THE CENTER FOR POVERTY SOLUTIONS

Beyond degrees: Empowering Illinoisans through career-first education

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Executive summary

The best path to empowerment and success, especially for poor people, is work. Work allows us to prosper while providing dignity, upward mobility, the means to support ourselves and create value for others. It's how we become thriving members of our community.

Central to this process is our education system. One of its core functions is to equip all students with the knowledge and skills necessary to find gainful employment and, ideally, careers. It's falling woefully short, as Illinois faces a massive skills gap with over 324,000 job openings and over 283,000 Illinoisans looking for work as of November 2024. Workers lack the skills companies need. That's a key driver of Illinois' steep unemployment rate – one of the highest in the nation.

Why is this happening? A primary reason is Illinois' education system mistakenly pushes college degrees as the best path to success. They aren't. Pushing this harmful narrative creates a host of other problems. Statewide, fewer than half of students who enroll in college graduate, while student debt continues to soar – approaching $2 trillion nationwide.

Illinois can become a true leader by going beyond degrees and establishing a career-first education system. Such a system emphasizes empowering students with practical skills to maximize their chances of building lasting careers. For some students, this means earning a college degree. For many others, it means emphasizing skills-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships or other workforce development training.

The economic and social benefits of apprenticeships are abundant. Apprenticeships are paid work training programs in which participants take on zero debt. Apprenticeship completers earn an average national starting salary of $80,000, surpassing the average $55,000 for workers who do not pursue or complete one. The hiring rate for people who complete vocational training, such as apprenticeships, is 44% higher than people with a bachelor's degree and 46% higher than people with a graduate degree. Career satisfaction is high, too, with nearly 90% of surveyed tradespeople reporting they are very or somewhat satisfied.

Despite these enormous benefits, Illinois shortchanges apprenticeships in favor of colleges and universities. In 2025, Illinois has allocated $2.6 billion in general funds to colleges. Meanwhile, the state is projected to spend only $148.7 million in general funds on apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships and workforce training – less than 6% of the college funding.

To adopt a career-first educational model, Illinois should:

1. Expand apprenticeships, especially youth-focused and non-registered programs.
2. Reform occupational licensing laws to allow apprenticeship as an alternative to formal education.
3. Raise public awareness of apprenticeship benefits and opportunities.
4. Regularly assess workforce trends to align education with labor market needs.
5. Shift funding from universities to support additional apprenticeship programming.

Introduction

The best path to empowerment and success, especially for poor people, is work. And a good education is crucial for our preparation to be effective workers. It's a pillar of social mobility, too. Research shows with every level of education completed, both lifetime[1] and median earnings improve.[2] It's clear why our nation invests trillions of dollars annually in education.

A proper education is the best route out of poverty, too. According to 2023 Census Bureau measures, which do not include income transfers, the national poverty rate is 12.5%,[3] and 16.8% in Chicago.[4] For people who follow what the Brookings Institution, a left-of-center think tank, calls the "success sequence" – finish high school, get a full-time job, get married and then have kids, in that order – it drops to a mere 2% nationally.[5] Success begins with education, then work. They're deeply interconnected.

Despite this, here in Illinois and across America, we aren't getting a good return on our investment because we've structured our education system around pursuing degrees. That's provoking numerous economic and social problems and driving inequality, disproportionately affecting poor and minority communities most in need of opportunity.

Illinois has suffered for years with one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation. While South Dakota's rate was 1.9% as of January 2025, unemployment in Illinois was the sixth-highest in the United States at 4.9%.[6] That's 324,000 of our neighbors looking for work who can't find it.[7] Illinois had 283,000 job openings as of November 2024.[8] People want jobs, businesses have openings, but one major reason they don't align is the "skills gap" – workers lack the skills these companies need.

A major reason for the failings in our education system is it's currently pointed at the wrong goal. Why? A major cultural shift since the mid-1990s has led us to believe the purpose of K-12 education is to prepare students for college and a bachelor's degree or higher.[9] As a result, Illinois disproportionately allocates billions to colleges and universities while providing far less support for postsecondary alternatives.

Businesses also share some of the blame. Of all job openings as of 2021, 65% requested a bachelor's or associate's degree to apply.[10] Data show only 31% of Americans actually need postsecondary education for their jobs,[11] and only 34% of jobs in Illinois require a four-year degree.[12] Yet, 61% of business and HR leaders admit to discarding resumes without a degree, even if the applicant is qualified.[13] This feeds an unvirtuous cycle: more applicants with degrees impels businesses to demand even more degrees.

The degree-first approach is pervasive and pernicious. The message that K-12 is a "stepping stone to higher education," is spread by schools, parents, the media, government and more.[14] Schools are three to five times more likely to talk to students about college than any other postsecondary alternatives. Only 23% of high school students hear "a lot" about apprenticeships, and just 19% hear "a lot" about jobs that don't require a college degree.[15]

The approach unfairly eliminates talent from the labor pool and career paths for millions of

Americans, especially poor people and minorities, who can't or choose not to acquire a four-year degree.[16] It pushes people into wasting years of their lives earning an unnecessary credential instead of learning practical skills to build a career. It's not even a guaranteed escape from poverty. In Illinois over 150,000 people with a bachelor's degree remain below the poverty line, including over 58,000 in Chicago.[17]

If our current degree-first education system isn't effectively preparing students for success, what would? Going beyond degrees.

It's time for Illinois to become a leader and adopt a career-first education system focused on empowering everyone to unleash their potential through skills-learning. A career-first education system prioritizes learning paths like apprenticeships, which are also employment opportunities, and other workforce development training above terminal degrees. After all, the true purpose of an education is to prepare you to be a thriving contributor to your community. One primary way we do that is through work.

This approach will extend opportunity to many Illinoisans in dire need of it. According to the National Skills Coalition, in Illinois, 52% of jobs require skills training, much more than the 34% we noted above requiring a four-year degree.[18]

A career-first approach produces many economic and social benefits, which we explore below. Among them are higher pay, no debt, economic growth and increased social mobility. The U.S. Department of Labor found apprenticeship completers earn an average national starting salary of $80,000,[19] surpassing the $55,000 national average.[20]During training, Illinois apprentices earn an annual salary of over $42,000,[21] higher than the average $31,200 earned in a typical minimum wage job in the state.[22]

It's no surprise there's strong support across the ideological spectrum for this approach, from progressive and left-of-center think tanks, such as Center for American Progress[23], Urban Institute[24], Brookings Institute[25] and Progressive Policy Institute[26], to right-of-center think tanks, such as American Enterprise Institute.[27]

By reorienting our education system to prioritize careers over degrees, Illinois can lead the nation in "equitable empowerment."[28] Empowerment unlocks individuals' potential by providing necessary tools and removing unfair barriers to success. Equity means we must position everyone with a reasonable chance to succeed. When people are held back by a lack of opportunity, that's systemically inequitable.

The backbone of an equitable empowerment policy agenda is education, which must create and expand opportunities, helping individuals overcome adversity and pursue careers. A well-structured education system fosters equitable empowerment by broadening opportunity for all, not by insisting on equal outcomes, which reduces opportunities for everyone, especially for those most in need. To widen opportunity, Illinois must move beyond a degree-first approach. This requires the expansion of both registered and non-registered apprenticeships.

The reforms outlined in this report will help Illinois build a career-first education system that increases access to opportunity for those who need it most, strengthens the workforce and ensures long-term economic growth.

Illinois' workforce crisis

There's a brewing workforce crisis across Illinois, bubbling over to create bigger economic and social problems. A growing skills gap, numerous youths neither in school nor working, and too many unnecessary degrees are increasing poverty and reducing social mobility, especially for many poor and minority Illinoisans.

For years, Illinois' economy hasn't been serving workers well. Unemployment in Illinois reached 4.9% in January 2025 – sixth-highest in the nation – with 324,000 jobless residents.[29]

Meanwhile, Illinois' labor force participation rate, which measures the percentage of people either working or seeking work, remains well below the historical high of 70.6% seen in July 1999. In January 2025, it was 64.3%.[30] Tens of thousands of Illinoisans who would've been working a generation ago, based on their demographics, have left the labor force completely. And with 283,000 job openings in November 2024, the issue isn't a lack of jobs.[31]

The "skills gap," a major issue across the country, is a primary culprit. The Business Roundtable defines this as the "difference between the skills that employers are looking for and the training and experience that candidates possess."[32] A 2023 Wiley national survey found 69% of HR professionals said their organization faced a skills gap, up from 55% in 2021.[33] A Business Roundtable survey from 2016 revealed 95% of America's executives viewed skills shortages as at least "somewhat problematic," with half considering it a major issue.[34]

The worst part? The gap is widening. U.S. Chamber of Commerce research from 2020 showed nearly three-fifths, or 59%, of respondents said finding qualified job candidates had become more difficult since 2017.[35]

In Illinois the gap is evident, with only 41% of workers having the skills necessary for most jobs requiring skills training.[36] This issue is particularly pronounced for "middle-skill" jobs – those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. In Illinois, the lack of middle-skill workers leaves essential sectors, such as health care, logistics and transportation, struggling to fill vacancies, with 32,844 job openings per year in the state between 2020 and 2030.[37]

Zeroing in on Chicago, a 2015 J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. report reveals the city's biggest skills gap is also with middle-skill jobs. These jobs make up 44% of all positions in the area, paying an average of $26.93 per hour in 2015 – certainly higher now.[38] The report found "approximately 60% of job openings require middle-skill credentials, but only 54% of the region's workforce have the necessary education levels," demonstrating the misalignment between education, the skills workers currently possess and those in high demand by the area's industries.[39] Closing the skills gap would create more jobs and reduce poverty, fueling a virtuous cycle of economic growth and opportunity.

Employment issues are most pronounced among the youth, the next generation of workers and innovators. Unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds in Illinois was 11.1% in September 2024, up

from 8.5% in September 2023[40] and exceeding the national average of 9.2% in 2024.[41]

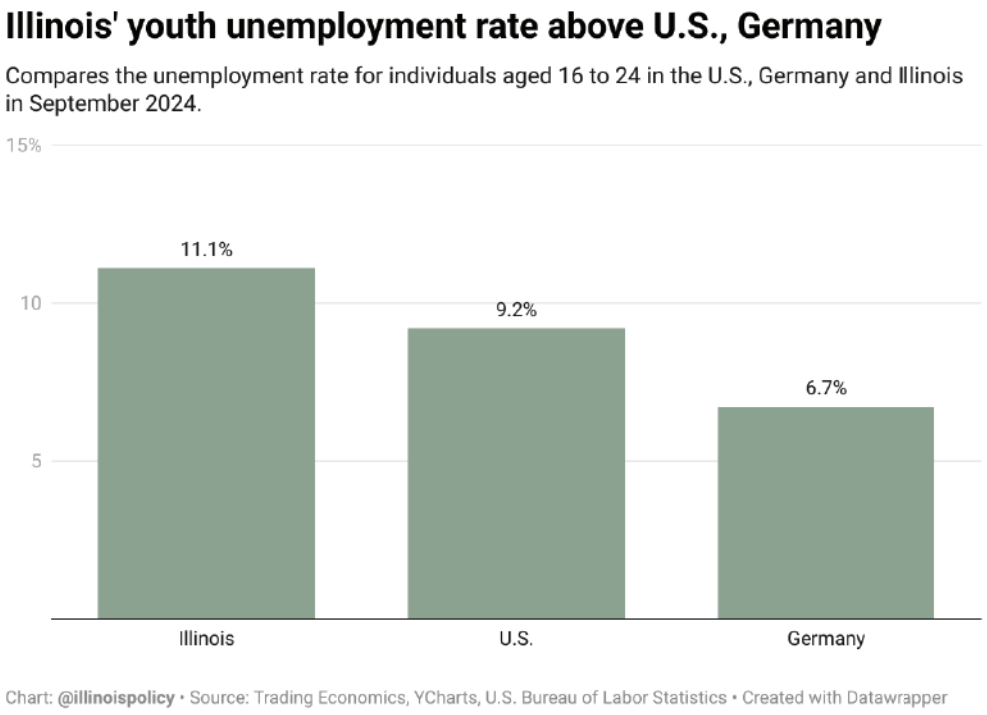
An even trickier problem facing Illinois' youth is "disconnection." People ages 16-24 are considered "disconnected" if they are neither in school nor working. Nationally, these youth are twice as likely to be in poverty[42] and receive Medicaid.[43] They're generally unmotivated, lack sufficient skills or otherwise feel discouraged from pursuing education or workforce participation. They also face higher rates of substance abuse,[44] committing and becoming a victim of crime,[45] and incarceration.[46]

As of 2021, over 177,000 teens and young adults in Illinois were neither in school nor working.[47] At 12% of youth, that's the second-highest disconnection rate in the Midwest after Michigan. In Chicago, the problem is worse. According to a study by the University of Illinois Chicago's Great Cities Institute, in 2022, 8.3% of 16- to 19-year-olds and 15.6% of 20- to 24-year-olds in the city were neither in school nor working,[48] totaling over 45,000.[49]

Disconnection in Chicago is particularly harmful for minority communities. A 2023 study from UIC showed the disconnection rate for Black 20- to 24-year-olds in Chicago in 2022 was 29.6%, and 38.5% for Black males.[50] The rate for Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds was 5.4%, less than for Blacks at 17.5% but higher than whites at 4.5%.[51] There were 17.9% of male Hispanic 20- to -24-year-olds in Chicago disconnected in 2022.[52]

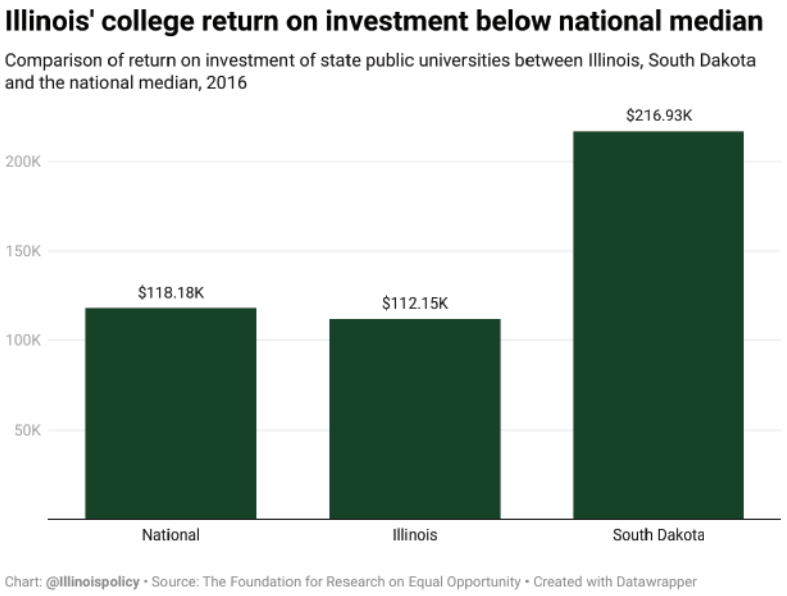
A career-first education system that emphasizes worker training programs, such as apprenticeships, is a proven way to address youth disconnection and bridge the gaps the degree-first system is creating.

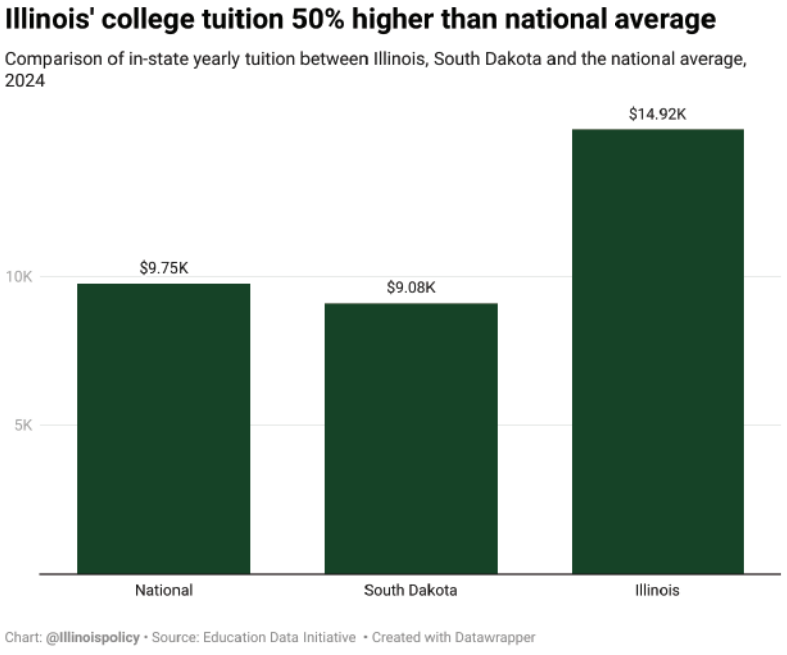
Fewer than half of Illinoisans who enroll in college eventually earn a degree. Statewide, Illinois had a college graduation rate of only 49.7% in 2024, ranking 27th nationally and far behind the national leader, Rhode Island, which has a 68.1% graduation rate.[53] It's even worse at Illinois' public universities, where the graduation rate was 41% as of 2024,[54] slightly above the national average of 38.4%.[55]



The future looks even worse for young Chicagoans. A University of Chicago study of Chicago Public Schools found, based on 2022 educational attainment rates, we would expect only 30% of CPS 9th graders to earn a college credential from a two- or four-year institution by the time they're 25.[56]

Even those who do graduate are finding their degrees aren't supplying them with the right skills for work. A 2021 report from Cengage found half of college graduates didn't apply to entry-level jobs because they felt underqualified.[57] Almost two in five, 38%, only occasionally or rarely use what they learned in college.[58] An Intelligent.com survey found 40% of employers deemed recent graduates unprepared for the workforce, 88% believed that's truer than just three years ago and 94% have avoided hiring recent graduates at times.[59]





A bachelor's degree is by no means a guaranteed pathway out of poverty, either. Nationally, 3.85 million people with a bachelor's degree or higher are in poverty as of 2023,[60] including 150,000 in Illinois[61] and 58,000 in Chicago.[62]

When we insist the optimal choice for anyone after high school is to go to college,[63] we unintentionally reduce opportunity and social mobility.[64]

America's "degree-best" model for education is especially harmful to low-income, first-generation students. The rate at which they complete a bachelor's degree within six years is 21% nationally, 45 percentage points lower than for non-low-income, non-first-generation students, whose rate is 66%.[65] The cost of attending college also disproportionately impacts minority and low-income students.

With Americans now owing about $1.6 trillion in federal student debt as of June 2024, up 42% from a decade ago,[66] and total student debt exceeding $1.7 trillion,[67] many students are dropping out and fewer are paying off debt.[68] A Gallup survey revealed 87% of students who left college before completing their degree identified cost as a very or moderately important reason for doing so.[69] Research conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations concluded Black, Hispanic and Native American students face greater financial burdens and higher default rates than white students.[70]

Many now question the value of a college degree. Pew Research Center data from 2023 showed just 22% of U.S. adults believed college was worth it if someone must take out loans.[71] Research found Illinois public universities provided the Midwest's lowest median return on investment at only $112,154 – less than half of South Dakota's $216,927[72] – while charging the region's highest and the nation's sixth-highest in-state tuition and fees, at $14,921 per year.[73]

These issues erode Americans' trust in universities. Only 36% of Americans have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in universities. The portion who has "very little" or "none" increased significantly in just one year, from 23% in 2023 to 32% in 2024. When Gallup first measured confidence in 2015, 57%, had confidence and only 10% had "very little" or "none." Democrats, Republicans and independents have all seen double-digit declines in confidence, but Republicans have had the steepest drop, from 56% in 2015 to 20% in 2023. Republicans with little or no confidence rose nearly five-fold, from 11% in 2015 to 50% in 2023.[74]

What is apprenticeship?

Apprenticeships offer a proven alternative to degree-first education. These paid, immersive work-based training programs prepare someone for a career by building specialized technical skills for a specific occupation. Apprenticeships standardize job requirements and skills assessment, ensuring professional competency. Lasting one to three years, apprenticeships provide classroom instruction at high schools, community colleges or vocational training centers, and on-the-job experience through a private employer.[75] Upon completion, apprentices earn industry-certified credentials, debt-free college credits or both.

Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, the United Kingdom and Australia have robust apprenticeship ecosystems. For example, as of 2022, 3.7% to 3.9% of the German labor force participated in apprenticeships at a given time,[76] while only 0.3% of the labor force in the United States participated in apprenticeships.[77] At the same time, 61.4% of recent American graduates were enrolled in college as of October 2023.[78]

Unlike an internship or other forms of work-based learning, apprenticeships are always paid. At the start, apprentices are usually paid around 50-60% of the typical wage of someone starting a full-time job in that field. As apprentices gain independence and boost productivity, their pay increases.[79] Unlike earning a college degree, apprentices get debt-free career training and often a guaranteed job after finishing.[80] The U.S. Department of Labor found 94% of apprenticeship completers retain employment.[81]

Most apprenticeships are registered with federal and state departments of labor. In 2024, the U.S. Registered Apprenticeship Program had 679,105 active apprentices. However, only 113,081 apprentices completed their programs.[82] Apprentices may struggle to complete apprenticeships for a variety of reasons, including programs' "general difficulty,"[83] insufficient apprentice support resources, work environment challenges, mismatches between program formats and an apprentice's learning needs, and personal life challenges.[84]

In Illinois, just 3,909 apprentices completed programs in 2024.[85] If the state had more robust apprenticeship participation like Germany, which boasts an almost 80% program completion rate,[86] an additional 13,638 apprentices would have finished programs last year.[87]

Other challenges with the registered apprenticeship system include low employer awareness, burdensome and time-consuming program registration processes and requirements for employers, oversaturation of construction and manufacturing trades, and a lack of stackable or interim credentials – certifications earned along the way to program completion, which can build to a higher qualification.[88]

Some apprenticeships are non-registered. Non-registered apprenticeships use standards and curricula set solely by employers, enabling employers to bypass bureaucratic barriers, expedite program start-up and scaling efforts, and customize training to fit the needs of their industry and company culture. Expanding these apprenticeships in Illinois would provide more accessible, employer-driven pathways to high-quality careers.

The structure of apprenticeships may vary to accommodate participants with different entry levels of knowledge and work experience. Two notable examples are pre-apprenticeships and youth apprenticeships. Pre-apprenticeships prepare individuals for successful entry into formal apprenticeships.[89] They can boost their ability to land a job through help with resume writing, mock interviews and apprenticeship applications. These programs primarily serve participants facing barriers to employment, such as minority groups, individuals with disabilities or individuals leaving incarceration to reenter the workforce and society.[90]

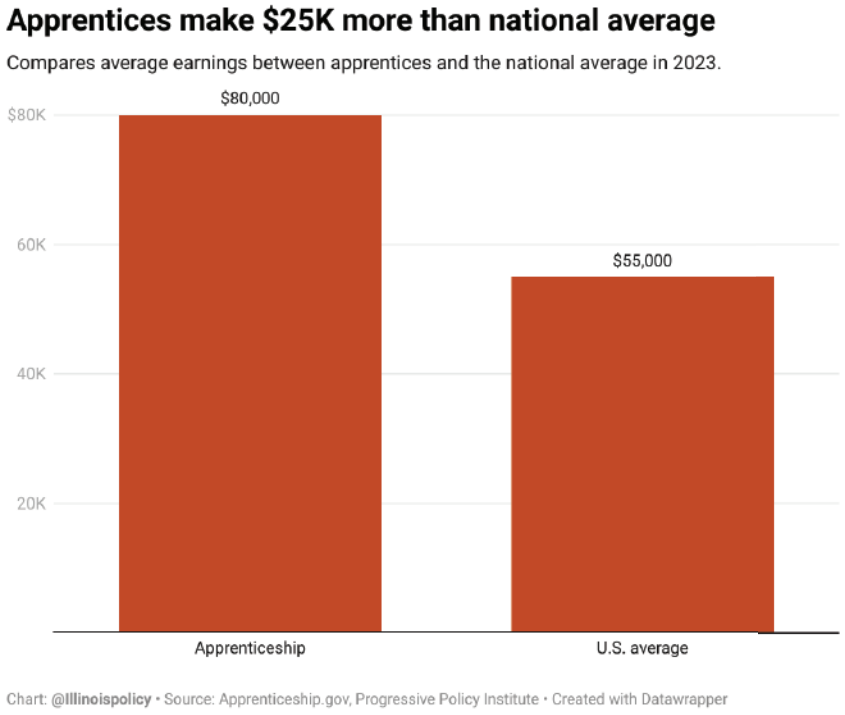
Youth apprenticeships are secondary or post-secondary educational programs explicitly for ages 16 to 24. These are distinct from traditional apprenticeships, which primarily enroll adults at the average starting age of 29.[91] Youth programs are directly tailored to the unique needs of younger learners, focusing more on academic integration, career planning and exposure, and preparation for workplace expectations. Registered youth apprenticeships in Illinois require a minimum of 450 hours of paid on-the-job training, as well as classroom-based technical instruction, skills-competency assessments and various student support services.[92] Upon completion, youth apprentices may receive application assistance for entry-level employment, post-secondary education or admission to an adult program.[93]

Through apprenticeships, Illinois can expand opportunity for more people and build a skilled workforce. The fundamentals of apprenticeship programs are simple. And, as discussed below, the benefits are enormous.

Social and economic benefits of apprenticeships

The social and economic benefits of apprenticeships are expansive. They help individuals, businesses and the economy thrive, while reducing poverty.

Apprenticeships create meaningful and well-paying career pathways for people who don't attend college. According to a report from the Progressive Policy Institute, while the average national salary was $55,000 in 2023,[94] individuals who completed an apprenticeship earned an average of $80,000.[95] During their careers, those who complete an apprenticeship earn an average of over $300,000 more than those who don't.[96]



According to the Urban Institute, effective employment and training programs "can play a key role in mobility from poverty because earnings from work are the largest source of income for most people."[97] They do this by analyzing the workforce and considering which professions are in high demand today, and which ones will and will not be in the coming years. Expanding career opportunities improves social mobility indirectly by equipping businesses with skilled workers, driving economic growth.

Apprenticeships reduce unemployment, too.[98] That's particularly important for the poor. The hiring rate for people who complete vocational training such as apprenticeships is 44% higher than people with a bachelor's and 46% higher than people with a graduate degree, as of May 2024.[99]

Germany's strong apprenticeship programming drives down unemployment. In Germany, about 60% of youth worked as apprentices as of 2014,[100] compared to 5% in America.[101] The youth unemployment rate in Germany stood at 5.96% across 2023,[102] notably lower than America's 7.9%,[103] and Illinois' 11.1%.[104]

Apprenticeships also offer significant benefits for minorities. Research from the Urban Institute states "apprenticeship is particularly appealing as a way of integrating minorities, especially minority young men, into rewarding careers."[105] A report from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation details how apprenticeships can be an essential career pathway for African-Americans and people of color working for water and wastewater utilities.[106]

More progress is needed. As research from WorkforceGPS shows, while Black participation in apprenticeships has nearly doubled from 2013 to 2022, their completion rate nationally remains lower at 12.5%, compared to 16.9% for Asian and 15.9% for white individuals.[107]

Apprenticeships also build participants' social capital through mentoring and networking. The Brookings Institution has explored how the adult supervision and mentorship provided through youth apprenticeship can give teens and young adults the opportunity to accumulate resources, information, industry connections and referrals. That's crucial for labor market success and economic mobility.[108]

Through youth apprenticeship, students experience navigating the day-to-day challenges of the workplace, from managing deadlines to dealing with difficult colleagues. This builds their interpersonal communication, independence, resilience and confidence.

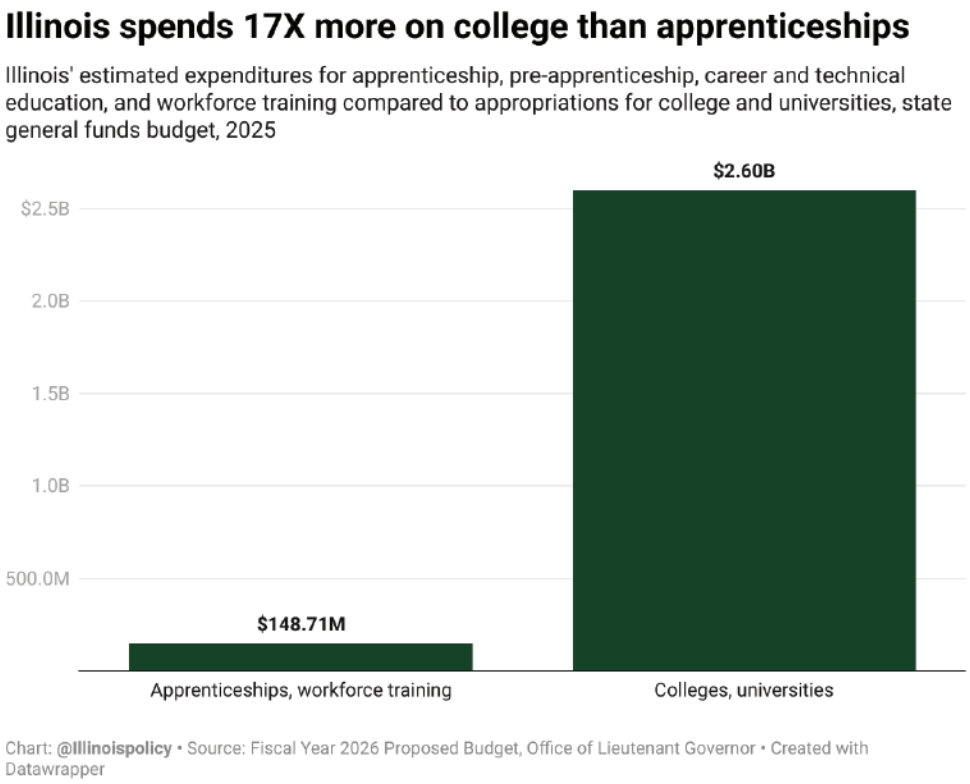
Apprenticeships are good for businesses, too. They boost recruitment and improve retention. Upon completing a program, 94% of apprentices stay with the company. Retaining trainees preserves institutional knowledge.[109]

Finally, apprenticeships make work more meaningful and increase career satisfaction. "Contextual learning" such as an apprenticeship has been found to make the work experience more meaningful, engaging and motivating.[110] This sense of meaningful work likely contributes to higher career satisfaction among those in skilled trades, with a recent report finding nearly 90% of surveyed tradespeople are very or somewhat satisfied.[111]

Apprenticeship in Illinois

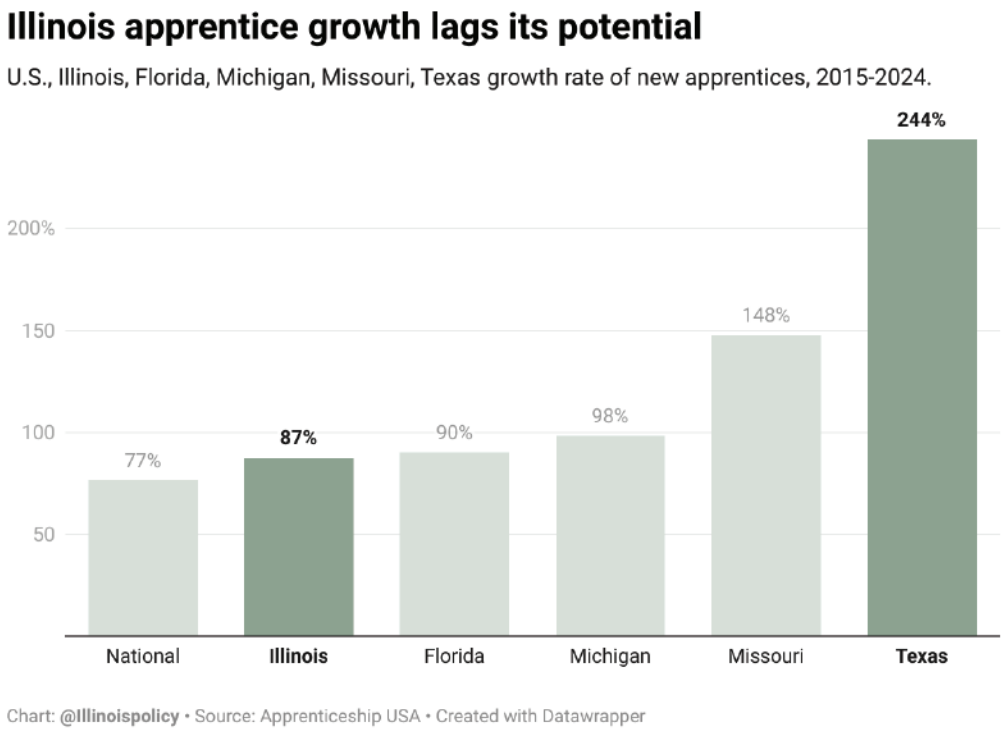
Illinois has made some progress expanding apprenticeships in recent years. The number of active registered apprentices in the state has increased by 9,000 since 2015, a 73% expansion.[112] While that might seem like a lot, it's lower growth than many other states with comparable baselines, including Texas, Missouri, Washington, Indiana and Michigan.[113] Additionally, Illinois faces a variety of challenges to expanding apprenticeships, including insufficient investment, lack of non-registered apprenticeships and a low program completion rate.

Illinois shortchanges apprenticeships in favor of colleges and universities. In 2025, Illinois is projected to spend about $148.7 million in general funds on apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships and workforce training efforts.[114] Meanwhile, Illinois allocated $2.6 billion in general funds to colleges – about 17 times more funding.[115]



Another challenge is the lack of non-registered apprenticeships. Nearly all apprenticeships in Illinois are registered. A 2020 study found only 23 non-registered apprenticeships, supporting 91 apprentices.[116] In comparison, as of 2024, Illinois has 424 registered programs,[117] supporting 21,934 active apprentices.[118] Non-registered apprenticeships are a viable option, as shown by successes in states such as Wisconsin.[119] They offer employers advantages over registered programs, including more flexibility to customize training, reduced regulatory and administrative burdens, and quicker implementation and scaling.

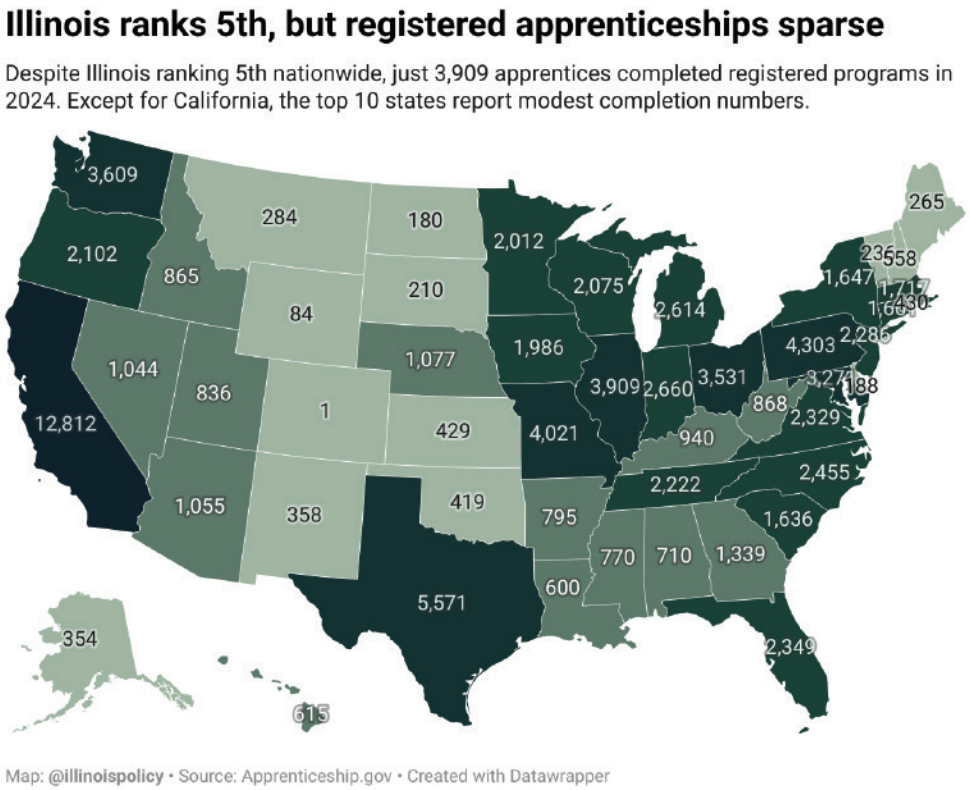
Despite their predominance, registered apprenticeships in Illinois still lag many states across several measures. Nationally, Illinois ranks 29th in growth of new registered apprentices, increasing about 87%, from 4,619 new apprentices in 2015 to over 8,600 in 2024. While this is above the national average, it is less than many other states with comparable baselines – Missouri, Michigan and Florida.[120] Texas increased over 240%.[121]



In 2024, 3,909 apprentices completed registered programs in Illinois.[122] Although it ranked fifth nationwide, the number remains low. Except for California, the other top five states also reported modest totals: Texas had just over 5,000 completers, while Pennsylvania and Missouri each had slightly more than 4,000.[123]

As shown in the chart below, many occupations supported by Illinois' registered apprenticeship programs have median annual wages higher than the national average of $55,000.[124] However, occupations in construction trades oversaturate Illinois' registered programs, accounting for about 80% in 2024. These are followed by manufacturing occupations at about 6%, and the remaining 14.8% in fields such as technology, health care, education, transportation, finance and more.[125] Illinois' non-registered programs also lack variety, with 61%, in manufacturing fields.[126]

The lack of occupational variety in Illinois' registered programs stems at least in part from the strong participation of construction unions. As of 2020, over 98% of all registered construction apprentices in Illinois were in programs under a union agreement.[127] Unions shape program focus around their trades. While Illinois needs more workers in these trades, it also needs many more in a much wider range of apprenticeable fields, such as the ones listed here.



Illinois apprentices can earn 2X national average wages

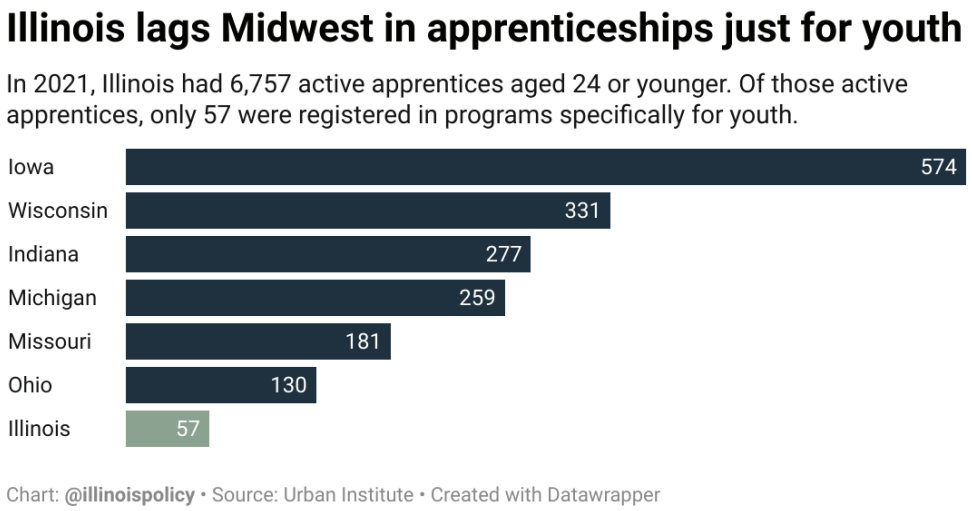
Industry	Occupation	Median annual wages
U.S. average		$55,000
Transportation, logistics	Purchasing agents	$73,920
	Airframe, powerplant mechanics	$73,350
	Diesel mechanics	$62,550
Professional, financial services	Bank branch managers	$149,900
	Office managers, administrative services specialists	$104,800
	Operations managers	$101,250
Technology	Application developers	$126,200
	Cybersecurity support technicians	$116,800
	IT project managers	$110,160
Health care	Registered nurses	$82,470
	Laboratory technicians	$64,100
	Behavioral health aides	$55,120
Manufacturing	Industrial production supervisors	$119,190
	Technical sales representatives, wholesale, manufacturing	$117,990
	Electro-mechanical, mechatronics technologists, technicians	$112,950
Construction	Elevator constructors	$129,840
	Drywall finishers	$103,600
	Structural steel workers	$98,170
Energy, utilities	Stationary engineers, boiler operators	$106,790
	High-voltage line installers, repairers	$106,540
	Electricians, substation, relay	$104,180
Other	Facilities managers	$102,250
	Regulatory affairs specialists	$101,090
	Firefighters	$93,690

Table: **@illinoispolicy** • Source: O*Net OnLine and Apprenticeship.gov • Created with Datawrapper

Illinois should seek to expand non-registered apprenticeships. These programs are more flexible, allowing them to adapt more quickly to industry, workforce and business needs. Companies can tailor apprenticeship opportunities to their needs, which might not align with a specific registered program. As one human resources executive explained, "Our company needs workers who can do many different things on the job – sometimes several different trades – and we need the flexibility to meet the needs of ongoing projects. Our unregistered programs are just as rigorous, but they're more relevant to the jobs at hand. That's a benefit to the organization, but also to the individual."[128] Non-registered programs also require less paperwork, a benefit especially for smaller companies, and allow more company control over program length and content. Companies have a strong incentive to ensure their programs are high quality, as ineffective training is wasteful.

Another promising alternative to registered apprenticeships was the federal Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship Program. Created in 2017 with Executive Order 13801,[129] industry-recognized apprenticeships were set to be "a new and flexible form of high-quality apprenticeship programs that provides individuals with opportunities to obtain workplace-relevant knowledge and progressively advancing skills."[130] In 2022, the U.S. Department of Labor rescinded the program,[131] depriving it of the opportunity to prove its value.

Illinois is underserving the demographic most ripe for apprenticeships: youth. About 39% of Illinois' active apprentices in 2021 were age 24 or younger,[132] but only 57 individuals were enrolled in programs exclusively for youth that year, according to the Urban Institute.[133] This was lower than nearly all of Illinois' Midwest neighbors in 2021. And although Iowa's 574 apprentices in youth-exclusive programs was the highest, it's still a low figure, indicating a need for improvement across the country.[134]



Programs that inadequately support apprentices' specific learning needs contribute to incomplete apprenticeships.[135] Reaching young people earlier with programs designed to meet their unique learning needs can help them stay engaged and successfully transition into the workforce, reducing their chances of falling into poverty or long-term unemployment.[136] Illinois needs to increase the quantity and quality of its youth apprenticeships, as they are tailored to the needs of younger learners and can empower them with experience, skills and industry-recognized credentials for a successful career.

Overall, Illinois' apprenticeship system shows promise but requires improvements to meet the diverse needs of its workforce.

Barriers to apprenticeship

Here we detail some of the most significant general reasons apprenticeships haven't expanded in Illinois and across America and suggest ways to overcome them. Each profession, from plumbing to computer programming, also faces specific barriers.

The Brookings Institution identified four overarching barriers:

- Stigmatization of apprenticeships as inferior to a college degree.[137]
- Low public awareness and understanding of apprenticeships.
- Onerous state and federal registration processes for businesses.
- "Siloed governance structures and funding streams between educational institutions, employer organizations and learners" which makes coordination difficult and reduces alignment with skills and curricula employers require.[138]

Apprenticeships have an image problem. They're often seen as a less-valuable career path than college. According to the Aspen Institute, many Americans see the trades as "dying and dirty."[139] For some, entering the trades feels like a step down professionally and socially. These views are driven in part by some of the other barriers we discuss, which means overcoming this stigma – the single biggest barrier – requires a comprehensive effort.

Information about apprenticeships is often limited. Apprenticeships usually aren't advertised in the same places as more traditional job opportunities. Application cycles are often different.[140]

Most Americans don't appreciate the value of apprenticeships. As Aspen Institute research explains, businesses "need to be exposed to the value of apprenticeship as evidenced by other companies," including through testimonials, case studies about results and site visits to more fully understand how apprenticeships can help them meet their business' needs.[141]

Businesses don't always perceive apprenticeships as serving their needs, either. Some don't see it as an effective means of recruitment.[142] Subsequently, employers aren't eager partners. Research from New America explains difficulties include communicating the benefits of youth apprenticeship to employers, particularly when it's a new post-secondary option in the region and persuading employers to become co-developers of talent rather than simply consumers of it.[143]

One crucial means of overcoming these challenges is better marketing about the benefits of apprenticeships by state-run programs, employers and through word of mouth.

The 1994 federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act temporarily boosted public awareness of youth apprenticeships. The act encouraged collaboration between businesses, schools and community organizations to provide students with vocational training, easing their transition from school to the workforce.[144]

However, momentum behind the act abruptly faded because of union opposition, concerns that students would make career decisions too early and a national reprioritization of other education

policies, such as expanding standardized testing and college enrollment.[145]

Because of insufficient data collection, stakeholders lack information about the benefits and efficacy of programs. As New America explains, "Youth apprenticeship programs sit at the intersection of the K-12 education system, higher education, and the public workforce system – each of which has its own rules and requirements around data collection and sharing."[146] An apprenticeship will likely show up in multiple sets of data, making it difficult to track an apprentice's progress and consider areas for improvement.

In fact, no publicly available comprehensive database for registered apprenticeships exists. While the U.S. Department of Labor has a data system with information on apprentice demographics and industries, much of it is inaccessible to the public. Data on employment outcomes by occupation or demographic group is unavailable. To the extent data is collected, employers typically must supply it with little financial support.[147] Although users can search registered apprenticeship program sponsors in a particular location, much of this information may be outdated and some is missing. Without accessible and comprehensive data, individuals and businesses struggle to make informed decisions. The best way to overcome this barrier is to "increase data capacity, better connect data systems and reconsider how youth apprenticeship appears in accountability data."[148]

Burdensome regulations complicate the registration process for many companies. Third Way explains, employers need to "understand varying regulations, collect data, complete paperwork, and meet standards that may look different from state to state or even city to city."[149] This costs significant time, expertise and money. The best way to overcome this barrier, according to the Progressive Policy Institute, is to cut red tape and simplify the registration process.[150] Expanding the number of intermediaries would help with this.

If Americans encounter an apprenticeship opportunity at all, it often comes far too late. While young people in countries such as Germany and Switzerland generally enter apprenticeships between the ages of 16 and 19, Americans usually enter registered apprenticeship in their late twenties.[151] That's far too late, and explains why, proportionate to population size, America lags Switzerland, England, Germany, Scotland and France. If America had as many per-capita apprenticeship starts as Switzerland, there would be a 21-fold increase in the number of Americans starting apprenticeships, up from 147,000 to over 3.1 million.[152]

The lack of stackable credentials creates another barrier. A stackable credential is a way to earn multiple credentials such as a certificate or degree en route to a larger credential. For example, a student might enroll in a nursing certificate program, then take the exam to become a certified nursing assistant, then complete an associate's or bachelor's degree.

Without a stackable credential, applicants often have nothing to show for years of investment. This deters many people from starting a program. The simple way to overcome this barrier is to ensure as many programs as possible have stackable credentials, allowing participants' hard work to yield something with career value even if they don't complete the program.

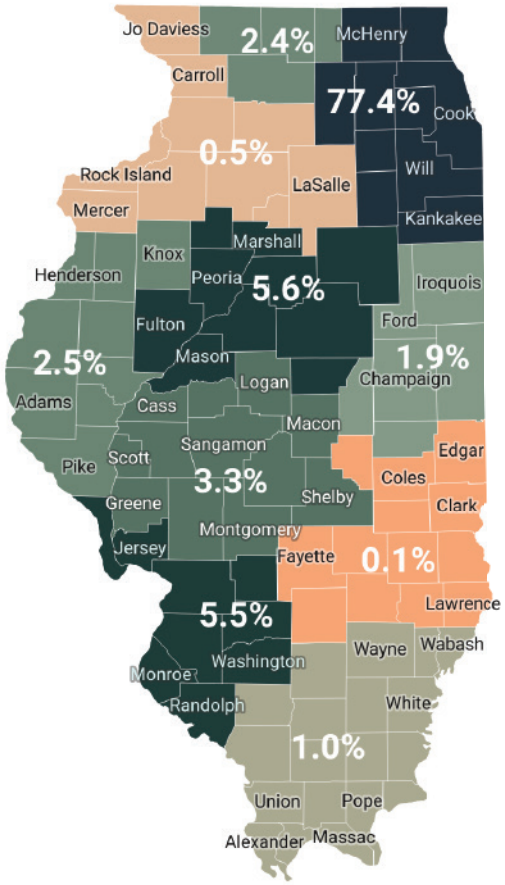
Geographic barriers exist, too. Rural communities have much less access to apprenticeships. There are 41 million rural Americans living more than 25 miles from the nearest college or university, key

places where people can learn trades, especially at community colleges.[153] Rural employers often have less financial or administrative capacity to start and maintain apprenticeships.[154]

According to a 2020 survey, 77.4% of Illinois' apprentices were in Cook County and the surrounding collar counties. Less than 1% were in Illinois' rural Northwest region, covering Bureau, Carroll, Henry, Jo Daviess, LaSalle, Lee, Mercer, Putnam, Rock Island and Whiteside counties. Just 10 apprentices were found in Illinois' rural southeastern region, encompassing Clark, Clay, Coles, Crawford, Cumberland, Edgar, Effingham, Fayette, Jasper, Lawrence, Marion, Moultrie and Richland counties.[155]

Over 3 in 4 Illinois apprentices are in Cook, collar counties

As of 2020, about 77% of Illinois apprentices were located in the Northeast Economic Development Region, covering Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties.



Map: @Illinoispolicy • Source: Brian Richard and Jennifer Foil. Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning in Illinois: A Report Mandated by Public Act 101-364, (Northern Illinois University, Center for Governmental Studies, 2020), 47-69 • Created with Datawrapper

Because it's impractical to build more community colleges without appropriate demand, the best way to overcome this barrier is to scale local apprenticeships so rural Americans have access to a wider range of career opportunities.

One substantial barrier that impacts most of the challenges discussed in this section is insufficient funding, particularly in Illinois. In 2022, Illinois dedicated $28 million to secondary-school apprenticeship programs,[156] least among the top seven most-populous states.[157] As we discuss later, the best way to overcome this barrier is to reallocate funding from universities to support more apprenticeships.

Part of this reallocation can be directed to investing in intermediaries, which can help overcome many of the barriers discussed above and support more apprenticeships statewide.[158] Intermediaries are organizations, often state-funded, which help employers develop and manage apprenticeships and connect interested participants with program opportunities and support services.[159] They include schools and school districts, nonprofit organizations, industry associations, workforce development boards and staffing companies.[160]

Intermediaries differ in their level of involvement and program support. Low-intervention intermediaries offer limited support and basic guidance, while high-intervention intermediaries provide day-to-day management and comprehensive services.[161] Crucially, they serve as the apprentice's employer of record, mitigating the wage cost for employers.[162]

Currently, Illinois' Apprenticeship Expansion Program funds just 16 intermediaries, most supporting construction.[163] This is small compared to Colorado, which enacted House Bill 21-1007 in 2024, which provided state funding to 35 qualified apprenticeship intermediaries.[164] Illinois needs to increase its investment to build a more robust network of high-intervention apprenticeship intermediaries, especially those serving non-construction industries.

Six traits of effective youth apprenticeships

Illinois needs to especially focus on growing and improving youth apprenticeships, as they help prepare the next generation of workers to succeed and contribute to their community. According to a 2021 state-by-state analysis of high school-level work-based learning, Illinois received "red ratings," indicating a lack of policy elements and need for improvement, on quality, state funding, communications infrastructure and use of data for accountability. Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, South Carolina, Washington, Virginia and Wisconsin received higher ratings in these categories.[165]

High-quality youth apprenticeships have six essential elements: skill-building opportunities and incentives; contextualized learning; a formal training structure; mentorship; program support services; and quality control processes. We consider each below.

First, high-quality youth apprenticeships help students build a diverse assortment of skills, including general employability skills and career-specific technical skills.[166] They do this through structured and measurable education plans, which detail the specific skills, day-to-day job responsibilities and industry qualifications required for a specific occupation.[167] High-quality programs are also academically rigorous, widening students' postsecondary options with both academic and occupational skill-building.[168]

Additionally, quality programs offer students incentives for skill acquisition, including pay increases as apprentices demonstrate proficiency and industry-recognized credentials upon completion. These credentials verify apprentices' skills and enable them to enter the workforce above entry-level.

Second, contextualized learning and real-world, practical application are important for youth apprenticeships. Research shows contextualized learning improves students' comprehension[169] and increases motivation and engagement.[170] Effective contextual learning aligns with immediate industry needs while remaining adaptable to technological advancements, changing industry standards and evolving workplace conventions. Ideally, businesses, community organizations, education institutions, school districts, industry associations and workforce development agencies collaborate to facilitate such alignment.

A formal training structure, with clearly defined hours for on-the-job experience and classroom instruction, is another key characteristic of quality programs. According to the Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary, a youth apprenticeship must include a minimum of 450 hours of on-the-job training and two semesters of classroom instruction,[171] an approach supported by research on vocational training models and labor market outcomes.[172]

Using a formal training structure benefits employers, ensuring quality, consistency and accountability on occupational tasks. According to a study from the Association of Talent Development, companies that invest in formal training structures exhibit profit margins 24% higher than those without such training.[173]

Mentorship is foundational to youth apprenticeships. Pairing students with experienced worksite mentors helps them build independence, confidence and social capital – the relationships needed to create inroads to job referrals, opportunities and resources. Mentors provide constructive feedback and serve as positive adult role models.[174] This is crucial for advancing young people's opportunity and securing future success, as research shows young people seeing adults working significantly improves their odds of economic mobility.[175]

Quality youth apprenticeships may also offer wraparound support services to widen accessibility and reduce barriers to program completion. This includes assistance with child care, housing, transportation, as well as academic support services, such as tutoring or career counseling, remote learning, fast-tracking or stackable credentialing options.[176]

Lastly, high-quality youth apprenticeships incorporate ongoing quality control processes, including the use of measurable performance metrics and monthly or annual progress reporting.[177] Quality control processes should enable program improvement, ensure accountability and facilitate replication and expansion of successful programs.[178]

Youth apprenticeship models for Illinois

Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship Program and South Carolina's Apprenticeship Carolina can serve as blueprints for Illinois to grow its programs.

Wisconsin was the first state to establish a robust youth apprenticeship system, passing bipartisan legislation in 1991. It stands out for its effective structure and low cost.[179]

Wisconsin's youth apprenticeship program is non-registered[180] but adheres to comparable time, credentialing and training requirements as registered programs. It operates across the state, through school districts, community colleges and local employers. The program offers career pathways in a variety of fields, including information technology, education, health care, finance, hospitality, manufacturing, transportation, construction, communications, marketing and more.[181] Responding to workforce trends, the state has continually expanded these opportunities, adding 14 new pathways in 2022 alone, bringing the total to 75.[182]

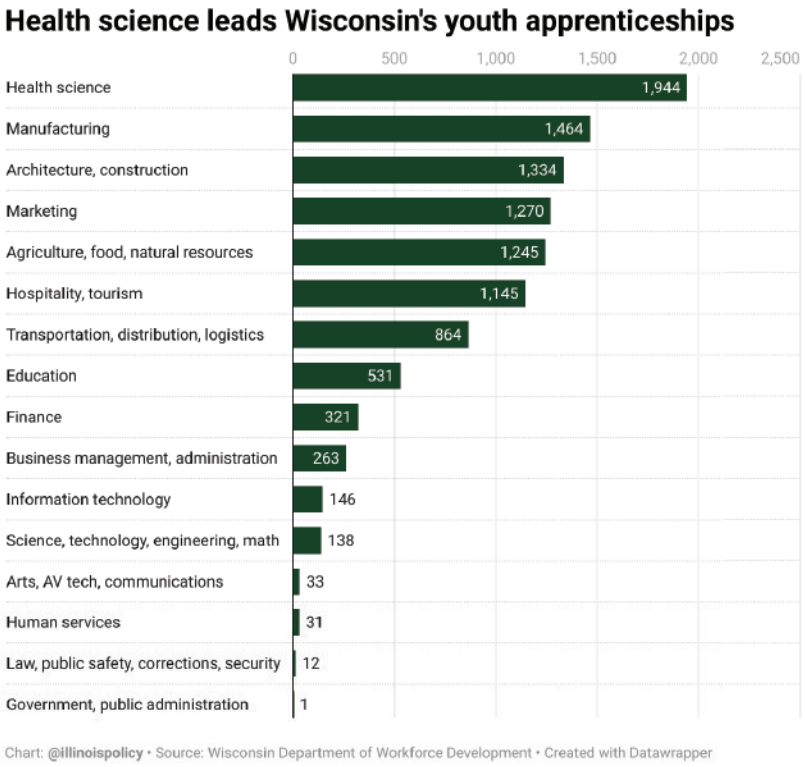
Outcomes for apprentices and employers involved in Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship Program have been positive. Between 2013 and 2023, both the number of Wisconsin's youth apprentices and employer sponsors nearly quadrupled.[183] According to data from Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development, the program had nearly 7,000 employer sponsors and over 10,000 youth apprentices enrolled for the 2024–2025 school year.

While Illinois' apprenticeships generally lack occupational variety, Wisconsin offers a wide range of options, with high enrollment in non-traditional fields, including health science, marketing, agriculture and hospitality.[184] This is likely one factor in the state's success in growing apprenticeship opportunities.

While few quantitative evaluations of the program's outcomes have been conducted to date, some past research has found positive results. A study from 2003 revealed 85% of employers perceived the program as beneficial to their companies. Another study from 1997 found 90% of employers would recommend it to other employers. Other long-term studies showed Wisconsin's youth apprentices had lower rates of absenteeism than their non-apprentice peers, they were more likely to craft strategic education and career plans, and gained greater independence and self-confidence.[185]

The Department of Workforce Development establishes detailed instructional guidelines in collaboration with industry stakeholders and educators, allowing for customization at the local level. This approach provides quality assurance across locations, supports local control and accelerates program development.[186]

South Carolina also has an effective state-funded apprenticeship model. Its distinguishing features are its intermediary focus and integration in the state's technical and community college system. Launched in 2007, Apprenticeship Carolina creates "demand-driven" programs based on employers' needs. Since 2012, the program has focused heavily on expanding registered youth programs.[187]



Apprenticeship Carolina has enrolled more than 53,000 apprentices since 2008.[188] Since its establishment, Apprenticeship Carolina has developed more than 800 registered programs, which support more than 3,000 occupations. [189] It added nearly 450 occupations between March 2020 and January 2021 alone.[190]

The state intermediary provides oversight and local-level program development.[191] Through apprenticeship consultants, it facilitates collaboration between education providers, employers and industry associations to identify required in-demand occupational skills and develop rigorous training curricula.[192] Consultants also help streamline program registration, easing regulatory and administrative burdens.[193]

To support state apprenticeship expansion efforts overall and offset costs for small business sponsors, Apprenticeship Carolina uses operational funds allocated by the state legislature, as well as federal grants, private funding and tax credits. In addition to funding from Apprenticeship Carolina, youth apprenticeship programs in South Carolina receive support at the local level through K-12 funds, state scholarships and philanthropic funds.[194]

Illinois can strengthen its youth apprenticeship system by implementing the following methods learned from Wisconsin's and South Carolina's successful models:

- Ensure programs remain responsive to workforce trends.
- Use a non-registered approach to expand apprenticeships outside traditional fields.
- Use intermediaries to engage employers and drive apprenticeship growth.
- Integrate apprenticeships within school districts and community colleges.
- Explore diverse funding mechanisms to sustain and expand its programs.

Policy recommendations

To become a leader in career-first education, Illinois must understand current and future workforce needs and expand apprenticeships to meet them. This requires removing barriers, fostering innovation and shifting mindsets among families, schools and businesses about education's purpose.

Our first major policy recommendation is to substantially grow Illinois' apprenticeship ecosystem, including youth-focused and non-registered programs. To achieve this, the state must increase investment and reduce funding disparities between apprenticeships and higher education. More balanced funding will help dismantle the stigma that apprenticeships are inferior to college education, reinforcing their value as a proven path to career success.

Current apprenticeship funding is insufficient to meet Illinois' workforce needs. In 2024, Illinois invested just $50.8 million in career and technical education, which includes apprenticeships. Of that, $28.5 million was allocated for secondary school programs.[195]

Although Illinois had 446 registered apprenticeship programs as of 2024, there were nearly 22,000 registered participants. During the past five years, only 3,426 apprentices in Illinois completed programs on average.[196]

How much does Illinois need to spend on apprenticeships to meet current and future workforce needs? According to 10-year employment projections,[197] Illinois will have nearly 150,000 job openings in the top 10 apprenticeable sectors alone, which includes health and science, legal services, finance, accounting and marketing.[198] That's almost 15,000 openings every year. While not every job in these sectors is apprenticeable, Illinois should strive to open as many of them as possible to apprentices. It's likely most of them will be either directly, or indirectly, applicable as apprentices climb an organizational ladder.

Based on current trends, there's an annual gap of almost 12,000 workers in these sectors between the number of apprentice completers Illinois is producing and the number needed to fill open jobs.

The costs to support Illinois' workforce needs are modest. An apprentice costs Illinois on average $4,770.[199] That's aligned with the national average of about $4,000, calculated by the Progressive Policy Institute.[200] For about an additional $55.2 million per year, Illinois can supply the nearly 12,000 workers needed in these sectors.

The best way to fund investment in apprenticeships, based on research from the Progressive Policy Institute, is to redirect expenditures on colleges and universities. As this study points out, tax funding for universities disproportionately benefits affluent individuals.[201] A more equitable approach would spread resources as widely as possible, increasing opportunity for low-income and minority people.

Illinois allocates $2.6 billion to higher education – over 90 times the amount it invested in secondary school career and technical education in 2024.[202] This funding supports 658,053 enrolled students,

at an average cost of $3,951 per student.[203] As discussed above, university education isn't adequately meeting the labor market needs of these students and businesses.

A substantial portion of university funding – more than 10% – is also spent on administrative bloat, not students or faculty. In fiscal year 2024, Illinois' public universities spent about $428.8 million in state-appropriated funds on administrative expenses.[204] In addition, Illinois had nearly 2,000 public university administrators who earned a base salary of $100,000 or more. The combined total salary for these administrators amounted to about $320 million.[205]

Administrative bloat is a national problem. A Forbes article revealed the number of full-time administrators and other non-instructors at U.S. colleges and universities surged by 164% and 452% between 1976 and 2018, while the number of full-time faculty only increased by 92% and student enrollment grew just 78%.[206] A study from the American Enterprise Institute found, on average in 2023, U.S. public universities had 70 full-time administrative staff members per 1,000 full-time students.[207]

Illinois' administrative growth is concerning. From 2006 to 2023, while full-time equivalent fall student enrollment dropped by almost 20%,[208] the number of full-time equivalent administrator positions at Illinois public universities increased over 50%.[209] In 2023, public universities and colleges in Illinois had about 105 administrative staff members per 1,000 full-time students[210] – 50% higher than the national average found by the American Enterprise Institute study.[211] Among other harms, this contributes to increasing tuition costs.

Policymakers should fund apprenticeships by trimming administrative bloat. A 13% reduction in state-funded administrative expenditures in 2024 would've provided the $55.2 million necessary to expand apprenticeships to meet the state's workforce needs.

The second major policy recommendation to empower poor and minority Illinoisans is to make it legal to apprentice in fields where occupational licenses currently require formal education. They would simply complete the apprenticeship, pass an exam and pay fees, then receive a license to work in a field. By training directly with someone in that trade, someone can get the skills to excel without being required to attend particular schools and take on massive debt.

A new apprenticeship-to-licensure pathway would have the biggest impact in aesthetic fields, such as barbering, cosmetology or hair braiding. Currently, individuals can only earn their approved credentials through for-profit trade schools with average annual tuition over $17,000, creating massive, unfair barriers to poor and minority workers.[212]

For people who cannot afford to attend school without working for a year or more – i.e. most people – apprenticeship-to-licensure offers a flexible, earn-and-learn opportunity. For example, someone working as an aesthetic apprentice on weekends alongside their full-time job could complete the required training in less than two years. Several states, including Idaho and Iowa, have recently passed similar, even broader bills.[213]

Illinois House Bill 3533, the Licensure Apprenticeship Act, would open apprenticeship as a pathway for all licensed occupations.[214] Upon completing the apprenticeship, passing an exam and paying fees, individuals should receive a

license to work in their chosen field. Idaho, Iowa, Alabama and North Carolina have passed similar legislaton in recent years.[215]

To further spread opportunity, especially in licensed trades, high schools should offer more apprenticeships in occupations such as cosmetology, pharmacy tech and paramedic services. Upon program completion, students would receive an occupational license. This approach would make apprenticeship accessible to a wider range of industries, opening doors for poor and minority Illinoisans who cannot afford the costs of post-secondary schooling.

Illinois needs to reallocate resources to increase marketing and public outreach, as many students, parents and employers remain unaware of the vast benefits of apprenticeships. Intermediaries are especially helpful with program development, registration, recruitment and marketing apprenticeships' benefits. That's why Illinois should reallocate resources to support more high-intervention intermediaries, which can help coordinate and scale both registered and non-registered programs.

It's also critical to identify which apprenticeable professions will be in demand not just today but tomorrow. The economy and job market are rapidly changing because of technological development, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and a host of other innovations. Without awareness of workforce trends, someone could train in a profession, escape poverty, then fall back into it if the profession shrinks or evaporates.

To avoid this, the state should commission biannual expert reports on the future of work to regularly reassess workforce trends. In 2022, the state released a report entitled "Future of Work in Illinois," which did this by tapping on the expertise of a wide range of stakeholders.[216] With such information, employers, intermediaries, educators and others can develop innovative apprenticeships, widening occupational variety.

Illinois should continue to encourage apprenticeship innovation at the local level, too. In 2023 Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot created a pilot program entitled "DiverseTech," which "seeks to train 25 apprentices in fields like cybersecurity and digital services."[217] These and other pilot programs should be tested at a small scale to see if they work. If they do, they can be expanded and adopted by other localities.

Finally, the state, the education system and employers must systematically identify and eliminate any other barriers to expanding apprenticeship. This includes simplifying program registration processes, offering customizable occupational frameworks for employers, and ensuring apprenticeship databases are publicly accessible, comprehensive and accurate.

Conclusion: higher than what?

Who do you believe: me or your own eyes? That's what our professional classes have been asking Americans when it comes to degree-first education and professional development. Resoundingly, Americans are believing their own eyes. While they see college as good and necessary for some professions, it's unnecessary for so many others. They see how unused degrees, mountains of debt and a range of other counterproductive outcomes are harmful, especially for those most in need of work.

This is why the survey data we noted above are so stark, with only 22% of U.S. adults believing college is worth it if you have to take on debt, and just 36% of Americans have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in universities.

Colleges and universities have taken to calling themselves "higher" education. This begs the question: higher than what, exactly? This report has demonstrated that, if anything, the personal and professional opportunities are higher through apprenticeships.

If someone wants to become a millionaire, the trades offer a pathway, shattering the myth of degrees as the superior route to financial success. A recent story in The Wall Street Journal stated private equity firms have been acquiring home services companies in fields such as plumbing, electrical work and heating, ventilation and air conditioning, highlighting their lucrative potential.[218]

People are increasingly recognizing college is not the only or best option for everyone, and rightfully so.

Illinois can lead America's education shift to go beyond degrees and focus on careers. It's true it requires a significant mindset change from educators, employers and individuals, but we know such a shift is possible. The "college-first" mentality emerged only a few decades ago.

Illinois is extremely well-positioned to become a national leader. It's strong in a wide range of sectors ripe for apprenticeship growth, including technology and manufacturing. It has great infrastructure, including transportation and logistics. It's home to world-class universities, which provide technical expertise in fields where required. It's home to America's third-largest city, Chicago.

Most importantly, there's a growing recognition among elected leaders that the state needs to focus more on empowering people's social mobility through employment. That's why the state implemented numerous occupational licensing reforms in 2024.[219]

2025 can be the year Illinois takes big steps towards restoring social mobility and empowering more Illinoisans to live their version of the American Dream, by growing apprenticeships and expanding access to fulfilling careers.

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