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COMPARISON OF THE GERMAN AND CONNECTICUT POST-SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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You asked for a comparison of the German and Connecticut post-secondary vocational-technical education and apprenticeship programs.

SUMMARY

Overall, Germany has a much higher level of government involvement in its postsecondary vocational and apprenticeship programs. Students are provided with government subsidized higher education if they are hired for a participating company's vocational apprenticeship for two to three years. If the student gets the apprenticeship, the government will provide education for one or two days a week while the young person works and gets paid in the apprenticeship the other three or four days. This system of work and study is often referred to as the "dual system."

While Connecticut provides significant training and education after high school, it does not guarantee subsidized higher education if a student is offered a postsecondary apprenticeship. However, apprentices in certain fields may receive financial assistance from the employer for more education as part of the apprenticeship. These particular fields with more private financial commitment to the apprentice are closer to the German model, but in Germany the government, not the employer, picks up the higher education cost.

Another significant difference is that the German model is driven by the German federal government. In the United States, the federal involvement is minimal. Here, it is up to the states to design vocational systems that educate young people at the secondary school level and prepare them to start apprenticeships that involve related postsecondary education. In addition to the differences between a state and a national approach, this report will touch on other major differences in educational approaches in the United States and Germany.

GERMAN DUAL SYSTEM

Germany's "dual system" of combining on-the-job training and post-secondary education is a commonly used path for young people to enter the workforce directly from secondary school.

In Germany, if the student is hired in a participating company's apprentice program, the company pays the student for on-the-job training (typically three or four days a week), while the government provides the one or two days a week of postsecondary education. Larger companies may have on-site training shops, while a group of smaller ones may share a training center. Most apprenticeships last for three years and are offered in white- and blue-collar jobs. While the employer is not obligated to hire the apprentice when he or she finishes the program, roughly half of the apprentices are hired by the same employer.

The German federal government identifies 350 job categories for apprenticeships and, in collaboration with industry and labor, sets the framework for training, education, and certification in each field. Each profession has regulations and standards that the companies and vocational schools must follow. In this way, BMW's mechatronics apprenticeship program at its Munich plants will be equivalent to the Mercedes-Benz program in Stuttgart or the Volkswagen program in Wolfsburg.

Near the end of the apprenticeship, students are given a standardized exam that tests their theoretical and practical knowledge. Students who pass receive a skilled worker's certificate that is accepted by other employers of the same job category.

While employer participation in the system is voluntary, many employers find that: (1) the dual system provides a steady stream of new employees ready to develop their skills and (2) the apprentices are paid less than established skilled workers, which helps hold down labor costs in a nation with a relatively high percentage of unionized workers.

CONNECTICUT

The Connecticut Technical High School system (CTHSS) prepares many of its students for apprenticeships in various trades. There are currently about 10,000 students in the CTHSS's 16 accredited diploma-granting high schools.

In Connecticut in general it is the employer that subsidizes the apprentices' education beyond high school and not the government. While some specific apprenticeship programs may have higher levels of employer financial support than others in Connecticut, the state overall has a uniform apprenticeship approval and oversight system.

In Connecticut, the Department of Labor (DOL) oversees and regulates apprenticeships through its Office of Apprenticeship Training (OAT). The licensed trades must meet all the minimum requirements set by OAT, the State Department of Education, and the state Department of Consumer Protection.

Under DOL, apprenticeship programs may be sponsored by the employer or a union-employer joint committee. Many of these programs include college courses, usually at the community college level, for the apprentices.

According to DOL's apprenticeship program manager nearly all of the union-employer joint programs are certified for college credit through Charter Oak Community College or another community college. In the employer sponsored programs, employers are required to pay 50% of the tuition that apprentices are charged at the CTHSS evening adult learners program for high school graduates.

The educational and work schedules may be designed to complement each other. Usually the apprentice works three or four days and goes to class one or two days and possibly some nights.

Some high-demand programs have specific arrangements. Electric Boat (EB) in Groton has an agreement with Three Rivers Community College for its computer-aided drafting apprentice program. EB pays Three Rivers tuition for the apprentices to attend class during working hours and sometimes provides them with transportation.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

As described above there are a number of differences between the two vocational education systems. On the other hand, there are similarities. The following is a brief list of similarities between the Connecticut's and Germany's post-secondary vocational education systems.

Both systems:

1. provide significant post-secondary training advancement opportunities,
2. regulate apprenticeships for quality and standards, and
3. provide apprentices with some degree of financial support for higher education (in Connecticut the support tends to come from employers).

The German system differs from the U.S. system or Connecticut's system in several important ways. It:

1. is driven by national policy with consistent federal government oversight and commitment;
2. has a long tradition of private sector buy-in (in American terms this means participating employers have put aside fears the other companies will "poach" the young people they train);
3. is based on an educational system that begins tracking students for vocational education (or for university) at fifth grade (i.e., students begin to make career choices much earlier);
4. exists in a country where there is less stigma about a young person choosing a vocational career.

HYPERLINKS

"Would German-Style Apprenticeships Work in the U.S.?"
BusinessWeek: <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-07-19/german-vocational-training-model-offers-alternative-path-to-youth>

"The Secret to Germany's Low Youth Unemployment," NPR:
<http://www.npr.org/2012/04/04/149927290/the-secret-to-germanys-low-youth-unemployment>

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