



Beyond Participation: Rethinking Workforce Development as Occupational Stewardship

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Beyond Participation: Continuing the Workforce Conversation

The electrical industry's workforce challenge continues to evolve. In *Beyond Recruitment: When the Market Will Not Wait*, IEC member Brian Brinkmann argued that the issue is not just attracting people to the trade, but ensuring contractors and apprenticeship programs can properly train and develop them. His new paper, *Beyond Participation: Rethinking Workforce Development as Occupational Stewardship*, advances that conversation by asking: What should workforce development ultimately produce?

As new programs, credentials, and pathways emerge, the paper encourages the industry to look beyond participation and toward occupational competency. It does not advocate for one educational model, but instead proposes a guiding principle: Different pathways. Same standard.

Brinkmann also emphasizes the contractor's role in developing broadly capable electricians and passing the profession's standards, judgment, craftsmanship, and commitment to safety from one generation to the next.

IEC's Perspective

IEC recognizes that workforce development is an ongoing and complex industry issue. *Beyond Participation* is not presented as a final answer or an endorsement of one pathway over another. It is intended to continue an important conversation and bring contractors, educators, apprenticeship leaders, manufacturers, workforce organizations, policymakers, and other stakeholders together to discuss the future of the electrical workforce.

Beyond Participation builds upon the discussion introduced in *Beyond Recruitment: When the Market Will Not Wait*.

Executive Summary

As workforce initiatives continue to expand, the electrical industry must consider whether its measures of success reflect participation or true occupational capability. Enrollment, completion, credential attainment, and job placement are important indicators, but they do not necessarily demonstrate that someone has developed the technical ability, practical judgment, safety mindset, craftsmanship, and professional responsibility expected of a broadly capable journey-level electrician.

Rather than prescribing a single educational model, the paper calls for the industry to define a shared standard of competency that can guide different pathways into the profession. It also highlights the essential role contractors play in transforming knowledge into dependable performance through supervision, field experience, mentorship, and increasing responsibility.

Ultimately, *Beyond Participation* reframes workforce development as occupational stewardship: the collective responsibility to preserve the profession's standards and pass them from one generation to the next.

Download the Full Paper

Explore the complete perspective and the questions it raises for contractors, educators, workforce partners, and the broader electrical industry. Read the full white paper.

Be Part of the Conversation

To participate in the discussion or share your perspective, contact IEC Executive Director Amy Biedenbarn at abiedenbarn@ieci.org.

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Beyond Participation

Rethinking Workforce Development as Occupational Stewardship

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Introduction

For nearly two decades, the electrical industry's workforce conversation has been dominated by a single question: How do we recruit more electricians? Contractors, associations, educators, policymakers, manufacturers, workforce boards, and economic development organizations have shared a common concern. Demand has continued to accelerate, while experienced electricians have become increasingly difficult to find. Nearly every conversation has begun in the same place: How do we attract more people into the profession? That concern was, and remains, entirely legitimate.

The United States is entering one of the most significant periods of electrical construction in its history. Investment in energy infrastructure, grid modernization, transportation electrification, advanced manufacturing, semiconductor production, data centers, healthcare, and commercial construction continues to reshape the scale and complexity of the work. At the same time, many experienced electricians are approaching retirement while the contractors responsible for developing the next generation face practical constraints in supervision, productive work opportunities, and the substantial investment required to transform inexperienced workers into competent practitioners.

The need for additional electricians is real. Few within the profession would argue otherwise. What has changed over the past several years is not the problem itself, but the conversation surrounding it. In *Beyond Recruitment: When the Market Will Not Wait*, I argued that recruitment, while important, was not the industry's binding constraint. The greater challenge was the capacity of employers to absorb, supervise, and intentionally develop inexperienced workers through the years of formation required for competent journey-level practice. I continue to believe that observation remains true. What I did not anticipate was how quickly the conversation would evolve. Today, the discussion extends well beyond recruitment. Across the country, organizations are experimenting with new educational partnerships, instructional models, credentials, pathways into the profession, and approaches to workforce participation. Community colleges, apprenticeship sponsors, technical schools, contractors, manufacturers, workforce agencies, philanthropies, and policymakers are investing significant energy in the future workforce.

That should encourage all of us.

Healthy professions adapt. They welcome thoughtful innovation, respond to changing circumstances, and seek better ways to prepare the next generation. The electrical profession should do the same. Yet as I listened, I began noticing something that was initially difficult to describe. Although many participants were using the same vocabulary, they often appeared to be answering different questions. Contractors discussed supervision ratios and productive jobsite integration. Educational institutions emphasized student success. Workforce agencies measured participation and placement. Manufacturers focused on specialized capability. Each perspective reflected the legitimate responsibilities of the organization advancing it. Yet beneath those conversations I began hearing another question, one that was rarely asked directly.

What, exactly, is workforce development intended to produce?

That question became the starting point for this essay. It is not written in opposition to innovation, nor does it argue for a single educational model. The electrical profession will require greater educational diversity, not less. Regions face different labor markets. Employers possess different capacities. Students arrive with different experiences, goals, and learning needs. Innovation will continue, and it should. My concern lies elsewhere. As the number of educational pathways continues to grow, so too does the importance of understanding the destination they are intended to reach. Because before a profession can meaningfully discuss how people should be prepared, it must first understand what it is preparing them to become.

The Conversation Has Changed

When I published *Beyond Recruitment: When the Market Will Not Wait* in February 2026, I believed the industry's emphasis on recruitment was obscuring a more fundamental constraint. We had become increasingly successful at attracting people toward the electrical trade, but the capacity of contractors and apprenticeship programs to absorb, supervise, and intentionally develop them had not expanded at the same pace. I believed that conversation was important. What I did not expect was how quickly the conversation itself would move.

In the months since that paper was published, I have watched the workforce discussion evolve at a remarkable pace. The question is no longer simply how to attract more people into the electrical trade. Increasingly, the discussion has become how to create more pathways into it. That shift is understandable. Demand continues to accelerate, while the industry's traditional formation systems face practical limits on how quickly they can expand to meet immediate workforce needs. Community colleges, manufacturers, workforce organizations, employers, and other institutions are responding with new programs, partnerships, credentials, and approaches to workforce preparation. Much of that innovation is both necessary and encouraging.

Yet as I watched those efforts multiply, it felt as though we were accelerating toward a destination no one had clearly defined.

We had become increasingly creative in discussing pathways into the profession, but less precise in describing the capabilities they were intended to produce. For much of the modern profession's history, that lack of precision mattered less because the destination was largely understood. Apprenticeship was not simply regarded as one educational option among many. It was widely recognized as the primary process through which electricians developed the knowledge, judgment, responsibility, and practical experience expected of journey-level practice. Other points of entry certainly existed—technical schools, community colleges, military experience, employer-sponsored training—but they generally converged toward the same professional expectation.

The pathways differed. The destination did not.

Today, however, the profession finds itself in a different moment. As pathways diversify, success is increasingly measured by enrollment, completion, credential attainment, placement, and other indicators of participation. Each provides valuable insight into the workforce ecosystem. None defines the destination. That leaves us with a different question. Not simply,

How do we create more pathways into the electrical trade? But,

What are those pathways intended to produce?

Beyond Participation

At first glance, the answer appears obvious. They are intended to produce electricians. Yet that response postpones the more important question: What does it mean to become an electrician? What knowledge, judgment, technical ability, and professional responsibility should be expected at the end of the journey? Until those questions are answered with greater precision, it is difficult to evaluate whether any pathway is accomplishing its purpose.

This is where I believe the industry's conversation has begun to drift.

Increasingly, workforce initiatives are evaluated by measures of participation rather than occupational capability. We celebrate enrollment, completion, credentials, and job placement. Each deserves recognition and represents genuine progress. None, however, necessarily tells us what the industry most needs to know. Participation measures tell us that someone entered, progressed through, or completed an educational experience. They do not necessarily tell us whether that experience developed the broad occupational capability upon which contractors, owners, coworkers, and the public depend.

Participation describes movement through a system. Competency describes the capability that emerges from it.

They are related, but not synonymous. Participation is relatively easy to measure. Students can be counted. Credentials can be awarded. Completion rates and grant outcomes can be reported. Those are appropriate measures for evaluating educational programs and public investments.

Occupational competency is different. It reveals itself over time through consistent performance, sound judgment, safe work practices, problem-solving, adaptability, and increasing responsibility under real working conditions. It integrates classroom learning, supervised experience, technical proficiency, and professional maturity into reliable performance. Competency cannot be fully captured by enrollment statistics or completion certificates because it ultimately exists in the work itself.

That distinction does not diminish participation. No one develops occupational competency without entering the process. Every apprentice, technical student, veteran, and career changer represents an opportunity to strengthen the profession. Participation creates the possibility of competency. Without participation, there is no formation. The reverse, however, is not automatically true. Participation alone does not guarantee competency.

As pathways multiply, this distinction becomes increasingly important. Organizations naturally evaluate success according to their own missions. Educational institutions may emphasize completion, grant-funded initiatives may emphasize participation, employers may emphasize hiring, and associations may emphasize enrollment. Each perspective reflects a legitimate objective. The electrical occupation, however, ultimately asks a different question. It asks whether the individual standing before a live electrical system possesses the knowledge, judgment, technical ability, and professional responsibility required to perform that work safely and competently. That question transcends every educational model, funding source, and credential.

Innovation should continue. New partnerships should be encouraged. Educational models should evolve. The future will almost certainly require approaches that differ from those of the past. But as those approaches multiply, the distinction between participation and competency becomes more important, not less. The question is not whether there should be different pathways. The question is whether those pathways are preparing the same kind of electrician. That question deserves to become the center of the industry's workforce conversation.

The Destination

Every educational system exists to accomplish a purpose. It may prepare physicians, train pilots, develop welders, educate engineers, or teach musicians. Methods may differ, but the fundamental question remains: What is the learner expected to become by the end of the process?

It is a surprisingly simple question, yet it gives meaning to nearly every conversation about curriculum, instructional delivery, innovation, assessment, funding, and workforce development. Before discussing how people should be educated, there must first be reasonable agreement about what that education is intended to produce.

The destination gives purpose to the pathway.

Without a destination, there is no meaningful standard by which educational models can be compared. One may emphasize speed, another affordability, another accessibility, and another specialized expertise. Each may succeed according to its own objectives, yet without a common outcome, it becomes difficult to know whether they are preparing people for the same profession or merely different versions of it.

This is where I believe the industry should exercise thoughtful discipline. Workforce innovation naturally begins with the pathway. Should instruction occur in classrooms or online? How much can simulation replace field experience? Can competency be demonstrated more efficiently? Should programs become shorter? Should specialized credentials satisfy portions of traditional training? These questions deserve careful consideration. But they are not the first question.

What capabilities should every broadly capable journey-level electrician possess, regardless of how those capabilities were developed?

Answering that does not require prescribing a particular educational model. It does not assume every pathway must look the same, require the same classroom time, or use identical methods. It simply establishes a professional expectation against which different pathways can be evaluated. That distinction matters because pathways exist to serve the occupation, not the other way around. The electrical profession does not exist to sustain apprenticeship programs, community colleges, technical schools, workforce initiatives, or specialized credentialing systems. Those institutions exist because the profession requires competent practitioners. Their value is measured not simply by participation or completion, but by the degree to which they consistently develop individuals capable of performing the work entrusted to them.

This is particularly important in a profession where mistakes carry significant consequences. Electrical work demands technical competence, sound judgment, disciplined work habits, an unwavering commitment to safety, and the ability to solve problems under changing conditions. It also requires something less easily measured: the capacity to integrate knowledge from multiple domains while accepting responsibility for decisions that affect coworkers, customers, and the public. These qualities develop over time through intentional formation. They cannot be assumed simply because someone has completed an educational experience.

If we cannot define that destination with reasonable confidence, our growing investment in workforce innovation may unintentionally optimize the pathways while leaving the profession itself to inherit increasingly different understandings of what it means to become an electrician.

That possibility deserves our careful attention.

Different Pathways. Same Standard.

As conversations about workforce development continue to evolve, there is an unfortunate tendency to frame the discussion as a choice between tradition and innovation, as though supporting apprenticeship requires opposing community colleges, or embracing new approaches requires abandoning traditional occupational formation.

I do not believe those are the choices before us.

Educational pathways can differ while remaining faithful to a common occupational destination. In fact, the electrical profession has always adapted its methods of instruction as technologies, tools, codes, and business practices changed. Innovation is not a departure from our history. It is part of it. The more important question is whether the practitioner emerging from those pathways is being prepared to meet the same professional expectation. If so, diversity becomes a strength. New educational models, partnerships, technologies, and methods can expand opportunity without redefining the occupation itself. If not, something more consequential is occurring. We are no longer creating different pathways into a single profession. We are gradually creating different understandings of the profession itself.

Different pathways. Same standard.

Those four words do not defend one educational model or criticize another. They simply recognize that diversity of pathways and consistency of professional expectations are complementary ideas. The industry should encourage innovation wherever it strengthens occupational formation while remaining equally committed to the common standard that gives that innovation its purpose.

The roads can differ. The destination cannot.

The Contractor's Stewardship

Defining a common destination, however, raises another question: Where is that occupational capability actually formed? Classrooms matter. So do apprenticeship programs, technical schools, manufacturers, workforce organizations, and the many other institutions contributing to workforce development. Each provides something important. But electricians are not ultimately formed in classrooms.

They are formed in the work.

That statement should not be understood as minimizing formal education. Every competent electrician depends upon technical instruction. Electrical theory, code, safety, mathematics, blueprint reading, motor controls, grounding, load calculations, and countless other subjects require intentional teaching. Knowledge matters because ignorance in our profession carries consequences measured not

merely in dollars, but sometimes in injury or loss of life. Education, however, is only part of occupational formation. Knowing the National Electrical Code is fundamentally different from learning how to apply it when an existing building refuses to cooperate with the drawings. Understanding a wiring method in a classroom is different from installing it while coordinating with four other trades, adapting to field conditions, maintaining productivity, protecting quality, and keeping a crew safe. Those lessons are learned where the work is performed. This is what makes the contractor's role unlike that of any other participant in the workforce ecosystem.

Educational institutions can provide knowledge. Apprenticeship programs can structure formation. Manufacturers can develop specialized expertise. Workforce organizations can expand opportunity. But the contractor possesses something none of those institutions can provide on its own: the daily environment in which knowledge, experience, judgment, and responsibility are integrated into occupational capability.

Every morning, somewhere in America, an apprentice climbs into a company truck beside a journey-level electrician. Before the day is over, countless decisions will be made that no curriculum ever prescribed. A foreman will explain why a particular installation is unacceptable even though it technically passes inspection. A mechanic will stop long enough to show a younger worker a better way to bend conduit instead of simply correcting the mistake himself. A superintendent will insist that an installation be rebuilt because craftsmanship matters, even when no customer would have noticed the difference. None of those moments appears in a lesson plan. None of them produces a certificate. Yet together they become the very experiences through which an occupation transmits its standards from one generation to the next.

Occupations do not simply preserve themselves. They reproduce themselves through practitioners. That realization has profoundly shaped my own thinking about workforce development. We often speak as though educational institutions produce electricians and contractors merely employ them. My experience suggests the opposite relationship is closer to reality. Educational institutions prepare individuals to begin becoming electricians. Contractors oversee the environment in which that transformation actually occurs. The distinction is not merely semantic; it changes where responsibility ultimately resides.

If the future of the profession depends upon broadly capable journey-level electricians, then contractors cannot think of themselves simply as consumers of labor. We are not purchasing a finished product from someone else's educational system. We are accepting stewardship of a developmental process that continues long after an apprentice has completed a semester, earned a credential, or graduated from a program. Every assignment given, every correction made, every expectation established, and every example demonstrated either strengthens or weakens the occupational standard we will eventually pass to those who follow us.

That responsibility cannot be delegated, but it can certainly be shared. Educators, apprenticeship sponsors, manufacturers, industry associations, and public agencies all play indispensable roles. The profession needs every one of them. But none of them stands beside the apprentice during thousands of ordinary moments in which habits are formed, judgment is refined, confidence is developed, mistakes are corrected, and professional identity gradually emerges. Those moments occur in the work, and for most electricians, they occur under the stewardship of a contractor.

The urgency to accelerate formation is understandable. Wherever unnecessary barriers exist, we should remove them. Wherever technology improves learning, we should embrace it. But some dimensions of occupational formation resist compression because they develop only through practice. Judgment develops by exercising judgment. Responsibility develops by accepting responsibility. Professional maturity develops by living with the consequences of decisions made under real working conditions.

These are not obstacles to efficiency. They are characteristics of formation itself.

As educational pathways become more numerous, the contractor becomes the place where those pathways converge. Graduates of community colleges, registered apprentices, military veterans, technical school graduates, and individuals entering through pathways that have not yet been imagined will all eventually arrive at the same destination:

The jobsite.

It is there that theory encounters reality. It is there that knowledge becomes judgment. It is there that technical proficiency becomes

dependable performance. It is there that professional responsibility ceases to be an abstract idea and becomes the daily expectation of people whose work carries real consequences for customers, coworkers, and the public. For that reason, I no longer think of workforce development primarily as an educational challenge. I think of it as a stewardship challenge.

The question before contractors is not simply whether we will hire enough people to meet tomorrow's demand. It is whether we will intentionally develop those people into the broadly capable professionals upon whom the future of the electrical occupation depends. No educational innovation, no funding initiative, and no alternative pathway can relieve us of that responsibility. It has always belonged to us. I believe it always will.

A Standard Worth Defining

For generations, the electrical industry depended upon a shared understanding of what it meant to become a journey-level electrician. Contractors knew it when they saw it. Foremen recognized it. Apprentices aspired toward it. Licensing systems reflected portions of it, and apprenticeship programs organized themselves around it. Yet much of that understanding existed as professional culture rather than as a deliberately articulated description of occupational competency.

Perhaps that was sufficient when electricians were formed through relatively consistent pathways. When educational models share common assumptions, those assumptions rarely require explanation. The destination becomes part of the culture, understood long before it is ever formally defined. Today's workforce environment is different.

As pathways diversify, the assumptions they share can no longer be taken for granted. Educational programs, licensing systems, credentials, and apprenticeship structures will inevitably reflect the purposes for which they were designed. But those systems should follow from an understanding of occupational competency rather than define it. The order matters. Educational models should not define occupational competency. Occupational competency should inform educational models. Without that distinction, fragmentation can occur almost unnoticed. One program defines success through completion. Another through placement. Another through credentials or employer satisfaction. Each measure may be entirely appropriate within its own context, yet none necessarily answers the question the profession itself must answer:

What does it actually mean to become a journey-level electrician?

I do not pretend to have a complete answer. In many respects, I believe discovering that answer is the work now before us. It does not belong to one contractor, apprenticeship program, licensing board, association, or educational institution. It belongs to a profession willing to describe itself before attempting to redesign itself.

That will not be easy. Competency extends far beyond technical skill. It includes judgment, adaptability, responsibility, communication, leadership, craftsmanship, safety, professionalism, and the ability to integrate knowledge under circumstances that are rarely ideal. No checklist will fully capture professional practice, nor does defining a standard require perfect agreement.

Perhaps that is not even the greatest value of the exercise. The discipline of defining what we expect forces us to confront what we believe is essential, and therefore what we are unwilling to lose as the profession evolves.

That, I believe, is a standard worth defining.

An Opportunity for Professional Leadership

If defining occupational competency is work that belongs to the profession, then no single institution can accomplish it alone. Contractors understand practice. Educators understand learning. Manufacturers anticipate technology. Licensing authorities protect the public. Associations create places for diverse perspectives. Each sees the profession from a different vantage point, and none possesses the whole picture. Perhaps that is exactly as it should be.

Healthy professions mature when people with different responsibilities recognize that they are serving something larger than their individual institutions. Organizations continue fulfilling their own missions while recognizing their responsibility to the profession as a whole. The profession becomes more coherent, not because every participant becomes more alike, but because each begins orienting its work toward a common purpose. That strikes me as an important form of professional leadership. Not one organization providing the answer,

but a profession willing to ask the question together:

What kind of electrician are we trying to develop?

The answer will influence pathways, programs, credentials, standards, and partnerships. But perhaps more importantly, it will force us to consider something deeper than how electricians are prepared. It will require us to decide what we are trying to preserve.

What We Are Trying to Preserve

Near the end of almost every successful project comes a moment most people outside our profession never see. The building is substantially complete. The lights are on. The equipment has been energized. The customer is preparing to occupy the space, and attention shifts toward punch lists, commissioning, and closeout. The project appears to be reaching its conclusion. Yet I have often found myself wondering if that is really true.

The contracted work is coming to an end. The installation will soon belong to the owner, another project will replace it, crews will disperse, and trailers will disappear. The jobsite will become another occupied building people pass without considering how it came into existence. From the perspective of construction, the project is finished. From the perspective of the profession, something different has been taking place.

Throughout the project, another kind of work has unfolded alongside the installation. Experienced electricians have explained decisions that never appear on drawings. Foremen have corrected mistakes before they became habits. Apprentices have learned not only how to perform tasks, but how craftsmen think about them. Project managers have demonstrated that decisions balance not only cost and schedule, but safety, quality, reputation, and responsibility. Those lessons will not appear in the final pay application or owner's walk-through. Even so, they may be the most enduring work accomplished on the project.

It occurs to me that every jobsite serves two purposes simultaneously.

One purpose is obvious. We construct electrical systems that power buildings, support businesses, and serve the public. The second is less visible but no less important. Every project becomes a place where the profession teaches itself. Knowledge accumulated over decades passes from one person to another. Standards that cannot be captured fully in a textbook are demonstrated through ordinary decisions. Judgment, craftsmanship, accountability, and responsibility become part of another person's thinking because someone explained not merely what to do, but why it mattered.

The more years I spend in this profession, the more convinced I become that these ordinary moments are how an occupation preserves itself. Workforce development is often described as beginning in a classroom and ending when someone enters the labor market. That is incomplete. Formal education provides language, theory, and foundational knowledge. The jobsite provides context. It tests judgment, reveals character, develops discernment, and teaches practical wisdom through responsibility carried over time. One prepares people to enter the profession. The other teaches them what it means to belong to it.

Perhaps that is why I have found myself thinking less about workforce shortages and more about occupational inheritance. Inheritance reminds us that some of the most valuable things we possess were not ours to create. Every electrician receives an inheritance assembled by generations they will never know: technical knowledge refined through experience; a safety culture shaped by costly lessons; expectations of craftsmanship, professionalism, and ethical responsibility; and, most importantly, society's trust in those whose work carries consequences beyond themselves.

None of us created that inheritance. We simply received it.

If the profession is something we inherited rather than invented, our responsibility cannot be merely to benefit from it while it is in our care. Stewardship asks whether those who follow us will inherit an occupation made stronger because we preserved its essential character. Enrollment, completion, hiring, and licensure help us understand participation. They tell us little about whether we have transferred the accumulated wisdom that makes professional practice worthy of public trust. Which leaves the deeper question:

What are we actually trying to preserve?

The answer is neither a particular educational model nor an institutional structure. Apprenticeship, community colleges, competency-based education, and other pathways are means by which a profession develops its people. They are not the profession itself. What we are trying to preserve is the occupational capability that allows society to trust an electrician with work affecting lives, property, commerce, and communities: judgment that prevents problems, craftsmanship that refuses to confuse minimum compliance with professional excellence, humility that remains teachable, and responsibility that understands every installation bears someone else's name and safety.

Those qualities have never belonged to one generation.

They move quietly from one generation to the next, carried not by policy documents or curriculum guides, but by people—through conversation, correction, example, encouragement, disappointment, responsibility, and trust. They are transmitted one project, crew, apprentice, and decision at a time. Long after today's initiatives and concerns have passed, one generation will still be receiving an inheritance and another deciding what kind of inheritance to leave behind.

Perhaps that has been the real conversation all along. The profession will require innovation, educational creativity, stronger partnerships, thoughtful public policy, and adaptation to changing technologies and markets. I hope we pursue them enthusiastically without mistaking adaptation for purpose. Professions endure neither by resisting change nor embracing every new idea, but by remaining faithful to the responsibilities that define them. If this essay has argued for anything, I hope it has argued for that: that as we build new pathways, we remain mindful of the destination; as we welcome new participants, we remain committed to professional competency; and as we pursue innovation, we remain worthy stewards of the occupation entrusted to our care.

Because, in the end, every generation receives a profession it did not create. The privilege and the responsibility is to leave it stronger than we found it.

Afterword

When I published *Beyond Recruitment* in February 2026, my hope was to redirect the industry's attention toward what I believed had become its binding workforce constraint: not recruitment, but formation throughput. The response was more encouraging than I anticipated. Across the country, contractors, chapter leaders, educators, and workforce stakeholders began engaging that argument, and the Independent Electrical Contractors established a national working group to explore the issues raised by the paper.

While that work has been underway, however, the conversation has continued to evolve. In only a few short months, new workforce initiatives have accelerated across the industry. Community colleges are expanding technical programs. Manufacturers are deepening training partnerships. States are investing in workforce development. Specialized credentials continue to multiply. Alternative pathways into the trade are emerging at a remarkable pace.

Those developments prompted the writing of this essay. *Beyond Participation* was never intended to replace *Beyond Recruitment*, nor was it written to provide definitive answers to the many important questions now confronting the industry. Rather, its purpose has been to bridge the conversation from one stage to the next. If *Beyond Recruitment* asked whether we had correctly diagnosed the workforce problem, *Beyond Participation* asks a different question:

Participation toward what end?

- What is a broadly capable journey-level electrician?
- How should competency be defined and demonstrated across different pathways?
- What distinguishes specialization from substitution?
- Who should define the occupational standard?
- What does meaningful occupational stewardship require of contractors, educators, manufacturers, policymakers, and associations?

These are exactly the questions I hoped this essay would provoke. They are also questions that deserve thoughtful, collaborative consideration rather than unilateral answers from a single author. They reach beyond the purpose of this reflection and into the work now before our profession. I believe the IEC working group established in response to *Beyond Recruitment* is well positioned to help facilitate that discussion, together with contractors, chapter leaders, educators, manufacturers, and other stakeholders across the industry.

My hope is that this essay serves its intended purpose. Not by settling the conversation, but by helping move it forward.

If *Beyond Recruitment* encouraged the industry to look beyond recruitment and toward formation, then *Beyond Participation* asks us to look beyond participation and toward purpose. Before we compare pathways, expand credentials, or redesign workforce systems, we should first define the occupational capability those systems exist to preserve.

Only then can we confidently say that different pathways truly lead to the same destination.

Brian Brinkmann