

EDUCATION



Mona Calhoun, MS, RHIA

JOHN DEAN, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

HEALTH INFO MANAGEMENT

TECHNOLOGY HELPS TO KEEP HEALTH CARE ON THE FAST TRACK

By Elizabeth Levy Malis
Contributing Writer

Increasingly, technology fuels our world; health care is no exception.

Today and for the future, this trend has fast-tracked medical records, the bedrock of health care, to the cutting edge of technology. These transformations bring with

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them shortages of qualified health information professionals in the 21st-century workplace.

In response, Coppin State University's School of Nursing rolled out a new allied health degree by designating its very first offering in the program as health information management (HIM). Students earn a bachelor of science in allied health with a concentration in HIM.

Coppin offers the only such four-year, baccalaureate degree in the state. Other Maryland schools offer two-year associate degrees and certificate programs in this field. But until now, Marylanders were forced to go out of state for higher-level HIM education.

Coppin's program changes that. "There has not been a baccalaureate degree offered for the HIM profession in this area since Towson University closed their program over 10 years ago," says Mona Calhoun, MS, RHIA, chairperson

of Coppin's HIM program, launched in fall 2007. Its first HIM class will graduate in 2009.

Clearly, the time is right. "The Bureau of Labor Statistics went on record in 2000 estimating that the need for annual replenishment to the health information workforce by 2014 of 6,000 HIM professionals at all levels," says Calhoun, a professor with more than 20 years working in the field. First-hand, she's witnessed the continued transformation from paper records toward an electronic, national information network. Calhoun's students say her real-world knowledge remains an asset to the classroom.

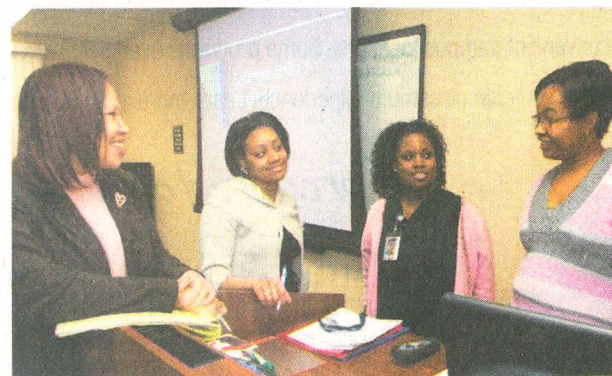
Coppin launches its program with forethought. "I looked at health care indicators and talked with representatives from hospitals," says Marcella Copes, Ph.D., RN, dean of Coppin's Helene Fuld School of Nursing. "At issue are patient care outcomes. The data shows that the higher educated

employee gives you better patient care outcomes. Most hospitals prefer to hire individuals with the higher level training."

Many workers, too, see educational training as the path to advancement. Especially when it comes to the rapidly-changing field of health information.

"Our students are excited that they can move into the Coppin program without going out of state," says Betty Mitchell, RHIA, program coordinator at Baltimore City Community College (BCCC). It offers an associate's degree in health information technology and a coding specialist certificate program. BCCC offered the first current procedural terminology (CPT) college course in Maryland, according to Mitchell, a past president of the Maryland Health Information Management Association.

She cites the history of the American Health Information Management Association



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Left to right: Mona Calhoun, MS, RHIA, chairperson of Coppin's HIM program, with students Kyrston Thornton, Tonya Taylor and Maria Jones in her class that prepares students to understand health care settings.

(AHIMA), originally founded in 1928 when the American College of Surgeons established the Association of Record Librarians of North America. Overtime, its name changed to reflect an expanded scope. "First, it was called med-

ical records science. With computers, it changed to medical records technology. Now, it's health information technology as it moves toward a universal e-

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health system," says Mitchell, who has worked in the field since 1965.

"This field is still the best kept secret in medicine. Most of the world doesn't even know we exist," says Mitchell. "You don't see our profession in the [medical] TV shows, but we've been here for years. We've always been part of the scheme of things, but our work is just becoming more important for the health of the nation."

"In the old days, the medical records profession wasn't mainstream or glamorous at all — especially to younger people. We were considered like librarians, often working in the basement of hospitals," says Celia Lange, RHIT, CCS, CCS-T, coordinator of Health Informatics and

Information Technology Program at The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). But now with the move toward computerized electronic records, all that has changed.

"The technology fields are very attractive to young people as well as the older generation, who must keep pace providing for themselves and their advancement," says Copes.

The first-ever HIM class at Coppin reflects that mix of young and old. Both Rosemary S. Boone, 55, and Maria Jones, 34, enrolled in the program. Both come into the classroom with previous health care experience. Boone first worked in computer operations at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Jones has worked as a medical secretary.

"Patient care is not my specialty. I don't like to see all the blood. I'll help patients on the paperwork side," says Jones, who matriculated at Coppin as an education major when no HIM program existed there. After it recently launched, she switched her major to HIM.

She's delighted with her choice. For Jones, HIM has opened up a world of career possibilities. "At first, I could not see past being an office manager, but now I see so many options I never thought of ... like working with jails, nursing homes, social security or hospitals. Before, I only saw private practice." Adds Jones of her originally declared major: "I still want to teach," she says. "Now, I hope to go out and teach HIM."

With the right credentials,

she'll have plenty of opportunities.

"The information technology field is up and coming. There's lots of jobs in the classifieds, but until now there was nothing in this region to help you get into management," says Boone, a non-traditional student who works from home as a medical coder. "I knew I needed to further my career as a coder, but for me to go into management I needed more schooling ... more understanding of the field. Even at my age, I still have some energy left. I enjoy a challenge. This program may keep me youthful for another five years. This program may be my lifesaver."

Yet it's not an easy field. It requires maintaining, collecting and analyzing information — all while playing an essential role in

decision making. "You have to analyze data, not just copy something down," says Mitchell. "One of our students calls it being a 'paper doctor' because you must learn and understand all medical terms."

Typically, the field attracts individuals who enjoy medicine but don't want hands-on patient care. Still, that's not always the case. "HIM programs remain attractive to nurses who may want to start their own business venture or add a part-time job," says Copes.

"It's where medicine, computers and management come together," says Mitchell, who stresses the variety in the field. "AHIMA lists 40 different types of positions with over 130 job titles," she says.

One such area remains medical coding. "This is a very specialized field," says Tracey Lloyd, coordi-

nator of medical assisting program at Anne Arundel Community College, which offers a medical coding certificate program. "The work is extremely complex and very involved. You need to know medical language as well as learn a whole new coding language. Coding is a language in itself. But when you get out, the job market is excellent. There's a shortage of professional coders in the state."

Coding joins other tracks — like transcription, privacy and security — under the umbrella of health information management. "Everyone knows that technology is truly the way of the future," says Copes. "We must create more professionals for these positions. The new program at Coppin helps them understand all aspects of HIM, not just one area." •