Projects Help Students Prepare for e-HIM

By Lisa A. Eramo

The technical, legal, and collaborative aspects of information governance had always appealed to Kristi Lundgren, MS, RHIA. Although Lundgren, a former graduate student at the College of St. Scholastica, had studied about the importance of governing data in an electronic environment, she couldn't help but notice that her employer—Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota—didn't have a formal governance program in place.

As an e-HIM manager at Children's Hospital, Lundgren says locating information for e-discovery and other requests was an insurmountable task because each department tracked data differently. Even despite its adoption of an EHR more than a decade ago, the organization's record retention policy was outdated, and it didn't have an effective process for tracking document changes within the EHR.

When Lundgren learned that the College of St. Scholastica required her to complete a final applied project (i.e., a project geared toward giving students experience solving a problem in a professional environment), she thought about ways in which she could address problems within her own facility.

Lundgren, whose degree includes a concentration in IT leadership, worked with her academic advisor at the College of St. Scholastica as well as the HIM director at Children's Hospital to design a project that would address the enterprise-wide information challenges within the organization while also helping her hone professional skills that she could apply in any professional setting.

Lundgren's project, which concluded this summer, included drafting policies and procedures for record retention and e-discovery, creating a source system matrix, and developing a formalized document tracking system that would allow individuals to identify when and how documents were created, edited, or retired. All tracking tools and spreadsheets are stored on a shared network drive within a specified folder for easy access.

"I know it was a lot of work, but it didn't feel overwhelming because I enjoyed it so much," she says. "I know that it's making my job easier and also helping the organization."

Lundgren says her academic project now serves as the basis for the organization's formalized information governance program that she will continue to develop over time. She plans to apply HIM principles to other departments that require data tracking as well, such as human resources and finance.

Like Lundgren, many HIM students at the College of St. Scholastica have chosen to tackle EHR-related topics as part of their final applied projects, says Amy Watters, MA, RHIA, FAHIMA, assistant professor and HIM graduate program director. Students recognize that employers are looking for those who are well-equipped to work in an electronic environment and who can bring fresh insight and expertise to address ongoing challenges, she adds.

"Students come away from projects of this magnitude with the confidence to tackle similar projects in the future," says Watters.

She provides an overview of the EHR-related topics that students are researching currently:

- **Data governance**—This project examines the impact of various data governance models on the HIM profession.
- **EHR interoperability and health information exchange**—This project includes an in-depth look at technologies and standards used to exchange health information with the intent of developing a framework to guide organizations in selecting and implementing health information technology for effective information exchange.
- **Health literacy**—This project intends to increase awareness of the importance of health literacy by developing an educational program for patients.

- **Patient portals**—This project focuses on strategies to increase patient enrollment in the portal by developing a program to create awareness and user support.
- **Population health management**—This project targets how data analytics can be used to predict disease patterns and trends to establish best practices.

"What we're going to see more and more of is data analytics," says Watters. "That is, figuring out strategies for how to take the data that's out there and examine it in a way that will help organizations make important decisions."

John Mashikian, a current graduate student at the College of St. Scholastica, says data analytics is critical in HIM. That's why Mashikian, a clinical systems applications analyst at the University of California San Diego Health System, chose to focus his final applied project on creating an electronic workflow to increase efficiency and tap into the power of big data at the health system's Bannister Family House, a 12-room home that offers subsidized lodging for patients and their families.

Mashikian, who also works nights and weekends as a resident manager at the Bannister Family House, says the topic for his project grew out of his awareness of the dichotomy between the electronically savvy health system in which he worked and the antiquated paper-based nature of the Bannister home.

"Here I was during the day using these advanced electronic tools, and then at night, I was writing on paper cards and faxing information," he says. "It was obvious that I could apply what I've learned in my day job to my night job."

Mashikian worked in conjunction with his academic advisor as well as a web programmer to include a hyperlink within the EHR on which providers can click to access an electronic referral form. Providers can fill out the form online and submit it electronically. The form then moves to an electronic queue that Bannister Family Home employees can access to check patients in and out of various rooms.

In addition to increasing efficiency and security, electronic data capture will allow Mashikian and others to perform analyses that were previously impossible using a paper-based system.

"With paper, you're not really capturing any discrete data for reporting," he says. "We can make better decisions with the data. With a paper-based system, it was difficult to find out who has been waiting the longest. Now, we can use filters and reporting to make better decisions that will allow us to hopefully give these rooms to the most deserving families."

Although the electronic referral process is still in the testing phase, Mashikian says he hopes it will eventually be a game changer for the Bannister Family House once deployed system-wide.

"Our ultimate goal is to be able to go to the chancellor of the university and say, 'Here's the data. This is why we need 50 rooms instead of 12.'"

What can HIM professionals learn from these and other creative and innovative student projects?

The most important takeaway point is that today's HIM students embody the innovation and creativity necessary to thrive in an electronic environment, says Watters. As the industry continues to implement health information technology, forward-thinking organizations will learn to embrace and tap into the knowledge of today's pioneering graduates, she adds.

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