Taking The Doctoral Challenge: Educators Push HIM Professionals to Add PhD to Credentials

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The push toward graduate education in health information management (HIM) is becoming a reality as more universities and colleges develop or explore launching HIM and informatics graduate curricula. Fundamental to offering these programs is the need for doctorally prepared HIM-credentialed faculty. The number of AHIMA members with that background is less than one percent of the AHIMA membership. Adding to this issue is the continuing loss through retirement of AHIMA credentialed faculty with doctorates.

As a result many more doctorally prepared faculty with an AHIMA credential are needed to teach in the existing and upcoming graduate programs. But the industry must first learn how to prepare faculty for this challenge and communicate what types of doctoral programs are available. Also, interested HIM professionals must learn what type of financial and advisory support is available to assist them in obtaining this goal.

AHIMA Strategic Plan Addresses Doctoral Need

This year the AHIMA Board of Directors developed the AHIMA Strategic Plan: Drive the Power of Knowledge for 2014-2017. The need to advance HIM education to a higher level is stressed throughout the plan, and explains the need for educators to play a vital role in moving the profession to greater levels of knowledge, advanced and specialized education, and recognition. The plan also discusses the need to recruit the best and brightest into HIM practice and education so these individuals can quickly learn leadership skills, data analytics, and health informatics in order to advance health intelligence. The plan further states that the industry must "through Reality 2016, create pathways for HIM professionals to be recognized for leadership skills, including higher education and advanced certification options and aligning curriculum to meet current and future needs."

Faculty who are prepared at the doctoral level are best suited to provide the advancements in higher education and certification and develop curriculum to meet these needs. Evidence-based research is another focus in the strategic plan. HIM professionals who are prepared at the doctoral level are best suited to write grant proposals, receive funding, and conduct the research. At this level, however, the industry is lacking in HIM professionals who have a doctorate, an HIM credential, and who are educated and trained in research methodology.

Statistics Support the Doctoral Need

The need to increase the number of members with advanced education and the potential to serve as educators in graduate level HIM programs is apparent. Approximately 0.48 percent of AHIMA members (322 out of 67,000 members) has a doctorate degree. Of this number, 40-43 percent work as an educator or in an educational institution. Other members have educational degrees in law or medicine (JD=138 members, MD=381 members) including 0.21 percent with a JD and 0.57 percent with a MD. Members who have one of the advanced degrees and an AHIMA credential make up an even smaller percent with 0.26 percent with a PhD (173 out of 67,000 members), 0.29 percent with a MD (197 out of 67,000 members), and 0.094 percent with a JD (63 out of 67,000 members). The need to increase these numbers is imperative if the HIM profession is to move toward advanced degrees. Many universities and colleges across the country in HIM and health informatics that are looking to fill a new faculty position will only consider faculty with a doctorate degree or another advanced degree. They also look for an AHIMA credential, publications written, research conducted, grant funding accrued, and teaching and clinical experience.

HIM Doctoral Program Structures Vary

An important consideration in hiring faculty with doctorate degrees is whether that individual has a sustainable line of research that supports funding opportunities and the ability to contribute to a profession's body of knowledge. The HIM profession is comprised of domains of practice that serve as a foundation for advanced graduate study. Doctoral programs in public health, epidemiology, health policy, health behavior and promotion, clinical informatics, and biostatistics support domains of practice related to informatics, analytics, and data use. The domain of data content, structure, and standards as well as the previously mentioned domains are supported by biomedical and health informatics, management information systems, and computer systems and technology doctorate programs.

Doctorate programs in business administration that focus on finance, marketing, operations, or accounting support domains of revenue management, compliance, and leadership. In addition, doctorate programs in human resources and organizational behavior support the domain of leadership. Doctorate programs in health services administration often focus on health outcomes, policy, and analysis, and also support the domains previously mentioned. In addition, doctorate programs in education that focus on instructional design and technology support not only the domain of leadership that encompasses human resources and training, but also informatics, analytics, and data use. There are a plethora of doctoral programs that can expand, and add value to, the practice of HIM and informatics. Credentialed HIM doctorate faculty are needed in all the previously mentioned content areas to enhance educational advancement within the profession and to add to the profession's growing body of knowledge.

HIM Doctoral Program Case Studies

The following illustrates three HIM and informatics doctoral programs and their various details.

Ohio State University

Ohio State University offers an interdisciplinary PhD program in health and rehabilitation sciences designed to prepare healthcare professionals to become leaders, teachers, and scholars in their respective fields. Specific goals of the interdisciplinary program are to prepare individuals to enter academic positions and to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the respective health disciplines. HIM professionals have the opportunity to focus their studies in a variety of cognate areas such as informatics, healthcare administration, healthcare policy, patient safety and outcomes, and business analytics. The Ohio State University program is open to applicants who have completed a graduate degree or wish to complete a master's degree as part of a pre-PhD pathway. Application requirements include submission of transcripts, GRE scores, letters of recommendation, statement of intent and research interests, and a 3.0 GPA or above for undergraduate and 3.3 GPA or above in previous graduate studies. Admission to the program is selective. Funding for tuition, fees, and stipend is available based on advisor funding and school resources.

The PhD program is full-time and requires a minimum of 80 credits including the master's degree. A minimum of 63 credits focus on the PhD curriculum. At least 45 of these credit hours are taken before completing a candidacy exam. These courses include coursework in college teaching, grant writing, research design and methodology, research practica, and courses in an area of emphasis. Post-candidacy the student will complete 18 credits that focus on in-depth research directed toward completion and defense of a dissertation.

The core curriculum emphasizes the program's fundamental objective to prepare stewards of respective professions. Throughout the program, students are exposed to cutting edge research conducted in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences and have the opportunity to work closely with well-respected scholars focused on a strong research mission. Graduates are prepared to assume tenure-line faculty positions and engage in independent research and scholarship. For more information on the Ohio State University program, visit http://medicine.osu.edu/hrs/phd.

Oregon Health and Science University

Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) offers a PhD in Biomedical Informatics. Most students in the program are funded through a training grant from the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The overall goal of this program is to produce researchers and leaders at the intersection of healthcare and information technology. The program is offered in two tracks, clinical informatics and bioinformatics. Both tracks build upon the core curriculum in the university's master's degree program,

adding additional courses in a cognate area, advanced research methods, and mentored teaching, along with a dissertation. The clinical informatics track is quite amenable to those wishing to study or who have already studied HIM.

In the clinical informatics track, one of the areas of concentration is HIM. The OHSU master's degree program also has a track in HIM that is CAHIIM accredited. Therefore, if a student chose the HIM cognate in the PhD program and completed all of the courses that meet the accredited CAHIIM curriculum, he or she would be eligible to sit for the RHIA credential.

The doctoral program allows other cognate areas that also would serve a current HIM practitioner or educator. Some of the other cognate areas include public health, systems science, finance, management, natural language processing, and innovation in technology.

While in the program, students are expected to present at conferences, publish in peer-reviewed journals, engage in mentored teaching, and fulfill research requirements as determined by their advisory committee. At OHSU, PhD fellows and post-doctoral fellows present to each other at a weekly fellows meeting. This provides a safe environment for individuals to explore new research directions within their peer group. Students complete written and oral examinations as well as public pre-defense and post-defense presentations. Annual reviews with advisors and mentors are required to assure progress towards completion in a timely manner. This provides students with greater focus and keeps them mindful of their obligations to their program. These annual reviews also provide an opportunity to address and resolve any barriers to completion. The program directors also identify refinements to the doctoral program to address emerging student needs.

Students may enter the PhD program upon completion of a bachelor's or master's degree. Although OHSU's certificate and master's degree programs are offered online, the PhD program is designed for full-time on-campus students. Credits earned through the distance certificate and master's degree programs transfer into the PhD program, which can shorten the time to completion and the on-campus requirement.

Entrance into the program requires a 3.0 GPA, meeting university GRE standards, and other traditional application materials. Because of the emphasis on mentoring, students are encouraged to identify a faculty member whose research is close to their interests. The program is based on quarters and a minimum of 135 quarter credits are required. A thorough discussion of the expectations of the PhD students and the PhD program is available on the OHSU website at www.ohsu.edu/informatics.

University of Pittsburgh

An interdisciplinary PhD program in rehabilitation science is available for HIM professionals at the University of Pittsburgh. The goal of this doctoral program is to advance the practice of rehabilitation disciplines and professions through research, teaching, and professional development. Graduates of this program will have a specific area of expertise in health and rehabilitation science as well as a core of interdisciplinary knowledge related to a specific area, such as health information technology. Application requirements include completion of an essay that includes specific research interests, experience, and career goals; letters of recommendation; a resume; transcripts showing a minimum 3.0 GPA; GRE scores; and examples of written work such as publications, class projects, etc. All applicants are evaluated for admission by the admissions committee that also includes linking faculty and student research interests. A minimum of 72 credits beyond the bachelor's degree level is required. Up to 30 credits taken at the graduate level towards a master's degree may be accepted for transfer. The following courses and credit hours are required as part of the 72 credits: doctoral seminars, four credits; dissertation research, 18 credits; methods of inquiry I and II, two credits; core concepts in disability and rehabilitation I and II, two credits; research design and statistics, nine credits; and courses in chosen content expertise such as health information technology (credits to be arranged with advisor).

A preliminary examination is taken by the student after their first year of study to show competence in methods of inquiry and core concepts of disability and rehabilitation. After successful completion of the preliminary examination, students will finish taking courses in their area of expertise such as health information technology in preparation for the comprehensive examination. The written and oral comprehensive examination consists of questions in the following areas: basic sciences, clinical sciences, social sciences, information sciences, theory, and experimental methods and research design. After mastering the comprehensive exam, the dissertation proposal defense is conducted where students propose the mentored research study they will pursue. The final step is the dissertation defense, in which the student defends the research study they have conducted. Dissertation topics include:

- An evaluation of the ICD-10-CM system
- Measuring patient satisfaction
- Examining privacy and security in telepractice

For more information on the doctoral program at the University of Pittsburgh, visit http://www.shrs.pitt.edu/phdrs/.

Mentoring Model for Doctorate Students

Doctoral programs should build their foundation on mentoring, with mentors focusing on conveying the following traits. Students should receive coaching from mentors to keep them focused, be directly engaged and empowered to build their confidence during a somewhat difficult educational journey, and collaborate with mentors to bolster their research skills and receive aid on becoming published authors.

Mentoring Potential Doctorate Candidates

Mentoring can be a great way for university faculty to build connections with students, instill confidence, and lead students toward the goal of completing their doctorate degree. A student may have many successes, but also may have stumbling blocks such as academic or personal issues. Mentoring reduces procrastination while emphasizing a clear message of "You can do it." A student in a doctorate program can feel isolated, fearful, or challenged by the many academic processes that are expected to complete the degree.

Mentors can help make the goal of doctorate education a reality. Of course students that pursue their doctorate have mentors through their advisors and clinical internship instructors, but mentors within the HIM profession are also necessary to succeed. An HIM professional with a doctorate degree is a perfect mentor because they have the same skills, expertise, experience, and understanding that is necessary to guide the HIM professional through the doctoral level of education. A mentoring institute that includes HIM professionals who have achieved their doctorate is needed so that aspiring doctoral students have individuals to communicate with as they proceed through the doctoral program. Mentors that have similar education and research interests are perfectly poised to help an HIM professional as they pursue this degree. Whether HIM professionals

enroll in a full- or part-time doctorate program, the more support and encouragement that they can receive the more likely they will finish their degree.

Mentoring students is time consuming but essential to the student's success, and benefits the university and the profession. Reassuring students along the way that they are capable of achieving their doctorate goal contributes to their confidence. Mentoring involves engaging students and coaching them on developing critical thinking and high level writing skills, which will serve them as they write their dissertation.

Doctoral Degree Benefits in the Workforce

HIM professionals with a doctorate degree work in a variety of employment settings with many different job titles and functions. Nearly 40 percent of AHIMA members with doctorate degrees work as educators in institutions. Eleven percent work as consultants, 10 percent work as HIM or IT directors and privacy officers, and 9 percent work as executives, presidents, or vice presidents in prominent healthcare settings that include single and multiple hospital systems and consulting companies. Additional employment opportunities are with companies and organizations that work with Big Data and healthcare business analytics for health benchmarking, health services research, and policy analysis.

Doctorate programs are challenging but not insurmountable. Students that choose to achieve a doctorate have already set rigorous goals for themselves. However, having a mentor along the way is vital-someone who can listen to concerns, engage them in positive thinking, collaborate with them to succeed, and help them learn to be empowered by their steadfast work.

Reference

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