

Advancing Learn-and-Earn Training Strategies

Findings from a Los Angeles, San Bernardino,
and Riverside County Regional Convening



The **James Irvine**
Foundation

Introduction

Dear Colleagues,

At the James Irvine Foundation, our mission is to expand opportunity for the people of California. In 2016, we [announced our evolving focus](#) of expanding economic and political opportunity for families and young adults who are working but struggling with poverty. To advance these mutually reinforcing goals, our team has focused on a body of work around career readiness and living-wage work, with the objective of identifying solutions that:

- Improve opportunities for job and entrepreneurship training that lead to quality jobs
- Identify more ways to provide credentials that lead to a family-sustaining career
- Create higher-quality jobs that help employers grow their business, including by increasing small business capital for entrepreneurs
- Identify successful models of matching employers with lower- or middle-skilled workers

A guiding principle in our work is [listening and learning](#) — and also sharing back what we are hearing. Last year the Foundation hosted [listening sessions across California](#) to hear directly from low-wage workers. And throughout the past year, our team at the Foundation has been making pilot grants, conducting research, and engaging in conversations to ensure that our strategy is informed by the deep knowledge and effective models that already exist in the field. Based on those interactions, we realized there are a number of areas where generative discussions could be beneficial not only to us, but to the entire field, helping to reveal the current landscape and also to identify potential new ideas.

In that spirit, we spent the spring and summer of 2017 speaking to and convening practitioners and field experts across the state. This document shares the findings from one of those convenings focused on “Learn-and-Earn” strategies, which help workers connect to and advance in middle-wage careers. The convening was held in Los Angeles and included participants from the Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties — but our hope is that the lessons learned are applicable across California.

This document contains two parts:

- 1) An **executive summary** that provides an overview of the process we undertook and the key insights that we gleaned
- 2) A **detailed synthesis** of what we learned through research, interviews, and discussions at the convening

In designing these convenings, we realized that we could only scratch the surface on these important topics. Rather than serving as a compendium of information on learn-and-earn strategies, this document is intended to add to the already-rich work of organizations that are advancing efforts to help workers connect to middle-wage jobs and businesses to find the talent they need. Our goal in sharing this information is to help you learn from the work of others and surface new understanding, connections, and ideas.

We invite you to also review the findings from our other regional convenings on our website at www.irvine.org/learning.

Thank you for engaging on this important topic.

Warmly,



Elizabeth González

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1) Executive Summary

1.1) What We Did

At the Irvine Foundation's first Career Readiness and Living-Wage Work convening of grantees and field leaders in the spring of 2017, participants came together to share their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities across the California workforce and employment landscape. Attendees painted a bold "better future" in which workers attain the right sets of skills that are valued by employers, thereby advancing, thriving, and being in a position to better support their families. To get to that better future, attendees identified a set of topics for deeper exploration, one of which was **understanding how learn-and-earn strategies can help workers connect to jobs and advance into middle-wage careers.**

Given the strong work in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties to advance learn-and-earn models, in July we convened field experts from these regions to further explore this topic and understand what opportunities exist to further expand the impact of learn-and-earn models in different industries and across the state. And while these models can range from high school summer internships to multi-year apprenticeships, we focused on those learn-and-earn strategies that help workers who have already completed high school connect to full-time, middle-wage careers.

To prepare for this convening, we reviewed existing research and interviewed participants to understand the landscape of existing efforts in the broader region, including what's working, what challenges exist, and what opportunities lie ahead. In advance of our time together, we synthesized and shared with participants what we read, heard, and observed so our group could come together with a common baseline understanding. We then spent the majority of our time together exploring potential solutions—or "What if's"—for expanding the use and impact of learn-and-earn models.

In the following section is a summary of what we learned through research, interviews, and discussions at the convening.

1.2) What We Learned

Across California, there are many people who are working but still struggling with poverty. They are looking for better ways to provide for themselves and their families. At the same time, employers across the state are looking to fill over one million middle-skill, middle-wage jobs over the coming years. To bridge this gap, there is strong promise in learn-and-earn strategies, which include a wide range of models that allow workers to gain critical skills while they are earning income.

Across the range of learn-and-earn models, registered apprenticeships have been the most studied, demonstrating clear and tangible benefits to workers, employers, and the economy. Apprenticeships are often considered the "gold standard" in connecting workers to middle-wage jobs, but the model has challenges. That's why organizations across the state are taking some of the traditional elements of the apprenticeship model and recombining them, adding to them, and adapting them into their own learn-and-earn strategies.

1.2.1) Trends That Could Help Accelerate Change

Through our discussions before and during the convening, there was a strong sense that now is an opportune moment for expanding the prevalence and quality of learn-and-earn programs in California. Participants identified a number of important trends that are forcing employers to challenge the status quo around how they attract and retain talent, making them increasingly open to new approaches, particularly learn-and-earn programs. These trends include:

Key Trends

1. **A strong economy with low unemployment rates.** As unemployment rates decrease and wages tick upward, many employers are struggling to hire and retain quality workers. Learn-and-earn programs can be an effective way to help employers to find new workers, equip them with job-ready skills, and retain them in the long term.
2. **The “silver tsunami” of aging workers.** In many industries, a large number of baby boomers are expected to retire in the coming years, leaving many middle-skill jobs and management positions open. Some employers are exploring ways to use learn-and-earn strategies not only to recruit new workers, but also to train existing employees in new skills in order to fill these critical roles.
3. **Increased automation and rapid technological advancements.** With the rise of automation, artificial intelligence, and the speed of technological advancements, millions of jobs could be at risk over the coming decades. At the same time, entirely new categories of jobs are emerging and require dramatically different skills. This pace of change is causing many businesses to realize the inefficiency of having students learn a set of skills in a classroom and then years later hope they can apply that knowledge in the workplace. Instead, many employers are looking for training and hiring models that incorporate on-the-job training so workers can better adapt to the changing nature of work.
4. **Increasing public demand for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.** Employers in many industries are taking a critical look at their own diversity, equity, and inclusion practices as the U.S. workforce (and companies' customers) becomes more diverse and demand the same from companies. Because learn-and-earn strategies allow workers to learn on the job alongside company mentors, they can serve as promising strategies to reach workers that may be overlooked in traditional recruiting methods.
5. **Employers' openness to rethinking required credentials and experience.** For many years, employers have inflated the credentials required for many jobs, defaulting to hiring workers with two- and four-year degrees and then investing even more time and resources to train them on the technical skills it takes to do the job. However, given employers' struggles to fill middle-skill positions, some have begun to explore alternative models in which workers without a formal degree can learn on the job while also attending targeted classroom trainings, thereby increasing workers' industry- and job-specific readiness.
6. **Employers' willingness to collaborate to address their shared lower- and middle-skill talent needs.** While companies may be fiercely competitive over high-skilled and senior-level talent, they appear to be more open to collaborate to fill lower- and middle-skill positions. This has led to a number of industry collaborations for learn-and-earn strategies in which employers work together to train cohorts of workers.

1.2.2) “What If”: Opportunities to Improve and Expand Learn-and-Earn Approaches

Building off these key trends and the strong set of existing models, participants identified a range of opportunities to enhance learning-related efforts, earning-related efforts, and system-wide efforts that shape the context in which learn-and-earn strategies are implemented. Before and during the convening, participants identified a number of “What if...?” ideas for how to improve and expand learn-and-earn strategies, ultimately honing in on **four areas of opportunity** around which there was significant interest and enthusiasm. Detailed recaps of breakout groups' discussions of each of these opportunities can be found on pages 17-23.

1 What if... learn-and-earn strategies could serve as a critical way to address biases — such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation — and other barriers to employment?

Many participants voiced a desire for learn-and-earn strategies to benefit all types of workers, even those who face biases or barriers to employment, and see learn-and-earn programs as a strong avenue through which employers can proactively add diverse and valuable workers to their teams.

Learn-and-earn can be an effective method for combatting hiring bias. By providing workers with a foot-in-the door that is outside of traditional talent pipelines, these strategies can help workers learn on the job, steadily gain valuable skills, and demonstrate their value to employers over time. To accelerate these effects, though, a number of practices may need to change. For instance, some noted that employers are slowly undergoing a mindset shift—from seeing diversity as a “liability” that they need to mitigate against to seeing it as an “asset” that helps their companies connect to an increasingly diverse customer and supplier network. By helping employers understand the value of diversity, elevating those that embrace it, and developing learn-and-earn programs that serve as a diversity pipeline, many see an opportunity for organizations to help workers overcome bias in finding jobs and help employers find diverse talent.

Learn-and-earn can be a way to help those with barriers to employment. For workers with barriers to employment, such as opportunity youth and re-entry populations, learn-and-earn strategies can help these workers earn income right away while learning workplace and life skills with the help of mentors and classroom training. Additionally, the costs of the supplementary supports that these workers may need could be subsidized by the public and/or philanthropic sectors, helping incentivize employers to hire these workers and enable them progress into traditional employment.

2 What if... we develop better ways for employers, education providers, and industry associations to co-develop training programs and credentials that address critical market needs?

Participants identified a need for better communication among employers, training providers, workers, and funders (both public and philanthropic) to break down silos, enabling them to collaborate better to deploy learn-and-earn programs. These silos oftentimes result from a lack of common understanding among the different stakeholders of the wide spectrum of potential approaches, a lack of common definitions that enable comparisons across approaches, and the perceptions associated with specific terms.

There is a wide spectrum of approaches. The spectrum of learn-and-earn approaches includes everything from paid summer internships for high-school students to formal apprenticeship programs for working adults. And while “earning” is a core component of learn-and-earn strategies, some acknowledge that unpaid opportunities like unpaid internships or some pre-apprenticeship training programs can be a necessary on-ramp to some learn-and-earn programs.

It can be hard to understand where similarities and differences exist. A number of formal, federally recognized programs like registered apprenticeships or on-the-job training have clear definitions, requirements, and dedicated public funding streams. However, programs that serve a similar function — for example, training workers while they are earning income and helping them advance at companies — are often harder to define and compare across organizations. This variation represents a challenge for training organizations looking to describe their work, for companies trying to understand the nuances among different programs, and for workers trying to make a choice of which program to pursue.

There is a perceived connection between “apprenticeships” and organized labor. There is political sensitivity in describing learn-and-earn strategies, especially with employers. Employers may be more eager to explore “learn-and-earn” programs, as opposed to “apprenticeships” because they associate the term with organized labor. Some training programs work diligently to educate employers on the difference, while others take a different tactic and describe such training in terms that resonate with more employers.

3 What if... we rethink how to best engage employers so they recognize the value of investing in learn-and-earn programs?

Employers are fundamental to successful learn-and-earn programs, and finding new ways to engage companies and industries was a theme through many conversations.

There is a business case to be made for learn-and-earn. A number of organizations are exploring ways to make the business case to employers and help them understand how learn-and-earn strategies can fit into their talent strategy and drive bottom line results. By focusing on metrics that employers value, such as reducing turnover or increasing productivity, training organizations can demonstrate how they can add value or reduce costs for employers. Additionally, many employers do not have large talent departments and may not know what specific skills

they need or what career pathways may be available. Helping companies map these paths and customize learn-and-earn programs to help workers advance along them is an important value-add that workforce organizations can provide.

There are different schools of thought for how to compel private sector companies to participate. While many organizations are working to help employers, some question what could be done to compel them to invest more in talent development and workplace learning in a way that helps workers from all backgrounds. Some participants highlighted that in Germany and other parts of the world, employers are mandated to invest in workplace training programs, which represents an additional funding stream than what is typically available in the U.S. However, others point to the significant costs of onboarding and training workers and argue that participating businesses should receive subsidies, either through workforce development funding or tax credits.

4 What if... we clarify and expand what counts as a “credential” so workers can better translate their life experiences into demonstrable competencies valued by employers?

Learn-and-earn models allow workers to learn in a variety of ways, such as in the classroom, on the job, or through other avenues, gaining critical experience that employers value. However, a challenge remains on how that learning can be catalogued and shared in a way that allows workers to demonstrate their skills while also giving employers confidence in the quality of those skills.

There is an opportunity to shift how we think about “credentials”. Some believe that we need to think creatively about how to recognize the relevant skills of a diverse set of workers gain through all avenues of their life. For instance, if a person planned their own wedding or another major event, that experience may have helped them develop skills that can transfer to project management or formal event planning. Alternatively, a worker may have years of on-the-job experience in a computer program without a formal credential. There is an opportunity to help employers catalogue the individual skills and competencies that they need and communicate those skills effectively to the labor market, and help workers document their own skills in a way that is quality-controlled.

2) Detailed Synthesis

2.1) Context

With workers looking for higher-paying jobs to support their families and employers looking to fill an estimated 1.5 million middle-skill job openings by 2025¹, learn-and-earn programs that allow workers to gain critical skills while they are also earning income can play a critical role in bridging this gap.

2.1.1) Defining “Learn-and-Earn”

On its face, the term “learn-and-earn” seems self-explanatory: a job training approach in which a worker is both learning and earning at the same time. In reality, there is much nuance embedded in this simple term. Learn-and-earn approaches can take a variety of forms, focus on various types of learning, and utilize a range of earning mechanisms:

- **Forms of learn-and-earn:** There are a number of different types of learn-and-earn, with **registered apprenticeships** oftentimes cited as the quintessential learn-and-earn model given the extensive evidence that exists of how registered apprenticeships successfully connect workers to middle-skill jobs and deliver strong returns on investment for employers. However, a number of additional strategies exist as well, such as:
 - **On-the-job training (OJT)**, which includes a broad range of programs in which employers train workers in a number of skills while they are on the job.
 - **Customized training** is when employers and education providers collaborate to train new or incumbent workers.
 - **Transitional employment** targets workers with barriers to employment to help them enter or re-enter the workforce.
 - **Paid internships**, which can be a first step for learn-and-earn models if they are intentional about training and coaching interns. Unpaid internships and job shadowing would not be considered learn-and-earn since trainees don’t earn during these programs.

Rather than being mutually exclusive, these strategies often work in concert. Many interviewees shared their own customized learn-and-earn models that piece together these and other strategies.

- **Types of learning:** There are different types of learning that are critical parts of learn-and-earn strategies. These include the development of:
 - **Hard skills:** Many interviewees spoke about teaching technical skills as part of a learn-and-earn approach. These may be taught at regional community colleges as part of degree or certificate programs, in other classroom-based instruction, or even on the job.
 - **“Soft” skills:** While these skills go by a number of different names, interviewees agreed on their importance along hard skills. In general, these included:
 - **Essential personal and interpersonal skills**, such as cooperation, teamwork, grit, and perseverance.
 - **Workplace etiquette**, such as showing up on time, dressing appropriately, and working with supervisors.
 - **Job search skills**, such as creating resumes and preparing for job interviews.
- **Types of earning mechanisms:** There are a range of ways that workers earn income as part of a learn-and-earn program:
 - **From an employer:** In many cases, “earning” refers to the wage that a worker receives from an employer while they are on the job. That wage may be pre-determined (especially for apprenticeships), and funding may be split initially between the employer and the public sector (in the case of OJT).
 - **From a separate entity:** In other cases, a separate entity (e.g., a nonprofit organization) is the employer of record that works with employers and the public sector to “place” workers at agreed-upon rates. Before these workers are placed and while they are still being trained, these entities

sometimes pay a small stipend, providing additional monetary support for workers to complete their training.

2.1.2) Understanding the Evidence Base

Of all the types of learn-and-earn models, **registered apprenticeships** have been the most studied and often are considered the “gold standard” in connecting workers to middle-wage jobs. In California, registered apprenticeships have grown from 52,763 in 2011² to 74,441 in 2016³. State and federal leaders continue to look for ways to expand them further. Registered apprenticeships have five components:

- Employers pay participants during their training
- Programs meet national standards for registration with the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) or state apprenticeship agencies
- Programs provide both on-the-job learning and job-related classroom or technical instruction
- On-the-job learning is conducted under the direction of a mentor
- The training results in an industry-recognized credential that certifies occupational proficiency⁴

Benefits to workers

Apprenticeships offer participants employment with compensation and benefits, skill development opportunities, free or low-cost classroom instruction in the short term, and a path to full-time, middle-skill, middle-wage jobs in the long term.

The financial benefit of apprenticeships is immediate and continues to grow over time:

- According to the DOL, 91 percent of apprentices are employed after completing apprenticeship programs, with an average starting salary above \$60,000.⁵
- Apprentices receive benefits and incremental wage progression, starting at \$15 per hour on average⁶ and increasing to \$35 or more per hour, based on the trade and industry.⁷
- Apprentices who complete the program earn about 1.4 times as much as non-participants with the same pre-apprenticeship history.⁸
- Over the course of their careers, participants who complete an apprenticeship program earn \$300,000 more than non-participants.⁹

Beyond direct monetary benefits, apprentices are able to develop both job-specific skills and transferable skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and critical thinking. Studies show that apprentices demonstrate greater leadership potential in a company than non-apprentices.¹⁰ In addition, apprenticeships help apprentices build work experience and a job network. Research shows that when apprentices compete for jobs against others in the labor market, they receive more job offers, are hired more quickly, and are paid higher starting wages.¹¹ When they find a job in their chosen field, they are also more likely to experience higher job satisfaction.¹²

Benefits to employers and the economy

Employers who invest in apprenticeships benefit in a number of ways as well, allowing them to establish a pipeline of skilled workers to meet their specific talent needs in a cost-effective way. In particular:

- Apprenticeship programs helped companies find skilled workers, evaluate those workers' skills, and identify which workers met their skill requirements.¹³
- Full-time retention is a major benefit, as 91 percent of apprentices remain at their employer.¹⁴
- Employers agreed that apprenticeships improve the firm's overall performance and gave them a competitive advantage over other firms.¹⁵
- Safety trainings provided through learn-and-earn programs could lead to reduce worker compensation costs.¹⁶
- Studies show that apprentices:
 - Remain longer, better integrate into the company culture, have better morale and pride, and show greater leadership potential at the company^{17,18}
 - Demonstrate a reduced need for supervision and flexibility to perform a variety of tasks¹⁹
 - Are able to increase company productivity, bring new ideas to the workplace, improve retention, reduce turnover, and even led to greater customer satisfaction^{20,21}

When it comes to the bottom line, return-on-investment data suggest that apprenticeships make financial sense for businesses. Canadian businesses report \$1.47 in gains for every \$1 they invest in apprenticeships.²² And in the U.S., Siemens USA reports a 50-percent rate of return when comparing hiring apprentices to hiring from other channels.²³ In New Hampshire, a medical assistant apprenticeship program had an internal rate of return of 40 percent.²⁴

Beyond individual employers, apprenticeships can benefit the economy and workforce development system broadly. A cost-benefit analysis of apprenticeships found that revenue from tax returns of newly employed apprentices yielded \$27 per dollar invested, with total benefits including unemployment insurance compensation and public assistance netting \$124,057 over the course of an apprentice's career.²⁵

Challenges

Despite these benefits, registered apprenticeships have shortcomings that have limited their usage. In particular, some employers are wary of apprenticeships due to their formal requirements (e.g., registration with the DOL or state agencies), long durations, the high degree of commitment required, and the perceived connection between apprenticeships and organized labor. In addition, apprenticeships have historically been concentrated in specific industries and do not always connect workers and businesses outside of those lines of work.

2.1.3) Understanding Existing Efforts

Beyond just apprenticeships, we heard how organizations are pursuing learn-and-earn strategies — what's working, what are the challenges, and what opportunities lie ahead. We have loosely categorized what we heard into three broad buckets:

- Learning-Related Efforts
- Earning-Related Efforts
- System-Level Efforts

In the following sections, we have provided additional detail related to each of these three areas.

Learning-Related Efforts

These are efforts focused on how to best equip workers with the skills they need, including hard skills, soft skills, and professional skills, while also supporting individuals' unique needs and starting points.

Hard skills development

Hard skills are tangible and teachable skills that allow workers to accomplish technical tasks. Typically, these skills can be a mix of general education plus industry-specific skills. Popular industries for learn-and-earn programs include healthcare, manufacturing, and logistics; interviewees are working to expand learn-and-earn programs to additional industries like technology and professional services.

Interviewees noted that one of the key aspects in teaching hard skills is to ensure that the teaching modality used adapts to the schedule and needs of both workers and employers. Some of these modalities include, among others:

- A supervisor teaching the participants the hard skills during work hours,
- Participants taking practical training sessions in a classroom (early morning or nights), with an emphasis on applying skills
- Participants attending a deep technical training, with a curriculum developed with the input of potential employers.

Some interviewees noted that in some cases, participants may need to complete basic coursework (often through pre-apprenticeships) to start the learn-and-earn program and any technical trainings.

In your words:

"Middle-skills jobs may not be middle-wage jobs. It is important to understand which skills are more highly valued in the marketplace"

"When teaching hard skills, getting input and buy-in from industry is critical."

"Workers learn practical skills through practical methods."

Soft skills development

Interviewees noted that soft skills and emotional intelligence are just as important as hard skills, even though they may be less concrete or measurable. Soft skills can include:

- Essential personal and interpersonal skills include skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, grit, and problem solving. Employers value these skills because they are fundamental to job performance and working with teams. They are also important for workers to develop since they are transferable to other jobs and become more crucial as workers get promoted to leadership positions. Some interviewees mentioned that teaching these skills can be more difficult because they often take more time and nuanced feedback to develop, especially when dealing with younger populations that lack extensive job experience or with those who have been out of the workforce for a while.
- Workplace etiquette refers to showing up on time, dressing appropriately, taking the appropriate amount of breaks, and working with a supervisor. For those with minimal work-experience, these skills were especially important to teach.
- Job search skills comprises skills such as writing a resume, preparing for interviews, and delivering an elevator pitch to prospective employers. While job search skills are not always included in these programs, they help participants become more self-sufficient in future job searches.

"It's critical to offer not just hard skills training but soft skills too—which we call harder skills—since those take more work to teach."

"It's ultimately the job seeker's responsibility to obtain soft skills, but employers and trainers should help them through that process. Too often employers screen out candidates without soft skills, instead of coaching and developing them."

"Much of life is showing up on time, and that is something we need to teach."

Coaching, mentorship, and case management

Group trainings are appropriate methods to develop key skills, but several interviewees noted that some participants need additional support in the form of one-on-one coaching or case management. This coaching can be done in a variety of ways, including mentorship from volunteers, dedicated case managers, or informal coaches. Some workers may be dealing with difficult personal challenges or limitations that can impact their work, and case managers need to individualize their feedback to help participants navigate the employment journey. Additionally, it can be helpful for participants to receive support from relatable mentors that have similar backgrounds and have completed learn-and-earn programs.

"Many people we train have faced trauma in their lives and need our support."

Earning-Related Efforts

These are efforts focused on how to best engage with employers to participate in learn-and-earn and expand program participants' earnings and full-time job prospects.

"We need more corporate engagement. Not just businesses waiting for the solution to be presented to them, but also interacting and contributing."

Engaging employers

For learn-and-earn strategies to be successful over the long term, they must be designed around the needs of businesses. During our conversations, it became clear that organizations are working to better engage businesses in a number of ways, including:

- **Being more "demand driven"**: A number of interviewees talked about the importance of understanding the skills and hiring needs of businesses in order to design learn-and-earn strategies that meet a clear demand for talent. Without input and buy-in from hiring managers, learn-and-earn can get "stuck" in the Corporate Social Responsibility part of a company, where firms provide grant dollars or give internships to small numbers of disadvantaged workers, rather than integrating learn-and-earn into a company's core approach to hiring. However, for those working with populations with significant barrier to employment, any foot-in-the-door at these firms was seen as positive.
- **Helping employers understand what skills they need**: Many interviewees explained that business often cannot pinpoint exactly what they are looking

"Employers are more likely to invest in their training roles when they are feeling the pinch."

"We work closely with employers to truly become part of their talent pipeline."

"Employers don't always know what skills their employees need, partly because technology and the markets are changing so quickly."

for in candidates and, as a result, send confusing signals to the labor market and training organizations. In some cases, businesses “default” to requiring candidates to have a college degree because they haven’t considered the specific skills that a position requires. While building deep relationships and trust with businesses can help, some organizations are beginning to work with companies to map out their own internal career pathways as a first step of pursuing learn-and-earn strategies.

- **Helping employers understand the value of cooperation:** A handful of interviewees shared how businesses can work together to collectively improve the middle-skill labor market. In some instances, industry leaders come together to form councils that can advise community colleges and nonprofits on the skills needed in a particular industry. In other cases, training curricula can be designed around what a large employer is looking for, but then opened up to other smaller employers that want their workers to attain similar skills.
- **Finding the right level of customization and modularization:** A challenge for many training organizations is deciding the level at which to customize offerings for individual employers. While the decision to customize relies on a range of factors — like employer size, funding, and trainee demand — some have focused more on making trainings more modular. For instance, some organizations are working to combine several different training modules that employers can choose from that cover most industry-specific skills. For the remaining firm-specific skills, some organizations design shorter, less intensive “bootcamps” for individual employers.
- **Using business-friendly language:** When engaging employers, many organizations are careful to use language that resonates. For instance, the term “apprenticeships” can imply a connection to organized labor, which may turn off many business owners immediately. Additionally, even the term “learn-and-earn” can sound like an approach that is worker-centric, rather than something that puts the best interests of the business at the center. Others point out that by framing benefits in terms that employers understand (e.g., reducing turnover, increasing interview-to-hire ratios, building a talent pipeline), they are able to better connect to business needs.

Expanding program participants’ earnings and full-time job prospects

Many learn-and-earn models incorporate some form of cost sharing among the private, public, and nonprofit sectors to attract more workers and employers to learn-and-earn. These mutually beneficial cost-sharing arrangements include:

- **On-the-Job Training (OJT):** For workers that are eligible for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) OJT support, funding can cover 50% of an employee’s wage for up to 1,040 hours.²⁶ A number of training organizations, intermediaries, and employers attempt to find ways to use OJT funding to further entice employers to hire these workers.
- **Subsidized Employment:** For workers that are eligible through WIOA and CalWORKS, employers can pay subsidized wages during the first 180 days of employment when making full-time hires.²⁷ While this funding stream is focused on entry-level positions, some interviewees discussed how this approach can help workers advance to middle-skill jobs.
- **Stipends:** Usually funded by nonprofit organizations, stipends can help workers through pre-apprenticeship programs or during parts of a program when they are mostly in a classroom.

One challenge that came up during multiple interviews is ensuring that learn-and-earn strategies ultimately lead to full-time, middle-wage work. In some instances, there is not enough of a direct link between the program and full-time employment, often

“In the US, we expect educational institutions to provide education. In Europe, the employer invests in that process.”

“Firms are competing for executives, but are willing to work together on middle skills.”

“Honestly, if a company is interested I’ll work with them to create a custom program.”

“It helps to understand employers’ pain points like turnover and recruiting and focus on solving them.”

“Learn-and-earn is more than just employment; it’s also health insurance, training, and other hiring costs for the employer; some organizations are willing to share some cost with employers.”

“I don’t think OJT should exclude those that are harder to employ, but that does happen in reality.”

“We need to ensure that there is full-time employment and a career path at the end of the program.”

because the starting points for participants vary and the time it takes to progress can be long, discouraging individuals from participating or continuing in learn-and-earn programs.

System-Level Efforts

Efforts such as influencing policy and funding, shifting public perception, and defining metrics for success, shape the context in which learn-and-earn strategies are implemented. If changed, these would enable learn-and-earn approaches to become more widely utilized.

Influencing policy and funding

Engaging new private sector funders, as well as strengthening the reliability of existing funding sources, was identified by interviewees as critical to the future growth of learn-and-earn. Specifically, interviews recognized needs for:

- **Making state funding more permanent:** Learn-and-earn initiatives are highly reliant on discretionary state funds. The fact that there isn't dedicated core funding for these initiatives puts these initiatives in a precarious position, as they face an ongoing risk of reductions in funding when state finances are tight or other initiatives take priority. With funding subject to ever-shifting political headwinds, it can be difficult for organizations to plan for the future of learn-and-earn, leading interviewees to question what it would take to make these initiatives part of the state's core funding.
- **Capitalizing on the momentum around apprenticeships:** Interviewees acknowledged that apprenticeships are currently a priority at the state and federal level. It is central to Governor Jerry Brown's strategy to create 1 million more 'middle-skilled workers', with California investing \$30 million in new funds over the past two years.²⁸ At the federal level, support for learn-and-earn increased under President Obama and indications from the current administration show additional support for apprenticeships (though significant cuts to other workforce development programs).
- **Encouraging employers to potentially play a larger role in funding learn-and-earn:** There were varied opinions on the role that businesses should play in paying for learn-and-earn. Some focused on the risk that business take by committing to learn-and-earn, particularly in making full-time hires, and focused on what could be done to make learn-and-earn more attractive to business (e.g., greater flexibility, lower commitment, additional cost-sharing). Others, pointing to the German model of apprenticeship, noted that firms can be incentivized differently and be expected (or compelled) to play an active role in designing learn-and-earn and funding a greater share of expenses. Furthermore, interviewees felt that employers' contributions are an important barometer of progress. As employers begin to require fewer subsidies and other financial incentives to participate, it is a sign that initiatives are meeting employers' talent needs and creating value for employers.

Shifting public perception

Some interviewees acknowledged a perception from workers and employers that learn-and-earn can be seen as less desirable than other forms of training and hiring.

Whereas in countries like Germany apprenticeships are viewed as a compelling career path that many workers choose to pursue instead of college, American youth often focus on college as a first choice, with apprenticeships as a second option. This, in turn, can lead employers to question the quality of workers they'll find. A cultural shift that elevates learn-and-earn paths could create more "pull" from both younger workers and employers to seek them out.

"We have to acknowledge unions are a crucial part of apprenticeships, and we also have to think about how to work with them."

"It's hard for these programs to achieve long term impact when they rely on discretionary funds and are created with a 3-5 time horizon in mind."

"From a stability and long-term outlook, we look for a diverse set of funding. The right balance is the employer paying for wages, and philanthropy or government paying for training."

"Early on, splitting wages 50/50 better allows employers to take a chance in hiring someone outside their normal channels."

"There can be a stigma associated with apprenticeships, so we often say "internship" instead. How can we shift the perception of talent and employers towards apprenticeships?"

"Learn-and-earn feels more prestigious in other parts of the world."

Defining metrics for success

A number of organizations discussed the challenges of measuring outcomes when it comes to learn-and-earn models — for both workers and employers:

- **Metrics for workers:** Many parts of the workforce system are geared to measure job placement and retention for a short period of time. For those looking to track the workers they train beyond entry-level jobs, it can be challenging to maintain contact.
- **Metrics for employers:** It can be arduous for employers to measure return on investment, and other key metrics, when undertaking learn-and-earn models. When partnering with employers, some organizations help to collect and measure data to show improvements in key hiring and retention statistics.

“We have to measure what employers care about.”

2.2) Solutions Explored Together

2.2.1) Overview of Brainstormed “What If?” Opportunities

Building on this rich base of knowledge and insights, our group brainstormed a series of potential solutions—or “What if” statements—to improve learn-and-earn strategies. We seeded this brainstorm with a series of initial ideas, which the group then added to. Below are the full set of ideas that were surfaced:

Initial What-ifs



What if learn-and-earn was a critical piece of firms’ talent pipeline **across all industries?**

Learn-and-earn strategies are popular in some industries like manufacturing, logistics, and healthcare, but a number of organizations are working to expand into areas like technology and professional services. Broadening further would likely require a number of components including industry research and outreach, new curriculum design, and experimenting alongside employers — just to name a few.



What if we improved **employer engagement?**

Currently, there are a number of hurdles system-wide that make it challenging to engage employers. For example, we heard:

- Employers don’t always know what they are looking for and may need help mapping career pathways within their own organization.
- Employers don’t always know about learn-and-earn and if they should consider it.
- For larger companies, it is easier to get support from the Corporate Social Responsibility part of the business, but more difficult to get buy-in from those that make hiring decisions.
- When an employer does express interest in learn-and-earn, they can be bombarded by dozens of individual nonprofits, each offering a different variation of learn-and-earn.
- There are varying points of view on what employers should be expected to pay for and what should be the role of workforce development or philanthropy.

To address these points would likely require new ways of working, new ideas, and additional resources.



What if learn-and-earn models created a **stronger link from entry level to middle-wage jobs?**

Many learn-and-earn strategies focus on both skill-building and work experience, often through paid internships or entry-level jobs. However, ensuring that workers ultimately progress into middle-wage jobs is oftentimes a challenge. We heard a number of potential solutions that could help strengthen that connection, including:

- Better tracking workers to understand what proportion advance to middle-wage levels and over what period of time
- Providing coaches that regularly connect with workers after initial placement and strategize with them on ways to advance
- Pursuing incumbent worker training that help workers advance upward in their organizations or fields

These and other ideas can help employers better fill their open middle-wage jobs and help workers increase their earnings.



What if our **systems (e.g., policy, funding) better supported** learn-and-earn strategies?

Taking cues from other countries like Germany with robust learn-and-earn programs, a number of systems could be changed in order to connect more workers to more middle-skill jobs. For instance, K-12 education systems could better connect to additional vocational training options, public funding systems could better incent employers to explore these options, and shifts in public mindsets could occur so that the apprenticeship path is viewed more favorably.



What if learn-and-earn became a critical way to **address biases related to race or class?**

Many low-wage workers and workers of color have experienced some form of discrimination in their job search. Research suggests that resumes with black-sounding names²⁹ or resumes that appear to be for someone from a lower social class³⁰ get fewer call-backs, all things equal. We've heard that learn-and-earn strategies may be able to enable historically-disadvantaged workers to access new opportunities, bypassing referrals or traditional resume drops. However, additional steps could be taken to ensure that learn-and-earn strategies further work for traditionally-excluded groups.

Additional What-ifs



What if we **re-think the role of employers?**

Employers play a major role in learn-and-earn strategies, but that role may need to be reimagined in order to help employers find critical talent and workers to connect to middle-wage jobs. Employers could potentially play a different role in communicating what skills they need to the market, co-creating training programs with education providers, or updating outdated hiring and retention programs—just to name a few possibilities.



What if there was a **simple process and better incentives for employers** to engage in learn-and-earn?

Some employers who want to participate in programs like learn-and-earn are dissuaded by the paperwork and bureaucracy. For formal programs like registered apprenticeships, there are often complex requirements and multiple points of contact, rather than a single simple, streamlined process employers can follow. Beyond a simplified process, incentive fees such as additional tax credits can also incent employers to participate.



What if **learning everywhere counts?**

Typically, the classroom is seen as the main place where learning occurs and is recognized, but increasingly workers learn across many aspects of their careers and lives. A key next step in advancing learn-and-earn strategies may be designing new ways for work and life experience to officially “count” towards educational attainment and credentials, in a way that quality-controlled and gives employers confidence.



What if we could **measure the value** of learn-and-earn programs for all stakeholders?

The value of participating in learn-and-earn programs is not always clear to employers, academic institutions, and even workers. While data exists on formal programs like registered apprenticeships, other types of learn-and-earn programs have difficulty in quantifying the value they add and then clearly communicating that value to stakeholders who may often speak very different languages.



What if **employers, industry associations, and education providers** partnered to provide better trainings and credentials?

Trainings and credential programs are often coordinated by community colleges or other education providers, with or without an industry perspective. More collaboration with employers and industry associations can increase the relevance and practicality of these programs, in order to strengthen the talent pipeline. In an ideal model, every employer in the industry would have a stake in the program, an industry group would sponsor it, and colleges would award academic credit and offer soft skills training.

Participants then voted on which “What if…” statement they would most like to explore, ultimately selecting four to work on further:

- Learn-and-earn strategies could serve as a critical way to **address biases** — such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation — and other barriers to employment? (8 votes)
- We develop better ways for **employers, education providers, and industry associations** to co-develop training programs and credentials that address critical market needs? (7 votes)
- We rethink how to best **engage employers** so they recognize the value of investing in learn-and-earn programs? (7 votes)
- We clarify and expand what counts as a “credential” so workers can **better translate their life experiences into demonstrable competencies** valued by employers? (3 votes)

2.2.2) Detailed Recaps of “What If…?” Opportunities with Most Interest

The group then divided into smaller teams to explore these selected statements in more detail. First, small groups fleshed out what a better future might look like if the statement was true. Next, they thought more tactically about how to make that “What If…” statement true, explore what needed to change, why it would change, and how the change could be accelerated. Finally, they brainstormed near-term interventions that could help jumpstart the implementation of these solutions.



Learn & Earn: Deep Dive into a Specific Opportunity

What If...

Learn-and-earn strategies could serve as a critical way to address biases — such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation — and other barriers to employment?

What Would It Look Like If This Were True?

- **Employers would have a more diverse workforce that represents the diversity of their customers.** Diversity of all types is important, including but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and immigration status. Diversity at all levels is also key, from entry-level to the board, and we should explore mechanisms to make sure diverse workers have advancement opportunities.
- **Employers would provide employment opportunities to individuals from underrepresented populations.** Some employers do not currently recruit from underrepresented communities. Learn-and-earn programs tend to attract and support individuals who have been significantly underrepresented in the middle-skill workforce. These programs can help connect employers with underrepresented populations.

What Would It Take?

WHAT would need to change?

- Some businesses may see diversity as an add-on expense due to additional hiring measures needed to reach and hire diverse candidates. This attitude needs to change so **employers understand that a diverse workforce is an asset**, as they can better understand the needs of their diverse customer base.
- Those struggling with poverty often have difficulties investing time in trainings that do not provide any source of income. **Trainings should be connected to income.**
- Learn-and-earn programs need to be recognized with the **same credibility as four-year colleges.**

WHY would it change?

- In times of economic growth, there is often a **shortage of workers** looking for employment. There can be a mismatch between the skills employers need and the skills the workforce has.
- Businesses with a diverse customer base may see a diverse workforce as a way to gain **affinity to customers.**
- Organizations that train diverse workers need to become **trusted partners for local employers**, so employers feel more comfortable accepting diverse workers.

HOW can we accelerate this change?

- We can **demonstrate the value** of diversity to employers by analyzing how a diverse workforce improves the bottom line.
- Public perception is very important to businesses. In that vein, participating employers are rewarded with a **positive image and public relations.**
- Governments can encourage learn-and-earn through **policy changes.** For instance, counties could incent businesses to employ target populations (e.g., people of color, opportunity youth) or even impose diversity mandates.
- Organizations provide a **pipeline** of skilled, diverse workers, so the pressure is not only on employers.

What Types of Near-Term Interventions Could Help?

- Nonprofit organizations can create programs and trainings that persuade employers to hire diverse candidates from learn-and-earn programs by **speaking their “language”** (e.g., “bottom line,” “corporate social responsibility”).
- A third-party organization can develop a **seal or rating system** that recognizes employers that embrace diversity.
- Individuals often directly acquire skills when working hands-on jobs, but do not receive formal proof of these skills without receiving credentials or certificates at community college. Instead, colleges can recognize **competency-based education** to acknowledge skills developed outside of the classroom.



Learn & Earn: Deep Dive into a Specific Opportunity

What If...

We develop better ways for employers, education providers, and industry associations to co-develop training programs and credentials that address critical market needs?

What Would It Look Like If This Were True?

- All stakeholders would have skin in the game, ensuring they are responsible and accountable for their part:
 - Workers would be aware of rapidly growing jobs and how to build the skills in high demand.
 - Industry associations and education institutions would offer trainings that deliver in-demand skills and credentials.
 - Employers would contribute to trainings both financially and in co-designing curriculums, with the aim of growing the pool of eligible workers they can hire.
- A couple individual roles would serve as intermediaries to help the above groups work effectively together:
 - A well-networked “champion” with industry clout would bring industry leaders to the table.
 - A “coordinator” would support co-development of credentials and trainings.

What Would It Take?

WHAT would need to change?

- There needs to be an **easier path for programs (that employers need) to obtain accreditation at community colleges** and for-profit institutions. Employers should be able to provide practical input on courses that carries weight with decision-makers at the educational institution
- In addition, employers should also create **accessible training programs through credentialed industry associations** that can become industry standard.
- Community colleges should **educate students about the jobs that are in high demand** to help inform students’ decisions about what they study.
- Employers and community colleges need to **develop students’ soft skills**. Educators should include interactive exercises and employers should teach soft skills on the job.
- All players should work together to be **more inclusive** and supportive of workers’ different needs (e.g., childcare, part-time studies). Employers should provide more on-the-job training and mentoring, instead of relying on colleges to provide diverse workers for them.
- Community colleges should also embrace providing **nontraditional pathways**. Flexible learn-and-earn programs should be nimble—to quickly react to industry changes—and teach transferable skills.

WHY would it change?

- We are experiencing a **skills gap** in many middle-skill industries (e.g., healthcare, logistics, construction).
- Baby boomers are nearing retirement (“**silver tsunami**”), and they will leave many open positions as they exit the workforce.
- There is a growing pressure on education institutions to shift their focus from academia to job preparation. Education programs should be **more connected to jobs** and prepare students for work.

HOW can we accelerate this change?

- We can collaborate with both community colleges and industry associations to **accelerate and scale trainings and credentials**.
- Currently, many organizations are collectively contributing through separate initiatives. We can **pool the training capacities** of community colleges, private education, and industry associations. Each contributor should be accountable to their part of the training.
- We can **create transparency** among players so organizations understand what others are working on. This way, organizations can streamline initiatives through the removal of redundancies and collaboration.

What Types of Near-Term Interventions Could Help?

- Several systems have already begun to pivot in this direction, especially **community colleges shifting** to address what the community needs by working with employers on career and technical education campaigns (e.g., free HireLAX Apprenticeship Readiness Program for unionized transportation jobs).
- We can **build on initiatives** like the Doing What Matters' Strong Workforce Program that invests in career technical education for high-demand, high-wage jobs. We can also develop economic partnerships for **job shadowing** in high schools, so students can explore various careers before choosing what to study in community colleges.
- We should continue to **hold community colleges accountable** to their students.



Learn & Earn: Deep Dive into a Specific Opportunity

What If...

We rethink how to best engage employers so they recognize the value of investing in learn-and-earn programs?

What Would It Look Like If This Were True?

At a high-level, this would be a win-win for both employers and workers:

- **Employers would have high-performing, more productive talent.** In the long term, this results in higher engagement from workers and lower turnover.
- **Employees would have “good jobs” from the best companies** that pay competitive wages and help them develop skills and advance in the organization.

What Would It Take?

WHAT would need to change?

- **Employers should take on more responsibility**, depending on their varying capacities. Employers acknowledge the skills gap, but there is debate around how much employers and/or training providers should change their roles in the hiring process.
- **Employer culture needs to be responsive to and inclusive of** the diverse, multi-generational workforce.
- **Employers need help understanding their needs.** CEOs, HR, and supervisors have different perspectives, and it takes effort to find the right people to determine the necessary skills.
- The role of businesses needs to change, and the best place to start is in **human resources**. HR is often compliance-driven, but in an ideal world, HR would have time to think about pressing issues like culture, diversity, and training.
- Messaging should highlight the **value of hiring diverse workers**. When placing at-risk workers, governments or nonprofits should pitch their participants as “valuable assets” instead of “lower cost, subsidized workers.”
- In low-wage industries, employers accept that there will be a high level of turnover. Even in these industries, there is a **business case for reducing turnover and improving retention**.

WHY would it change?

- **Companies need new leaders, as older ones near retirement.** In many industries, there will be a generational shift when baby boomers leave the workforce (“silver tsunami”) and leave many open positions, especially in leadership roles. Understanding who takes those roles is an important question. At the same time, this may not be as critical of an issue as we originally thought since many people are retiring later and thus tempering the effects of the silver tsunami.
- **Technology is changing at increasing rates.** Businesses need new technology to stay competitive, and workers need new skills faster than in the past.
- Workers, especially younger ones, are looking for more than a job; they are also **looking for mentorship, development opportunities, and a positive culture**. We heard younger generations are less likely to stay at their jobs if they don’t find what they are looking for at work.

HOW can we accelerate this change?

- We should identify the right decision-makers at employers and explain the **value proposition of investing in workforce development**. Specifically, we should tell that narrative using their “language” and build a compelling business case that demonstrates the long-term value to the employer’s performance and competitiveness.
- Systems change is possible and requires **persistence and years of collaboration** with government and private sector, which includes serving on advisory boards with local officials.
- We should **help companies understand what they need**. In particular, employers are interested to learn more about training the 21st century workforce, which is multi-generational and as diverse as ever.
- Government can offer **tax incentives** to reward workforce training programs.
- We can **bring together employers** that are interested in having this conversation and help them understand the approach and resources they need to make a difference.

What Types of Near-Term Interventions Could Help?

- **Governments can incent and reward employers to invest in workforce development.** For example, governments often have preferred contractors, where they pledge to purchase a certain percent of services or products from small businesses or veteran-owned businesses. In addition, the County of Los Angeles also gives preference to social enterprises through a 15% bid price reduction for certain product or service requests. Building off these public procurement incentives, **governments could choose to only buy from companies that treat their workers well or are hiring fairly.** In the near term, it would be challenging to define these terms and measure employers, but there can be steps to help flesh out what this would look like and what conversations would need to happen.
- There is an opportunity to **consult for employers about diversity, equity, and inclusion** in a way that can expand their employee base and hire more of the people that nonprofits serve.



Learn & Earn: Deep Dive into a Specific Opportunity

What If...

We clarify and expand what counts as a “credential” so workers can better translate their life experiences into demonstrable competencies valued by employers?

What Would It Look Like If This Were True?

- Job seekers would have a way to **translate passions, talents, and life experiences** (e.g., planning their own wedding) **into competencies** (e.g., project management, event planning), which would be valued and can help them get jobs.
- Employers would **value and recognize demonstrated skills regardless of where they came from**. Therefore, they would be able to find more skilled workers suited for employment, potentially bridging the skills gap or mismatch.
- **Upskilling would be democratized**, rather than solely granted by educational institutions.

What Would It Take?

WHAT would need to change?

- There should be ways to **articulate competencies** that are developed from a wide range of experiences.
- Employers would have to invest the time to **create competency-based job descriptions**. This requires a competency analysis of their roles, which could be accomplished by surveying their skilled employees. Then the necessary competencies should be clearly articulated to the labor market.
- Skills and competencies developed through on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities would need to be recognized and earn credit towards **industry-recognized credential or company-approved competencies** and become part of a broader education system.
- The **view of education** would be expanded. People can learn anywhere, and college is one of many places. Students should feel empowered to market non-academic skills.
- WIBs would need to explore **in-demand skills** that span across industries, in addition to focusing on high demand industries. For example, WIBs could support data analytics trainings across advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and high tech.

WHY would it change?

- In a tight labor market, **employers are looking at new ways to evaluate talent**. Now more than ever, they recognize that learning happens in a variety of places and experiences. In particular, many low- to moderate-income individuals have learned skills through non-traditional training or academic programs that are often not formally recognized.
- **Top-down job requirements don't work** if employers don't understand what each job takes. Skilled employees acknowledging their role in the talent development process and job seekers proactively offering their skills to employers can help make this cultural shift.
- **The acceleration of technology changes demand, skills, and expertise**. The new reality is that skills can be developed in many places; for instance, millennials and Gen Z grew up as digital natives and possess technological skills that employers may value, even if they don't have formal credentials.

HOW can we accelerate this change?

- We can **develop a marketing campaign to value skills and competency**, in addition to credentials or pedigree. These efforts would help gain buy-in from key stakeholders.
- We can **change the “traditional” message** regarding what creates value for employers (skills and competency over credentials and pedigree). We have to redefine what it means to qualify for a job.
- There should be more training opportunities at work. We can **identify non-traditional practices**, such as bringing classes to work to obtain college credit at workplaces.
- We can create employer collaboratives, grouped by industry, to break down **skill needs into competencies**, so they can be easily translated to life experiences or non-traditional training programs.

What Types of Near-Term Interventions Could Help?

- A technology platform can serve as a **regional digital marketplace** that uses analytical tools to translate skills into competencies. Employers can post job descriptions, sought competencies, and endorsed programs, while job seekers can post resumes and life experiences. The interactive platform recommends jobs by matching information.
- We can help the education system see work-based learning in action. We can establish Regional Workplace Centers, which are **physical talent hubs co-located at businesses and college campuses** where students can learn on the job, receive resume help, or find mentors or coaches. In addition, colleges or others can help employers complete apprenticeship registration paperwork; this would help create a streamlined process where employers can easily find and immediately hire apprentices.

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