

Revisiting Apprenticeships

While the word “apprenticeship” may evoke images of craft guilds in the Middle Ages, the concept is gaining new currency today in the United States. Here’s what you need to know.

An online search for the term “apprenticeship” quickly yields illustrations of medieval bakers and roof thatchers. With those images in mind, it’s a bit disconcerting when Sarah Ayres Steinberg, a policy analyst on the economic policy team at the Center for American Progress, says that right now in the United States, “apprenticeship is a very hot topic.”

To back her claim, Steinberg cites facts that make one sit up and take notice. Earlier this year, for example, the Obama administration announced that it was creating [a \\$100 million program](#) to support new apprenticeship programs, particularly those in nontraditional, high-demand occupations. In his budget, the president has called for \$2 billion to double the number of apprentices in the United States in five years. In recent speeches, Vice President Joe Biden has been advocating “job-driven” training, which Steinberg says has become a buzz phrase in the administration.

Meanwhile, Sens. Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Tim Scott (R-SC) have reached across the political aisle to jointly introduce a [measure](#) that would give a \$1,000 tax credit to businesses that sponsor apprentices.

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In South Carolina, the private sector and government have partnered to breathe new life into the practice of apprenticeships. In 2003, the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce studied the state’s workforce needs. A key finding was that South Carolina needed to fill more jobs that required some postsecondary training but not a four-year college degree. The study said that apprenticeships would help bridge that gap. As one result, the South Carolina legislature passed \$1,000 tax credits for businesses that sponsor apprenticeships. The state also created [Apprenticeship Carolina](#), an office in the South Carolina Technical College System that helps design and implement apprenticeship programs. Since 2007, Steinberg reports, South Carolina has gone from 90 to 700 employers that sponsor apprenticeships. Apprenticeship Carolina’s website touts what it calls “the new evolution of apprenticeship.” [Iowa](#), [Maryland](#), and [Vermont](#) are examples of other states that have invested in apprenticeship programs.

The uptick in apprenticeships in South Carolina notwithstanding, the United States has a fairly limited apprenticeship system today compared with those found in other advanced economies. According to the Department of Labor’s [Office of Apprenticeship](#)

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[ship](#), in fiscal 2011 there were some 388,000 apprentices in the United States. Most are pursuing occupations in the building and construction trades. By comparison, the United Kingdom has more than 1 million apprentices that include occupations that we in the United States typically consider white collar occupations, such as accounting, engineering, and software development.

APPRENTICESHIPS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The worlds of apprenticeship and higher education are beginning to intersect, typically in the community colleges. In Indiana, for example, [Ivy Tech Community College](#) has an initiative that enables workers from a number of apprenticeship trade programs to obtain an associate degree or a technical certificate using the credits that they earned for time spent on the job.

This past April, the Department of Labor partnered with the Department of Education to launch the [Registered Apprenticeship College Consortium](#), one goal of which is to help graduates of [Registered Apprenticeship programs](#) convert on-the-job and classroom training into college credits toward an associate or bachelor's degree. The Registered Apprenticeship program is designed as a clearinghouse for the thousands of articulation agreements that now exist between a given college and a local registered apprenticeship program.

The American Council on Education (ACE) is one of the third-party organizations that evaluates apprenticeship programs to determine their appropriate value in college credit. Apprentices may petition to have that credit apply toward an associate or bachelor's degree at any of the institutions in the consortium. This serves the many individuals who are likely to enter degree programs at a later date. Learning achieved in an apprenticeship program will give these individuals a jump start toward pursuing additional postsecondary education, whether at the certificate, associate, or bachelor level in a competency-based or credit-hour model.

TIME FOR NEW PARTNERSHIPS?

Given this landscape, how should leaders of colleges and universities think about apprenticeships? For some institutions, such as the community colleges in the Registered Apprenticeship College Consortium, the time might be right for developing new apprenticeship partnerships. For other institutions, though, more creative thinking might be needed to find common ground around apprenticeships.

In the meantime, the growth of apprenticeships might be viewed as channeling some students on a track other than the tradition of going to college. On this topic, Steinberg is frank: "When you are thinking about apprenticeship and higher education, the way I think of it is that apprenticeship is [a form of] postsecondary education. There are actually many good jobs in the economy that don't require a four-year degree." Moreover, she observes, apprenticeships have the dual advantages of offering postsecondary education with little or no accumulation of student debt and the possibility of also earning college credit.

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Steinberg also argues that apprenticeships help improve outcomes for workers, noting that apprentices have been shown to earn higher wages than comparable workers, and also have been found to increase productivity of businesses that sponsor them. “Apprenticeships are dramatically underutilized in this country,” she says, “and if we expand our apprenticeship system, it is a good way to help businesses meet the demand for skilled labor that labor economists have said is a concern that we should be worried about over the next 10 years.”

The Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University (DC) has predicted a shortage of 3 million workers with associate degrees or higher by 2022, and that the nation will need some 5 million workers with technical certification and credentials to fill high-demand occupations. “Our current system of education and training is not sufficient to meet the demands for skilled labor,” Steinberg says. “We have to do something different. We have to make it easier for young people to get the postsecondary education and training that they need. And I think what that means is not focusing as much as we have on ‘everyone needs a bachelor’s degree,’ but on open access to alternatives forms of education and training after high school.”

NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

Steinberg says businesses should become more involved in apprenticeships. “Businesses are investing much less in worker training than they have in the past,” she says. “We need to do everything we that we can to boost the demand for apprenticeships among businesses.”

But what about higher education—are there opportunities, too, for innovative colleges and universities, including four-year institutions, to become more engaged with apprenticeships? “I think universities can do more to partner with employers to help document their skills needs and connect that to curricula and partner with them to offer the course work that corresponds with their future needs,” Steinberg says.

Robert Lerman, an economics professor at American University (DC) and a fellow in labor and social policy at the Urban Institute, sees another possible channel for partnership. “Apprenticeships are a step toward lifelong learning,” he says, enabling participants to “gain the confidence and motivation that they’ve learned how to learn.” Lerman says colleges and universities may want to take a long view, in the sense that apprenticeship experiences “will prepare many to do much better in college at a later age than they are doing now.”

RESOURCES

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