

Job-searching in the USA: High school dropout ~ quo vadis?

In his last report from Austin, Texas, Robert Egloff mentioned that a considerably large number of young people in the United States leave school early, and thus never receive a diploma. What possibilities do these and other poorly qualified people have on the job market? What programs does the Capital Area Training Foundation have available to them?

The Setting

The city of Austin, together with its surrounding areas, presently has over one million inhabitants, four universities, an active community college sensitive to the needs of the city's job market, a booming economy (even if the chip industry is in a slump at the moment), and a very low rate of unemployment, which at about 3% is well under the state and national averages. Many university graduates want to stay here after their studies are complete, and therefore accept positions which are actually beneath their education level. This creates a tighter job market for those with only a high school education, let alone high school dropouts. The booming economy means, though, that despite the large potential workforce, even the less privileged educationally speaking have a chance- if they are prepared. I want to report on three such preparation programs here.

The Construction Gateway program

This program was designed for the unemployed, the underemployed, the economically disadvantaged, African- and Hispanic-Americans, residents of east and southeast Austin, and former prison inmates, and was created in response to an acute personnel shortage in the

growing construction industry. In the first phase, applicants were recruited, given an orientation about construction work, taken into the program, and had their relevant previous knowledge evaluated. In the 5 week, 170 hour training course that followed at the local community college, the participants learned basic skills in plumbing, electrical wiring, brick laying, concrete/masonry, carpentry, iron working, sheet metal, as well as in safety and blueprints. Graduates of the program received 8 college credits (about a ninth of the requirements for an Associate's Degree), an official OSHA safety certification, CPR and First Aid certification, job placement assistance, and half a year's worth of credit if their application for the Association of Builders and Contractors' Apprenticeship was accepted. The program was extremely successful; of 128 graduates, 19 of whom were former prison inmates, 84 work in construction, 19 are in other careers, and 3 are studying full time for an Associate's Degree. The main reason for the success is the absolute support from the industry: the course material was developed by the construction industry and firms committed themselves to employing the graduates whenever possible.

The Employability Skills Core Curriculum seminar

This eight week course was developed by the local community college in close cooperation with heads of personnel from very different branches of industry. This October, the first 4 groups of 15 participants each will start, 2 groups will be at the college, one will be at a company, and the last at a private education provider. The goal is to give graduates a general basis they can use when applying in the job market. The course encompasses 4 topics: Math and Measurement (Basic Operations, Problem Solving, Metric System, Basic Financial Language), Communications (Reading for Information, Listening Skills, Locating Information, Technical Writing, Team Building, Problem Solving, Decision Making), Workplace Essentials (Planning & Organization, Total Quality Service, Leadership & Ethics, Personal Presentation, Computer Literacy, Software Application, Critical Thinking, Safety & Health) and Career Focus (Explore Career Opportunities, Tour Business, Industry & Labor, Prepare Personal Portfolio). After the basic course, the

graduates have the choice of either searching for a job right away or deepening their knowledge in specific areas. Right now, one such offering has been developed for the semiconductor manufacturing industry. Other planned areas include training for Sales Technicians, Operators, CSD Technicians, Marketing Technicians, and Networking Specialists. It is also anticipated that all courses will lead to an accumulation of credits which then counts toward a continuing college education. Many people in Austin are enthusiastic about this concept; only the future will tell whether or not it will be successful.

The Customer Service Management Check-In program

Last summer we held a so-called Customer Service Management Summer Academy here in Austin. 18 high school students took part in the 10 week program, during which time they spent alternating days in the classroom and in either an organization in the hospitality industry or a retail business. The 25 days of school instruction were based on a training plan

and course materials that were developed in keeping with the voluntary objectives of industry I mentioned in my report before last, and therefore garnered a lot of respect from the businesses. The following areas were covered: Business Systems, Customer Service, Career Planning, Work Readiness, Business Communication, and Business Math. Our plan is to offer this program as a five week college course much like the Gateway Program described above, in order to make the entry into customer service careers possible for other segments of the population as well. Employers in this quickly-growing branch of industry are enthusiastic about the program, because they are having difficulty finding employees just as the demand for them is increasing. As mentioned above, the absolute support of these programs by the industry is the First Commandment for all workforce development measures, though unfortunately this relationship is terribly neglected in the USA.

Two final thoughts

All of the programs described above are short, and not dual,

which means they do not combine school and workplace learning. There are various reasons for this: (1) the potential participants often have families and depend on having a steady income again as soon as possible, (2) the American tendency to look for quick solutions that makes the creation of long-term training programs so difficult and (3) the lack of a dual training tradition and an adherence to the principle „learn now, use later.“

We are currently installing the so-called „ERISS System“ (see below) in Austin, in order to gather job market data and track potential candidates for these and other job training programs. This system would make the job and job-training markets clearer and more easily accessible not only to adults, but to students and organizations as well. The experiences we had, or to put it more honestly, the chaos we lived through this summer trying to find people summer jobs should not be repeated next year.

ERISS (Employment Research and Information Supply System) is known as the most comprehensive, user-friendly and advanced occupational information software on the market. The software program provides one-stop access to occupational information for over 40,000 job titles and was chosen by the Employment Development Department of California to be the vehicle for disseminating local occupational information.

ERISS Corporation has developed an innovative One-Stop Career System which will provide clients with a number of services in “one-stop”. Using the ERISS system at one-stop career centers, clients are able to have occupational assessment, research comparable occupation related to experience or education, check the labor market demand, and then find relevant training providers and employers. The One-Stop Career System providers will be able to offer clients true, informed choices for workforce preparation.

In addition, ERISS’ occupational information software has expanded to include the Workforce Information Network (WIN), a revolutionary electronic network. The WIN provides users with a real-time, fully interactive, multimedia environment online – from career information to chat groups to special forums to job openings. According to ERISS, WIN is designed to serve as the electronic onestop infrastructure for workforce development.

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