcare specialties, such as nursing informatics and medical informatics, and it is used in other disciplines such as library and computer sciences.

People interested in this aspect of health data also are finding professional homes in the HIM field and in the graduate-level HIM curriculum. Indiana University in Indianapolis established a separate school of informatics in 2000, based on collaboration between several existing schools. Its master of science in health informatics is but one of several graduate-level informatics degrees offered. Graduates of the health informatics program work as solution development analysts, health information systems consultants, senior systems administrators, and project managers, among other roles, according to Danita Forgey, MIS, RHIA, CCS, CCS-P, senior lecturer. Most of the students have clinical, but not necessarily HIM, backgrounds, she says.

Update on Accreditation

The growing interest in master's level education has spawned development of new master's programs in HIM. At present there are 12 master's degree programs, up from three just five years ago, says Claire Dixon-Lee, PhD, RHIA, FAHIMA, vice president for education and accreditation at AHIMA and executive director of the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM).

Concurrent with this growth has been maturation of the accreditation process for master's degree programs. AHIMA developed an approval process for master's programs in 1998. CAHIIM assumed responsibility for program approvals in 2005 and revamped the process as a precursor to a more rigorous accreditation process.

Approval of a program involves review of its mission and goals, curriculum, faculty, and student support based on a self-assessment, but is not as extensive as accreditation, which typically also includes a site visit. Thus far, four master's level

programs have been approved, and a fifth is awaiting review, according to Dixon-Lee.

In the meantime CAHIIM developed draft standards and interpretations for master's program accreditation, and it held a public comment period through July 31, 2008. Later this fall, CAHIIM is expected to issue final standards and interpretations, with a May 1, 2009, application deadline for programs seeking accreditation for the 2009–2010 academic year. CAHIIM also plans to announce a process to transition to accreditation programs that previously had been recognized as approved. (For more information and updates on all of these initiatives, visit www.cahiim.org.)

Interest is also growing in establishing competencies for graduates of master's level programs. In 2007 AHIMA issued a draft set of master's degree competencies in three domains, including health data management, information technology and systems, and organization and management. The competencies were validated through a job analysis survey of HIM professionals with master's degrees, explains Dixon-Lee. Another perspective will come from an employer survey about the current and future roles of HIM, which AHIMA expects to complete this fall.

Even as master's level programs expand and mature, many universities already have an eye on developing doctoral programs in HIM and health informatics. A key factor in being able to do so will be the availability of faculty. "Between retirements and new programs there is a shortage of academicians," Dixon-Lee says.

Choosing a Program

Thanks to the growth in master's programs, individuals now have much more flexibility in choosing where and how to earn an advanced degree in HIM. Wannetta Edwards, MS, RHIA, earned her master's in the early 1980s, one of the first graduates of the pioneering master's program at the University of Pittsburgh.

At the time, Edwards, who now is HIM product manager for Siemens Medical Systems in Malvern, PA, had been researching a variety of master's programs in HIM and other fields when she was transferred to Pittsburgh. Once there, she discovered that the University of Pittsburgh program "was exactly what I was interested in," she recalls.

For those not fortunate enough to reside in a locale that is home to an HIM master's program, many colleges and universities offer the degree through complete or partial distance learning. For instance, the University of Tennessee program is a complete distance learning model and requires no in-class time. The College of St. Scholastica's program is mostly distance-based, with brief in-class time required at the beginning and end of the program. Students also have the option of attending sessions at other times in either Duluth, MN, or Orange County, CA. In contrast, the Indiana University School of Informatics program offers a primarily in-class format with some distance learning.

The flexibility to learn when and where she wanted was a major factor in Hammen's decision to enroll at the University of Tennessee. "I work a lot of long hours and I couldn't be tied to a class schedule. I had to do it when it was convenient for me," she says. Like Edwards, Hammen also considered a master of business administration, but she felt a master's in HIM was better suited to her overall career goals. "I've been in HIM almost 30 years, and I'm not planning on leaving the field," she says.

In Martin's view, master's degrees put HIM professionals on more of a level playing field with colleagues who have earned MBAs or master's degrees in health administration. "It's a catalyst that can catapult us into leadership positions that have gone to MBAs and MHAs because they went after the positions and because people didn't think HIM professionals could perform the jobs," she explains.

Even as master's level programs advance careers and salaries, open wide the doors of opportunity, and facilitate expert-level knowledge, the jury is out as to whether graduate degrees will become a requirement in HIM.

Forgey thinks not. "There will still be a big need for bachelor's level degrees in organizations that don't necessarily need master's level expertise," she argues. LaTour is more inclined to see master's degrees becoming the standard. "I think it will become almost required because the body of knowledge is so complex," she explains.

However that question gets settled, it is clear that "high levels of education will be needed to survive in this marketplace," according to Reynolds. The expanded body of knowledge and educational and employment opportunities only mean good news

for the HIM profession in the opinion of Edwards. “It’s a very important time for HIM,” she says. “There are so many opportunities out there, and hopefully people will take a broad view in considering their career options.”

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