

Taking the Specialty Route

[Save to myBoK](#)

by Gina Rollins

Specialty tracks and associate degrees offer professional fulfillment, career advancement, and better pay.

Laid-off when a manufacturing and shipping business closed, Cindy Higgins, RHIT, took advantage of retraining opportunities and entered the HIM field. She went on to complete an associate of applied science degree in health information technology and receive technical certificates in medical insurance specialist and medical coding from Walters State Community College in Morristown, TN.

The credentials have “advanced my career tremendously,” she says. Higgins now is office manager for a neurologist in Greeneville, TN. “We just implemented a new software system, and it gave me the ability to manage the process,” she adds.

Tiffany Rhodes, CTR, wasn’t forced into a new career due to a plant closing. She had already started coursework toward an associate of science in medical record technology at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) in Little Rock when chairman and associate professor Kathy Trawick, EdD, RHIA, suggested that she try UAMS’s cancer registry track.

“From the first class, I just loved it,” she says. It’s very rewarding to know what you’re doing can help researchers find a cure or treatment that can help improve survival for cancer patients.” Rhodes has been administrator of the tumor registry at the 314th Medical Group at Little Rock Air Force Base since January 2007.

Higgins and Rhodes exemplify the individuals who pursue associate’s degrees and specialty tracks. Such students tend to be older than typical undergraduates, and they may be entering the HIM field as a second, third, or even fourth career, says Angela Picard Carney, PhD, RHIA, director of the HIM program at St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, FL.

“Our average student is in their 30s or 40s or older. They may be pursuing a certain position or are more career-oriented. Some are retiring [from one profession] and want another part-time income,” Picard Carney explains. Specialty certificates, with or without an associate’s degree, can help students land comfortably in HIM and, for many, begin a journey of continuing education and career advancement.

That has proven to be the case for Gwendylen Dykstra-Long, RHIT, CTR, CMT, cancer program coordinator at Overton Brooks VA Medical Center in Shreveport, LA. Dykstra-Long began her HIM odyssey with a distance learning program for medical transcription. Later, while working as a medical transcriptionist at UAMS, she decided to take advantage of the university’s tuition reimbursement program. While in the second year of UAMS’s Associate of Science in Medical Record Technology program, she was not certain what career path she wanted to pursue. So she took a specialty study course involving cancer registry. “I was so excited. I knew that was what I wanted to do,” she recalls.

Dykstra-Long subsequently completed coursework for both her associate’s degree and the cancer registry track, and then she sat for both the RHIT and CTR certification examinations. Now she has her sights on earning a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. “I want to provide myself with all the educational requirements so I can teach cancer registry in the future,” she says.

Growing Interest

There are 199 HIM associate degree programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM). In comparison, there are 48 accredited bachelor’s programs and four approved master’s programs. Enrollment in associate’s programs nearly doubled in five years, rising to 13,164 in the 2006–2007 academic year, according to Claire Dixon-Lee, PhD, RHIA, FAHIMA, vice president for education and accreditation at

AHIMA and executive director of CAHIIM. That growth reflects the overall interest in the HIM field, particularly for entry-level positions.

Common specialty tracks include medical coding, medical transcription, medical insurance billing, and cancer registry. Students who meet requirements for a particular specialty track may receive a certificate from the program offering it. More importantly, they are on a pathway to obtaining professional credentials, generally by passing an examination offered by professional associations and by meeting other requirements, such as having a certain amount of work experience.

Coding probably is the most common specialty track and the most in-demand credential by employers. “There has been, and continues to be, a shortage of coders overall,” explains Picard Carney. Despite the need for coding specialists, newly minted coders, even those who have taken a coding specialty track and hold a credential such as CCA, may have difficulty landing that first coding position. That was the case for Higgins. “Every [employer] wants someone with experience. They don’t want a greenhorn, so it’s hard to get a position straight out of school,” she says.

Her experience is not unique, according to Martin Smith, MEd, RHIT, CCA, instructor at St. Petersburg College. “It’s the classic Catch-22. Employers only want people with experience, but they’re not willing to give [prospective employees] experience,” he contends. “We have an educational track [in the HIM field], but we need an apprenticeship for coders. That’s how people learn.”

AHIMA has encouraged its state associations to work with their members to “ramp-up the number of internships and develop programs to monitor and support new coding graduates. It’s worth it in the long run for capable, quality coders,” says Dixon-Lee. Certain coding and staffing companies offer training programs, as do some individual hospitals, she adds.

Responding to Market Forces

Local employment conditions influence not only the types of positions available but also the specialty tracks that colleges offer. For instance, UAMS launched its cancer registry track in response to a state-wide shortage of cancer registrars, Trawick says. In contrast, St. Petersburg College discontinued its cancer registry track due to a shortage of local jobs. “After our 2001 class, we had saturated the local market,” explains Picard Carney. “When people get these jobs they hang on to them, and there’s not a lot of turnover.”

Lack of appropriately credentialed faculty hampered the college’s plans to offer the track online and make it available to students outside the area. St. Petersburg College faced a similar dilemma with its medical transcription specialty track, which also has been discontinued. When a national transcription company closed its offices in St. Petersburg, the college was hard-pressed to find practicum and positions for students, as well as faculty to teach the curriculum, says Picard Carney.

While St. Petersburg College disbanded two specialty tracks, it has initiated a new one to reflect the changing landscape of HIM. In August 2008 the college began offering an associate of science degree in healthcare informatics and an 18-credit specialty track leading to a certificate in healthcare informatics. Approximately 60 students had enrolled by July 2008; about half from the St. Petersburg area and half from across Florida. Enrollees included a mix of people with clinical backgrounds, graduates of the college’s associate of science program in HIM, and some “job seekers who recognize HIM as the new wave of automation,” says Picard Carney.

The specialty track curriculum includes topics such as data and workflow management and understanding electronic health records. Program graduates should be very involved as their employers convert from paper to electronic records, according to Picard Carney. “They could be key players in evaluating manual processes and outlining what needs to be done in an electronic environment, in planning the go-live transition, in sitting with the project management team, and in working as trainers as EHR systems are implemented,” she says.

Evaluating Future Program Needs

More specialty training and greater curriculum flexibility could be in store for associate degree programs in the future. AHIMA’s Vision 2016 white paper, a blueprint for quality HIM education issued in September 2007, called for realigning HIM associate degrees with work force needs. Among its recommendations was the restructuring of associate-level curriculum to

“make room” for development of special skills and enable specialized tracks to provide a “stronger, technically skilled HIM professional employers want.”

Vision 2016 noted that associate degree programs are “pressed to cover an increasingly complex set of entry-level competencies and knowledge at a basic level of understanding,” a conclusion shared by Gail Winkler, RHIA, director of health information technology programs at Walters State. “We teach at such a high competency level and we’re going so fast it’s hard for the students to absorb it all. If we spread the domains over three educational levels it would be easier for them to master skills needed at each level,” she contends. AHIMA’s education strategy committee is currently evaluating ways to streamline the associate degree curriculum and eliminate duplication between the associate and bachelor levels, says Dixon-Lee.

Vision 2016 also called for coding to become an associate-level specialty with a core set of knowledge in the first year of study. The second year would involve in-depth courses, not only on how to code but also on the data-related critical thinking skills that will be needed in the future.

Even as AHIMA takes stock of the associate degree and competencies and the emerging need for additional skills, one thing is clear: specialty tracks and related credentials make a difference in professional fulfillment, career advancement, and salaries. “For the area where I live there’s no doubt that without my education I would not make [the salary] that I’m making,” says Paula Bowlin, RHIT, program coordinator for Incompass Health in Morristown, TN.

HIM is Bowlin’s fourth career; shuttered trucking, manufacturing, and retail businesses led her to pursue an associate of applied science degree in health information technology, along with technical certificates in medical insurance specialist and medical coding from Walters State. She subsequently earned a bachelor’s degree in HIM from the State University of New York.

A 2008 salary survey from AHIMA found that director salaries ranged from approximately \$60,000 for individuals with associate’s degrees to nearly \$82,000 for those with master’s degrees. Average coding salaries ranged from nearly \$37,000 for respondents with AHIMA’s CCA credential to nearly \$58,000 for those holding its CCS credential. “In general, as one adds education and credentials, their salary is higher,” explains Dixon-Lee.

Choosing a Focus and a Program

Choosing which specialty tracks to pursue and how and where to do so boils down to interest and lifestyle. “Check out opportunities in the field in the area where you’re living,” advises Higgins. “Otherwise, you might have to move to take advantage of your education.” Higgins says she “would love” to study cancer registry, for example, but there are no such positions near her hometown.

Many colleges offer distance learning options, but regardless of format, the course must “fit with your lifestyle, or it won’t work,” notes Bowlin. Likewise, it only pays to pursue further education in domains of HIM that are of interest, she says.

Both Rhodes and Dykstra-Long stumbled into cancer registry by happenstance; neither knew much about it beforehand. Therefore, Dykstra-Long recommends shadowing colleagues to learn about their roles and responsibilities. “Even if you can spend one hour per week in a different department [or aspect of HIM] it will give you a broader perspective, and you never know what will jump out at you,” she says.

Pursuing one specialty track often leads to another. “Insurance and coding complement each other very well, and it’s easy to do them both at the same time. On the other hand, transcription requires a little different skill and personality set,” observes Winkler. Cancer registry and coding also inform one another, according to Rhodes. “They’re very complementary. Whether you’re assigning codes or staging cancer, the principal is the same. You’re telling a story with numbers,” she explains.

As the field of HIM evolves, new specialty tracks are likely to emerge, and those in existence today are likely to change. “I don’t know that we’ve found all the possible jobs for these credentials,” says Winkler. “It’s a real exciting time to be in our profession, and as it continues to grow and change, I urge people to keep an open mind and think not about what they’re losing but focus on what they’re gaining.”

Gina Rollins (rollinswrites@verizon.net) is a freelance writer specializing in healthcare.

Article citation:

Rollins, Gina. "Taking the Specialty Route" *Journal of AHIMA* 79, no.10 (October 2008): 44-47.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

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