

Towards Career Apprenticeships

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Last summer I met an English house painter who'd left school at 15 to enroll in a government-sponsored painters' apprenticeship program. He was enrolled in academic and technical courses in a further education college, then trained in a large painting company and subsequently took a full-time job with them. "It was only after I emigrated to the U.S. and started working as a house painter that I realized how well-prepared I was, compared to other painters on the crews I worked with. My apprenticeship really developed my skills. And I got paid for it."

Many European countries offer their youth continuing education, occupational training, and job placements through varieties of apprenticeship programs. Such programs provide further education and an orientation to a specific career; the training and certification necessary to employment as a skilled and experienced candidate; and stipends during the apprenticeship period. Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, and to a lesser extent, England offer school-age youth the subsidized opportunity to enter their chosen fields in this manner. Christina's mother remembers a similar apprenticeship experience.

In 1962, I left school at 15 1/2 years old in Southampton, England to work for the government's postal service, a nationalized enterprise which has since been privatized. I worked in the telephones division. My parents allowed me to leave school early as the postal service offered good jobs and also provided further education. One day a week I went to college to pass my O levels (national examinations in specific subject areas) and then I transferred to a technical college for specific occupational training. As I was under 16, I had a 1 1/2 hr. lunch, attended college one day a week to learn technical drawing, and was employed as a tracer; tracers mapped the underground telephone lines and electrical cables. I was paid to go to college for two years until I was 18, when I was employed as a draftsman's assistant. Such apprenticeship arrangements gave young people who did not want or could not afford to go to university a paid opportunity to develop technical and occupational skills while being consistently employed by the company and guaranteed a job when you finished your training."

During the years I helped to run an alternative high school for dropouts in Newark, we paused the school's academic program for two months each year to implement our hands-on work experience effort. Each teacher led a small advisory group of students that met weekly, and one of the leader's key tasks was to help their students select month-long work experiences. Once students decided how they wanted to spend their work months, their advisory teachers developed suitable placements and monitored those placements weekly. Students were paid a stipend for both months.

The most popular placements reflected businesses and occupations students knew and liked — photography studios and photography labs, veterinarians' offices, hair and beauty salons, florist shops, and dental offices. A third of our students couldn't define a work situation that interested them and chose one of the fail-safe options we developed.

As cohorts of our students graduated and entered the world of work, we watched our white male students enter fields their fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins worked in – Newark's shipping, trucking and warehousing industries, particularly in the Port of Newark; ground crew and aircraft maintenance jobs at Newark Airport; machinist and maintenance jobs in Newark's declining brewery and machine tools industries. Since entry into those jobs depended on family or union connections, our Black and Latinx male graduates faced severe disadvantages. Because of extensive workplace segregation, they had very limited pathways to traditional jobs in those areas.



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Our female graduates, across race/ethnicity, often took courses in the area's community colleges that prepared them for positions in radiology, anesthesiology, and other technicians' roles in the growing New Jersey Medical Center and other Newark area hospitals. Many went into foodservice and hospitality positions in the area's burgeoning hotel and restaurant sectors, and some took clerical positions in Newark-area universities and community colleges or the back-office sectors serving the New York metropolitan areas' financial and real estate sectors. Our school's work experience program did not disrupt these traditional gendered pathways but instead tried to offer a sample of potential alternatives while introducing students to workplace discipline.

Currently, opportunities to access many of those traditional jobs are much more limited, because of the globalization of production and automation. Worse, today's students do not have access to a national apprenticeship program provided by the federal government in collaboration with major employment sectors. Though specific U.S. occupations and trades have developed small-scale apprenticeship programs, we have no national structure that coordinates or supports subsidized apprenticeship opportunities for our country's youth. Instead, high schools have traditionally offered vocational education as a track in which students train in business, health, information technology, industrial skills, and many other occupational fields. On a larger geographic scale, states and counties have developed regional vocational high schools specializing in skills training for specific occupational areas, and large urban school districts have developed their own vocational high schools. The New York City school system, for example, features some 20 career and technical high schools including Brooklyn Tech, Staten Island Tech, Aviation, Thomas Edison, High School of Fashion, Arts & Design, Clara Barton, Automotive, and Transit Tech.

Whether offered as tracks in comprehensive high schools, regional vocational high schools, or career and technical high schools in large urban districts, all these efforts are subsidized by the federal government through the latest version of the Carl Perkins Act for Career and Technical Education (CTE). Though the Perkins Act helps fund these occupational training efforts across the country, it offers no curricular coordination or alignment across programs and, unlike European apprenticeship programs, provides no oversight or funding for collaborative placements with trades or industries and no subsidies for individual students.

Instead, given this nation's intense commitment to voluntarism, federally-sponsored subsidized opportunities for youth work experience and training have focused on service work, through international and domestic programs such as the Peace Corps and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and its more recent version, AmeriCorps. VISTA, founded in 1965 as a domestic version

of the Peace Corps, was subsumed into AmeriCorps in 1993, and recruits youth volunteers to work for nonprofit community organizations and public agencies in programs that help low-income families and communities move out of poverty. Both VISTA and AmeriCorps volunteers receive a living allowance, health benefits, and childcare assistance.

The development of community colleges during the past half-century has begun to provide some of the training and skills development essential to employment in health and medical sectors, communications, information technology, marketing, data management, and other fields. In some ways, community colleges serve as a U.S. alternative to European national apprenticeship programs—though community colleges, as primarily local institutions are limited in scope, have little relationships with industries, and charge tuition rather than provide stipends.

In both urban and rural education districts, high schools that provide CTE through Perkins Act funding have begun to work with community colleges and four-year post-secondary institutions to offer school-to-career pathways linking coursework and training for specific occupational fields. Because U.S. public education is primarily provided, regulated, and funded at state and local levels, these incipient occupational pathways are currently local and small-scale. Still, they offer the potential for significant expansion, especially if federal resources, through the Perkins Act or new interventions, could encourage broader and stronger linkages and course alignment across high schools and post-secondary institutions, develop private sector business and industry collaboration to offer onsite occupational placements, and add a stream of federal funding for such apprenticeships.

Federal grants to align the CTE courses given by high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions could help these institutions stage, sequence, and standardize their course offerings and provide relatively seamless learning transitions from baseline to more complex occupational skills. Federal grants to key private sector business and industry groups could provide incentives for such groups to link with high school/community college/four-year institutions to develop occupational training and work placements to complement their CTE coursework. And federal grants to consortia of CTE coursework-offering institutions and key business and industry groups could provide funding for student apprenticeships. Add the subsidies to provide free community college education advocated by President Biden, and the U.S. could develop a decentralized alternative to successful European youth occupational training through subsidized apprenticeships.