

# The Push for Education Programs That Pay People As They Learn

Advocates say worker training is key to economic stability—but can they convince the federal government it's worth the money?

[Lolade Fadulu](#) 10:00 AM ET

Just before President Trump took office, Ammar Campa-Najjar wrote him a memo urging him to support apprenticeship. Apprenticeship is “a program that sounds like your show,” Campa-Najjar half-jokingly explained to Trump in the letter in a nod to the president’s reality-TV series. “You should just put your name on it, like everything else, and take credit for it.”

Campa-Najjar—who served in the Labor Department’s Office of Public Affairs for the Employment and Training Administration under President Obama—never got a response from Trump. Congress, however, has taken action on the model, recently [increasing federal funding for apprenticeships](#) from \$90 million to \$95 million per year. “I’m not going to take credit for that,” Campa-Najjar told me, “but that is something that happened.”

What’s promising about apprenticeship is that participants don’t have to go into debt while getting trained for the workforce. Unlike college, apprentices learn while they earn. What’s more, [87 percent of participants finish their programs having already secured a job](#). Apprenticeships are, in turn, being touted as a simple fix to the country’s [\\$1.3 trillion student-debt crisis](#) and the high percentage of unemployed college graduates.

But \$95 million is, according to Campa-Najjar, just a “drop in the bucket.” European countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, [invest billions in](#)

[apprenticeship](#). He wonders what the U.S. government could achieve if it took money earmarked for the U.S.-Mexico border wall and dedicated it to apprenticeship programs instead.

Campa-Najjar has reason to be optimistic, though: Apprenticeship has bipartisan appeal and has enjoyed the support of both the Obama and Trump administrations. The White House [created 75,000 new apprenticeships](#) between Obama's 2014 State of the Union address and April of 2016. A few months ago, Trump [issued an executive order](#) establishing a Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion aimed at finding ways to promote apprenticeship.

I spoke with Campa-Najjar about the cost of providing apprenticeships, the merits of such programs compared to higher education and trade school, and current job vacancies. Campa-Najjar sees a bright future for apprenticeship, and he argues that it's possible for these programs to evolve and address the potential risks posed by automation and disloyal workers. This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

**Lolade Fadulu:** I've heard the argument that apprenticeships are just too expensive to implement. Where do you think the necessary funds will come from?

**Ammar Campa-Najjar:** I think the money should come from the federal budget. President Trump moved the government's \$90 million commitment up to \$95 million because he saw the benefit of it.

To really match the kind of scale and growth in countries like Germany and Switzerland, which invest billions of dollars in apprenticeship, we really have to double down on our investing. What we tried to [do under the Obama administration was] incentivize corporations to match federal dollars. [We also tried to work] with unions and community colleges to make it more affordable and then just more effective. That's the kind of model that we're

seeing around the world. ...We could have the kind of workforce that's able to fill 21st-century job vacancies.

There are 200,000 job vacancies in construction. There are 360,000 job vacancies in ... manufacturing [[as of June 2017](#)]. We just don't have the robust job-training agenda that we see from our neighbors across the pond.

**Fadulu:** Isn't it likely that these same jobs in construction and advanced manufacturing will become automated in the very near future? Wouldn't that make apprenticeships in those industries somewhat futile?

**Campa-Najjar:** A great deal of them will be, but there will always be somebody who will have to work in construction and manufacturing, and that kind of person will be highly skilled who maybe is creating the coding for that automation. I think that the manual-labor aspect of it will be replaced.

We have to retool and retrain people for 21st-century jobs. I think that's not impossible. ... Americans are afraid [to reinvent themselves] because they don't even know what the first step looks like, and that's on ... the government and public service to show people the way. We have come through many stages in America where we've helped people walk through new doors and new opportunities, but there's a fear and a reluctance towards change. ...[For some] it's about this sense of pride that these people have been doing this for years and their parents did it before them. We have to deal with it delicately because it's dignity, it's history. We have to help people transition skills-wise and psychologically.

**Fadulu:** How difficult do you think it will be to get the federal government to invest in apprenticeships?

**Campa-Najjar:** President Trump's [June 2017] executive order and his [stated goal](#) of increasing the number of apprenticeships by] 5 million ... is a good gesture. It's moving in the right direction, [even though] it's not even close to what we need. But that tells me there's a bipartisan sentiment in the

power and effectiveness and need and urgency of apprenticeship.

**Fadulu:** Even though a company has invested in an apprentice, couldn't the apprentice leave and go elsewhere for a job that pays better? It sounds risky from a business perspective.

**Campa-Najjar:** There are certain agreements that could prevent that. Unions, when they do apprenticeships, they just say, "If we train you, you have committed to staying for five years." It's almost like the military. ... Maybe there's just [a need for] accountability on both sides [when it comes to companies and their employees]. The employer and employee come into this relationship where *we're going to train you and you will work for us for the next five years. We'll put you on this curriculum where every couple months you get a promotion.* ... So I think there are some things legislatively we could do to make that happen.

**Fadulu:** Do apprenticeships ever include lessons on, say, how to be a good person or espouse the value of knowledge for the sake of knowledge?

**Campa-Najjar:** I think that if we see this massive exodus [of people] out of colleges, that will happen, but that's not what people who support apprenticeship are calling for. It's college for the rest of us. It's not saying, "Hey! Don't go to college." It's like, "If you're not going to go to college, face the fact that you need more skills" and "If you're not going to do college because of debt, because you don't want to spend the time, because you just don't care about getting an education of that kind, there is an alternative."

And sometimes apprentices go back to college because they want to manage the project they had been working on [in their apprenticeship] and they get support from their employer [to do so]. ...I think [apprenticeship and higher education are] more complementary—that's why a lot of community colleges are on the front lines of making apprenticeship work. They just see it as another step in continuing education.