RECOMMENDATION

The AHIMA Council on Certification recommends that individuals with a minimum of a baccalaureate degree and documented five years of full-time HIM experience be considered eligible to sit for the RHIA exam.

This proposal outlines the background and rationale supporting this recommendation, along with more specific guidelines for exam eligibility consideration.

BACKGROUND AND OPPORTUNITY

The driving force behind this recommendation is the unmet workforce demand for HIM professionals at the managerial level. Because professional certification programs exist to meet workforce demand through validation of competency, this driving force is of utmost importance to the Council on Certification. Supplementing the HIM workforce with individuals who work in the HIM domain, have demonstrated experience in the HIM field, and who consider attainment of the RHIA credential of great professional value is an additional mechanism to meet this demand.

The concept of examining RHIA eligibility for this purpose arose at the 2006 House of Delegates, which voted in favor of amending the bylaws to give non-AHIMA credentialed HIM practitioners the right to be an active member of AHIMA. The House recognized the need for a certification channel at a higher academic level requirement, to compliment and solidify these members’ professional home with AHIMA. In addition, AHIMA frequently receives inquiries from individuals working in the HIM field requesting an opportunity to write the RHIA exam. While the volume is estimated to be modest initially, the need is real. Finally, the opportunity to connect with non-credentialed individuals holding HIM-related managerial positions will positively impact AHIMA membership by embracing their experience, higher education and involvement in the ongoing transition to e-HIM®.

RATIONALE FOR THE RECOMMENDED EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

To determine the expanded eligibility requirements to write the RHIA exam, the Council started by reviewing the current standard:

- Successful completion of a baccalaureate program in HIM at a CAHIIM-accredited academic institution, OR,
Alternate Paths to RHIA Exam Eligibility
Council Recommendation
April 2, 2008

- Successful completion of a non-HIM baccalaureate degree, plus, attainment of a post-baccalaureate certificate from a CAHIIM-accredited program, OR,
- Successful completion of an HIM program in a foreign country with which there is an agreement of reciprocity with AHIMA,
- Successful completion of a Master’s degree from a program that has been approved by CAHIIM for the optional portion of the curriculum that meets the Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate Degree Programs in HIM.

Following considerable dialog regarding the merits of allowing individuals with a Master’s degree and significant HIM experience the opportunity to sit for the RHIA exam, the Council ultimately determined that the baccalaureate degree builds an essential foundation for successful practice and as such, should be maintained as the minimum educational level for all RHIA eligibility.

In the pursuit of determining the length of experience in the field that would be equivalent to the standard course of RHIA study, the Council considered three important factors.

- First, the RHIA exam today is developed to test entry level competencies in the health information management field.

- Second, individuals entering the field by earning a post-baccalaureate certificate do so by completing approximately two additional years of study.

- Third, and perhaps most compelling, are the comparative eligibility requirements in other professions with voluntary credentials. While the HIM profession has defined academic programs, our certification exams are voluntary. This means that HIM professionals are not regulated by either the state or federal government and individuals can enter the HIM workforce without a credential. This is a different paradigm than that which protects other healthcare professionals, such as doctors, nurses, etc, in which the professional credential is regulated. As a result, individuals in these professions cannot enter the workforce without their respective credential (i.e., license). Review of other professions’ voluntary certification standards illustrates multiple eligibility paths for individuals pursuing these professional credentials. Typically these paths involve a combination of work experience and academic degree attainment; often higher academic degrees are combined with shorter periods of work experience. Ultimately, the specific relationship between years of work experience and academic study is dependent on the profession.

For the HIM profession, the Council has determined that one year of academic study is equivalent to 2.5 years of work experience. Therefore, five years of work experience was selected as the requirement.
PROPOSED EXPANDED RHIA ELIGIBILITY PATHWAYS

This proposal expands eligibility to write the RHIA exam from the existing four to six pathways.

ROUTE 1:
- EDUCATION: Minimum bachelor’s degree.
- EXPERIENCE: Five (5) years of full-time management-level work experience in the HIM field, or, as a full-time educator in a college or university either currently accredited by CAHIIM or in candidate status.
  - Management-level experience is typically defined as a salaried position involving substantive responsibility for people, functions, processes, or projects. Job titles will typically consist of descriptors including, but not limited to: director, manager, analyst, specialist, and in some cases, coordinator.
  - Candidates will be required to demonstrate competence in all five HIM domains through successful completion of the standard RHIA examination, regardless of their specific work experience.
- ENDORSEMENT: The endorsement of two RHIA-credentialed professionals will be required.
  - In addition to a certified transcript from the college or university granting the bachelor’s degree, applications of this type will be required to submit their current resume to demonstrate relevant experience in the HIM domain, as well as current job description detailing HIM-related duties and responsibilities.
  - As noted above, the review and endorsement of the applicant’s work experience by two RHIA-credentialed professionals will also be required. In the event the candidate does not have access to two RHIA professionals, this verification of eligibility will be completed by an independent panel appointed by the Council on Certification.

ROUTE 2:
- EDUCATION: Master’s degree in an HIM-related curriculum, or, in Education.
  - Examples include but are not limited to: Master’s in Health or Medical Informatics, MBA in Healthcare Management or Health Services, MHA, M.Ed., and MHSA.
- EXPERIENCE: Two (2) years of full-time management level work experience in the HIM field, or, as a full-time educator in a college or university either currently accredited by CAHIIM or in candidate status.
  - Management-level experience is typically defined as a salaried position involving substantive responsibility for people, functions, processes, or projects. Job titles will typically consist of descriptors including but not
limited to: director, manager, analyst, specialist, and in some cases, coordinator.
⇒ Candidates will be required to demonstrate competence in all five HIM domains through successful completion of the standard RHIA examination, regardless of their specific work experience.

• ENDORSEMENT: The endorsement of two RHIA-credentialed professionals will be required.
  ⇒ In addition to a certified transcript from the college or university granting the master’s degree, applications of this type will be required to submit their current resume to demonstrate relevant experience in the HIM domain, as well as current job description detailing HIM-related duties and responsibilities.
  ⇒ As noted above, the review and endorsement of the applicant’s work experience by two RHIA-credentialed professionals will also be required. In the event the candidate does not have access to two RHIA professionals, this verification of eligibility will be completed by an independent panel appointed by the Council on Certification.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Vision 2016 Blueprint document, which was first released in mid-2007, included numerous rich discussions that underscore the workforce implications and provided fresh momentum to this endeavor. The following quotations from that report are especially cogent:

“The data still demonstrate moderate to high vacancy rates in HIM jobs across the nation.”

“There will be other professions who will try to fill HIM niches.”

“HIM professionals with a baccalaureate degree have knowledge that is critical to many decisions that are made at the EHR decision table. Better educated HIM professionals will be better positioned to contribute ideas, knowledge, and experience, and will be more likely to be invited to the decision-making table.”

The subject of alternate paths to RHIA exam eligibility has surfaced at various times in the past. During 2007, the Council on Certification spent considerable time discussing and debating the topic, ultimately deciding to make a proposal and pursue membership adoption in 2008. Therefore, to fulfill its primary responsibility – that is, to recognize qualified professionals and address workforce demands through a high quality certification program – the Council on Certification proposes this change to RHIA exam eligibility.