



## Workforce Playbook: Understanding Apprenticeships, Internships, and Self-directed Placements on the Field of Career Readiness

### Overview

In preparing students for today’s workforce, experiential learning models—apprenticeships, internships, and self-directed placements—offer unique pathways for skill-building and career exploration. Each model varies in structure, commitment, and funding opportunities, making it essential for institutions, students, and employers to select the option that best meets their goals. This mini playbook outlines the differences among apprenticeships, internships, and self-directed placements, using a team sports analogy to illustrate the levels of structure, guidance, and independence each provides.



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### Apprenticeships: Employer-Driven and Structured Partnerships

**Definition:** Apprenticeships are employer-driven programs that combine structured, paid, on-the-job training with related instruction, typically by a college. In this model, employers partner with colleges to define training standards and learning outcomes, ensuring apprentices gain essential industry-specific skills needed for career success. Registered apprenticeships require an intermediary to register students with the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) or local state labor agency and have a high commitment level from all stakeholders.

**Funding Advantage:** Registered apprenticeships unlock access to federal and state funding sources, including grants, tax incentives, and workforce development funds, making them financially beneficial for students, employers, and institutions alike. This alignment with industry standards also makes apprenticeships eligible for public and private investment not typically available for internships.

**Team Sports Analogy:** Apprenticeships are like playing on a professional sports team—the student has a specific role, receives consistent coaching, and follows a structured training schedule to achieve high performance. Just as professional athletes are part of a committed team with clear goals and standards, apprentices sign contracts and engage in a formal learning journey guided by both the employer and college.

**Benefits for Higher Education:** Apprenticeships provide a sustainable pathway to workforce readiness by equipping students with in-demand skills aligned with industry standards. Colleges benefit from forming strong employer partnerships, improving job placement rates, and accessing funding to support students’ educational expenses. The return on investment (ROI) for apprenticeship models is high.

Overall, degree apprenticeships represent a **transformative approach** to workforce development, offering higher education institutions a way to align curriculum with industry needs, provide accessible education, and graduate students who are career-ready from day one.

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## Internships: College-Driven and Exploratory Experiences

**Definition:** Internships are college-driven experiences designed to give students hands-on exposure to a field, usually in a shorter-term and less structured setting than apprenticeships. Colleges help students secure internships by fostering industry partnerships, providing them with a chance to assess different roles and explore potential career paths. Internships may be paid or unpaid and often focus on gaining basic workplace experience rather than long-term career training.

**Challenges:** Many internships, especially unpaid ones, limit access for students who cannot afford to work without pay, creating barriers to equity. Additionally, internships often lack standardized learning outcomes, leading to variable experiences. Colleges can address these challenges by securing funding for paid internships, establishing consistent guidelines, and fostering strong industry relationships.

**Team Sports Analogy:** Internships are like joining a club sports team—students get the chance to try out various positions, build foundational skills, and discover their strengths. While the college facilitates these opportunities, students have more freedom to experiment. Just as club sports allow players to explore different roles, internships provide students with a chance to try various tasks and assess their fit in a field.

**Benefits for Higher Education:** By expanding access to high-quality, structured internships, colleges can deliver equitable and meaningful work experiences that align with academic and career readiness goals. Strengthening the quality and consistency of internships benefits students, employers, and colleges by building a more skilled workforce. Internships also offer flexibility in providing students with experiences but allow them to look for employment elsewhere after they complete the opportunity.

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## Self-directed Placement: Flexible, Student-Driven Learning

**Definition:** Self-directed Placement is a student-driven model where individuals pursue field-based learning independently, without the structured partnership of an apprenticeship or college-arranged internship. Students arrange opportunities on their own to explore career-relevant experiences that align with personal interests and career goals, offering greater autonomy and flexibility.

**Challenges:** Students often have the difficulty of finding meaningful placements without formal support from college faculty or staff, or how they may lack recognition by employers compared to structured programs.

**Team Sports Analogy:** Self-directed placement is like participating in pickup games—informal, self-organized, and flexible. Students determine when, where, and with whom they engage, gaining practical skills and insights along the way. Just as pickup games let players shape their own experience without a formal schedule, self-directed placement empowers students to develop skills through self-directed learning.

**Benefits for Higher Education:** Self-directed Placement provides autonomy and flexibility for students, making it ideal for those who want to explore various career paths or those in industries with non-traditional career structures. This model supports self-directed learning and helps students build their own professional networks and experiences. These are not typically paid positions but could be volunteer based.

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## Summary

Model	Driven By	Funding Opportunity	Commitment Level	Team Sports Analogy
Apprenticeship	Employer	High	High – Formal, structured training	Professional Sports Team
Internship	College	Limited	Medium – Short-term, exploratory	Club Sports Team
Self-directed Placements	Student	None	Low – Independent, flexible	Pickup Game

## ***Colorado's Future Workforce: The Transformative Role of Degree Apprenticeships***



Apprenticeship is a workforce model that has proven successful across many industries, from construction and healthcare to advanced manufacturing. However, degree apprenticeships represent a new and transformative approach, creating strong partnerships between employers and higher education institutions to address workforce needs more effectively. Unlike traditional degree programs, these apprenticeships integrate academic learning with hands-on experience, aligning training directly with industry demands. This model not only benefits employers by creating a highly skilled, job-ready workforce but also supports economic growth by addressing critical talent shortages in key sectors.

According to a 2023 report by the U.S. Department of Labor, industries utilizing apprenticeship models see a 94% retention rate of employees post-apprenticeship, significantly higher than traditional workforce training models. While only 6% of colleges in the United States currently offer degree-based apprenticeships, the success of programs in fields like education,

healthcare, and technology highlights their potential to scale nationwide. Degree apprenticeships offer higher education institutions a unique opportunity to better align their programs with market needs, making them more productive and relevant for both students and employers.

For industries like education, where teacher shortages are a growing crisis, degree apprenticeships provide a clear pathway to recruit, train, and retain talent by leveraging partnerships between local employers—such as school districts—and colleges. As higher education institutions recognize the potential of this model, degree apprenticeships could become a cornerstone of workforce development, offering meaningful, needs-based solutions that benefit both communities and the economy.

## ***Empowering Colorado's Communities to Solve their Own Teacher Shortage Crisis***

Colorado's rural communities have long grappled with significant teacher shortages, a challenge that has persisted over the years. According to the Colorado Department of Education's 2023-2024 Educator Shortage Survey, small rural districts reported that approximately 41.57% of teaching positions were filled through shortage mechanisms, such as hiring long-term substitutes or educators with emergency authorizations. Additionally, 10.03% of these positions remained unfilled throughout the school year. These figures underscore the acute difficulties rural areas face in attracting and retaining qualified educators.

The impact of these shortages is profound, affecting educational quality and student outcomes. In response, various initiatives have been launched to address the crisis. For instance, the Colorado Department of Education, in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Higher Education, developed a strategic action plan to tackle teacher shortages, focusing on recruitment and retention strategies tailored to the unique needs of rural districts.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, and continuous attention is required to ensure that all Colorado students, regardless of their geographic location, have access to quality education.

## Three Pathways:

### The Traditional

- **Description:**  
A college-driven program for students pursuing a teaching career through a traditional route. Includes a residency year as a paid internship (as funding permits).
- **Admission Requirements:**  
None.



### The Apprenticeship

- **Description:**  
Employer-driven pathway for individuals employed by a school district who have not completed a bachelor's degree. Requires employer designation.
- **Admission Requirements:**
  - Employment by a school district.
  - Apprentice designation from the school district's HR department.

### The Alternative

- **Description:**  
Designed for individuals with a bachelor's degree and employment as a classroom teacher in a school district. Graduates earn a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency (COP) in Elementary or Secondary Education.
- **Admission Requirements:**
  - A bachelor's degree.
  - Full-time employment as a classroom teacher (not substitute teaching).

Teacher apprenticeship pathways open doors for individuals who are already employed in schools—such as paraprofessionals, aides, or support staff—who may have never considered that earning a teaching credential was within their reach. By combining on-the-job training with accessible coursework and wrap-around support, these pathways allow working professionals to advance their careers without leaving their current positions. This approach removes traditional barriers like cost and time constraints, enabling these individuals to leverage their valuable classroom experience and deep community connections to become fully credentialed educators.

### ***Building Sustainable Pathways: The Critical Role of Strong Industry Partnerships***

Colorado Mountain College (CMC) is at the forefront of solving teacher shortages in Colorado through innovative teacher apprenticeship degree pathways. In close partnership with our most critical state agencies—the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE), and the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE)—we are aligning policy, funding, and workforce development strategies to address this pressing issue.

CMC also collaborates with key industry organizations such as Career Wise Colorado, the National Center for the Apprenticeship Degree (NCAD), and Educator Registered Apprenticeship (ERA) to create accessible pathways into the teaching profession. These partnerships allow us to provide structured pre-apprenticeship and adult apprenticeship opportunities for high school students, paraprofessionals, and career changers, ensuring they receive the credentials, mentorship, and on-the-job (OJL) learning experience needed to succeed as educators.

The success of the model is contingent on the strength and collaboration of the partnerships.



Additionally, CMC integrates wrap-around support to ensure attainment and completion for apprentices through organizations like Mind Up, which equips aspiring apprentices and their mentor teachers with tools to self-regulate their own stress and support students' emotional wellness. This holistic approach ensures that our apprentices are prepared to take care of their own mental well-being while they meet the diverse needs of today's classrooms, particularly in rural communities where shortages are most acute.

Through these partnerships, CMC is not only helping to stabilize the teaching workforce but also building pathways for strong "utility players" in the classroom by employing stackable credentials to support culturally and linguistically diverse educators in entering the profession. With concurrent enrollment coursework available in both English and Spanish and a focus on dual endorsements in culturally and linguistically diverse education and special education, our teacher apprenticeship pathways are creating a sustainable and inclusive solution to Colorado's education workforce challenges.

### ***Empowering Student Success: CMC's Apprenticeship Pathways Deliver Results***

The success of Colorado Mountain College's (CMC) teacher apprenticeship pathways has been measured through a variety of metrics that highlight their effectiveness as a workforce development model. The current cohort of apprentices is not only highly diverse—with over 50% identifying as culturally and linguistically diverse, including multilingual learners—but also demonstrates a retention rate of 95%. This is a testament to the program's ability to engage and support aspiring educators from underrepresented backgrounds. Moreover, satisfaction surveys reveal that apprentices and faculty alike value innovative models such as the 8-week course design, which accommodates the busy schedules of working professionals while ensuring high-quality instruction.



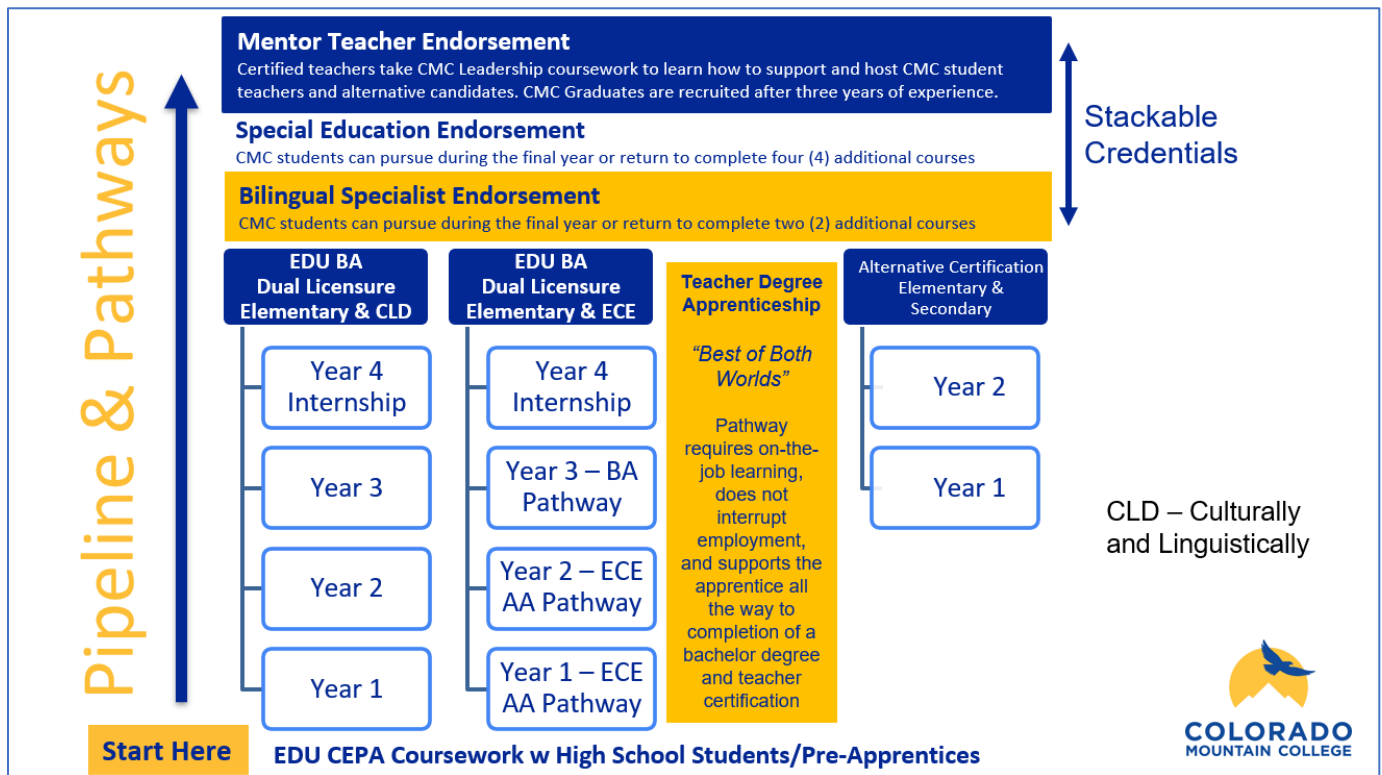
One of the most significant factors contributing to the success of this pathway is its braided funding model. By combining resources from local, state, and federal grants, as well as partnerships with CareerWise Colorado, NCAD, and other agencies, the program was able to cover all tuition costs for the cohort this year. This financial support eliminates one of the primary barriers to higher education, making degree attainment more accessible and equitable for participants. Early evaluations also show employer satisfaction in partner school districts, as apprentices are well-trained, well-supported, and as a result of increasing their earning potential, more likely to remain in their local communities to teach.

These successes demonstrate that degree apprenticeships are a practical and scalable solution for higher education institutions looking to address workforce issues. The streamlined integration of academic learning and on-the-job training, coupled with wraparound support and innovative course delivery, makes this model easier to implement than many institutions might think. CMC's experience shows that strong partnerships with state agencies, industry leaders, and community stakeholders are key to ensuring sustainability and impact. These pathways are not only addressing immediate workforce needs but also setting a new standard for how postsecondary education can adapt to the demands of the economy.

## Pathways to Prosperity: Stackable Credentials for Workforce-Ready Educators

The brilliance of stacking credentials lies in its ability to create a seamless, learning pathway that meets the evolving needs of Colorado’s workforce while supporting students’ financial and professional growth. CMC’s apprenticeship pathway begins in high school with concurrent enrollment opportunities, allowing students to earn college credits while exploring a career in education. From there, it transitions into an adult apprenticeship model within the bachelor’s degree program, enabling participants to gain on-the-job experience while earning their degree. Beyond the bachelor’s degree, this pathway continues to stack endorsements and credentials, such as culturally and linguistically diverse education or special education, which are in high demand across Colorado school districts. To further enhance career prospects, CMC envisions partnerships with other institutions to offer a 5th-year master’s degree option, ensuring graduates are highly qualified and land on a district salary schedule that provides a livable wage.

Additionally, CMC is committed to staying connected with our graduates to foster a self-sustaining pathway that solves teacher shortages and strengthens workforce readiness at every level. By mentoring future cohorts of apprentices, graduates will contribute their experience and expertise to the next generation of educators, creating a cycle of support and success. This approach not only produces workforce-ready employees equipped to meet the needs of school districts and preparation partnerships but also ensures that our graduates remain engaged in a collaborative effort to sustain and grow Colorado’s education workforce.



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For inquiries about CMC’s apprenticeship pathways or to discuss partnership opportunities, please do not hesitate to reach out!