

# Teaching the Legal Record: Professor Combines HIM and Legal Backgrounds to Educate the Future

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by *Meg Featheringham*, assistant editor

Laurie Rinehart-Thompson, JD, RHIA, CHP, didn't plan on going into academia when she began her HIM career. "I absolutely love it, but I didn't originally consider it," she says of how she came to be assistant professor of clinical allied medicine at The Ohio State University.

Rinehart-Thompson began her career as the director of a medical records department in a small rural facility, where she became interested in medical malpractice defense. She eventually left her position to enroll in law school. However, Rinehart-Thompson soon discovered that litigation was not the path for her.

"After my first year of law school at Ohio State, I worked at a law firm in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Being there was a wonderful and unforgettable experience, but through my work I realized I did not want to litigate," she says. "I really disliked it." However, having committed to a legal education that she otherwise found intriguing and realizing that it could lead to many career options, she completed law school, passed the bar exam, and now holds an Ohio law license.

She took a position with a small occupational and physical therapy contract agency, performing contract reviews and administrative work with medical records. It was during this time that past AHIMA president Melanie Brodnik approached her at a local association meeting about teaching a legal HIM course as an adjunct instructor at Ohio State, which she accepted.

When a full-time faculty position opened up, Rinehart-Thompson jumped at the opportunity. "By that time, I realized that I really enjoyed teaching and it was a career transition I would like to make."

## Legal EHR Basics

Rinehart-Thompson currently teaches courses on HIM fundamentals, healthcare delivery, and legal issues to HIM and health management students. As the industry changes, so too does her curriculum. She's beginning to incorporate more about the electronic health record early into the curriculum so her students are "introduced to the concept of the EHR, certification by CCHIT, and other current issues," she says. "I introduce them to legal issues associated with HIM early on as well."

Rinehart-Thompson emphasizes that every organization is different when it comes to defining what their legal EHR should include. "There's no one-size-fits-all definition of a legal health record, including a legal electronic health record," she notes. "What one organization decides to disclose is going to be different from another organization."

Metadata is a huge issue for organizations maintaining a legal electronic health record, Rinehart-Thompson notes. "It's not just documentation that is important. The information about documentation that can now be captured has huge legal implications because of its evidentiary value." Printouts that contain additional or more recent data than the EHR can also be problematic from a legal standpoint.

"It's imperative to sit down with the legal counsel in your organization and decide what your legal EHR is going to be," she says.

## The Perpetual Student

Like her students, Rinehart-Thompson is constantly learning. "Having to share information with others really forces you to stay current," she says. She keeps up by reading journal articles, giving presentations, and attending conferences. She is also coediting and coauthoring a legal textbook to be published by AHIMA in the spring.

Her students play a significant role in motivating and energizing her. “When a student says to me that ‘I got so much out of your class’ or ‘This is one of the best courses I’ve taken,’ that makes it all worthwhile.”

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