

Apprenticeship: The Other Four-Year Degree

Kentucky is striving to increase the number of students who are college and career ready through a variety of avenues, including Career and Technical Education (CTE).

Registered Apprenticeship programs are increasingly popular as one of the ways and cover more occupations than most people think, said Mike Donta, deputy commissioner with the Kentucky Labor Cabinet. In fact, there are more than 1,200 occupations that the federal government recognizes as being apprenticeable occupations.

“Typically, the thought is construction trade apprenticeships, but really there are many more in the manufacturing side and service industry,” he said.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “A few of the traditional skilled occupations in which apprentices are being trained are: automotive technician, baker, bricklayer, carpenter, electrician, machinist, maintenance mechanic, operating engineer, painter, roofer, sheet metal worker, structural steel worker, and tool and die maker. However, there are many other occupations that have apprenticeship programs. Examples of these occupations are computer programmer, computer service mechanic, dairy technologist, dental assistant, electronics technician, environment analyst, fire fighter, horticulturist, insurance claims adjuster, laboratory technician, optical technician, wastewater treatment plant operator, chef” to name a few.

“It’s unbelievable when you look at the diversity of programs that are out there recognized and certified by the federal government,” Donta said.

A minimum of 144 classroom hours per year is required of all apprentices, he added. “Typically they are working a full time job through the process. Total training hours vary depending on the occupation they are training for and typical programs range from 1-5 years,” Donta said.

He noted that both a college degree and apprenticeship pathways are very credible and one is not better than another. But for some students, the apprenticeship path is more accessible and a better fit for personal situations.

“Many times you would hear that something related to an apprenticeship was an alternative to college, but it’s really a career choice now,” Donta said. “And that has evolved just over the last few years and as more jobs have become specialized. With Registered Apprenticeship, you’re still getting related classroom instruction, but you’re taking that instruction onto the job and doing hands-on learning, then back to the classroom.”

With so many choices, students and parents should take a fresh look at apprenticeships, not as a second choice but as a viable option when considering what type of postsecondary education is for them, said Mary Taylor, the Office of Career and Technical Education’s industry training and development specialist.

“These apprenticeship programs allow students to earn while they learn and, once completed, will lead to high-demand, high-wage job skills that will follow them wherever they may go,” she said.

College often comes with a large amount of debt for many students while those in a registered apprenticeship program are making money, Donta said. By the end of the usually four-year apprenticeship program, the wages will likely double, he added.

An important thing to remember about the apprenticeship route is the role of the employers. Donta said employees once were competing for jobs. Now, employers are competing for the skills of those workers.

Through apprenticeship programs, students learn those skills, making them attractive to perspective employers, Taylor said.

“The world of work is more competitive than ever, and the skills learned through a Registered Apprenticeship program give a student so much more of an advantage. It also gives employers a much more knowledgeable and valuable new employee,” she added.

Donta said the more companies learn about the benefits of apprenticeship programs, the more willing they are to become involved because they all have some kind of training program. “This really gives some formality to it,” he said.

Getting Students Prepared

While apprenticeship programs work well for those just finishing high school or those looking to make a career change, OCTE is embarking on a new project that will better prepare its high school students to enter into an apprenticeship program after graduation.

The office is partnering with the Kentucky Labor Cabinet to create a pre-apprenticeship pilot program. Taylor said it should be underway by fall 2013 and will involve 10 to 15 career and technical centers. It will encompass machine tool, metal fabrication, welding, industrial maintenance, electrical technology, computer aided drafting and wood manufacturing programs.

“Each manufacturing employer will choose four courses offered by a local center,” Taylor said. “And students must successfully complete the course sequence as determined by the employer, in addition to attendance and course grade guidelines.”

Taylor added that the business must agree to have a Registered Apprenticeship with the Labor Cabinet.

“Upon successful completion, the Cabinet will issue a Pre-Apprenticeship Industry Certification. A set amount of hours toward the apprenticeship will be awarded to that student, who will also be awarded some or all of the required minimum 144 classroom hours,” she said.

Between the efforts of the Labor Cabinet and OCTE, Kentucky is positioning itself to become a leader in Registered Apprenticeship programs, Donta said.

“We have the potential to help students find high-skill, high-wage jobs while filling a need for existing and new businesses across the state,” he said.