CENTER FOR APPRENTICESHIP & WORK-BASED LEARNING

Registered Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning: Challenges and Opportunities for Rural America

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At a Glance

Apprenticeship presents a powerful strategy to connect jobseekers to family-supporting wages and career advancement opportunities. However, rural communities and especially rural young adults have, by and large, not benefited from the recent gains and investments made in the development of work-based learning opportunities and the apprenticeship system. The goal of this paper is to create a shared understanding of both the challenges and opportunities of creating apprenticeships as an integral part of a work-based learning approach to economic and workforce development in rural America.

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About JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all, including apprenticeship and work-based learning. These programs are proven methods for connecting people to good careers while providing employers with skilled workers. The center consolidates JFF's broad skills and expertise on these approaches into a unique offering. We partner with employers, government, educators, industry associations, and others to build and scale effective, high-quality programs. Visit www.jff.org/center.

About the Rural Youth Catalyst Project

Working nationally, the Rural Youth Catalyst Project aims to strengthen and create opportunities that allow rural and Native youth to realize their hopes and dreams while remaining in or returning to their communities. Project staff bring over 30 years of experience to the rural community and youth development fields. The team created and expanded a working model for training and supporting rural and Native opportunity youth into career focused pathways and have extensive expertise scaling programs nationally. At the Rural Youth Catalyst Project, we believe that when given the opportunity, rural and Native young people want meaningful leadership, real work and to contribute their skills and service to their communities. We seek to: change popular perception of rural and Native young people; build the leadership and representation of rural and Native youth at the regional and national level; strengthen the capacity of local practitioners to design programs to meet the needs of rural and Native young people; pilot innovative solutions to persistent barriers that can be replicated across rural communities; change the indicators used to measure what success looks like for rural young people and their communities; and influence and shape policy to meet the needs of rural and Native youth. Visit https://ruralassembly.org/introducing-the-rural-catalyst-project/.

Introduction

While apprenticeships are not new in rural America, these communities have, by and large, not benefited from the recent gains and investments made in the apprenticeship system. This can be attributed to the characteristics of what makes a place rural—low population density, fewer job opportunities and lower wages, inadequate transportation options and the distances between home, education, training, and work, and a growing digital divide. These, along with the lack of critical infrastructure—both physical and institutional—pose challenges to creating robust work-based learning opportunities and Registered Apprenticeships.

Historically, apprenticeships in rural communities were informal with young people following a parent into their place of employment. Young people were expected to start at the bottom as unskilled laborers and gradually worked their way up the employment ladder over decades, many times with the same employer. Parental role models provided a road map for future employment, but this is less often the case today. This shift, along with a changing occupational landscape and a loss in vocational exposure and guidance in schools, is leaving young people unclear about the job opportunities and career pathways available to them.

Rural young people, and in particular, rural opportunity youth, are facing precarious futures as the full economic impact of the pandemic emerges in the coming year. Prior to the pandemic young people living in rural areas had the highest rate of youth disconnection, 19.3 percent, followed by those living in towns (14.9 percent) and urban centers (12.9 percent). Suburban youth are the least likely to be disconnected, with a rate of 11.3 percent.[1] As of early 2020, the national average of disconnected rural youth was 25.5 percent in rural counties with the highest persistent poverty rates.[2]

Disconnection rates are compounded by the fact that job availability is less certain in rural communities. According to a 2018 Pew Charitable Trust survey, rural adults are somewhat more likely than urban and suburban respondents to say that finding a job is a major problem where they live (42 percent.) In addition, rural adults are less optimistic about their future than their urban and suburban counterparts. The average earnings per worker in urban areas were $49,515 in 2016, followed by $46,081 in the suburbs and $35,171 in rural areas. This survey also revealed that 63 percent of adults in rural areas who say they don't currently have enough income to lead the kind of life they want don't expect to in the future. This is notably higher than in urban or suburban areas and the gap in financial optimism across community types is driven by a marked concern among rural residents without a bachelor's degree.[3]

While rural communities face challenges in developing Registered Apprenticeship programs, they have several assets that, when invested in and leveraged properly, can support the

development of effective apprenticeship ecosystems. For example, many rural communities have strong social ties and high levels of civic engagement that cut across silos of education, economic and community development, and the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. They know who needs to be at the table to effect change and many are successful in building cross-sector coalitions within and across rural communities and regions.

Rural Economies

For decades the term rural has been synonymous with agriculture, forestry, hunting, and mining. Today however, less than 10 percent of the rural workforce is employed in these industries. While they remain important in some rural areas, most of the recent job growth has come from the service, hospitality, and retail industries.[4] The largest employers in rural counties tend to be in education, health care, and social assistance, all of which are primarily government funded.[5]

Rural places, however, are not monolithic. Economic vitality can differ greatly based on natural amenities, the presence or lack thereof of institutions of higher learning, the quality of transportation infrastructure, and the diversity of the businesses located there. While a few communities have become home to large employers, most small community economies are centered around Main Street and entrepreneurial businesses, the same businesses hardest hit by both the 2008 Great Recession and the more recent COVID-19 economic shutdown.

The COVID pandemic and economic shutdown sent shockwaves through rural economies. Rural unemployment peaked at 13.6 percent in mid-April 2020, which was one point lower than in metro areas—largely the result of more stable agricultural employment in the Midwest—and fell to 6.0 percent by mid-September.[6] Rural regions tend to have higher levels of poverty, fewer job opportunities, and less resilient economies relative to urban areas. Because of this, many rural communities might be uniquely vulnerable to the pandemic's physical and economic impacts and will require recovery plans that will look very different than those designed for urban areas.

For example, while many urban businesses were pivoting to online sales or virtual training to survive COVID shutdowns, the lack of robust broadband infrastructure in rural areas became painfully apparent. Although some rural counties fared better economically than urban counties, the overall rural recovery is anticipated to be slower, similar to recovery from the 2008 recession, due to a lack of available capital, distance to markets, insufficient technical assistance, and poor connectivity.

Data on the actual effect of the pandemic on rural communities is sparse. Most research has been focused on urban data, leaving out the 46 million people who live in rural America. Without a deeper understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on rural areas, the development of long-term recovery policies, including those centered around apprenticeship and work-based learning, could prove ineffective for those living in rural communities.[7]

Workforce

From spring 2019 to spring 2020, unemployment among young adults spiked from 8.4 percent to 24.4 percent.[8] Even before the pandemic, the youth labor market was in crisis, with the percentage of young people employed at historic lows. In 2018, more than 4 million 16- to 24-year-olds were identified as "opportunity youth," and were neither in school nor employed. Due to the pandemic, as many as one in three young adults may now fall into this group—increasing this population to more than 10 million.[9]

Linking rural youth to job opportunities is critically important but challenging as rural labor markets are disadvantaged in their institutional structure. While there is a richness of intermediaries in metro areas working to match labor supply, demand, and training, this is not always the case in rural areas. Instead, rural communities are often served by regional workforce boards that serve both metro and rural areas. These boards often find that there is plenty to be done in the cities but struggle to effectively work with and support rural communities that may require additional services and supports, or more intensive outreach and engagement strategies. As a result, rural areas may not always get the help or investment that they need to build apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities in alignment with local labor market and credential landscape.

The focus on industry-recognized credentials as a required element of program design in funding proposals is logical to increase workforce mobility from one market to another. However, popular and accessible certifications are not always a strong match with rural labor market needs and can result in a flood of particular certifications without a market to support placement. This disconnect between workforce training and actual job opportunities is often caused by limited capacity in rural communities to conduct labor market scans. It can also be the result of designing programs using urban models, with the focus on just one or two certifications with classes held repetitively to gain economic scale. The lack of guaranteed employment after credential attainment can actually exacerbate local labor shortages as it can create distrust and disengagement in young people who look to these programs to support their employment needs but who may still find themselves disconnected after participating.

Apprenticeships can serve as a bridge for rural people to access a meaningful career ladder. Unfortunately, the bottom rung on that ladder is many times too high for young people,

specifically rural opportunity youth, to reach. Success is contingent on building flexible models and on-ramps in the form of a strong work-based learning continuum exposing young people to work experiences early and connecting them with opportunities to explore the world of work in both classroom and hands-on settings.

One of the biggest challenges rural communities face with apprenticeship is economies of scale. In a 2017 survey of workforce development boards, rural boards confirmed the challenge of creating apprenticeships when jobs come in ones and twos. There is less employer concentration in any one sector, making it difficult to find enough students at one time in one occupation to meet the economic requirements of their educational partners or the high outcomes often tied to federal grants and contracts. The "cost-per" basis of evaluating developed apprenticeships puts rural workforce boards at a disadvantage.[10]The converse, creating a full classroom focused on in-demand skills can oversaturate the market leaving many trainees without positions.[11]

Additionally, most of the existing youth apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and Registered Apprenticeships require rural residents to travel significant distances for training, jobs, or both. The lack of public transportation infrastructure and the high cost of personal transportation is a barrier that can limit access to in-demand jobs in high-growth industries for many rural individuals. When the only available apprenticeship training and work opportunities exist far away, rural communities experience losses to their workforce as jobseekers relocate. This can in turn weaken rural communities and their economies.

The apprenticeships that are often available in rural communities tend to have barriers created by prerequisites or screening processes that can limit access to many jobseekers including young people and those without a postsecondary education. These design elements include:

- Designing apprenticeships solely as advancement strategies to support existing employees in gaining the skills to move up in their careers, instead of leveraging apprenticeship to support both new jobseekers and incumbent workers.
- Focusing apprenticeship on careers that require postsecondary education, specific degrees or training, or a minimum number of years working in the field, without providing on-ramps into these programs.
- Requiring qualifying assessment or exams for occupations that rural jobseekers may not be adequately prepared for because they are scarce or unfamiliar to the local labor market.

By designing apprenticeships with only incumbent workers in mind or for mid-level occupations that require a high level of education or work experience to participate, existing programs are not equitably accessible to all rural jobseekers. The lack of connection to entry-level occupations

also means that employers are often still left struggling to build a workforce from the ground up as existing workers advance to high-level jobs.

To ensure that apprenticeships are equitable and accessible to all jobseekers and that they present a viable alternative for postsecondary placement, there needs to be a comprehensive pipeline of work-based learning opportunities that includes youth apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships that lead into registered opportunities. It is also important that apprenticeship funding is made more accessible to rural communities and that they allow for flexibility in outcomes and design, given the unique challenges faced by rural employers, apprenticeship sponsors, intermediaries, and jobseekers.

Education Structure of Rural Communities

For many rural communities, their school system (and particularly their high school) is not just a key employer but also a central part of multi-generational, community life. In addition to being a spot for families to connect and champion their children, the school often serves as the place for town meetings, voting, cultural events, and even the emergency shelter. Due to limited budgets and resources, rural school systems rely on high levels of civic engagement and community volunteers to offer in-school and out-of-school programming for students. While employers can be strong supporters of local schools as part of their civic responsibility, the opportunities they provide for young people are often done as an act of community philanthropy and are not an integral part of a workforce development strategy.[12]

The cohesion and connectivity in rural communities makes them uniquely positioned to harness human capital to create robust work-based learning and school-to-work opportunities that could include apprenticeship. Rural employer champions serve as conduits and connectors between the school system and the regional workforce from Main Street businesses to hospitals and health care facilities, to the public and nonprofit sectors, and even to larger employers based farther away from the community. They can provide opportunities for students to gain exposure and exploration to different pathways through job shadowing and internships and can help rural young people acquire the “first-job” readiness skills that are needed for successful entry into and completion of Registered Apprenticeship opportunities.

Infrastructure

Transportation

Rural residents often find current apprenticeship opportunities difficult if not impossible to access, particularly if they desire to stay in their community. Most apprenticeship opportunities are not located in rural areas, necessitating relocation, long commutes, or a combination of both. Even when the employer may be close, training could be miles away and adequate personal or public transportation is essential and rare for many living in rural America.

Broadband

In urban areas 97 percent of Americans have access to high-speed fixed broadband service. In rural areas that number falls to 65 percent and on Tribal lands it drops to 60 percent.[13] The insufficient access to high-speed broadband limits rural communities from taking advantage of remote training or participating in remote work. This has been particularly detrimental during the COVID-19 economic shutdown when schooling, training, and work pivoted to primarily online settings. The FCC has committed to investing $9.2 billion over the next 10 years, through the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, to expand rural broadband in unserved areas. However, this may not address the millions of rural consumers considered "served" but without adequate or consistent access. Allowing apprenticeship dollars to be used to support digital literacy, equipment, and infrastructure would help to close the digital divide for many rural jobseekers and increase access to work-based learning and Registered Apprenticeship for more rural opportunity youth.

Employer Engagement

Employer engagement remains one of the greatest challenges to both urban and rural workforce development efforts. Rural employers can be particularly skeptical of formalized government programs like apprenticeship, often viewing them as creating unnecessary bureaucracy and costs to train one or two employees. Rural employers are also often reluctant because they fear that the apprentices will leave, taking the benefits of a company's significant private investment to another employer (frequently to urban employers where the pay is better). Finally, there can be the perception that apprenticeships are a union model. This can lead to tension between union and non-union employers,[14] which is particularly troublesome in small communities.

Many workforce development boards struggle to effectively sell the benefits of Registered Apprenticeship to employers and support the apprenticeship development process afterward. Deeper collaboration between the program and business services teams at local boards is needed to create consistent messaging that resonates with employers. However, this is particularly

challenging for rural boards that often work with significantly less staff and funding capacity than their urban counterparts. To help rural workforce boards more effectively engage employers in apprenticeship, they need hands-on examples of successful rural apprenticeships that demonstrate the value-add that this training can provide. They also need guidance and support to develop apprenticeship programs where there are few participants in any one occupation.[15]

The dependence of rural communities on small businesses and employers does not preclude them from taking part in apprenticeship but affects their efficiency in creating apprenticeship opportunities. Large employers have the capacity to pay apprentice wages, provide sufficient skilled staff to act as mentors, schedule workflow around classroom schedules, and maintain the administrative responsibilities of apprenticeship programs if capacity of the intermediary is low. In addition, large employers may have the capacity to host cohorts of apprentices, making apprenticeship development more cost effective. Small employers, however, are less likely to have the same capacity and resources and may only be able to host one or two apprentices at a time, putting them at a financial disadvantage.[16] This limits their ability to engage in apprenticeship as fully and comprehensively as their larger counterparts.

Connections to Work-Based Learning and Postsecondary Education

Work-based learning is a crucial component of Registered Apprenticeship and, with its inclusion in the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), it now has the recognition and mandates needed for workforce and education systems to implement the framework.[17] While this is a good start, it does not guarantee that those systems in rural communities will work together effectively.

Rural school districts, all too often, have little collaboration and communication across the educational and workforce systems at both the state and local district levels. There is still a persistent disconnect between rural high schools and postsecondary institutions with the postsecondary completion rates for rural residents at approximately 25 percent overall, and rural young people are more likely to have parents without postsecondary credentials. Rural schools also have higher numbers of low-income students but fewer dollars to spend per student.[18] Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is another perennial challenge for rural districts; thus, the higher-level course offerings that prepare students for postsecondary success as well as specialized classes such as technology and manufacturing are limited or not available at all.

Community and state college systems can serve as on-ramps to postsecondary credentials and often connect young people to Registered Apprenticeships. However, the ability for rural young

adults to access the career pathway training and credentials offered by postsecondary institutions is becoming increasingly limited.[19] In March 2021, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that rural colleges experienced steeper decreases in undergraduate enrollment than their urban counterparts.[20] In December 2020, the National College Attainment Network reported that the number of rural students who filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), dropped by more than 18 percent.[21] This is contributing to the financial instability and viability of these institutions.

One challenge faced by rural school districts is that programs are not often designed to be adaptable to the full range of learning styles and needs. Blended instructional design is not often utilized, and credentialing tends to take place solely within the walls of a classroom rather in both academic and workplace environments. As a result, some students may gain a credential, but they have not been able to develop their work-readiness skills and gain the necessary exposure to a range of career pathways. This can leave them with a limited understanding of how to navigate the workforce and advance along or across career pathways. This is compounded by the fact that the connection between education and employers in many rural regions has been lost, further exacerbating career exploration challenges.

A work-based learning continuum including Registered Apprenticeships—when well designed and supported with a cross-sector approach—offers a comprehensive, holistic, and lasting pathway out of poverty for rural young people. As state-level, work-based learning strategies are created across the country, it is critical that they are required to be truly statewide, ensuring that rural communities and young people are not deemed "unservable". Providing the needed professional development and planning funds for rural districts to design work-based learning strategies that include an apprenticeship pipeline and are responsive to the needs of rural young people, employers can not only capitalize on the cohesion of rural communities but also ensure that the statewide plan does not impose a one-size-fits-all approach.

Funding

Inconsistent and limited funding to support pathway training, credentialing, and apprenticeship presents another challenge for rural communities that are eager to prepare their students for the world of work. Existing resources and funding opportunities can be difficult for rural communities to access and are often unsustainable and insufficient to create a meaningful, work-based learning system that includes robust apprenticeship and employer partnerships. This is in part because philanthropy and federal funding opportunities often overlook rural communities because they cannot produce the same high outcomes as their urban peers.

In the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) June 2020 Youth Apprenticeship Readiness grants, not a single award went to a rural community or area.[22] However, two states that received

grants, Alaska, and South Carolina, hope to expand their current work to better serve rural communities. In addition, in December 2019, out of 67 DOL YouthBuild grant awards for pre-apprenticeship training, only 11 percent of funds went to rural communities.[23] The minimal provision of funding to rural communities limits the number of pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships and impacts the capacity of programs to effectively engage, recruit, enroll, and support young people who may need additional services and supports to find success. Rural communities who are awarded funding frequently find themselves in an "all or nothing" approach, having to contend with outcomes and program designs geared for higher population density areas rather than responding to local nuanced need. The limited flexibility in funding can result in the development of Registered Apprenticeship programs that lack the proper foundations in employer partnerships, pre-apprenticeship training, and participant readiness.

Rural communities are hard pressed to create strong apprenticeship programs using federal resources alone, but do not have equitable access to other funding streams to support their work. While urban communities can often rely on private philanthropic funds to fill the gap, rural areas have been largely left behind by philanthropy. According to a USDA study, while 19 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural communities, only 6-7 percent of private foundation grants benefit rural areas. On average, rural areas receive less than half the average dollars provided to organizations in metro counties.[24]

Successful apprenticeship programs, whether delivered in-person, virtually, or through hybrid models, cannot be built with incidental grants. They require robust braided funding strategies that leverage federal and state dollars include long-term sustainable funding sources, philanthropic funds, and strong public-private partnerships. Equally critical to their success is comprehensive engagement with and commitment from education and employer partners and the local workforce system, all of which is made easier with adequate funding.

Conclusion

Creating apprenticeships in rural communities inarguably presents challenges. However, what rural communities lack in resources they make up for in their social cohesion and ability to create coalitions to get things deemed important to their futures done. Successful apprenticeship development in rural communities will require a sustained investment in people and institutions. Solutions need to be built from the ground up and rural examples of success must be shared widely.

Strengthening work-based learning opportunities will create the on-ramps necessary to ensure that young people build the skills, competencies, and readiness needed for success in Registered Apprenticeships. The creation of a comprehensive work-based learning continuum in rural

communities is a critical first step to expanding access to the apprenticeship system and increasing engagement in Registered Apprenticeship in particular. Engaging employers as partners in developing this work will be essential to success, and coaching, tools, and resources for rural communities to support employer and business engagement will be especially valuable.

Registered Apprenticeships need to be viewed by employers not as a community service but as a strategy to reduce employee churn, instill responsibility and commitment in entry-level employees, and develop supervisors and managers for the future. In rural communities in particular, apprenticeships can provide a solution for business succession, which is problematic for many rural businesses. These efforts require the collaboration of education, workforce development, and economic development. Messaging to employers needs to demonstrate a coordinated community strategy to address business development as well as the needs of young people.

To meet rural challenges, communities of policy and practice must stretch their thinking beyond tradition to imagine an apprenticeship infrastructure that meets a wide variety of community needs.[25] In the aftermath of COVID-19, it is clear the fragilities of governments, economies, health care, and education across all communities but particularly in rural regions of the nation. This is a pivotal moment in history—in the process of the pandemic recovery, we can reinvent systems and structures and not just go back to where we were. There is a hope that those local and regional efforts can be strengthened by investing wisely in the people and institutions in rural communities.[26]

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