

Apprenticeship demand outstrips availability

Before we can rebuild aging infrastructure, we need to rebuild respect for the men and women who make it happen. It takes apprentices who invest as much or more time and effort into learning their professions as most undergraduates put into pursuing a four year college degree.

A bachelors degree at the University Washington requires 180 credits, typically earned within four years. Figuring classroom and study time at a generous 60 hours per week, a proud Husky will have invested 7200 hours and over \$40,000 in tuition. If they've chosen a major wisely, they may find a job that pays enough to cover their student loans before they're ready to retire.

To become a Journeymen Lineman requires an apprenticeship with 7000 working hours, plus seven months of Saturdays in the classroom and 10 days of intensive training at a specialized controlled facility, according to Will Power, IBEW Local 77 Eastside Construction Representative. "It's basically equivalent to a four-year college degree and possibly more time commitment," wrote Power in a recent email exchange. "There are written quizzes, midterm



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We do society and individuals a disservice in pushing "college for all."

The slogan of the men and women of IBEW Local 77 is "We bring power to the people." Lineman makes the top 10 list of most dangerous trades according to the Department of Labor, which is one reason the final hurdle is a personal endorsement from future coworkers. Their lives will literally be in the hands of their former apprentice.

Plumbers, pipefitters, HVAC technicians and other essential construction trades have similar requirements for 8,000 to

and final tests each year and requires the endorsement of three Journeymen Linemen with over three years experience at the Journey level."

And successful apprentices "graduate" without a mountain of college debt.

10,000 hours of training to complete an apprenticeship. There is no spigot to turn on and flush out competent plumbers.

The number of apprentices is limited by the ratio of apprentices to each journeymen as determined by safety and training requirements. For the most dangerous trades, that ratio may be 1:1. "The learn while you earn model that makes registered apprenticeship programs so successful breaks down when the work isn't there," according to Brett Wideman, business manager for Plumbers and Steamfitters Union Local 44.

It's easier to get into Washington State University than into a registered apprenticeship. WSU's acceptance rate was 77% in 2019. Wideman noted they have many qualified applicants for his union's five-year apprenticeship program every year, but the acceptance rate runs about 15% to 20%. They can't take on more apprentices than work available.

For a decade the work wasn't available. When construction slumped after the 2008 recession, apprenticeship numbers declined and took eight years to recover. The current labor shortage stems from a combination of lower apprentice

numbers and journeymen who stuck it out then started retiring in greater numbers once their retirement portfolios recovered.

The logjam in the labor supply chain is affecting project timelines and cost. It shows up in the compressed housing market. "Technology isn't going to save us on this one. We can't 3D print our way out of the housing shortage or develop an app to fix a crumbling bridge," wrote Cheryl Stewart, executive director of the inland Northwest AGC. "We need people and we need to start training them now to develop the skills they need to help us continue to build our community."

The Sustainability Action Plan under consideration for adoption by the Spokane City Council sets an ambitious goal to require all new construction to include "on-site renewable energy generation" by 2025, in addition to moving more of our transportation and heating demand to the electrical grid. While it's great to include "expand local and national apprenticeship programs to meet growing demands for a skilled workforce" as a priority strategy for the long-term, it will not help the IBEW staff up to bring more power to the people in less

than four years.

Last week 1 million households and businesses in Louisiana were reminded of electrical infrastructure fragility. Cleaning up debris and rebuilding the electrical grid requires more than infrastructure funding. It requires boots on the ground or up in the bucket truck, and it takes time. Linemen from around the country will pause ongoing projects to respond. A typical work schedule, according to Will Power, might be 32 hours straight through then eight hours off. Then crews will keep working 16 hours on duty and eight hours off until all customers are restored, whether it takes a few days or more than a month.

We have high demand for men and women in essential, fulfilling and good paying jobs that won't be addressed by rallying around student loan forgiveness. There's no shortcut to expanding the skilled labor force to handle a massive influx of infrastructure spending and take care of every day maintenance and expansion. Happy Labor Day to America's apprentices. We need you.

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