



Earn While You Learn: Skilled Trades as a Powerful Alternative to the Four-Year Degree

Skilled trades and apprenticeship programs offer second-chance workers paid training, valuable credentials, and a practical path toward a stable future.

A four-year college degree remains an indispensable pathway to many professions. It opens doors to careers in medicine, law, engineering, education, and numerous other fields. For people whose interests and goals call for a degree, college can be an excellent investment.

College, however, is not the right choice—or the only good choice—for everyone. Some learners prefer hands-on work. Others need to begin earning an income sooner, want training tied directly to a job, or simply thrive outside a traditional academic setting. For them, a skilled trade may provide a better fit.

Cost can also be an important consideration. According to [The College Investor](#), 42.8 million federal borrowers owed approximately \$1.69 trillion as of March 2026, with an average balance of about \$39,500. Not every college student borrows, and the cost of an education varies widely, but prospective students should consider tuition, time, career goals, and likely earnings before choosing a path.

These questions are especially important for people rebuilding their lives after incarceration, substance use disorder, unemployment, or other serious setbacks. Returning to full-time

academic study may not be practical when immediate income and stability are priorities. Skilled trades, vocational programs, and apprenticeships can provide another route forward.

Learning—and Earning—on the Job

Registered apprenticeships combine paid employment with supervised on-the-job learning and classroom instruction. Apprentices earn wages from the beginning, receive increases as their skills develop, and work toward a portable, nationally recognized credential. That is the heart of the “earn while you learn” model: education and employment occur together.

Community and technical colleges also offer vocational certificates designed to prepare students for specific occupations. Many programs can be completed in two years or less. Depending on the field and institution, credits may also apply toward an apprenticeship, advanced credential, or future college degree.

These pathways do not compete with education; they are forms of education. They simply deliver learning in a different way—through a combination of instruction, practice, mentoring, and progressively greater responsibility.

The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) reports that Registered Apprenticeship participants receive paid work experience, progressive wage increases, classroom instruction, mentoring, and an industry-recognized credential. Earnings vary by occupation, employer, experience, and location, but the model enables participants to build both skills and income from the start.

Opportunity in the Skilled Trades

The country will continue to need workers who build, operate, repair, and maintain its homes, businesses, transportation systems, and infrastructure. New construction creates opportunities, but so does the continuing need to repair and replace existing electrical, plumbing, heating, cooling, and mechanical systems.

Many openings also result when experienced workers retire, change occupations, or otherwise leave the workforce. For people entering or reentering employment, that continuing demand can create opportunities to establish a dependable career.

Skilled trades can offer competitive wages, advancement, specialization, and, in some positions, strong benefit and retirement packages. Experienced workers may become supervisors, estimators, inspectors, trainers, project managers, or independent business owners.

People with criminal records should remember that licensing requirements and employer policies vary by occupation and state. A prior conviction does not necessarily prevent someone from entering a trade, but applicants should investigate local requirements early.

Job Growth and Outlook for Skilled-Trade Careers

The following examples are based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#).

Electricians

[Electricians](#) earned a median annual wage of \$62,350 in May 2024. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment to grow 9 percent from 2024 through 2034—much faster than the average for all occupations—with approximately 81,000 openings each year.

Most electricians learn their trade through an apprenticeship, although some begin at a technical school. Licensing requirements vary by state.

HVAC Mechanics and Installers

[Heating, air-conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers](#) earned a median annual wage of \$59,810 in May 2024. Employment is projected to grow 8 percent through 2034, with approximately 40,100 openings annually.

Demand is expected to come from new construction, increasingly sophisticated climate-control systems, and the repair or replacement of existing equipment. Experience, certifications, specialization, and location can all influence earnings.

Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers

[Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers](#) earned a median annual wage of \$57,440 in May 2024. Employment is projected to grow 4 percent through 2034, with approximately 237,600 openings each year, primarily because workers leave the occupation or the labor force.

Drivers generally need a high-school diploma or equivalent, professional driving instruction, and a commercial driver's license. Training time varies by school, license class, and state requirements.

Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters

[Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters](#) earned a median annual wage of \$62,970 in May 2024. Employment is projected to grow 4 percent from 2024 through 2034, adding approximately 22,700 jobs over the decade.

Most workers learn through an apprenticeship, although some attend vocational or technical school first. Experienced workers may earn additional income through overtime, emergency calls, supervisory responsibilities, or self-employment.

Readers can explore educational requirements, duties, wages, and job projections for hundreds of additional careers through the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#).

Pathways to Second-Chance Employment

Several structured pathways can help adults prepare for skilled employment.

Community and Technical Colleges

[Community colleges](#) throughout the country offer vocational certificates and technical programs. These programs focus on the knowledge and skills required for particular occupations and are often designed in cooperation with local employers.

Certificates may be completed in less than two years, although program length varies. Some credits may also count toward an associate degree, advanced credential, or apprenticeship.

Registered Apprenticeships

[Registered apprenticeships](#) combine paid employment with structured instruction. Participants work under experienced mentors, gain documented skills, receive progressive wage increases, and earn recognized credentials.

Career seekers can use the Department of Labor's [Apprenticeship Job Finder](#) to search for opportunities nationwide. Because availability and admission requirements vary, applicants should contact employers or program sponsors directly.

Electrical Apprenticeships

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers ([IBEW](#)) and its training partners offer electrical apprenticeship opportunities across the country. Programs typically combine classroom instruction with paid, supervised field experience.

The [IBEW Local Union Directory](#) can help prospective applicants locate a nearby union and ask about available programs, application periods, qualifications, and local requirements.

Let's Recap

- 1 A four-year degree is a valuable and necessary pathway for many careers, but it is not the only route to meaningful work and financial stability.
- 2 Skilled trades offer an appealing alternative for people who enjoy practical work, want a more direct connection between training and employment, or need to begin earning sooner.
- 3 Careers in electrical work, HVAC, plumbing, pipefitting, and commercial driving offer competitive wages and continuing demand, although pay and opportunities vary by occupation and location.
- 4 Registered apprenticeships allow participants to earn income while receiving structured training, mentoring, wage increases, and a recognized credential.

5 Community and technical colleges provide additional pathways through career-focused certificate and degree programs.

For people rebuilding their lives, the skilled trades offer more than a paycheck. They can provide structure, accomplishment, credentials, independence, and the dignity of work that others depend upon.

The choice between college and a skilled trade is not a choice between education and no education. It is a choice between different kinds of education—and different ways of building a good life.