Zach Varghese’s job search in the high-demand field of health information technology lasted exactly zero days.

The day Varghese, 36, earned his health IT certificate in early November through the University of Texas, he received a job offer from e-MDs of Austin. There, he works as a content developer to improve the efficiency and security of computer networks that manage medical records for a rapidly increasing number of hospitals, physicians and health insurance providers.

And he’s hardly the only one to rapidly enter the workforce after completing the postgraduate certificate program that was developed with the help of the private sector.

“All the students in my class are still connected on Facebook, and I’ve seen almost all of their statuses change to ‘employed’ with various health care employers in the field,” Varghese said. “I actually don’t think I know any of them who aren’t employed in the field.”

A new way to help patients

Varghese has a medical degree and a master’s degree in public health, but he switched to health IT because it offered what he saw as his best chance to improve the health care delivery system.

Since hosting its first students in summer 2010, UT has produced 391 graduates from the nine-week course, with more than 90 percent of those securing a job within a year of completion.

Students are trained to learn how health care professionals record patient information, how that information can be stored electronically and how that data travels between various computer systems used by insurers, physicians and hospital networks.

Upon completion, graduates are able to work creating systems to store electronic health records, help implement them at customer sites and improve their efficiency so data networks can mine the information to look for long-term health trends.

That shift means that any company or entity involved in health care needs to have secure and accessible EHR systems in place, with trained employees earning an average of about $51,000 per year.

Companies helped UT get in the game

“IT’s built-in job security for these students because the products are always changing, and there’s new systems coming into place,” said Bob Ligon, a health IT instructor at UT. “The demand will stay because the technology and the health care system are changing in parallel.”

Because the program was created specifically to meet industry demand, UT officials have worked closely in concert with more than 50 providers and EHR vendors who have provided medical equipment, computer systems and software to train students, and offer two-week practicum positions as part of the course. That close relationship lets Ligon, Health IT Program Director Dr. Leanne Field and their colleagues update the course after each semester to keep current with evolving technology and user demands.

The result of that diligence is a reliable pipeline of jobs into workplaces such as e-MDs, which has hired 22 UT graduates, or Scott & White Health Plan, with 30 hires.

More help wanted

“This is a field that has grown by leaps and was one of the only professions that actually grew during the economic downturn,” said Matt Chambers, chief information officer at Scott & White, where health IT employees work as project managers, trainers and data analysts. “Because most of them come into the field with a bachelor’s degree, they have very interesting educational backgrounds and work well in hospitals that are working to implement the systems.”

Chambers expects demand for health IT graduates to remain extremely strong for the next five years to meet the labor-intensive need to implement EHR systems throughout the health care industry.

After that, the focus will likely shift to system maintenance, which Chambers estimates will reduce yearly demand by as much as 50 percent.

At UT, though, Ligon and his colleagues think the emerging field of health information data mining will keep job demand strong well into the future.

“You’ll gradually see a shift in competencies and what can be done using the technology,” he said. “It’s going to become about taking the data and how you can use it to tell a story.”

9-week health IT program filling jobs fast