



Securing the future of healthcare

OhioHealth reimagines education benefits to recruit, retain and upskill healthcare talent





As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge and alter our healthcare systems, the need for skilled healthcare workers – already a challenge pre-pandemic – continues to grow. Stresses within the industry, including the large number of nurses retiring, the burnout level of existing healthcare workers and an uneven distribution of talent across regions in the U.S., are driving high vacancies.

To address the need to attract and retain a talented workforce, hospitals are increasingly reimagining and transforming the education and training benefits they offer. Employees require greater flexibility and financial support, as well as resources to promote resiliency and well-being. To accomplish this, healthcare systems are forming strategic partnerships with higher education institutions to create new pathways to achieving educational goals and to remove barriers.

OhioHealth: “We’re hiring as fast as we can.”

OhioHealth, a large healthcare system in central Ohio, competes with several other large healthcare systems in its area for skilled talent. This competition, combined with the ongoing nursing shortage, makes recruiting a top priority. Patti Wilson, project manager for academic partnerships for OhioHealth, said the organization decided to enhance and relaunch its education benefits as part of its strategy.

“Like all organizations, we want to recruit the best of the best,” Wilson said. “And that’s become harder across every system. We hire nurses –300 new nurses are starting at OhioHealth in the next few months – but an equal number are going to retire. On top of that, nurses and other staff are leaving due to Covid-19 fallout. We’re hiring as fast as we can.”

The ability for OhioHealth recruiters to promote education benefits upfront to potential associates serves as an effective tool. The majority of the system’s new hires are entry level and searching for a pathway to a career. “Our benefits help them see the bigger picture of the industry and the role they could play within it,” Wilson said. According to Katie Hickey, MHA, BSN, RN, learning manager for OhioHealth, “We find that once we get them into our organization and they experience our core values of compassion, excellence, integrity, inclusion and stewardship, they want to stay.”

One successful recruiting component is the opportunity for associates to pursue a degree with little or no out-of-pocket costs. Capella University, an affiliate of Strategic Education, Inc., was one of the first universities to approach the organization with the idea of offering a benefit that would develop associates while also helping them avoid student loans. Today the program, Tuition Assistance Aligned Pricing (TAAP) is offered through partnership with Strategic Education and aligns the cost of tuition for select degree programs with the tuition assistance OhioHealth provides. When TAAP is combined with Capella’s FlexPath learning format,



the benefit is magnified. FlexPath allows learners to pursue their degree at their own pace and to leverage the knowledge and experience they've gained on the job. This helps learners control tuition costs, as the faster they are able to complete courses, the more they save.

"Certainly finding ways to not just upskill but also reskill our providers is paramount. By working with our healthcare partners and streamlining tasks such as tuition reimbursement, we continue to address the needs of the nursing workforce related to continuing education."

Adele Webb, PhD, RN
Executive Dean of Healthcare Initiatives
Capella University

OhioHealth was also searching for an out-of-the-box solution to its recruitment efforts. In 2021, it partnered with Strategic Education to launch the Grads to Work program, which focuses on recruiting recent high school graduates from underserved populations in the communities OhioHealth serves. The program helps participants build core competencies through career-readiness courses. Those hired into positions with OhioHealth have the opportunity to pursue an associate degree with little or no out-of-pocket costs.

"We're happy to be in at the ground level with Grads to Work because no other healthcare system in our region

is doing something like this," Wilson said. "We want everyone to have an opportunity to be in a role where they can be a success. That role may be a stepping stone – a place to start – but associates can grow from there with our support for their continued education."

"Our goal is professional development for all 30,000 of our associates." _____

Of course, recruitment is just one piece of the puzzle. Equally as important is retaining associates who can continue to contribute their growing knowledge and expertise. "Studies show that professional development supports retention," Adele Webb, PhD, RN, executive dean of healthcare initiatives for Strategic Education said. "In healthcare it also leads to better outcomes for patients. One way to support professional development is through academic partnerships.

Wilson said OhioHealth recognizes that providing associates with the resources to dream big fits with its core values. "We're not just about offering a discount on higher education," she said. "Our goal is professional development for all 30,000 of our associates and that means knocking down barriers." Since forming a partnership with Strategic Education in 2018, OhioHealth has had 370 associates enroll and 90 have earned their degree. But it's not always a degree associates need in order to reach their full potential. Other forms of professional development, all offered by Strategic Education, include certificates, general education courses, IT bootcamps and continuing education courses, can help employees obtain the skills they need. Wilson cites project management courses through Capella as an example. "We had a large number of associates from throughout our system who wanted to learn project management in order to excel in their roles. When we offered the program, we had very high demand and a successful program."



Retaining associates also means offering support and resources to help them avoid burnout.



When Wilson sees a gap in a specific area, she can reach out to SEI. “Because we have a true partnership, I can say, ‘What do you have that could help our associates? What can we tap into?’” The organizations have worked together to offer resources including presentations on time management, inclusion and how to have difficult conversations at work, online continuing education courses for nurses, Sophia Learning courses, and Capella’s Nursing Leadership Development Series.

“We’re better able to meet associates where they are.”

A large part of retention is developing and upskilling talent. All new associates in nursing and labs at OhioHealth take an assessment of their strengths. Learning – and the desire to be a lifelong learner – is consistently the top strength. “We know our associates want to keep learning and growing,” Wilson said. “So we need to remove any barriers to that and expand our benefits to help people get to the next level.”

To honor their value of stewardship, OhioHealth is working to find ways to make education more affordable for all. One method is to change their reimbursement system. In partnership with SEI, they’ve offered deferred billing for tuition costs. “Many of our associates don’t have the money up front to start a program,” Wilson explained. “Capella and Strayer defer billing until after the course is completed and the associate has received their reimbursement from OhioHealth. Being able to offer this has been instrumental in removing a considerable financial barrier.”

Other strategies in development include expanding options for micro-credentialing through certificates or specific online courses, paying academic institutions directly for tuition rather than using a reimbursement system and communicating more effectively system-wide to promote education benefits. “Finding new ways to upskill and also reskill healthcare providers is paramount,” Webb said. “By working with our healthcare partners and streamlining tasks like tuition reimbursement, Strategic Education is finding new and better ways to meet the needs of the workforce related to continuing education.”

Currently, OhioHealth is working to communicate with all associates to let them know about their education benefits and emphasize that these benefits aren’t just for nurses. “We’ve seen more associates than before who are pursuing degrees in IT or healthcare administration,” Wilson said.

“That tells us that awareness is reaching beyond our nurses. This effort, combined with our additional options like certificates and access to online prerequisite courses, makes us better able to meet people where they are.”

“It’s good to have a partner looking out for us.”

Keeping up with rapid change and the increasing competition for talent remains a daily challenge for all healthcare systems. Wilson said relationships with academic partners have been a key to successfully navigating these challenges for OhioHealth. “With Strategic Education, I feel like we’re truly on the same team. If I reach out about a need for a new program or with questions about how we can meet our goals, they help me figure it out,” she said. “With so much happening in the education space, it’s good to have a partner looking out for us. Together, we’re increasing access to education and that’s a good thing.”



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