

What to Do About Paths After High School



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There's a reason 2/3 of voters say improving education should be a top priority this year.¹ America faces an opportunity crisis. The ability to earn a good life depends heavily on a person's skills and educational attainment, and nearly 2/3 of jobs require some form of postsecondary education.² Yet only 40% of adults in the US have that level of education.³ While economic opportunity exists for highly-skilled workers in certain superstar regions and industries, far too many other Americans are left behind.

The ability to get the right skills will continue to be a top issue, especially since a majority of voters think it will be harder to earn a good life in the future.⁴ Further, while many people choose to go to college after high school, many don't complete their degrees. Employers face a skills gap, and good-paying jobs remain unfilled.

Anyone running for office in 2020 needs to confront this crisis head on. As a central part of that, policymakers need to make sure there are alternative paths in addition to the traditional college degree that help Americans get jobs throughout in-demand fields.

The Case

There is a dearth of skilled workers across booming industries. Currently, 7.6 million jobs remain unfilled,⁵ with severe skill gaps in industries such as health care, information technology, manufacturing, and energy.⁶ For example, 71% of manufacturers say their inability to attract skilled workers is their top challenge.⁷ Many good-paying, in-demand occupations in numerous industries don't call for a bachelor's degree—they just require some training after high school. Yet while 53% of jobs are “middle skill” jobs, only 43% of US workers are trained for them.⁸

Millions of people don't have a college degree. In 2017, 44% of students enrolled in four-year colleges immediately after graduating from high school.⁹ But 40% of people do not complete a four-year degree program within six years.¹⁰ In 2015 and 2016 alone, 3.9 million undergraduates left college with student loan debt and no degree.¹¹ We need to do a lot more to increase completion rates. But we also need to ensure there are other paths to get skills outside of the traditional four-year degree.

Eleven million Americans live in “education deserts” without easy access to a traditional college path. Eleven million adults live more than an hour's drive from a public two- or four-year college.¹² While many people can and will move to more populated areas to pursue a college degree, there are many who can't move or choose not to. Alternative paths after high school, such as apprenticeships, can help people in these primarily rural areas acquire the skills needed to land good-paying jobs.

Apprenticeships are an afterthought in the US.

Apprenticeships allow people to earn money while learning in-demand skills. And because apprenticeships are employer-driven, the skills a person learns will be tailored for a specific job opening. A worker who completes an apprenticeship earns a solidly middle class \$50,000 a year on average.¹³ Despite this, apprenticeships have not caught on in the United States

in the same way they have in European countries.¹⁴ As a result, the US apprenticeship system serves too few industries and doesn't reach enough people. Apprenticeships remain rare in industries like advanced manufacturing, information technology, financial services, and health care—all of which are currently experiencing skills shortages.¹⁵

The traditional postsecondary system doesn't help people keep up with changes in the nature of work. In this fast-moving economy, skills stay relevant for just ten years.¹⁶ Yet, credentials often don't build on one another, or “stack,” which encourages people to only pursue postsecondary education in single, large increments immediately after high school. A modernized system could help people gain skills in more manageable chunks, allowing them to move up the ladder throughout their career. It would better align with the future of work, letting people retool and reskill as jobs evolve. And allowing skills to build on each other could also help people eventually build up credit for a college degree.

Seeking a college degree may not be feasible for adults who need to rapidly retrain or upgrade their skills. Pursuing associate's and bachelor's degrees all at once requires a significant up-front commitment of both time and money and often requires people to delay earning an income for two or four years. For these reasons, it may not be the right path for mid-career workers who have lost their jobs or want better ones, particularly if they have families to support. Instead, many of these workers need access to shorter-term training programs that can quickly and effectively provide them with in-demand skills and then return them to the job market.

We are wasting economic opportunity behind bars. There are 2.3 million people locked up in the American criminal justice system,¹⁷ many of whom don't have access to skills or credentials. As Third Way has written, “41% of incarcerated individuals do not have a high school diploma or GED. Only 44% of private prisons and 7% of jails offer vocational training, and only 27% of state prisons offer college

courses. This leaves too many inmates without access to the skills that could help them upon release so they could return to the workforce.”¹⁸

Possible Solutions

There are a number of ways to help more people get the skills to earn a good life outside of a traditional four-year college path. Here are a few:

Apprenticeship America

Third Way has proposed creating a national apprenticeship system as robust and prevalent as our public university system.¹⁹ Collectively equipped with \$40 billion in federal funding, Apprenticeship Institutes in every state will launch new apprenticeship programs and proactively engage employers, workers, technical colleges, unions, and other organizations that make apprenticeships work. A new, subsidized Federal Apprenticeship Loan will also encourage small and medium-sized employers to join the 50-state Institute system and establish apprenticeship programs. A version of this idea has been introduced by Senators Chris Coons and Todd Young as well as Reps. Donald Norcross and David McKinley.²⁰

The PARTNERS Act (H.R. 989, S. 431)

Reps. Suzanne Bonamici, Drew Ferguson, Susan Davis, and Brett Guthrie, as well as Senator Tammy Baldwin, have proposed legislation to fund local partnerships between employers, education and training institutions, community-based organizations, and labor unions. These partnerships would help small and medium-sized businesses develop apprenticeship programs as well as provide mentoring and other support services for workers.

Reemployment Insurance

Third Way has proposed overhauling the Unemployment Insurance system, in part by ensuring that jobseekers can acquire new skills.²¹ Anyone unemployed would continue to

receive income support but could also receive one of the following: 1) A universal training voucher, redeemable for certified programs run by community colleges, unions, nonprofits, or employers; 2) A job search stipend to help defray the cost of moving for those jobseekers who want to pursue opportunities elsewhere in the country; or 3) A bonus if a worker lands a new job before their income support expires.

Lifelong Learning and Training Accounts

The Aspen Institute has proposed the creation of Lifelong Learning and Training Accounts, which workers would be able to take from job to job and could use to pay for training programs throughout their careers.²² Workers and employers could contribute to these accounts, with matching government contributions. Versions of this idea have been introduced by Senators Chris Coons and Mark Warner as well as Senators Amy Klobuchar and Ben Sasse and Reps. Derek Kilmer and Glenn Thompson.²³

Expanded Pell Grants for High-Quality Short-Term Training Programs

There are efforts to expand Pell Grant eligibility to short-term postsecondary programs that are at least eight weeks long (currently programs must be at least 15 weeks long). For example, programs exist to train people for in-demand health care positions in eight weeks. We must ensure these programs leave students better off—with credentials that allow them to land good-paying jobs. Third Way has outlined a quality assurance proposal that would make sure federal financial aid dollars only go toward high-quality programs.²⁴

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ENDNOTES

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