

Case Study

UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS



“College for You”: How University Hospitals Uses Online Degrees to Grow Talent from Within

Talent development in healthcare settings typically faces pressure from both the supply side and the demand side.

For example, in most hospitals, to move beyond entry-level roles, employees often need a four-year degree, and the pool of those employees may be limited. That’s a familiar challenge for University Hospitals (UH), a large, nonprofit healthcare organization in Cleveland, according to Heather Harmon, Vice President of Human Resources and Organizational Development.

Adding pressure from the demand side, UH must compete with many other healthcare organizations in Northeast Ohio for qualified employees.

So, rather than rely on external recruitment and hiring alone to fill roles above the entry level, UH wants to grow its own

employees from within. They do that in part by partnering with Southern New Hampshire University’s online competency-based degree program for working adults, College for America. UH provides tuition assistance to its employees, and **College for America’s flexible format** means employees can complete degrees on their own schedule and at their own pace. For eligible full-time employees, tuition assistance from UH covers 100 percent of College for America’s tuition, so most students will graduate with no debt.

The impact of that partnership, which began in October 2016, can already be seen in one particular unit – the Accountable Care Organization (ACO). It includes a team of 25 patient navigators who help patients receive the right care at the right time by connecting them with various hospital resources. For example, a navigator might refer a patient to a dietitian to ensure they stay on the road to recovery between doctor visits.

Angela Harris, Education and Engagement Manager in the ACO, says the patient navigator role requires specialized knowledge, and many of them are trained medical assistants. Most, however, do not have college degrees, and upward mobility from these entry-level roles is greater with a degree.

Since the ACO is growing, and the roles within it are expanding, Harris' first concern is to prepare people for promotions within the department, while helping them develop succession plans for other future roles.

Her first step is to ensure people from her team are enrolling in — and thriving in — the College for America degree programs. “For me, education is really important,” she says. “Patient navigator is a great role to be in, but it’s not the highest-paying occupation here, and it’s not a role in which most people usually retire.”

It’s important to Harris that cost not get in the way of an opportunity to earn a degree. “For them to pay out of pocket would be a barrier,” she says, and many of her direct reports don’t take advantage of tuition assistance resources because they aren’t aware of them.

Since the UH–SNHU partnership launched, over 200 people from around the organization have enrolled, including 12 from Harris’ team. One of those is Janice Wallace, who graduated from Cuyahoga Community College three years ago with an associate’s degree in applied science in medical assisting. Wallace had been trying to go back to school for her bachelor’s, attending night classes, but had trouble balancing the schedule with the rest of her responsibilities.

“When this came along, it seemed like it might work better for me since it’s all online,” says Wallace. “I can do it when I’m at home, or during lunch breaks, or at study sessions on the weekend.”

Wallace is in College for America’s bachelor’s degree in healthcare management program and has been working evenings and weekends on her coursework and projects. “Saturday and Sunday are my big days,” she says. “I usually take one day and do nothing but schoolwork. Then two or three nights a week, I do a little work for about two hours.”



200+

UH employees enrolled in the CFA program



97%

*of enrolled students are satisfied with their SNHU experience**



74%

*of students reported that the curriculum has positively impacted their current job**

*Source: SNHU CfA Student Success Survey, March 2017

A Workplace that's Become a Community of Learners

The Saturday sessions are well attended, and Harris says, "It has been a big morale booster. It's such a joy to see individuals joining together to assist each other."

It takes discipline to set that time aside for work, but Wallace, who has worked from home and earned one degree already in the past, possesses both discipline and drive, according to Harris.

Not every employee is as well equipped for college, though. A handful of Harris's team have struggled with some of the skills they need to move ahead in the program. So she stepped in to create an additional support system within her department that would keep those employees in school.

First, she asked an employee who'd already graduated from SNHU for help preparing study guides for other team members. Then Harris started scheduling special office hours, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays, for any team member who needs extra help.

That help is sometimes academic, but it can also be about building confidence. Students at College for America receive support from dedicated learning advisors, but some students aren't always comfortable confiding in that advisor. Harris talks those employees over that hurdle, encouraging them to communicate with their advisors when they were having trouble.

"We had to get through the barrier of feeling judged," she says. "No one knows everything, and that's why we have to band together to figure some of this stuff out."

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Another barrier was technology access. College for America is a remote learning program, but some team members don't have computers at home. Harris got permission for those students to use their computers at work, and she worked with others in the organization to ensure they had the access to be successful.

As her direct reports progress through the program and develop a career path for themselves based on their studies, Harris is reaching out across UH to recruit colleagues to act as mentors for them, if even for a day.

In some cases, Harris may be effectively preparing employees to be promoted out of the ACO, but that doesn't concern her. "I just want them to be successful," she says. "My goal is to strengthen their performance and their confidence as a patient navigator, and to help them transition to other roles at UH when they feel this is no longer a fit."

A Hospital Dedicated to Learning

"Teaching and learning are part of the fabric of our organization," Harmon says. "We take that seriously."

Harmon points out that as a teaching hospital, UH has education in its mission statement — To heal. To teach. To discover. "Teaching and learning are part of the fabric of our organization," she says. "We take that seriously."

The partnership with College for America is only the newest way UH helps employees with education. UH already partners with local colleges for traditional degree programs. And the Certification Pursuit Program provides financial incentives to employees who work on certifications that aren't required for their job, but will improve their performance.

Harmon admits to having been skeptical when she first learned about College for America's nontraditional approach. There are no courses or exams, and students set their own pace, moving quickly through subjects they are familiar with and spending more time where they need it.

Once Harmon began looking into the program, however, she became excited by the possibilities of such a flexible program; UH employs a workforce of 27,000, but many of those employees don't have college degrees. A self-paced program would benefit many of them who might not be able to get degrees the traditional way, who may not be able to get to a classroom, or who've already attended classes and don't want to sit through information they've already learned.

UH was also attracted to how College for America students learn through working on real-world projects that promote skills that can be applied directly in the workplace. In fact, one student applying for a new position recently brought a project she worked on for College for America to her job interview.

“College for You”

Even though it's called College for America, Harris likes to tell her team, “This is college for you. This is your opportunity to transition to something better.”

UH had clear goals for its partnership with College for America. They wanted employees to earn degrees, to move up with the organization, and to be committed to UH. In fact, seven employees have already completed associate's degrees, all of whom are now enrolled or planning to enroll in bachelor's degree programs.

Ultimately, they want to retain valued employees like Wallace, who says she hopes to graduate within a year and a half, and then to perhaps take on more leadership responsibility.

“I like what I'm doing, but I think having the degree would be a good stepping stone if I want to move into a management role, especially within University Hospitals,” she says.

That is exactly why Harris schedules those extra Saturday sessions. Even though it's called College for America, Harris likes to tell her team, “This is college for you. This is your opportunity to transition to something better.”



For more information about how you can bring College for America to your organization, visit:

www.SNHU.edu/workforce-partnerships or call 1-855-764-8232

