



Apprenticeships: A Path to Working in a Licensed Occupation

BY IRIS HENTZE AND ZACH HERMAN

What do occupational licensing and apprenticeship programs have in common? Apart from being major labor-market institutions, each represents a distinct yet often intertwined pathway to highly skilled jobs. Occupational licensing is a regulatory method that requires workers to meet certain conditions set in statute in order to work in a given profession. Licensed occupations represent about 1 in 4 jobs in the U.S. Apprenticeships are work-based learning programs that allow apprentices to earn a paycheck while simultaneously learning the hands-on skills they need to work in that profession. In 2018, there were about [585,000 active apprentices](#) in more than 23,000 registered apprenticeship programs nationwide.

Apprenticeship programs serve as a critical pipeline to get more workers into licensed occupations. Apprenticeships are often structured to help workers earn the education and experience necessary to ultimately qualify for a license. Many sectors and industries experiencing worker shortages have some sort of occupational licensing or apprenticeship requirement. Occupational licensing and apprenticeships both often represent industries and sectors that are in high demand and are experiencing worker shortages in states. Traditionally, these included jobs like electricians, plumbers, and heating, ventilation and air conditioning technicians, but states have expanded their support to encourage apprenticeships in such diverse sectors as information technology, financial services and advanced manufacturing. Licensing requirements and apprenticeship programs work together to pro-

Did You Know?

- More than 100 bills related to licensure and apprenticeships have been introduced in state legislatures since 2017, 55 of which have been enacted.
- Registered apprenticeships have increased by 128% since 2009.
- Licensed occupations account for 20% of the total workforce.

vide critical pathways to highly skilled, high-paying jobs without the need for a traditional four-year college degree.

The specific background experiences of a worker can present other pathways to licensure, too. The skills and education gained while serving in the military, for example, are increasingly recognized by states as transferable to civilian jobs requiring an occupational license. Training earned through an apprenticeship program while incarcerated is another pathway under consideration in states to ensure rehabilitated workers can get jobs in the occupations for which they have received training.

State Action

In the face of budgetary and economic uncertainty, states enacted 494 bills related to apprentices and apprenticeship programs in 2020, underscoring the importance of this career pathway for state economies. As seen in previous years, states continue to consider legislation to align their systems and structures to meet market demands and federal requirements. For example, the Indiana General Assembly [passed legislation](#) requiring the Governor's Workforce Cabinet to create a comprehensive plan to ensure the state's early childhood, primary, secondary and postsecondary education systems are aligned with workforce training programs and state employer needs.

Legislation intended to expand apprenticeship pathways as a workforce tool also continued to be popular in 2020. In Maryland, the legislature passed [HB 1029](#), which expanded the scope of apprenticeship programs able to receive support from the Clean Energy Workforce Account in the state. Now, pre-apprenticeships and youth apprenticeships (similar to apprenticeships but generally unpaid) are also eligible. The bill also expanded eligible industries for pre-apprenticeships to include renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy storage, resource conservation and advanced transportation.

New Jersey [passed legislation](#) requiring the state's commissioner of Labor and Workforce Development to establish a mentoring program focused on increasing participation in apprenticeship programs by underrepresented groups. The program will provide women, minorities and people with disabilities the opportunity to receive mentoring from their peers and additional support services as they move through their apprenticeship.

Recently, states have started to create pathways that enable apprentices to gain all the skills necessary during their training, increasing their ability to earn a license in their field. The bulk of these pathways have been focused on plumbers, electricians and

cosmetologists. Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee have created apprenticeship pathways for all three of these professions. Washington has created an apprenticeship for electricians and Wisconsin has done so for plumbers. Alabama, Connecticut and Idaho have joined others in creating apprenticeship pathways for barbers and cosmetologists.

In 2019, several states amended licensing requirements to allow for apprenticeships as a pathway toward an occupational license. Alabama [HB 570](#) allows the state to grant individuals licensure in a trade in which they apprenticed, as long as other requirements like passing exams and paying all applicable fees are fulfilled. The bill also prohibits higher testing standards from being imposed on someone seeking licensure through apprenticeship compared to other license applicants. North Carolina enacted [legislation](#) requiring licensing boards to recognize certain apprenticeship and training experiences as a part of the licensure process. Finally, Vermont enacted [HB 104](#), which created apprenticeship pathways to licensure for radiologic technology and real estate. It also created bridge programs for apprenticeship programs in Canada.

Federal Action

At the federal level, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) works as an umbrella over state workforce and apprenticeship policy. WIOA requires states to create and oversee state workforce boards that encourage apprenticeships by bringing together the diverse stakeholders involved in these programs, including business, education and government. They are tasked with developing career pathways that help more workers get into high-skilled, high-paying jobs. WIOA requires that states align their workforce systems and programming to provide comprehensive workforce services and reduce duplicative functions.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) complements this effort with its [Registered Apprenticeship Programs \(RAPs\)](#). To be eligible for state and federal funding and incentives, RAPs must meet core requirements and be officially recognized by DOL. Once an apprenticeship program is registered, states are then able to allocate [WIOA funding](#) to cover a variety of program-related expenses. These include supporting the on-the-job training component of apprenticeship programs for businesses and classroom-related expenses for apprentices, like tuition, books, supplies and other fees. In Congress, the National Apprenticeship Act of 2020 (H.R. 8294) is currently under consideration. [The bill](#) would amend the National Apprenticeship Act to expand RAPs to include youth apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships.

Additional Resources

- [NCSL Occupational Licensing Legislative Tracking Database](#)
- [NCSL Occupational Licensing Project](#)
- [NCSL Workforce Development Resources](#)

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