

Can Apprenticeships Restore the American Dream?

A conversation with “Apprentice Nation” author Ryan Craig on why “earn and learn” college alternatives are key to giving more young Americans a path to a better future.

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By [Romesh Ratnesar](#)

Romesh Ratnesar is a member of the editorial board covering national security, education and immigration. A former senior State Department official in public diplomacy, he is author of “Tear Down This Wall: A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War.”

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Romesh Ratnesar: As 2023 ends, the US’s unemployment rate stands at 3.7%. At the same time, there are still millions more job openings than there are workers available to fill them — in part because young Americans, including recent college graduates, too often lack the skills and experience employers are looking for. Your book, *Apprentice Nation*, makes the case that the US isn’t doing nearly enough to develop the “earn and learn” educational system needed to address this challenge. Why should this be a more urgent priority for policy makers?

Ryan Craig, managing director, Achieve Partners and author, *Apprentice Nation: How the Earn and Learn Alternative to Higher Education Will Create a Stronger and*

Fairer America: The process of career launch in America isn't working. We have a lot of young people who see this bright, shining digital economy but can't figure out how to break in. Young people who don't have a college degree are completely shut out. And even among those who have a college degree, 40% are underemployed, meaning they're doing jobs that don't actually require a degree. And that's about to get worse, because the skills that employers are having a hard time finding — digital skills, platform skills, business knowledge, role knowledge — are harder to learn in a classroom than they are by actually gaining work experience.

So if we care about economic mobility and opportunity, how are we going to make sure people outside the elite have a way to launch productive careers? We need to figure out a way to integrate real, relevant work experience into our educational pathways. And apprenticeship is the best answer for that.

RR: How so?

RC: An apprenticeship is a full-time job, where you're hired without having skills or experience and where the training and experience are built into the pathway. Apprenticeships in America are nowhere compared to every other developed country. We have half a million apprentices — that's 0.3% of the workforce, and 70% of them are in the construction trades. The apprenticeship giants of central Europe have 10 to 15 times more apprenticeships per capita than we do.

Even the UK, Australia and Canada are eight times bigger than we are. A generation ago, they looked a lot like the US, with relatively small apprenticeship sectors, almost all in construction. Today, it's very common for workers in those countries to launch a career in tech or health care or financial services through apprenticeship.

RR: How did that happen?

RC: Apprenticeships flourish in places like Switzerland and Germany — and now the UK and Australia — because there are intermediaries that are either required or are incentivized to do the heavy lifting of setting up and running these programs for employers. In the UK today, you have 1,200 of these intermediaries, three-quarters of which are for-profit. You won't find a large or mid-size company there that hasn't been approached by a half-dozen apprenticeship service providers offering to set up and run programs for them.

But that doesn't happen in the US. One big reason is funding. We have the most highly developed, tuition- and debt-based higher education system in the world. We spend over \$500 billion of federal and state taxpayer money on our 4,000 accredited colleges and universities and less than \$400 million on apprenticeships. That's a ratio of more than 1,000 to 1. No other developed country has anything close to that gap.

RR: Your work has focused on addressing this mismatch: The failure of much of our higher education system to equip students with skills that employers demand. Yet the traditional college model is still dominant over work-based, "earn and learn" alternatives. Do you see any evidence that's changing?

RC: I think what's become clear is that higher education won't change unless it's forced to. And one way or the other, digital technology *is* going to transform higher education — because it's transforming the world of work. And as a result, we're going to be graduating millions of students over the next decade who will not be able to get good jobs unless we change the system.

Why is it that our only major policy debate on higher education is related to backward-looking student-loan forgiveness? It's because the system is broken. If every student graduated into a \$60,000-a-year job, we wouldn't be too worried about the student-loan debt burden. But there's no connection between what colleges are doing and what employers are seeking in entry-level hires for good jobs. We need to address college affordability, but we also need to address employability.

RR: In your book you argue that there's huge untapped potential for apprenticeships in the US, but we lack the infrastructure to accommodate the demand. What needs to happen to build this infrastructure?

RC: What we know from other countries is that employers don't do it themselves. Neither will educational institutions. So we need to incentivize intermediaries, just as Australia and the UK did. That means not just addressing the disparity in funding between tuition-based college and earn-and-learn models, but spending the money correctly. Over the last decade we've increased federal spending on apprenticeships from \$70 million to almost \$300 million. But the vast majority of it has been wasted, because rather than using a formula-

based funding model where the money flows with the student so the provider knows it's coming, the government has been trying to pick winners by issuing grants. And 90% of those grants have gone to low-intervention intermediaries, primarily community colleges, who register the program and then sit on their hands and wait for an employer to come along.

Until we can figure out how to incentivize an employer — either the end employer or more likely an intermediary — to hire and train this unproductive resource for a period of time, then we'll have no apprenticeships. They'll just exist on paper.

But if we can do these things, we'll be in a place where in five to 10 years we'll have thousands of intermediaries knocking on employer doors across the economy, yielding tens of thousands of new apprenticeship programs. And we'll have a useful directory of apprenticeship programs where a high school junior or senior can sit with their guidance counselor and compare the 10 or 20 colleges they might be interested in with the 10 or 20 apprenticeship programs they might be interested in.

RR: But won't that require a mindset change among Americans, to choose a post-secondary path that doesn't involve a traditional college degree?

RC: If you're from a wealthy family and you're not worried about getting a job, you're still going to opt for a four-year college with a grassy quad so that you can discover yourself and so forth. But I think the vast majority of young people would absolutely choose the "earn

and learn” alternative. Right now we have this orthodoxy where you go to high school, then to college and then to work. You don’t start real full-time work until after college. Well, what if we had as many apprentice jobs as we had places in freshman classes across the country? Then you really could pursue an earn-and-learn pathway, gain work experience, gain soft skills, gain confidence from being able to support yourself, gain insights on your own interests and strengths.

And let’s say you apprentice as a data analyst and you decide after two years you don’t want to ever do data analysis again. You’re still in a much better position to make an informed decision as to what post-secondary college program you do want to pursue. I think that will go a long way to addressing the bad outcomes we’ve been seeing in higher education.

RR: The last chapter of your book expounds on its subtitle and makes the case that apprenticeships can help build a “stronger and fairer America.” What’s the connection between the development of a real apprenticeship sector and the future of democracy?

RC: Again, I think that a lot of the social and political discontent we see today comes down to the fact that people see this bright, shining, dynamic digital economy and they can’t figure out how to break into it. They’re consumers of it, but they can’t figure out how to earn a living from it other than dreams of social-media influence and e-sports. We need to provide more on-ramps and pathways. These disaffected Americans don’t want a handout. They want work, but work with an opportunity for advancement. And that’s what apprenticeships are.

In Washington, folks on both sides of the aisle are enthusiastic about this. I think we can get something done at the federal and state level. I think apprenticeships are about to have a moment.

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