

Status of Graduate Education Programs in Health Information Management

Save to myBoK

by Melanie Brodnik, PhD, RRA, Betty Bean, RRA, Christie Hickey, RRA, Olivia Massey, RRA, and Carissa Ritchie, RRA

The growing complexity of information needs in the delivery of quality healthcare at low cost has contributed to educational reform in health information management (HIM) and the need for advanced professional preparation of HIM practitioners. In 1997, AHIMA published curriculum models for undergraduate programs in health information management.^{1,2,3} Progress toward implementing the model curricula in associate and baccalaureate degree programs in HIM is ongoing.⁴ In addition, the curriculum content from the models has been incorporated into the newly revised *Standards and Guidelines for Academic Programs for the Health Information Technician and Health Information Administrator*.⁵ Recognizing the importance of the profession's evolutionary growth in discipline-specific content areas leading to advanced education in the field, AHIMA formed a Master's Curriculum Task Force to provide guidance in curriculum development at the HIM graduate level.

Part of the mission of the task force was to determine where the profession is in regard to graduate education in HIM. In 1992, Myra Brown reported that approximately 6 percent (1407) of the AHIMA membership had master's degrees.⁶ Of these degrees, the majority were in business administration, education, and hospital administration. Brown's findings are not surprising, given the availability of academic programs in these areas on college campuses. Interest in graduate education continues to increase, as evidenced by the 1997 AHIMA membership profile. This most recent profile reveals that 8 percent of the members have graduate degrees.

As HIM professional roles and responsibilities expand, the need to offer graduate education opportunities in HIM is becoming more evident. Several graduate programs in HIM have been developed since the early 1990s. However, to develop a better understanding of graduate education in HIM, a survey was distributed to all directors of baccalaureate degree programs in HIM. The purpose of the survey was to determine the current status of graduate education specific to HIM.

Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The following four research questions guided the survey effort:

- What graduate degrees are offered on baccalaureate degree HIM campuses?
- How many baccalaureate degree HIM programs currently offer, or plan to offer, a graduate program in HIM?
- What are the most common barriers to establishing graduate education in HIM?
- What are the perceptions of baccalaureate degree HIM program directors in regard to graduate education in HIM?

The survey instrument was comprised of eight demographic questions and items specific to the offering of HIM graduate education programs. Participants also were asked to rank barriers to HIM graduate education and to respond to a graduate education perception scale. An open-ended question invited the respondents to express their thoughts on the challenges facing the implementation of graduate education programs in HIM. A survey and cover letter were sent to all baccalaureate degree HIM program directors.

Results

Respondent Profile

The survey was sent to the entire population of 54 baccalaureate degree program directors, who were located in 31 states and Puerto Rico. Forty-one surveys were returned for a response rate of 75 percent. Of the respondents, 44 percent are located in liberal arts colleges, 27 percent in major academic research institutions, 20 percent in professional colleges, and 10 percent in academic health center campuses. The majority of programs (90 percent) are two years in length. The average number of

full-time faculty per program is 3.6 and the average number of part-time faculty is 1.9. Respondents indicate that 16 percent (n=26) of the faculty have doctoral degrees, 53 percent (n=88) have master's degrees and 31 percent (n=51) have baccalaureate degrees. The remaining study results will be presented as related to the research questions.

What graduate degrees are offered on baccalaureate degree HIM campuses?

Respondents were asked whether their institution currently offered graduate education opportunities, and if so, what were the most common degrees sought by their graduates. Eighty-five percent (n=35) of the respondents indicated that graduate education opportunities are offered on their campuses. The three most common graduate degree programs sought by HIM graduates on these campuses are MBAs (59 percent), master's of science (56 percent), and master's of public health (39 percent) (see Figure 1). Percentages do not total 100 since more than one choice could be selected by the respondents.

figure 1 — Types of Graduate Degrees

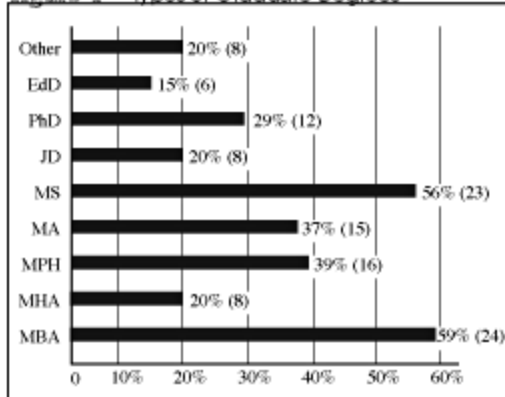
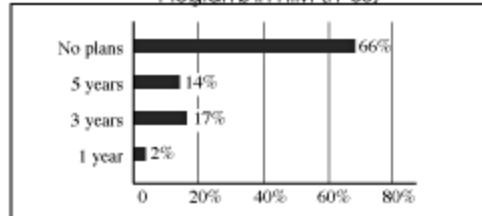


figure 2 — Plans for Graduate Education Programs in HIM (n=35)



How many baccalaureate degree HIM programs currently offer, or plan to offer, a graduate program in HIM?

Six (15 percent) respondents indicated that their college presently offers a master's degree in HIM. Respondents were asked to indicate whether the program was at an entry or advanced level of practice. Respondents could choose more than one program type. Of the six respondents, two programs are at the entry level, one is at the advanced practice level where an RRA and/or ART credential is required for admission to the program, and five offer advanced practice tracks where the RRA and/or ART is not required as part of admission. Respondents who did not offer a graduate program in HIM revealed that 66 percent (n=23) did not have plans to implement a graduate program in HIM within the next five years. However, 12 respondents did have plans to implement HIM graduate programs, seven within three years and five within five years (see Figure 2).

What are the most common barriers to establishing graduate education in HIM?

To gain a better understanding of the barriers to the establishment of graduate education programs in HIM, respondents were asked to rank order the top five, out of 10, barriers to program implementation. The top five barriers were lack of program funds, lack of faculty with doctorates, not enough faculty, lack of clearly defined curriculum content, and unclear job perspectives for graduates with such a degree (see Table 1).

table 1 — Barriers to Master's Programs in HIM

Barriers	Responses
Lack of program funds	24
Lack of faculty with doctorates	21
Not enough faculty	14
Lack of clearly defined HIM graduate curriculum content	10
Unclear job perspectives	10
Not enough student interest	8
Not part of institutional goals	7
Not a graduate degree-bearing unit	5
Lack of teaching resources at this level	3

What are the perceptions of baccalaureate degree HIM program directors in regard to graduate education in HIM?

Respondents were asked to respond to four questions related to their perception of graduate education in HIM. A five-point Likert-type scale was used where 5 represented "strongly agree" and 1 represented "neutral." The results indicated that a majority of the respondents feel there is a need for graduate programming in HIM ($M=4.1$, $SD=.63$). The respondents were also in agreement that a graduate degree in HIM is necessary for the survival of the profession ($M=4.1$, $SD=.74$). The respondents were in agreement, but less so, when asked whether a graduate degree is important to the HIM profession no matter what it is in ($M=3.7$, $SD=1.0$). Finally, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed that the baccalaureate degree HIM professional would be replaced by individuals with a graduate degree at some time in the future. The majority of respondents did not agree with this statement ($M=3.1$, $SD=.98$) (see Figures 3-6, [below](#)).

Along with the perception scale, respondents were asked to comment on what they believed to be the greatest challenges facing graduate education in HIM. Twenty-four respondents commented. Their comments were categorized into the following themes:

- Identification of specific graduate education focus in HIM, the discipline-specific content and differentiation between professional levels
- Marketing of graduate degree in HIM to employers and why the degree would be more relevant than an MBA, MHA, MPH, etc.
- Marketing of graduate education HIM to a diverse student body that includes not only HIM professionals but others

Discussion

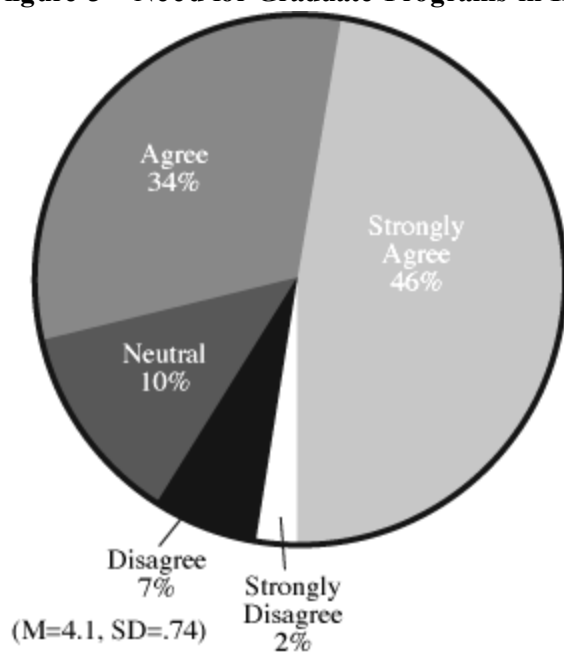
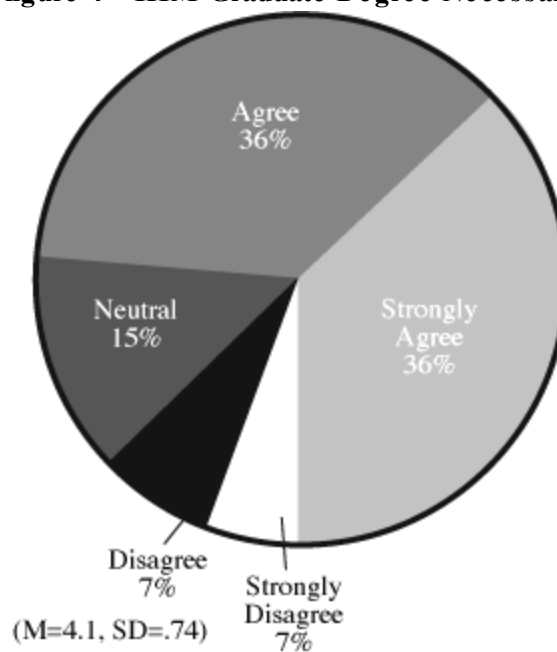
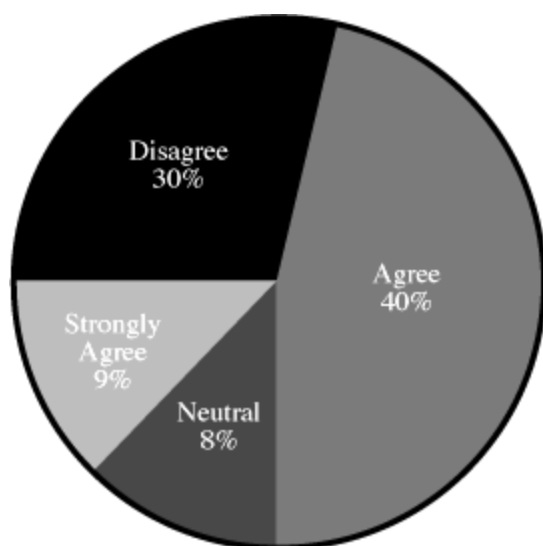
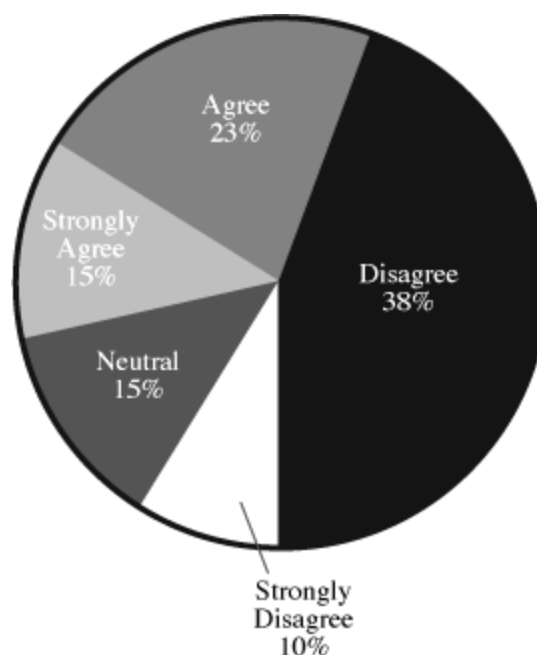
It appears that a variety of graduate education opportunities are available on college campuses. This survey did not attempt to determine the availability of graduate programs offered on campuses without baccalaureate degree HIM programs or graduate programs offered through a nontraditional format. There are at least six graduate programs in HIM. The majority of these programs do not require that individuals possess prior entry-level knowledge of HIM at either the associate or baccalaureate degree levels as a prerequisite to the program. An additional 12 graduate programs are planned within the next five years. At this time it is not known whether prior HIM knowledge will be a prerequisite to admission for these programs or whether the program will follow a traditional or nontraditional curriculum design.

The major barriers to implementation of graduate programs in HIM are lack of program funds, lack of faculty with doctorates, and a limited number of available HIM faculty, followed by concerns related to curriculum content and job perspectives for graduates of such programs. The top three barriers refer to resources that unfortunately are an issue in many allied health-related academic programs.

The respondents recognize that graduate education in general is important to the survival of the profession, and that there is a need for graduate programs that are specific to HIM. While there is support for graduate education in HIM, the respondents do not feel that HIM baccalaureate degree individuals will be replaced by individuals with a graduate degree in the near future. The respondents identified several challenges facing the profession as it addresses graduate education implementation. These challenges provide insight into issues academic programs and the profession in general must face as graduate education opportunities in HIM continue to expand. These issues are similar to issues raised by other disciplines who have, over time, acquired a broader knowledge and skill base, e.g., physical therapy, nursing, etc.

Summary

The survey results indicate that HIM practitioners have numerous opportunities for graduate education but not necessarily in the HIM field. There is interest, however, in expanding opportunities for graduate programming in HIM, especially if barriers can be overcome. As professional roles and responsibilities continue to expand, it will be important for the profession to implement graduate programs that prepare individuals for a wider scope and domain of professional practice. Also, it will be extremely important for HIM professionals to look toward graduate education as a way to stay competitive in a changing healthcare environment.

figure 3—Need for Graduate Programs in HIM**figure 4—HIM Graduate Degree Necessary for Survival****figure 5—Graduate Degree Important Regardless of Discipline****figure 6—Bachelor Degree HIM Professionals Will Be Replaced by Graduate Degree Professionals**

Acknowledgement

This study was conducted as part of an intercollegiate collaborative effort between faculty from The Ohio State University and students from the health information management program at Arkansas Tech University. Thanks to student research team members Betty Bean, Christie Hickey, Olivia Massey, and Carissa Ritchie, and the faculty member who encouraged them to pursue all options in fulfilling class assignments.

Notes

1. Brodnik, M., M. McCain, J. Linck, B. Bowman, C. Elliott, M. Johns, C. DeBerg, and M. St. Leger. "A Summary of the Associate and Baccalaureate Degree Curriculum Models for Health Information Management, Part I." *Journal of AHIMA* 68, no. 4 (1997): 60-64.
2. Brodnik, M., M. McCain, J. Linck, B. Bowman, C. Elliott, M. Johns, C. DeBerg, and M. St. Leger. "Curriculum Model for Baccalaureate Degree Programs in HIM, Part II: Focus on Educational Outcomes and Curricular Content," *Journal of AHIMA* 68, no. 5 (1997): 54-59.
3. Brodnik, M., M. McCain, J. Linck, B. Bowman, C. Elliott, M. Johns, C. DeBerg, and M. St. Leger. "Curriculum Model for Associate Degree Programs in HIM, Part III: Focus on Educational Outcomes and Curricular Content." *Journal of AHIMA* 68, no. 6 (1997): 64-67.
4. Brodnik, Melanie. "Progress Toward Implementing the Health Information Technology and Health Information Administration Curriculum Models." *Journal of AHIMA* 68, no. 9 (1997): 86-91.
5. AHIMA. *Standards and Guidelines for an Accredited Educational Program for the Health Information Technician and Health Information Administrator*. Chicago: 1997.
6. Brown, Myra. "A Look at Master's Degrees among Health Information Management Professionals from 1985 to 1992," *Journal of AHIMA* 63, no. 12 (1992): 30-32.

*Melanie Brodnik is director of health information management and systems, School of Allied Medical Professions, The Ohio State University, in Columbus, OH. She also serves on AHIMA's Board of Directors. At the time this study was conducted, **Betty Bean, Christie Hickey, Olivia Massey, and Carissa Ritchie** were senior students in the HIM department at Arkansas Tech University. This study represents an intercollegiate research effort between Dr. Brodnik and the students.*

Article Citation:

Brodnik, Melanie, Betty Bean, Christie Hickey, Olivia Massey, and Carissa Ritchie. "The Status of Graduate Education Programs in Health Information Management." *Journal of AHIMA* 69, no. 7/8 (1998): 80-83.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.