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IN DEPTH: REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Apprenticeship benefits employers, labor pool

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Jonathan Barton says that as a high school senior in 1989, he had given more thought to spending the summer with his friends in Hawaii than to what he would do when he returned.

"I had worked at a grocery store through high school, and I figured I could temporarily work there until I decided what path to take," he says.

Instead, Barton was among the first to enroll and complete a three-year apprenticeship offered by Austin-based Intertech Flooring, certifying him as a journeyman flooring installer.

Today, at age 32, Barton is a project manager for Intertech, where he is responsible for multimillion-dollar commercial construction projects for clients like AMD and Sears TeleServ. He also is completing an associate's degree in applied sciences at Austin Community College.

"There's just nothing as good as a combination of work and education to build a workforce, and a dual-credit [apprenticeship] program is a win-win relationship," says Warren Heatwole, ACC Building Construction Technology Department chairman.

Former Leander High School Principal Mark Kincaid agrees. In July, he became the director of College and Career Preparatory Programs for Austin Community College and Austin Independent School District.

A proponent of apprenticeships while at Leander High, Kincaid says during the 2002-2003 school year, about 80 juniors and seniors took part in two apprenticeships offered in machining and construction electrical training.

"These students need a niche, a place to exercise their skills," Kincaid says. "They like to learn hands on. And even if they aspire to go to college, they know they're going to have to work to pay for it. Skills-based training allows them to transition from high school to high-skill, high-wage jobs, or go on to college."

An AISD May 2003 survey of high school seniors found that, although 91 percent of students planned to pursue some type of post-secondary education, financing remained a concern. Nearly 43 percent of students said they would need to borrow money to continue their education.

Maintaining workforce quality is one of three major concerns for Austin's future economic health, according to a study commissioned this year by the Greater Austin Economic Development Foundation.

The study recommended that the business community initiate best-practice workforce development programs and leverage existing workforce development resources to their full extent.

Historically, apprenticeships have been marketed as alternatives to post-secondary education, but today they're being viewed increasingly as an adjunct to other forms of higher education.

"I believe it is a losing battle to pitch apprenticeship as an alternative to college," says Dr. Robert Glover, research scientist with the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. "Parents want their kids to go to college,

and some have a perception of apprenticeships as strictly a blue-collar path."

"Apprenticeships are about options," Kincaid says. "If we can find a niche for these neglected majority students ... they can look at that as a major in college."

The educational requirements for jobs are increasing every year, says John Fitzpatrick, executive director of the Capital Area Training Foundation and vice president for workforce development with the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce.

"A job you could get 10 years ago with a high school diploma demands more education today," says Fitzpatrick, who is also an AISD trustee at-large. "If you want to earn a high wage, you have to have higher education."

This spring, Intertech Flooring and Austin Community College have agreed that the company's apprenticeship can serve as the foundation for a two-year associate's degree in applied sciences. By completing the apprenticeship requirements along with an additional 15 hours of coursework in math, communications, humanities and social behavioral science, the apprentice can earn a college diploma along with a journeyman's certification.

The Intertech apprenticeship works like most others. An apprenticeship combines classroom study with work experience under the supervision of journeymen in the field. Apprentices earn half of a journeyman's wage initially, with merit raises every six months.

When it comes to hard dollars, research shows that apprenticeship programs directly correlate to higher wages.

Glover has spent years studying apprenticeship programs. In researching six trades within the construction industry, he found that "apprentices worked more regularly, advanced to foreman or supervisory positions faster and worked in those positions longer than their non-apprenticed peers."

Gilbert Ferrales' observations are similar. He is the training director for the electrician apprenticeship program offered through National Electrical Contractors Association and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

"We've found that apprenticeship is one of the most successful ways for a person to advance in earnings potential," says Ferrales, whose five-year program has 266 apprentices in Central Texas.

"You can be an electrician without apprenticing and can expect to earn around \$10 per hour," he says. "But a typical first-year journeyman out of our program will earn more than twice that, plus benefits. The ones that are going to make the money are the ones that are educated."

This year, the Central Texas chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors, or ABC, expanded its apprenticeship program offerings to seven trades. Eleven of the nation's largest contractors provided the funding to standardize ABC's curriculum and implement a "train the trainer" program. By delivering uniform content from one ABC chapter to the next, the program ensures portability when participants move to another location.

"Programs like this are a great asset for the employee and the employer," says Kathey Gillispie, Central Texas chapter president and CEO. "Employees tend to be loyal to a company that has invested time and effort in training them. It generates better employees, while giving the employee a path to advance and make more money."

Glover warns, however, that companies and trade associations should regard apprenticeship programs as long-term commitments.

"Apprenticeship is a long-term training endeavor that cannot be turned on and off with fluctuations in the economy or the profit circumstances of the firm," he says.

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