

Career training in the USA: Problems and opportunities

For about a year and a half we've lived here in Austin, Texas; in February 1995, we moved here from our home in Switzerland and began work in the USA as „developmental aides“ to help establish a meaningful workforce development system. I'd like to take this opportunity to take stock of our progress by asking the following: what are the problems that hinder our work here? what are the positive circumstances and experiences that give us hope things are moving in the right direction?

1. The problems:

1.1 Everybody goes to college!

In a 1992 study of high school seniors undertaken by the National Center for Education Statistics, 95% of those surveyed said they planned to continue their education; 84% envisioned themselves getting at least a Bachelor's Degree, and 33% had already decided to go all the way to graduate school.¹ In their strategic plan for 1997-2001, the Texas Workforce Commission quoted the following statistics from the National Education Goals Panel: out of every 1000 students in Texas high schools, 860 will graduate. 430 of those students will go on to a four-year college. And out of this group, 86 will receive a Bachelor's Degree, but within 6 years, not 4.² What are the reasons for this seemingly grotesque difference between students' intentions and reality?

One answer lies in the included (see table at the end), dangerous statistics with which the local community college attempts to attract students. The statistic is not only dangerous, but actually just plain wrong, because it conceals something that researchers for the Department of Labor have discovered: namely, that the lifelong incomes of people in professions like precision metal working and other skilled, technical, and non-academic labor are higher than those of college graduates, excepting those who find a job as an academic or manager.³ For example, the ultra-pure water and climate specialists, whom I've

mentioned in previous articles, earn significantly more than \$50,000 per year. Such numbers are missing from the statistics.

1.2 'One size fits all' high school

And then of course there's the panicky fear Americans have of treating different groups of students differently. Education specialists actually agree that in the USA the distinction between good and not-so-good students is made earlier than in any other developed nation in the world. Despite the growing gap, the word „tracking,“ which is used to describe the European system of different types of schools, has an unbelievably bad reputation here. Accordingly, high schools assume that they should prepare all their students for an academic career, including 10th and 11th grade students who read, write, and do math on a 3rd grade level.

1.3 The negative image of vocational education

Parents, and especially those of a lower social standing, don't want their children taking vocational courses, because such training has a bad connotation. And the credits needed to graduate high school are mainly academic, not occupational, even if one doesn't want to go on to college.

1.4 The 'One-Way-to-Win' mentality of career and school counselors, parents, and teachers

Career counseling in the USA is more or less exclusively focused on one thing: how do I get into college? The question why a student should go to college, or

if she or he even wants to, is usually left unanswered. The original intention of education, as a path to help a person along toward some preconceived goal, is completely lost. Going to college itself becomes the goal. Parents share this opinion, and teachers behave as if all their students are college-bound.

1.5 Contrasts complicate dual partnerships

Wherever timid attempts are made at combining school and workplace learning, the different natures of each partner quickly present a problem: US business is based on the short-term, and education is a long-term endeavor. Joint projects suffer again and again because firms pull out if they fear the next quarterly report might not look too rosy. The thought that an investment in the future workforce makes the most sense in hard times is not widespread at all.

1.6 School-orientedness prevents genuine partnerships with organizations

The other side to this is that schools have the hardest time trusting their partners in industry and giving them a necessary part of the responsibility and decision-making power. People in the education establishment want to retain absolute control over each element: teachers control work assignments; students report on their worksite learning in

school; the time spent at school during the training period is markedly greater than the time spent at the company; in most cases the workplace experience counts little or not at all towards graduation requirements. A further indication of this imbalance can be seen in the attempts to measure the first successes of School-to-Work here. The benchmarks are better grades in school, fewer high school drop-outs, better attendance rates - these are all school-related results.

2. The opportunities:

2.1 Many people in the USA want to help School-to-Work succeed

My extensive speech and presentation activities bring me in contact with lots of people in the USA who are convinced that School-to-Work should not be just a passing fad. They know this system could change the whole outlook of their country's future. These supporters of School-to-Work also maintain that only a good workforce development program can permanently help rebuild the middle class and close the ever-increasing gap between the „Haves,“ who make up 30% of the population, and the „Have-nots,“ who are the remaining 70%.

2.2 Many want a new system and not simply new programs

The fact that all these people are convinced that a completely new system of workforce development must be developed, instead of just a couple of new programs, creates hope. Even so, the large majority of Americans with

whom I come into contact would want to use this new system to help redefine the deteriorating school structure, instead of thinking in terms of creating an independent workforce development system.

2.3 The PC as a learning and working tool

The advance of electronic devices in all areas of our lives means that computer knowledge, both of software and hardware, is becoming more and more important. However, it is also true that these skills can be learned without workplace learning and without official school training. The concentration of computers is higher in the USA than anywhere else, and people with computer skills can sell themselves well in the job market, regardless of where or how they got their knowledge.

2.4 Many people realize that it can't go on this way

I've just read an excellent article with the title „The Baccalaureate Game.“⁴ In it, the author establishes that it is just plain wrong for most high school students to go to a four-year college. A great film from Hedrick Smith called „Pathways to Success“ compares the American and German workforce development systems and likewise claims: „Average kids need a New Deal.“⁵ It seems that more and more influential people are trying to wake up the average American.

In the edition of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from May 13, 1996, an article appeared on page 17 of the domestic news section with the title „Apprenticeships as a Social Investment“ and said the following: „Right at this point (the beginning of one's career), life is fragile. A society which

does not guide its youth here invests in the wrong values and triggers a dangerous spiral of lost perspective that promotes juvenile crime and which ultimately costs the nation a great deal.“

In the article's close, the author addresses those responsible for the Swiss economy at a time when an increasing number of students are being confronted with a reduction in apprenticeship positions. I can only agree with him from the bottom of my heart; here in the USA a wealth of supporting evidence is available for those who don't believe him.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, *Statistics in Brief* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, NCES 93-473, November 1993), p. 3

² Texas Workforce Commission, *1997-2001 Strategic Plan*, VI. Opportunities, *Educational Partnerships*, pages not numbered.

³ Alan Eck, „Job-Related Education and Training: Their Impact on Earnings,“ *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1992, pp.59-77.

⁴ Kenneth Gray, „The Baccalaureate Game: Is It Right for All Teens?“ PHI DELTA KAPPAN, pp. 528-534.

⁵ Hedrick Smith Productions, „Pathways to Success,“ *Video produced for the Center for Learning and Competitiveness*, 1995, Time: 47:20.