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American Made: The New Manufacturing Landscape

In South Carolina, A Program That Makes Apprenticeships Work

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Uri Berliner

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John Harris (left) walks with Warren Snead, a manager for Cooper Standard, an auto parts manufacturing factory near Spartanburg, S.C. After working as an electrician in the Air Force, Harris found the apprenticeship program at

Cooper Standard, where he learns while working on the job. **Mike Belleme for NPR hide caption**

itoggle caption Mike Belleme for NPR

Several years ago, South Carolina had a problem: a shortage of skilled workers and no good way to train young people for the workforce. So at a time when apprenticeship programs were in decline in the U.S., the state started a program called Apprenticeship Carolina.

"We were really, really squarely well-positioned at the bottom," says Brad Neese, the program's director.

From the beginning, South Carolina took apprenticeship beyond the building trades — that's the traditional route for apprentices — to fields like nursing, pharmacy and IT. As the number of apprenticeship programs has fallen nationwide, it has taken off in South Carolina.

"When we started this back in 2007, we only had 90 companies that had apprenticeship programs," Neese says.

"We've hit 670, which, by the way, we only had 777 apprentices in 2007. And we've now serviced nearly 11,000 apprentices. So it's been a phenomenal growth."

What's the secret sauce? A state tax credit for companies doesn't hurt — but at \$1,000 per year per apprentice for four years, it's pretty modest. A big factor is Germany. Companies like BMW and Bosch have plants in the state and brought with them the German system of apprenticeships.

"I think that the German influence has been great," Neese says. "But we also have seen that it's just a process that makes sense."

You can see the process unfold at companies like Cooper Standard in upstate Spartanburg, S.C. The company makes sealing systems that keep wind and noise out of cars and trucks.



John Harris replaces power cables for equipment at Cooper Standard. **Mike Belleme for NPR hide caption**

itoggle caption Mike Belleme for NPR

John Harris is a new apprentice there, fresh out of the Air Force. In the military, he dealt with his share of challenging situations, some of them in Afghanistan. But when he left the Air Force last summer it was pretty scary. He and his wife were moving to a new state, and he had no job prospects. Civilian life was a giant unknown.

"I'm an adult, I'm disciplined, I have leadership skills," he says. "I knew I had all these skills to offer. But I didn't know if anybody would want me. Everybody says they'll hire veterans, but that doesn't mean they can hire you if there's no jobs open."

At Cooper Standard, Harris is using his Air Force background as an electrician to learn an occupation called mechatronics. It's a fairly new kind of job in manufacturing — a utility player on the factory floor with myriad skills.

"They know a little about programming, they can work with automation," says Warren Snead, Harris' boss. "They know the basics of wiring, hydraulics, pneumatics — so really a Superman or Superwoman who can do everything." In other words, it's someone who's able to fix just about anything at a plant — and the kind of job that can't be sent to a faraway country. Recently, Harris installed sensors for an alarm system. Four nights a week he attends a

welding class. And he's feeling pretty good about the direction his life has taken since leaving the Air Force. "You only have a short amount of time on this planet; you better make the best of it," Harris says. "And that's what I'm going to do. So, yes, I do feel confident that I'm going to make the best that I can for my family."



Harris rests after his shift at Cooper Standard as his wife, Summer, gets home from work. Harris gets a few hours to have dinner and unwind before heading to class four days each week. **Mike Belleme for NPR** [hide caption](#) [itoggle caption](#) **Mike Belleme for NPR**

Starting Early

Many manufacturing companies are at a crossroads. They have converging needs. For example, there are the machining skills of veteran employees — think tool and die making — and there's the Information Age know-how of workers who can operate complicated computer-operated equipment. That's the case at United Tool and Mold in Easley, S.C. The company repairs and re-engineers molds that stamp out plastic parts for cars, trucks and refrigerators.

So why does the company have an apprenticeship program?

"Because every day, your workforce gets older," says United Tool and Mold manager Jeromy Arnett. "We've been walking around here for 20 minutes, and our workforce aged 20 minutes. We can't go back and get the time from the employees that are growing older."

So the company followed the German system of starting apprentices off early. They start here after their junior year in high school, combining classwork with on-the-job training. "We didn't go over and take verbatim what their model is, but a lot of how we set up our apprenticeship is based on that German model," Arnett says.

Brandon Richards is a youth apprentice at the company who just started at the local technical college. In class he studies computer-aided design. "I get paid for my hours at work when I'm here, and I get paid while I'm in class, so I stay on the clock even at school," he says.



Spartanburg Community College welding instructor Teresa Elder (left) grades Harris during class. **Mike Belleme for NPR** [hide caption](#)

itoggle caption Mike Belleme for NPR

Graduates of the company's apprenticeship program make around \$16 an hour and can earn up to \$24 as they get more experience.

Arnett says in this area that's enough to live pretty well.

"These folks in here are making a living so they can buy a house for their family, they put food on the table, they take that family vacation," he says. "They get the car that they want. Take care of their kids. To me, that's middle class."

'Apprenticeships Are Win-Win'

An apprenticeship isn't a cure-all. Companies can still make the wrong hire and squander their investment. Apprentices can wind up in a field they don't like and find it hard to switch. But everyone interviewed for this story — regardless of ideology or geography — from employers in the red state of South Carolina to economists to a Cabinet member in the Obama administration — all say the same thing: The apprenticeship system is an economic plus.

"Apprenticeships are win-win," says Labor Secretary Thomas Perez. "Apprentices are opportunities for young people to punch their ticket to the middle class and for employers to get that critical pipeline of skilled labor."

Given all that, you'd think they would be commonplace. Far from it. In 2003, there were about 489,000 registered apprentices in the U.S., according to the Labor Department. Last year, there were only around 288,000. Some of that can be chalked up to the recession and companies investing less in training. But people involved in apprenticeships see something else going on: the belief that somehow it's a failure when a young person doesn't go from high school to a four-year college.



Harris walks through the workspace of his welding class at Spartanburg Community College. **Mike Belleme for NPR hide caption**

itoggle caption Mike Belleme for NPR

"It's a stigma that we're trying to get over, especially in our schools," Arnett says. "Just because they don't have a sheet of paper hanging on the wall saying they went to school for four years doesn't mean that they're any less important to our country and the economy of our country than anyone else."

Perez says apprenticeships can be a sleeping giant for the U.S. economy. But some of the toughest converts are parents. "When you talk to people in the manufacturing context and you say, 'Hey, your son or daughter should be an apprentice manufacturer,' too many parents look at me and say, 'Tom, my kid's going to college.'"

Perez says apprentices can always get four-year degrees while they work — and employers will often foot the bill.

The Standout Efforts That Are Getting Americans Back to Work

What will it take to find jobs for the 9 million unemployed?

• by [Thomas MacMillan](#) on November 20, 2014

After four years as an assistant branch manager at Hudson Valley Bank in Bridgeport, Conn., Dora Coriano was laid off in August 2013, when the bank left the state.

Coriano, who's 58, soon discovered that finding a new job wasn't as easy as it had been the last time she'd been unemployed, 15 years prior. "In 1998, you could literally grab a stack of resumes and pound the pavement," she says. "You went from door to door ... you left your resume, you got called, and you got the job."

A year after losing her position at the bank, and submitting more than 75 job applications, Coriano still hasn't found full-time work. Instead, she has joined the ranks of the long-term unemployed.

"It's been really disheartening," Coriano says. "That's how I feel — like I'm stuck."

Despite a dropping unemployment rate, which hit 5.8 percent in October, 9 million people nationwide are like Coriano — stuck without a job.

Across the country, people are working to determine the best way to help those jobseekers find employment. Economists, analysts, policy-makers and not-for-profits are all seeking the antidote to unemployment, so they're trying out different programs that train or retrain the jobless, help them achieve certifications or land

internships.

Several approaches are showing promise. From paid apprenticeships to beefed-up community college programs and public-private partnerships, here's a look at some of the ways people are getting back to work — including Coriano.

Placing Workers in Apprenticeships

Organizations looking to bridge the gap between job training and job placement are increasingly turning to the apprenticeship model. One of the most successful of these is Apprenticeship Carolina, an initiative of the South Carolina technical college system.

While Apprenticeship Carolina's main focus is to help businesses that want to expand, says Brad Neese, program director, "a really positive byproduct is that these companies are going to hire South Carolinians." Funded by the state, Neese and his crew of consultants help companies to establish apprenticeship programs by connecting them with technical colleges around the state. "We meet with them and discuss the needs of the company," says Neese. "We personalize the process, and it's all free."

So far, it's working. Apprenticeship Carolina started with 90 companies in 2007. Today, it's working with more than 700 businesses and over the past seven years has placed almost 11,000 apprentices (in fields ranging from manufacturing to health care).

Seeking Out Trained Talent

While training programs are reaching out to potential employers, some successful programs start the other way around.

In St. Louis, the aircraft company Boeing approached the local community college to set up a 10-week program for would-be assembly mechanics. The class is free for students (paid for by Boeing), and the company hires 87 percent of those who complete it, says Becky Epps, program director.

In Newark, N.J., the Ford Motor Co. sponsored an automotive technical program at the New Community Workforce Development Center. In nine months, students are trained and certified and then placed in jobs through established relationships with Ford, Nissan and Toyota, says the program's director, Rodney Brutton. "The placement rate is 60 percent, which is great in this line of work," he says.

The Ford program helped a mechanic named Tom after he was laid off. Although he had 20 years' experience, he found he couldn't get another job without new certifications. All he heard was, "Leave your number and we'll give you a call." No one called.

After completing the program, Tom ended up getting 10 certifications, updated his resume and "started hearing from the dealerships," he says.

Now, he says, he's making over \$25 per hour, and he's no longer one of the country's 9 million unemployed workers.

Linking Companies and Community Colleges

Community colleges can play a key role in workforce development. Recognizing that fact, the White House in September announced \$450 million in grants to the schools, aimed at improving job training programs.

One popular movement in job training programs, according to Lauren Eyster, a researcher at the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C. think tank, is to build strong connections with hiring companies, so that trainees can be channeled right into waiting jobs that need their new skills.

Both of these trends are converging at Cape Cod Community College, in West Barnstable, Mass., which won one of the recent federal grants. The school is creating two 12-month programs to train workers to inspect and repair airplanes and airplane engines, in response to the needs of area employers.

"There's enormous support for this," says Michael Gross, director of communication. He says the school has letters of support from JetBlue, Delta and Cape Air, which will be looking to hire the first graduates of the program.

Supporting Struggling Students

While community colleges can set people up for new careers, some students have significant obstacles to overcome first, like lack of transportation, child care or money for books.

"The other piece of this is, once you get them into these programs, how do you get them to complete?" says Eyster. "The latest number I saw was only 40 percent of community college students graduate in six years."

Eyster says some colleges are starting to employ "navigators" to help guide students through school. At the Accelerating Opportunity: Kansas (AO-K) program at Washburn Tech, in Topeka, Kan., students learn technical skills while earning GEDs, with assistance from a navigator provided along the way.

“These students are under-resourced in every way you can imagine,” says Gillian Gabelman, associate dean at Washburn Tech. The navigator helps connect students to social services like child care and veterans benefits. “The transformation of the students is extraordinary,” Gabelman says. For example, a woman who dropped out of high school to have a baby has been able to go into medicine, and a reformed drug addict went through technical training and is working for a local manufacturer, she says.

Reversing the Snowball of Unemployment

Now Coriano, the unemployed bank worker, may be on a new path to employment, too.

After a year without work, her savings dwindling, Coriano enrolled in a program in Bridgeport called Platform to Employment, aimed specifically at the long-term unemployed, who often face snowballing challenges.

The longer people are out of work, the less attractive they can be to employers and the more discouraged they get. Platform to Employment tries to address both of those challenges with a two-pronged approach.

The first is a full-time five-week course of job preparation classes. “It’s not a job training program,” says Tom Long, vice president of communications and development. “It’s more about taking someone who’s ready to be back at work and helping them improve their confidence and readiness.”

During the course, Coriano and other participants learn how to present their best selves to employers, to develop their “personal brand” and to “conquer their fear about their own limitations,” Long says. They also meet with a behavioral health specialist and learn how to deal with the stress and psychological struggles that come from long-term unemployment.

The second part of the Platform to Employment approach is to place participants in jobs with local employers for a two-month “tryout,” paid for by the program. The try-before-you-buy system allows employers to take a chance on a new employee with no financial risk, since private foundation funding pays for wages.

After a successful pilot program in Bridgeport in 2011, Platform to Employment recently completed a 10-city nationwide expansion. And, with \$3.5 million in funding from the Connecticut Legislature, the program is spreading across that state.

Read more: <http://nationswell.com/5-ways-workers-are-getting-jobs/#ixzz3JhuUUApa>

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