

Apprenticeships are gaining steam across America and could be a workforce development solution particularly well suited to rural communities

Apprenticeships for Rural America

During his first semester at Belmont Abbey College, Nolan Cassidy's life changed dramatically. Entering college as a student athlete playing basketball, he chose a degree that aligned with his passion: "I started off in psychology. I wanted to stick around sports, so I thought I would be a sports psychologist."

But just a couple months in, he shattered his metatarsal, a key bone in the foot. Unable to continue playing, his sports scholarship was revoked. Without a way to pay for college, he needed to find a new way forward.

Troy Cassidy, Nolan's father, has been in the utility business for over 40 years. He served as a superintendent and public works director across member utilities of the Florida Rural Water Association and now works for the North Carolina Rural Water Association, ensuring safe drinking water access and wastewater management for rural counties across North Carolina. The National Rural Water Association is a nonprofit organization created in 1976 in the wake of the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Water Act to help rural communities meet the new standards for drinking water through training,

supporting, and promoting wastewater professionals. Every Fifth District state hosts a branch of the National Rural Water Association, and all except Virginia have a corresponding apprenticeship program, training apprentices to become water and wastewater professionals in rural areas.

Troy sees those apprenticeships as a strong path into the profession: “It’s great for students coming out of high school, great for students who went to college for a couple years, and for those coming out of the military and trying to find a new way of getting back into society.”

When Troy introduced Nolan to the North Carolina Rural Water Association’s apprenticeship program, Nolan knew it was exactly what he was looking for. “I wanted something that would give me career growth and a good opportunity for myself.”

Sociologists and economists alike have identified a strong desire among many rural Americans to remain in their communities. A 2022 study conducted with 68 individuals in rural Pennsylvania described participants as “valuing the ability to remain in their hometowns over seeking better pay and opportunity elsewhere.” A similar sociological study, conducted by sociologist Ryan Parsons at the University of Mississippi, found that rural youth struggled with the idea of leaving their communities. Could apprenticeships be a pathway for rural residents to build careers closer to home?

APPRENTICESHIPS GAIN ATTENTION

Apprenticeships, as defined by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), “combine paid on-the-job training with classroom instruction to prepare workers for highly-skilled careers.” Many potential apprentices are attracted to the path by the direct pipeline it offers to steady work. ApprenticeshipsUSA, a DOL informational resource on apprenticeships, estimates that 93 percent of apprentices in Registered Apprenticeships are hired by their training company after completing the program. Registered Apprenticeships are programs that meet certain DOL standards, including being industry vetted and paid, providing structured job training, and offering supplemental classroom education.

For decades, apprenticeship programs have existed in the United States as a lesser-used option for job training. But recent years have seen an increasing appetite from private sector employers to offer these programs. In May 2026, Apprenticeships for America published a report sharing ideas from leading U.S. employers with developed apprenticeship programs. These companies argued that four-year degree programs are not evolving quickly enough to meet new job expectations stemming from increased automation and artificial intelligence implementation. They cited worker shortages in health care, infrastructure, advanced manufacturing, and technology as evidence that the current degree-focused workforce pipeline is not meeting demand, and they pointed to apprenticeships to fill these labor market gaps.

“Employers across industries are increasingly recognizing

apprenticeship as a powerful tool,” the authors of the report wrote. However, they also identified a major barrier to apprenticeship programs’ wider adoption: “insufficient” national policy efforts.

According to a 2023 study by the Urban Institute and Mathematica, administrators from eight states’ apprenticeship programs noted that state and federal guidelines and subsidies can offset costs that might dissuade firms from establishing apprenticeship programs. Some of the participating states said that these payments mitigate startup costs for apprenticeship programs, which are especially helpful for small businesses, and keep continued expenses low. The study also found that “incentives have helped states strengthen connections with employers, reach underrepresented populations of potential apprentices, increase the overall number of apprentices, and diversify apprenticeship industries.”

For policymakers looking to bolster employment in critical industries, supporting apprenticeship programs may offer an attractive solution. The National Apprenticeship Resource Hub asserts that apprenticeships can support key U.S. industries by addressing common workforce issues, such as labor shortages and the need to keep pace with rapidly evolving skill requirements. By providing a direct pipeline to industries and a training resource, apprenticeships can help fill shortages in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, health care, transportation and logistics, and education. For sectors including energy, professional services, and finance and insurance, the resource hub finds that apprenticeships address widespread needs for more skills and experience.

Without public support, it can be difficult to grow and sustain apprenticeship programs, says Heather Somers, executive director of the North Carolina Rural Water Association. The funding her apprenticeship program receives from the DOL and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) pays the salary of her apprenticeship coordinator, but the apprenticeship program still runs a deficit every year. “We’re happy with what we get, and we make it work, but it gives us no outlet to fund outreach.” If the North Carolina Rural Water Association could offer more money to utility companies hosting apprentices, she believes it would incentivize greater participation. “If companies are on the fence or unsure if this is the right fit for them, that takes away a little bit of the risk so that they’re willing to give it a try.”

According to Miranda Lough, apprenticeship coordinator of the West Virginia Rural Water Association, support of state agencies like WorkForce West Virginia can also ensure programs expand where they are most needed. When discussing towns in West Virginia where the loss of the coal industry hit the job market particularly hard, she said, “The goal is that we would always be there to provide the apprenticeship as a service to that community, to try to help people who are unemployed.” In her experience, working with a state agency has helped them have that impact. “A good thing about working with WorkForce West Virginia so closely is that they have rapid response. There’s a WARN

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INVESTIGATING STATE SPONSORSHIP

Across the Fifth District, states are increasingly bolstering apprenticeship programs by strengthening informational resources and subsidies.

Apprenticeship Carolina, part of the SC Technical College System, is South Carolina’s well-established state apprenticeship organization. Started in 2007, it now encompasses 16 technical colleges across the state and has produced 55,501 Registered Apprenticeships. There are also pre-apprenticeship programs to familiarize potential participants with an industry and provide a pathway into Registered Apprenticeship programs. Devin Orr, pre-apprenticeship coordinator of the South Carolina Rural Water Association, emphasizes that pre-apprenticeships can have a transformative impact on teenagers. “They’re learning increased responsibility, they’re developing a work ethic, and they’re maturing as they’re working in a professional environment.”

Julianne Dunn, senior program officer on the Workforce and Financial Prosperity team of Rural LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation), is a major proponent of economic programs that bolster rural areas. Rural LISC fosters apprenticeships “that meet the unique needs of rural areas” across rural Arkansas and Mississippi through regional collaboratives. In *Workforce Realigned, Vol. II*, a 2025 book compiling skill development approaches for workers across the country, she wrote, “By equipping residents with in-demand and transferable skills, apprenticeships can foster local talent retention and enable rural communities to thrive in an increasingly competitive job market while maintaining the small-town culture most rural communities prefer.”

While many industries could potentially implement apprenticeships, there are certain fields that may be well poised for success because of their existing presence in rural communities. Rural Youth Catalyst, an organization supporting rural youth, and Jobs for the Future, a workforce development organization, came together to study rural apprenticeships and identify roles in essential services, such as police, firefighting, health care, civil service, and education. In their 2025 Rural America at a Glance report, the USDA found these industries to comprise a large share of the rural U.S. economy. In addition, essential services match the community-centric mindset of many close-knit rural areas.

Another way apprenticeships could help in rural settings is by training participants for business succession. This may be most applicable in agriculture, where the average age in the profession is 58, and hands-on experience is essential. (See “Virginia’s Small Farmers Weather Unpredictability,” *Econ Focus*, Fourth Quarter 2025.) One successful program is the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, which stretches across 16 states and matches more than 200 dairy farmers with apprentices to work side by side for two years.

Even outside of rural places, apprenticeships may be gaining relevance due to shifting conditions in the labor market. Laura Ullrich, director of economic research in North

America at the job search website Indeed’s Hiring Lab, uses the term “experience creep” to describe the growing trend of employers asking for increasing levels of experience for entry-level jobs. A recent report from Strada Education Foundation, an organization that aims to bridge the gap between educational institutions and employers, analyzed the preferences of executives in the hiring process and found they are looking for candidates with internships and other industry experience and deprioritizing academic performance. This shift in expectations between the employer and potential employee could make apprenticeships appealing to employers looking for more skills in entry-level employees.

EMPLOYMENT IN RURAL AMERICA

Apprenticeships may also be attractive to rural residents seeking to enter the workforce, as the availability of jobs in rural places often lags urban markets. According to a 2026 USDA article, nonmetropolitan total employment had not yet fully recovered to pre-Great Recession levels as of 2022, whereas metropolitan areas reached that level in 2013. Labor force participation rates also decreased at a faster rate in nonmetro versus metro areas from 2007-2019, which the article noted “suggests that rural workers faced a choice between moving to urban areas to find work and remaining in rural areas where there were fewer jobs post-Great Recession.”

According to Lough, apprenticeships could offer a third option. “Once people understand apprenticeships or know that there’s an apprenticeship available, there’s usually a lot of excitement,” she says. In her opinion, part of the appeal comes from stability. “An apprenticeship lays out what you’re going to be making in the program and your wage progression. There’s never any doubt or confusion about whether you will be able to keep progressing and growing.”

Another attraction is the promise of stable work in one’s own community. A pair of articles in the 2022 volume of the *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* titled “Growing Up Rural: How Place Shapes Life Outcomes” point to the importance of a rural identity in career choices. One study found, “The vast majority of participants had a common goal for their future selves: to remain steadily employed throughout their adult lives. In fact, nearly all stated that not working was not acceptable in adulthood. ... Yet participants also spoke of communities undergoing drastic economic changes—labor-market shifts that left their hometowns to languish. Despite the value placed on paid work, they grew up in areas where finding paid work could be difficult.”

For rural men, their relationship to work appears closely intertwined with a commitment to staying in their communities. A study of 61 working-class men in rural Pennsylvania found that most chose “upskilling,” or postsecondary education or training, that reinforced their identities as working-class men and helped them remain in their communities. A mixed gender study of 68 rural individuals found the families of working-class women strongly emphasized college for them — more so than for their male siblings. For those who didn’t feel pushed toward college, they found their “parents encouraged them to attach their identity to paid work.” At the same time, a desire to remain

close to families and communities prompted working-class women in several instances to downsize their ambitions and not pursue higher-paying occupations away from home.

To James Blevins, director of the Virginia Rural IT Apprenticeship Program at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, helping people stay in their communities can be the entire drive of a rural apprenticeship program. “The purpose is to bring high-paying, quality jobs to rural areas so people can make a good living where most of them grew up.”

In his experience as a technical assistant/trainer with the North Carolina Rural Water Association, Troy Cassidy found the outreach was often well received when it helped people remain in rural areas. “I work with all the rural communities in Western Carolina, and it can be really community based. There are certain towns I go to, and participants live there their whole life. They don’t want to leave, and through our program, they’re able to stay and get their license.”

That said, his son Nolan says apprenticeships are also a good fit for rural young adults wanting to gain skills close to home while retaining the flexibility to roam. “At the end of the program, you’re able to be a journey worker, and that license can be transferred wherever you plan on moving.”

LIMITS TO BROADER IMPLEMENTATION

Despite these benefits, developing large-scale apprenticeship programs faces significant challenges in the United States.

From the perspective of top employers, there needs to be significant evolution in how apprenticeship programs are introduced to businesses to make widespread adoption feasible. The representatives of firms convened by Apprenticeships for America saw both complex navigation requirements and program design as barriers to entry for companies considering offering a Registered Apprenticeship. They also identified an incompatibility between the long-term multiyear mindset that companies bring to workforce planning and the widespread perception of apprenticeships as a one-off program to fill immediate hiring needs. They attributed this misperception to insufficient and unpredictable federal and state grants, which disincentivize the kind of sustained investment that would help companies view apprenticeships as a long-term workforce development tool.

The group had a few ideas for solutions: Clear, standardized frameworks for programs; intermediaries to help with cumbersome administrative tasks; and technological tools that simplify navigation and design. They also thought apprenticeships should be more closely aligned with college and other

credit-bearing paths so they aren’t an isolated option.

Rural LISC identified some specific hurdles with bringing apprenticeships to rural areas. One logistical challenge is getting potential participants to training centers, as public transportation is often “relatively nonexistent” in rural communities. Another is an educational barrier, with potential apprentices “lacking the basic skills in math, literacy, and technology necessary to learn more complex skills usually related to apprenticeships.”

Sherri Buckner, apprenticeship and eLearning coordinator for the South Carolina Rural Water Association, was able to address those issues with more flexible learning options. “We offer a variety of training classes throughout the month. We have roughly 10 to 12 options every month, and to stay on track, they only have to come to two classes. Offering those options makes the program work for smaller towns.”

In *Workforce Realigned, Vol. II*, Dunn emphasized the importance of educational and workforce partners in the community scoping out existing skills, training, and positions, as well as a “workforce assessment” to better understand the barriers to employment in an area.

Somers agrees that this kind of intentional community assessment is essential. “There’s a saying among rural water people that if you’ve seen one rural water community, you’ve seen one rural water community, because every community has different challenges. To have that regional lens is so valuable.” In her view, “funding will continue to be the biggest barrier and opportunity.” But seeing the results for program participants makes overcoming these challenges worth it. “We had an apprentice who had no water or wastewater experience, she completed her apprenticeship four or five months early, just worked really hard, and then about six months later, the system came back to us and said they’d like to hire another apprentice.”

Driven apprentices are a theme across the National Rural Water Association branches. Buckner notes that “many have actually gone on to complete higher-level licensing while they were in my program, which has led to increases in pay for them and also job offers from other local utilities.”

With their focus on hands-on learning and ability to ground employment in hometowns, apprenticeships are being increasingly recognized by the private sector and state governments alike as a tool well suited to rural labor markets. They are discovering what those championing and completing apprenticeships in rural America already know: These programs can provide a transformative opportunity to enter a new field with confidence under the stability of guided and paid training. **EF**

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