Inside Higher Ed

Learning at Work: Why Higher Ed Is Leaning Into Apprenticeships

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About the Series

APPRENTICESHIPS: Learning at Work

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What We Cover:

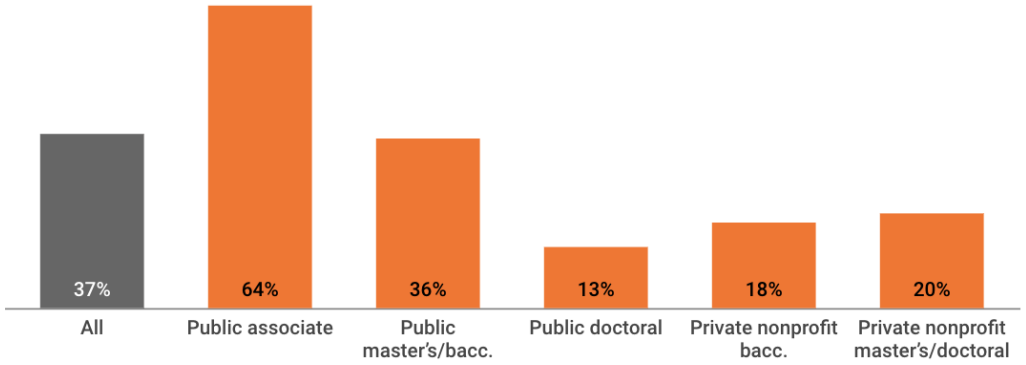
- Why and how higher education is leaning into apprenticeships
- How apprenticeships and apprentices themselves are changing
- A photo essay showing what apprenticeships really look like
- Where apprenticeships are benefiting rural learners and their communities
- What it will take to scale, not just grow, apprenticeships

Takeaway 1: Apprenticeship is *one* solution to higher education's polycrisis.

The Apprentice: Why Higher Ed Is Leaning Into Earn-and-Learn

Colleges are facing "a perfect storm." Is adding apprenticeship pathways a way through?

Presidents Looking to Add or Expand Apprenticeship Pathways in the Next 3 Years, All and by Institution Type



Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/Hanover Research 2026 Survey of College and University Presidents (n=430)

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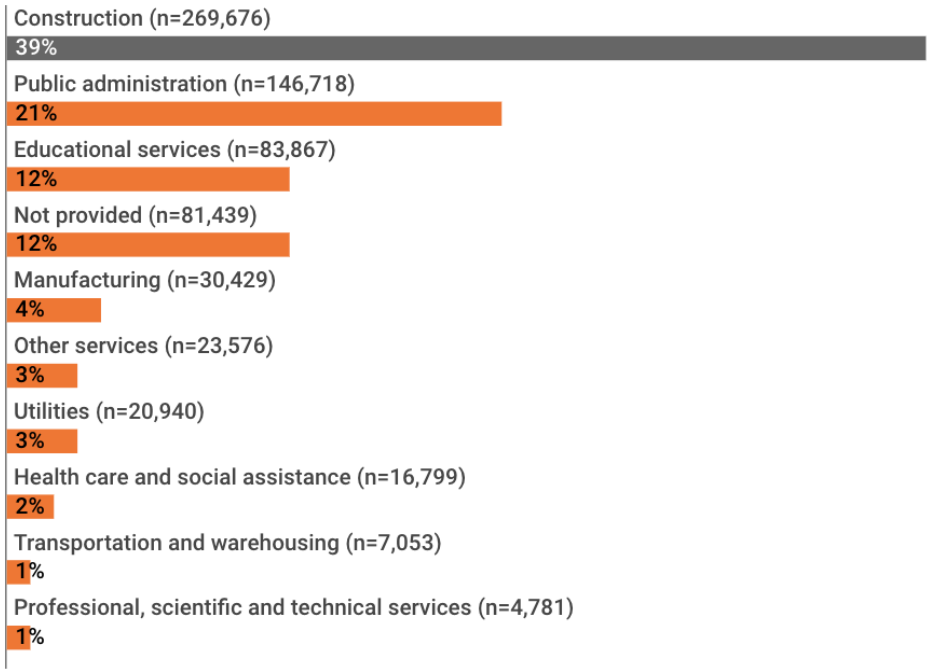
Takeaway 2: New apprenticeship fields mean new opportunities for learners, employers and higher ed.

The Apprenticeship (R)Evolution

Once synonymous with hard hats and tool belts, apprenticeships are branching into health care, artificial intelligence, business services, advanced manufacturing and more.

Top 10 Apprenticeship Industries



Source: Federal Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Database System (RAPIDS)/Apprenticeship.gov dashboard (Retrieved March 2026). Total number of active registered apprentices as of Sept. 1, 2026 is **714,050.**

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Takeaway 3: For apprentices, learning means earning—and *doing.*

An On-the-Job Education

South Carolina technical college students can participate in a wide range of apprenticeship programs, from culinary arts to automotive care. *Inside Higher Ed* visited with some of the apprentices recently to see what they're learning as they're earning.

Azaria Jeffcoat checks paperwork prior to filling a prescription as part of her pharmacy tech apprenticeship at the Medical University of South Carolina pharmacy at Rutledge Tower in Charleston. | Justin Morrison, IHE

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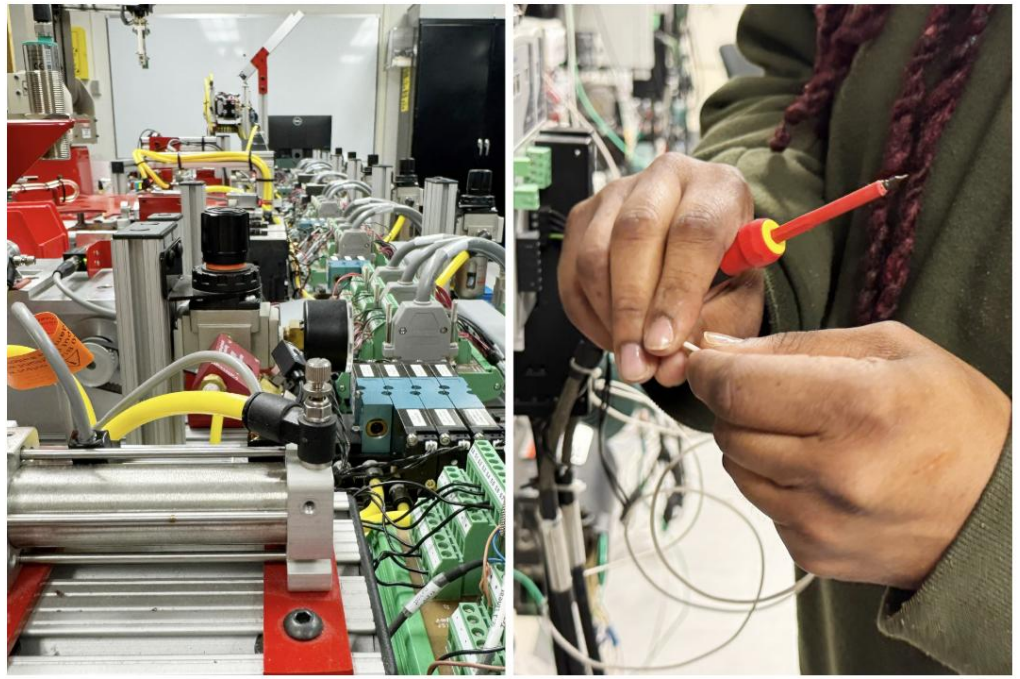
Takeaway 4: Apprenticeships work best when they're solving for multiple problems at once.

Rural Opportunity Through Apprenticeship

From special education classrooms in rural Missouri to manufacturing plants in central New York, apprenticeship programs and their higher ed partners are helping workers earn while they learn, fill critical labor shortages and build careers close to home.



Left: A lab at Mohawk Valley Community College where apprentices and students take classes. Right: MVCC student Rodney Pierre, a graduate of the Advance 2 Apprenticeship pre-apprenticeship program run by the Manufacturers Association of Central New York, participates in a class at the college.

Sara Weissman/Inside Higher Ed

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Takeaway 5: Apprenticeships won't scale on enthusiasm alone.

The Apprenticeship Wish List

Apprenticeships are growing. But experts say that without more funding, updated laws and better data, the U.S. is still far from the system they know is possible.

"More reliable money [and] knowing that those people and processes are going to be there—and are not going to be changing dramatically every 36, 48, 72 months—would go a long way to creating a system that's strong and stable. And right now, we just don't have that mentality around investment in the system."

—Taylor White, director of postsecondary pathways for youth at New America

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Poll: Audience on Apprenticeship/WIL

Q1: What best describes your current relationship with apprenticeships?

- Active champion: I/My organization builds, hosts or teaches in active programs.
- In the trenches: Currently trying to design or launch one (without losing it).
- Curious explorer: Actively researching if this is worth the hype for our strategy.
- Team internship: We're interested (we're here) but still prefer WIL models such as co-ops and internships.
- "Um, what's an apprenticeship?": Totally new to the topic—just here to learn!

Q2: Which of the following most limits your institution's ability to expand work-integrated learning opportunities?

- Insufficient employer partnerships in our region or field
- Faculty skepticism about the academic value of work-integrated learning
- Difficulty ensuring equitable access for all student populations
- Accreditation or curricular constraints
- Limited staff capacity to coordinate and manage these programs
- Students' financial need to work for pay rather than pursue unpaid or lower-pay experiences
- We don't face significant barriers in this area.
- Other

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Panel Discussion

Audience Q&A

Thank you!

Taylor Zamiello, a shipping and receiving supervisor at Indium Corporation, works in her office at the company's electronic chemical division site in Clinton, N.Y. She finished the industrial manufacturing technical apprenticeship and now serves as a mentor for the program.

Sara Weissman/Inside Higher Ed

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