

Why businesses should rediscover apprenticeships

The current discussions in the press about the value of a college education miss an important facet of the college experience that has key implications for business.

Education is a product that involves instilling knowledge and processes, and we measure the success of the end result by the knowledge gained in the education program.

These days we tend to think about the delivery of education using a metaphor drawn from manufacturing: we take a large number of students and put them through group classes. But long before we systematized education in the early 20th century, however, most education happened in a much different way. People who wanted to learn a skill or trade apprenticed with an expert who had already mastered their craft.

You may not know that this tradition of apprenticeship is alive and well within universities. For example, PhD students do take some classes as part of their course of study, but much of their extensive training involves an extended apprenticeship under the supervision of members of the faculty in their department. Students often start by working on projects that their advisers have developed and gradually gain more independence as they progress through the program.

One shining example of apprenticeship at the University of Texas is the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program, headed by Rick Chervitz.

This program, part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, matches up students — many of whom are the first in their families to go to college



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— with faculty members and graduate students who hone their skills individually within a field of study. The students get an insider's view of what it means to work on difficult intellectual problems as they engage in their own work.

Over the years, I have had several of these students work in my lab, and the experience is eye-opening for them and for me. Indeed, one of the students who worked in my lab, Rogelio Garcia, was a first-generation college student. After graduating from UT, he moved to Europe to join a psychology lab and then went on to a masters program at UT-San Antonio.

These kinds of educational experiences do not show up in many of the measures we take of the efficiency of universities. Many of these apprentice students are not enrolled in formal classes, considering they are learning directly from faculty and graduate students, and are simply taking part in the day-to-day intellectual work that goes on at universities.

In the process, they add richness to the research mission of universities. They learn skills that cannot be taught in the classroom. Perhaps more important, they internalize the work ethic that leads to success at a world-class university.

This kind of apprenticeship is valuable in any organization. In many companies, when someone is promoted to a new position, they show up the next day at their new office and are expected to take over



The traditional type of industry apprenticeship depicted in this photo is alive and well in the university system.

without any transition period. Managers in large companies may meet many of the people in the area they supervise for the first time on their first day of the job.

Creating an apprentice period provides an opportunity for emerging leaders to learn core aspects of the job in a partnership with existing leaders who can share their experience and wisdom.

The apprentice leader can also learn a lot from the actions that go unspoken but

turn out to be crucial.

Ultimately, UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship program is a wonderful example of the kinds of learning that goes on at universities outside of the classroom. It's also a model for the way any organization can add an apprenticeship system to its leadership training.

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