

# Evaluation Brief

## BEHIND THE WHEEL:

### A CASE STUDY OF MISSION COLLEGE AND SANTA CLARA VALLEY TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY'S COACH OPERATOR APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

APRIL 2020



#### BRIEF BACKGROUND

*This case study is part of SPR's evaluation of the California Apprenticeship Initiative.*

*The evaluation includes an additional three case studies, an apprenticeship brief, and a pre-apprenticeship brief, which can be found at :*

<https://caihub.foundationccc.org/Research-and-Reports>

Recent data show that approximately 70 percent of registered apprenticeships in California are in the construction trades, even though the construction industry employs just 5 percent of the state's workforce. By contrast, fewer than 1 percent are in manufacturing, transportation, and healthcare occupations combined, even though approximately 18 percent of the state's workers are employed in these industries.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, to help address these types of imbalances and establish apprenticeships in industries where they are uncommon—particularly industries deemed by the state as a priority for economic growth—California's governor and state legislature created the ongoing California Apprenticeship Initiative (CAI) grant program.

One of the grants was awarded to Mission College, in partnership with Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 265, to support the creation of apprenticeships in four transportation occupations: Coach Operator, Track Worker, Service Mechanic, and Overhead Line Worker. Under the umbrella of the Transit Apprenticeships for Professional Career Advancement (TAPCA) initiative, these programs evolved from the work of the Joint Workforce Investment (JWI), a labor-management agreement and partnership established in 2006 between VTA and ATU. JWI is focused on training and supporting workers in key positions as professional members of the VTA workforce.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- **Employer Engagement:** The Coach Operator Apprenticeship (COA) program grew out of a labor-management commitment to professionalize key transit occupations and better support career advancement within VTA's workforce.
- **Program Structure:** The COA program includes 10 weeks of full-time classroom training followed by 15.5 months of on-the-job training (OJT), complemented by mentoring and additional credit-bearing training integrated into the OJT component.
- **Apprentice Recruitment and Selection:** VTA recruits for coach operator positions through open application periods typically held a few times each year.
- **Apprentice Perspectives:** Coach operator apprentices expressed considerable enthusiasm about all three program components—classroom training, OJT, and peer mentoring and programming through JWI.
- **Employer & Union Perspectives:** VTA and ATU expressed enthusiasm for the COA program as a vehicle for structuring and formalizing the training, mentoring, and development offered through JWI.
- **Sustainability:** VTA, ATU, and Mission College are all invested in sustaining and expanding the COA program and other transportation industry programs, and in helping other transit agencies begin to offer them as well.

## Implementation Findings and Lessons Learned

Feedback from the college, VTA, ATU, and apprentices indicates several key findings and lessons that may help others who are developing apprenticeship programs.

### Employer Engagement

Mission College initially launched a partnership with VTA to help develop management leadership training. As the partnership evolved, the college realized that, because of VTA's size (2,100 employees) and the extent of its demand for trained workers, there was an opportunity to build multiple apprenticeship programs within a single industry that was identified as a priority for both the region and the state. VTA and ATU are committed to the program for the following reasons.

- **The program works as a key strategy for VTA to develop and strengthen the pipeline for recruiting and training workers.** By combining intensive skill development with paid work, it is more financially feasible for workers to obtain the high-quality training required to successfully transition into the occupations that VTA needs to fill. In addition, apprenticeship has enhanced career development and advancement opportunities within VTA. It has scaled the work JWI has accomplished over a decade to pilot an approach to training, peer mentoring, and supporting coach operators.
- **The program reinforces the culture of ongoing learning and development and of shared responsibility.** Experienced employees play critical roles in onboarding, training, and supporting their peers, which reinforces what works, and reveals new or unmet training and support needs so that VTA and ATU can build strategies to address them in subsequent programs.

## Program Design

The Coach Operator Apprenticeship (COA) program includes an upfront classroom instruction and hands-on coaching component that requires 10 full-time weeks to complete. This is followed by 15.5 months of on-the-job training (OJT), with mentoring and additional credit-bearing training provided concurrently. With respect to recruiting candidates, VTA manages recruiting and hiring. To recruit, VTA conducts an open application period a few times a year. The selection process includes interviews, background checks, and other internal testing. Program staff identified two key lessons learned during program development:

- **Academic credit is an important aspect of the program because it signals the level of professionalism expected on the job.** Courses are taught by college-approved VTA instructors at VTA facilities, and apprentices earn 10 hours of academic credit for completing classroom instruction. This part of the program is cohort based, as all new apprentices are enrolled in the same courses full time, 40 hours per week, for 10 weeks.
- **Peer mentoring plays a critical role in building skills and managing public interactions.** Mentors also provide new coach operators with advice on how to handle having to be seated for long stretches and how to manage sleep and family time while working night shifts.

## Apprentice Perspectives

Most coach operator apprentices reported that the COA program has been very helpful in preparing them for their jobs. Apprentices reported that the combination of classroom-based instruction, OJT, and mentoring and support is well suited to their needs and prepares them for their jobs (and careers) in the following ways:

- **The program enhances technical, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration skills.** Apprentices indicated that learning to manage public interactions in highly stressful situations is one of the most significant challenges they face as coach operators. They reported that by participating in OJT and building close relationships with their mentors, they developed successful public engagement strategies that have built their confidence and developed their skills and professional expertise.
- **The program connects apprentices to career paths, a professional community, and ongoing development opportunities.** Although VTA prides itself on hiring from within, paths to advancement are not always clear to employees. Apprentices noted that TAPCA programs have made it possible for employees to change career paths while putting their existing knowledge of VTA to use.
- **The program provides apprentices with a new understanding of their own potential.** Some apprentices noted that their interest in earning a college credential or degree increased once they successfully earned college credit through the COA program; at that point, completing a college program seemed more achievable.

*“With apprenticeship, it’s like your job was created just for you. That’s why there’s hardly any turnover. You’re invested.”*

**—Coach Operator and  
Apprentice-Turned-Mentor**

## Employer Perspectives

VTA continues to support the program (across all four TAPCA occupations) and, as noted, has made it the sole route to employment as a coach operator for both new hires and internal transfers. Further the COA program has the following benefits for VTA:

- **The program effectively, predictably, and efficiently trains the coach operators that the company needs,** and connects them to a career path, which aids in retention.
- **The program structures and makes transparent what had been disparate processes** for recruiting, training, and internal promotion and advancement, so that job seekers and employees can more easily understand how to build satisfying careers at VTA.
- **The program strengthens and adds value to the labor-management partnership embodied in JWI** by integrating the pre-existing mentorship approach that VTA and ATU are well known for into formal credit-bearing training and professional development programs.

ATU shared a similar perspective, expressing appreciation for the program's structured approach to learning and access to college credit. The opportunity to earn college credit formalizes the training because it allows apprentices to gain college credit and learn a trade while also earning a living, rather than forcing a choice between the two.

## Program Sustainability

VTA's COA program has continued beyond the completion of the original CAI grant with support from the U.S. Department of Labor's American Apprenticeship Initiative, the California Workforce Development Board's High Road Training Partnerships initiative, the California Energy Commission (via the California Employment Training Panel), and continued support from Mission College, VTA, and ATU. Additionally, JWI and other area transit agencies are working with the new California Transit Works! partnership to launch apprenticeship programs like those developed by VTA, ATU, and Mission College.

1 Apprentice statistics come from California Department of Industrial Relations (2016), State of California Department of Industrial Relations Division of Apprenticeship Standards: 2016 Legislative Report (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/DAS/reports/2016LegReport.pdf>) and from internal DAS statistics. Construction, manufacturing, transportation, and utilities statistics come from California's Employment Development Department ([https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/file/indhist/cal\\$shws.xls](https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/file/indhist/cal$shws.xls)), as does the health care statistic ([https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/SpecialReports/Health\\_Care\\_in\\_CA.pdf](https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/SpecialReports/Health_Care_in_CA.pdf)).

### ABOUT THIS SERIES

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Other briefs in this series can be found **HERE** and include:

- CAI Apprenticeship Evaluation Brief
- CAI Pre-App-Evaluation Brief
- Columbia College Case Study
- Mission College Case Study
- SCCC Pre-Apprenticeship Case Study
- WERC Case Study Brief

