Healthcare's Hot New Specialty
In-demand informatics skills yield good jobs and salaries

At first blush, "healthcare informatics" may sound like a rather dry topic, but proponents say this emerging field is poised to play a major role in curing America's ailing healthcare system.

Healthcare informatics represents the intersection of three key disciplines: information science, computer science, and healthcare. "The combination of these three has the power to greatly enhance healthcare delivery," says Noushin Ashrafi, professor of information management systems at the University of Massachusetts Boston, which just launched a graduate-certificate program in healthcare informatics.

In four intensive courses focusing on healthcare administration, the UMass Boston program covers everything from data mining to technology standards to privacy and security issues. It's designed to equip a variety of professionals, from nurses to pharmacists to insurance specialists, with the skills needed to better understand, manage, and analyze healthcare information. Says Ashrafi: "That helps people make knowledge-based decisions," which, in turn, improves productivity and efficiency and reduces costs.

"The biggest issue in healthcare is cost, cost, cost," Ashrafi says. "It just cannot continue. We have to reduce costs. One of the most effective ways of doing that is using health informatics."

The underlying idea—digitizing healthcare information—isn't new; electronic medical records have been around for years. The problem: "Everything was in isolation,"

Ashrafi says. "The interoperability wasn't there." In other words, the systems holding those records couldn't share the information. "So just having electronic records isn't good enough," Ashrafi says. "They have to be standardized, and they have to talk to each other. That's what health informatics does."

Because of its interdisciplinary nature, healthcare informatics attracts professionals from a wide range of professions. Among those in UMass Boston's new program is Michael Tieu, a data analyst for a private health insurance company. "Any successful business starts with a strong analytical foundation," he says. "That's especially the case in healthcare. When the well-being of patients depends on test trials and experiments, data and analytics become especially important."

Ultimately, Tieu hopes to become an analytics expert: "I want to be someone an employer can go to and have me dissect their data, produce results and knowledge from it, and then implement the needed solutions or advancements," he says.

He and his classmates should find plenty of opportunities to apply what they've learned about healthcare informatics. "There is definitely a need in the marketplace," Ashrafi says. "The demand is there." Tieu agrees, adding that high salaries are apparently there as well. "I know several people who are exceptional at their positions as statistical informicians, and they are in high demand. They are younger than I am and make twice the salary I do."