

# The Indirect Benefits of a Transit Apprenticeship and its Potential Value as a Flexible Postsecondary Pathway

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## Introduction

The next chapter of transit workforce development could be transformative. Transit apprenticeships sit at the precipice of a historic wave of retirements, a renaissance of work-based education, and a renewed commitment to higher education's civic mission. The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority Joint Workforce Investment (JWI) partnership is already the “gold standard” for transportation apprenticeships. This study finds the JWI has yet to reach its full potential. Offered at no cost to students who see an immediate wage premium, the accredited JWI apprenticeships illustrate how postsecondary pathways that feature work-based learning can provide students a financial “cushion.” These features make the JWI relevant to educational questions beyond the transit sector. College incompleteness rates, persistent equity gaps, and the decline in the college wealth premium have fueled an interest in any pathway models that make college less risky for financially precarious students. The public dimensions of transit work make transit apprenticeships an especially compelling

candidate for postsecondary institutions interested in building hybrid pathways that lead to well-rounded, flexible credentials of value.

## Study Methods

This study applies three metrics to the JWI apprenticeships—affordability, portability, and articulation—and finds that its certificates hold potential value for all three measures. To gauge affordability, the program features are contextualized within publicly available data on postsecondary trends including completion rates, financing risks, and college wage and wealth premiums. Portability and articulation are assessed through content analysis of curricular offerings, syllabi, student learning outcomes, and other program materials. In consultation with the Dean of Workforce Development at Mission College, the study details how the JWI partnership works within current postsecondary accreditation and articulation practices noting the differences in requirements and funding streams for registered apprenticeships. The

study consults publicly available data and literature on transit sector job growth, workforce training activities, registered apprenticeships, non-degree credentials, and “middle-skill pathways” to identify ways in which the JWI program might be modified to address recruitment challenges by offering students flexible career pathways.

## Findings

In addition to the proven benefits as a recruitment and training instrument for the transit workforce, the JWI apprenticeships affirm a growing body of literature that finds rising value in non-degree credentials for jobs that require at least a high school diploma but not necessarily a bachelor’s degree. The full value of the JWI as an entry point into flexible career pathways has not been fully realized. The current structure of the program makes it well suited to becoming a “middle-skill pathway” that can lead to a degree. The JWI’s unrealized potential is neither a deficiency in the program nor unique to JWI. The historic divide between Career Technical Education (CTE) and degree programs presents several obstacles. Current accreditation, funding, and articulation practices do not support degree pathways that route through apprenticeships. The obstacles are not insurmountable and the conditions for change are favorable. The diminished premium of the bachelor’s degree has softened the resistance to alternative credential models and opened the door for work-based programs like the JWI to connect with degree programs. There are many options for applying transit apprenticeships to degree requirements so that apprentices are advancing toward a degree. The JWI curriculum already features multipurpose soft skills in communication that could articulate with general education requirements. Additionally, the program’s emphasis on transit work as public service aligns with learning objectives for civic education. That alignment presents another option for satisfying degree requirements with JWI credit hours.

## Policy/Practice Recommendations

- More than two credit hours of the JWI certificates should apply toward a degree, and all students should be made aware of how JWI hours can meet

degree requirements.

- The JWI content related to communication and public service should be developed to meet general education requirements in communication and civic engagement.
- The JWI stakeholders should look beyond the direct benefits to workforce development and consider the additional advantages of connecting apprenticeships to degree programs.
- Degree pathways that route through the JWI do not need to lead to transportation or engineering-related degrees. Other options should be considered, and flexibility should be prioritized.

## About the Authors

**Dr. Kathleen McConnell** is professor emeritus in the Department of Communication Studies at San José State University. She is the author of *Advocating Heightened Education: Seeing and Inventing Educational Possibilities* (Lexington Press, 2020) and of numerous essays about the purpose and future of higher education.

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## To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at [transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2364](https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2364)



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