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Apprenticeships help young workers, companies and SC's economy

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For students and families concerned about the high cost of college these days, there's a unique opportunity available in South Carolina to avoid these costs — and the large student loan debt that often results from them.

This opportunity lies in our state's extensive and growing apprenticeship programs.

Through apprenticeships, job seekers obtain manufacturing and other employment skills in on-the-job settings while also gaining knowledge in the classroom, in some case while they're still in high school. And very often, apprenticeships lead to career employment.

This is good for everyone involved.

It's good for apprentices because they're able to obtain skills and jobs at little to no cost while avoiding the already high and growing cost of college.

It's good for companies because they're able to meet their workforce needs with customized trainees.

And it's good for the state's economy, helping to fill jobs and create spending power for consumers.

Apprenticeships are not a new idea, but they were overshadowed in recent decades as more emphasis was being placed on higher education. Now, however, apprenticeships are regaining popularity, and South Carolina is at the forefront of a great idea.

I don't believe it's an overstatement to say South Carolina is a national leader when it comes to apprenticeships.

One example is Apprenticeship Carolina, which works to create training programs at the state's technical colleges to meet the workforce skills needed by South Carolina companies. Since it began in 2007, Apprenticeship Carolina has grown from about 775 apprentices at 90 companies in our state to some 4,600 apprentices at 625 businesses.

"We made a conscious decision to break down the traditional barriers to registered apprenticeship," says Brad Neese, director of Apprenticeship Carolina. "We're redefining a centuries-old concept and making it something that has real value for business and industry in South Carolina."

The New York Times featured Apprenticeship Carolina in a story it recently published about apprenticeships in South Carolina.

"The [state's] emphasis on job training also has been a major calling card overseas for South Carolina officials, who lured BMW here two decades ago and more recently persuaded France's Michelin and Germany's Continental Tire to expand in the state," the story says.

The article also highlights an apprenticeship program involving the Aiken County Career Center.

In an August dispatch, Bloomberg News took note of South Carolina's apprenticeship offerings, reporting that the state has added more than 500 such programs since 2008. "They range from certified nursing assistants in senior-care facilities to pharmacy technicians at CVS," the Bloomberg story says.

Surely the state's strong apprenticeship programs are helping to reduce South Carolina's unemployment rate. The most recent figures show that it has dropped to 7.1 percent, the lowest it has been in more than five years, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

And, again, apprenticeships offer young people a great way to avoid racking up a mountain of student loan debt.

Much to their credit, Gov. Nikki Haley, who has made job creation one of her top priorities, and state Commerce Secretary Bobby Hill and the agency he runs, the S.C. Department of Commerce, are working hard to grow our state's employment base and economy as a whole.

The state's apprenticeship programs are a wonderful complement to their efforts.

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