Apprenticeship Building America Grant Program

Qualitative Evaluation

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Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board
WASHINGTON

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Executive Summary

The Apprenticeship Building America (ABA) Grant Program, launched by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2022, was designed to expand, modernize, and diversify Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) nationwide. Washington State received approximately $5.7 million through this initiative, administered by the state's Employment Security Department (ESD) on behalf of the Career Connect Washington initiative, to support apprenticeship expansion in high-demand industries and improve access for underserved populations. Across Washington, funding was distributed to 26 program-building partners to develop, expand, or enhance apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities.

Washington's ABA grant successfully created, expanded, and modernized apprenticeship programs across priority industry sectors like construction, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, information technology, and education. Washington State achieved key short-term federal performance measures ahead of schedule, such as individuals served in Registered Apprenticeships and individuals served in Recognized Pre-apprenticeships. Washington intends to conduct a long-term quantitative evaluation to measure participants' employment and wage outcomes, once such data are available. During the ABA grant period, Washington's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board) utilized grant resources to conduct an initial implementation evaluation, measuring qualitative data from stakeholder focus groups. The qualitative data were collected in early 2026, by Social Policy Research Associates (SPR), through structured interviews with apprentices, employers, and program builders to capture key successes, challenges, and lessons learned from Washington's efforts to expand apprenticeship opportunities.

Participant feedback indicates that the ABA grant catalyzed apprenticeship innovation and capacity building. Flexible seed-funding enabled the launching of new apprenticeship pathways, particularly in non-traditional sectors such as information technology, education, healthcare, telecommunications, and advanced manufacturing. Many organizations reported that curriculum design, equipment, staffing, outreach, and employer engagement were only possible because of the funding. Technical assistance from state partners, including ESD and the state's Department of Labor & Industries (L&I), helped newer sponsors meet registration and compliance requirements.

The evaluation offered strong evidence that the ABA initiative advanced Washington's goals of expanding apprenticeship into emerging industries while improving equity and accessibility. Apprentices and program leaders described intentional efforts to recruit and support women, communities of color, opportunity youth, rural populations, low-income individuals, and participants facing barriers such as felony backgrounds or transportation challenges. Apprentices reported positive experiences, highlighting in particular bilingual instruction, supportive instructors, and the opportunity to earn wages while gaining practical skills. Many participants described apprenticeship as a transformative pathway that provided confidence, direction, and access to stable careers without the burden of traditional college debt.

However, the evaluation identified substantial structural barriers that continue to limit apprenticeship expansion and participant success. Program builders consistently described the

Registered Apprenticeship approval process as highly complex, difficult to navigate, and resource-intensive, especially in sectors without established apprenticeship infrastructure or union support. Stakeholders highlighted challenges with coordinating multiple compliance systems across federal, state, and educational entities. Organizations also reported that apprenticeship programs require greater staffing and administrative capacity specific to employer engagement, reporting, data management, and participant support services.

Employer engagement emerged as both a major success factor and a persistent challenge. Programs were most successful when employers recognized apprenticeship as a long-term workforce strategy rather than short-term training. Industries with acute labor shortages—such as construction, healthcare, and skilled trades—demonstrated stronger employer buy-in due to urgent workforce needs. Smaller employers and mission-driven organizations participated more readily than larger firms with less adaptive human resource structures. Respondents noted that scaling employer participation requires substantial upfront investment, mentorship capacity, and organizational commitment. Participants emphasized the benefits of enhanced state-level incentives, policy supports, and communication strategies to broaden employer engagement and normalize apprenticeship as a standard workforce development model.

Apprentices identified barriers to program accessibility and retention, including lost wages during classroom training periods, transportation costs, rigid attendance policies, and limited scheduling flexibility. The scheduling and financial hardships especially impacted those balancing work and family responsibilities. Apprentices also expressed frustration with unclear navigation systems and inconsistent information regarding program entry, testing, ranking systems, and career pathways. Career navigators and supportive instructors were highly valued because they helped participants better understand apprenticeship opportunities and set realistic expectations about trade work and program competitiveness.

Across all focus groups, one of the strongest recurring themes was the importance of relationships, trust, and sustained institutional commitment. Successful programs relied heavily on strong leadership, dedicated staff, employer champions, and community partnerships capable of supporting participants beyond technical training alone. Stakeholders reported that sustainable apprenticeship expansion is best supported through long-term investment and coordinated leadership. Additionally, sustainability requires stronger system-level coordination, flexible operational funding, streamlined approval processes, and better alignment between apprenticeship systems and federal workforce development funding streams, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Washington's ABA initiative made meaningful progress in expanding and modernizing apprenticeship opportunities while raising awareness of apprenticeship as a pathway to economic mobility. The initiative spurred innovation, supported new apprenticeship models in emerging industries, and expanded access for historically underserved populations. To sustain and build on these gains, Washington will need continued investment, regulatory improvements, stronger employer incentives, and support services that help participants succeed. Stakeholders consistently identified apprenticeship as an effective workforce strategy for addressing labor shortages, strengthening talent pipelines, and creating more equitable access to family-sustaining careers.

Introduction

America Builds Apprenticeship (ABA) Grant Program

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) launched the Apprenticeship Building America (ABA) grant program to expand, modernize, and diversify Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) across the country. The ABA supported the federal government's workforce development strategy by helping employers, workforce organizations, labor unions, educational institutions, and public agencies create pathways into high-quality jobs through "earn while you learn" apprenticeship models.

The initiative made roughly $113 million available through competitive grants to states, with individual awards ranging from $1 million to $8 million. Washington received about $5.7 million to expand apprenticeship opportunities in high-demand industries, including manufacturing, healthcare, transportation, information technology, clean energy, infrastructure, and supply chain occupations. A strong priority of the grant was to broaden access to apprenticeship for populations historically underrepresented and in these fields, including women, people of color, veterans, youth, individuals with disabilities, and residents of rural communities.

The ABA grant program funded projects in four primary categories:

- State Apprenticeship System Building and Modernization
- Youth Apprenticeship Expansion
- Equitable Apprenticeship Pathways and Pre-Apprenticeship Programs
- Registered Apprenticeship Hubs

A major intent of the ABA initiative was to expand the number of apprentices and the number of industries using the Registered Apprenticeship model. The program also prioritized equity, job quality, evidence-based practices, and on-going partnerships between employers, labor organizations, educational institutions, workforce boards, and community organizations.

In 2024, there was a second round of ABA funding totaling approximately $95 million meant to expand apprenticeship opportunities across the country. This second phase further aligned apprenticeship investments with major federal infrastructure, clean energy, and manufacturing initiatives.

Washington State Initiative

Washington State's Apprenticeship Building America (ABA) program was administered by the state's Employment Security Department (ESD) on behalf of the Career Connect Washington initiative.

ESD received the one-time $5,682,883 grant and Career Connect Washington distributed funds to 26 program builders to build, expand or enhance apprenticeships across the state. More information about this USDOL grant can be found at the Employment Security's ABA webpage.

Goals and Focus

The ABA program in Washington targeted:

- High-demand and high-growth industries such as construction, manufacturing, and critical supply chain sectors.
- Equity and accessibility for underrepresented and underserved communities, including pre-apprenticeship opportunities and equity partnerships.
- Modernization of the state's apprenticeship system with updated curricula, training equipment, and program delivery.

Purpose of the Evaluation

In the original proposal, Washington's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board) was contracted to provide a third-party evaluation of outcomes for ABA program participants. The proposal was to look at employment and earnings two quarters after exiting the ABA program to evaluate effectiveness.

Program implementation took longer than anticipated, limiting the availability of employment and wage outcome data before the contract ended on June 30, 2026. As a result, the Employment Security Department (ESD) and Workforce Board shifted the evaluation's focus from long-term outcomes to stakeholder experiences.

To support this qualitative evaluation, the team contracted with researchers to conduct a series of focus groups with program builders, employers, and apprenticeship participants. Researchers used the findings to identify key successes, challenges, and lessons learned from Washington's apprenticeship expansion efforts. The following section describes the focus group process and evaluation methodology.

Methodology

In early 2026, the Employment Security Department contracted with the research organization, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR), to support the evaluation of Career Connect Washington's (CCW) Apprenticeship Building America (ABA) grant. SPR conducted focus groups with apprenticeship stakeholders—including apprentices and pre-apprentices, employers, labor representatives, nonprofit organizations, and educational institution program builders—to better understand their experiences expanding apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities across Washington.

The focus group findings informed the third-party evaluation of the ABA grant conducted by the Workforce Board's Research Office.

To prepare for the focus groups, SPR worked with ESD, CCW, and Workforce Board staff to develop a strategy and instruments. Products included protocols for the three different groups of respondents (apprentices, program builders, employers) and a pre-event survey to help aggregate stakeholders into groups that could leverage one another's insights.

In April 2026, SPR facilitated three in-person, two-hour focus groups over a two-day period and conducted several in-depth interviews with stakeholders who offered expertise in key priority areas. SPR also held three virtual focus groups for stakeholders who were unable to attend in

person. After completing the sessions, SPR provided ESD and the Workforce Board with cleaned, formatted, and anonymized transcripts for analysis.

A total of 27 stakeholders participated in the focus groups, including 19 in-person participants and eight virtual participants. Participants included five apprentices, two employers, and 21 program builders; one participant served as both an employer and program builder. Approximately half of the program builders represented the construction industry. The remaining participants came from manufacturing (3), maritime (3), education (2), healthcare (1), technology/cybersecurity (1), and telecommunications (1).

A central goal of the ABA initiative was to build and expand apprenticeship programs across Washington—a topic that generated extensive discussion among focus group participants. In addition to summarizing individual focus group findings, SPR identified several themes that emerged across conversations about how ABA subgrants helped build capacity in Washington to expand and grow apprenticeships.

The survey instrument used in the focus groups is located in the Appendix at the end of this report.

Findings

Employers and Program Builders

The largest number of focus group participants were categorized as program builders. The two employer participants were combined with the program builder focus groups so for the purposes of this section, responses from both categories were combined.

"What surprises me most is how few employers are actually signing up and participating. They're all in favor of it in principle, but once they see what's involved, many aren't interested. I think that's going to have to change." - *Employer response*

The program builder and employer focus groups were centered around four primary questions:

- What had to take place (in your organization, your partnerships, your community) before expansion was possible? What had to be built first?
- What strategies for engaging employers actually worked? What did not, and what would you do differently?
- If another organization wanted to replicate your model in a new region or sector, what would you tell them are the absolute essentials—and what are the avoidable mistakes?
- If you could change one thing about how apprenticeship expansion is structured and funded, what would have the biggest impact?

The following are the various answers to the above questions:

What had to take place (in your organization, your partnerships, your community) before expansion was possible? What had to be built first?

- **Role of ABA Grant Funding as Essential for Program Development and Launch.** It was essential for financing program development including formalizing program structure, deepening employer relationships, and accelerating implementation. The grant provided legitimacy and a framework that helped programs move from informal or volunteer-led operations to sustainable, structured entities.
- **Regulatory navigation needed to be a priority.** Programs needed to reconcile multiple compliance regimes — PESB, L&I, OSPI, DOL — before apprenticeship programs could be approved and apprentices enrolled (in the approved program). A good L&I consultant to help you navigate the system is critical. Other programs started with the aspiration of designing Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs but opted instead for pre-apprenticeship programs which are easier to integrate into existing ecosystems, pathways, or demand contexts.
- **Technical Assistance from State Partners**: ESD, L&I, and apprenticeship staff were praised for responsiveness and patience, particularly in helping smaller or newer programs understand grant compliance, reporting, and program design requirements
- **Grant Design and Institutional Alignment Matter from the Start.** Had significant implementation challenges stemming from a grant that was not well-integrated into the host institution's core mission or administrative structure. Leadership changes, staff turnover, and insufficient internal buy-in led to project delays and the return of unspent grant funds.
- **Seed funding enabled the building of new (non-traditional) programs.** Federal COVID dollars, SAEF grants, and ABA program builder grants gave programs the runway to build. Most wouldn't have started without that early, flexible investment.
- **Program standards had to be written from scratch** in non-traditional sectors (education, IT, fiber tech) where no union infrastructure or existing apprenticeship framework existed to draw from. This proved a heavier lift than even program staff familiar with traditional apprenticeship models had anticipated.
- **Staff capacity to set up and maintain the program –** Registering an apprenticeship program or running a pre-apprenticeship program is extremely management-labor intensive.
- **Leadership was a Foundation of Success.** Strong, experienced leadership as the single most important factor in program success above curriculum, employer engagement, or funding. The importance of getting beyond a single charismatic leader was specifically mentioned and supported.
- **Employer Incentives Are Needed to Shift Culture.** Without structural incentives, the burden falls on program staff to engage employers one at a time, which is not scalable. One interviewee pointed to sectors (e.g., nursing, welding) where employer demand is high and apprenticeship "works" organically, contrasting this with emerging sectors where engagement requires more active cultivation.
- **Having strong employer champions and a strong demand for skilled labor.**
- **Established strong curricula and capacity to implement additional training components**. Respondents explained that along with having a training curriculum in place, space and staffing capacity are important for expansion and implementation of new training components.
- **Clear policies and procedures around participant enrollment**. One respondent mentioned that as the number of pre-apprenticeship (PA) applicants increased, it was important to refine enrollment processes and pre-apprentice selection procedures.

- **A compelling wage progression was essential** — particularly for education, where the program had to compete against faster, cheaper certification alternatives. Articulating the full earnings trajectory (from ~$27K to ~$90K in 18 months) was a prerequisite for employer and apprentice buy-in.

What strategies for engaging employers actually worked? What did not, and what would you do differently?

What worked:

- **Targeting employers with pre-existing training cultures.** Pharmacy tech succeeded partly because pharmacies were already accustomed to having learners present; the transition to youth apprentices / pre-apprenticeship was culturally familiar.
- **Leading with the employer's business case.** For us, the pitch was: your apprentices will already know your district's compliance requirements, Individualized Employment Plans (IEP) systems, and community thereby reducing your legal risk and onboarding cost.
- **Tapping employers motivated by mission and long-term needs, since apprenticeship (and pre-apprenticeship leading to apprenticeship) are career pathways and not just short-term job training.** One employer engaged because a funder required it and because leadership believed it was "the right thing to do," school districts were looking at a talent development and diversity strategy for a decade, and smaller pharmacies were aware of their aging workforce and the need to better reflect their current customers.
- **Small employers can be more eager than large ones.** Smaller pharmacies, unburdened by corporate slow-moving HR, and public agencies with IT needs that struggled to compete with private-sector salaries can move faster and expressed more commitment to the pipeline relationship that larger firms.
- Companies were invested in apprenticeship because they were desperate to develop a pipeline of skilled labor. **What brought them to the table was demand.**
- **State-level apprenticeship policies and requirements have been effective**. Respondents noted that in the building trades, apprentice utilization requirements and contractual obligations for public projects have been an effective approach for employer engagement.
- **Having the right outreach staff in place**. Respondents connected around the quality "dogged" to describe the type of personality required to approach and engage employers
- Another grantee mentioned the importance of not just selling the program initially but **maintaining an on-going relationship with the employer** to ensure the quality of the apprentices/apprenticeship was consistent and the program was high value.
- **Emerging Sectors Show Promise but Face Timing Challenges.** New apprenticeship opportunities in behavioral health and medical assisting are attracting interest, but required training and licensing requirements can take much of a participant's available time, making it harder to fit apprenticeship experiences into a program schedule.
- **Participant Support Services Are Essential.** Services that help participants navigate programs and overcome barriers such as transportation, childcare, housing, or financial challenges were viewed as essential to supporting diversity and inclusion, particularly for youth and newer apprentices. However, stakeholders reported that these services often

receive less funding and attention than curriculum development and employer engagement activities.

What didn't work / what to do differently:

- **Not involving union partners early enough.** Multiple participants cited this as their biggest avoidable mistake. Going to union halls after the program was already structured generated immediate distrust: "We didn't get any say in this." Building that relationship from the start is critical, even in non-traditional sectors.
- **Over-relying on a single champion.** Several programs described losing momentum when a key employer champion changed roles. This is a frequent vulnerability of programs that run on time-limited grant funding.
- **Employers in IT/tech can be structurally misaligned with apprenticeship.** They struggle to predict hiring, tend to lack a mentorship culture, and actively resist multi-year commitments. "Even when hearts say yes, practically, it's tough."
- **Engaging employers in work readiness activities has been challenging**. One respondent expressed challenges securing employer commitment for mock interviews in PA programs.
- **Workforce System Connections Are Inconsistent**. Interviewees described varied and sometimes limited integration with the workforce development system (WorkSource/WIOA). The broader challenge of aligning apprenticeship funding structures with WIOA mechanisms, where on-the-job-training (OJT) is capped and does not easily accommodate apprenticeship timelines, was noted as an ongoing system design gap.

If another organization wanted to replicate your model in a new region or sector, what would you tell them are the absolute essentials—and what are the avoidable mistakes?

Essentials:

- **Hire good people** – you need to be champion and hire other people who will be champions and evangelists. Coordination through complex circumstances requires dedicated staff. Multi-trade or multi-partner programs face significant scheduling and coordination burdens that require dedicated staff time and strong inter-organizational relationships
- **Find an internal institutional champion** and make apprenticeship development a formal, assigned work deliverable rather than a part of someone's existing job.
- **Dedicate someone specifically to data and compliance.** Reporting requirements are complex, definitions are inconsistent, and missing a deadline (e.g., approving committee minutes) has real consequences.
- **Be ready to dive into L&I** – Establishing and maintaining Registered Apprenticeship programs requires considerable administrative capacity. Even if you think you know about apprenticeship and what it is, it's difficult to be prepared for the paperwork and other hurdles in place to registering and maintaining your apprenticeship.
- **Identify an industry association or anchor partner early.** In sectors without union infrastructure, an employer association (or similar body) can "smooth the skids" and legitimize the program to skeptical employers.

- **Strong partnerships with employers, industry representatives, and other program builders**. Respondents noted that employer partners and industry representatives are needed to ensure apprentice placement while other program builders can support outreach by providing opportunities for exposure to careers in the construction industry.
- **Build a network of partners**. Respondents agreed that it's critical to have a network of partners in place, including partners that can provide supportive services and connect pre-apprentices and apprentices to needed resources (e.g., childcare and transportation assistance).
- **Understand that relationship-building is the work.** Whether with union halls, tribal communities, or rural employers, trust takes time. Programs that skipped this step paid for it later.
- **Encourage placement processes and employer relationships be established before curriculum development**, not after.
- **Develop a curriculum with classroom and hands-on training**. Respondents shared that core training components include in-person and virtual related studies/classroom instruction, in-person training, and paid on-the-job training.
- **Leverage existing RA and PA programs**. Respondents noted that before starting a new apprenticeship program, it's important to understand the landscape of existing local programs in the same sector as starting a new program can be a complex process.
- Design in **consistent, multi-directional communication** with both employers and participants.
- **Design for the actual population being served**, including their barriers, not an idealized participant profile. Ensure key partners (employers, journey workers, training providers) are genuinely invested in serving underrepresented participants before launching programs that intend to serve them.

Avoidable mistakes:

- **Consider Long-Tem Program Sustainability When Choosing an Educational Structure.** Several program builders noted that while continuing education pathways can sometimes be established more quickly, for-credit programs offer greater long-term stability. Continuing education programs may also be more vulnerable to funding changes and may lose funding during lean times.
- **Chasing grants whose goals don't align with yours.** While grant funding can create valuable opportunities for growth, stakeholders noted that funding requirements do not always align with program needs. Sustaining activities after grant periods end can also be challenging. Many experienced regret after securing a grant that was misaligned with their program goals. Grants closely aligned with their mission and strategic goals produced the strongest results.
- **Failing to develop a credit-for-prior-learning policy before enrolling apprentices.** We had to retroactively negotiate training hour waivers for their first cohort because this wasn't figured out in advance.
- **Assuming articulation partnerships will materialize once the program is built.** Several programs built recognized pre-apprenticeships only to discover that no registered apprenticeship partner was willing (or able) to accept their graduates at the required 3% conversion threshold.

If you could change one thing about how apprenticeship expansion is structured and funded, what would have the biggest impact?

- **Establish financial incentives for employers to take on apprentices**. Respondents indicated that public-sector employer training subsidies don't currently exist in Washington (they may not have been familiar), reporting that program builders face a heavy burden in convincing reluctant employers to absorb the cost and risk of early-career workers, in tight-budget environments.
- **Perspectives Varied on Youth Apprenticeship Models**. Some participants emphasized the need for youth apprenticeship models with reduced hour requirements that better align with school schedules. Others expressed concern that creating separate requirements for youth apprentices could dilute the traditional apprenticeship model, arguing that apprenticeship standards should remain consistent regardless of participant age.
- **Include additional certifications in PA programs**. Respondents expressed an interest in providing more opportunities for pre-apprentices to earn certifications that can better prepare them for apprenticeship programs and careers in the building trades.
- **Provide flexible and unrestricted funding**. Respondents expressed a need for more flexible funding that could be used to cover operational and supportive service expenses such as maintenance for training equipment, materials for outreach activities, and services for participants with barriers to training and employment.
- **More support for collaboration among key partners.** Participants noted that local workforce boards, community and technical colleges, school districts and other partners often play important roles in apprenticeship efforts, but may need additional incentives, funding, or guidance from state and federal agencies to participate fully.
- **Reform at the committee level for RA approval.** State level apprenticeship committee members are perceived to use the approval process to thwart competition. Suggestion that all programs that complete their paperwork/have all their requirements in place are allowed to operate probationally for the first year.
- **Age and Insurance Barriers Create Structural Friction.** In healthcare settings, employer hesitation about employing workers under 18 is driven less by legal prohibition than by insurance and liability policies.
- **Communications and Myth-Busting Have Untapped Potential.** A recurring observation was that much employer resistance to youth apprenticeship reflects unfamiliarity and cultural assumptions.
- **Make sure the messaging about apprenticeship recognizes it as an equal pathway to college.** Participants noted that messaging should consistently present apprenticeship as a respected option alongside college. Public investments should reflect that commitment, so students, parents, and schools see apprenticeship as a viable long-term pathway to living-wage careers.
- **Emerging Sectors Show Promise but Require Flexibility.** Behavioral health and medical assistant programs represent growing areas of interest for apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship, but face credential sequencing challenges (e.g., nursing assistant licensure requiring a full school year) that compress available apprenticeship hours.

Apprenticeship Participants

The apprenticeship focus group participants reflected on experience together. Their conversations are summed up along the following thematic lines.

Accessibility, Inclusion, and Support for Diverse Backgrounds

The overall sentiment was mostly positive, with appreciation for accommodation and diversity, but concerned that rigid systems can unintentionally disadvantage people facing hardships.

Key Themes

- **Language accessibility was viewed positively**
    - One apprentice highlighted bilingual instruction, especially Spanish-language support through bilingual instructors.
    - This support helped participants who struggled with English feel more included and enabled them to learn effectively.
- **Programs showed some flexibility for personal circumstances**
    - Participants described accommodation for:
        - Parenting responsibilities
        - Emergencies
        - Participants with felony backgrounds
    - Instructors were described as willing to work with students if communication occurred early.
- **Attendance policies could still be difficult**
    - Several participants noted strict attendance requirements (e.g., removal after missing three days in a nine-week program).
    - Apprentices recognized the need for accountability but emphasized the importance of flexibility for real-life situations.

Employer Expectations vs. Real-Life Challenges

Participants repeatedly discussed tension between work culture and personal realities. The overall sentiment was mixed: they were positive about instructors but more critical of employer culture and lack of compassion in the trades

Key Themes

- **Trades were described as unforgiving**
    - Apprentices felt employers often prioritized productivity over personal circumstances.
    - Missing work due to illness or family emergencies could negatively affect future opportunities.
- **Participants wanted more empathy and human connection**
    - Apprentices emphasized:
        - Understanding individual backgrounds
        - Avoiding judgment about attendance or productivity

        - Building stronger personal relationships between instructors and apprentices
- **Instructors generally received stronger reviews than employers**
    - Several participants described instructors as personable and supportive.
    - Employers/contractors were more often viewed as rigid or transactional.

Desire for More Hands-On and Specialized Training

A major recurring theme was the need for more practical experience, specialized instruction, and better integration of training with paid work

Key Themes

- **Participants valued hands-on learning most**
    - Apprentices especially appreciated:
        - Electrical conduit bending
        - Welding practice
        - Real-world job exposure
- **Programs were sometimes too broad**
    - Pre-apprenticeship participants felt exposure to many trades was useful but wanted deeper training in their chosen field.
    - Some apprentices never received practical exposure to the trade they hoped to pursue.
- **Training time competed with paid work**
    - Apprentices in union programs described tension between:
        - Classroom instruction
        - Losing paid hours and benefits eligibility
    - Unpaid training created financial strain, especially during slower work seasons.

Financial and Structural Barriers

Participants identified financial barriers as a major obstacle, especially for lower-income participants and those supporting families.

Key Themes

- **Lost wages during training were a significant challenge**
    - Some apprentices only earned income while actively working.
    - Classroom periods reduced earnings and sometimes jeopardized healthcare benefits.
- **Transportation and food support mattered**
    - Existing transportation support was appreciated.
    - Participants suggested:
        - Gas cards
        - Food support
        - Minimum-wage stipends during training
- **Scheduling flexibility could improve access**

    - Evening or alternate schedules were suggested for participants balancing jobs or family responsibilities.
    - Participants acknowledged staffing and funding limitations.

Difficulty Navigating Apprenticeship Systems

Participants described apprenticeship pathways as confusing and difficult to navigate independently. Participants wanted clearer guidance, more transparency, and stronger advising throughout the process.

Key Themes

- **Information gaps were common**
    - Participants often learned critical information informally through peers rather than official channels.
    - Examples included:
        - Pool ranking systems
        - Testing opportunities
        - Application strategies
- **Career navigators were highly valued**
    - Honest guidance about competitiveness helped apprentices develop realistic plans.
    - Participants appreciated transparency regarding difficult entry pathways, especially in electrical trades.
- **Electrical apprenticeships were viewed as highly competitive**
    - Participants discussed:
        - Long wait times to enter apprenticeship programs
        - Strong competition for O1 (journey-level) electrician apprenticeship programs
        - A need for alternative pathways and interim work opportunities while waiting for apprenticeship openings.

Apprenticeship as a Career Pathway

Participants strongly viewed apprenticeships as pathways to stable careers and upward mobility. Apprenticeships were viewed as meaningful career-building opportunities with strong long-term potential.

Key Themes

- **Apprenticeships provided direction and confidence**
    - Several participants were initially uncertain about their futures and later felt more optimistic and focused.
- **Participants valued earning while learning**
    - Apprenticeships were seen as preferable to traditional schooling because they combined:
        - Paid work

        - Practical training
        - Career advancement
- **Long-term goals included advancement and entrepreneurship**
    - Aspirations included:
        - Foreman or superintendent roles
        - Business ownership
        - Specialized certifications
        - Travel opportunities
        - Management careers
- **Participants appreciated broad skill development**
    - Apprentices described gaining:
        - Technical skills
        - Communication skills
        - Safety awareness
        - Professional confidence

Realistic Expectations About Trade Work

Participants emphasized that apprenticeships are valuable but not suitable for everyone. Strong endorsement of apprenticeships overall, but with recognition that success requires commitment, resilience, and preparation.

Key Themes

- **The trades require physical and mental commitment**
    - Apprentices described the work as:
        - Labor-intensive
        - Time-consuming
        - Demanding
- **Participants stressed informed decision-making**
    - Several wished they had understood their trade more fully before enrolling.
    - They recommended clearer explanations of:
        - Job realities
        - Physical demands
        - Daily work conditions
- **Despite challenges, participants still encouraged exploration**
    - Most participants encouraged interested young people to try apprenticeships, especially early in life when career flexibility is greater.

Overall Tone of the Focus Group

The discussion reflected a generally positive view of apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. Participants saw apprenticeships as:

- A realistic path to economic mobility
- A source of confidence and direction
- A way to build practical and transferable skills

At the same time, apprentices highlighted structural barriers that could prevent some people from succeeding, especially:

- Financial hardship
- Limited flexibility
- Lack of information
- Employer cultures perceived as unsympathetic to personal challenges

Discussion

The major purpose of this evaluation is to determine if the Washinton State ABA Grant achieved the goals and priorities outlined by the Employment Security Department and USDOL. Below are the findings related to whether programmatic goals were met.

- **Comparing participant experiences to the intended grant design.**
    - Were high-demand and high-growth industries such as construction, manufacturing, and critical supply chain sectors successfully targeted? About half of the participants came from construction, which has been a traditional industry for apprenticeships. However, we know that at least some of the construction programs focused on new techniques such as learning and using 3D concrete printing. In addition, there were programs in IT, healthcare, and education that are not the traditional focus of apprenticeships.
    - Was the experience equitable and accessible for underrepresented and underserved communities, including pre-apprenticeship opportunities and equity partnerships? Apprentices in the focus group felt that the programs they were in did a good job of being inclusive. Program builders mentioned efforts to improve access for low-income individuals, opportunity youth, homeless, communities of color and women entering the trades. They emphasized the importance of meeting individuals "where they are," building trust within communities, and creating culturally responsive outreach and support systems.
    - Did a modernization of the state's apprenticeship system with updated curricula, training equipment, and program delivery occur? Participants mentioned that grant funding was a catalyst for equipment purchases, curriculum development, instructional capacity, and technology integration. Participants valued the flexibility of the funding structure, which allowed organizations to address varied local needs and program models.

- **Common Administrative Challenges:** Participants across multiple focus groups identified several recurring barriers to program implementation, including**:**
    - Complex terminology and compliance requirements.
    - Extensive reporting and documentation expectations.
    - Budget management and audit requirements.
    - Federal grant processes and timelines that were difficult to navigate.

Recommendations

The following recommended improvements will help expand and enhance apprenticeships in Washington:

- **Establish state-level employer incentive or recognition programs.** Respondents indicated that program builders face a heavy burden in convincing reluctant employers to absorb the cost and risk of early-career workers in tight-budget environments. Barriers include the upfront cost, competitive dynamics between employers in the same trade, and generational resistance to collaboration. The upfront investment is significant given that employer partners pay per journeyman per hour, and it goes into a shared pool for training, materials, and instructor pay. It's a business model that makes sense, but there needs to be a willingness to think of it as an investment with a long-tern benefit. Without structural incentives, the burden falls on program staff to engage employers one at a time, which is not scalable.
- **Develop a unified state communications strategy** that frames apprenticeship as a key "workforce solution." Participants identified opportunities for stronger, more consistent messaging and myth-busting. That's especially true for employers with limited familiarity with youth apprenticeship. Aligning messaging with sustained investment would help reinforce apprenticeship as a postsecondary pathway comparable to college for students, families, and schools.
- **Streamline alignment between WIOA and apprenticeship funding mechanisms.** Interviewees described varied and sometimes limited integration with the workforce development system (WorkSource/WIOA). The broader challenge of aligning apprenticeship funding structures with WIOA mechanisms, where on-the-job training (OJT) is capped and does not easily accommodate apprenticeship timelines, was noted as an ongoing system design gap.
- **Better models for Youth Apprenticeships are needed.** In addition, the state needs to normalize age-related transition models (e.g., "pre-apprenticeship to apprenticeship bridge years"). Providing more opportunities for pre-apprentices to earn certifications to better prepare them for apprenticeship programs is recommended. In healthcare settings, employer hesitation about employing workers under 18 is driven less by legal prohibition than by insurance and liability policies.
- **Regulatory navigation for starting programs needs to be further developed.** Registered apprenticeship programs are difficult to integrate into existing ecosystems, pathways, or demand contexts. Programs need to reconcile multiple compliance regimes before apprenticeship programs could be approved and apprentices enrolled.
- **Design for the actual population being served,** including their barriers, not the ideal participant. Ensure key partners are genuinely invested in serving underrepresented participants before launching programs that intend to serve them.

- **Consider reforms to the committee-level Registered Apprenticeship approval process.** Some participants perceived that approval decisions by state- level apprenticeship committees can be influenced by concerns about competition. This may slow or limit program approval. One suggested reform was to allow programs that meet all documentation and requirements to operate on a provisional basis for the first year while they complete full approval.
- **Increased program flexibility and accommodation for participants** facing parenting responsibilities, barriers such as transportation and unforeseen emergencies, ability to maintain earnings while going through program, and those with felony backgrounds. Allowing for gas cards, food support, minimum wage stipends, and evening or alternative schedules.
- **More practical hands-on experience for trainees**, specialized instruction, and better integration with paid work.
- **Improved navigation and information services for participants**. While participants appreciated exiting navigation services, they often learned critical information informally through peers rather than official channels. Several participants wished they had understood their trade more fully before enrolling.
- **Seed funding to develop Registered Apprenticeship programs in non-traditional areas.** The focus group participants felt that without early flexible investment, most programs would not have started.

Conclusion

Summarize overarching learning: the promise of ABA funding as a catalyst for innovation, the need for deeper structural support, and the enduring importance of employer partnerships.

The findings from this evaluation demonstrate that the Washington State Apprenticeship Building America (ABA) Grant played a significant role in expanding and modernizing apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities across the state. The grant provided critical seed funding, technical assistance, and institutional legitimacy that enabled organizations to launch new programs, strengthen employer partnerships, and explore apprenticeship models in both traditional and emerging industries. Programs in construction, healthcare, information technology, education, and other sectors illustrated the growing adaptability of apprenticeship as a workforce development strategy capable of addressing evolving labor market needs.

Participants across focus groups consistently described apprenticeship as a valuable pathway to economic mobility, career advancement, and long-term stability. Apprentices emphasized the importance of earning while learning, gaining practical skills, and developing confidence and direction for their futures. Program builders and employers similarly viewed apprenticeship as a viable strategy for building talent pipelines, particularly in industries facing workforce shortages and aging labor pools. The evaluation also found meaningful efforts to increase access and inclusion for underserved populations, including communities of color, women entering the

trades, opportunity youth, individuals with felony backgrounds, and participants facing economic hardship.

At the same time, the evaluation revealed substantial structural and operational barriers that continue to limit apprenticeship expansion. Program developers described the registration and compliance process as highly complex, labor-intensive, and difficult to navigate, particularly in non-traditional sectors without existing apprenticeship infrastructure. Participants identified inconsistent employer engagement, limited funding flexibility, and misalignment between apprenticeship systems and workforce funding mechanisms such as WIOA as ongoing challenges. Apprentices themselves highlighted financial hardship, inflexible attendance expectations, lost wages during training, transportation barriers, and limited access to clear information about apprenticeship pathways as factors that can hinder participant success.

A consistent theme across all stakeholder groups was the importance of relationships, trust, and sustained institutional commitment. Successful programs relied heavily on strong leadership, employer champions, community partnerships, and dedicated staff capacity to manage compliance, outreach, navigation, and participant support services. Respondents also emphasized that apprenticeship expansion cannot rely solely on short-term grant cycles or individual champions. Long-term sustainability will require stronger structural supports, including employer incentives, streamlined regulatory systems, flexible operational funding, and improved coordination among educational institutions, workforce systems, labor organizations, and employers.

Overall, the evaluation suggests that the ABA Grant substantially advanced apprenticeship innovation and capacity-building efforts in Washington. The grant helped establish new pathways into high-demand careers while broadening awareness of apprenticeship as an alternative and complementary pathway to traditional postsecondary education. However, sustaining and scaling these gains will require continued investment, policy refinement, and system-level coordination. Future efforts should focus on reducing administrative barriers, improving participant support systems, strengthening employer engagement strategies, and ensuring that apprenticeship programs are designed around the realities and needs of the populations they intend to serve.

The experiences shared through these focus groups demonstrate that apprenticeship remains a promising workforce strategy with the potential to expand opportunity, address labor shortages, and create more equitable access to family-sustaining careers. With continued refinement and support, Washington is well positioned to build on the momentum generated through the ABA initiative and further strengthen apprenticeship as a cornerstone of the state’s workforce development system.

Appendix: Survey Instrument

CCW Apprenticeship Building America

Focus Group Question Sets by Stakeholder Group

Career Connect Washington | Employment Security Department

Social Policy Research Associates

Facilitator Guidance

This protocol consolidates the comprehensive evaluation question bank with conversational, stakeholder-specific question sets designed for 75–90-minute focus group sessions. Each group section contains the core questions, probing questions for depth, and facilitator notes for pacing and emphasis.

Key Facilitation Principles

- Not every question needs to be asked—use judgment based on what is generating insight. Prioritize the questions marked as cross-group priorities (noted in amber).
- Avoid leading with program-specific or agency terminology (CCW, ABA, ESD) in Groups 1 and 2; let participants describe their experience in their own words first.
- Each group's question set is sequenced to end on forward-looking and positive questions rather than challenges, so participants leave the session on an energized note.
- For employer and administrator groups, participants may have completed a pre-event questionnaire—reference those responses where useful to avoid repetition.
- Probes are optional follow-ups to deepen responses. Use selectively based on the depth and direction of discussion.

Cross-Group Priority Questions

The following questions are priorities across all groups. If time is short, do not cut these. They are marked throughout the document with an amber "PRIORITY" tag.

Stakeholder Group	Priority Focus	Priority Qs
Group 1: Apprentices	Near-quit moments, critical supports, accessibility barriers	Q3, Q4, Q5, Q9
Group 2: Employers/ Grantees	Motivation, ROI, scaling barriers, honest advice for expansion	Q1, Q2, **Q8**, Q10
Group 3: Program Staff/ Grantees	Preconditions, employer engagement, replicability, system design	Q2, Q5, Q10, Q12

Note: The "unlock" question in Group 2 (Q8) and the leverage points question in Group 4 (Q4) tend to generate the most strategically actionable responses.

Introduction and Informed Consent

[Facilitator reads aloud. Adapt opening based on the specific focus group cohort.]

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to join us today. My name is [FACILITATOR NAME] and I'm a researcher with Social Policy Research Associates, a research firm based in Oakland, California that conducts policy-related research on workforce, education, and economic issues.

The aim of our discussion today is to understand efforts to grow apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs in Washington State, and how those efforts have been experienced by people like you.

Privacy Statement

This session is designed as a group discussion. We have many questions, so please don't feel as though you need to answer every one. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any question.

My colleague and I will be taking notes to document what we hear. We will not share these notes with anyone outside of our research team. When we compile our reports, individual respondent names will not be attributed to specific comments unless you give us explicit permission to do so.

To help us accurately capture the information you share, we would like to record this discussion. The recording serves as a backup for our notes and will be deleted once we have developed a complete set of notes. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside our research team.

[For apprentice group only:] I want to emphasize that nothing you say here will affect your standing in your apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship program in any way. We are here to learn from your experience, and there are no right or wrong answers.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Do I have your permission to begin recording? *[BEGIN DISCUSSION IF CONSENT GRANTED]*

Group 1: Apprentices & Pre-Apprentices

Goal: Understand what draws people in, what sustains them, and what barriers nearly stopped them—especially for those furthest from opportunity.

Avoid leading with program-specific or agency terminology. Let participants describe their experience in their own words.

Warm-Up

1. Tell us briefly about yourself and how you ended up in this program. What were you hoping it would give you?

Probe: How did you first hear about the program? Did someone recruit you, or did you seek it out?

Probe: What were you doing before you entered the program (e.g., in school, working, looking for work)?

Experience and Support

2. What has surprised you most—good or bad—about the experience?

Probe: How well did the classroom instruction connect to what you were learning on the job?

Probe: Were there aspects that felt disconnected or not useful?

3. Was there anything that made participation hard—financially, logistically, personally? What would have helped that wasn't there?

Probe: Were there barriers you had to overcome to enroll (e.g., transportation, awareness, eligibility, language, childcare, cost)?

Probe: Have you been able to earn a livable wage while in the program?

4. What support made the biggest difference in helping you get through and succeed? Who or what could you not have done without?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: Did you receive mentoring, tutoring, financial support, or help with transportation or childcare?

Probe: What support did you wish you had but didn't receive?

Equity and Accessibility

5. One of the goals for growing apprenticeship in Washington state is to ensure that no matter their background, demographics, or identity, that all Washingtonians can access and thrive. To that end, did the program would work for someone with a different background than you? Why or why not?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: Did you notice if program materials and communication was available in different languages or formats?

Probe: Did/does the program do anything specific to make people with different backgrounds feel welcome?

6. What do you wish employers, instructors, or program designers understood better about what participants actually go through?

Probe: Quality of instruction or training?

Probe: The balance between work and classroom time?

Probe: Communication from program staff?

Probe: Workplace environment or treatment by supervisors and coworkers?

Access and Improvement

7. If you could change one thing about how this program works, what would it be?

Probe: Available support services?

Probe: Program structure or scheduling?

8. What would make apprenticeship more accessible for people who face the biggest obstacles—cost, family responsibilities, transportation, distrust of institutions?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: Did anyone help you navigate the enrollment process? What would have helped?

Looking Ahead

9. What are your plans after completing your program? How has this experience shaped your career goals?

Probe: Do you plan to stay in the field? Continue with your employer?

Probe: Are there additional credentials or advancement opportunities available to you?

Probe: Has the program changed how you think about your career path?

Probe: Has the program affected your family or community in any way?

10. Would you recommend this to someone in your community? What would you tell them to expect—honestly?

Probe: Would you encourage others in your community to pursue apprenticeship? Why or why not?

Group 2: Employers/ Grantees

Goal: Understand what motivates employer investment, what creates friction, and what the unlock looks like at scale.

Avoid leading with program-specific or agency terminology initially. Let participants describe their experience in their own words.

Warm-Up and Motivation

1. What first got you involved—what made you decide apprenticeship was worth the investment of time and money?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: For those involved before this grant, how would you describe the state of apprenticeship in your sector before this funding opportunity came along?

Probe: What did the landscape look like in terms of available programs and participant access?

2. Looking back, was it worth it? What would you point to as the return—for your business, your workforce, your industry?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: Has your perception of apprenticeship as a talent strategy changed?

Probe: Are you doing more apprenticeship hiring now? More structured training?

Program Structure and Experience

3. What aspects of how the program is set up, administered, and funded worked well for you? What created unnecessary friction?

Probe: How did the allowable cost structure affect your work?

Probe: Were there critical needs the funding could not address?

Probe: Were there costs or challenges you didn't anticipate?

Probe: What aspects of the registration or setup process created friction?

4. What support from the program made the biggest practical difference for you as an employer?

Probe: Were you involved in the design of the apprenticeship program?

Probe: Did you receive incentive funding to offset start-up or training costs? If so, was it sufficient?

Probe: How did working with a Program Builder compare to other ways you've engaged with apprenticeship?

Employer Perspective and Talent Pipeline

5. What do you wish program designers understood better about the employer's perspective and real constraints?

Probe: What do employers need that the current system doesn't provide?

Probe: Simplified registration? More financial incentives? Better-prepared candidates?

6. How did this change—or not change—how your organization thinks about workforce development and building a talent pipeline?

Probe: Did you have visibility into program outcomes or data about your apprentices' progress?

Probe: What kinds of information would help you assess the value of your apprenticeship investment?

Scaling and Sustainability

7. What would it take to get more employers in your industry or sector to do this? What is the real barrier, and what is the unlock?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: Are there types of employers for whom this model works particularly well—or really does not work? What distinguishes them?

Probe: Were incentive funds effective at getting employers to participate?

8. Would you continue to sponsor apprenticeships after the grant? Why or why not?

Probe: What would make continued participation more feasible?

Probe: Has your organization's commitment to apprenticeship as a talent strategy solidified?

9. If the goal is to dramatically expand employer participation in apprenticeship across Washington, what is your candid advice for how to make that happen?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: What innovations or strategies from this experience could encourage more employers to adopt apprenticeships, particularly in emerging or non-traditional sectors?

Probe: What is the most important lesson you've learned that you'd want policymakers to know?

Group 3: Program Staff/ Grantees

Goal: Surface implementation wisdom, capacity requirements, strategic lessons, and honest assessments of what is replicable and what is not.

Context and Capacity

1. Tell us about your organization's apprenticeship journey—where you started and where you are now.

Probe: How did your role evolve over the course of the grant?

Probe: Did your organization take on functions it hadn't performed before (e.g., convening, technical assistance, sponsorship)?

2. What had to take place—in your organization, your partnerships, your community—before expansion was really possible? What had to be built first?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: What did the landscape look like in terms of available programs, employer engagement, and participant access before this funding?

Implementation and Partnerships

3. What was the hardest part of building or scaling this program, and how did you work through it?

Probe: Start-up and planning issues (e.g., hiring staff, engaging partners, building curriculum)?

Probe: Implementation challenges (e.g., employer engagement, participant recruitment, program registration)?

Probe: External factors (e.g., COVID-19 recovery, labor market shifts, economic conditions)?

4. Which partnerships turned out to be most essential, and what made them work?

Probe: Were these existing relationships or new ones formed under the grant?

Probe: What role did each partner play (e.g., instruction, employer engagement, recruitment, support services, registration)?

Probe: Were any partnerships harder than expected? Why?

Probe: Have any partnerships continued or deepened beyond the grant period?

5. What strategies for engaging employers actually worked? What did not, and what would you do differently?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: How did you make the case for apprenticeship to employers unfamiliar with the model?

Probe: Were incentive funds effective at getting employers to participate?

Probe: What were the biggest barriers to employer adoption?

Equity and Data

6. How did you approach equity—reaching people of color, low-income participants, rural communities, people with disabilities? What worked, and where did you fall short?

Probe: What specific tactics or partnerships were used?

Probe: Did you make changes to program design based on feedback from underrepresented participants?

Probe: How did you address potential bias in hiring, mentoring, or on-the-job training?

7. What data or evidence did you use to make decisions and improve the program? What data did you wish you had?

Probe: Did you use measures beyond the required DOL performance indicators?

Probe: Were there challenges in collecting or sharing data across partner organizations?

System Support and Grant Structure

8. What technical assistance or support was most valuable? What was missing or not useful?

Probe: What forms of TA were most useful (e.g., help with registration, curriculum, employer engagement)?

Probe: Was the TA timely and relevant?

9. Walk us through the grant experience. What worked about the application, procurement, and funding structure? What created challenges?

Probe: Were the targeted award amounts adequate for the scope of work expected?

Probe: How did the timeline and period of performance affect your ability to deliver?

Probe: Did the rolling rounds of funding allow the initiative to adapt and reach more partners over time?

Probe: How did the allowable cost structure—funds for program design and development but not for direct instruction or wrap-around supports—affect your work?

Sustainability and Replicability

10. If another organization wanted to replicate your model in a new region or sector, what would you tell them are the absolute essentials—and what are the avoidable mistakes?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: What aspects of this work depend on conditions specific to your context—geography, sector, existing relationships—and cannot simply be copied?

Probe: What features of this approach could and should be replicated elsewhere?

11. What is your plan for the program after this grant period, and how confident are you in it?

Probe: What sources of funding will sustain program activities?

Probe: Are the partnerships strong enough to continue without dedicated grant support?

Probe: What is at risk of being lost when the grant ends?

12. If you were advising on a strategy to expand apprenticeship at scale across Washington, what would be the core elements? (E.g., what's one thing about how apprenticeship expansion is structured and funded that would have the biggest impact?

PRIORITY — Do not cut if time is short

Probe: Larger awards? Longer timelines? Different allowable costs?

Probe: A different procurement process? More flexibility in how funds are used?

Probe: Where are the greatest unmet needs in terms of sectors or populations?

Probe: What innovations or strategies from this grant could encourage more employers to adopt apprenticeships?

Closing

[Read for all groups.]

Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences with us today. Your perspectives are invaluable to understanding how Washington's apprenticeship expansion efforts have worked and how they can be improved.

If you think of anything else you'd like to share after today, please don't hesitate to reach out to us at [CONTACT EMAIL].

[Distribute any follow-up materials or contact information. Confirm participants' consent to be contacted for any follow-up questions.]