

Resource We Can't Afford Not to Cultivate

Save to myBoK

by Barbara P. Fuller, JD, RHIA

How do we nurture our health information students and new professionals? I was prompted to ask myself this question after reading a recent letter from a new HIM graduate. This graduate was asking for a mentor and help in securing a job with a living wage.

Among other ways, AHIMA responds to this question by annually holding a focus group for new professionals. This provides the new professionals with the opportunity to exchange ideas, receive encouragement, and network. There is also the opportunity to meet AHIMA staff and a member of the AHIMA Board of Directors in an informal setting.

But what about the rest of us? What are we doing to nurture our students and the newest members of our profession? Concern for the diminishing numbers of HIM students and graduates is paramount and must be addressed by all of us.

Students Ask the Hard Question

Students and new graduates are troubled by the requirement for two to three years experience found in the majority of job advertisements. How, they often ask, can we get the required experience unless someone gives us a chance at the position? It is a good question. All health information curricula carry the requirement of an extensive number of hours in laboratory and on-site clinical practice to apply what is learned in the didactic portion of the program. HIM professionals in the field have often participated in the design of a clinical practice experience. Is it asking too much of us to bring new graduates on board and mentor and shape them until they become the HIM professionals we need?

Perhaps we need to be reminded that we were once in need of such support when we began our working lives. I am sure each of us can name a mentor who gave us our first job opportunity or helped us learn the intricacies and nuances of the HIM profession. We need to repay this debt, now more than ever.

Learning From Students

Mentoring is not a one-way street. We can learn from those we advise. HIM students and graduates of today have spent their educational years in an academic environment far richer in learning experiences than the one we were in a few years ago. Today's graduates have been exposed to the multiple sites from which healthcare is now delivered. Their acquaintance and comfort with computers likely dates back to their kindergarten years. The blueprint for the use of electronic systems in everyday living is solidly imprinted on their minds. Recent graduates have been engaged in problem-solving experiences both in the classroom and in clinical practice. They have met, and in numerous ways exceeded, required competencies. These HIM graduates come to us enthusiastic, adaptable, and ready to contribute. What a stimulating opportunity for those of us who may be feeling somewhat burned out with the challenges we face each day.

Find the Time

Our time-worn response to working with students and mentoring graduates is often "When do I have time for all these things?" It is a legitimate response. Never has more been required of us with less time and resources available. Called on constantly to do more with less staff and fewer budget dollars, we surely cannot be blamed for wondering how it all can be accomplished with just 24 hours in each day.

Perhaps the answer is another question: How can we afford not to hire, mentor, and support our students and new graduates? We must somehow find the time. It is often those who are busiest who somehow find time to accomplish important, extra things. The life of the HIM profession depends on the integration of its newest members. Let's welcome them to our profession.

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