

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Why Colleges Need to Embrace Apprenticeship

By Scott Carlson JUNE 04, 2017

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Theo Stroomer for The Chronicle  
Alejandro Garcia (right), shown working with a more experienced employee to route power cables.



Noel Ginsburg, chief executive of a plastics company, spent years pouring money into college scholarships, trying to entice dozens of high-school students to graduate and to pursue four years of college. A four-year college education, he thought, could be the "secret sauce" to a lifetime of success. Now he wonders whether the promise of college was ever enough, since most kids never make it to a four-year institution anyway.

"We were wrong," he says, in an interview at Intertech Plastics, a warehouse facility here on Interstate 70. "It should have been college and career. To this day, you walk in many of the high schools and it's all these banners of colleges around the country that you should go to, and we know damn well that, at best, 25 percent or 20 percent of those students are going to go." For the students who don't go to four-year colleges, what's the implied message? "You're a loser," he says.

Now Mr. Ginsburg is taking a different approach, one that puts work experience and learning on the job first. He is the founder of [CareerWise Colorado](#), a nonprofit organization that aims to establish apprenticeships as a key to training the state's next generation of workers. This fall, as many as 140 high-school students will work as apprentices, earning college credit and a salary at more than 50 businesses in Colorado — in health care, education, telecommunications, technology, and manufacturing. If CareerWise meets its goals, 20,000 Colorado students will be enrolled in apprenticeship programs by 2027.

Apprenticeships — long embraced as a work-force-training method in other countries — may now have an opening to become a far more common pathway to education and employment in the United States. The enthusiasm for apprenticeships represents a kind of refutation of college education — a recognition that something about the path from college to career is not working for many people.

Last month, in Washington, more than half a dozen educational and labor groups organized a sold-out conference called [Apprenticeship Forward](#), with an underlying message that hit higher education in the gut: Colleges saddle students with debt and yet still don't deliver graduates who have the hard and soft skills to enter the workplace.

With apprenticeships, advocates often say, students could be "earning while learning" — gathering valuable skills on the job, while their employers pay for related courses and degrees at a nearby college. In the past, employers may have been reluctant to invest money in training. But today a number of companies, desperate for skilled workers and dissatisfied with the talents of college graduates, are starting apprenticeships to build up their work forces. Meanwhile, parents and prospective students, wary of the rising cost of college and what to them seem like uncertain returns, may be more willing to seek out alternative forms of education, which allow students to earn a salary and college credits at the same time. The new forms of apprenticeships don't replace college, they supplement it.

In the popular imagination in this country, apprenticeships might be most commonly associated with manual labor and the trades. People might picture a young man, smudged with grease or coated in sawdust, standing next to a sinewy older man with rough hands, learning the essential secrets of carpentry, plumbing, or mechanics. Certainly those apprenticeships continue to exist. But the trades — while romanticized by pundits and politicians eager to connect to a blue-collar base — have been denigrated in recent decades, as school systems have pushed more students to consider college as the main training pathway to a job in the service economy. For some students, the term "apprenticeship" connotes a path away from college and lucrative white-collar jobs.

But apprenticeship has expanded in recent years to occupations far from the factory floor, the wood shop, the dusty job site. Apprenticeships in white-collar work, like insurance and information technology, can be found among traditional apprenticeship offerings in manufacturing or the trades. An interest in apprenticeships from President Barack Obama has fueled growth, too. In his 2014 State of the Union address, he lauded apprenticeships as a path that could "set a young worker on an upward trajectory for life." His administration devoted hundreds of millions of dollars to expanding apprenticeship programs, and the number of apprentices in the country grew by 75,000 over the next two years.

Advocates believe the federal government could do yet more — to eventually establish one apprenticeship for every four college students. It could offer tax incentives to companies that expand their work-based learning programs, expand the Pell Grant program to support apprenticeships, and establish more organizations, like CareerWise, that can work between educational systems and industries.

Mr. Ginsburg believes that the CareerWise apprenticeships will make a difference in students' lives by giving them an entry point to good jobs. But he also thinks that those apprenticeships will deliver life skills that many employers say are hardest to teach new employees: the ability to show up on time, communicate with co-workers, work in teams, take leadership roles, and improvise solutions to new problems.

Colleges say they teach some of those skills through liberal-arts programs and the social environment on a campus, but Mr. Ginsburg says the job environment has higher stakes and weightier lessons.

"Soft skills are actually better taught in a business environment than they are in a classroom," he says. "In a classroom, the consequences are very different — like you don't get fired. But when you're put in a professional environment at a young age in a business, you behave differently, hopefully."

Apprenticeships go back hundreds of years as a learning arrangement between master craftsmen and young men entering the field. They have been codified in the modern era by the National Apprenticeship Act, also known as the [Fitzgerald Act](#), a New Deal law that set up labor protections for apprentices, as well as other employees, at the companies that hired them.

But as a training method, apprenticeships in the United States have been marginalized.

"Our registered apprenticeship system has almost no connections, or very limited and very tenuous connections, to either our secondary-education system or our higher-education system," says Mary Alice McCarthy, who directs the Center on Education and Skills at the think tank New America.

Apprenticeships are common in European countries like Germany and Switzerland, where they are incorporated into the pathways from school and college to work. Swiss students start learning about apprenticeship opportunities as early as the fourth grade, and 70 percent of them will start an apprenticeship at age 15 on their way to college or a job. Advocates for apprenticeships often point to the results in Switzerland: Swiss high schoolers are ready to work by the time they graduate. Ninety-seven percent of them graduate from high school there, compared with 82 percent in the United States. The youth unemployment rate — which measures the jobless status of 15- to 24-year-olds — averages around 8 percent in Switzerland, versus 10 percent in the United States. Nearly half of Swiss companies participate in apprenticeship programs, and half of the business leaders in the country were once apprentices.

In the United States, apprenticeships are relatively little known, used mainly by the building trades and the manufacturing industry, and largely disconnected from the offerings of high schools or colleges. As a result, American apprentices, at an average age of 28, are much older than their European counterparts.

"For an American high-school student to find an apprenticeship program is very unusual," Ms. McCarthy says. "You wouldn't even know where to start."

Not that advocates haven't tried to call attention to such programs. In the 1990s, she says, policy makers under the Clinton administration tried to push apprenticeships, but the effort "ran like a buzz saw into our long history of tracking." By the 1990s, educational tracking — which sent students to college-preparatory or vocational courses, depending on perceived ability — had been deemed discriminatory. Apprenticeships, associated with the trades, were out of sync with an education system pushing college for all.

Today, given the rising cost of college, apprenticeships could have a broad appeal. The American apprenticeship system, Ms. McCarthy says, could make crucial changes to be more useful in work-force training.

She would like to see the on-the-job training gain as much respectability — and credit toward a degree — as what a person might get by sitting in a classroom. That prospect, she notes, is an uncomfortable one for colleges and accreditors, who are reluctant to grant credit for learning that happens outside of academe.

The success of apprenticeship programs in the United States hinges on their connections to higher education. The college degree is still the most accepted credential — the gateway to viable careers — and apprenticeships have to work with that system. What's more, given the negative associations with tracking, many people would resist an educational alternative that diverts people from postsecondary education.

"You cannot make this a pathway that doesn't lead to college," Ms. McCarthy says.

Instead, she says, apprenticeships could help solve problems associated with the costs or time needed to get a college degree. They could be a more practical way to train workers for jobs — in health care or early-childhood education, for example — that require high-level skills but don't pay well. In cybersecurity, she says, apprenticeships could give workers exposure to the latest computer viruses and threats, which evolve too quickly for college curricula to keep up.

The insurance industry has embraced apprenticeships as a way to solve a persistent problem: attracting younger employees. Close to half of the industry's workers will retire in the next decade, according to some studies. One company, Zurich North America, formed a partnership in 2015 with Harper College, a two-year college about three miles away from the corporate headquarters, just outside of Chicago, to offer an associate degree in business, with a focus on insurance, for 24 apprentices who started work at the company in January 2016. (Zurich has since hired another 12.) Harper got a \$2.5-million grant from the Obama administration to start apprenticeship programs like the one in insurance, which was the first of its kind.