

Executive Summary: Building, Scaling, and Sustaining Apprenticeships Across Illinois Community Colleges

The Apprenticeship Learning Community discussion reinforced a consistent theme: successful apprenticeship expansion is less about launching “a program” and more about building an institution-wide operating model that aligns academics, student services, workforce teams, and employers around a shared value proposition. Colleges are seeing strong employer demand and promising student outcomes, but scaling remains constrained by internal understanding, workload capacity, and systems that were not built for an employer-driven model. Participants surfaced practical strategies to secure stakeholder buy-in, reduce perceived burden, make the case with evidence and stories, bridge academic/workforce divides, and embed apprenticeships into routine college operations.

1) Stakeholder Mapping and Strategy: Build a Coalition, Not a Department

Across colleges, the most important internal champions are faculty and academic leadership. Participants emphasized that apprenticeship programs “belong” to faculty in practice—faculty endorsement drives credibility, recruitment, and the willingness to adapt course sequencing and policies. Department chairs, deans, and key program directors are essential allies because they can normalize apprenticeship expectations, address pushback, and provide cover for changes that affect scheduling, prerequisites, and curriculum mapping. A committed president or senior leadership sponsor accelerates culture change, removes barriers, and helps communicate apprenticeship as a strategic priority rather than a niche workforce project.

Different divisions bring different motivations and concerns:

- **Faculty (CTE, transfer, accredited programs):** CTE faculty often show more flexibility and openness, while business/transfer areas may require more education on how apprenticeship fits academic goals. Accredited programs (e.g., healthcare) may face stricter requirements and external constraints, making early engagement with program directors critical.
- **Academic leadership (deans/chairs):** Focused on quality, workload, and viability. They respond to clarity, predictable processes, and demonstrated outcomes.
- **Student services (advising/counseling, career services):** Need clear roles, course plans, and streamlined communication to support apprentices efficiently; career services can amplify apprenticeship opportunities.

- **Finance, grants, and compliance:** Influence sustainability decisions and staffing structures; they need clear long-term plans that reduce reliance on temporary funding.
- **Employers and industry partners:** They are not just external customers—they can be persuasive messengers who influence internal buy-in by sharing why apprenticeship works, what changes they need, and the benefits to students and the regional economy.

A key strategy is tailoring the message by audience. Transfer-focused or traditionally academic areas may respond best to “long-term pathway” framing—apprenticeships as structured, credit-bearing pathways that support degree completion and transfer, not a diversion from academic rigor. Administrators focused on accreditation and quality respond to apprenticeship as a high-accountability model that improves persistence and completion through structured work-based learning, documented competencies, and employer investment. Enrollment-focused leaders respond to apprenticeship as a stable pipeline that brings in new learners (including employees), supports retention, and strengthens community partnerships.

2) Addressing the Workload Barrier: Make “Yes” the Easy Option

Workload remains the most persistent barrier to growth. Participants noted that apprenticeship coordination requires sustained time for employer communication, student onboarding, registration troubleshooting, advising alignment, reporting, and internal problem-solving—often exceeding current staffing capacity. As employer demand increases, the risk is not just burnout but dropped handoffs and inconsistent experiences for students and partners.

Promising strategies include:

- **Dedicated staffing models:** Many colleges have used grant-funded positions to start, then gradually transitioned costs into institutional budgets over time. Participants stressed that long-term planning and clear outcomes help convert short-term grant roles into stable positions.
- **Centralized apprenticeship teams:** Some institutions have teams that handle everything except the actual instruction, reducing faculty burden and improving consistency. This model can be especially effective in complex programs or where employers have limited time to co-design.
- **Process reuse rather than reinvention:** Colleges reduce workload by borrowing program models, templates, and lessons learned from peer institutions rather than building each apprenticeship from scratch.
- **Clear role definition and repeatable processes:** Explicitly defining who handles advising, reporting, employer communication, student support, and internal coordination reduces confusion and prevents duplication.

- **Proactive navigation of prerequisites and onboarding:** Early planning for placement requirements, testing, and prerequisite waivers (when appropriate) can prevent bottlenecks—especially around math and literacy minimum competencies that can delay apprentice enrollment.
- **Structured communication routines:** Regular touchpoints with key offices (advising, registration, finance, academic divisions) and “light lift” relationship-building meetings (e.g., brief office visits, short informal sessions) help resolve issues quickly and build shared ownership.

3) Making the Case: Combine Outcomes Data with Human Proof

Participants emphasized that while data is essential, stories often move decisions faster—especially when competing initiatives are vying for attention. The most compelling “case” tends to blend both:

Data that resonates with internal audiences

- **Completion and persistence rates:** Apprentices often outperform general student populations in retention/completion; comparing outcomes to institutional, statewide, or national benchmarks can be powerful.
- **Enrollment and pipeline stability:** Apprenticeships can represent reliable, employer-supported enrollment—particularly in high-need sectors.
- **Employer demand signals:** Documented requests, repeat employers, and expansion to additional employers validate market relevance.
- **Program growth and pathway expansion:** New pathways or additional related programs demonstrate momentum and scalability.

Stories and visibility tactics that amplify impact

- **Employer testimonials:** Employers explaining the return on investment (talent pipeline, retention, skills alignment) can increase faculty and leadership buy-in.
- **Student stories and images:** Humanizing the pathway—who the apprentices are, what they’re achieving, how work and education connect—can be more persuasive than charts alone.
- **Campus recognition rituals:** Graduation stoles, public recognition, and celebration moments (e.g., “signing day,” National Apprenticeship Week programming) normalize apprenticeship as a point of pride and create broader campus awareness.
- **Peer-to-peer employer storytelling:** Employers speaking to other employers builds external demand and reduces skepticism faster than college-led promotion.

4) Bridging Academic and Workforce Divides: Use Shared Language and Joint Structures

A recurring challenge is that apprenticeship is employer-driven, which can feel misaligned with academic norms—particularly in transfer programs or areas that prioritize traditional academic pathways. Participants identified that bridging this divide requires consistent messaging and frameworks that honor both perspectives.

Effective approaches include:

- **Education-first clarity on “what apprenticeship is”:** Explicitly explaining parameters (employer-driven competencies, paid work-based learning, structured progression) helps other departments understand why certain choices differ from traditional academic models.
- **Pathway framing:** Positioning apprenticeship as a guided pathway that supports degree attainment (and in some cases transfer) helps shift perceptions from “training” to “education + career.”
- **Unified external messaging:** Aligning how the college speaks to K–12 partners and employers avoids fragmented narratives and reinforces that apprenticeship is part of a coherent talent strategy.
- **Shared advising and course planning:** Dedicated advisors with standardized course plans reduce friction for apprentices and ensure consistent academic progression.
- **Cross-program alignment:** Connecting apprenticeship to other funding/program structures (WIOA, youth funding, ICAPS, grants) can reduce silos and help braid resources.

5) Sustaining Momentum: Institutionalize Apprenticeship as a System

Participants described a clear transition point: early success often relies on champions, but long-term sustainability requires policies, routines, and structures that outlive individuals. Colleges that move apprenticeship from “big bet” to business-as-usual tend to do the following:

- **Embed apprenticeship in the strategic plan** and communicate it top-down as an institutional priority.
- **Formalize cross-campus collaboration** through recurring meetings, office-by-office engagement, and shared planning processes that prevent apprenticeship from operating as a silo.

- **Create routine communication and visibility systems** (e.g., employer newsletters, campus recognition events, regular updates to leadership and departments).
- **Build durable staffing and funding models** that reduce volatility from grant cycles and ensure continuity as demand grows.
- **Standardize the operational playbook** (intake, onboarding, advising, registration, employer communication, reporting), making it easier to scale without adding friction.

Key Takeaway

The group's collective experience suggests that apprenticeship growth is strongest when institutions treat it as a coordinated enterprise initiative: faculty-supported, employer-validated, student-services-enabled, and leadership-sponsored. The path forward is to reduce workload through repeatable systems, elevate success through data + stories, align language to bridge academic/workforce priorities, and institutionalize apprenticeship through strategy, staffing, and shared routines. This combination turns apprenticeships from a promising project into a lasting part of how colleges serve students, employers, and communities.