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Education

Colleges create future health care workers to fill demand

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Obamacare didn't create the need for tech-savvy people in the health care world.

But the landmark legislation – formally known as the Affordable Care Act – made a huge mark in requiring entities throughout the health care system to record, track and utilize patient data in standardized ways.

The law requires all health care providers to use electronic medical records and provides financial incentives for use of the more comprehensive electronic health records, which encompass a patient's history from various medical practices.

The elevated status of EMRs and EHRs in American health care has created a huge need from individual doctors, hospitals and insurance companies for individuals who can understand, implement and analyze patient data while respecting various rules and regulations. Colleges, meanwhile, have stepped into that void with educational programs.

The following are three examples.

Health informatics, Trocaire College

Trocaire College, a private college in South Buffalo, started its health informatics program in 2013.

The data provisions in Obamacare were the inspiration.

"The ultimate goal is to be able to share and transmit data in a similar language so information can be shared between providers and, ultimately, on a national level," said Debra Shelvay, director of health information management at Trocaire.



IMAGE PROVIDED BY GETTY IMAGES (MARK STAHL)

“The EHR boom was the catalyst to a lot of what health informatics people do.”

Trocaire offers a one-year certificate for qualified individuals who already have a bachelor’s degree. There also are separate associate’s and bachelor’s degrees in health informatics.

Students learn about the legal aspects of health care data, the clinical health care system and about quality management and process improvement in health care.

Those in the bachelor’s program get specialized instruction in statistics and advanced training in Microsoft Excel.

The various programs have ranged from 25 to 40 students since they were introduced, with the first bachelor’s cohort set to graduate this spring.

Shelvey said it will be interesting to get placement data on those graduates, who are expected to get jobs in health care environments and work closely with medical records.

health information technology, Canisius College

Canisius College also developed a program based on the health care legislation championed by President Obama.

The online master’s degree in health information debuted in 2013 and welcomes four to six new students a year.

It’s designed as a part-time format that allows working students to get their master’s degree in two years.

The program aims to vault health care individuals into higher roles, arming them specifically with knowledge of the comprehensive way technology is changing health care.

That includes everything from EMRs or EHRs to courses on security and privacy, as well as big-picture direction on the direction of health care.

And it seeks to help people in possible management roles bridge the discussion gap between those who are technically proficient and others who aren’t.

“Everybody we’ve gotten has either moved up where they are or found new jobs,” said Arvela Heider, adjunct professor and director of the Canisius program.

“We’ve had several organizations that have said, ‘The more you can train, the more we can place.’ ”

Health analytics, D’Youville College

D’Youville College started offering a bachelor’s degree in health care analytics in 2014, with an eye on projected job openings for data analysts in the health care field.

Since that time, the program has sent interns to institutions as big as BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York and as small as Infonaut, a startup company on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

Program leaders also learned that pairing data and health can be a tough sell to 17-year-old projected students, who can struggle to understand what it means.

Six students started in the program this year.

“What we’re finding is that people are just learning about this nascent field,” said Lisa Rafalson, chair of D’Youville’s department of health services administration.

“But it’s definitely growing and we’re trying to promote it internally as well as externally.”

Dan Miner
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