Preparing Tomorrow's Professionals: a New Framework for HIM Education

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Dramatic change in HIM demands new thinking about how we educate tomorrow's professionals. Redefining roles, competencies, and educational progression is the first stage in AHIMA's new framework for HIM education.

When tomorrow's graduates enter the HIM workplace, will they be ready for the e-HIMTM environment? Technology is transforming day-to-day functions, redefining traditional roles, raising expectations of base competencies, and creating new opportunities. This rapid change poses a special challenge to education, which must prepare students for future jobs as well as provide current professionals opportunities to advance their education.

Change in the workplace is not the only challenge in HIM classrooms. Academic programs are at risk due to decreased enrollment, shortage of new faculty, and curricula that has not kept pace with technological change. Programs are suffering from a failure to communicate the profession's unique value to both employers and students.

These issues demand an assessment of how we educate tomorrow's HIM professionals and the roles for which we educate them. This article offers new roles and competencies that form the basis for AHIMA's new framework for HIM education.

Studying Up

In 2002 the AHIMA Board of Directors charged a newly convened committee with outlining short- and long-term strategies that address the overriding question "How can we ensure the future of the HIM profession in the world of electronic health information management?" The HIM Educational Strategy Committee (ESC) subsequently identified four areas of focus:

- Strengthening the network of academic programs
- Updating curriculum at associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree levels
- Developing faculty in response to the e-HIM transformation
- Expanding the pool of qualified faculty

ESC began with a review of several AHIMA reports on the current and future HIM environment. The first of these was the Joint Committee on Education white paper that initially addressed the status of the HIM professional.[1] ESC also relied on the 2003 e-HIM task force report, which reinforced the urgent need to enact educational reform.[2] The e-HIM task force drafted roles and competencies that ESC took into account when preparing the framework.

In particular, two recommendations from the e-HIM report related directly to ESC's work:

- Accelerate plans and activities to implement changes in health information management training, education, and curriculum
- Develop and implement programs to better prepare and train HIM professionals to pursue leadership roles in current and future areas of health information management

ESC also made extensive use of reports from the AHIMA national work force study, which surveyed educational program directors, graduating students, AHIMA members, and employers.[3-5] ESC employed the following findings and recommendations relating to technology, professional identity, credentials, and education in further developing the framework:

- The **conversion to the EHR** will be a pivotal event for HIM. Professionals will need to be academically prepared in information technology, legal and regulatory standards, information technology platforms, languages, and the effect of information on clinical outcomes.
- **HIM's core identity** is shifting. HIM professionals work in increasingly diverse settings and roles, and health information has multiple audiences that include clinicians, administrators, researchers, and patients.
- A **shortage of HIM professionals** is occuring in certain areas of the country. These shortages can be addressed directly through increasing the number of educational programs in those areas.
- HIM faces **growing competition** from other professions due to the slowness with which many HIM educational programs have adapted to changes taking place in the health information industry.
- A **lack of HIM-focused programs** at the graduate level can cause members to pursue advanced education in other disciplines.
- Members are interested in **career ladders.**
- **Technology is affecting education** as well as the healthcare industry.

A thread running through this research relates to the relationship between the field of HIM and applied health informatics. Acknowledging this connection, ESC concluded that the framework must account for the connection while asserting and preserving the unique body of HIM knowledge.

A New Educational Framework

Based on these materials and through issue-identification sessions, ESC began drafting an updated model for HIM education. The committee set five goals for the new framework:

- Reflect the abilities that will be required in the near future, when electronic-based health information management practice is the norm and paper-based practice is the exception
- Present a continuum of academic levels
- Define descriptors and roles for each academic level
- Develop competencies and model curricula for applicable academic levels
- Provide distinct entry and exit points at each academic level for ease of progression

The resulting model, "HIM Educational Framework Description of Roles for HIM in an Electronic Workplace," is shown below.

The framework begins by specifying four academic levels: predegree certificate, HIM associate degree, HIM baccalaureate degree, and HIM master's degree. Each degree level includes HIM in the title to strengthen the recognition of HIM as one continuous body of knowledge.

General descriptors outline the distinct knowledge base graduates will possess at each academic level. Briefly, these are:

- Predegree certificate: recipients possess education and entry-level competency in an HIM specialty area with the ability to perform "processes specific to the certificate" following "best practice guidelines" in HIM.
- HIM associate degree: recipients have technical expertise in areas such as "processing and using health data for billing, compliance, and surveillance purposes" using electronic systems.
- HIM baccalaureate degree: recipients possess "the expertise to develop, implement, and/or manage" health information processes and systems.
- HIM master's degree: recipients are "engaged in executive level, enterprise-wide, administrative, research and/or applied health informatics activities."

Next, roles under each academic level describe the job functions that HIM professionals completing the respective education could expect to assume. The descriptors and roles reflect the move to an electronic health information environment, as described in the e-HIM vision report.

Attendees at the AHIMA 2003 Assembly on Education Symposium and the 2003 House of Delegates reviewed the first draft of the framework. The Councils on Certification and Accreditation held a joint meeting to consider the general framework and its implications for accreditation of educational programs and content tested in the RHIA and RHIT certification examinations.

After developing an updated draft of the domains, subdomains, and tasks for the RHIT and RHIA certification examinations, ESC established task groups to work on each level of the framework. Each group was charged to:

- Use the e-HIM report and the Assembly on Education and House of Delegates comments to further sharpen the general descriptors, roles, and competencies in the ESC framework
- Revise the model curriculum for each academic level
- Recommend academic program progression models

ESC stressed to the task groups the key goals of the framework relevant to their charge:

- Include specific competencies to reflect a clear distinction between the academic levels as well as clear career pathways
- Avoid curricula content duplication by clarifying the HIM core body of knowledge at each academic level
- Provide clear entrance and exit points within the respective curricula to facilitate student progression

To date, the framework has been finalized as shown here, and both the bachelor's degree (HIA) and associate degree (HIT) competencies have been completed. These competencies have been forwarded to the Council on Accreditation for consideration to incorporate along with revised curricula into future revisions of the academic program Standards for Accreditation. The Council on Certification received the HIA competencies to include in the job analysis and revised HIA certification exam, scheduled for 2005.

Transitioning to the New Framework

The ESC has prepared a program response plan to help educational programs modify their curriculum and develop faculty. The next steps established for 2004 include revision of the model curricula for HIA, HIT, and master's programs. The goal is to have all models finalized, along with a response plan for educational programs to begin implementation of the models, for rollout at this summer's Assembly on Education Summer Symposium on June 27–30 in Chicago.

A significant milestone for ESC was the development of the Healthcare Informatics and Information Management Faculty Development Institute. This initiative will provide guidance and professional development to ensure the HIM educational community is prepared to redesign and teach the new curriculum requirements. The first efforts of the institute will debut at the 2004 Assembly on Education Summer Symposium, with sponsorship from the Foundation on Research and Education.

Education is the key to achieving the HIM 2010 vision statement described in the e-HIM report and supported on a national level by a federal government goal of universal electronic health records within the next 10 years. The HIM educational framework model is the first step on this road. ❖

Knowledgeable Fellows
The AHIMA Fellowship Program

Excellence in HIM education and significant contributions to the advancement of the profession through innovation and knowledge sharing can lead to one of AHIMA's most distinguished honors: fellowship.

AHIMA recognizes members who have made those and other significant and sustained contributions to the profession by conferring the distinction of fellowship. The distinction indicates the individual's professional achievements and enriches the AHIMA community by drawing together senior HIM professionals as an organizational resource for continued promotion and development of the profession through mentoring and other activities. Fellows may indicate this professional honor by using the designation "Fellow of the American Health Information Management Association" (FAHIMA).

Fellowship is granted through a peer-review process. The program is open to any individual who is an active, associate, honorary, or senior member of AHIMA who has a minimum of 10 years full-time professional experience in HIM or related field, a minimum of 10 years continuous AHIMA membership, and a minimum of a master's degree. The candidate must evidence sustained and substantial professional achievement that demonstrates professional growth and use of innovative and creative solutions.

Once conferred, the fellow status is a lifetime recognition (subject to continuing AHIMA membership and compliance with the AHIMA Code of Ethics). The designation often plays a significant role in career advancement and can convey honor on an entire department or faculty.

Individuals whose portfolio currently does not meet the criteria for fellowship may apply for candidacy for the fellowship designation. A candidacy allows members an opportunity to formalize lifelong learning and development plans. The normal candidacy period is one to five years, depending upon individual background.

Full information on the fellowship program, including application criteria and application forms, is available online at www.ahima.org/fellow.

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The HIM Educational Framework
Description of Roles for HIM in an Electronic Workplace

Predegree Certificate	Health Information Management Associate Degree	Health Information Management Baccalaureate Degree	Health Information Management Master's Degree
General Descriptor The individual holding a pre-degree certificate in a health information management specialty area performs processes specific to the certificate and complies with established data quality principles, legal and regulatory standards, and pre-degree best practice guidelines in the performance of their work functions. In an e-HIM environment, this individual performs these functions through the use of various electronic applications.	**General Descriptor** The individual holding an associate degree in health information management is the technical expert in health data collection, analysis, monitoring, maintenance, and reporting activities in accordance with established data quality principles, legal and regulatory standards, and professional best practice guidelines. These functions encompass, among other areas, processing and using health data for billing, compliance, and surveillance purposes. In an e-HIM environment this individual performs these functions through the use of various electronic systems.	**General Descriptor** The individual holding a baccalaureate degree in health information management possesses the expertise to develop, implement and/or manage individual, aggregate, and public healthcare data collection and reporting systems. These systems ensure the quality, integrity, availability, and preservation of healthcare data in support of patient safety and privacy as well as the confidentiality and security of health information. In an e-HIM environment, these processes and systems are needed to support authorized users and decision makers.	**General Descriptor** The individual holding a master's degree in health information management is engaged in executive level, enterprise-wide, administrative, research, and/or applied health informatics activities. These activities are focused on evolving the strategic and operational relevance and robustness of clinical information resources of the healthcare industry and public health sector. Research advances the body of knowledge and standards associated with the management of health information in the e-HIM environment.
Roles • Clinical release of information specialist • Medical coder/editor (inpatient, ambulatory, physician practice) • Medical biller • Medical claims analyst • Medical office coordinator • Medical transcriptionist/editor	**Roles** • Cancer/other disease registrar • Clinical coder/compliance auditor/vocabulary specialist • Clinical data collection and reporting specialist • Data integrity specialist • Document imaging coordinator • Documentation specialist • Information access/disclosure specialist	**Roles** • Business process engineer • Clinical data analyst • Clinical documentation coordinator • Clinical research/trials associate • Compliance officer • Data quality manager • Data sets, nomenclature and classification standards manager • Data translator • Instructor/trainer • Healthcare consumer advocate	**Roles** • Academic faculty • Applied health informatics researcher • Chief executive officer • Chief information officer • Chief compliance officer • Corporate health information manager/officer • Data analytics/data mining engineer • Data sets, nomenclature, and classification standards

• Medical staff coordinator • Patient registrar	• Reimbursement specialist/financial services liaison • Quality improvement specialist	• Health data/information resource manager • Health information services manager (director, assistant director, supervisor) • Health information system applications designer/trainer, marketing and sales manager • Implementation and support manager • Privacy/security officer • Project manager • Quality improvement manager • Reimbursement manager • Revenue cycle manager	developer • Health information applications developer • Health information management specialized practice consultant • Public health information officer

Notes

1. AHIMA Joint Committee on Education. "White Paper on the Health and Well Being of Professional Education in the Health Information Management Discipline." Executive summary. Available online at www.ahima.org.
2. AHIMA. "A Vision of the e-HIM Future: A Report from the AHIMA e-HIM Task Force." Available online at www.ahima.org.
3. Wing, Paul, et al. "Responses from the 2002 HIM Student Exit Survey." Available online at www.ahima.org.
4. Wing, Paul, Charles McCormick, and Margaret Langelier. "Report on Responses to the 2002 HIM Education Program Director Survey." Available online at www.ahima.org.
5. Wing, Paul, et al. "Data for Decisions: The HIM Workforce and Workplace. 2002 Member Survey." Available online www.ahima.org.

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