



THE
WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS CENTER



education
northwest

Demand for Degrees

Perspectives from Apprentices

Rachel Maller, Erich Stiefvater, and Shannon Davidson

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About The William D. Ruckelshaus Center

The William D. Ruckelshaus Center (the Center) is an impartial resource for collaborative problem solving in Washington State and the Pacific Northwest dedicated to assisting public, private, nonprofit, tribal, and other community leaders in their efforts to resolve conflicts around difficult public policy issues. The Center is a joint effort between the Washington State University Office of the Provost and the University of Washington Daniel J. Evans School of Public Policy and Governance. For more information about the Center, please visit:

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About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations to address educational inequities and improve student success. While most of our work centers on the Pacific Northwest, our evaluations, technical assistance, and research studies have national impact and provide timely and actionable results.

CONTACT

Education Northwest
811 SW 6th Avenue, Suite 100
Portland, OR 97204
educationnorthwest.org
503.275.9500

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Executive Summary

Expanding access to higher education credentials, such as college certificates and degrees for individuals enrolled in apprenticeship programs, is a growing national trend, but a key question remains: What is the demand for credentials among apprentices? As part of a statewide collaborative process led by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center in response to Washington Senate Bill 5764 (2022), Education Northwest conducted research to assess the demand for degrees among registered apprentices in Washington state. Education Northwest surveyed 641 current apprentices and 151 former apprentices and held focus groups with an additional 13 current apprentices.



Current and former apprentices expressed a high demand for degrees. Seventy-three (73) percent of current apprentices were interested or very interested in earning an associate degree, and 69 percent were interested in earning a bachelor’s degree. Similar interest was expressed by former apprentices.



Current and former apprentices of color expressed a higher level of interest in earning degrees compared to white apprentices. Between 79 and 93 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic or Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander current apprentices were interested in earning an associate degree, compared to 69 percent of white current apprentices. Eighty-one (81) percent of Hispanic or Latino former apprentices expressed interest in obtaining an associate degree, compared to 69 percent of white former apprentices.



Many current and former apprentices have prior experience with college coursework. Fifty-five (55) percent of the current apprentices reported holding college credits, and 50 percent said they are currently earning college credit through their apprenticeship programs. However, 25 percent of current apprentices were unsure if they are currently earning college credit through their apprenticeship.



Most current and former apprentices, especially apprentices of color, agreed that earning a degree supports career advancement, such as through opening more career opportunities, demonstrating competency to employers, offering a pathway to positions with more responsibility, and standing out in the job market.



Current apprentices identified financial support, flexible scheduling, and access to information as important factors in supporting them to pursue credentials through their apprenticeships.

Overall, these findings suggest strong demand for degrees among Washington’s registered apprentices, particularly among apprentices of underrepresented groups. The findings can inform decision making among Washington higher education and apprenticeship partners to advance the state’s pioneering work in connecting its citizens to education and career success.

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Background

Apprenticeship programs and higher education are increasingly recognized as complementary pathways for workforce development and educational advancement (Goger, 2020). While historically treated as separate and distinct pathways, many states are now interested in creating pathways for apprentices to obtain college credits and credentials and for college students to participate in apprenticeship programs (Prebil, 2019). Washington state has been a leader in expanding postsecondary opportunities for apprentices, such as through the Washington Grant for Apprentices and establishing the Multi-Occupational Trades degree. Senate Bill 5764 (2022) builds on this foundation by mandating and sponsoring research, consultation, and reporting focused on developing opportunities for state-registered apprentices to receive credits toward a degree.

This report responds to the need for research on this topic by exploring the extent to which current and former apprentices are interested in earning degrees or credentials. The report also provides information on apprentices' perceptions of and experiences with their existing preparation pathways. To date, one exploratory study (Decker, 2019) has shown that college students are interested in apprenticeships, but the reverse—apprentices' interest in earning degrees—has been underexplored. Understanding whether apprentices are interested in pursuing degrees is important for determining whether state efforts to support them in that pursuit are worth the investment.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies of its kind, and it is particularly timely as Washington higher education, workforce development, and apprenticeship partners are currently developing recommendations related to Senate Bill 5764. By centering apprentices' voices in decisions that directly affect them, Washington is adopting a learner-centered approach to creating postsecondary pathways that lead to career success in an ever-changing job market.

Methods

Education Northwest conducted a survey and focus groups with current and former state-registered apprentices to gather insights on their interest in college credentials, prior college experiences, and perceptions of degree benefits. The survey was distributed via apprenticeship program contacts obtained from a publicly available dataset posted on the Washington Department of Labor and Industries website. We sent two emails to each contact and followed up with phone calls to maximize participation. Focus group participants were recruited from survey respondents, with incentives offered for participation.

The survey received responses from 641 current apprentices and 151 former apprentices (table 1). The demographics and apprenticeship industries of the survey participants were similar to the state's apprentice population (Washington State Apprenticeship & Training Council, 2022) with

80 percent from construction and manufacturing industries, and the sample was predominantly white and male. Additionally, Education Northwest conducted four virtual focus groups with 13 current and former apprentices—five from construction and manufacturing apprenticeships and eight from emerging industries. The focus group participants consisted of five men and eight women.

Table 1. Survey demographics

Category	Current apprentices		Former apprentices	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
Industry*				
Construction & Manufacturing Industries	80%	488	72%	106
<i>Construction</i>	63%	386	40%	60
<i>Manufacturing</i>	2%	23	20%	30
<i>Other</i>	15%	90	12%	16
Emerging Industries	20%	122	28%	42
<i>Agriculture</i>	N/A	n<10	1%	n<10
<i>Education</i>	N/A	n<10	N/A	n<10
<i>Energy</i>	9%	54	5%	8
<i>Healthcare</i>	5%	30	17%	25
<i>Information technology</i>	N/A	n<10	N/A	n<10
<i>Other</i>	N/A	n<10	N/A	n<10
<i>Personal services</i>	N/A	n<10	N/A	n<10
<i>Telecommunication</i>	2%	15	N/A	n<10
<i>Transportation</i>	2%	12	N/A	n<10
Gender				
Men	85%	485	74%	99
Women	15%	83	26%	34
Non-binary	n<10	n<10	n<10	n<10
Something else fits better	n<10	n<10	n<10	n<10
Age				
Ages 18 to 29	48%	282	27%	37
Ages 30 and up	51%	298	73%	100
Formal education				
High school	46%	263	31%	42
Some college	28%	161	68%	50

Category	Current apprentices		Former apprentices	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
College degree	26%	151	32%	44
Race/ethnicity				
American Indian or Alaska Native	6%	33	n<10	n<10
Asian	5%	30	n<10	n<10
Black or African American	5%	29	n<10	n<10
Hispanic or Latino	27%	157	15%	20
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3%	19	n<10	n<10
White	64%	370	72%	96
Something else fits better	4%	22	n<10	n<10

*The categories of "construction and manufacturing industries" and "emerging industries" were created to align with how the Washington Department of Labor and Industries classifies construction trades versus non-construction trades in their quarterly reporting (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, n.d.). The term "emerging industries" is used to reflect the growing nature of these fields.

Note: N = 641 for current apprentices and N = 151 for former apprentices.

Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

As the survey and focus groups relied on convenience sampling (i.e., relying on apprenticeship coordinators for recruitment), the generalizability of their findings is limited. This approach likely missed potential participants, skewing the sample. Additionally, participation in both the survey and focus groups may reflect a selection bias. That is, apprentices who chose to participate may have different characteristics or perspectives than those who did not participate, potentially leading to overrepresentation of apprentices more interested in higher education credentials.

Other possible limitations may include a framing that suggests academic credentials have more value than industry-recognized certifications due to the emphasis on earning degrees. However, this research does not make any claims about the relative value of credentials and recognizes the importance of all types. This report focuses on the demand for degrees to help inform legislation. Furthermore, the survey did not contextualize demand with several considerations, such as cost and time. Additionally, the survey did not ask about current opportunities, such as the Multi-Occupational Trade degree. Nevertheless, this research aimed to gauge high-level interest to serve as a foundation for future research

This report should be viewed as a starting point for better understanding the experiences and career expectations of Washington’s registered apprentices. Further investigation can expand apprentices’ participation in the research and offer a more finely grained assessment of their experiences and motivations.

An online appendix with more detailed methods, the survey and focus group instruments, and full survey results can be accessed here: <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:3efc64b6-63eb-4506-b5f0-ce23535e4132>

Interest in credentials

Credentials, as defined in the survey, are verifications of qualification or competence, such as diplomas, certificates, degrees, registered apprenticeship certificates, occupational licenses, personnel certifications, and other skill certificates (U.S., Department of Labor, 2010). Apprentices who complete a registered apprenticeship program receive a certificate of completion of apprenticeship, which is a nationally recognized credential demonstrating professional skills and knowledge in their chosen field. On-the-job training and related supplemental instructional hours are the building blocks of this credential, with apprentices required to complete a set number of hours to earn it. Apprentices may also earn additional industry certifications during their apprenticeship, such as in project management or equipment operation, or occupational licenses in fields like teaching or cosmetology.

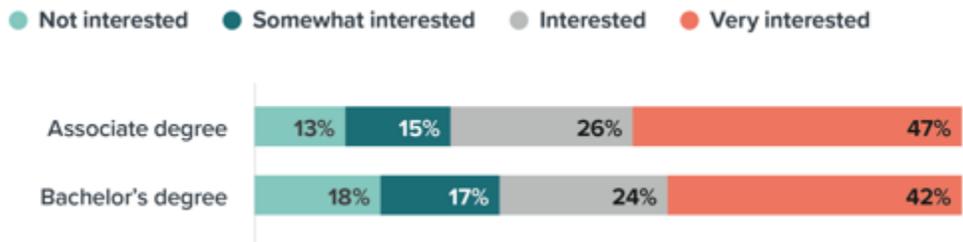
Since related supplemental instruction is often provided at Washington state community and technical colleges, many apprentices can earn college credit or a credential, such as an associate degree. Currently, Washington state offers the Multi-Occupational Trade degree, providing a pathway to college credentials for apprentices. Data from the Educational Research Data Center (ERDC) shows that, from 2000 to 2022, 78 percent of Washington apprentices were concurrently enrolled in college (Maller et al., 2022). However, only 3 percent of them had earned a college certificate (a shorter program in college such as accounting or early childhood education) and only 1 percent had earned an associate degree. These credentials are earned through college credit in courses with set terms and requirements. Some apprentices may be earning college credit without applying them toward a credential.

While current completion rates for college credentials are low, there is untapped potential interest among apprentices. To date, no studies have specifically asked apprentices if they would be interested in earning degrees as part of their program. This lack of targeted research leaves questions about the true level of demand for college credentials within apprenticeship pathways.

Apprentices reported a high interest for degrees

Survey results showed a strong interest among apprentices in earning college credentials (figure 1). Specifically, 73 percent of current apprentices reported being “interested” or “very interested” in receiving an associate degree as part of their apprenticeship program, and 66 percent of current apprentices expressed being “interested” or “very interested” in obtaining a bachelor’s degree.

Figure 1. Most current apprentices expressed interest in receiving an associate degree or bachelor's degree



Note: N = 596 for associate degree and N = 577 for bachelor's degree. Current apprentices were asked, "How interested would you be in receiving the following credentials as part of your apprenticeship program?"

Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

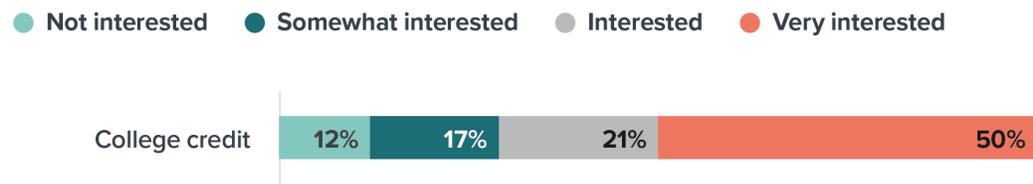
Former apprentices also expressed a high level of interest in earning college degrees, with rates similar to those of current apprentices.

There was also a high level of interest in college certificates and college credits, both of which can serve as foundational building blocks toward a degree. Most current apprentices (73 percent) and former apprentices (71 percent) reported being "interested" or "very interested" in earning a college or university certificate as part of their apprenticeship program. Additionally, 71 percent of current apprentices expressed interest in receiving college credits as part of their program (figure 2), while interest in college credits was slightly lower among former apprentices (63 percent).

73%
of former apprentices were interested or very interested in an associate degree

66%
were similarly interested in a bachelor's degree.

Figure 2. Most current apprentices expressed interest in receiving college credit



Note: N = 593 for college certificate and N = 624 for college credit. Current apprentices were asked, "How interested would you be in receiving the following credentials as part of your apprenticeship program?"

Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

These findings suggest that apprentices are not only interested in degrees but also in the incremental credentials that can support their long-term educational goals. This highlights a demand for both degrees and related credentials among current and former apprentices.

During the apprentice focus groups, many participants expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to earn educational credentials through their apprenticeship programs. They shared that they would have wanted to pursue a credential as part of the program and emphasized how it would have been helpful in achieving their goals.

“That would be amazing. If I would've got an AA or BA through the program, I would've done it immediately regardless of what it was.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

Several participants shared that they had previously attempted attending college but found that apprenticeships better suited their needs for various reasons, including financial considerations and learning preferences. They saw the possibility of earning a college degree through their apprenticeships as a feasible way to obtain a credential without following the traditional route. This approach aligned better with their schedules and learning styles. Additionally, many participants initially doubted their ability to succeed in college. However, their experiences in the apprenticeship program helped them realize that college could indeed be an achievable goal for them.

“I never thought about college. It wasn't something that I was like, ‘Oh, I need that.’ I was doing what I was doing. But now that I see that I could actually work and go to classes, I feel like maybe that’s something I want to do now. I’ve been looking at different options, and business administration sounds good for me, so I may pursue that after this.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

Several focus group participants expressed a strong interest in earning stackable, transferable educational credentials to support their career growth. For example, some highlighted the value of obtaining certificates or degrees in fields like management. Others emphasized a desire for their apprenticeship experience to count toward academic credit, allowing the qualifications, skills, and licenses they acquired during their training to be formally recognized and applied toward further education or career advancement.

“I’ve already got my state license or certificate, but it would be great having that count towards an AA if I were to continue to go towards nursing. I think it’s always beneficial and always more enticing for somebody to get into the program.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

However, a few participants indicated that they would not be interested in pursuing additional credentials. They cited reasons such as not wanting or needing further education or being near the end of their careers. While they acknowledged that earning credentials could be a valuable pathway for others, they felt content with their certificates of completion and were not interested in obtaining additional qualifications.

“A degree probably wouldn’t be of interest to me just because I just want my [industry] certification. I’m not planning on going back to school again.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

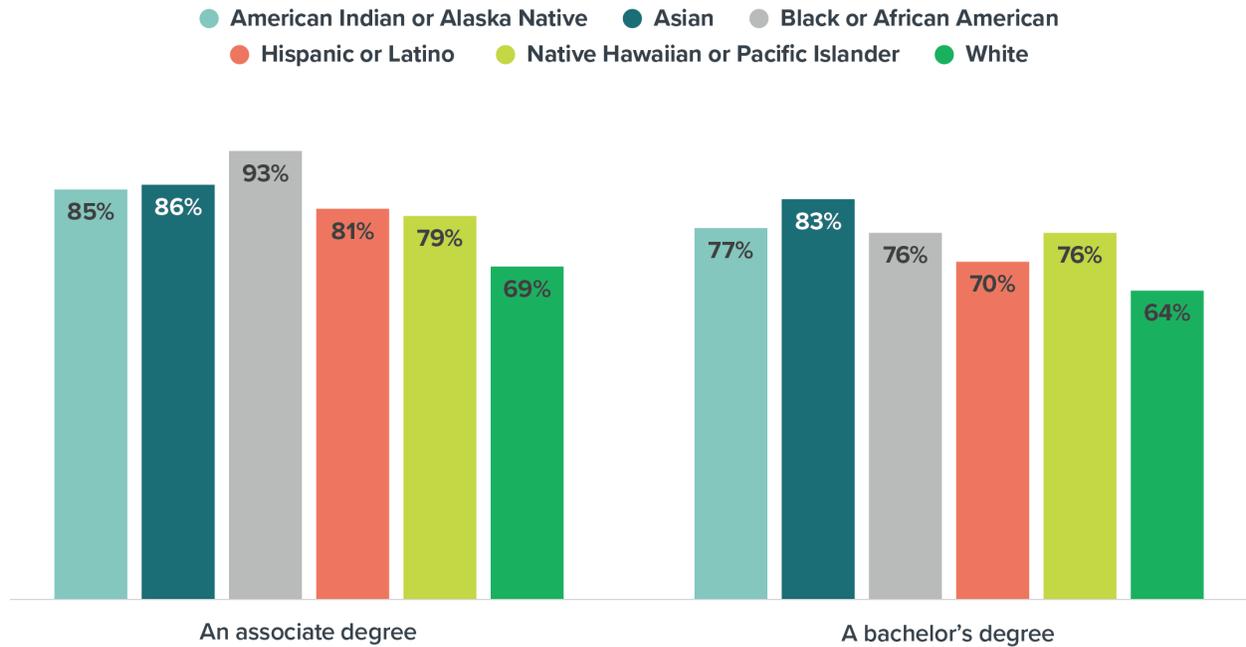
Overall, apprentices demonstrate a strong interest in earning credentials, viewing education as a valuable complement to their apprenticeship experience. They recognize the potential for personal and professional growth through educational opportunities, although interest in pursuing credentials varies depending on individual goals and career stages.

Apprentices of color expressed a higher interest in degrees

There were notable demographic patterns regarding survey completers’ interest in credentials, highlighting variations in the demand for degrees. The most significant difference was by race/ethnicity, with apprentices of color expressing a greater demand for educational credentials compared to white apprentices (figure 3). Specifically, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic or Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander apprentices reported a higher interest in pursuing both associate and bachelor’s degrees, compared to white apprentices.

This pattern was also evident among former apprentices, as Hispanic or Latino former apprentices demonstrated higher levels of interest in credentials compared to white former apprentices. For instance, 81 percent of Hispanic or Latino former apprentices expressed interest in obtaining an associate degree, compared to 69 percent of white former apprentices.

Figure 3. Current apprentices of color expressed higher levels of interest in receiving credentials compared to white apprentices



Note: N = 596 for associate degree and N = 577 for bachelor's degree. Percentages represent respondents who selected "interested" or "very interested" in response to the survey question: "How interested would you be in receiving the following credentials as part of your apprenticeship program?"

Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

By gender, women were slightly more likely to be interested or very interested in an associate degree (77%) than men (73%). The interest in bachelor's degrees was similar by gender, with 66 percent of women and 66 percent of men indicating interest. This gender pattern differed for former apprentices. Women former apprentices showed greater interest in obtaining a certificate, an associate degree, or a bachelor's degree by around 10 percentage points compared to male former apprentices. In terms of college credit, current women apprentices were more likely to be interested or very interested in receiving it during their apprenticeship programs (78%) compared to male apprentices (71%). However, former male apprentices were more likely to express interest in receiving college credit (67%) compared to women apprentices (59%).

By prior education level, a higher percentage of apprentices with some college experience expressed interest in degrees compared to those with only a high school education. For instance, 83 percent of apprentices with some college experience said they were interested or very interested in earning an associate degree, while only 71 percent of those with a high school education shared this interest.

In terms of industry type, there was similar interest in associate degrees among apprentices in construction and manufacturing (71%) and emerging industries (73%). However, apprentices in emerging industries showed a greater interest in obtaining a college or university certificate (77%) compared to construction and manufacturing (71%) and a bachelor's degree (68%) compared to those in construction and manufacturing (63%). Focus group participants noted that the demand for degrees varies by industry, indicating that in sectors like construction, a degree is often not necessary, whereas certificates or licenses may be more appropriate.

68%

of current apprentices in emerging industries were interested or very interested in a bachelor's degree compared to

63%

of current apprentices in construction and manufacturing industries

“I think whether it's a certificate or a degree, it depends on what your apprenticeship is focused on. Certain things will apply more to one than the other. Mine's fire stopping. There's not really much [need for] a degree there, in my opinion, but it would certainly make sense to have a certification that goes along with it and the life safety factors associated with it.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

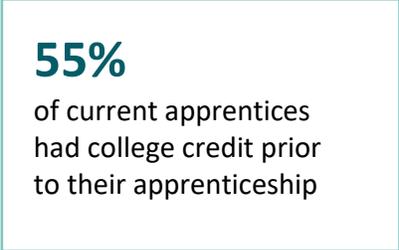
These findings indicate that the demand for degrees among apprentices varies based on experience, gender, and race/ethnicity. Apprentices of color and those with prior college experience showed greater interest in earning educational credentials. Gender differences also emerged, with women, particularly former apprentices, being slightly more inclined to pursue degrees. These insights suggest that expanding opportunities for apprentices to earn educational credentials could better address diverse needs and support pathways to higher education, particularly for groups traditionally underrepresented in apprenticeships.

Experience with credentials

Most Washington state apprentices are enrolled in community or technical colleges, often due to the college hosting or providing the related supplemental instruction part of the apprenticeship. However, findings from a situation assessment report prepared by the Ruckelshaus Center (2023), which involved interviews with apprenticeship coordinators and higher education staff members, suggest that many apprentices may be unaware that their college enrollment is earning them college credit and entitles them to benefits and supports available to other enrolled students. Understanding how apprentices accumulate credits before, during, and after their apprenticeships is crucial for recognizing how apprenticeships and educational pathways can align and complement each other, helping to better support apprentices' overall career development.

More than half of apprentices reported earning college credits prior to their apprenticeship

A significant number of apprentices who participated in the survey and focus groups began their apprenticeship programs having previously earned college credits, with some even completing degree programs. According to the survey, 55 percent of current apprentices had college credits prior to starting their apprenticeship programs. This percentage was higher among apprentices in emerging industries, women apprentices, and those aged 30 and older. By race/ethnicity, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and white apprentices reported earning college credits at higher rates than Hispanic or Latino and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander apprentices, with differences ranging from 9 to 16 percentage points.



Focus group participants provided details about their prior college experiences. Several apprentices described having accumulated general education credits, although some felt these would not apply towards their apprenticeships or career goals. One apprentice described earning credits and a certificate through an Air Force program, using their GI Bill benefits. These examples show that apprentices have varying degrees of awareness about—and different views on—how academic credit would or would not help them reach their career goals.

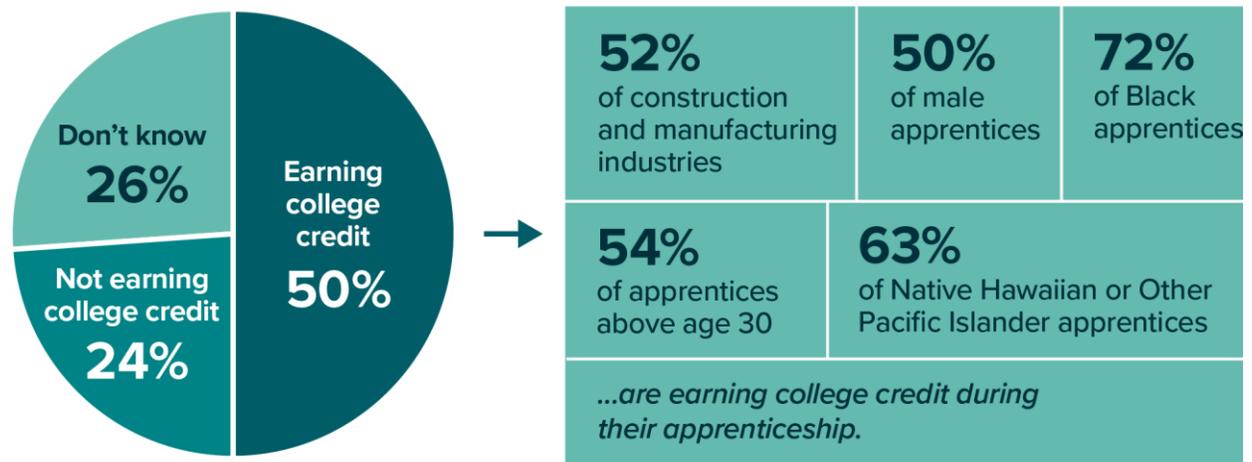
“I have some English and other regular classes that you would have to take for your [associate degree], and mostly I was doing a lot of math, so there’s that. I have those credits, but they’re kind of useless.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

Half of apprentices reported they will earn college credit as part of their apprenticeship program

Half of the participants in the survey reported that they have earned or expect to earn college credit during their apprenticeships. Twenty-six (26) percent of current apprentices were unsure if they were earning college credit (figure 4). Among former apprentices, 48 percent reported earning college credit through their apprenticeship programs and 25 percent were unsure if they had.

Figure 4. Half of current apprentices reported they are earning (or will earn) college credit during their apprenticeship



Note: N = 635. The question was, “Have you earned (or will you earn) any college credit during your apprenticeship?”
 Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

In open-ended survey responses, apprentices shared how they had learned about the opportunity to receive college credit as part of their apprenticeship program. Many reported discovering this information during orientation at the beginning of their program, with some noting that their program is linked to a community or technical college, allowing them to enroll as students from the beginning. Apprentices also cited instructors and teachers as key sources of information, along with apprenticeship program coordinators. Additionally, several mentioned their union, workplace, or word of mouth as channels through which they learned about the college credit opportunities available to them.

“We were informed during our orientation. We also fill out paperwork for the associated technical college at the beginning of every school year.”

– Apprentice survey respondent

In focus groups, several participants mentioned that they were informed that their related supplemental instruction courses would transfer for college credit and that they could earn a degree with just a few additional classes. However, other participants expressed uncertainty about whether they were currently receiving college credit for their coursework. Additionally, some were unsure about the process of earning a degree based on the credits they had already accumulated. Apprentices enrolled in community or technical colleges through their apprenticeships were more likely to be aware of credit opportunities and instructional and student support services available to them.

“I was told my classes would transfer as college credit and I would be able to apply for an associate [degree] in applied science. I didn't get very far with that, but I was told that they would transfer over.”

– Apprentice focus group participant

Construction and manufacturing apprentices were more likely to report earning college credit than apprentices in emerging industries (52% to 34%, respectively). Additionally, male apprentices were more likely to report earning or expecting to earn college credit (50%) compared to female apprentices (41%). Black (72%) and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (62%) apprentices were more likely to report earning college credit than American Indian, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, and white apprentices (42-48%).

52%

of current apprentices in manufacturing and construction industries were earning college credit during their apprenticeship compared to

34%

of current apprentices in emerging industries

Women and apprentices in emerging industries were more likely to express interest in pursuing credentials. However, they were less likely to be earning college credit in their apprenticeship. This shows a gap between their interest in credentials and their current college credit attainment.

Further, while the majority of current apprentices (82%) reported that the college credits they are earning would apply toward a credential, such as a certificate or degree, only a small percentage expect to receive a credential during their apprenticeship. Specifically, 6 percent of current apprentices said they will earn a college or university certificate (compared to 4 percent of former apprentices who did), 10 percent will earn an associate degree (3 percent of former apprentices received), and just 1 percent will earn a bachelor's degree (less than 1 percent of former apprentices received).

Overall, survey and focus group data show that many apprentices have access to opportunities to earn college credit. However, degree attainment remains low, as both survey findings and Washington ERDC data indicate. This gap suggests that barriers may be preventing apprentices from completing degrees. For example, 25 percent of survey respondents were unsure whether they were earning college credit during their apprenticeship and focus group participants expressed confusion about how to apply their credits toward a credential. This lack of awareness or clear pathways could be contributing to the low degree completion rates among apprentices.

Benefits of credentials

While apprentices reported being interested in earning credentials and having prior experience with them, it remains unclear why they are interested. Do apprentices see tangible benefits in earning educational credentials, and if so, what are they? These motivations are key to determining the value of linking higher education with apprenticeships and whether such connections will provide meaningful payoffs for apprentices in terms of career advancement and personal growth.

Many apprentices reported that a degree would be beneficial for their careers

Over half of current apprentices (59%) we surveyed indicated that obtaining a college degree or certificate would improve their chances for employment and career advancement (figure 5). Twenty (20) percent felt that it would not enhance their chances, and another 20 percent were uncertain. There were no major differences across apprenticeship industry, gender, or age.

Figure 5. More than half of current apprentices said they believed that a college degree or certificate would improve their chances for employment and career advancement



Note: N = 604. Apprentices were asked, “In your view, would earning a college degree or certificate improve your chances for employment and career advancement?”

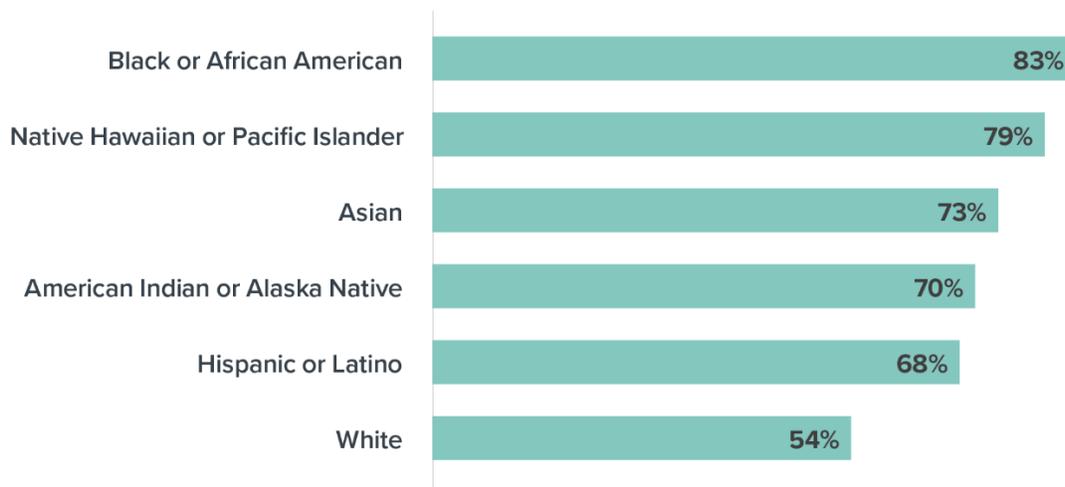
Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest.

Former apprentices were asked a similar question regarding their perspectives on whether a college certificate or degree would have improved their career opportunities. Forty-three (43) percent of former apprentices agreed that obtaining a degree would have been beneficial, while 39 percent disagreed, and 18 percent remained unsure. Unlike current apprentices, former apprentices showed differences based on industry, gender, and age. Specifically, former apprentices in emerging industries, as well as women and individuals aged 30 and above, were more likely to believe that earning a degree would be beneficial for an apprentice.

Apprentices of color expressed a stronger belief in the benefits of earning a degree

There were racial differences in perceptions of the benefits of earning college degrees through apprenticeship. Black, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic or Latino apprentices expressed higher levels of belief that a degree would positively impact their career opportunities compared to white apprentices (figure 6). Among former apprentices, 55 percent of Hispanic respondents believed a degree would benefit their career, compared to 40 percent of white respondents.

Figure 6. Current apprentices of color expressed a stronger belief that a college degree or certificate would improve their career opportunities, compared to those who are white



Note: N = 604. Percentages represent respondents who selected “yes” in response to the survey question: ““In your view, would earning a college degree or certificate improve your chances for employment and career advancement?””

Source: Washington Apprenticeship Survey, 2024, Education Northwest and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center

The combination of higher interest and higher perceived benefits among apprentices of color raises several questions and possibilities. For example, could creating pathways to degrees through apprenticeships expand both college and career opportunities for apprentices of color? These findings encourage further exploration into why there are racial differences in perceptions of value. For instance, are apprentices of color more likely to succeed in the labor market with a credential compared to their white counterparts? How does having a degree impact job placement and labor market outcomes for traditionally underrepresented apprentices?

“As a Latina woman it gives me better pay and opportunities for this industry. It shows I put in the work.”

– Apprentice survey respondent

Apprentices believed that a degree opens opportunities, demonstrates competency, leads to management positions, and helps them stand out

In response to a follow-up open-ended question in our survey, apprentices shared their perspectives on how a college degree or certificate could improve their chances in the job market. Several key benefits emerged from those responses:

- **Increased career opportunities.** Many apprentices noted that holding a degree or certificate would open the door to more career options. For example, one apprentice shared in their open-ended survey response that the experience “Allows you to have more opportunities for future work when it presents itself,” and another shared, “I would be able to have a head start on a different career path for the future.” Some apprentices stated that as their lives and market demands change, earning a degree or certificate can enhance their long-term career sustainability.
- **Demonstrated competency.** Apprentices emphasized that a degree or certificate serves as evidence of their knowledge, skills, and commitment to employers. One apprentice said, for example, “It shows employers that you dedicated yourself to getting a degree,” and another apprentice shared, “Having a certification or degree serves as a validation of the knowledge you have gained in a particular subject, and it also shows you're capable of learning and functioning in certain environments.”
- **Pathway to management.** Many apprentices expressed that obtaining a college degree or certificate could facilitate advancement within their organizations, potentially leading to leadership roles. For example, one apprentice wrote, “Would help me move up the ladder towards supervisor,” and another shared, “It has helped me greatly to move up through my company. With the degree I qualified for leadership roles.”
- **Standing out to employers.** Some apprentices stated that a degree or certificate would enhance their resumes and differentiate them from other candidates. As one wrote, “On a resume, the more degrees or certificates you have related to your field, the better you look to potential employers,” and another apprentice said, “I think a degree looks better on a resume than no degree.”

“Earning a degree gives you an extra tool to your toolbox. So, if you are able to put on a resume that you earned a degree, that'll only bring you more peace of mind.”

– Apprentice survey respondent

Other apprentices expressed that a college degree or certificate is not necessary for their career advancement. Two stated reasons that emerged from open-ended survey question responses were:

- **Not required.** Apprentices described how their industries do not require a college certificate or degree for employment. One apprentice shared, “A college degree would not make a difference in the industry I am in,” while another noted, “My apprenticeship allows me to acquire all certifications needed for my career.”
- **On-the-job training is prioritized.** Some apprentices emphasized that their industries prioritize practical work experience on the job rather than college degrees or certificates. One apprentice remarked, “Mostly work experience is important,” and another said, “A piece of paper doesn't prove how well you are at a job.”

“A degree does not always translate to ‘competent’ in construction.”

– Apprentice survey respondent

These findings highlight variation in how apprentices perceive and assess the value of college credentials. While most apprentices recognize the benefits of degrees for demonstrating competency and facilitating career advancement, some apprentices feel that degrees are unnecessary for their fields or current career stages. Ultimately, the perceived advantages of earning a degree vary among apprentices, depending on their unique situations and the expectations of their industries. Additionally, research on the actual benefits of degrees for apprentices is limited. A key question for future research is whether apprentices with degrees experience better career outcomes.

Facilitators and barriers to earning credentials

Understanding the facilitators and barriers to earning credentials is crucial for creating effective pathways for apprentices. By identifying the factors that support the credentialing process and the obstacles apprentices encounter, policymakers can develop systems that effectively address their needs.

Apprentices reported that time, finances, employer culture, and communication were barriers to earning credentials

In focus groups, apprentices identified two main barriers to earning additional credentials: time and money. Regarding time, they mentioned managing the demands of working while attending school, including doubts about whether their schedules could accommodate class attendance and if they could manage the additional workload on top of their jobs. Regarding finances, apprentices noted that the cost of paying for classes was a significant barrier, with many stating they would not be able to afford the tuition. They also expressed a strong desire to avoid taking on student loans.

“Money is definitely a barrier. Time, I think would also be, because of all these courses you need to get to this degree at the end of your apprenticeship. And you still have to find a community college that can [accommodate] your work schedule. So, finding that kind of resource is going to be a challenge.”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

Another important barrier was employer culture. Some apprentices mentioned that their ability to pursue credentials depended on how supportive their workplace was of continuing education. A positive work environment, where coworkers and managers encouraged educational growth, made it easier for apprentices to pursue additional credentials. In workplaces that were unsupportive or did not offer assistance, however, it was much more challenging for apprentices to advance their education.

“Honestly, if the job or workplace that you're in isn't supportive and open to furthering your education, it can be a barrier. Some places offer help with continuing education, whether it's financial or accommodating a schedule, but having more places of employment being on board with [the idea that] improving and building your employees is what's going to improve and build your company as well [would be helpful].”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

Finally, apprentices mentioned that a lack of communication and information about their educational options left them feeling uncertain. Due to insufficient outreach, they often felt unaware of the paths available to them, making it difficult to make informed decisions about pursuing credentials.

“My coordinator says, ‘Yeah, I’m here for you if you have any questions.’ But it’s one of those situations where we have questions, but how do we proceed through those questions? You have to take the initiative, figure out what you need, and then ask for help, rather than having all the resources laid out for you to choose from.”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

Apprentices suggested that affordability, flexibility, information, and mentorship can facilitate pathways to credentials

Focus group participants identified several factors that would make the process of earning credentials more manageable. Financial assistance was a crucial factor, but flexible scheduling was almost as important. Apprentices in our focus groups noted that balancing full-time work with school requires programs to offer adaptable schedules or online learning options.

“I think having the option or availability to work things easily around a current work schedule. Honestly, what I struggled with the most was work-life balance as well as school. Obviously deadlines are necessary, but having that [flexibility] to be able to fit it in where you need would be helpful.”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

Another important facilitator was clear and accessible information about how apprenticeships connect to credentials. Apprentices expressed a need for better communication about which credits would apply toward degrees and how to navigate the education system.

“Knowing that my credits are applicable and having more straightforward answers would be helpful. Just being more certain that whatever classes I’ve taken are going to apply for credit. Letting students know what degrees they can get or where their credits are applicable and then giving them some options would be very beneficial.”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

Finally, apprentices felt that networking and mentorship played a crucial role. Apprentices especially valued outreach efforts by experienced mentors who had gone through similar experiences. By sharing their own success stories, mentors provided motivation and demonstrated that earning a credential was achievable.

“Outreach through people who are already in the system—like mentors and networking—is important. If people from the office took the time to come out to the job site and explain—‘This is who I am. This is where I come from. I was in your shoes once, and this is where I am now.’—it would make a difference. Showing, especially young apprentices, if I can make it, you can make it.”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

These findings highlight that the barriers of money, time, and lack of information can be addressed through financial support, flexible scheduling, clear communication about credential pathways, and the support of career mentors. By providing these supports, apprentices will be better equipped to navigate educational pathways and earn credentials that can enhance their career success.

Conclusion

Apprenticeship and higher education are two systems that help individuals achieve their career goals. There are increasing state and national conversations around the intersection and alignment of these systems, focusing on how to leverage the strengths of each to create multiple pathways to success. However, a largely unanswered question so far has been whether apprentices themselves are interested in these pathways.

Keeping in mind the limitations of these methods, the survey and focus groups signal that current and former apprentices indeed see benefits to expanding access to college credit and degree attainment through apprenticeship pathways. This expansion may be especially attractive to apprentices of color, as in the survey they expressed a higher interest in earning credentials and were more likely to express that they would benefit from them.

“I think it opens up more doorways for more people to try and educate themselves and get a more rewarding long-lasting career versus just a job to get them by. It’s like building blocks to get there without having to make sacrifices of ‘I can’t go to school because I can’t afford it.’”

– Apprentice focus group respondent

Many apprentices were currently connected to Washington state community and technical colleges, but some are unsure if they are receiving college credit and most do not complete a degree during or after their apprenticeships. Our participants highlighted finances, scheduling, and lack of information as barriers or inhibitors to investing time and energy in pursuing credits and completing certificate and degree programs. Given the findings regarding the importance of personal relationships in how apprentices access and experience apprenticeship, this highlights the importance of raising awareness of credit opportunities not only among apprentices themselves but also among the academic and apprenticeship counselors and coordinators, unions, and employers who support and hire them.

As policymakers and practitioners in Washington seek to expand access to college credits and degrees for state-registered apprentices, the voices and perspectives of the apprentices themselves must be centered in conversation and decision making. A deeper understanding of apprentices’ interests, needs, and challenges will be key to ensuring new policies and programs support their career and life success. This research establishes an important starting point for this effort. Future research and conversations should continue to foreground apprentices’ lived experiences to design effective and equitable apprenticeship degree pathways.

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