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Apprenticeship U

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It's time for a new era in the arc of education in America—one that better prepares workers to earn more and obtain wealth amid seismic changes in the economy.

For more than a century, American education has been built on a series of transformative leaps. Universal K–12 schooling in the early 20th century created a literate and capable workforce for an industrial economy. The expansion of land-grant colleges and, later, the post-World War II surge in four-year degrees helped propel millions into the middle class and positioned the United States as a global economic leader. Each step expanded access and opportunity, reshaping the labor market and American society.

Today, the challenge has evolved. A four-year degree unquestionably remains valuable, but only one-third of Americans have a four-year diploma. Those who don't go or never finish college have far fewer viable pathways to high-earning jobs and long-term wealth. Technological change is also happening faster, impacting not only jobs but entire sectors of the economy. That's why in this 21st century economy, the nation must add a new chapter to our education story—one focused on equipping adults with career-connected learning and high-quality training programs that deliver both economic mobility and workforce readiness. **And that new chapter must start with a national commitment to spreading apprenticeships to every community in the country.**

Apprenticeships—where people earn a living as they learn skills in their field—could boost millions of workers into high-quality, high-earning and exciting careers. They would replace economic uncertainty with economic security, as apprenticeships increase worker earnings by an average of 50%.¹ Over a lifetime, people who complete apprenticeships make an average of \$240,000 more than comparable job seekers.²

The problem is, right now, apprenticeships are an afterthought in the United States. In 2024, there were 680,000 Americans in registered apprenticeship programs—a miniscule 0.3% of the working-age population.³ During the same year, the share of working-age adults in apprenticeship programs was five times higher in Canada, seven times higher in Germany, and a staggering 11 times higher in Switzerland.⁴

This is because apprenticeship programs are deeply engrained in the postsecondary systems in other countries. Half of young Germans between the ages of 18 and 24 are apprentices—while just 2% of young adults in the United States are.⁵ These countries have made significant investments in expanding apprenticeships into new sectors, engaging employers, and eliminating burdensome red tape.⁶

The numbers show these efforts have had tangible financial impacts. The earnings gap between non-college workers and those with at least a college degree (or its equivalent) is largest amongst workers in the United States. To put this into perspective—if a college

worker earns \$90,000 annually in each of these countries, their non-college peer could expect to earn \$50,000 in the United States, \$60,000 in Germany and Switzerland, \$64,000 in the UK, and \$69,000 in Australia. ⁷

There are numerous reasons why we shortchange worker training broadly and apprenticeships. Tuition costs, complex reporting requirements, and a fragmented administrative system makes getting businesses on board nearly impossible, especially small businesses. Apprentices struggle with transportation and child care, barriers which often prevent them from completing programs. ⁸ In the last 50 years, federal spending on workforce services has declined by two-thirds, even though the workforce has grown 50%. ⁹ And while the United States put \$140 billion towards postsecondary education and training last year, just \$28 billion of that went to workforce training programs and even less of that to apprenticeships in particular. The rest went to traditional four-year degree programs. ¹⁰

No wonder there are significant headwinds against apprenticeships in the United States. A recent study found that 73% of people believe apprenticeships are a successful way to train potential employees, compared to 52% who said the same about an undergraduate degree. Yet more respondents still said they would rather attend college than pursue an apprenticeship. ¹¹

College is clearly a key path to the middle class, and we should continue to support high-quality four-year programs. But now is the time to also elevate non-college training that prepares workers for middle-class careers. **That is why the next president should pledge to dramatically scale the use of earn-and-learn training models in this country, making apprenticeship programs as common as four-year degrees. It's time for Apprenticeship U.**

How Do We Build Apprenticeship U?

We propose a new apprenticeship era in our country that will dramatically increase the scale and reach of earn-and-learn models across the nation.

To do that, we must create Flagship Apprenticeship Universities in each of America's 50 states. Just as we created public K-12 school systems and public colleges, now is the time to establish Apprenticeship Universities in each state across the nation. These institutions will act as a nucleus—bringing together employers, educators, and workers to dramatically grow the number of new high-quality apprenticeship programs and guide participants towards success. Larger states may build out a network of satellite universities, while smaller states may invest more heavily in in-demand local industries.

To ensure these Apprenticeship Universities are successful—creating millions more apprenticeships that lead to in-demand jobs, support families, and generate wealth—lawmakers must also make a series of changes. These include:

Invest federal dollars in scaling high-quality apprenticeships. Department of Labor grants should help employers, especially smaller ones, with start-up costs for apprenticeship programs. Funds should also help high schools grow out early training programs in their classrooms. A portion of grant dollars should also help provide workers with key supportive services like child care and transportation costs.

Establish a centralized marketplace for credentials in America. Without a centralized and vetted system, it is hard for workers to know whether a training program or credential is high quality and transferrable across industries and geographies. A centralized platform (like Healthcare.gov) would help workers, educators, employers search and verify high-quality training programs to make educational journeys more transparent.

Streamline red tape and regulations that burden our training system. Different agencies manage varying parts of our workforce development system. Rules often vary from state to state, and there are many different vehicles for workforce funding (all with their own reporting requirements). Collectively, this bureaucracy inhibits innovation, slows down service delivery, and prevents programs from being responsive to worker needs. Apprenticeship Universities would ease the administrative burden for many local employers and educators by helping to coordinate and streamline regulations where it is helpful.

Integrate career and technical education into high school classrooms. Many kids graduate high school without a plan outside of “get a college degree.” We are failing to provide the tools to young people to understand the training opportunities available to them and the pathways to get there. Apprenticeship Universities can work with local high schools to bolster the integration of career and technical education (CTE) offerings into curriculum and increase the participation by young adults in pre-apprenticeship programs.

Finally, don’t add a dime to the deficit. We anticipate the cost of starting up Apprenticeship Universities, investing in high-quality apprenticeships, and creating a centralized marketplace for credentials to be between \$50 and \$75 billion over a decade. To ensure that investment doesn’t increase the nation’s deficit, we suggest reforming tax benefits for higher education, which disproportionately benefit high-earning families. Specifically, this could include reducing benefit levels, implementing stronger means testing, and/or limiting the eligibility of the tax breaks to high-quality or in-demand programs. More money could also be raised by expanding higher education endowment taxes in a strategic way and repurposing some federal training spending.

Democrats need to be the party that boosts wealth and opportunity for working- and middle-class families. To do that, we need to fundamentally rethink how we train and retrain workers. College will always be right for some, but now is the time to elevate other non-college training programs—like apprenticeships—that prepare workers for high-quality careers. It's time for Apprenticeship U.

ENDNOTES



- 1.** Gardiner, Karen. “Registered Apprenticeships Can Increase Earnings, but Not Enough People Know That.” *Urban Institute*, 15 Nov. 2023, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/registered-apprenticeships-can-increase-earnings-not-enough-people-know>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025.
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- 3.** Author’s calculations based on “Registered Apprenticeship: Federal Role and Recent Federal Efforts.” *Congress.gov, Library of Congress*, CRS Report R45171, 7 Feb. 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45171>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025; And Working Age Population: Aged 15–64: All Persons for United States.” Federal Reserve Economic Data, FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LFWA64TTUSM647S/>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025; And; Curran McSwigan. “America’s Apprenticeship Gap in Two Charts.” *Third Way*, 4 Jan. 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/americas-apprenticeship-gap-in-two-charts>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025.
- 4.** Author’s calculations based on the share of apprentices divided by the working age (15 to 64) populations of Switzerland, Canada, and Germany. Apprentice numbers are sourced directly from the country’s government websites. Working age populations are sourced from Federal Reserve Economic Data, FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2024, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025. Further details can be provided upon request. And; Curran McSwigan. “America’s Apprenticeship Gap in Two Charts.” *Third Way*, 4 Jan. 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/americas-apprenticeship-gap-in-two-charts>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025.

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For this analysis we looked specifically at workers aged 25 to 64 and compared those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education to those with at least a bachelor’s degree.

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