

The Washington Post

THIS COLLEGE IS RESPONDING TO AN OFTEN-IGNORED POPULATION: WORKING ADULTS

By Danielle Douglas-Gabriel
September 23, 2020

Before the public health crisis leveled the economy, employer-paid tuition programs were evolving from recruitment tools for college-educated candidates eyeing an MBA to a path for working-class employees to gain a foothold in higher education.

The recession could threaten that momentum if companies continue to shed jobs or curtail benefits. But Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College in Dallas, is making a calculated bet on the longevity of a movement that serves an often-ignored population of potential students: working adults.

On Wednesday, Paul Quinn will become the first historically Black college to partner with Guild Education, a Denver-based firm that works with companies such as Walmart and Lowe's to provide education benefits to employees.

Paul Quinn is among dozens of colleges and universities, including Southern New Hampshire University and the University of Florida, offering credentials and degrees through Guild. Employees of the companies in the Guild network can access all of Paul Quinn's courses and four-year-degree programs. The college has short-term credential programs and accelerated degrees designed for working adults.

"This is about unlocking the potential of America's workforce," Sorrell said. "It's about moving people forward using higher education in a way that is accessible and doesn't make people feel excluded. It's giving people access to a tomorrow in a place that feels comfortable to them."

Democratizing higher education and strengthening the ties to industry have come to define Sorrell's tenure at Paul Quinn. Shortly after taking the helm in 2007, Sorrell cut tuition at the private college by 40 percent — from \$23,800 to \$14,275 — to make it possible for students to graduate with little debt.

He then required all students to work, first on campus and then in the community. The urban work-college model allows students to keep a portion of their pay and use the rest to defray the cost of attendance. Its success has attracted JPMorgan Chase, FedEx and others to sponsor internships. At the same time, Paul Quinn has rolled out an online, three-year-degree program and a three-to-six-month certificate program for workers trying to sharpen their skills at no more than \$4,000.

"People need a way of getting back into the marketplace without spending 10 years to do so and getting into debt," Sorrell said. "We have to innovate at the street level for the people who need this the most. I'm doing what HBCUs have always done ... educating people who are underserved."

The efforts to make higher education more accessible to a broader population made Paul Quinn a perfect fit for Guild, said Paul Freedman, president of the Learning Marketplace at Guild Education.

"A lot of people have created a false division between credentials and the traditional bachelor's," Freedman said. "Paul Quinn's model proves it's not either/or. It could be and or both. You can get a credential as a part of your college education, earn more income while still enrolled in college."

With declining enrollment because of a shrinking population of high school graduates and pressure on tuition revenue, employer-paid tuition programs could be a lifeline for colleges and universities. But Freedman has found that few four-year schools are skilled at serving working adults.

"There are a lot of universities that get in their own way because of their elitism," he said. "Working adults have different needs. If universities structure their service models in ways that are supportive and conducive to their success, it can help stabilize the economic realities of higher education and deliver a lot of societal good. This is a hugely important population of people deserving of high-quality education."

Tuition reimbursement programs, however, are at risk in a protracted recession. The benefits are discretionary, and if companies struggle to turn profits, they could try to save money by cutting the expense. But even in the Great Recession of 2008, employers such as McDonald's and Disney invested in tuition benefits as a retention tool, said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.

"They knew that if they wanted people to stay on the job, instead of quitting in six months, they'd have to offer education benefits," Carnevale said. "This is part of the evolution of the relationship between education and the labor market. This is the future of workforce training."

Freedman said Guild's corporate partners are not retreating. He said the network is supporting 25 percent more students since the start of the pandemic. Furloughed workers at companies in the network, in some cases, are taking advantage of the benefit.

Walmart, one of the nation's largest private employers, expanded the eligibility of its tuition benefit in June by offering it to all workers on the first day of employment rather than after three months on the job. The company also broadened the program to include skilled trades and digital certifications. Walmart began offering associate and bachelor's degrees in business and supply-chain management to its employees for \$1 a day in 2018. Since then, more than 25,000 Walmart employees have enrolled, nearly half of whom are people of color.

What makes tuition benefits at large retailers appealing to experts in higher education is the potential to usher marginalized groups into higher education without saddling them with huge debt. The tricky part is ensuring that Black and Latinx workers are not being steered into career training to the exclusion of other forms of higher education, Carnevale said.

"There has got to be some balance in this that says it's a highway with lots of off-roads and lots of on-roads, and there is always another pathway to more education and a better job," he said. "It's about how you integrate these systems."