



Tuition Assistance Utilization Study

A Focus on Healthcare Employers
in the Austin Metro Area

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Executive Summary

Workforce Solutions Capital Area is a private, publicly-funded, non-profit organization that connects employers and employees through advisement of current legislation and availability of funding.¹ In partnership with Workforce Solutions Capital Area's ongoing study, LEAP Consulting (graduate business students from Concordia University – Texas) researched Austin-area healthcare employers in order to assist Workforce Solutions Capital Area specifically in learning more about other companies' tuition reimbursement plans and the barriers to employee participation in these programs.

A Master Community Workforce Plan was established in June 2017 by Workforce Solutions Capital Area that outlined the current challenges with employer research and the upskilling initiatives for employees.² Using the background information in this plan as a guide, LEAP Consulting identified potential healthcare employers, contacted them, and conducted employer interviews with a set of questions centered on utilization of tuition assistance. Questions regarded employer administration techniques of tuition assistance programs, specifics of their offerings, employee eligibility and limitations, and their program results thus far.

LEAP Consulting researched and contacted a total of 54 healthcare employers in the Austin metro area in search of eligible participants that offer tuition assistance programs. Out of 34 received responses, two declined to participate further, 19 did not offer any form of tuition assistance, but 13 replied they did provide this benefit. Ten of these 13 companies were therefore deemed suitable for interviews and appointments were scheduled with each of them.

The interview data were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed for each of more than 20 questions. Four questions were of particular focus. LEAP Consulting asked one question about each employer's financial assistance model and 90% responded they

¹ Workforce Solutions Capital Area, Master Community Workforce Plan

² Ibid., page 27

utilized a reimbursement approach. When asked a question about communication of the benefit to the employees, most employers provided information at orientation, on their company intranet, and in their employee handbook. Another question asked what category of employees was eligible to receive the benefit. All employers responded full-time employees and two stated part-time employees were also eligible. A fourth question examined the use of company resources for school work. Four employers stated they strive for schedule flexibility and three employers acknowledged a case-by-case basis for use of company resources may be most appropriate. One company responded they would allow employees to study on their breaks, but two responded all school work must be done off-site.

Best practices were researched apart from the interview results as well as promising practices developed from the interview answers to present a complete and tangible policy for employers. Five main points were distilled. First, a tuition assistance program should align to fill current and future skills gaps. Second, the program should attract competitive applicants. Third, networking with community schools is encouraged. Fourth, industry policy trends should be monitored. Fifth, partnering with a local Workforce Solutions branch could offer options previously untried.

After review of the interview data, LEAP Consulting developed the policy. It is applicable to both tuition assistance program participants as well as those employers who do not yet offer such programs, and is scalable for companies of varied size. The intention of this policy is to provide recommendations to employers which aid in effective program administration and to overcome tuition assistance usage barriers.

Research findings are reported to Workforce Solutions Capital Area herein in the form of a method overview, data findings, promising practices, and concise recommendations for employers.

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Company Background

Workforce Solutions Capital Area (WFS) is a private, publicly-funded, non-profit organization that serves as the guidance and governance for the workforce in the Austin and Travis County region.³ WFS aspires to develop local workers through formation of partnerships who research and share information on labor market and economic health. They aim to identify the needs of area employers and advise on public policy. The organization receives funding through grants and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

WFS is the backbone organization for the Master Community Workforce Plan (MCWP) written June 2017. The plan is a five-year framework with a vision to form a more need-driven area workforce. One of WFS' challenges is assisting frontline workers in obtaining skills needed for these middle-skill jobs.⁴

³ Workforce Solutions Capital Area, Master Community Workforce Plan

⁴ Ibid., page 27

Introduction

Problem Statement

The Austin metro area workforce does not adequately meet current and future job requirements. Although many area healthcare employers offer tuition assistance programs, employees underutilize the benefit.

Purpose

LEAP Consulting researched Austin-area healthcare employers to assist WFS to learn more about local employers with tuition assistance programs (TAPs). The goal of the research was to determine how employers in one of the MCWP's three target industries (Healthcare, Skilled Trades/ Manufacturing, and Information Technology) help their employees engage (or re-engage) in post-secondary education, and to understand the barriers to employee participation in these programs. WFS communicated a need for gathering and analysis of data on education incentives and tuition reimbursement for a selected sample of at least ten healthcare employers in Austin metro area. Research findings were reported to WFS in the form of an overview and concise recommendations for employers.

Problem

The MCWP was created to address the challenge of unequal income growth in the Austin-area. Many residents live more than 200% below the poverty line and are considered economically disadvantaged despite the region's substantial economic growth.⁵ The MCWP aims to address this challenge, but also faces challenges of its own. The current challenges faced by WFS are related to employers' lack of awareness, lack of policy to support tuition reimbursement, and few employers willing to participate in market research and share their promising practices. Employers also have limited awareness of WFS' resources and partnerships to support upskilling of their employees. As reported in the MWCP, the current barriers faced by employees are distance to

⁵ Ibid., page 8

training, a lack of financial resources, lack of prerequisite courses, lack of childcare, and scheduling.⁶

Deliverables

To contribute to WFS's research, discussing their previous work, results, and challenges was a crucial foundation to this project's start. Stakeholders included WFS, TWC, training institutions, employers, employees, and the local communities in which the employees live. A clear understanding of the product WFS desired was achieved, that uncovered various processes, approaches, and engagement techniques which proved successful. Discussions with WFS revealed that employer engagement is sparse, and even more so with the respective employees. This was a challenge for LEAP Consulting to conquer, so the team used different engagement techniques and selected a wider set of employers in the Austin metro area. With these employer contacts, LEAP Consulting conducted interviews using a standardized set of questions. These were centered around barriers to using tuition assistance and built-in liberties to accommodate diversions from the set. The answers were studied and analyzed to identify promising practices and present a tangible policy. A combination of primary and secondary research produced industry best practices, promising practices, and recommendations to foster the expansion of TAP use. Austin metro area employers can use the policy to overcome barriers and increase employee participation in the TAP offered. The research methods and engagement methodology can be applied to other Workforce Solutions organizations to study TAP utilization.

⁶ Ibid., page 19

Engagement Methodology

The engagement methodology approach was agile and iterative to help LEAP Consulting achieve continuous improvement. A unique approach was required for engagement with each WFS and the targeted healthcare employers as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1



Research

The research was obtained from three sources, shared research from WFS, literature review, and employer interviews.

Collaborate

LEAP Consulting met on a weekly basis with WFS to report the status, obtain guidance, and collaborate on overlapping tasks.

Review

All deliverables were reviewed internally for quality and accuracy. Standardized interview questions and the list of employers were reviewed with WFS for applicability to the scope of the study.

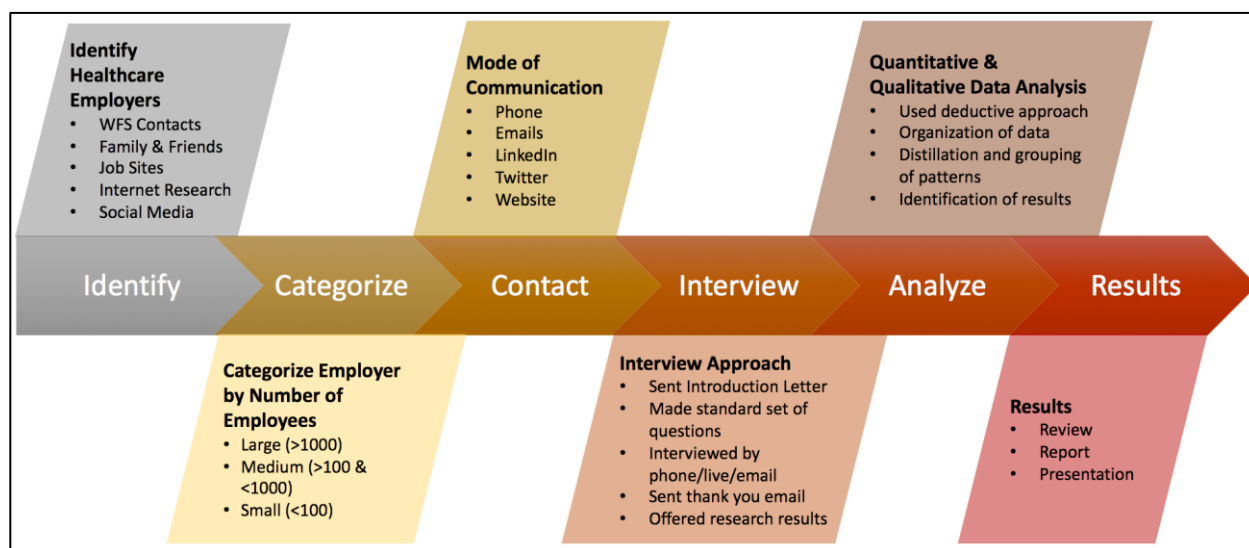
Document

From project inception, all milestones, meeting minutes, and results were documented by LEAP Consulting and reported herein.

Research Methods

LEAP Consulting opted to pursue data collection through interviews. The interview process was time-consuming; however, the time investment allowed the team to achieve 10 interviews. Interviews allowed the team to identify contacts within companies and share the benefits of WFS and the MCWP. Figure 2 summarizes the multi-step interview process. A deliberate by-product of speaking to employers was to spread the mission of the MCWP and educate employers on resources available through WFS. This methodology for data collection and analysis can be used for other industries and in other cities by Workforce Solutions organizations to study TAP utilization ultimately expanding the use by employers and employees.

FIGURE 2



Identify Healthcare Employers

Identification of healthcare employers was a challenge as the City of Austin is more known for employment in government, academia, and semiconductor sectors. The team utilized multiple avenues to contact Austin-area healthcare employers. WFS provided ideas for several contacts, and the team performed research through job sites, Internet, social media, family, and friends to identify additional healthcare employers that offered TAPs.

Categorize

WFS requested a cross-section of employers based on size. Employers were categorized according to the number of employees. LEAP Consulting achieved a fair cross-section of these differently sized companies in the research which follows. A variety of healthcare employers in the Austin metro area (hospitals, specialists, clinics, and assisted living facilities) were also well-represented by our sample.

Contact

Contact was established through various approaches. In some instances, multiple attempts contacting each employer were made before receiving a response or introduction to the authorized person to assist. This was most likely due to accommodating summer vacations, business travel, and employers' normal operating hours. Team members established credibility with employers by corresponding using their Concordia University email accounts. The team also provided an introduction document which explained the project scope and stakeholders.

Interview Approach

To help research effectiveness, the team prepared 20 survey questions and divided them into four different categories. Interview appointments were scheduled for 30 minutes to one hour during normal business hours, based on the employer's availability. All employers honored their appointment times with the team members. One interview was held at the employer's office, one was held via email/internet interview, and the remainder occurred over the telephone involving between one and three LEAP Consultants.

Data Analysis and Results

A quantitative and qualitative data analysis occurred after all interviews were complete. The data were grouped and graphed allowing LEAP Consultants to identify the trends and patterns. The data results are summarized and explained in the following section.

Findings from Interviews

LEAP Consulting researched and contacted a total of 54 healthcare employers in the Austin metro area. Responsiveness was varied; of the 54 contacted employers, 34 replied to our phone calls, emails, website contact forms, and LinkedIn messages (Figure 3). Of the 34 responses, two declined to participate further, 19 did not offer any form of tuition assistance, but 13 replied they did offer this benefit (Figure 4). Two employers provided no further response after this affirmative reply, and one employer was found to be an insurance company; these three employers were not further pursued. Ten companies remained which were deemed suitable for interviews, and appointments were scheduled with each of them.

FIGURE 3

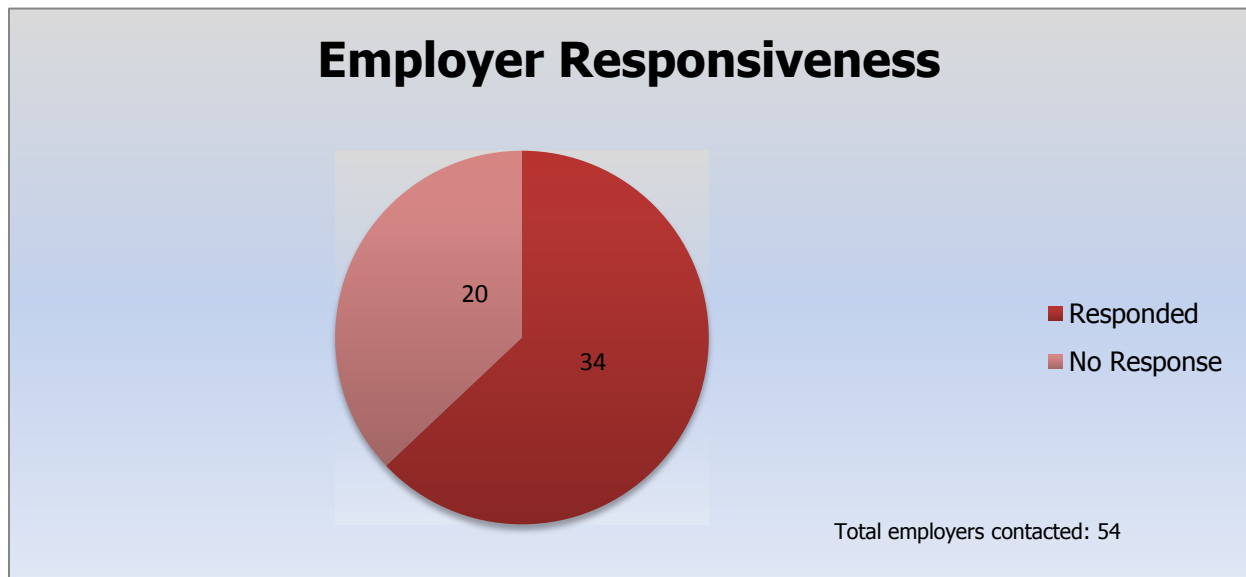
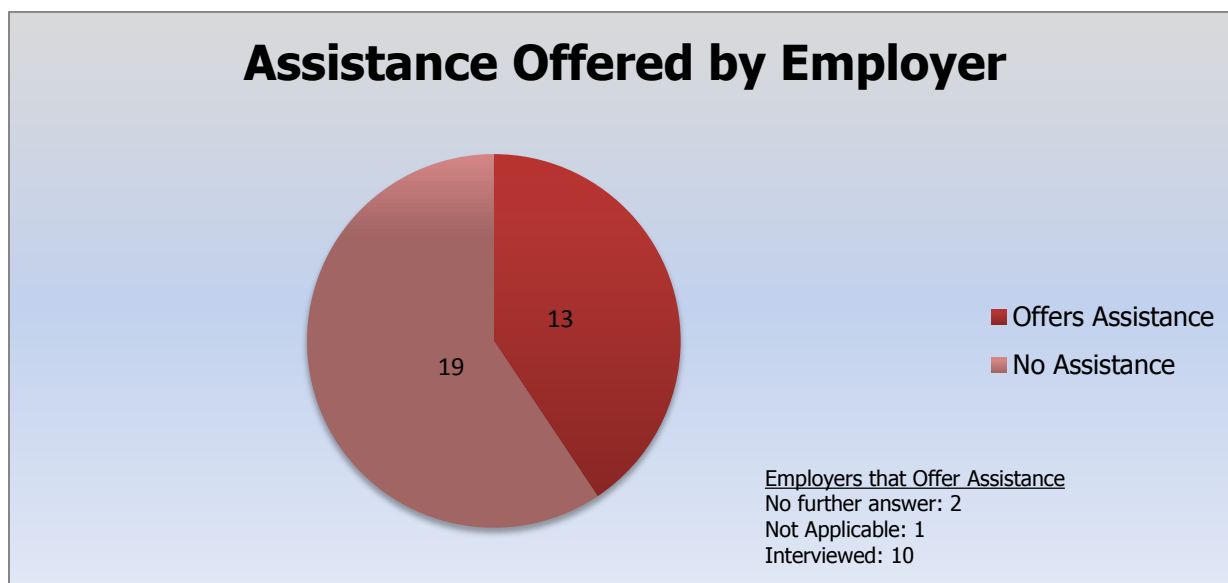


FIGURE 4



LEAP Consulting interviewed these ten employers over 30 calendar days.⁷ Due to a high degree of competitive advantage, some employers requested complete anonymity when providing their answers to the interview questions. Therefore, all ten employers have been blinded and aforementioned as companies "A" through "J." In no particular order, the employers were as named in Figure 5.

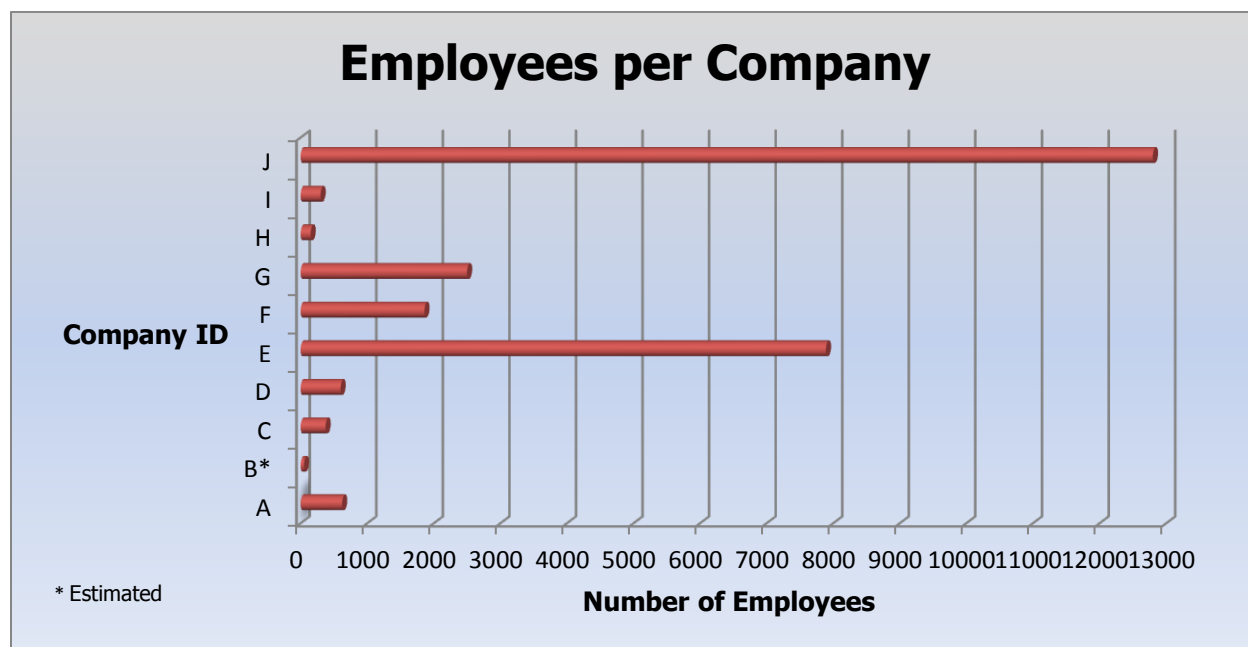
This list of ten employers met WFS' request of interviewing a cross-section of the Austin metro area's small, medium, and large healthcare companies. As seen in Figure 6 below, some companies employ many people, and some employ very few.

FIGURE 5

- **Arise Austin Medical Center**
- **Austin Gastroenterology**
- **Austin Regional Clinic**
- **Baylor Scott & White Health**
- **Brookdale Senior Living**
- **Cedar Park Regional Medical Center**
- **Center for Autism and Related Disorders**
- **CommUnity Care**
- **Seton Healthcare Family**
- **St. David's HealthCare**

⁷ Personal communication data from ten employers

FIGURE 6



Employer Profile

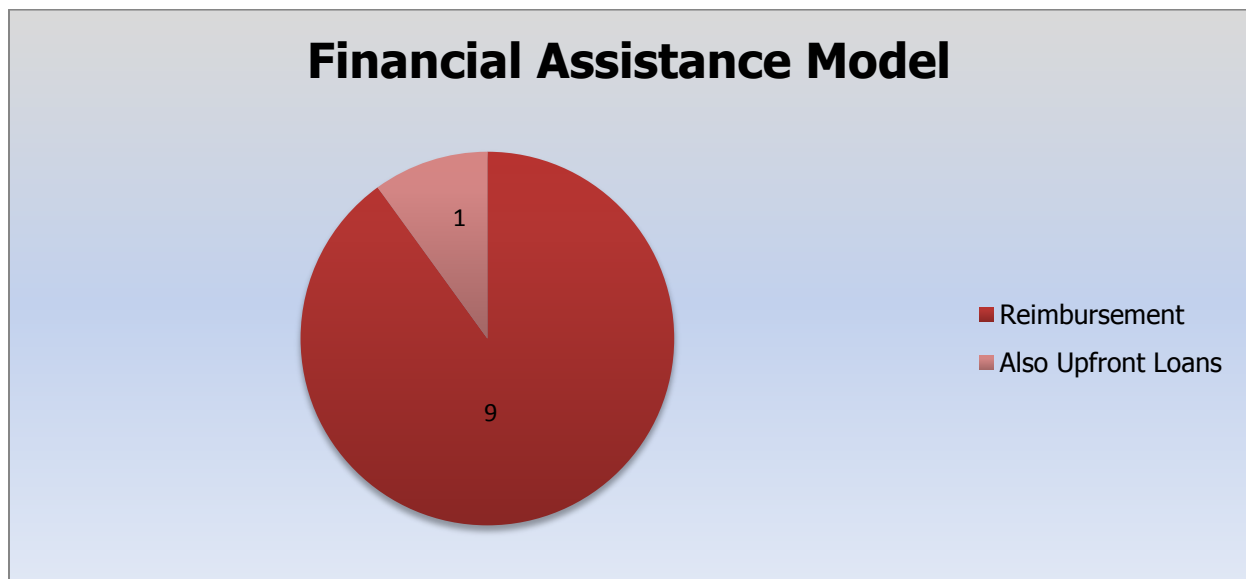
LEAP Consulting's first set of interview questions pertained to the employer's general profile information. When asked if increasing the education of their current workforce through tuition assistance would align with their company's talent management and corporate strategies, 90% of the companies responded affirmatively. One employer responded that providing financial assistance may not currently match company strategies well; however, the aim is to pursue this alignment in the near future.

All employers stated they experience a shortage of skilled workers in a wide variety of positions in the healthcare industry. Licensed vocational nurses, medical assistants, registered nurses, certified nursing assistants, certified surgical technicians, radiology technicians, behavior technicians, pharmacy technicians, sterile processors, and very specialized lab workers were specific positions for which they had a shortage of workers to fill. The minimum required education to fill these positions and others not mentioned is a high school diploma, or equivalent, as answered by all ten employers.

LEAP Consulting asked what each employer's financial assistance model consisted of and 90% responded they utilized a reimbursement approach (Figure 7). The other

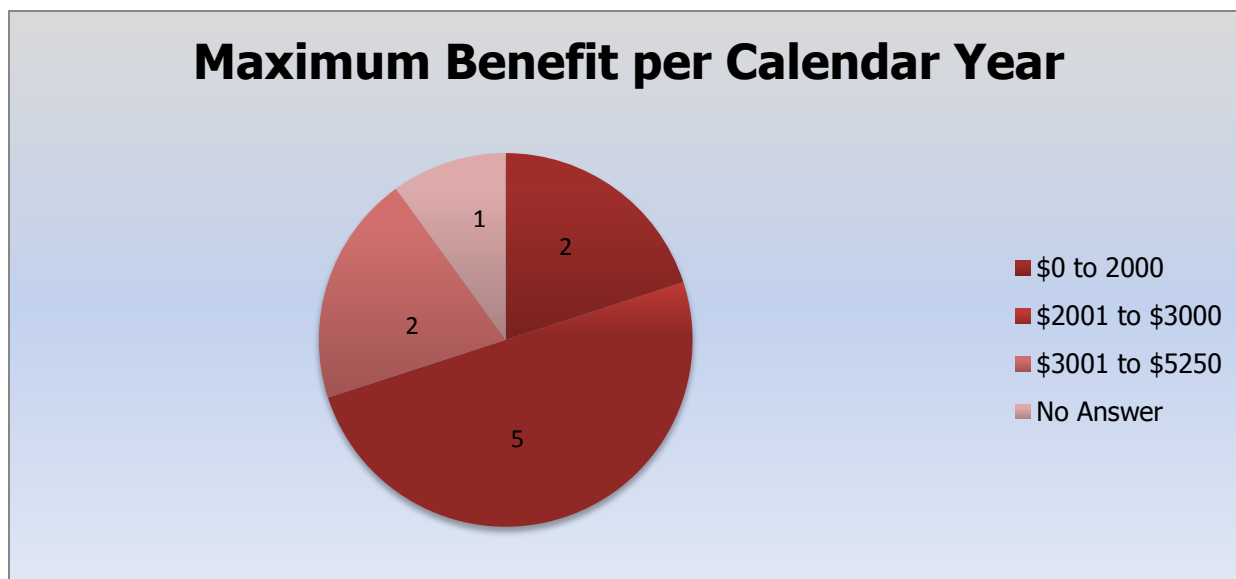
employer stated they would consider paying upfront for degree work in certain cases but did not give details. Two companies mentioned the reimbursement will cover only tuition expenses, but two others will cover all incurred expenses (tuition, books, meals, and more). Other companies did not reveal this coverage detail during their interviews. Separate from degree coursework being reimbursed, two companies will pay upfront for non-degree coursework or certifications.

FIGURE 7



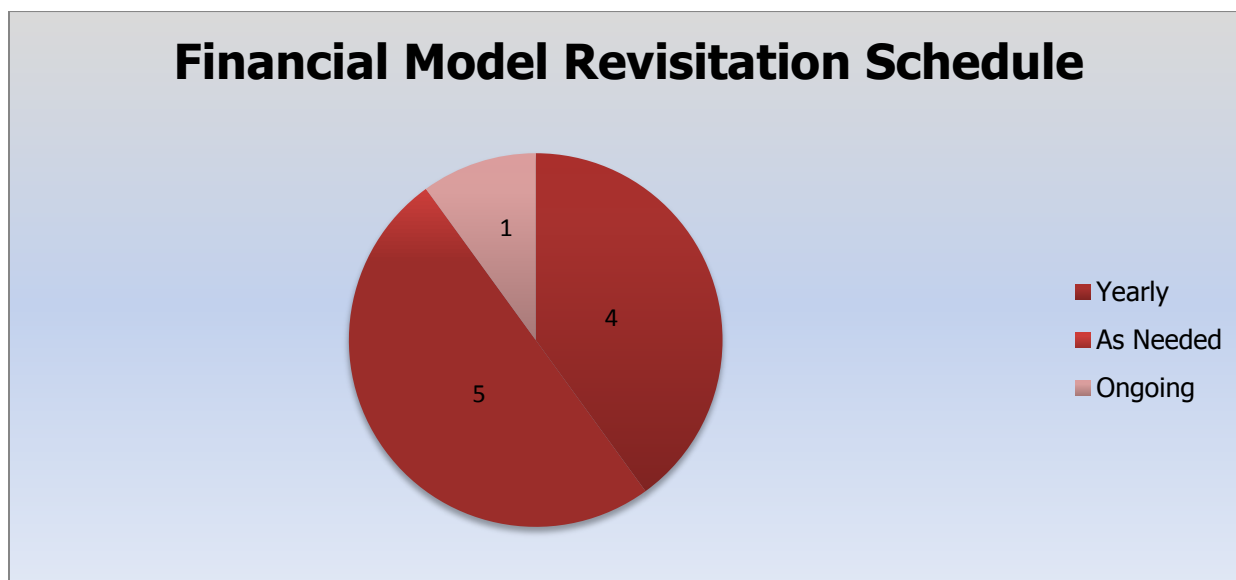
A question was asked regarding the maximum benefit offered per employee per year. For the employers that used reimbursement models, 50% totaled between \$2001 and \$3000 paid to the employee (Figure 8). Other companies responded their benefit was as low as \$1500 per year and as high as \$5250 per year. One employer did not reply. One company mentioned reimbursing on a grade scale—the higher the grade the employee attained, the higher the percentage of reimbursement. Another employer mentioned the amount of the benefit could be increased on a case-by-case basis and with manager approval. Interestingly, only two companies offered the full tax-exempt business expense amount of \$5250. The reasons supporting this particular decision are unknown and could be a focus of future research.

FIGURE 8



The employers revisited their financial assistance policy over different time frames. Some reviewed yearly, some as deemed necessary, and one constantly (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9



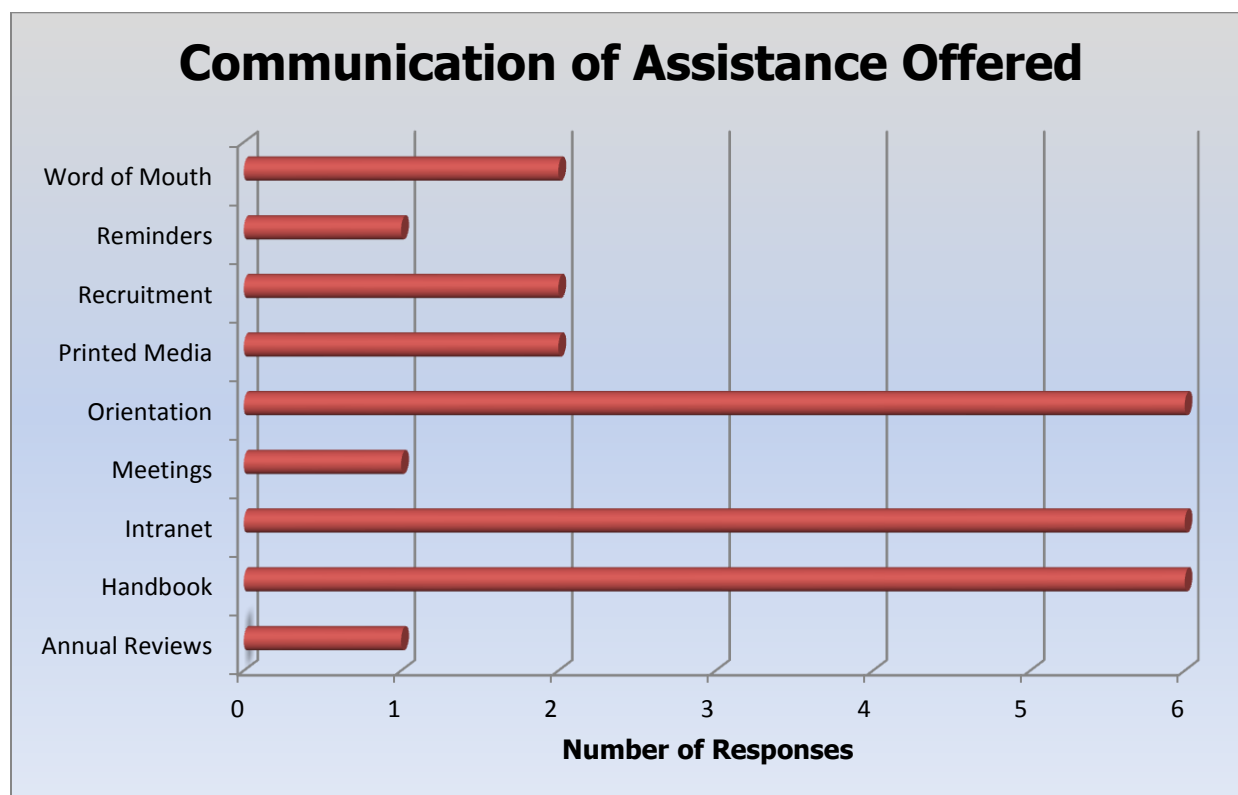
WFS offers several options to employers to assist with their tuition support programs and on-the-job training for employees. The ten employers were asked if they were familiar with these benefits and 40% responded they were (they participate in

partnership committees and on boards with WFS members) but 60% were unfamiliar or provided no answer.

Tuition Assistance Program Offerings

The second set of questions LEAP Consulting asked the ten employers referred to specifics of how their TAPs were administered. When asked how the employers communicated information about the benefit to the employees, a variety of answers were given (Figure 10). Most employers provided information at orientation, on their company intranet, and in their employee handbook for employee reference. Other responses included simple word of mouth from participants who completed the program, and reminders from managers at annual reviews.

FIGURE 10



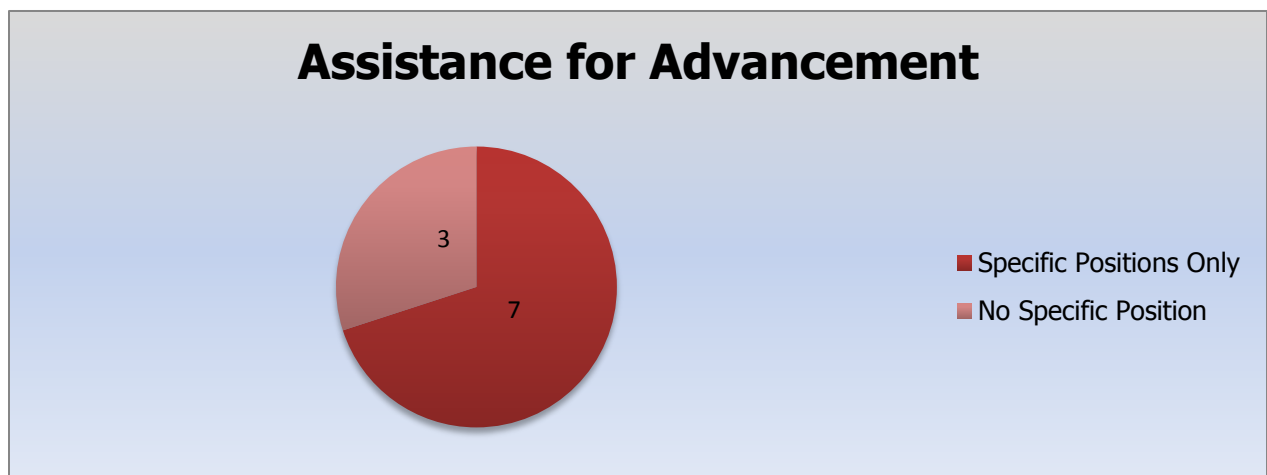
When asked if the employer had formed any strategic partnerships with local or online schools, 50% responded they had done so. Some of the schools mentioned were the University of Texas at both Austin and Arlington, Austin Community College, Concordia University-Texas, Skillpoint Alliance, certain high schools, Southern Careers Institute,

Cybertex, Everest College, Texas State University, and Western Governors' University. One employer responded they will partner with any school that provides the training for the positions for which they have the greatest need to fill. The other 50% of the companies either stated the school only needed to be accredited or had no specific school in mind as an answer.

Eight out of the ten employers reported they manage the TAP internally. Two employers outsourced their benefits management.

The next question in this set asked whether the benefit could only be used for specific positions. Seven out of the ten employers stated the coursework should pertain to a healthcare-related position applicable within their company (Figure 11). Three employers, however, stated they have noticed success in not limiting the benefit to staying in line with the employee's current position, but simply a position applicable to the company. A few examples given were using the assistance for moving from food services to nursing, moving from nursing to accounting, or moving from a patient technician position into a nursing role.

FIGURE 11

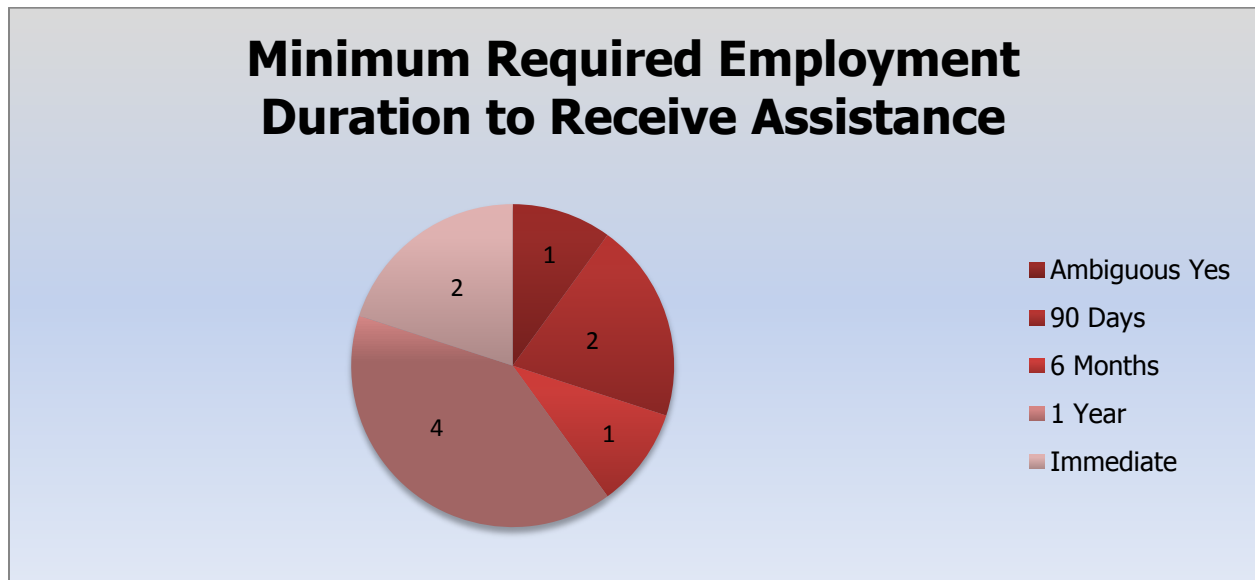


Employee Eligibility and Limitations

The third set of interview questions related to how the employees used the benefit. In order to receive the tuition assistance benefit, all employers responded full-time employees were eligible, and two stated part-time employees were also eligible. For

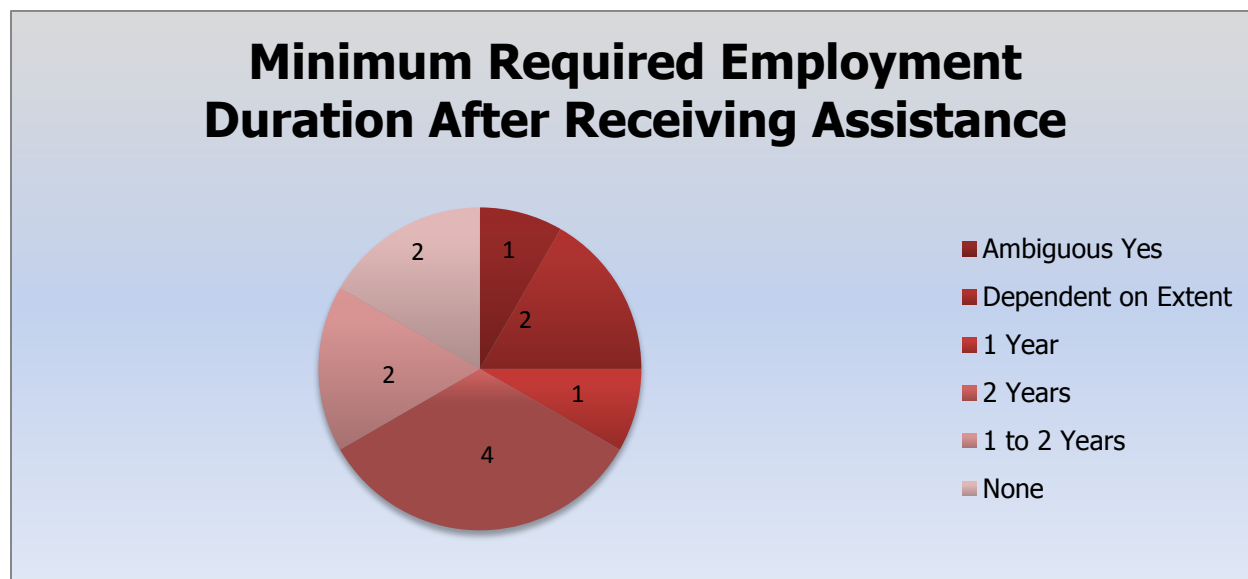
full-time employees, an amount of employment time must pass before the benefit was available for use. This was indicated by eight of the ten employers and ranged from immediately to 1 year, including one unspecified amount, yet affirmative answer (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12



After receiving the benefit, employees were asked to continue working with the company for a period of time at eight companies (Figure 13). Three companies indicated there would be a prorated payback penalty enforced if the employees left the company after using TAP. The continuance period time frames ranged from one to two years, though most responded with two years. Sometimes the required time for continued employment was dependent on the extent of the benefit used. Two employers stated they did not require the employee to stay with the company for any period of time.

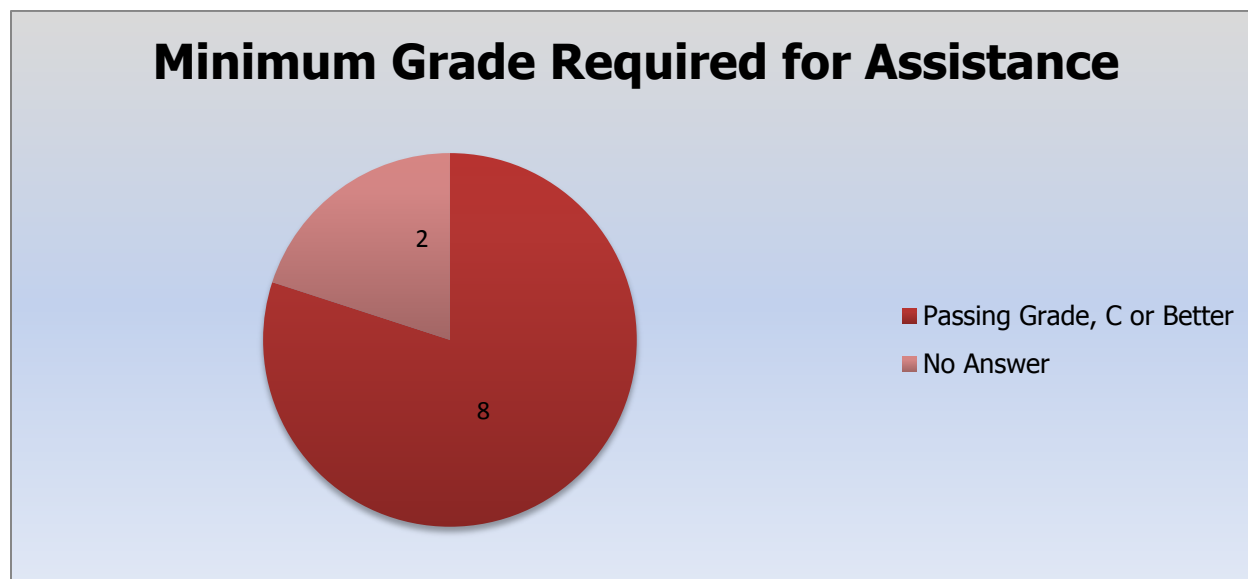
FIGURE 13



The use of company resources for school work was also examined. Four employers stated they strive to make the school schedule as easy as possible for the student, increasing the flexibility in employees' schedules so studying can be worked into their busy working lives. Some employers commented they would scale back on the employee's working hours, while others responded the employee's shift could be adjusted. One company allows employees to study on their breaks and use company computers and rooms, but two stated all studying must be done off-site. Three employers acknowledged a case-by-case basis for use of company resources may be most appropriate and handled solely between students and their managers. LEAP Consulting identified a trend in successful completion of education programs among employers that offer flexibility to employees using tuition assistance.

LEAP Consulting asked if a certain grade was required in order to receive the tuition assistance benefit. Two employers did not provide an answer, but eight responded a passing grade is necessary (Figure 14). A passing grade in a grade-based course is an A, B, or C, or achieving a passing status in a pass/fail type of course.

FIGURE 14

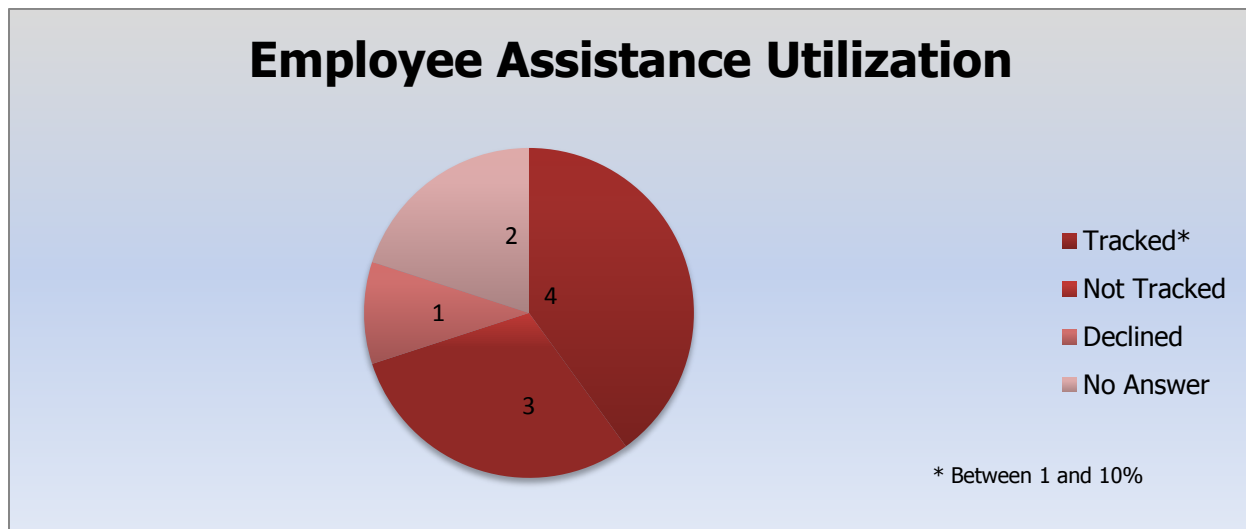


The employers were asked if they offered their employees a training portal within their company for internal training and/or policy purposes (not for degree coursework). Eight of the employers responded this is what they offer, but two employers did not have this option at all.

Tuition Assistance Results

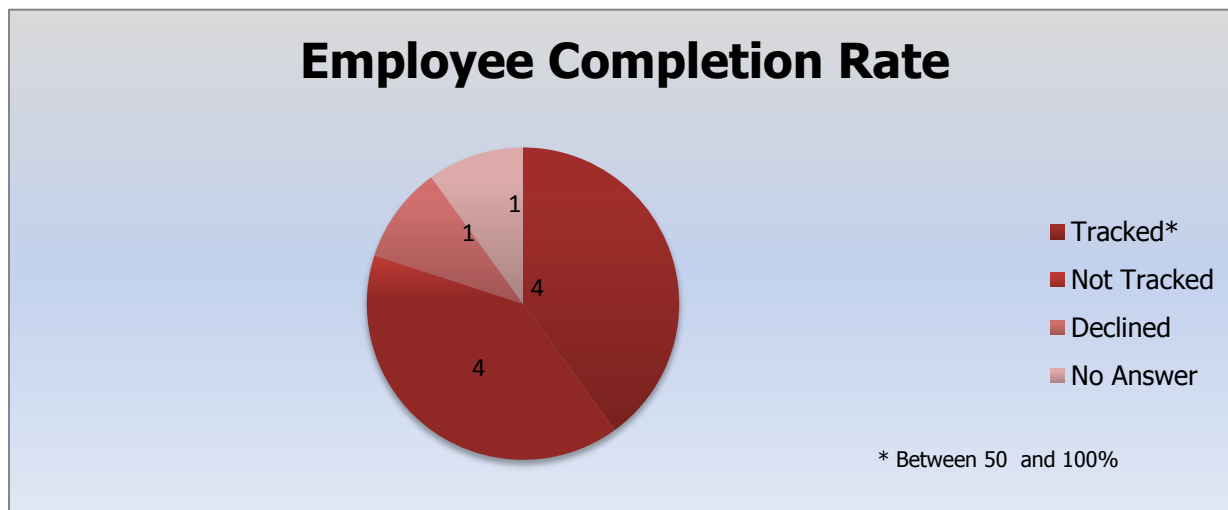
The fourth and final set of interview questions allowed LEAP Consulting to investigate the results of these ten employers' participation in the benefit. A major part of offering a benefit is monitoring how much it is used in order to continue or discontinue the offering. This question yielded answers more varied than expected. Three employers did not track how many employees used tuition assistance, one declined to answer the question, and two did not answer at all (Figure 15). The remaining four employers did track the use of the program and estimated the use to be very low, from between 1 and 10%.

FIGURE 15



A similar question was asked about how many employees complete their education goal while using the tuition benefit and similar results to the previous question were yielded. Four employers did not track how many employees completed their educational goal, one declined to answer the question, and one did not answer at all (Figure 16). The remaining four employers did track the successful completion of the program and estimated the completion rate, in this case, to be very high: between 50 and 100% across all four companies. One company estimated their rate to be 50%, one company estimated 90%, and two companies estimated 100%.

FIGURE 16



Barriers

A major part of LEAP Consulting's research was centered on identifying barriers to usage of the TAPs. Interviews revealed barriers indicating why employees do not take advantage of TAPs offered by their employers, and secondary research provided reasons why employers do not offer TAPs.

Employers Not Offering Tuition Assistance Programs

Monetary motives were the common theme explaining why companies do not offer TAPs. Monetary impacts included

- the risk of loss of investment if an employee utilizes the benefit and leaves the company
- smaller companies' lack of funds
- challenges faced by larger companies in convincing the board of directors to fund more employee benefits

Additional challenges included communicating benefits to employees and the company culture not supporting further education, even though a TAP exists.⁸

These challenges mirrored much of what was shown in research, including the risk of investing in employees who leave the company, low attendance, low completion rates, and limited financial resources for supporting this type of employee benefit.

Employees Not Using Tuition Assistance Programs

Employers were asked what situations employees have reported which prevent them from taking advantage of the offered benefit. Two questions in this fourth set pertained to personal barriers unique to the individual employee and barriers stemming from external factors. LEAP Consulting analyzed the answers and combined them into one large set of barriers.

⁸ <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/the-role-of-business-in-promoting-educational-attainment.pdf>

The majority of interview respondents said upfront costs prevented employees from participating in TAPs (Figure 17). Often the student must pay for the first semester, and then reimbursements pay for the following semesters. The limiting factor is often whether the employees can secure the funding to start their first semester. Employers also reported traffic, lack of transportation, an unknown career path after graduation, and the difficulty of acceptance into competitive programs as reasons employees have mentioned for not pursuing the benefit.

Other barriers also contribute to low TAP utilization. These are factors outside of the employees' or employers' control, and the main one is limited space in nursing programs. With nursing and healthcare careers in high demand, seats in programs like Austin Community College's associate's degree in nursing fill up quickly and students are often placed on a waitlist. One employer said the existence of higher paying jobs requiring fewer skills, like food service careers, are having an impact on the shortage of workers pursuing healthcare careers.

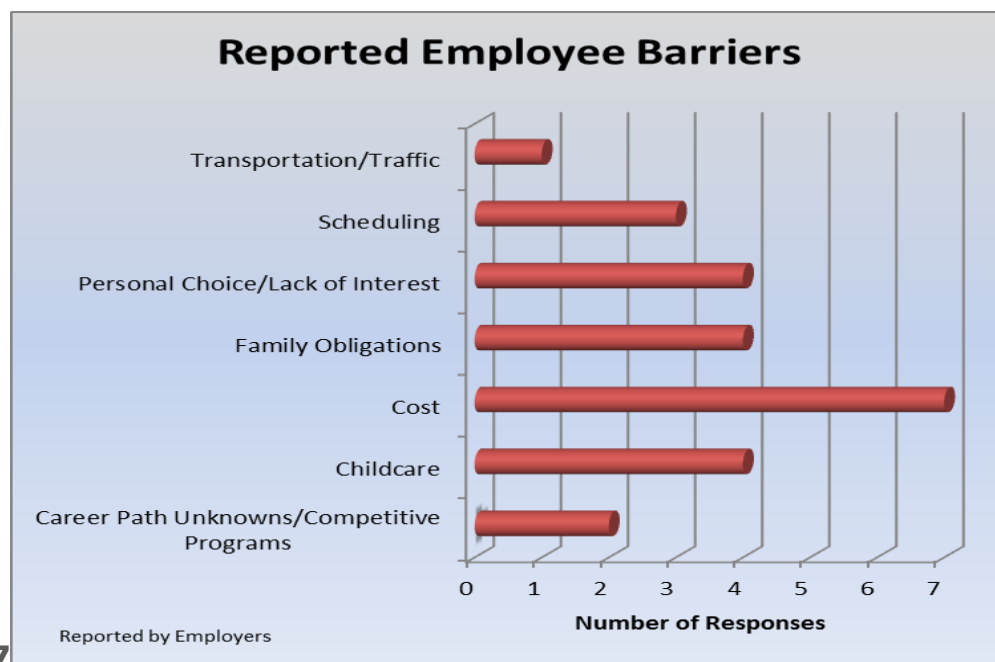


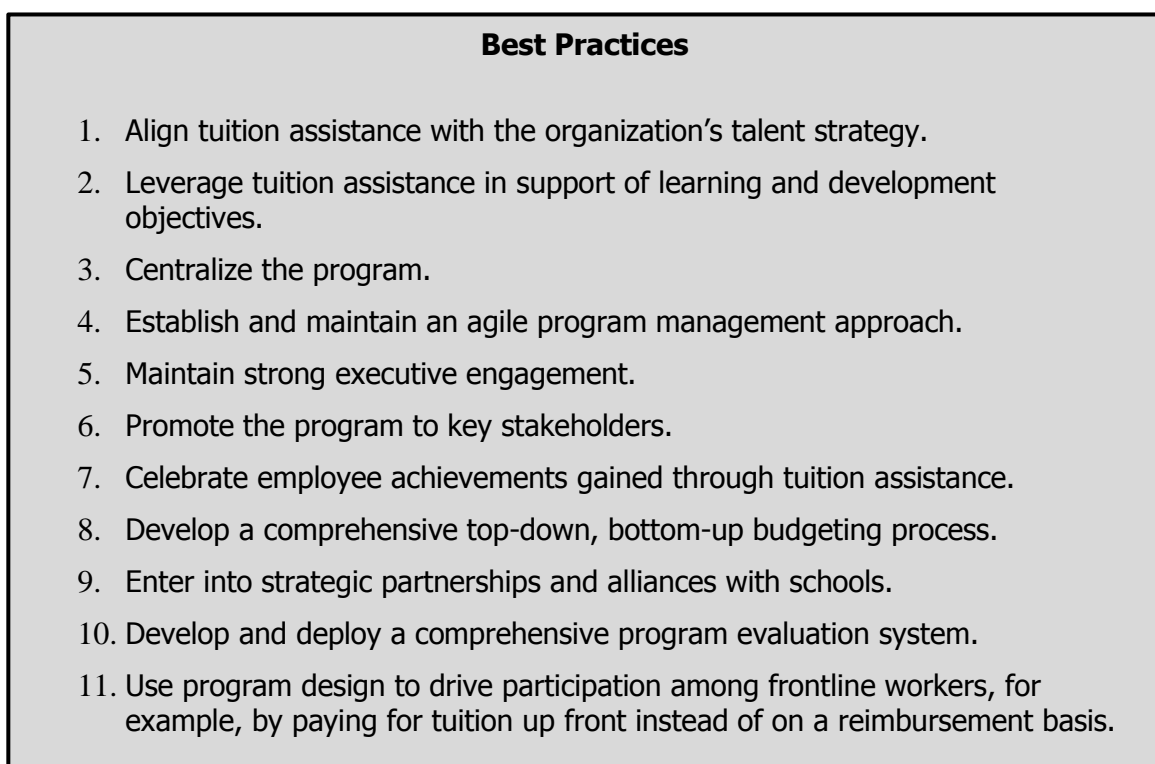
FIGURE 17

Despite these barriers, modern organizations must confront them to support their workforce and their community's career development.

Best Practices Literature Review

This section will delve into the established TAP best practices from a literature review and the promising practices shown by interview data of Austin area healthcare employers. The ten best practices for TAPs are in Figure 18 and an eleventh best practice included from a second study.⁹

FIGURE 18



Two themes arose in the literature review of Best Practices—primarily, program monitoring and evaluation on participation, cost, participant retention, engagement, and succession, which coincided with Best Practices 8 and 10. The second theme coincided with Best Practices 1 and 2, and is the recommendation to align TAPs with

⁹ Kowske, B., Lamoureux, K.: 35

http://www.upskillamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Upskilling_Employer_Handbook_042015.pdf

talent management goals. TAPs support a company's talent management goals through employee retention, competitive recruitment, and addressing skill gaps.

Employers and employees benefit from education with improved employment rates, lifetime earnings, and career advancement.¹⁰ Primary research and literature show the benefits of tuition assistance; therefore, current and future trends focus on program monitoring, evaluation, and program adjustment to encourage usage, as demonstrated in Best Practices 10 and 11.

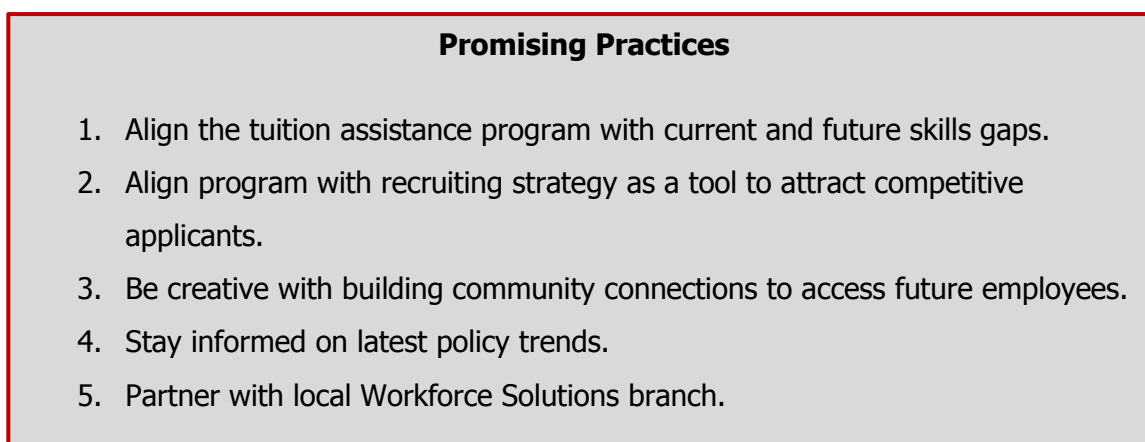
¹⁰ <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/study-finds-investing-in-employee-higher-education-results-in-cost-savings-for-major-financial-services-company>

Recommendations

Promising Practices for Employers

Through the employer interviews, LEAP Consulting identified the five promising practices outlined in Figure 19 and described below.

FIGURE 19



1. **Align the tuition assistance program with current and future skills gaps.** Tuition assistance could incentivize employees to pursue coursework in positions with a critical need. Interview results showed 7 out of 10 employers offer tuition assistance only for programs and coursework in areas specific to company needs. This existing practice is upheld as a promising practice when applied to fill critical need positions.
2. **Align program with recruiting strategy as a tool to attract competitive applicants.**
One interviewee reported ongoing education for all employees is crucial to remain competitive with larger hospitals, and for clinical staff to be able to adequately utilize new technologies.¹¹

¹¹ Personal communication data from ten employers

3. **Be creative with building community connections to access future employees.** Forming community contacts is essential to building pathways to future applicants. To address a shortage of Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVN), one employer researched high school certification programs and will partner with a local public high school to provide practicum hours for LVN students. This partnership would not have been formed without this employer's research and creative problem-solving skills.
4. **Stay informed on latest policy trends.** One hospital could be considered a trendsetter with its student loan repayment program. This would appear to be of benefit to the employer and the employee by assisting employee with student loans.
5. **Partner with a local Workforce Solutions branch.** Local WFS branches have access to resources, programs, and locale-specific knowledge for assisting employers and employees. For example, with the Capital Area Subsidized Employment Program, an employer can be reimbursed by WFS for a new employee's regular wages for up to eight weeks' time for full or part-time employees.¹²

¹² <http://www.wfscapitalarea.com/EmployerServices/EmployeeSkillsTraining#subsidized-employment-work-experience>

Model Policy

After review of the interview data, LEAP Consulting developed the following policy. It is applicable to both TAP participants as well as those employers who do not yet offer such programs, and is scalable for companies of varied size. The intention of this policy is to provide recommendations to employers which aid in effective program administration.

Model Policy: Establish a Previously Non-Existent (or Improve an Existing) Tuition Assistance Program

Guideline Name: Tuition Assistance Program Establishment or Improvement

Effective Date: 8/9/2018, Last Revised: Not Applicable

Guideline Owner: Workforce Solutions Capital Area

Author: LEAP Consulting

Introduction

An employer-supported TAP is a key component of learning and development programs to upskill employees and meet the need of certain positions within the company. They are traditionally managed by the human resources department but can be outsourced to a third party, such as EdAssist or EdCor. The main goal of the TAP is to encourage and manage employee participation in the employer-paid programs to meet workforce demands. The program aids the growth of eligible employees in furthering their knowledge, skills, and job effectiveness through certification and higher education. Use of these programs should be related to employee's current job assignment or other associated fields of great interest by the company due to need. The policy below was formed to help companies provide a TAP to their employees in the form of reimbursement; however, a model of upfront payment for coursework could also be a valuable option for some employers.

Policy Recommendations

Employee tuition reimbursement programs should be provided in accordance with the guidelines below.

Employee Eligibility and Corporate Limitations

1. Tuition reimbursements should be offered to all full-time and part-time employees who are in good status with the company.
2. Benefit amounts under this policy may be limited to the tax-deductible business expense limit of \$5,250 per the calendar year but can be exceeded upon approval of a manager. Reimbursement covers the cost of tuition, registration, fees (except penalties), and books, up to the company-specified maximum, and could be based upon a percentage of the maximum benefit per year at the discretion of the company.
3. Eligibility starts the first day of employment. Enrollment in programs prior to an employment start date is acceptable and covered.
4. Employees whose tuition is funded through scholarships, grants, financial aid from the government, or other sources will be reimbursed as the difference between the aid and their eligible tuition assistance amount.

Coursework Requirements

5. Approved coursework must be completed outside of employee work hours.
6. Courses must be accredited by nationally-recognized colleges, universities, and technical schools, and can be online or in-person classes.
7. Flexible work schedules may be arranged between the manager and the employee to accommodate completion of the coursework.
8. An employee must receive either (i) a grade of "A," "B," or "C," or (ii) if the course is graded as Pass/Fail or Complete/Incomplete, a grade of "Pass" or "Complete", to receive any reimbursement, when provided with evidence of successful completion.

Employee Participation

9. If an employee voluntarily ceases employment with the company before completing an approved course, no reimbursement will be given. Employees

who are severed due to a reduction in force are eligible for full reimbursement for currently enrolled courses.

10. Associates who participate in the tuition reimbursement program must agree to remain an associate of the company for a period of six months following the date of any tuition reimbursement payment.

Corporate Strategy Involvement

11. Partner with local community colleges and nonprofit educational organizations which provide avenues for employees' skills advancement.
12. Programs should be expanded to offer a variety of courses directly related to the employee's career advancement.
13. The Strategy should be clearly published, aligned with corporate and business strategy, and revisited on a scheduled basis for continued alignment.
14. A budget must be allocated to support the learning and development strategy.

Corporate Support and Employee Feedback

15. Executive support is required for the success of all learning and development programs and should be attained.
16. Train managers and supervisors to mentor their employees in the learning and development areas for successful implementation.
17. Partner with local Workforce Solutions organizations to understand the options offered to improve the learning and development programs.
18. Educate employees about the various grant and scholarship opportunities available outside of tuition reimbursement to support their endeavors.
19. Programs should be promoted at least annually for the awareness of all employees using improved communication. Use creative methods to inform the employees about the available program.
20. Monitor and evaluate the programs offered. Set SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) and review the progress regularly.
21. Conducting an employee survey is highly recommended. Data should be incorporated into the review of existing programs.

22. Managers should recognize and support employee participation in learning and development programs, inspiring other employees who are considering participation in these programs.
-

Recommendations Formed Outside of Primary Research

Cost was identified as the top barrier in our research. A discussion on two recommendations to combat this problem follows. Since the reimbursement model requires the employee to pay for their first semester without assistance and then be repaid at the completion of the classes, the upfront costs of the first semester is a barrier. First, it is recommended employers using the reimbursement model offer a loan for the first semester which the employee can pay back in small increments over a set period of time, then offer reimbursements for subsequent semesters. The reimbursement for the first semester often funds the second semester and so forth, so a loan would aid in clearing this financial hurdle. Second, schools often require physical exams or prerequisite courses for new students. These could be placement tests, drug tests, and background checks, dependent upon the position. It is recommended employers also pay for these types of school entry tests to financially ease the school application, or include it in the reimbursement if not already.

In order to encourage employee use of a TAP, it is recommended to remind the employees on a regular schedule, possibly every 6 months or annually during the months prior to the start of fall semesters. Forgetfulness and apathy are additional reasons why employees may not make full use of the benefit.

Next Steps

Case studies were requested by WFS to be part of this report. LEAP Consulting has identified potential employers willing to participate. Due to employer responsiveness in need to obtain approvals from managers, Human Resources Department, and others, the information was not available by the time of this report. These biographies describing the successful completion of upskilling using a TAP would make the goal more relatable to employees, and could be used as a promotion resource. All contact information for the employers who were interested in participating in a case study will be provided to WFS outside of this report.

Other Considerations

The MCWP objective is to secure 10,000 middle-skill jobs by the year 2021 for Austinites residing at or below the poverty level.¹³ The accomplishment of this objective will provide great opportunities for all stakeholders in the Austin metro area. For the continued engagement of the business community as talent champions, greater visibility and communication of results into the progress of the plan implementation is necessary. The plan is a living document and is expected to continuously evolve as actions are taken and feedback is provided. Remaining current with timely document updates is also necessary; providing access to all stakeholders with updates is essential to the success of the program.

An enhancement to WFS' social media outlets will give the employers and employees the opportunity to learn more about the services and work accomplished by the organization. For the WFS social media network to be effective, it must attract more followers as more followers translate to higher traffic page. A further recommendation would be to create an Instagram page to give WFS a larger presence in yet another social media network.¹⁴

The high cost of education is a barrier for employees, as supported by LEAP Consulting's research, but may also be a barrier for employer participation. Companies can partner with WFS for TWC opportunities, as well as for WFS' own funding options.¹⁵ Businesses can also choose non-grant models such as raising product prices, decreasing travel expenses, and repurposing funds from other departments within the company

¹³ MCWP, Page 1

¹⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2018/02/06/four-ways-to-use-instagram-to-propel-your-nonprofit-goals-in-2018/#58906cff42f8>

¹⁵ <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/partners/skills-development-fund>

<http://www.wfscapitalarea.com/EmployerServices/EmployeeSkillsTraining#skills-for-small-business>

<http://www.wfscapitalarea.com/EmployerServices/EmployeeSkillsTraining#on-the-job-training>

<http://www.wfscapitalarea.com/EmployerServices/EmployeeSkillsTraining#subsidized-employment-work-experience>

and cite TAP aims as the reason. Traditional fundraisers¹⁶ or institutional grants could be explored, as could contacting retirees to make gifts to the employer for tuition assistance use. If an employer chooses not to offer any assistance, the employee could apply for various grants through various government websites.¹⁷ Finally, workshops which teach people how to apply for federal and non-federal grants could be utilized by employers and employees alike.¹⁸

LEAP Consulting's Research Methods (Figure 1) used in the healthcare industry can be beneficial in studying other Austin metro area's key economic drivers: skilled trades/manufacturing, and information technology.

Sharing the employee barriers to upskilling with Austin area employers may help in addressing the underutilization of the TAP program. Circulating the Model Policy with Austin area employers may help in expanding the usage of their TAPs. Periodic updates to the policy are necessary to align with the MCWP's progress.

Continuous engagement with educational institutions will help WFS in fulfilling its MCWP vision. Partnership with academia will help WFS in research, data gathering, data analysis, marketing, and social media upkeep. Sponsoring after-school clubs and vocational programs will educate students on career choices and could provide much-needed publicity for WFS programs.

¹⁶ <https://bizfluent.com/list-6965906-for-profit-fundraising-ideas.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.grants.gov>

¹⁸ <http://diversity.utexas.edu/tgrc/>

Conclusion

The goal of the partnership between WFS and LEAP Consulting is to raise awareness about promising practices in tuition assistance currently in use by Austin metro area healthcare employers. WFS requested an achievable tuition assistance policy of recommendations for employers to use and expand the adoption and use of promising practices. Now compiled by LEAP Consulting, the use of the policy will increase the skilled workforce in the healthcare industry in the Austin metro area and foster a strong economy and sustain growth for the area. This report highlights the results from interviews with local area employers, industry best practices, and promising practices by several companies' utilization of TAP. Deliverables by LEAP Consulting are to uphold WFS' goal to increase affordability for employees in the Austin area by providing easier access to upskilling for a disadvantaged group of citizens.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Meeting Minutes

Removed for Confidentiality

Appendix B: Time Management Schedule

Milestones	Task	Estimated Hours	Actual Hours
1	Strategic Plan	30	39
	Meet WFS Team	8	7
	Project approvals and signed agreements	2	6
	Develop deliverables (proposal)	4	7
	Develop meetings and communications strategy	4	4
	Identify team roles and responsibilities	2	3
	Develop milestones	4	4
	Develop timeline	6	8
2	Research	42	51
	Familiarity of WFS Master Plan	8	9
	Review best practices	8	6
	Review tax code	4	2
	Gather list of employers from Leslie	2	2
	Research employers	16	25
	Generate list of healthcare employers from jobsites	4	7
3	Employer Interviews	76	80
	Develop interview questions	16	9
	Review Interview Questions	6	5
	Develop data collection spreadsheet	4	3
	Determine interviewees	2	27
	Contact employers or WFS warm introduction	4	14
	Schedule interviews	4	6
	Conduct Interviews	40	16
4	Interviews Report	74	120
	Analyze Data	34	26
	Synthesize Findings	8	16
	Draft Report	24	46
	Report Revisions and Edits	8	32
5	Deliverables	58	23
	Policy/Recommendation	34	14
	Promising Practices Overview	8	6
	Case Studies	16	3
6	Completion	92	128
	Schedule Capstone presentation with WFS	1	1
	Schedule Capstone presentation with Concordia	1	1
	Invite stakeholders to Capstone presentation	1	1
	Practice Capstone Presentation in class	4	4
	Presentation feedback	4	16
	Revise presentation	8	5
	Final Capstone report, slide deck, and presentation	5	36
	Project Management		
	Weekly Team Meetings	40	40
	Weekly Meeting with WFS	28	24
	Total Hours:	372	441

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Healthcare Employer Interview Questions

Employer Profile

1. Does upskilling tie to your talent management strategies (vision, mission, policies, long-term business goals, etc). [Yes or No]
2. Are there any occupations where you are currently experiencing a shortage of skilled workers? What are they?
3. What is your minimum required education for frontline employees? [Short answer]
4. What is your financial assistance model? Do you offer a loan upfront, or a reimbursement, or a flat rate, or a percentage of the cost? Are program participants required to achieve a specific grade to receive reimbursement or continue receiving tuition assistance? [full or partial loan, full or grade-based reimbursement, other, tax-capped \$5250]
5. How often do you revisit your financial assistance model? [Short answer]
6. Are you aware of the support offered by WFS? (in case TAP aligns with WFS initiatives/partnerships) [Short answer]
7. If you don't participate, is it due to unknowns, as in, are you aware of the benefits to your workforce and long-term business goals? (benefits employees of this community using WFS' assistance) [Short answer]

Tuition Assistance Program Offerings

8. How do you communicate your TAP to employees (advertised as benefit, offered, listed in employee handbook, etc.) [Short answer]
9. Is your TAP managed internally, or do you outsource it? For example, using a third party for student employee advising or career counseling. [Internally or Outsourced]

10. Do you have any strategic partnerships or alliances with schools? (i.e. a school comes to your facility for class) [Yes or No]
11. Do you limit participation to specifically approved courses? (job-related, succession goals) [Yes or No]

Employee Eligibility and Limitations

12. What type of employees are eligible to participate in your TAP (full-time, part-time, temp, perm)? [Short answer]
13. Is a minimum employment duration required to participate in TAP? [Yes or No]
14. Is there an employment continuance period after receiving benefits? [Yes or No]
15. Are employees allowed to use company resources or given flex time for school? (How does the company support employees who participate in the tuition assistance program, in non- monetary ways?) [Flex time, Conference Rooms, or Work Student Cohort)?
16. Is there a minimum required grade to continue receiving tuition benefits?
17. Is there an internal training portal or learning center for your employees? (Example, SkillSoft) [Yes or No]

Tuition Assistance Program Results

18. What percentage of your employees currently utilize your TAP? [Short answer]
19. What percentage of participants complete their upskill goal(s)? (i.e. graduate, complete certification, etc) [Short answer]
20. What are some external factors which negatively affect employee interest, motivation, and/or completion? [Childcare, Transportation, Upfront Costs]
21. What are some community factors which affect employee interest, motivation, and/or completion? [Short answer]

Appendix D: Employers Contacted

Company Names	
Arise Austin Medical Center	Hanger Prosthetics and Orthotics
Austin Dental	Heart to Heart Hospice
Austin Diagnostic Clinic (ADC)	Helping Hand Home
Austin ENT	Longhorn Imaging
Austin Family Medicine	Longhorn Pediatrics
Austin Gastroenterology	Natera
Austin Medical Group	North Austin Pediatrics
Austin Primary Care Physicians	Red River Family Practice
Austin Regional Clinic (ARC)	Regency Healthcare Systems
Austin State Hospital	ResCare
Baylor Scott & White Health	Salina Towery RMT
Boon Chapman	Seton/Ascension
Brookdale Senior Living	Sonic Reference Laboratory (Sonic Healthcare)
Capitol Home Health	South Austin Medical Clinic
Carousel Pediatrics	St. David's (HCA)
Cedar Park Pediatric and Family Medicine	Syneos Health
Cedar Park Regional Medical Center	Tarrytown ExpoCare (Pharmacy)
Center for Autism and Related Disorders	Texas Cardiac Arrhythmia
Central Texas Colon & Rectal Surgeons	Texas MedClinic
Central Texas Speech Pathology Services	Texas Orthopedics
Children's Medical Group	The Comprehensive ENT Center of Austin
CommUnity Care	The ENT & Allergy Center
DaVita	Victory Medical
Direct Orthopedic Care	Vik Medical
Double Creek Eye Care	WellMed Healthcare
EHI Surgery Center-Austin	Worldwide Clinical Trials
FastMed Urgent Care	
Great Expressions Dental Centers	