

Recruiting Students: Strategic Planning vs. Wishful Thinking

A big differentiator between programs that have high enrollment and those that struggle with enrollment is recruitment activity. Programs with high enrollment can list numerous tasks they have completed toward their recruitment goal, while the struggling programs list what they would like to accomplish; but have little to show in the “completed” column. We’ve researched a variety of approaches to finding and recruiting students to your HIM program. Some approaches may not work for you; but others surely will.

A multi-focus approach includes presentations, career booths, ad space, and incentives to encourage students to consider your program. PowerPoint presentations should be polished, and where an internet link exists – use the hicareers.com website in your messaging. After the presentation, provide students with a handout with details about your program. They can share this with family and friends and plan their next step.

On-Campus:

- Open House Socials – offer light refreshments, and invite other allied health programs to participate and pick a theme such as: healthcare in the 21st century...
- Hidden Healthcare Careers Day - coordinate a day for allied health profession programs to help raise awareness about these programs among the student body. Students often mention that they were unaware of any but the medical school and nursing school programs.
- Legacy Open House – consider legacy admissions, if program has been around for years, reach out to alumni 5-15 years later and invite them to visit the school again with their 10th or 11th grader, or family member

Off-Campus:

- High school presentations - if faculty time is tight, encourage your CSA volunteers to do presentations in their region. You may not be recruiting at the high school level now, but research in 2008 revealed that over the next seven years, southern states will see a large increase in number of graduating high school students (around 25%) while the northeast will be seeing a drop in high school grads from 1-10%.
- Health magnet school presentations - you know that these students have already expressed an interest in a healthcare career. Check to see if any of your currently enrolled students attended a magnet school and see if they would be willing to return and present their story if you help them prepare.
- Career Fairs or Healthcare Fairs in the community or at other schools – Standard Register has printed recruitment materials which you can order and customize for your booth
- If your program is located close to a military base, consider actively recruiting soldiers and their family. The recent changes to the GI bill entitles a soldier, or their spouse or children to be able to use grants to cover tuition, books, and a daily living stipend ([link to Military article](#))

Any time recruiting:

- Program web site – what does your website say about your program? Is it exciting and up to date?
- Social networking – programs can build a profile in FaceBook and Twitter to encourage students and potential students to discuss the program in a peer to peer venue ([link to Social Network article](#))
- Web banner ads advertising the HIM program on school search engines and career engines
- Web optimization – so that your program appears in the first page of Google or Yahoo searches

- Ads in industry newsletters that reflect your service area
- CSA ad space in their newsletter and website
- Public service announcements (PSAs) in local news about your HIM program – have students assist high school students with creating a personal health record, or have students work with senior citizen groups to help familiarize them with the various CMS online tools such as the Medicare drug program, or the quality scores for nursing home

Don't Reject ... Recycle:

Schools that have competitive placement in nursing, dental hygiene, radiology technology programs and other allied health programs may have more qualified applicants than they have seats to fill. Rather than lose these students to another school, contact the deans of those disciplines and ask if you can send program materials to the students who aren't selected for placement into their first choice program. Student surveys conducted by AHIMA indicate that these students make excellent HIM students, and are very happy with their new major but didn't know about it ahead of time.

Make the Message Meaningful

There are two recruitment campaigns that are available from AHIMA through Standard Register. These materials can be customized with information about your school. In addition to the AHIMA materials, you may want to consider creating a local program awareness campaign. Ask alumni of your program to collaborate and "tell their story". Produce a multi-page booklet with their success stories and photos to hand out at recruitment events. Students want to know the kind of success they can achieve, and a local success story demonstrates that they can do it too.

No cost ideas to stimulate recruiting activity:

- Link the AHIMA student recruitment website to your program page: <http://www.healthinformationcareers.com> it covers all academic levels of HIM programs and can be a good "first look" source to redirect student questions.
- Create a "Buzz Board" and post interesting facts about HIM careers and your program, display business cards of former students who are now working in the field to demonstrate that students are going out to find jobs in the HIM field.
- Contact the President and Director of Education at your state CSA. Ask them to conduct student recruitment efforts on behalf of your program. Each year, AHIMA recognizes CSAs with student recruitment awards. For example, in Pennsylvania, the PHIMA offers first time test takers of the RHIT or RHIA program full reimbursement for the cost of the exam.
- Ask your CSA if they will provide grants to students to get an AHIMA student membership (\$35).
- Hold a contest with prizes to alumni of your program who refer new students – word of mouth referrals are a powerful method of recruitment (offer a free course).
- Ask your CSA to donate a vendor booth at your state conference and advertise your program to attendees – online offerings, progression programs, and specialty tracks (like Cancer Registry) are desirable. If the CSA can't offer individual tables, see if they will approve a single booth for Educational Opportunities and invite all the programs in the state to sign up for times at the booth. This

would provide a one stop shop where members interested in advancing their career can speak with representatives from multiple programs at one time.

Recruitment vs. Retention

Recruiting students is one part of the plan, but retaining the students once they are enrolled is another. Here is advice from programs that are recognized as providing best practice in student retention:

- Provide more frequent exams and assignments rather than basing the class grade on four or less components. Students failing their courses will withdraw and may never come back.
- Make sure at least one person on staff is very versed on financial aid and can help HIM students navigate through rough waters – loss of student aid, or failure to qualify frequently derail students.
- If recruiting into the military community, be sure you have a veterans focus in your program, and that there is a veteran assistance department at your school – veterans have unique needs (academic, financial, and emotional) and appreciate getting counsel from someone with prior military experience.
- Don't wait till final grade time to identify failing students – assess each student's class standing at mid-term, and put those in trouble on an improvement plan using resources from the school library or student development center.

Should You Be Recruiting Soldiers Into Your Program?

The rising costs of college tuition, books, and living expenses have caused some schools to see a drop in student enrollments. Some families simply aren't able to support a student's wishes to go to school. But even in this cash-strapped economy, there are recruitment opportunities that you may not be familiar with. In 2007, more than 300,000 veteran students returned to school on their GI Bill benefits. As military deployments end, returning soldiers are looking to return to school and are using their Chapter 30 GI Benefits to help them.

The average Pell grant award to the neediest nonveteran students (25th income percentile) averaged \$4,050. This award figure drops to an average of \$1,600 for students in the 75th income percentile. By comparison, the average GI benefit for veteran students is a constant \$9,306 and isn't affected by income categories. A recent add-on to the bill extends this benefit to the soldier's spouse and children. Consider how your recruitment efforts can reach out to this market.

AHIMA Foundation selects a veteran for a paid internship

Shawn DeFries: was a recent student at the University of Pittsburgh, pursuing his MS in Health Information Systems (RHIA Option). He has been working in the HIM field for several years and is an active duty Army officer (Captain) in the Medical Service Corps. His last assignment was as the Deputy Chief of the Patient Administration Division at Madigan Army Medical Center, a 200 bed, tertiary/acute care teaching facility in Tacoma, WA.

Shawn says "While at Madigan, I managed to survive an EHR implementation, as well as a Joint Commission survey. I developed an avid interest in this field while serving in that capacity, in particular for coding, EHRs, data quality, and reimbursement, and I was subsequently selected by the Army to attend graduate school in this field."

We asked Shawn how he found out about the internship. "I found out about the internship from one of my professors, Dr. Val Watzlaf, who sent it to me via email. I thought this would be an excellent opportunity for me to learn more about SNOMED and mapping. I have experience in coding and EHRs, and thought this might be a great way to expand and improve my knowledge in an area that I am only mildly familiar with", says Shawn. AHIMA welcomes active military, their family, and veterans to consider a career in health information management.

Using Social Networking Tools to Connect with Students and Graduates

By Rebecca B. Reynolds, EdD, RHIA

One of the challenges facing the HIM profession is recognition of our profession as a career option for students. In the past, programs visited university career fairs, visited classrooms to talk about the HIM profession, mailed brochures to prospective students and built web sites to provide program information. These methods are useful and provide value to meeting students in traditional environment; however, the students today are more likely to check their face book or my space pages between their classes than visiting with friends in the student center on campus.

Connect, connect, connect

It seems that every generation has unique characteristics and the current, college-age student has some unique communication characteristics. They are known as the plugged-in generation that has grown-up with a cord connecting them to the computer, the internet, the MP3 player or other media source. They want to be continuously connected as a result they have created social networking and social networking technologies to stay connected.

As a result of our desire to connect to students, potential students and alumni, we at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center created a face book site and a face book group titled Careers in Healthcare. We have several goals with face book including creating a virtual presence on face book for student recruitment and alumni communication. We also envision face book as an informal web site and a place to include program updates and other information. One of our challenges is that the format and content requirements of our university web site are formal and structured. It takes time for updates and changes to be made to the university web site so face book allows the information to be available immediately on your face book site. Using face book does not require knowledge of any programming languages, it is easy to beginning using...even for digital immigrants.

Getting started

All you to create a face book site is a web browser and email address. The service is free and allows a user to create a personal web page. When a user creates a face book account he or she is asked to answer a series of questions about where they live, where they went to school, personal interests and other personal facts. Most of this information may be omitted by the user. Face book has a back-end database that is used to help you locate other face book users who live in your geographic area, who went to school with you or who share the same face book friends. This allows you to connect easily with many former students from your program. For example, if you locate a former student on face book, you can see all the people they are face book friends with and some of the friends might also be former students.

Current students are a wonderful resource for getting started with face book. They can help you develop your site, critique it and help you troubleshoot as you learn about using face book. One tip is not to use face book to share personal information that you don't want applicants, students and others to see. It is amazing how much personal information you learn from what people share on face book (OMG).

Face book is an easy way to stay connected with your graduates and alumni. As they change jobs, start families or relocate, it is an easy way to stay in touch with them and stay connected.

Recruiting Students: Invest in the Program's Website

Health information management programs are often challenged with the issue of insufficient funds for the advertisement of their offerings to the communities of interest that they serve. Wisely spending one's limited resources to stimulate the biggest bang for the advertising buck is an essential recruiting strategy. To determine where to target recruiting strategies, Jim Condon, MSA, RHIA, CTR, assistant professor in the Department of Health Informatics at the Medical College of Georgia (MCG), began asking new Health Information Administration (HIA) students how they each became aware of the HIA program at MCG. **Nearly 38% of the students said that they initially learned about the program on the Internet, either through visiting the AHIMA Website or the program's Website.** The remaining means by which students learned about MCG's program are:

- from a parent, relative, or friend (17%)
- from an HIA professional (9%)
- from a health care professional (7%)
- from a magazine or book (6%)
- from a guidance counselor (3%)
- from other means, including school presentations, career fairs, and students currently enrolled in an HIA program (19%)

Mr. Condon suggests that programs should invest enough time to insure that their Websites are attractive, informative, user-friendly, and up-to-date. If the program's Website is not maintained by someone familiar with the program, it is critical to establish a program liaison who can convey updates expeditiously and accurately to the institution's Web designer. In addition, the program liaison should surf the program's Website looking for broken links, missing and expired documents, and out-of-date Web pages. One's own experience from visiting the Website is probably the first impression that a prospective student will form about a program; the more time a prospect explores the Website, the more likely he or she is to contact the program for additional information.

Program response is another critical aspect of recruitment. When a prospect uses an e-mail link that is located on the program's Website to ask a question or to seek additional information, the point of contact person should respond as soon as possible, even if it is simply to acknowledge receipt and to thank the prospect for his or her interest. A prompt response leaves the impression that the program is organized, well run, and values the potential student. Even if the prospect decides against applying, the seed is planted for possible future contact in the event that the prospect's future plans change.

Program websites offer program directors and student recruiters tools that were not available fifteen years ago. As health information technologies and careers in health informatics become more popular, programs should not ignore the opportunity that a well designed website affords to capitalize on the strengths of the program and faculty.