



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Briggs Volume III

Briggs Papers and Speeches

---

May 1986

# Apprenticeship: The Prospects for Survival

Vernon M. Briggs Jr.  
vmb2@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/briggsIII>

**Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.**

**Support this valuable resource today!**

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Briggs Papers and Speeches at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Briggs Volume III by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [hlmdigital@cornell.edu](mailto:hlmdigital@cornell.edu).

---

# Apprenticeship: The Prospects for Survival

## **Keywords**

Apprentice, labor, train, nation, work, skill, federal, trade, employer, job

## **Comments**

Volume 3 - Paper #43

Andrew Johnson Memorial  
Forum on Apprenticeship  
Raleigh, N.C.  
May 8, 1986

### Apprenticeship: The Prospects for Survival

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.  
Cornell University

In the field of training, apprenticeship has enjoyed the reputation as being the oldest formal training system in the nation. In fact, of course, the history exceeds that of the United States itself since its roots extend back into the medieval era of Europe. It was a product of the guild system—a process whereby untrained youths progressed through the training process involved in learning a trade. Ultimately these apprentices actually became masters (or employers). For this reason, people have referred to this system as a “management training system.” Even with the coming of the industrial revolution and the subsequent collapse of the guild system, apprenticeship survived as a training system. Although its primary purpose is to train skilled workers, it is still the case that many management officials in some trades are graduates of the apprentice system.

But in addition to perseverance, apprenticeship is uniformly praised by training experts as being the ideal form of training since it combines both the classroom instruction in theory and principles with the actual “hands-on” experience that can only be learned on the job. In an increasingly technical era, education and training modes that are both basic in their content yet flexible in their format are being exalted today. Apprenticeship training offers precisely this type of skill acquisition process. Thus, it may seem hard to imagine that anyone could even raise a question about the prospects for apprenticeship survival. The system of training has proven its worthiness over the

centuries. It also has widespread support by training experts as being an ideal form of training. Many people, including myself, believe it should be expanded into occupations and industries where it does not now exist. But, these attributes of durability and praise can breed complacency and lead to a false assumption that what has been good and what is good can survive on the basis of logic alone. But such is not entirely the case. The great enemy of “the best” is “the good.” When people feel that something is good they often become satisfied and do not do the things that can make the undertaking the best. And, in today’s changing times, to be good may not be enough.

It may seem at first inappropriate to even raise this question before an audience such as this. For here assembled we have part of what Ray Marshall and myself once favorably referred to as the “apprenticeship establishment.” That is, those persons from business, labor, and government who have the responsibility for safeguarding the existing apprenticeship system. But this is precisely the reason to speak to this group on this subject. For most of the nation takes the apprenticeship system for granted. The Reagan Administration, in particular, regards the apprenticeship system as being an essentially private sector undertaking. It has greatly reduced the federal government’s guidance and support for the apprenticeship. It assumes the system can take care of itself. The staffing of the Federal Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training has been sharply reduced and has eliminated any expenditures for critically needed apprenticeship research. Since the early 1980s, the Federal Apprenticeship Committee has essentially ceased to function as a leadership force. Except for Japan, no government of any other major industrial power in the free world contributes less to the training of its future skilled workers than does the United States. Japan is the exception. Japan does not have a modern apprenticeship

system because it has an extensive system of firm-specific training, and firms often have life-time employment arrangements with its workers. Accordingly, Japan has not seen the need for a training system that promotes worker mobility within an industry. Thus, aside from Japan, it is probably no surprise that no other such industrialized nation has a lower percentage of its labor force in apprenticeship than does the U.S. (with less than .3 percent of a percent of its civilian labor force participating in apprenticeship compared to, for example Germany, Austria, and Switzerland with about 5.0 percent; Great Britain close to 2 percent, Italy close to 4.0 percent). To put it another way, if apprenticeship in the U.S. was at the same scale as Austria, Germany, or Switzerland, there would be about 7 million apprentices. Thus, unless groups such as this one speak out on what is needed to expand apprenticeship training, it is the nation itself that is going to bear the cost of real shortages in its skilled labor force ranks in the future. Our nation has real problems dealing with slowly emerging problems. It is much more responsive to claps of thunder than it is to falling barometric readings. But most claps of thunder are harmless; a falling barometer can be a sign of a disaster. Such it is with the supply of skilled workers in the U.S. Their ranks are not increasing fast enough.

Let's look at the system itself. As of fiscal year 1985, there were 222,591 registered apprentices plus about 50,000 military apprentices in all four armed services. In total about 320,000 persons participated in apprenticeship training during the year. While that figure may seem impressive, as late as 1979 there were 380,000 persons who participated in apprenticeship training. Since 1979 the civilian labor force of the U.S. has increased from 102.9 million to 115.7 million (or by 13.2 million workers) but the absolute number of apprentices has fallen considerably over this period. Last year (1985)

the Secretary of Labor William Brock said, “I am deeply concerned about the production quality in all fields of production...I look to the revitalized apprenticeship system to help the United States achieve that quality.” But words without actions are meaningless. To date, there have been no federal initiatives.

The apprenticeship system is designed to produce the elite of the skilled labor force. It is intended to produce workers who can command top wages. But, more importantly for the nation, it seeks to provide standards for high quality work in each of the respective trades and crafts it represents. By every labor market indicator, the jobs that are increasing are those that require high training skills and extensive levels of education. Unemployment for these types of workers—while it does have some cyclical variation—remains the lowest of the labor force. Yet, training—especially in the apprenticeship trades—is not increasing. Indeed it is falling in proportion to the size of the labor force. Thus, if the nation is going to provide more quality jobs for its workers and more quality production of the goods and services it provides, an increased role for apprenticeship has to be part of the future, or some alternative measure must be developed in its place.

Six years ago, Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall addressed the last national conference held in 1980 on apprenticeship research in the United States. I think he captured the dilemma facing the apprenticeship system when he said:

“I think that one of the problems we have with apprenticeship is that, while those people who are part of that system understand it very well, it tends to be isolated from the public opinions; not enough people know about apprenticeship and the values it has.”

Thus it is time for the apprenticeship establishment to spread its message. I also believe it is time for the federal government in particular but state governments as well if they are

willing to initiate steps to expand the number of apprenticeship trades as well as to expand the number of apprentices who complete their trades each year.

To meet the skill needs of the nation it is essential that the Federal Committee on Apprenticeship be revitalized. This committee has had an erratic history. When it has had strong leadership and been active, apprenticeship has flourished (as was the case in the late 1970s; when it has been inactive and neglected, the system has tended to flounder (as has been the case in the 1980s). This Committee should set the cadence for the development of the system. It should be the public advocate for articulating the collective needs of the system. It has also proven to be an effective platform for the reform when the system has needed changes to keep in step with the changing character of the labor force (e.g., efforts to open up apprenticeship to qualified minorities and women in particular and to non-relatives of journeymen in general who were often arbitrarily excluded).

At the federal level there is a need to encourage the expansion of apprenticeship by more than reliance solely upon promotional activities. It is time to put “bucks where our mouths are.” There should be federal financial support to state apprenticeship agencies. Assuring a growing supply of apprentices for the skilled trades is more than of mere local and regional importance. Grants should be available to state agencies that seek to carry out the objectives of the National Apprenticeship Act in cooperation with the Secretary of Labor. The grants should be contingent on submission of acceptable state plans.

Federal grants should be made available to assist local apprenticeship committees to cover their administrative costs and to assist multi-trade committees in communities where the trades are numerically too small to support separate committees.

There should be federal financial support for the expansion or creation of apprenticeship opportunities in fields with critical shortages of trained workers. These fields would be identified by the Secretary of a Labor and certified as being essential to the nation's continued well-being.

There needs to be some system developed to support apprenticeship participants during the economic downturns. Dropouts from apprenticeship programs are already a serious problem but it tends to be worsened during cyclical downturns. Many apprentices do not return to the trade when the industry rebounds. The building trades in particular are subject to extensive swings in employment. Perhaps it would be possible during such periods for the Secretary of Labor to authorize and to fund local apprenticeship committees to undertake public service projects and off-site training as a means of maintaining the continuity of training.

There is a desperate need to expand national promotion of apprenticeship. Such activities could best be done at the national level through promotion and registration of apprenticeship programs among multi-plants and multi-state firms; sponsoring national information programs; and funding promotion and development contacts with trade associations and unions to extend apprenticeship into growth industries.

There should be mandatory apprenticeship provisions in federal and state government contracts in excess of some minimum amount. The provisions should require training of apprentices in crafts related to carrying-out the contracts.



The possibility of tax credits for apprenticeship programs should be explored. This would provide an incentive to employers to hire apprentices who, because of their inexperience would necessarily be less productive than skilled workers. Indeed, the entire subject of financial incentives designed to entice more employers to sponsor apprenticeship programs needs to be explored. The topic is controversial but the public does benefit from apprenticeship training. Hence, the public should shoulder some of the financial burden if the cost of training is an obstacle to expansion of apprenticeship opportunities. As long as the public does not do so, the price it seems is that there are suboptimal expenditures on the amount of skill training done by the private sector. Governmental support of apprenticeship is widespread in other nations and it is no doubt part of the explanation as to why these other nations do so much better than we do in providing apprenticeship opportunities.

There is a desperate need to re-establish the apprenticeship research programs that the U.S. Department of Labor funded prior to the advent of the Reagan Administration. Not only is research needed to keep abreast with what is happening in this vital training area but it can also provide demonstration projects to improve the quality of training. Too often, apprenticeship committees and various state apprenticeship and federal apprenticeship bodies are unable to keep up with what is happening elsewhere in the nation and in the world concerning apprenticeship training. Regular conferences and sponsored publications can bridge this information gap. There needs to be better ways to collect data and to evaluate the performance of the apprenticeships system. Such information is simply too important to the nation to be left uncollected and unassessed.

At all levels there needs to be away to tie apprenticeship into the nation's human resource development strategies. Currently the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) which replaced the Comprehensive Employment Act has no ties to apprenticeship. There is a tragic lack of linkages between the various training systems in the United States – these include not only JTPA activities but also vocational education programs, and the undertakings of community colleges and other educational bodies.

There is much more that would be said but I hope the message is clear.

Apprenticeship contributes markedly to the general economic welfare of the nation but it could and must do more. Next year is the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the passage of the Fitzgerald Act (i.e. the National Apprenticeship Act of 1937). While the apprenticeship establishment can be proud of its past accomplishments, it does need to be aware that it needs to do much more if it is to meet the future needs of a nation whose economy is becoming more complex and more complicated. The supply of skilled workers and the mechanism for providing them is the Achilles heel of the transformation of the American economy that is now in progress. Apprenticeship will be of no value if the nation itself is not equipped to provide the quality work force that will be required for this nation to remain industrially competitive in the world. The survival of a viable U.S. economy depends on many things. One of them is unquestionably the availability and quality of its skilled labor force. The question is not whether we need an expanded commitment to apprenticeship training but, rather, when are we going to begin the task of making it happen. Other nations are way ahead of us and if the U.S. apprenticeship establishment does not begin the urgent task of expanding its numerical base, a shortage of qualified

workers could mean a shortage of jobs that will be lost to the nation. If that happens, we are all going to suffer the consequences.