

# Reducing Healthcare Disparities: How HIM WorkForce Diversity Helps

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*HIM professionals can play an important role in reducing disparities in care that result from race and ethnicity. One practical step is by increasing the diversity of the HIM workforce.*

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Race and ethnicity are significant predictors of the quality of care a person receives, and minorities who had the same insurance, status, and income as nonminorities received a lower quality of care, according to a study undertaken by the Institute of Medicine.<sup>1</sup>

Increasing the diversity of the healthcare workforce can decrease disparities. Research shows that a diverse workforce is associated with improved access to care for racial and ethnic minority patients, greater patient choice and satisfaction, better patient-provider communication, and better educational experiences for all students while in training.<sup>2</sup>

Racial and ethnic minority healthcare professionals are significantly more likely than white peers to serve minority and medically underserved communities, according to the Institute of Medicine. This results in improved access to care for disparate populations. And minority patients who have a choice are more likely to select healthcare professionals of their own racial or ethnic background.

Racial and ethnic minority patients are also generally more satisfied with the care they receive from minority professionals. Minority patient ratings of the quality of their healthcare are generally higher in racially concordant settings than in racially discordant settings as well.<sup>3</sup> The evidence provides an imperative to increase diversity in the healthcare workforce.

The Institute of Medicine recommends several actions to increase workforce diversity, including reducing financial barriers to health professions training among minority and lower-income students, increasing the emphasis on diversity goals in educational program accreditation, and improving the campus climate for diversity.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to promoting a diverse workforce, all health professionals need to be knowledgeable about cultural factors in order to provide high quality care and reduce disparities in care. This factor has been recognized by the Joint Commission, which has proposed standards addressing this area.

Government agencies and others involved in quality measurement, such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, have also recognized the importance of cultural competency skills in the healthcare workforce. When HIM professionals and students of all races and ethnicities acquire and maintain cultural competency skills they can assist healthcare consumers and care professionals on the front lines in reducing disparities.

## AHIMA's Diversity Resolution

Within AHIMA the definition of diversity includes race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability status. In October 2007 the association's House of Delegates approved a resolution intended to describe actions the profession should take to further increase its diversity. Though not originally intended to address health disparities, the actions in the resolution are in alignment with nationally recognized recommendations.

The resolution sought to "advance AHIMA's commitment to a culture that respects diversity throughout its organization, the federation and the HIM profession at large."<sup>5</sup>

## Gains in Student Member Diversity

Analysis undertaken by AHIMA comparing member information in 2006 and 2009 reveals some favorable trends (see [table](#) [below]). AHIMA collects diversity information from responses offered on its membership applications.

The greatest diversity exists in AHIMA's student population. Several initiatives have been developed to increase diversity in nonstudent membership categories. These include updating the diversity program information on the AHIMA Web site and educating the membership about what diversity constitutes and how it will benefit AHIMA and the profession.

In addition, a question has been added to the AHIMA Foundation scholarship applications. As a first step, collecting data about key variables related to scholarships sought and awarded helps evaluate the current status of diversity in scholarship awards. Once data are available, the association can seek to understand and remediate the causes of key gaps should they be present.

## Promoting Diversity at Chicago State University

Graduates from the Department of Health Information Administration at Chicago State University (CSU) are making contributions in the diversification of the workforce and in eliminating health disparities in Chicago. CSU is a public urban institution of higher learning located on the south side of Chicago. Its mission and vision statements support the goal of a culturally and economically diverse community of students and scholars.

The student body is multiracial and includes part-time and full-time students, many of whom are older than traditional college-age students. Most CSU students commute to campus; there is currently one dormitory on campus. The 161-acre campus can be reached by public transportation, and affordable parking is available on the property.

Several CSU programs address issues of diversity, reflecting the Institute of Medicine's acknowledgment of the importance of a campus climate that supports diversity. CSU houses the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing, the Latino Resource Center, the Larry A. Harris Reading Center, the Educational Talent Search/TRIO program, and programs to prepare students for graduate study.

The Department of Health Information Administration (HIA) is located in the College of Health Sciences (COHS), which also includes the Departments of Nursing, Health Studies, and Occupational Therapy; the HIV/AIDS Research and Policy Institute; and the Wellness/Health Center. The COHS mission and credo statements reflect diversity and speak to the belief that "strength comes from giving voice to diversity and that every student has a right to be successful."

The Department of HIA celebrates its thirtieth anniversary this fall. It offers a bachelor's degree and a post-baccalaureate certificate. The racial and ethnic diversity of the students in the department has shifted from that of predominately white students prior to 1985 to predominately black students today. This shift is, in part, attributed to the relocation of the university campus to Chicago's South Side, primarily inhabited by African Americans.

## Community Connections

The department's current recruitment efforts focus on attracting high school and two-year college students from various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The majority of HIA graduates are employed in the Chicago metropolitan area in health centers located in underserved communities. Many graduates who assume HIM leadership roles provide professional practice experience (PPE) placements for HIA students.

The department goals include expanding PPE opportunities to other areas within the metropolitan Chicago area, including nontraditional settings. Most students in the HIA program receive some form of financial aid, and an overwhelming majority work full or part time.

Each year, HIA students at CSU also engage in an exchange program with the University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Health Information Management. Senior students at both institutions attend an in-service presentation at each school in the fall semester. The benefits from this exchange experience include education, networking, exposure, and collaboration. Recent

HIA graduates at CSU seem more interested in seeking employment and graduate school opportunities beyond Chicago's South Side.

## Race and Hispanic Origin in AHIMA Membership

AHIMA collects diversity information from responses offered on its membership applications. Comparing 2006 and 2009 data shows a trend toward greater diversity. The greatest diversity exists in the student population.

Race and ethnicity	US Population	ahima membership	
		Nonstudent	Student
<b>African American, not Hispanic</b>			
2009		8.3%	16.5%
2006	12.2%	6.7%	13.0%
<b>Asian and Pacific Islander, not Hispanic</b>			
2009		4.0%	6.7%
2006	4.4%	2.8%	5.1%
<b>Biracial and multiracial</b>			
2009		0.6%	1.7%
2006	1.4%	0.5%	1.5%
<b>Caucasian, not Hispanic</b>			
2009		81.7%	67.1%
2006	66.5%	85.6%	71.7%
<b>Hispanic origin (of any race)</b>			
2009		4.0%	6.8%
2006	14.7%	3.1%	6.6%
<b>Native American, not Hispanic</b>			
2009		1.4%	1.3%
2006	0.8%	1.4%	2.1%

Sources: US Census Bureau; AHIMA membership profile data

## How to Promote a Diverse Profession

Individuals can play a concerted role in reducing disparities through increasing workforce diversity.

HIM professionals can help promote a diverse workforce by setting personal goals to participate in a relevant activity. For example, leaders in AHIMA Component State Associations can facilitate diversity in ballots and in appointed leadership positions.

Individuals can donate to AHIMA Foundation scholarship funds (such as the Esther Mayo Sherard Foundation, which provides scholarships to African-American students) and to educational institutions with a mission to educate traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in the health professions.

They also can participate in programs that evaluate and improve the climate for diversity in the institutions with which they are associated. By participating in these types of activities HIM professionals can align professional practice experiences with the organizational initiatives.

## A Need for Research and Reporting

Individuals can address health disparities through research. More information is needed to evaluate how HIM professionals are contributing to their communities in general and underserved areas in particular. Further, graduates from HIM programs may be contributing to communities, but the impact has not been identified.

In order to attract students from diverse backgrounds to the profession, more information is needed on how the field is viewed by different segments of the populations. Learning more about how the career goals in potential student groups align with what HIM has to offer will help determine the best means to reach and effectively attract students.

HIM professionals can also play a role through quality data collection and reporting that supports accurate capture of race and ethnicity data. They can educate consumers about how they can create and use personal health records to better manage their own care and chronic conditions.

HIM professionals can take part by setting a personal-professional goal to support at least one action in alignment with the Institute of Medicine recommendations and the AHIMA diversity resolution. Facilitating a broader reach of the profession will help bring HIM skills to those individuals affected by health disparities.

## Notes

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4. Ibid.
5. AHIMA. "Resolution on Diversity." 2007. Available online in the AHIMA Body of Knowledge at [www.ahima.org](http://www.ahima.org).

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