

Executive Overview

THE CHALLENGE & OPPORTUNITY OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION



Every year, millions of Americans are forced to choose between pursuing a degree and securing a paycheck. Nearly two-thirds of jobs in the US demand postsecondary education¹, yet approximately half of the American workforce lacks a degree.² An astonishing 40 million Americans³ enroll but exit their college pathway before completion. This has led to a staggering accumulation of as much as \$260 billion in student debt, or 15% of total student debt resting on those who have no degree. Moreover, approximately 55% of high school⁴ graduates express intentions of forgoing college or harbor uncertainties about attending.⁵ These decisions often stem from concerns about affordability and the pressing need for a steady paycheck. The inflated cost of earning a college degree set against an immediate need to earn a paycheck presents a false dilemma that disproportionately impacts people of color and low-income populations, exacerbating inequities and perpetuating economic immobility.

As momentum to modernize higher education builds across the country, Reach University emerges as a pioneering force. The first-of-its-kind approach developed by Reach University flips the conventional paradigm: instead of a degree leading to a job, it's the job that leads to a degree. This is the promise of the Apprenticeship Degree, an entirely job-embedded educational pathway. By leveraging a candidate's on-the-job experience to provide deeper and immediately relevant learning in combination with aligned college courses, students receive a paycheck and pursue a top-tier, cost-effective degree simultaneously. This opens higher education access to learners who might otherwise forgo their education entirely.

¹ Hanford, Emily. *The Value of a College Degree*. American Public Media, 2023

² A Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data. United States Census Bureau.

³ Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes, *Annual Progress Report – Academic Year 2021/22*. National Student Clearinghouse, 2023.

⁴ Fawcett, Eliza and Fortin, Jacey. *They Have Debt but No Degree. Could Loan Forgiveness Send Them Back to School?* New York Times, 2022

⁵ How higher education lost its shine. *The Hechinger Report*, 2023.

In 2024, Reach University launched the National Center for the Apprenticeship Degree (NCAD). NCAD will drive the upward mobility and vitality of America's diverse talent pool by actively advancing the expansion of Apprenticeship Degree programs, designed to address labor shortages throughout the United States, enabling three million Apprenticeship Degrees by 2035. NCAD will collaborate with like-minded institutions, industry partners, state systems, and local community leaders to implement and scale Apprenticeship Degree pathways in partner institutions around the country, empowering local communities to lead and advance their own innovation efforts.

WHAT IS THE APPRENTICESHIP DEGREE?

NCAD's vision is to reimagine the workplace as the university campus. Every element and individual involved is directly connected to the field: the enrolled candidates (i.e., students), who simultaneously hold jobs and earn salaries; the professors of practice, who offer direct experience through their work in the field; and the curriculum itself. Embracing on-the-job learning as its cornerstone, the Apprenticeship Degree model diverges from the typical U.S. approach of merely incorporating on-the-job experience through credit recognition or clinical practicums. In the Apprenticeship Degree, practical experience is central to the model, with each degree and certificate program seamlessly integrating on-the-job work into every facet of learning.

The Apprenticeship Degree is not a condensed version of a conventional degree or one that simply awards credits for work-based learning. It is a conferred degree from an accredited institution, complete with the rigor and assurance of any other degree. While the outcome is the same, it is unique in its delivery model. Classroom instruction is intentionally designed to empower apprentices to immediately apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills to their everyday work. This learning approach extends beyond the classroom to the workplace through observation, coaching, and project-based methodologies, effectively intertwining theoretical understanding with practical exposure. The program's design is developed to align with industry needs and requirements, in close collaboration with industry leaders, ensuring a seamless fit between assignments, assessments, and the overall program structure. The result is a cohesive post-secondary pathway in which learners simultaneously earn a wage and gain years of relevant work experience. At the same time, industry reimagines already-budgeted, entry-level positions into apprenticeship positions with clear upward mobility.

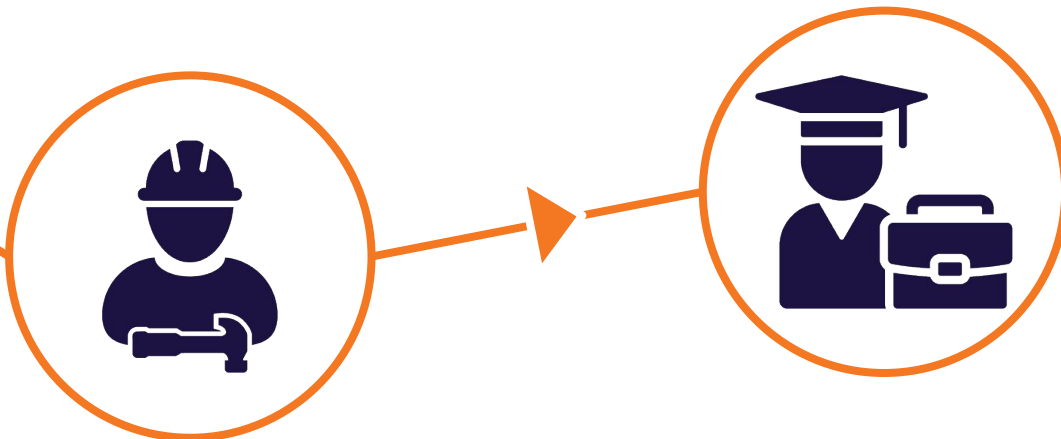


Each student in a cohort is concurrently enrolled in both their degree program and an apprenticeship. To accommodate full-time work commitments, courses are thoughtfully scheduled: often available online, condensed into a single day each week, or conducted during the evenings. Communication and coordination is facilitated between professors of practice and workplace supervisors or mentors, who play a pivotal role in on-the-job training, guiding work performance, and providing essential insights that contribute to the grading process.

NCAD's Strategy

NCAD will be dedicated to advancing equitable access to high quality careers by catalyzing the expansion of earn-and-learn Apprenticeship Degree programs throughout the United States. Our central role is to spearhead wide-spread programmatic adoption while building strong system alignment that will position the Apprenticeship Degree as the next frontier in US higher education. In the initial three-year phase, NCAD will concentrate on achieving the following objectives, with a North Star of realizing three million Apprenticeship Degrees by 2035 through its network of partner programs.

- Demonstrate the efficacy and viability of the Apprenticeship Degree model in the US.
- Substantiate that persistence and graduation rates for candidates in high-quality Apprenticeship Degree pathways exceed regional comparison groups of students enrolled in traditional academic degree programs.
- Identify systemic barriers to accessing higher education in communities we serve and develop community-specific strategies that address them.
- Establish NCAD as the premier intermediary to advance national adoption of the Apprenticeship Degree model.



NCAD's Services

While NCAD aspires to see three million Apprenticeship Degrees awarded in the United States by 2035, this ambitious goal will only be achieved through strategic partnerships with forward-thinking leaders, organizations, and traditional higher education institutions that share the vision of the Apprenticeship Degree. NCAD's role will be that of a facilitator, working in tandem with these like-minded entities to fulfill the promise of this innovative educational model.

Through a community-driven collective impact model, NCAD will provide the leadership and facilitation support needed to create Apprenticeship Degree programs that empower communities to grow their own local, specialized talent to solve long-standing labor shortages. NCAD will share resources, expert guidance, and targeted technical support to guide higher education institutions and their partners through a curriculum transformation process that empowers faculty voice and leverages the strengths and culture of the institution and community.



NCAD's services include, but are not limited to:

- **Partnership Development and Employer Engagement** - Bringing together key stakeholder groups in coordinated and mutually beneficial roles.
- **Curriculum Integration** - Supporting instructional staff in integrating on-the-job learning into existing curriculum.
- **Unlocking Financial Resources** - Securing public/philanthropic dollars to ensure the degree-seeker has zero student loan debt.
- **Quality Standards** - Defining Apprenticeship Degree best practices and supports driving program fidelity to the model's core principles.
- **Compliance** - Providing infrastructure and strategic advising to align with accreditation and registered apprenticeship.
- **Professional Learning Community** - Facilitating a series of convenings for Apprenticeship Degree program leaders across the country to collaborate and share best practices, learn more about accessing additional funding, and promote their successes and programs.

NCAD's Partnership

NCAD's success is interconnected with the broader earn-and-learn ecosystem and postsecondary innovation efforts. Leveraging key cross-sector partnerships is core to the NCAD vision and strategy. NCAD firmly believes that the initiatives outlined above have the potential to reshape the future of workforce development and ensure a more inclusive, agile, and effective education system. Partnerships with institutions of higher education, employers in high-demand sectors, workforce organizations, and regional or state government institutions will not only contribute to the growth and success of Apprenticeship Degree programs but will also have a lasting impact on the broader education and employment landscape.

NCAD's Contact



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NCAD

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**APPRENTICESHIP
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