

## **BlueCross, East Tennessee State University Launching BlueSky Tennessee Institute**

*Innovative partnership allows students to earn bachelor's degree and technology job placement in two years*

**CHATTANOOGA, Tenn.** — BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee has partnered with East Tennessee State University (ETSU) to create BlueSky Tennessee Institute. This groundbreaking collaboration will provide Tennessee students the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree in computing and a job offer at BlueCross – all in just two years.

BlueSky Institute's accelerated bachelor's degree will provide a new pathway into one of the fastest-growing careers in the nation. The program will help develop much-needed technology talent for BlueCross – and prepare the next generation of technology leaders.

“In developing BlueSky Institute, we sought out a program partner that recognized the high demand for technology jobs in Tennessee and shared our vision to meet that need with a new approach,” said JD Hickey, M.D., president and CEO of the Chattanooga-based health insurer. “We're excited to collaborate with ETSU to develop tech talent together, right here in our home state.”

ETSU will deploy its ABET-accredited B.S. in Computing with a concentration in Information Systems in an accelerated format to serve as the foundation for BlueSky Institute's curriculum. ABET is the premier global accreditor for computing programs, and ETSU's program offers coursework in high-demand fields such as cybersecurity, cloud computing, wireless computing, data analytics, healthcare information systems, and more.

“Earning a college degree is transformational to the lives of our students and the BlueSky Institute will further the impact of higher education with an innovative job training model that ETSU is proud to join,” said Dr. Brian Noland, ETSU president. “We are delighted to partner with BlueCross to deliver a first-class computing education in Chattanooga.”

Tennessee has roughly 4,100 technology job postings per year and only 1,000 qualified graduates to fill them.

BlueCross is facing the same challenge, typically having more open cybersecurity and coding jobs than it can fill with local talent. As a Tennessee-based organization committed to the state's overall wellbeing, the company recognized the opportunity to help prepare more people in its own communities for these rewarding career paths.

“The work of serving BlueCross members has become increasingly technology-driven,” Hickey added. “With BlueSky Institute, we can meet a critical business need while expanding opportunities for students in our community.”

Local leaders also expressed support for the new program, citing its innovative approach.

“BlueCross has been part of a number of forward-thinking civic partnerships over the years, and it’s gratifying to see them working with the public education system once again to address a workforce need in ways that will benefit both their business and our community,” said Hamilton County Mayor Jim Coppinger.

### **BlueSky Institute in action**

BlueSky Institute will offer eligible high school graduates the chance to:

- Earn a bachelor’s degree in Computing from ETSU in just over two years;
- Gain real-world experience by learning and working as an intern at BlueCross – a mission-driven company focused on improving the health of 3.4 million members in Tennessee and beyond;
- Create a portfolio of projects while earning their degree; and
- Secure a rewarding job offer at BlueCross after successfully completing the program.

“ETSU’s robust computing curriculum is delivered by faculty who are passionate about developing students’ skillset so that they may grow and adapt to meet the needs of this ever-changing and exciting career field,” said Dr. Tony Pittarese, senior associate dean of ETSU’s College of Business and Technology and chair of the Department of Computing. “When BlueCross approached us with the urgent need to fill technology positions, we immediately went to work looking at how we could adapt our curriculum to support this innovative institute.”

ETSU BlueSky Institute students will complete their coursework on the BlueCross campus in downtown Chattanooga, becoming part of the company’s diverse and inclusive workplace community.

### **Focus on challenged schools**

The inaugural BlueSky Institute class will begin in the summer of 2022 with around 15 students. BlueCross and ETSU are placing a special focus on identifying and recruiting high-potential students from Hamilton County’s most challenged high schools.

“Our students will get personal support every step of the way, including mentorship from BlueCross employees,” said Scott Wilson, vice president of corporate communications and community relations, who helped spearhead the initiative. “We’re committed to making it easy for BlueSky Institute students to focus on their futures.”

BlueSky Institute will be led by Brad Leon, an education expert who most recently served as chief of strategy and performance management for Shelby County Schools. Leon brings more than a decade of successful innovation to the role, with experience in blended digital/online and teacher-driven instruction as well as leading effective improvement efforts at some of Tennessee’s most-challenged schools.

“It’s an honor to be part of such a unique program that will propel students into high-demand career fields,” said Leon. “I look forward to seeing what our BlueSky Institute graduates accomplish in the years to come.”

Visit [BlueSkyTN.com](http://BlueSkyTN.com) to learn more about BlueSky Tennessee Institute.

*The BlueSky Tennessee Institute will be based at the BlueCross BlueShield headquarters in Chattanooga, Tenn. This education site is pending approval of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and SACSCOC.*

*BlueCross and its foundation have a shared commitment to supporting local education. Starting in 2018, the BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Foundation has gifted \$500,000 to fund the BlueCross Technology Academies at Red Bank High School and Soddy Daisy High School. The programs pair classroom learning with professional mentors to prepare students for technology careers.*

#### **About BlueCross®**

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee is a taxpaying, not-for-profit health plan serving more than 3.4 million members in Tennessee and around the country. The Chattanooga-based company was founded in 1945 and has brought peace of mind to its members and local communities for more than 75 years. BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Inc. is an independent licensee of the BlueCross BlueShield Association. For more information, visit the company’s news center at [bcbstnews.com](http://bcbstnews.com).

#### **About East Tennessee State University**

East Tennessee State University was founded in 1911 with a singular mission to improve the quality of life for the people of the region. A century later, the mission is unchanged and ETSU has transformed into a nationally ranked university focused on academics, research and service. ETSU is situated “in the shadow of the mountains” in Johnson City, Tennessee, and offers more than 160 undergraduate and graduate programs.