




Learning From the Swiss

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Marriott Student Review is a student journal created and published as a project for the Writing for Business Communications course at Brigham Young University (BYU). The views expressed in Marriott Student Review are not necessarily endorsed by BYU or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Recommended Citation

Wright, Aubrey () "Learning From the Swiss," *Marriott Student Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview/vol4/iss1/5>

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LEARNING FROM THE SWISS



As the Swiss have shown us, vocational training is a win-win: it gives students marketable skills, and gives employers significant savings.

By Aubrey Wright

July 9, 2015: “Switzerland and the U.S. sign a Joint Declaration of Intent on Vocational Education and Training.”¹ Since then, the two countries have worked closely on integrating the Swiss model of vocational training into US education.² Switzerland’s vocational program began in 1799.³ The US, on the other hand, has only had recent interest; events such as the National Apprenticeship Week began in 2015, and have continued strong since.⁴

A Swiss Student’s Experience Today

Fourteen year-old Swiss students can choose to either continue with the equivalent of a High School education, called “gymnasium,” or apply for a course of study and practical experience called an apprenticeship.⁵ These tracks differ drastically from traditional schools of the United States, with only two days each week in the classroom and the other three on the job with “both practical exercises and actual work from the start of their apprenticeship.” Most students in Switzerland choose an apprenticeship over high school.⁶

What does this look like? Students at the Swiss hospitality school Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne take “professional training courses which are both practice-based and academic.” The school’s former General Director Michael Rochat explains, “We offer a comprehensive educational ladder - enabling students to start from scratch with an apprenticeship and to move all the way up to an internationally-recognized Bachelor and Master degree.”⁷

Some points of the system are controversial. Placement tests determine 14-year-old students’ options.⁸ Not all programs allow them to continue with a college education.⁹ Dr. Johannes Giesinger, a researcher in the Center for Ethics at the University of Zurich, explains, “Students are allocated to different tracks at an early stage...These segregated systems have long been accused of undermining educational justice or equality of opportunity”.¹⁰ Giesinger proposes that educators can prepare students early, beginning at age five, to significantly reduce the number of students that face an unfair disadvantage.

Migrant students are a current focus for Swiss educators.¹¹ While displaced students require additional preparation, education can drastically improve their lives.¹²

A Swiss Employer’s Role Today

Government-recognized industry groups determine positions, training requirements, and final examinations for prospective apprentices. The Swiss Leading House on Economics of Education notes that, “The most obvious feature of the Swiss apprenticeship system is that it is based on the voluntary participation not only of apprentices but also of employers.”¹³

Many employers realize a net gain from training apprentices due to the reduced cost of labor, but this varies depending on how quickly a student learns their role and the length of the apprenticeship. Some employers “poach” trained students from

other businesses upon graduation to avoid the training cost, and most companies that train apprentices report that they are driven by non-economic motives.¹⁴

Interest and Initiatives in the US

“The National Apprenticeship Act (NAA), 29 U.S.C. 50, authorizes the Secretary of Labor ‘to bring together employers and labor for the formulation of programs of apprenticeship.’” This “industry-led, market-driven approach provides the flexibility necessary to scale the apprenticeship model where it is needed most and helps address America’s skills gap.”¹⁵

Resources like apprenticeship.gov consolidate information for employers, career seekers and educators. Self-evaluation tools, such as the one featured in figure 1 help businesses and students understand if an apprenticeship program would benefit them.¹⁶

Is Apprenticeship Right for your Business?

Consider these scenarios below:

- Do you have trouble recruiting a skilled workforce?
- Do you have difficulty retaining talent?
- Do you want to diversify your talent pool?
- Do you want to train and educate your staff to meet your specific needs?

If you answered yes to one of more of these questions, apprenticeship might be the right solution for your business!

Figure 1 An example of a self-evaluation tool.

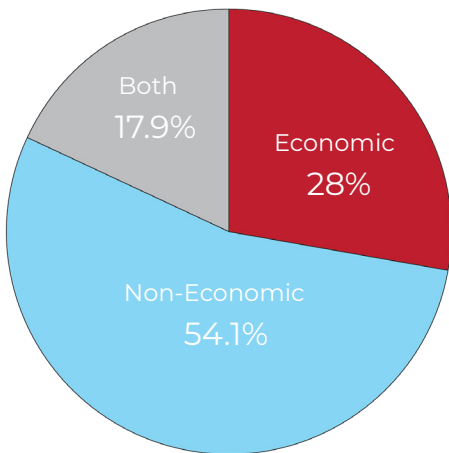
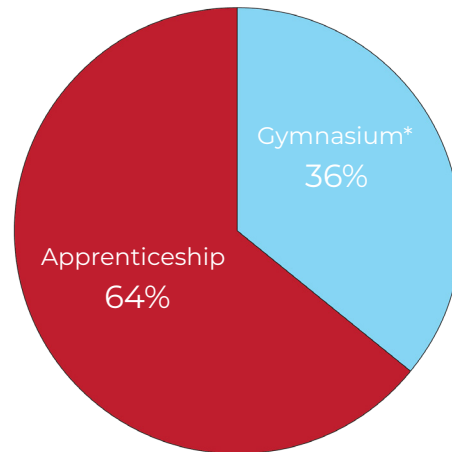


Figure 2 Swiss employer's self-perceived motives for training.



*High-School Equivalent

Figure 3 Breakdown of education choices for recent Swiss adolescent cohort.

Next Steps

Most apprenticeships currently available in the United States do not result in a transferable certification. The United States Department of Labor proposed a solution on June 25, 2019 that would authorize recognized private sector groups to guide certifications in each industry, like the Swiss system. The Proposed Rule Document explains, "This new program is intended to harness industry expertise and leadership to meet the United States' skills needs in the twenty-first century."¹⁷

The apprenticeship program in the United States empowers students and businesses to directly coordinate industry demands with students' education. A blend of instruction in the classroom and on-the-job training teaches young people what the career they are pursuing involves and sets them up for future success.

As this critical addition to our American education system progresses, we need to stay informed. As the Swiss have shown us, vocational training is a win-win: it gives students marketable skills, and gives employers significant savings. 🇨🇭

Notes

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