

OPINION

Doors to apprenticeship should open early

By DAN CAMPBELL

Although apprenticeship is known by some as “the other four-year degree,” others refer to it as “the best-kept secret in Oregon.” Apprenticeship as a work force training method is often overlooked.

Apprenticeship is an “earn while you learn” form of training. According to Ken Fry, a member of the Oregon State Apprenticeship Council, it is “occupational training that combines supervised on-the-job training experience with classroom instruction.”

Apprentices are paid as full-time employees at a rate usually based on a percentage of journeyman pay. Apprentices also attend classes at an industry training center or community college. Apprenticeships in Oregon typically last two and five years, depending on the occupation and the depth of training required. Unions and employers privately fund many programs, so there is little or no cost to taxpayers. Apprenticeship is highly regulated by the state Bureau of Labor and Industries and by the U.S. Department of Labor.

If it were a four-year institution of higher learning, apprenticeship would be the fourth-largest university in Oregon, with more than 7,000 registered apprentices. Most apprentices have a higher wage when they complete their training than most graduates of the Oregon University System. Apprentices typically earn \$40,000 to \$70,000 per year, depending on their occupation.

An example of apprentice earning capacity is the program offered by the Central Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee. Graduates of the General Journeyman Electrician apprenticeship program accumulate more than \$160,000 in earnings plus a generous benefit

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package during their five years of training. Not only is their training done without any significant cost to the state, apprentices contribute to the state through taxes paid on their income. All apprenticeship programs share the “earn while you learn” component.

Although 80 percent of registered apprentices in Oregon are in the building trades, there are also apprenticeships for other occupations such as corrections officer, equipment technician, forest worker trainee, law enforcement officer, etc.

Many other careers could benefit from this type of training. In Europe, it is common for people to receive work skill training in an apprenticeship setting for jobs in finance and manufacturing.

The median age of a new apprentice in most programs ranges between 27 and 30. Why aren't more high school graduates finding their way to our doors at an earlier age?

Some speculate that the starting age seems to be going up because of a lack of direction for non-college bound students. I believe it goes deeper than that. For the past 15 years or longer, we have gradually disinvested in our schools. Schools had few options when property tax support and local control of school funding was reduced. Many school districts faced a tough decision — not whether to make cuts, but which programs to cut. Unfortunately, in many districts the more expensive vocational education and shop programs were among the first to go.

I and many of my contemporaries who followed careers in skilled manual occupations went to shop classes. We graduated from high school knowing that we liked to work with our hands. We knew there was a reason for the math and science classes we took, because we had a chance to apply much of it in shop class projects. We graduated from high school with some knowledge and proficiency in the use of hand tools and power equipment. Shop teachers knew about apprenticeships and often directed students toward them.

Today's high school students aren't as lucky. Few schools have shop and vocational education programs. Most graduates wait 10 years or longer before they finally stumble across “the best kept secret in Oregon,” and apply for careers in skilled trades that require manual dexterity.

If we want to change this pattern and offer high school graduates the great opportunities of apprenticeship, we must find a way to bring back those school shop programs that my generation took for granted. That goes beyond stabilizing school funding. We must find a way to increase school funding. We need to put resources back into the programs that offer skills that provide an opportunity for good family-wage jobs.

Students who may choose something other than four years of college for their path to success deserve no less from us.

Dan Campbell, an electrician for 35 years, has been training director of the Central Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee for 18 years and is a member of the Lane Workforce Partnership Board of Directors. This is the eighth in a biweekly series of columns on developing Lane County's work force.