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FOREIGN

Austria's Apprenticeship Program Energizes Economy in Possible Model for America

A dispatch from Vienna, where students as young as 15 gain skills, earn salaries, and help keep youth unemployment among the lowest in Europe.

People ride bicycles near the State Opera, on August 22, 2024 in Vienna, Austria. Heinz-Peter Bader/Getty Images

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VIENNA, AUSTRIA — On a recent trip to Vienna, while wandering the pristine cobblestone streets and weaving between horse-drawn carriages, this correspondent stumbled

upon a refreshing observation: while much of Europe feels as though it's decaying into a museum — a shell of its long-lost imperial glory — this city, even in the swelter of July and swarmed with tourists, felt strikingly alive. Young people were everywhere.

Crafting pralines at the century-old chocolaterie Altmann & Kühne. Serving schnitzels at the storied restaurant Zum Schwarzen Kameel. Managing the hotel concierge in the heat of high season. Leading tours through baroque landmarks like the Belvedere. Training as early as age 16 to perform atop white stallions at the famed Spanish Riding School.

It seemed everywhere I went, there was more energy, more youth — not just lounging at bars, but working, and working hard. Vienna may no longer be the cultural capital it was in the age of Klimt and Freud, before war fractured its Empire and crushed its appetite for decadence. But today, its vibrancy comes from its youth. A third of the city's residents are under age 30, much like in New York City. Yet in Austria, the youth unemployment rate hovers below 6 percent — less than half the rate for American teenagers.

A key reason is Austria's trade school system — a centuries-old partnership between education and industry that helps set its young people on a path to stable careers and fulfilling lives. It's a model Americans would do well to study — and under the current administration, may finally be ready to.

After completing compulsory education at age 15, about 70 percent of Austrian students enter vocational education and training, rather than an academic high school (*Gymnasium*). They are trained directly for careers in technical fields such as mechanical engineering and IT support, skilled trades like carpentry and plumbing, and traditional crafts ranging from

instrument building to hairdressing. Roughly 40 percent of students choose to pursue a dual-track apprenticeship, in which they spend one day a week in vocational school (*Berufsschulen*), and four days working — and getting paid — in a company.

"Not everybody finds education suitable at university," the director of the Institute for Research on Qualifications and Training of the Austrian Economy, Thomas Mayr, tells the Sun. "Some people are inductive learners. They learn by doing."

President Trump seems to agree. In May, he posted on Truth Social that he was considering taking three billion dollars worth of grants allocated to Harvard and giving it to trade schools. He signed an executive order in April directing officials "to identify alternative credentials and assessments to the 4-year college degree that can be mapped to the specific skill needs of prospective employers." The goal, he said, is to "fully equip the American worker to produce world-class products and implement world-leading technologies."

Indeed, as the costs of traditional college soar, many 18-year-olds in America are opting for trade schools. Vocational-focused community colleges are seeing a boom in enrollment. Yet the "college-for-all" mentality runs deep, and university degrees are still the default aspiration. The U.S. job market tends to reward credentials over practical experience, and anything other than a 4-year degree is often seen as second-tier or a fallback.

In Austria, however, apprenticeships are treated with greater prestige and professionalism. The European Qualifications Framework, developed by the European Union, promotes the idea of a "parity of esteem" among all educational pathways.

This means that in countries with strong vocational systems like Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, Mr. Mayr says, "a master craftsman qualification is equal—not the same, but equal—to a bachelor's degree."

Take the word of the head pastry chef at Demel — one of Vienna's famous coffee houses, renowned for its Sacher-Torte — Dietmar F. Muthenthaler. "I really made a career with my apprenticeship," Chef Muthenthaler said in a video by Advantage Austria, the trade promotion organisation of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. "I was one of the youngest master pastry chefs in Austria, and was just over twenty when I completed my master craftsperson examination."

The apprenticeship tradition traces back to Medieval Vienna, when learning a trade in crafts like carpentry, shoemaking, and baking was regulated by guilds (*Zünfte*). A master craftsman (*Meister*) trained young people through a formal apprenticeship, and a "masterpiece" (*Meisterstück*) allowed them entrance into the guild.

As the Industrial Revolution swept through Europe, most countries including the United Kingdom and France replaced apprenticeship training with school-based education. However, in the German-speaking countries of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, apprenticeship training was integrated into the formal education structure and ultimately standardized through national law.

In Austria today, the system succeeds with the help of the tens of thousands of employers who work closely with trade schools to recruit students, not only to preserve traditional crafts, but to meet modern demands like sustainable design and green technology. Those employers depend on strong

state support, including tax incentives and subsidies that help offset training costs.

This standardized system might be difficult to replicate in America, where education policy is largely set at the state and local level and funding for vocational training remains limited. American employers might balk at the idea of spending €25,000 to train a teenager, the average cost in Austria, especially since that investment only pays off if the apprentice stays on after completing the program.

Yet apprenticeship training isn't seen as charity; it's strategy. "Most companies don't train apprentices for corporate social responsibility reasons," Mr. Mayr says. "Companies do it as an investment."

That's the spirit of one company that is spearheading the Austrian apprenticeship model in the United States. Blum, Inc., the North American subsidiary of an Austrian-based manufacturer of furniture hardware, partners with a community college near its facility in North Carolina to train local high school students into technical roles. They get paid for their time, earn bonuses based on performance, and after graduation, they have a guaranteed job and four years of seniority within the company.

"When you train a young person from day one to do the correct thing, guess what you get later?" says the apprenticeship manager at Blum, Andreas Thurner. The answer is high quality, committed employees — who help bolster the workforce needed to sustain manufacturing. Since Blum opened its apprenticeship program in 1995, more than one hundred companies across North Carolina have adopted similar ones.

Back on those cobblestone streets of Vienna, the working youth are buzzing. In a city often defined by its past, they are the ones pointing its culture and economy toward the future. If the United States seeks to expand opportunity for a generation of young people burdened by student debt, it might be a good time to book a flight to Vienna for some inspiration.