BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee (BCBST) created an accelerated computing degree program at its Chattanooga headquarters in partnership with East Tennessee State University to address long-term technology workforce needs. BlueSky Tennessee Institute supports students to complete their Bachelor of Science degrees in just over half the time as is typically required. As BCBST CEO JD Hickey explained, "Our students do in 27 months what others do in four years, and they're on our campus for the entire experience. By the time they finish the internship, they don't need additional training or support."

Acceleration comes not from faster coursework but from eliminating long breaks. "We cut out winter and summer breaks and go full time year-round," Bradley Leon, Executive Director of BlueSky Tennessee Institute, said. General education courses are completed online, while all computing courses are taken in person with ETSU faculty. After about 15 months of academics, students begin internships in BCBST's information technology division, rotating across three teams. "They do three rotations over the course of the year so that by the time offers go out, they know what they want to do."

The model includes intensive advising and mentoring. "We hired a full-time advisor who follows up immediately if a student gets a bad grade or misses class," Leon explained. Students also receive full financial support. "They pay nothing. Public dollars go directly to the university, and they graduate with no debt. If they finish on time, they earn a job offer with our IT team."

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Recruitment focuses on local high schools with historically low college-going rates. "We prioritized recruiting directly from these schools. We knew there were students who were capable and would thrive if given the right support," said Hickey.

Enabling Conditions

Leaders describe the program as both a business strategy and a community investment. "We are a not-for-profit, mission-driven company. We don't have quarterly earnings or shareholders, so we can take multi-year risks," Hickey said. "The goal is securing and augmenting the talent pipeline we need to run the business."

BCBST views itself as a technology enterprise. "People think we pay claims, but almost all that work is automated now. Of our 6,800 employees, less than a hundred still do claims processing," shared Hickey. The organization struggled to find qualified local candidates. "We were frustrated that we couldn't find the quality or quantity of tech talent we needed, and our efforts to work with local schools on adapting curriculum weren't going well."

In building the program, the company looked for a university partner that shared its commitment to pragmatic, team-based learning. "We had to walk away from our first partner," Hickey said. "We were fortunate to engage with a university willing to collaborate, adjust, and build something that worked for both students and employers."

Conditions within the company that supported effectiveness and sustainability include:

1. **Clear leadership commitment**
   The program has strong foundations in executive spon-sorship and advocacy. JD Hickey is clearly supportive of program leadership. Leon commented, "I've heard time and time again from people who try to do this work that it takes enormous will and leadership commitment from the team. The entire organization has to come together to make this work, and that doesn't happen unless leadership is committed. I've never had to worry about getting time and resources – that just doesn't happen without leadership commitment. There is no substitute for it."

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2. **Focus on the community**
   "Community economic vitality is part of our motivation," commented Hickey. BCBST views the increasing economic mobility of interns, and of the community more broadly, as a win, and a reflection of their mission. "Students who are buying cars, putting a down payment on a condo, who are full-fledged adulting at 20 years old, that is success. We don't expect they'll all work for us forever, and we want to keep as many as we can, but if we're producing talent for all of southeast Tennessee and they go on to be successful elsewhere, that is a huge metric for us."

3. **Public and philanthropic investments in talent**
   BCBST finances the program creatively, leveraging both corporate dollars and public and philanthropic resources as available. BlueSky Tennessee Institute has support from a variety of local education-focused foundations, as well as the state of Tennessee.

Core Program Activities

When BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee created its work-based learning program, the major considerations that led to the program's effectiveness included:

1. **Intensive student support and structured rotations**
    The program relies on "intrusive advising," which provides immediate outreach for any academic or personal issue, and structured internship rotations. "Each student goes through three rotations," Leon explained. "They get enough exposure to know what they want to do and where they fit best."

2. **Centralized management and layered mentoring**
    Internships are tightly managed by a small, dedicated staff. Each intern has a manager and a mentor or "buddy" who provides day-to-day support. "Managers are busy managing," Leon said. "Mentors guide, listen, and help students navigate challenges. It's often their first leadership experience, and many go on to become team leads."

3. **Inclusive selection and expanded opportunity**
    Recruiting aims to break traditional molds. "We're trying to bust through old paradigms about what makes a successful candidate," Leon explained. "We take chances on students who don't meet traditional profiles, and we've had success."

4. **Continuous evolution and future focus**
    The program adapts to changing technology. "We're incorporating AI into the curriculum," Leon shared. "We have to master it to stay competitive, and this tech talent will help us do that." The company is also focused decades into the future. Leon commented, "The initial thing that impressed me when JD interviewed me was that he said the person who would be in his role [CEO] in 10 to 15 years will have a tech background. This entire program is directed toward ensuring that we have great entry-level people, and toward the future, ensuring future leadership is being prepared through a program like this."

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Understanding Business Value

BCBST has a clear vision of where the initiative is producing value:

1. **Candidate Readiness and Speed to Productivity**
   The first cohort achieved an 88 percent on-time graduation rate and a 100 percent job acceptance rate among eligible graduates. The second cohort reached 93 percent retention halfway through their programs.

   Leaders see both immediate and long-term business value. "Tech talent can be outsourced and labor can be cheap if short-term labor is all you're after," Hickey said. "But we're convinced this is the next generation of talent." Students complete their program fully prepared for full-time work: "They don't need additional training or support when they start."

2. **Retention and Conversion**
   The company also anticipates compounding gains over time. "Longitudinally, we'll be looking at how many we retain and how many we see move into leadership roles over five to 10 years," a senior leader said. "The payoff will be down the road as these people grow."

3. **Community and Industry Development**
   Recruiting from local schools has created meaningful community impact. "The volume of students we can continue to recruit from our priority schools matters to us," Leon said. "We want to keep providing opportunities to students who might otherwise have been overlooked."

Lessons Learned

Through deliberate design, leadership commitment, and a shared sense of purpose, BCBST has built a program that delivers both business and social value. The partnership between employer and ETSU has created a replicable model for developing high-quality, diverse tech talent in regional markets:

- **Executive sponsorship anchors sustainability**
  Long-term programs require consistent advocacy from senior leadership who are willing to champion funding and organizational alignment, going beyond initial enthusiasm.

- **Design for measurement from the start**
  While BCBST does not comprehensively track ROI, the team has embedded tracking and outcomes metrics and is able to point to specific program-driven improvements, helping everyone recognize and understand the business value.

- **Structured support improves completion and conversion**
  Deep advising, mentoring, and relationship-building with participants has had a dramatic impact on academic progress and post-graduation placement.

- **Community partnerships expand opportunity**
  BCBST's approach of recruiting from priority high schools demonstrates that with the right supports, students from underrepresented backgrounds can excel in accelerated technical programs.

- **Long-term thinking outweighs short-term costs**
  While the model requires substantial upfront investment by the company, reduced ramp-up time, higher retention, and stronger cultural alignment will generate significant downstream impacts for the business and the community.

This long-term thinking is apparent in leadership's orientation. Leon commented, "From a big-picture, future-vision perspective, we're trying to set a roadmap that is 20 to 30 years long by positioning ourselves differently."