

## Career decisions as late as possible

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*'America may have the worst school-to-work transition system of any advanced industrial country', write the 34 extremely well-respected authors of America's Choice: high skills or low wages<sup>1</sup>. Or 'put simply, it has few systematic processes to assist high school graduates to move smoothly from school to work. Secondary school teachers and counselors are primarily geared to encourage youths to enter college, even though almost one-half of each high school graduating class directly enters the labor market without enrolling in college and only one-fourth of each graduating class ultimately obtains a baccalaureate degree.' concludes 'Bridging the Gap: Implementing School-to-Work Transition in Austin, Texas'<sup>2</sup>.*

This indicates that the problem is recognized; and yet even today most American youth and their parents assume that they will go to a four year college after high school. Actually, 66% of all high school graduates start with a college education. Six years later, however, only 27% have graduated with a diploma. And that is from a four year institution. These numbers are common knowledge. They are ignored, however, by a large majority of the population. Accordingly, all efforts to prepare students for an occupational career still have the flavor of a second class education. 'Vocational Education' is a derogatory expression in many places here, even though sooner or later everybody will hopefully have a profession.

My extensive traveling and speaking activities throughout the USA have, nevertheless, gotten me in touch with very many people who want to change this situation. Everybody talks about School-to-Work, and the Americans are experimenting with many different kinds of learning on the job. A more or less official list from the School-to-Work-office in Washington includes among others the following

forms of 'Work-Based Learning':

**Job Shadowing:** A kind of exploratory internship, whereby a student observes (shadows) a staff member in a company for a certain time.

**Service Learning:** Is something like a membership and an office in a club (Verein) in Switzerland.

**Internships:** Often during summer vacations for high school students. Or during a semester for college students. Very often unpaid.

**Cooperative Education:** Usually a form where students, for example, go to school in the morning and have a job in the afternoon (or vice versa), at which they learn more or less, are evaluated and then given credits for the school.

**Youth Apprenticeship:** Really the equivalent of our Apprenticeship. Starting in the third year of high school (age 16): Duration 4 years; therefore, extending over the end of high school.

**Registered Apprenticeship:** Apprenticeships with more or less all the rules that govern our (Swiss) Apprenticeships. The main differences are: Average age 28, only very few apprentices (approx. 380'000 in the entire USA in 1996) and very much dominated by the

unions. Accordingly only in few professions.

All these forms of education are more or less isolated from each other. The people in charge of each one of them believe that they have the right form and refuse to work with others. I have tried to bring all forms together in a system and to embed this system in an associated environment:

(see chart at the end of the article)

**Explanations: Below in the center** we have the companies as the main foundation of workforce development. Only very slowly are there more and more people here who consider employers to be educational institutions and who don't think schools are the only places where learning takes place. Now and then there are articles in newspapers and magazines which demand a larger involvement of employers (the world of work) in School-to-Work. For me it is obvious that (1) employers will only take over responsibility if it is profitable for them and (2) that School-to-Work will

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<sup>1</sup> National Center on Education and the Economy, June 1990, page 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin, Policy Research Project Report, # 103, 1993, page xv

be successful only if industry takes over this responsibility.

**The six circles** that are joined with arrows form the net of connections that must play together for an effective system to develop:

**Standards/Assessment/Certification:** At this very moment, National Skill Standards Boards are preparing universally valid minimal goals for 22 career clusters, which could then lead to a universally accepted qualification.

**Worksite mentor training:** Since systematic workforce development has no tradition in this country, natural Apprenticeship mentors (that is persons who have learned the profession by apprenticeship) are not available. Accordingly a big emphasis needs to be placed on workplace mentor training.

**Career counseling:** As mentioned in the quote at the beginning, career counselors consider themselves to be academic advisers only. Their education prepares them for that. Here in Austin, for example, we organized mandatory excursions to high-tech firms, hotels and hospitals for all school counselors in 1996 to make them a little more familiar with the occupations in these fields. But in the long run, the education of these counselors must be changed drastically.

**Articulation Agreements:** Since, as mentioned in the last

article, the conclusion of high school occurs about in the middle of basic workforce development, even well-meant and well-planned

Apprenticeship projects have big difficulties here keeping the interest of the apprentices in further years of education (those after the eighteenth year of age).

**Work experiences for teachers:** A school-based system, like the one in the USA, produces a vast number of teachers who have no idea what the world of work looks like. Accordingly, their abilities to help their students select the right occupational career are inadequate.

**Further partnerships:** In addition to schools and organizations, there are a large number of community service organizations and church groups here which gladly help youths get a head-start on a successful life. This group often includes the local Chambers of Commerce and retired executives of larger firms, who make their services available for free.

And **in the center**, resting on this network, I have placed the forms of learning around and on the job which students should experience at an individual pace and intensity, beginning in the middle of their way to the world of work. Thereby I have adapted the system of Dr. Stephen F. Hamilton, an American Apprenticeship pioneer and professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, of visits,

work-like experience and work (paid and unpaid). The problem is, however, that at this point only a small minority of all students actually follows this path.

This morning I had a typical discussion with Katie, our 'apprentice' here at the Capital Area Training Foundation. She is at the beginning of her last semester of high school and works for us as co-op-student approximately four hours every morning. We all like her very much; she's a good worker and a rather grown up person. She asked me whether she should take 'humanities' or 'history' as an elective in her last semester. I asked her what she's planning to do after high school. Standard answer: She will go to college. "Why? What is your goal of studies? What career do you have in mind?" I wanted to know. She doesn't know, she said, probably liberal arts, because it is a basis for many things and does not force her to decide already - at eighteen! What did that principal say yesterday at a meeting at a local high school: "We try to be everything to everybody at all times". Avoid making a career decision as long as possible! Voilà, an American Dream!