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A Changing Perception of Apprenticeships



■ Trade and Transportation

By *Thomas O'Brien*

A July 13 article in the New York Times showcased an apprenticeship program at a Virginia naval shipyard. Around the same time, Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton proposed a tax credit for companies that take on apprentices. It's a call that has been taken up by others, including some on the Republican side as well.

Apprenticeships aren't new but they're enjoying renewed attention. The typical apprenticeship includes a paid salary for on-the-job training with some classroom-based instruction as part of the mix. In places like Germany, which has one of the best known and most successful programs in the world, employers are willing to invest in apprenticeships because they get workers with job-specific skills. Furthermore business chambers and trade associations play a critical role in developing and overseeing training standards and defining the skill sets that apprentices need.

In the U.S. students are more likely to take part in a shorter-term internship, which provides valuable work-based experience, often during the summer as part of a two-year or four-year college program. But that's significantly shorter than the two-to-three year period that is the hallmark of the relationship between apprentice and employer.

Part of the challenge in this country has been the perception of on-the-job training programs, which are often viewed as lesser alternatives to a degree conferred by a two-year or four-year institution. It's the same problem that vocational education programs have had in high schools. Many have viewed them as pathways to lesser-skilled employment opportunities with little opportunity for advancement.

But that's beginning to change. Given the cost of a college degree, the debt many of us have incurred to get that degree, and the uncertainty of employment once graduated, the prospect of any salaried position that is designed to prepare you for employment in a particular field is increasingly appealing to many young people.

At the national level, President Obama has made it a goal to more than double the number of young Americans in apprenticeship programs from 325,000 to 750,000 in five years. And last year, the Department of Labor made available \$100 million in grants to employers, training providers, and apprenticeship and workforce

agencies to enhance training opportunities as part of the "American Apprenticeship Initiative." Some of the emphasis of the Initiative is placed on "registered" apprenticeships in the trades. But the eligible applicants for the grant program also include those tied to economic sectors which rely heavily on foreign workers here on H1-B visas, visas for knowledge-workers performing functions usually developed at institutions of higher education. These are the jobs many employers say Americans are not well equipped to fill. Proof again that this is not your father's apprenticeship.

And all sides see the upside of expanding our range of education and training options. Apprenticeships were included in the Regional Economic Strategy for the Central Puget Sound in Washington State. This is a plan issued by a coalition of business, labor and governmental and community leaders.

Closer to home, pre-apprenticeship programs have been proposed as part of a Project Labor Agreement for all construction projects at the Port of Long Beach. And as part of a College and Career Fair held on the Cal State Long Beach campus last fall, the Port held a workshop open to local high school students called "Earn While You Learn: Apprenticeships."

Pre-apprenticeship programs can play a critical role in providing foundational knowledge to the new apprentices before they set foot in the workplace. It's a role well-suited to colleges and universities, particularly those of us already engaged in professional development and continuing education. And in logistics, where the potential for apprenticeships is great, a basic understanding of how the supply chain works will go a long way in preparing someone to be apprenticed at the port, in a warehouse, at a 3PL or even in an additive manufacturing (3d printing) company where advanced technical skills may be required.

The university works closely with industry, but as the industry needs change - and the expectations of the student - so must our approach. A rise in apprenticeships may require us to develop more pre-apprenticeship courses, restructure others so that classes are offered in a way that fits the work schedule of the apprentice (who may have availability only 1 day per week) and provides knowledge that can be applied on a particular job. But this isn't a zero sum game. A vibrant economy should hold opportunities for people with advanced degrees as well as those with apprenticeship training.

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