






The Apprenticeship Degree

Promoting Upward Mobility and
Addressing Labor Shortages

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ABOUT PPI'S CAMPAIGN FOR WORKING AMERICA

The Progressive Policy Institute launched its Campaign for Working America in February 2024. Its mission is to develop and test new themes, ideas, and policy proposals that can help Democrats and other center-left leaders make a new economic offer to working Americans, find common ground on polarizing cultural issues like immigration, crime, and education, and rally public support for defending freedom and democracy in a dangerous world. Acting as Senior Adviser to the Campaign is former U.S. Representative Tim Ryan, who represented northeast Ohio in Congress from 2003 to 2023.

Since 2016, Democrats have suffered severe erosion among non-college white voters and lately have been losing support from Black, Hispanic, and Asian working-class voters as well. Since these voters account for about three-quarters of registered voters, basic electoral math dictates that the party will have to do better with them

to restore its competitiveness outside metro centers and build lasting governing majorities. The party's history and legacy point in the same direction: Democrats do best when they champion the economic aspirations and moral outlook of ordinary working Americans.

To help them relocate this political north star and to inform our work on policy innovation, PPI has commissioned a series of YouGov polls on the beliefs and political attitudes of non-college voters, with a particular focus on the battleground states that have decided the outcome of recent national elections.

This report is the eighth in a series of Campaign Blueprints that can help Democrats reconnect with the working-class voters who have historically been the party's mainstay.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, millions of America's high school graduates face a difficult choice: Should they follow the pathway to a traditional university degree and hope it yields long-term financial stability and upward mobility? Or should they enter the workforce in an entry-level job and hope it yields long-term financial stability and upward mobility?

A traditional degree doesn't guarantee financial freedom. Many graduates are burdened by student loan debt and underemployment. The median student loan debt ranges from \$10,000 to \$14,999, though a quarter of borrowers owe at least \$25,000.¹ Additionally, research from the Burning Glass Institute and the Strada Institute for the Future of Work indicates that 52% of bachelor's degree graduates are employed in jobs that typically don't require a college degree.² Ten years later, that figure only drops to 45%. Meanwhile, many employers no longer regard a college degree as a gatekeeper credential for jobs, shifting from degree-based to skills-based hiring.^{3,4}

Clearly, college alone doesn't guarantee labor market success. Furthermore, the idea that all high school graduates should attend college is no longer widely accepted. The 25-year mantra of "college for all" has lost its luster.⁵ According to the nonpartisan think tank Populace, when Americans ranked their priorities for K-12 education, "being prepared to enroll in a college or university" plummeted from the 10th highest priority (out of 57) in 2019 to 47th in 2022.⁶ After all, 62% of Americans don't have a four-year degree.⁷

Other surveys reveal a growing skepticism about the value of a four-year degree.⁸ More than half of Americans (56%) think a degree is not worth the cost, with skepticism most pronounced among college degree holders ages 18 to 34.

“I like to talk about the ABCs of apprenticeship degrees: ‘A’ stands for affordability without student debt; ‘B’ stands for based fully in the workplace — it starts with a paid job and ends with a better paid job; and ‘C’ stands for credit for learning at work, leading to an accredited degree.”

Joe E. Ross, Reach University President and CEO

This situation has many interrelated causes, but policymakers’ chronic underinvestment in career education, workforce training, and alternative pathways to good jobs tops the list. Simply put, high school graduates and working-class Americans lack opportunities to access quality employment outside the traditional two- or four-year degree path.

All of this is a loud call for U.S. political leaders to reorient economic policy around the aspirations and values of America’s non-college majority. Americans want and need new pathways to financial prosperity and upward mobility. Polls and studies indicate that they view work-based learning, such as apprenticeships, as a promising solution to their current workforce challenges.⁹ The apprenticeship degree model is one of these emerging solutions.

Apprenticeship degrees anchor postsecondary education to paid workplace learning under the guidance of experienced mentors, establishing paid employment as a key component of the degree. The wages offset college expenses, enabling students to graduate with little to no debt, making the degree affordable. Students also receive academic credit for their on-the-job experiences and related classroom instruction, which leads to a degree over a period of two to six years, depending on the program.

The apprenticeship degree model is based on a new public-private partnership that positions apprenticeships as a new higher education pathway, expanding access to postsecondary education for individuals seeking alternatives to the traditional college experience. It also provides a talent pipeline for employers eager to hire candidates with real-world experience.

This report provides an overview of the American public’s demand for alternative pathways to a traditional college degree, with a focus on preparing individuals for the workforce. It then describes the emerging apprenticeship degree model as a compelling way to meet the demands for alternative pathways to workforce preparation. Finally, it proposes a variety of ways to sustainably finance this model, suggesting a blended funding approach.

AN EITHER/OR CHOICE: COLLEGE OR A JOB

Each year, millions of America's high school graduates face a difficult choice: Should they obtain a traditional university degree or begin their lives as working adults?

This onerous decision has lasting effects on financial well-being and quality of life. For many, delaying employment and incurring debt to pursue a degree isn't financially feasible. However, bypassing postsecondary education in pursuit of a job can have a negative impact on future earning potential, professional networks, personal growth, career opportunities, and other aspects of one's life.

By failing to provide an alternative to the either/or choice of attending college or getting a job, the United States is failing its young people and its current workers. Unfortunately, our current economy and higher education institutions force young people to choose between a job they need now and a degree that might lead to a better future. Today, nearly two-thirds of U.S. jobs require some form of postsecondary education, yet 50% of the American workforce lacks a degree.¹⁰ Furthermore — and even more troubling — roughly 42 million Americans are college dropouts.¹¹ Their median student loan debt ranges from \$10,000 to \$14,999, though a quarter of borrowers owe at least \$25,000.¹² Meanwhile, 10 million critical job vacancies remain unfilled.

THE DEMAND FOR AN ALTERNATIVE: THE EARN-AND-LEARN MODEL

The past few years have been marked by a sea change in Americans' views of college. A *Wall Street Journal*/NORC survey found that more than half of Americans (56%) believe a college degree is not worth the cost.¹³ These views are strongest among those aged 18 to 34, especially college graduates.

Gen Z high schoolers agree. A poll by Educational Credit Management Corporation reports that 51% of today's high schoolers are considering a college

degree, a drop of more than 10% since before the pandemic.¹⁴ Moreover, 65% say that learning after high school should be done on the job through workplace experiences, such as internships or apprenticeships.

The increasing desire for work-oriented learning is also apparent among working-class Americans without college degrees, who seek more practical training pathways to good jobs, according to a poll by the Progressive Policy Institute and YouGov.¹⁵ Given three choices for proposals that would best enable them to get ahead, nearly three-quarters (74%) prefer "more public investment in apprenticeships and career pathways to help non-college workers acquire better skills" rather than stronger labor unions (15%) or forgiving student loans (11%).

Likewise, a plurality of working-class voters see "degree requirements for jobs that don't need them" as the most significant barrier to people like them getting a good job today. They also overwhelmingly believe that the federal government is looking out for the interests of college degree holders, not theirs. More than half (56%) say that forgiving student debt is unfair "to the majority of Americans who don't get college degrees and will increase costs for students and taxpayers alike over the long term." While less than half of these voters said the federal government is responsive to their needs, 70% said that it is responsive to the needs of the college-educated.

There is also evidence of a real-world disconnect between obtaining degrees and securing jobs. A 2022 American Student Assistance report shows employers no longer view a college degree as a symbol of career readiness.¹⁶ A survey of more than 600 employers revealed that 81% of employers believed skills, rather than degrees, should be the focus when hiring, and 72% of employers stated that they do not regard a degree as a reliable indicator of job preparedness. As their

doubts about traditional universities' ability to act as gatekeepers of job credentialing increase, many employers are shifting from degree-based to skills-based hiring.¹⁷

Hiring Lab, an economic research program of Indeed, reports that the share of U.S. job postings that require at least a college degree has fallen from 20.4% to 17.8% over the last five years, opening up employment opportunities for the 64% of U.S. adults without a bachelor's degree.^{18, 19}

To better understand the skills and earning potential of working Americans without degrees, Peter Q. Blair and colleagues from the National Bureau of Economic Research identified employees who don't have bachelor's degrees, but who have acquired valuable skills through avenues such as

community college, military service, workforce training programs, or on-the-job experience. According to their calculations, these so-called STARs — Skilled Through Alternative Routes — comprise approximately 70 million U.S. workers.²⁰

Many STARs earn low wages. However, low wages do not necessarily mean low-skilled, so Blair and his colleagues developed an "opportunity landscape" that revealed a skills overlap between many low-wage and middle-wage jobs, as well as many middle- and higher-wage jobs. Building on this research, Opportunity@Work analyzed 130 million job transitions to higher-wage positions and determined that many STARs have the potential to move into roles that pay at least 50% more than their current positions, provided they receive appropriate support and training.²¹

AKIKO MOFFETT

Nursing Apprentice



Madison, Wisconsin

University of Wisconsin Health

I started with an Associate of Applied Science (ASS) in Criminal Justice-Law Enforcement in 2012. I am the single mother of three beautiful children, whom I adore. I had a career working for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections but realized I wanted to do something different.

I started working for UW Hospitals and Clinics in 2018 and gave birth to my son in 2019 at 23 weeks pregnant — that is when my entire world changed. He spent 122 days in intensive care at Meriter Hospital, while I continued to work for UW. I was inspired by his medical team, including the intensive care unit nurses, and wanted to serve families like mine.

I joined the Nursing Assistant apprenticeship at UW. I completed that program, obtained my Certified Nursing Assistant license, and got a job through UW, working at the American Family Children's Hospital. I currently work as a Registered Nurse apprentice, taking care of my "littles" while completing my RN apprenticeship. For me, this program has been successful because it allows me to attend school at no cost while still working as an RN apprentice at UW Health. The support from the manager and upper leadership in this program is extraordinary. They provide the tools and resources needed for everyone enrolled in the program to succeed.

Upon completing this program and obtaining my nursing license, I plan to join the nurse residency program at UW Health and ultimately become a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit nurse. I aspire for my nursing career to focus on pediatrics and the families of pediatric patients.

Despite the shifting attitude towards traditional higher education, research shows that the American public holds positive views of the so-called “earn-and-learn” pathway to jobs and career education.²² Earn-and-learn opportunities, like apprenticeships, can provide a viable alternative for working Americans seeking career advancement. Participants in apprenticeship programs earn wages, learn from workplace/classroom mentors, and receive employer-recognized credentials — all while taking on little to no student debt.

An American Staffing Association poll reports that more than 92% of respondents view apprenticeships favorably, and over six out of 10 say apprenticeships make people more employable than attending college.²³ Additionally, an American Compass poll reports that when parents are asked to choose between a full-tuition college scholarship for their children and a three-year apprenticeship leading to a good job, nearly 6 out of 10 (56%) opt for apprenticeships.²⁴

While the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on college enrollment, both undergraduate and graduate enrollment peaked back in 2010, at around 21 million.²⁵ Since then, enrollment has fallen nearly 12%. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s fall 2024 report shows that total postsecondary enrollment has rebounded since 2019.²⁶ The report also indicates that a significant increase in alternative credentials and certificate programs has driven this rebound, with enrollment in these programs increasing by nearly 10% annually since 2019 (resulting in a total increase of 28.9%). Meanwhile, enrollment in other programs remains below 2019 levels, with bachelor’s degree programs increasing by only 2.9% and associate degree programs by 6.%, which is significantly lower than in 2019. In short, young people and workers are voting with their feet, seeking alternatives to the traditional college degree.

APPRENTICESHIPS IN AMERICA

The U.S. government established its authority to register and oversee apprenticeship programs in 1937, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the National Apprenticeship Act into law. The measure also allowed states to register and oversee their apprenticeship programs. Today, about half the states do so. Federal and state-registered earn-and-learn apprenticeship programs (RAPs) allow individuals to earn wages, learn from workplace and classroom mentors, and receive employer-recognized credentials. RAP sponsors include employers, community-based organizations, trade associations, and educational institutions, such as community colleges.

Registered apprenticeships prepare individuals for rewarding employment. One study shows that workers can earn \$240,000 more over their lifetimes — \$300,000 including benefits — by participating in a program.²⁷ An evaluation of the Department of Labor’s American Apprenticeship Initiative reveals that earnings increased for all participants between the year preceding their apprenticeship and the year following its completion, regardless of occupation or demographic background.²⁸ On average, earnings increased by 49% for all apprentices, with women, Hispanics, and apprentices of a race other than black or white experiencing the highest earning gains.

Regrettably, the United States lags behind many nations in utilizing apprenticeships to prepare individuals for the workforce. The country’s 27,000 programs enroll only around 680,000 individuals, roughly 0.4% of the U.S. workforce, giving the United States the lowest apprenticeship enrollment numbers among developed countries. English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, enroll an average of eight times as many workers in apprenticeship programs as a percentage of their workforce. Germany, Austria, and Switzerland enroll up to 15 times

as many.³⁰ Moreover, American apprenticeship programs place a strong emphasis on construction trades such as carpentry and plumbing. Other nations train apprentices for a broader range of careers, including those in the health care, logistics, technology, and financial industries.

Federal financial support for apprenticeship programs is increasing.³¹ Spending on the Office of Apprenticeship in the Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration went from \$90 million in 2016 to \$285 million in 2024. However, this number is still far short of the billions of dollars the U.S. Department of Education provides post-secondary institutions for student grants and loans.

A NEW PATHWAY: THE APPRENTICESHIP DEGREE MODEL

The apprenticeship degree model builds on this fundamental notion of apprenticeships. It is a way to prepare individuals for the workforce that combines classroom instruction with hands-on workplace learning, leading to a post-secondary degree. The apprenticeship degree model formalizes the academic merit and credentialing of apprenticeship programs, elevates the status of apprenticeships as an alternative form of higher education, and expands access to apprenticeships nationwide.

The earn-and-learn apprenticeship model need not conflict with the offerings of higher education institutions. As Jooyoung Voeller of New Apprenticeship explains, the best strategy to “promote and modernize apprenticeships in countries [like the U.S.] without a rich culture of vocational education is by creating them within modern occupations and integrating them into higher education by offering degree apprenticeships.”³²

Moreover, the apprenticeship degree model eliminates the either/or choice between a job and a degree. It puts skill and effort front and center, redefining traditional career pathways by combining paid, hands-on experience with academic learning. An apprenticeship degree is similar to an accredited college degree, but it is delivered through a different approach.

For context, a registered apprenticeship typically begins with a job and ends with a more advanced position.³³ The apprenticeships are industry-approved and validated by the U.S. Department of Labor or a state apprenticeship agency. However, a person in a registered apprenticeship program does not usually obtain a degree. A person in an apprenticeship degree program does.

But what could this approach look like in the United States? Due to the largely decentralized nature of career education and workforce training in the U.S., the requirements for obtaining an apprenticeship degree vary from state to state. However, unlike four-year degree programs at traditional universities, a key component of every apprenticeship degree is that students participate in relevant, paid employment as they obtain their workforce credentials. Apprenticeship degree programs can take between two and six years to complete, depending on the specifics of the program, industry requirements, and other factors. However, students earn an income the entire time, making the opportunity accessible to working-class Americans and better positioning them for upward mobility.

Ultimately, the goal is to integrate apprenticeship degrees into traditional four-year universities, community colleges, and technical and vocational institutions. Creating new accredited universities, such as Reach University, which is specifically designed to offer apprenticeship degrees across various occupations, will also play a critical role and set a strong example for other institutions looking to offer apprenticeship degrees to their students.³⁴

When students graduate from an apprenticeship degree program, they are awarded a bachelor's, master's, or certification, depending on the occupational standards of their profession and the role or level within that profession. For example, a student enrolled in one of Reach University's teacher apprenticeship programs will graduate with the education certification, bachelor's, or master's required to secure a teaching position. Because such requirements vary from occupation to occupation, the student outcomes of an apprenticeship degree program will vary depending on the type of apprenticeship a learner pursues. However, all graduates should be able to secure a well-paid job or obtain a salary increase that results in greater economic mobility.

Employer engagement is crucial for developing and expanding apprenticeship degree programs throughout a region. Because they can identify the skills gaps and shortages within their businesses, local employers know the exact type of training learners need to succeed. Employers should collaborate with the degree-awarding institution, helping to guide students' education and training and providing on-site classrooms for hands-on learning, a vital part of the apprenticeship degree model. Students learn the most from apprenticeship placements with engaged employers, and employers receive a high return on investment through the development of a local talent pipeline.

APPRENTICESHIP DEGREES: THE MODEL IN ACTION

While the apprenticeship degree model is still emerging in the United States, other countries have already implemented their versions, which offer lessons for how this could be done in the U.S. The United Kingdom developed a program beginning in 2015.³⁵ It offers a debt-free path to a bachelor's or master's degree from a university for 18- and 19-year-olds, as well as junior-level employees seeking to acquire new skills. In 2022-2023, approximately 46,800 individuals started an

apprenticeship degree.³⁶

A program can take three to six years to complete, depending on the particulars. The degree is awarded by the university that provides the coursework. Degrees are offered in fields that typically require academic work, such as health and the sciences, business and administration, and aerospace. Through this apprenticeship degree program, the employer and the government each pay a portion of the full program cost; the government covers the tuition cost through an employer apprenticeship levy.³⁷ Therefore, students do not have to take out loans to earn their degree.

Degree apprentices spend most of their week at work, with at least 20% of their time used for off-the-job study. Individuals cannot apply directly for an apprenticeship but must apply through an employer. It then becomes the employer's responsibility to arrange their study with an education provider. Research indicates that UK apprenticeship degrees generally have positive outcomes like increased earning potential and improved social mobility, and participants report receiving valuable work experience.³⁸

Germany is home to another example of the apprenticeship degree model.³⁹ Its institutions of applied sciences, now numbering more than 200 across the German higher education and research landscape, partner with employers on dual-studies programs that combine applied science degrees with apprenticeships. As higher education analyst Ben Wildavsky writes, "These relatively new universities attract a broad range of students who want to pursue postsecondary studies but with clear practical applications."⁴⁰

These institutions enroll about half (48%) of new undergraduates enrolling in university, while traditional universities enroll the other half. Most apprenticeship degree courses are in fields such as technology, engineering, economics, design, and the

RUCHELLE ELLIOTT**Respiratory Therapy Apprentice****Madison, Wisconsin***University of Wisconsin Health Hospital*

I began my professional journey in the Philippines, where I earned a bachelor's degree in tourism. In 2016, I moved to the U.S. and, like many immigrants, faced the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural and professional environment, while striving to build a meaningful career.

Shortly after arriving, I secured a position in Guest Services at the University of Wisconsin Hospital. I realized after three years in that role that advancing in the health care field would be challenging without formal medical training or clinical experience. I was eventually accepted into the hospital's Learn at Work program, an initiative designed to support the professional development of current hospital employees and prepare them to advance within the healthcare field. That was my stepping stone, which led to my acceptance into the UW Hospital's Medical Assistant apprenticeship program.

I worked as a Medical Assistant for four years, deepening my clinical knowledge and reaffirming my passion for patient care. In 2024, I applied for and was accepted into the Respiratory Therapy Apprenticeship Program, where I am currently developing specialized skills in respiratory care. I realized that hands-on learning combined with structured training was the most effective way for me to build competence and confidence as a health care professional.

The apprenticeship model has worked especially well for me because it allowed me to continue working and supporting my family while gaining specialized skills and earning credentials that might have been otherwise out of reach. It provided a clear, supported pathway for career advancement and helped me transition into a more technical, patient-focused role. More importantly, the program has given me the opportunity to make a greater impact in patient care. It's been a meaningful step not just in my career, but in fulfilling a personal goal — to be part of something that truly helps improve people's lives every day.

social sciences. According to a study by the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies, graduates of these institutions earn higher starting salaries than those without these degrees. Additional studies indicate that apprentices can achieve comparable lifetime earnings to those of traditional university graduates.⁴¹

While scaling apprenticeship degree models remains challenging in the U.S., some community college networks, nonprofit organizations, and states have already adopted degree-granting apprenticeship programs, particularly those focused on education and early childhood care.

This approach strengthens the educator pipeline, helps students graduate with little to no debt, and addresses recruitment challenges in the field.

The non-profit Reach University offers undergraduate and graduate programs that provide debt-free teacher apprenticeships, awarding bachelor's and master's degrees to graduates.⁴² Reach works with over 400 school network partners nationwide, has credit transfer agreements with a growing number of community colleges, and is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission. The federal Pell Grant

and Department of Labor grants, combined with philanthropy, typically cover most of the program's costs, and students' tuition payments are usually capped at \$900 per year.

To further support apprenticeship degrees across the U.S., Reach established the National Center for the Apprenticeship Degree.⁴³ NCAD recently launched its International Center for the Apprenticeship Degree (ICAD) so that international actors in workforce development can share best practices.⁴⁴

The non-profit Western Governors University enrolls around 189,000 students in competency-based online learning programs, including K-12 education.⁴⁵ Its School of Education has over 1,200 students enrolled in Grow Your Own, a nonprofit organization that collaborates with states and communities to develop apprenticeship programs across 30 states. It recently acquired Craft Education, a technology platform that integrates work-based learning experiences, such as apprenticeships, to expand its degree apprenticeship programs.⁴⁶ The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accredits its programs.

Finally, the nonprofit National University is the largest provider of teaching credentials in California, serving over 50,000 non-traditional learners, including working adults and military personnel, as well as more than 80,000 through its workforce and professional programs. In May 2025, the U.S. Department of Labor approved the University's application to sponsor a Registered Apprenticeship Program for K-12 teachers. It offers an accelerated online and on-campus learning format, allowing students in California and other states to complete four-week and eight-week classes. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission accredits it.

Alongside these three institutions,, community colleges, nonprofit organizations, and states are also starting these programs. For example, the Community College System of New Hampshire now has three apprenticeship degree programs for early-care education leaders.⁴⁷ Boston's Neighborhood Villages operates two programs for early childhood educators in Massachusetts.⁴⁸ In Kentucky, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood works with two other state agencies to offer an "early childhood administrator director" apprenticeship.⁴⁹

During the Biden Administration, the federal Departments of Education and Labor began collaborating to create paid Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) for K-12 teaching by combining Department of Labor apprenticeship grant funding with Department of Education K-12 grant funding. As part of the Administration's Good Jobs Initiative, the program sought to fill teaching jobs by recruiting local community members, including education paraprofessionals, career changers, and high school and college students, into teaching careers.⁵⁰ The initiative also provided financial support to a consortium of organizations to provide technical assistance to those developing these teacher apprenticeship programs.

In January 2022, Tennessee became the first state to receive approval from the Department of Labor for a teacher apprenticeship program.⁵¹ By February 2025, that number had increased to 39 states and the District of Columbia, with at least 32 school districts participating in these programs. These programs receive financial support from various entities, including federal, state, and local government sources, as well as philanthropic grants.⁵²

The Trump Administration's approach to apprenticeships presents a mixed picture. President Trump issued an executive order instructing federal officials to "reach and surpass" a million

new active apprenticeships.⁵³ Apprenticeship advocates praised this ambitious goal. However, the Administration has proposed significant reductions in workforce development funding and the elimination of multiple programs, including those that support teacher apprenticeship degree programs.^{54, 55} In its place, the Administration is proposing a new program called Make America Skilled Again, through which states will receive block grants and be required to spend at least 10% of the funds on apprenticeships.⁵⁶

FUNDING AVENUES

Expanding the apprenticeship degree model requires a combination of federal, state, and local tax dollars, as well as private employer contributions and philanthropic funding. To put it differently, a blended funding model is needed. For example, employers pay students wages and sometimes contribute to their tuition. Federal and state funding provides student grants, such as the federal Pell Grant or similar state grants. The public sector can also offer employers incentives, like tax credits, to support intermediary organizations that operate apprenticeship degree programs.

The practical ways this support has been provided have varied, with policymakers taking different approaches. Some — often Democrats — have argued for strong government oversight of registered apprenticeships to weed out fly-by-night job training vendors and establish high standards for skill acquisition. This typically includes federal grant support to gatekeeper organizations, such as workforce boards and community colleges, which work with trade associations or employers to create apprenticeship programs.

Others — often Republicans — tend to favor private-sector apprenticeships. For example, the first Trump Administration created the Independent Registered Apprenticeship Program (IRAP) to expand access to training and diversify the organizations and industries that offer

apprenticeships.⁵⁷ Supervision of apprenticeships was to be transferred to industry groups known as Standards Recognition Entities, rather than relying on traditional federal or state oversight agencies.⁵⁸ A Biden administration Executive Order rescinded that approach.⁵⁹ As mentioned above, the current Trump administration proposes cuts in workforce funding and a new program called Make America Skilled Again, or MASA.⁶⁰

Private Sector

The private sector plays a vital role in scaling the apprenticeship degree model. PPI has written on the importance of engaging employers and recruiting apprenticeship intermediaries, arguing that the path forward requires incentivizing both to fulfill their roles.^{61, 62} Just as the public sector cannot rely solely on private actors to scale apprenticeships nationwide, employers cannot rely on the public sector to do all the work.

Employers should contribute to funding apprenticeship degrees by providing paid on-the-job training, mentorship, and supplemental classroom education. They possess the financial means to help scale earn-and-learn models offered by apprenticeship degree providers such as Reach University. A mere \$3,000 from an employer can make education free for a student once the provider has secured other funding. Employers typically recoup these investments through increased productivity and improved retention of skilled workers.⁶³ Their contributions to accredited institutions offering apprenticeship degrees are crucial for the model's growth and sustainability.

Engaging employers is essential for realizing large-scale apprenticeship degree programs across the US. Market incentives would encourage employers to financially support these programs. However, tax incentives can also play a role in ensuring meaningful participation. Some incentives exist, such as the \$5,250 tuition reimbursement, a tax-free benefit that employers provide to students

ANGELA WOMBLE**Teacher Apprentice****Rogers, Arkansas***NorthWest Arkansas Community College*

I have lived in Rogers my entire life. I faced challenges growing up in poverty and graduated high school in 2005. At the age of 21, I enrolled at NorthWest Arkansas Community College, and obtained an Associate of Science degree with a focus on elementary education. I intended to complete a teaching degree at the University of Arkansas, but paused my education for personal reasons. Once my daughter entered school, I returned to the classroom. I enrolled in one course. Tuition costs of approximately \$1,000 per class made it impossible for me to take more.

I began substitute teaching, working as a kindergarten and Title I instructional assistant, and then as an inclusive practices instructional assistant. During this time, my husband experienced a medical set back and I began working two jobs to make ends meet. It underscored the need for a stable career that would allow me to both support my family and pursue meaningful work.

Soon after, the district superintendent announced a partnership with NorthWest Arkansas Community College and Reach

University — an apprenticeship-based degree program allowing school employees to complete their education while continuing to work. It addressed the two biggest barriers I faced: cost and the inability to take time off for traditional student teaching. This was my chance to complete my degree in two years.

Tuition is only \$75 per month, and the program's flexible structure allows me to work full-time while attending Zoom classes in the evening. The workload is manageable and engaging. The professors and advisors are incredibly supportive, ensuring we understand the material and feel confident. The curriculum also encourages deep reflection and collaboration, and supports the development of a growth mindset — essential qualities in any effective educator.

After each semester, I take the corresponding Elementary Education PRAXIS subject subtest, preparing me for licensure through the Arkansas Professional Educator Pathway (ArPEP). Upon graduation, I will be eligible to receive a provisional teaching license, allowing me to begin teaching full-time immediately. After one year of teaching, I will be eligible for a standard license. I fully intend to continue my education in the future by pursuing a master's degree in education. I plan to remain with Rogers Public Schools. This district — and this community — is home.

to cover initial education expenses.⁶⁴ Providing employers with a tax credit for apprenticeship degree tuition effectively addresses funding uncertainties. For example, Alabama provides tax credits to employers who pay tuition for students enrolled in the state's nursing apprenticeship program, resulting in the participation of hundreds of students.

Federal

Apprenticeship degree programs can leverage prominent and lesser-known federal grants and programs for funding. Programs like AmeriCorps and the Job Corps, currently targeted by the Trump administration for severe cuts, could be revitalized and reimaged.^{65, 66} Many occupations served by apprenticeship degrees share similarities or overlap

with those offered by national service programs. Redirecting a portion of these dollars to earn-and-learn models and apprentices could be highly effective. Additionally, Perkins Funding, Department of Labor H-1B grants, and the Civil Service Fund at the Department of Justice have pools of funding that could be used for apprenticeship programs.^{67,68}

Some existing grants target specific professions, such as education and healthcare, where apprenticeship degrees are already in practice. Teacher Quality Partnership Grants, Supporting Effective Educator Development Grants, and Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grants could all be leveraged to support participants in these programs.^{69,70,71} The array of federal support currently available for students pursuing traditional teaching degrees should also extend to those earning a teaching degree through an apprenticeship program. Considering schools hire teacher candidates with degrees from both programs, there is no reason why these supports should be reserved only for those in traditional four-year degree pathways.

State

There is no shortage of efforts to expand apprenticeships within states. Like traditional apprenticeships, apprenticeship degrees can benefit from state funding and support. Although the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is a federally authorized program, governors determine how to spend those federal dollars in their state.⁷² They can and should use their discretionary allocations for apprenticeship degrees. States can also explore performance-based funding opportunities, which allocate state appropriations based on a postsecondary institution's performance on a defined set of metrics and act as a complement or alternative to more traditional reimbursement methods, focusing on "outputs" such as the number of participants enrolled.⁷³ Given the current state funding landscape, state dollars are unlikely to cover the full

costs of apprenticeship degree programs alone, but they remain a critical contribution to the blended funding model.

Other Avenues

U.S. policymakers should be more creative in exploring alternative funding sources for apprenticeships. State and federal legislative efforts around workforce development should include apprenticeship degrees. In March 2025, Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) and Susan Collins (R-Maine) introduced the *American Apprenticeship Act*, a bipartisan legislation to expand access to apprenticeships.⁷⁴ The Act aims to grant states tuition assistance funding for apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. It would also award competitive grants to states that have developed effective strategies to diversify, market, and scale registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, analyze the use of apprenticeship in in-demand occupations, and cover the costs associated with program participation.

Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) is leading companion legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives. Senator Klobuchar also introduced the *Apprenticeships to College Act*, jointly with Senator Jerry Moran (R-Kan.), which allows workers to earn college credits for completing apprenticeships.⁷⁵ These congressional initiatives, which are already focused on improving and scaling apprenticeships, should be amended to explicitly include apprenticeship degrees in these funding opportunities.

CONCLUSION

America is ready for a new era of education and workforce training that includes alternatives to the two- and four-year college degree. Building on our nation's oldest earn-and-learn pathway of an apprenticeship, apprenticeship degrees offer an affordable and viable path forward for high school graduates and working-class Americans. They aim to ensure these individuals acquire the skills and training they need for good jobs and upward mobility.

Apprenticeship degrees anchor postsecondary education to paid workplace learning under the guidance of experienced mentors, establishing paid employment as a key component of the degree. Students receive academic credit for their on-the-job experiences and related classroom instruction, which leads to a degree. Students' wages offset college expenses, enabling them to graduate with little to no debt, thereby making the degree affordable. In a conversation with the authors of this paper, Joe Ross, President and CEO of Reach University, talked about the ABCs of apprenticeship degrees: "A' stands for affordability without student debt; 'B' stands for based fully in the workplace — it starts with a paid job and ends with a better paid job; and 'C' stands for credit for learning at work, leading to an accredited degree."

With this third-way approach to education and workforce preparation, America can ensure a robust workforce development pipeline and increase prosperity for working-class Americans and young people looking for alternatives to the traditional college degree. To make this vision a reality, apprenticeship degrees must be included in today's discussions about how to grow earn-and-learn models.

Finally, in the words of Kelly Field, writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Though [apprenticeship] degrees are new — and mostly untested — the model has drawn interest from members of both political parties. Proponents of apprenticeship degrees see them as a solution to a range of problems plaguing higher education and the economy."⁷⁶

Like most policy issues, funding remains the most significant barrier to launching the apprenticeship degree model. However, workforce development and continuing education advocates can move this proposal forward by incentivizing private sector funding and repurposing existing funding at the state and federal levels.

With the apprenticeship degree model, we can scale the number of apprenticeships offered throughout the United States and create opportunities to improve the economic reality of millions of working Americans.

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