UVA Earn While You Learn Program Boosts Post-pandemic Staffing

University of Virginia (UVA) Medical Center | Charlottesville, Va.

Workforce Development Case Study

Overview and Impacts of COVID-19 on the Nursing Shortage

Located in Charlottesville, Va., the University of Virginia (UVA) Medical Center is a 696-bed academic medical center that is a Level I trauma center and Tier 1 research university. It has 9,012 employees and offers staff well-being programs, on-site child care and professional learning opportunities.

Like most academic medical centers, UVA was plagued by staffing shortages. At the start of the pandemic, the staff rallied and focused on caring for patients. Then after COVID-19 cases subsided, senior leadership evaluated the workforce and realized that it was obliterated. They were tired, burned out, and some had left the profession. But most importantly, the medical center did not have the support teams needed to help their nurses. Leadership began critically thinking about how to care for patients in the here and now, and how to get creative in staffing.

Development and Progression of the Earn While You Learn Program

In March 2022, UVA assessed their workforce post-pandemic and discussed the development of an "earn while you learn" program with leadership. There were significant vacancies in many areas within the UVA system but not enough trained and licensed applicants to fill them. The Earn While You Learn staff worked closely with the human resources department to streamline hiring so that it is done as a cohort at three times throughout the year: February, June and October. From the beginning, application numbers have been high and are first come, first served to train participants and fill open positions as quickly as possible. They began with external hires to minimize staffing shortages in other areas of the hospital, but quickly expanded to internal hires as the program gained traction. The completion rate is around 75% to date, and a one-year commitment is required.

As of August 2023, 175 people have completed the program and another 66 are enrolled.

UVA could not have anticipated how quickly the idea would take off in the Charlottesville community, and they quickly adjusted to accommodate the interest. UVA staff first developed the pharmacy technician program in June 2022, where they recruited 35 local residents interested in health care careers. For 12 weeks, the students job shadowed for half the day and participated in more didactic programs the other half of the day. Building from the pharmacy tech program, UVA expanded to include certified nursing assistant, emergency medical technician, medical assistant, phlebotomist and sterile processing. The program provides participants full-time salary and benefits, with approximately 50% of their time spent in the classroom and the remainder in their clinical units for a more immersive education. Each participant is assigned a preceptor to help build skills.

Results

The Earn While You Learn program has been a team effort. Living in Charlottesville, which is a fairly rural community, staff recognized it was imperative to train local residents and ensure that the medical center employees represent the communities that they serve.

Now that the program has been in place one year, the team finds it satisfying to see the first cohorts working on the floors and in the clinics and inpatient units. For many local community members, the Earn While You Learn program has been a gateway to a career, and they are motivated and inspired to continue their health care path. Staff at UVA reflected that they routinely hear, "I've always wanted to get into health care but didn't know how to start," and the Earn While You Learn program provided them a clear path to a health care career. From the first cohort, UVA saw interest from people who resettled in the Charlottesville community, as well as the local high schools and youth organizations. UVA wanted to build the pipeline to include youth outreach because interest in health care careers often begins before students graduate from high school. In some cases, UVA has witnessed families progress through the programs together. In addition to having a positive impact on the community, current UVA staff see the success of the program and feel supported in succeeding in their work. Many UVA team members have reached out to Earn While You Learn staff with ideas to support their units and a willingness to participate in training the next generation of team members.

> For many local community members, the Earn While You Learn program has been a gateway to a career, and they are motivated and inspired to continue their health care path.

Lessons Learned

The staff at UVA started with one program and continued to add more programs after the first cohort. They chose to take the program a step at a time and did not wait to begin until they had all the planning in place. There have been times when staff moved forward knowing the plan was not perfect, and trusted that they were going to learn from it. With regular communication, transparency and trust, the Earn While You Learn team has been able to iterate on their efforts and garner support from the entire organization.

The team also emphasized the importance of developing a vision for the long-term pipeline and career opportunities beyond the current needs. They wanted to ensure that the opportunities did not end with a job, but could be developed into a career path. There are career pipelines within each track as well as tuition reimbursement, which enables individuals to further their career, if they so choose. The university also developed a Pipelines and Pathways program that ensures that individuals are workforce ready, including assistance with transportation, child care and life skills.

The program requires heavy collaboration between senior leadership, as well as departmental leadership, educational systems both internal and external as well as ongoing needs assessments to keep pace with the changing nature of health care.

Next Steps

UVA is now focusing on sustainability efforts to ensure that individuals who come into the Earn While You Learn program are workforce ready. As more participants have expressed interest, the team identified the need for wraparound supports, such as English as a second language, transportation, child care, or technology training.

The next step for the Earn While You Learn program is to progress from certificate programs to two-year associate degree programs and other roles that may require further education and certification. Earn While You Learn staff are working on a nursing degree program with a local community college to be an

American Hospital Association™
Advancing Health in America

extended career pathway for participants. Beyond nursing, the Earn While You Learn program has also shown the Charlottesville community that there are a variety of roles within health care. To meet current and emerging demands, the team is looking to expand into radiology, respiratory therapy, surgical scrub technicians and lab services.

In just one year, the program has been able to expand the mission of caring for patients and their teams to providing meaningful roles for their community. Hospitals are anchors for the community, so the more they can not only care for those within their walls, but also the entire community, the better the outcomes for all.

Contact

Wendy Horton
Chief Executive Officer, UVA Health University Medical Center

✉ *WMH7R@uvahealth.org*

Beth Mehring
Program Manager, Earn While You Learn, University of Virginia Health

✉ *EBB6F@uvahealth.org*

American Hospital Association™

Advancing Health in America