

Apprenticeships are no silver bullet

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Many organizations across Chicago have responded to the flawed college-to-career transition process with apprenticeships, which create opportunities for early-career professionals, companies and colleges. Unfortunately, the positive impact of apprenticeships is reaching only a limited few.

For example, Apprenticeship 2020 and the Chicago Apprenticeship Network were launched with great fanfare earlier this year ("[Why Penny Pritzker is bullish on apprenticeships](#)," Jan. 29 and "[Apprenticeships a solution to skyrocketing student debt](#)," May 9), as companies rethought the traditional apprenticeship model to apply it to professional roles. While the goal of such programs is admirable and they are helping those 435 City College students serving as apprentices, what about the other 99.5 percent of City College students who weren't selected? In addition, the 84,000 undergraduate students enrolled across Chicago's other colleges and universities don't have the opportunity to participate, which is ironic given that the data suggest that over 40 percent of them will be under or unemployed upon graduation based upon national averages.

The problem is not the efforts themselves, but rather that on-the-job training programs are being positioned as the panacea that will create a more equitable way to hire and ensure equal access to professional opportunities for all. While apprenticeships support individuals who choose not to pursue a bachelor's degree or are interested in incorporating a full-time professional experience within their post-secondary education, they do not address the issues facing college students and recent grads who are filtered out based upon their school's ranking, major, GPA, or limited network. Furthermore, research shows the long-term benefits of a four-year degree, therefore suggesting professional development programs as a replacement for the degree can limit career potential and have other unintended consequences.

Though there is no silver bullet, one part of the solution for the college-to-career challenge has emerged from an unexpected place: gigs. While some have warned that freelancing would replace jobs, in fact, gigs are having the opposite effect. Specifically, companies now are engaging college students on short-term, paid, professional projects, or micro-internships, as a more effective and equitable way to identify and assess potential job candidates. Instead of relying on the traditional hiring signals of school, GPA, major, and network, micro-internships allow companies to evaluate prospective candidates based upon real work. Micro-internship programs are highly scalable as professionals across industries and departments always have a backlog of neglected tasks—such as blog post development, data clean-up or competitor prospecting—that are perfect for college students.

Micro-internships also provide companies with access to broader pools of talent, as they allow hiring managers to engage students from underrepresented backgrounds, beyond their typical focus on schools, GPAs and majors. In addition to creating these on-ramps for this student population, they help companies overcome internal preconceptions about the "right" pedigree that a new hire should possess. In the same way, this approach curbs the exodus of Chicago's recent college grads—as more students work with Chicago-based companies, they recognize the opportunities and benefits available without the need to move to the coasts.

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