

Educating within: How Baylor Scott & White is using training to confront staffing issues

The hospital system started a free continuing education program for employees in March to lower barriers to professional development

By [Marin Wolf](#)

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Belinda Ellison, 50, always wanted to go to college. Life kept getting in the way.

The oldest daughter in her family, Ellison cared for her brothers and mother while also serving as a caretaker for her then-boyfriend's diabetic mother. She raised her three children on her own while working as an X-ray technician and later a pulmonary tech at Baylor Scott & White Health, the state's largest not-for-profit hospital system.

Spending money on a bachelor's degree felt frivolous.

"Financially, the money just wasn't there," said Ellison, who has lived in Dallas for most of her life. "It was just my paycheck. No help, no assistance from anyone, no government assistance." After more than 30 years of taking care of everyone else, Ellison is finally focusing on herself. She'll begin classes at the University of Arizona for a bachelor's degree in business management in August, paid for through Baylor's new workforce education program.

The program through Guild Education, a platform that manages companies' education benefits, pays directly for employees' college-level classes instead of requiring them to front the cost and later get reimbursed. Paying out-of-pocket for expensive courses, even with the promise of repayment, was a significant barrier to many Baylor workers such as Ellison.



Pulmonary technician Belinda Ellison at Baylor Scott & White in Dallas on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)

Baylor rolled out the program in March as health care companies across the nation grapple with [chronic staffing shortages](#) and [provider burnout](#). Compensation remains the top concern of employees today, but professional development remains a key concern. About half of workers do not see a career advancement path at their current company, according to the [2023 Total Talent Guide](#) by recruitment and staffing company Tandym Group.

Matching the trends seen across the health care industry, job vacancy rates at Baylor jumped about 400% at the height of COVID-19, said Baylor chief human resources officer Nakesha Lopez. Getting that number down — and keeping it down — required a multi-pronged approach including short and long-term solutions.

The Guild Education program, part of Baylor’s broader workforce development strategy, is a win-win for both the hospital system and its employees, said Baylor CEO Pete McCanna. Workers can pursue free or discounted training and schooling that can progress their careers, while Baylor can train employees for high-need positions.

“It’s one of the best investments we make as an organization,” McCanna said. “In the current workforce, they’re going to change jobs a lot throughout the course of their working career. It’s even better if they can do that within one organization.”

Baylor has committed more than \$8 million per year on the new professional development efforts.

Full-time employees and part-time employees who work over a certain number of hours per week qualify to access the Guild Education benefit program. Already, more than 10,000 Baylor staff members have started the process of choosing a continuing education program.

External degree and certificate opportunities aren't the only professional development options for Baylor employees. The health system also offers on-the-job training programs for certified medical assistant and sterile processing technician positions.



Certified Nursing Assistant Alex Suarez at Baylor Scott & White Primary Care in Frisco, Texas on Thursday May 11, 2023. (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)

The CMA Academy and Sterile Processing Technician Academy serve as entry points into the health care industry that requires only a high school diploma. Each academy is 12 weeks long and offers trainees full benefits from their first day of classes.

Alex Suarez, 25, knew he wanted to work in health care since he was a student at Coppell High School. He initially pursued a nursing degree, but stepped away from classwork before moving to Pennsylvania, where he worked as a dental assistant.

When Suarez decided to move back to North Texas, a family friend alerted him to Baylor's certified medical assistant program as an opportunity to get closer to becoming a nurse. Suarez started classes in September and learned skills like giving injections, drawing blood and administering electrocardiogram tests.

Once Suarez graduated with his cohort of 12 CMA students, he was placed at the Baylor Scott & White Primary Care at The Star in Frisco. The program requires a two-year work commitment from academy graduates.

Suarez plans to finish his nursing degree after completing his two years at the practice. He knows now more than ever that nursing is the career he wants.

"I didn't really go to the doctor's normally until I started this, so this was all very foreign to me," Suarez said. "But the academy kind of brought me up to speed on how things work and the basics of what I need to know."

That's exactly how Baylor wants these programs to function, Lopez said. Entry-level positions, like medical assistant and sterile processing technician jobs, help guide North Texans into an industry where they can continue to learn. A technician can become a licensed practical nurse, or a nurse who provides basic patient care. A licensed practical nurse can study to become a registered nurse.

"The pathways are there, the educational opportunities are there, and it's all about the appetite of the employee to grab hold of that and engage in those programs that are available to them," Lopez said.

Ellison is only months away from beginning her online classes, which she'll take while continuing her full-time job. She's told a handful of patients about her plans.

"I told a few of them and they're very happy for me. One of my patients ... he just told me to keep going. I told him I will and he said, 'Let me know when you're finished,'" Ellison said.

Ellison expects to graduate in December 2024, although graduating with her bachelor's degree won't be the end of her educational endeavors. Ellison plans

to pursue a master's degree in legal studies so she can transition to the legal field to support people who have been wrongly incarcerated.

“It’s going to be a new chapter in my life and I’m going to be helping someone else. So there’s not going to be a patient, there’ll be a client,” Ellison said. “It’s the same thing to me, though. Everybody needs help at some point in their life.”



Certified Nursing Assistant Alex Suarez at Baylor Scott & White Primary Care in Frisco, Texas on Thursday May 11, 2023. (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)