

Trade Your Job

The old apprenticeship model of learning by doing gets new life as people who've been left out of the job market train to meet the growing demand for green-collar workers.

by Valerie Saturen

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Youth participants in the iYouthworks! Green Collar Jobs Apprenticeship Program in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Photo courtesy of iYouthWorks!

In the last 30 years, wages have dropped for people without college degrees. But in Pierce County, Washington, high school students who aren't headed for college are learning to retrofit houses; they stand to make up to \$50 an hour once they're experienced journeymen. In Lansing, Michigan, unemployed auto workers can get up to \$10,000 to train for new careers in renewable energy. These people, and others nationwide, are part of a rapidly expanding market for green-collar workers.

Since green-collar job training is affordable—usually requiring an associate's degree at most—and since these jobs typically offer good living wages, they represent a pathway out of poverty and into the middle class.

“If a job improves the environment but doesn't provide a family-supporting wage or a career ladder to move low-income workers into higher-skilled occupations, it is not a green-collar job,” says Sam Haswell of the Apollo Alliance, a coalition formed in 2001 to push for a clean-energy revolution.



Photo courtesy of iYouthWorks!

According to a 2009 report by the American Solar Energy Society, there were 9 million green-collar jobs in the United States in 2007, and 37 million could be created by 2030 if policymakers support renewable energy and energy efficiency initiatives at the state and federal level.

“We must build a 21st century workforce in America to compete in the new clean energy economy,” says Apollo Alliance Chair Phil Angelides. “This means training a new generation of workers to fill a wide range of skilled jobs in the rapidly growing green sector.”

The need for green workforce development has produced unprecedented collaboration among labor and environmental organizations, government agencies, schools, and businesses. There’s a return to the apprenticeship model of learning by doing and a growing acknowledgment that valuable education happens outside the classroom.

In Bellingham, Washington, which American Public Media's Marketplace recently declared “the epicenter of a new economic model,” the Opportunity Council’s Building Performance Center is teaming up with Bellingham Technical College to provide green workforce development. “We feel like this training has to take place on the job and in the field,” says the Center’s director, John Davies. “The training has to include hands-on learning along with the learning that takes place in the classroom.”

The Center is one of 26 agencies participating in a state-run project that sends trainers to teach home audits and energy retrofits in communities across Washington, including those not served by established training programs. Led by experienced peer technicians, these sessions are customized to meet the specific needs of Washington agencies that provide low-income weatherization services.



Photo courtesy of iYouthWorks!

Sound Alliance, in Pierce County, Washington, matches women, people of color, youth, and members of other traditionally disadvantaged groups with openings in green-collar apprenticeship programs. Like other Industrial Areas Foundation organizations, the Sound Alliance empowers people to create change and become grassroots leaders. One leader, Steve Gelb, emphasizes the need to train workers in deep retrofitting, which involves not only simple weatherization, but replacing furnaces and water heaters. Doing so saves more energy and also creates higher-skilled jobs, Gelb says.

When youth and people from disadvantaged communities step into such high-demand, high-salary jobs, it not only gives them an avenue toward a brighter future; it also helps to change community perceptions of them. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, for instance, the group iYouthworks! joined with city officials and local businesses to create the Green Collar Jobs Apprenticeship Program in 2008. The program provides valuable training, academic skill building, and job counseling to youth in a city where the dropout rate hovers around 50 percent.

What Draft Horses Teach College Students



The students at Sterling College learn from demanding teachers—like a stubborn, 2,000-pound draft horse or the campus cows, which need water even on a 20-below-zero Vermont morning when the trough is frozen solid. Sterling is part of a seven-school consortium that requires students to take practical jobs, such as working on the college’s farm, in its kitchen or offices, or as a mentor to children or seniors. Read on...

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“There’s a lot of racism and discrimination and bad perceptions of young people in Santa Fe,” says Tobe Bott-Lyons, educational coordinator at iYouthworks! “Now you see these tattooed kids that people are generally used to being scared of restoring the river and building a house, and they’re retrofitting homes and installing solar panels.”

Lauren Herrera’s life turned upside down when her 6-year-old son passed away last year. She started getting into trouble, which culminated in drug-related felony charges that caused her to lose her job as a dental assistant. Scarce jobs and a criminal record made it hard to find work, until iYouthworks! gave her an opportunity to play a positive role in her community. Now she weatherizes homes for low-income families with the newly launched Energy RX crew. “They’re ecstatic when they find out the weatherization is free,” she says. “It’s very rewarding.”

Young people aren’t the only ones looking for green-collar jobs. Throughout the country, community college programs in alternative energy have been flooded with recently unemployed workers and those simply seeking valuable new skills. In Michigan, which suffers the nation’s highest unemployment rate, the transition to a green economy promises to revive communities that have been devastated by job losses in the auto industry. Michigan’s Green Jobs Initiative is one of the programs made possible by the \$500 million in federal stimulus funds allocated for green workforce development. The money helps workers enroll in new community college programs in green sector fields like alternative energy.

The alternative energy degree program at Lansing Community College, one of the first of its kind, has grown from 42 students in 2005 to 252 in 2008. Starting this fall, the college will offer new certificates in solar, geothermal, wind turbines, and energy efficiency. The college also has partnered with the National Alternative Fuels Training Consortium to develop an alternative energy curriculum for colleges and universities nationwide.

Gelb says that green workforce development has turned on its head the historical divide between labor and environmental concerns. “We call it the ‘triple bottom line,’” he says. “We’re reducing carbon, creating jobs, and saving money for people in the homes we’re retrofitting.”



Valerie Saturen wrote this article for **Learn as You Go**, the Fall 2009 issue of YES! Magazine. Valerie is a freelance writer living in Tacoma, Washington. Her work focuses on politics, the Middle East, and the environment. She can be reached through saturen.blogspot.com

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A horizontal banner with a blue border. On the left is the 'yes!' logo. Next to it is a collage of three small images: a person at a podium, an elderly woman, and a group of people. To the right of the collage is the text 'See more articles from our Fall 09 issue' and 'Learn as You Go' in a larger, bold font. On the far right is an image of a hang glider in flight against a light sky with birds.



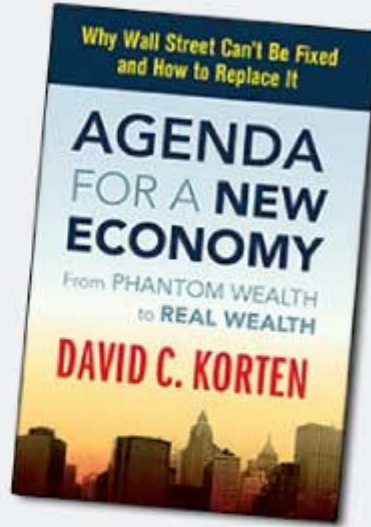
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