



Diversity and Equity in Apprenticeship Programs: Community Colleges Can Make a Difference

May 2020

Community colleges have always played a key role in workforce development in the communities they serve, and now they are expanding such efforts by increasingly taking the lead in apprenticeship programs.

In recent years, instead of just serving as the partners that provide classroom instruction in apprenticeship programs, many community colleges are starting to play active roles as the sponsors or intermediaries of Registered Apprenticeship programs, and they are taking responsibility for engaging employers as partners. As they step up into these leadership positions, community colleges have an opportunity to improve the diversity of apprenticeships, and thereby address what many observers see as a longstanding problem: a lack of equitable access to apprenticeship programs that are widely regarded as on-ramps to rewarding careers that pay good wages.

AACC Aims to Expand Apprenticeship

Some colleges first got involved with apprenticeship through either the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program, which began in 2011, or the American Apprenticeship Initiative of 2015. Others have had longstanding relationships with local partners in the building trades and manufacturing.

More recently, however, through a contract from the U.S. Department of Labor, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in 2019 launched a major initiative called the Expanding Community College Apprenticeships (ECCA) project, whose goal is to train 16,000 apprentices over the course of three years and expand apprenticeship in fields such as IT and health care.

Once thought of as programs run by unions for blue-collar workers in the building trades and manufacturing, high-quality apprenticeship programs have begun to expand into industries such as IT and cybersecurity, financial services, biotechnology, and health care.

Despite the recent evolution of apprenticeship programs, many workforce development specialists have expressed concern that not all Americans have equal access to apprenticeship opportunities and say there is a need to get more women, people of color, and people with disabilities involved in this proven pathway to middle class jobs and wages.

Racial and Gender Gaps

According to an analysis of 2017 data from the Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Management Data System (RAPIDS) by the Center for American Progress (CAP), only 7.3 percent of the people who completed Registered Apprenticeships that year were women. CAP's report also noted that men who completed apprenticeships earned a median wage of \$27.25 an hour, but the median wage for women was just \$11.49 an hour at the end of their apprenticeships. Similarly, white workers who had completed apprenticeship programs earn a median wage of \$26.14 an hour in 2017, while black workers who completed apprenticeships earned a median wage of \$14.35 an hour that year.

These wage disparities are startling. To understand how providers of apprenticeship programs can better support women, people of color, and others who have encountered barriers preventing them from accessing or completing work-based training programs, JFF prepared several documents and resources to highlight and address the lack of equal access and representation in the apprenticeship system and the gender and racial disparities in wages among people who complete apprenticeships.

We met with a range of companies and other stakeholders to discuss the issue and learned that employers are aware of the importance of having a skilled and diverse workforce and recognize that apprenticeship is an effective vehicle for building such a workforce.

Opening Doors to Careers

Because they provide both classroom instruction and hands-on work-based training that reinforces the lessons participants learn in class, apprenticeships give people from a range of backgrounds opportunities to learn new skills that open the doors to rewarding careers. And over the past few years, we have seen that the apprenticeship model can be adapted to a wide range of skills and industries.

Apprenticeship is primed to become a core component of workforce development strategies that will create new opportunities for an ever-expanding cross-section of American workers for years to come. And the community colleges that are on the front

lines will have the capacity to improve diversity and equity in the registered apprenticeship system.

Promising Strategies

The resources listed below highlight promising strategies that organizations are using to promote and support diversity and equity in apprenticeship programs.

JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning has conducted dozens of interviews with business leaders, and in March 2019 we convened a meeting where representatives of 22 employers and industry associations from various sectors engaged in a roundtable discussion about ways to build equity in apprenticeships. CEOs, diversity officers, human resources officers, and other business leaders responsible for overseeing apprenticeships provided insights into what it takes to lead an effort to use apprenticeship as a strategy to recruit, advance, and retain diverse talent. The bottom line for most community colleges and other stakeholders is that we have to be intentional and purposeful about our outreach and recruitment of both apprentices and employers.

The resources below synthesize the strategies shared by representatives of leading businesses that are designing and implementing apprenticeship programs that meet their talent needs and give people from underserved populations pathways into solid middle-skill jobs. At each phase of program design and delivery, they are endeavoring to use the apprenticeship model as a way to train and advance talent not only to improve their competitiveness by addressing skills shortages, but also to build workforces whose demographic makeup reflects that of their customer bases and the communities they serve. Community colleges can do the same.

Some companies are just getting started. Others have had more experience and have tinkered with their apprenticeship designs to improve success rates. In all cases, community colleges or other partners can help expand access to apprenticeships and improve diversity and equity across the work-based learning ecosystem.

These resources provide a sense of how businesses are approaching apprenticeship design and what they are learning. The list concludes with a link to a series of blogs offering ideas about how to take lessons learned in developing diverse apprenticeship programs and apply them on a larger scale to improve equity companywide. Examples include modifying job requirements so that they emphasize skills and abilities rather than degrees and other credentials, more clearly delineating internal career pathways, using mentors and sponsors to support employees, and measuring inclusivity.

We hope that this information will inspire community colleges to review their programs and spark a needed conversation among colleges, local partners, employers, and the field at large about how to support, structure, and fund high-quality apprenticeship programs that enable diverse populations to succeed.

Resources

- [Growing Equity and Diversity Through Apprenticeship: Business Perspectives](#), JFF
- [Company Perspectives on Building Equity in Apprenticeships](#), JFF
- [Becoming the United States of Opportunity: The Economic Equity and Growth Case for Apprenticeships](#), New Jersey Institute of Social Justice
- [Business Perspectives on Growing Equity & Diversity Through Apprenticeship](#), Blog Series