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Advanced Professional Apprenticeships: A Moonshot for Middle-Class Mobility

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The path to America's most stable, family-sustaining professions has become a financial gauntlet that too few can afford to run. The cost of graduate and professional training is often placed entirely on students, which means talented individuals from low-income backgrounds are blocked from entering careers in law, medicine, and other licensed fields.

This memo proposes a structural solution: adapt the apprenticeship model to advanced professional education by creating paid, mentored pathways that shift costs from students to a shared investment among employers, educational institutions, and state and local governments. By building on the existing Registered Apprenticeship Program framework to pilot graduate-level apprenticeships, the US can restore professional mobility without compromising standards.

The Problem

Professional paths to the middle class are blocked by costs students must pay for their training.

The financial burden of graduate and professional training falls almost entirely on individual students. Unlike in many other advanced economies, or even the historical apprenticeship model that once governed entry into skilled trades, aspiring professionals today must complete years of coursework while paying tuition and forgoing wages. The result is a system in which a graduate degree, which should be a reliable pathway to the middle class, can be an expensive gatekeeper that blocks it. Students from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately steered away from careers like law and medicine because they cannot afford the upfront tuition or the years of lost income.

The problem is compounded by the fact that many colleges and universities use graduate programs to cross-subsidize undergraduate and other programs, meaning high tuition on professional master's degrees helps balance institutional budgets—potentially to the detriment of student mobility. Consequently, access to the professions increasingly correlates with family wealth, not talent or drive, and generations of potential practitioners are relegated to lower tiers of the labor market. Placing the cost of training on students is not a feature of a rigorous system; it is a design flaw that can be addressed by applying an apprenticeship framework to graduate programs. In some fields, apprenticeships may be one of the best solutions for making graduate education and training more affordable and accessible because the model simultaneously addresses the prohibitive cost of degrees as well as any disconnect between academic learning and practical job skills. Apprenticeships also provide a strong return on investment for employers in the form of increased employee retention.

The Solution

Apply the apprenticeship model to advanced professional training programs.

In a traditional apprenticeship, the learner works alongside a skilled “master” in an actual work context and engages in productive labor while receiving instruction, mentorship, and compensation. The employer in turn agrees to provide training and a clear pathway to competence. Applied to graduate-level professions, this would mean that aspiring health care professionals, lawyers, educators, and other licensed professionals would split their training between classroom instruction and paid, mentored work in real clinical, legal, teaching, or corporate settings. Instead of taking on debt for tuition and living expenses, the apprentice would earn a wage while learning. The employer would share in the cost of the training, and the university would focus its classroom instruction on the theoretical and foundational knowledge that complements hands-on experience. This flips the current model from one in which students bear all the risk and cost to one in which employers pick up their fair share of the bill.

There is already a blueprint for apprenticeships in the United States, though it remains underutilized at the degree-bearing level. Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) are validated by the Department of Labor and require a formal training plan, clearly defined standards and competencies, a classroom instruction partner, and a mentor who supervises the apprentice’s work. Teacher apprenticeship programs, like Tennessee’s Grow Your Own model, have already demonstrated how this can work in a licensed professional setting like education. Within the program, paraprofessionals and teaching assistants already working in schools can earn a bachelor’s degree in two years while being mentored by an experienced teacher, taking classes part-time, and continuing to earn a paycheck.

Similarly, a law apprenticeship allows students to work under a practicing attorney while preparing for the bar exam. This pathway to the legal profession predates the proliferation of law degrees in the United States, and some states have long permitted it. In advanced graduate and professional fields, the key is to fit the apprenticeship experience into existing licensing and accreditation requirements without bypassing or eliminating coursework requirements or standards, but rather meet them through more accessible—and compensated—pathways. In fields that require supervised clinical experience, this could mean reorganizing those experiences so they occur in tandem with relevant coursework, rather than as isolated requirements.

Abroad, the United Kingdom piloted a graduate-level medical apprenticeship, which was intended to address a physician shortage by tapping an underutilized funding stream: the

apprenticeship levy. While the program ultimately wound down due to changing government priorities, US policymakers can take from it valuable lessons for program design. For one, a true apprenticeship requires the student to have opportunities to participate in relevant and productive work, so the availability of apprenticeships must match available work placements. Two, program designers should consider incentives employers can use to retain apprentices upon completion of their program. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, a successful advanced apprenticeship program must have the buy-in of the profession in question. Professional associations and other bodies that set standards should be consulted to ensure program and graduate quality is on par with traditional pathways. Rigorous accreditation, oversight, and alignment with actual workforce capacity—including the availability of clinical sites, facilities, supervising professionals, and classroom faculty—are essential.

Create a seed fund to pilot advanced professional apprenticeships.

The United States has an opportunity to pilot its own advanced professional apprenticeships that involve institutions of higher education and employers applying jointly for funding to develop programs at the graduate level. Congress should consider setting up a one-time competitive fund that state workforce boards could tap to test the graduate apprenticeship model. The pilot programs should be registered with the Department of Labor to ensure they meet standards for competencies, mentorship, and outcomes. Resources would then flow to demonstrated workforce needs rather than being spread thinly or cut arbitrarily with changes in political administrations.

An alternative and potentially more sustainable approach would be to set up a revolving fund to which employers contribute and draw from to support their apprentices. In the United Kingdom, employers pay an apprenticeship levy based on the size of their workforce, which funds apprenticeship training. The levy applies to private and public sector employers as well as to charitable and non-profit organizations. A handful of US states already collect revenue from employers to fund workforce development, though there is limited public information about how state workforce boards and employers subsequently use those funds.

Critiques and Responses

Someone has to pay for it.

Student loan availability is newly restricted, but that won't make the cost of graduate school attendance drop overnight. In many cases, advanced professional training involves high

overhead costs that will make it very difficult for prices to come down. However, society still needs professionals, and they will either be forced to pay for it themselves—potentially by relying on predatory private student loans to do so—or policymakers can rethink who pays for different parts of their training. This proposal is a new way to fund advanced professional training that may be better suited for some fields over others. Employers already bear the cost of hiring early-career professionals who do not have on-the-job training, and apprenticeships help create productive workers from day one.

Equally important to the development of advanced professional apprenticeships is attention to *where* funds get deployed. Limited resources were used to create the UK's medical degree apprenticeship initiative before other elements of the health care system were ready to absorb an increased number of trainees. Policy and program designers can take a lesson from the UK experiment and ensure the availability of an adequate number of job sites and supervising professionals. Employers and universities looking to establish advanced degree apprenticeships should seek advice from community college apprenticeship partnerships which tend to have a track record of implementing programs in direct alignment with local employer needs.

Not every field is a good match for the apprenticeship model.

It is true that the apprenticeship model may not be suited for professional fields that have a wide breadth and range of foundational coursework, but narrower fields and those with significant practice-based skill requirements may be a perfect fit. Policymakers and apprenticeship program designers need not pit theoretical and experiential learning against each other. Instead, properly sequenced theoretical and classroom learning can enhance the hands-on elements of an apprenticeship, and vice versa.

The UK's medical degree apprenticeship initiative was opposed by the professional medical community.

The British medical community argued it diluted standards and would create a two-tier system. Further, critics were concerned about the two-tier funding structure where some students were being paid to learn while others were paying (and borrowing) to attend. This is a pitfall that can be avoided by fitting the apprenticeship model in with existing classroom and foundational learning requirements and universalizing it. Likewise, professional associations and organizations that represent practitioners should be involved in the adaptation of the apprenticeship model throughout the process. One reason US-based teacher apprenticeships have been successful is the involvement, input, and support of

faculty, parent, and student groups, as well as those who research best practices in education and childhood development.

The US Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) framework has barriers.

In the context of the RAPs, it is easier for trade organizations and labor unions to participate. The barrier to entry is often too high for small employers. Expanded Department of Labor resources, tools, and connection-building would be needed for the apprenticeship model to be implemented at advanced degree levels.

Conclusion

Bipartisan support for apprenticeships already exists at federal and state levels, but extension of the apprenticeship model into graduate and professional training has been slow. There would be costs to setting up these programs, but the return on investment in the form of a secure professional workforce that is less burdened by student debt would be high. And shifting training costs from students to a shared investment model via high-quality apprenticeships would remove barriers to professions that provide upward mobility.

The case for turning advanced professional training into apprenticeships is not about replacing rigor with convenience. It is about reorganizing the current system that places the full cost of training on students and blocks talented individuals from entering certain professions into one that more efficiently and fairly distributes opportunity.

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