

# CONNECTING EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS: The Swiss Apprenticeship Model

## ACTE Partners with the Embassy of Switzerland



On March 12, 2017, a delegation of 100 CTE professionals attending the ACTE National Policy Seminar visited the Swiss Embassy in Washington D.C. to learn about the apprenticeship programs that are common instructional practice for students in Switzerland. Attendees then participated in a Swiss-oriented reception at the Ambassador's Residence. This highly popular event illustrated the strong interest the CTE community nationwide has in learning about effective and innovative CTE programs, no matter their country of origin.

The U.S. and Switzerland have a Joint Declaration of Intent on the Cooperation of Vocational and Professional Education and Training, Career and Technical Education and Apprenticeships. <sup>1</sup>The U.S. signatories were the Departments of Commerce, Education and Labor, and the Swiss representative was the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research. ACTE has been actively involved in efforts to better support the dissemination of information about apprenticeship programs. Executive Director LeAnn Wilson is serving as a member of the U.S. Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Apprenticeship. <sup>2</sup>This event was developed to extend these efforts and bring a larger audience of CTE professionals into contact with a successful model that is showing promise in the U.S.

The event began with a short video presentation that detailed how two Swiss companies, Buhler and Zurich Insurance, have established apprenticeship programs in the U.S. Simon Marti, the Head of Science, Technology, and Higher Education at the embassy, elaborated on the nature of the Swiss system. Approximately 40 percent of Swiss companies offer apprenticeships, far more than in the U.S., and these apprenticeships exist through the collaboration of the private sector, Swiss cantons (states), and the Swiss federal government.

Swiss apprenticeships typically span two or three years, with students entering these programs at ages 15 or 16 after receiving career counseling for a year beforehand. However, these apprenticeships are open to those of other ages as well. Approximately 10 percent of Swiss apprentices are adults. The length of these apprenticeships means students have the opportunity to learn many different skills within a larger specialty. For example, a student interested in welding will gain expertise as part of a larger mechanical engineering apprenticeship. Students will generally attend training and take industry-related courses for three or four days a week, while remaining in their original classrooms for one or two days. Apprentices often earn a two-year vocational certificate, which qualifies them for employment but also puts them on the road to a three- or four-year federal diploma or vocational baccalaureate if they wish to continue their education. Many apprentices choose to work full time before returning for these postsecondary degrees.

During the question and answer session, Marti noted that much of the support for the program in Swiss society stems from Switzerland's centuries-long history of apprenticeships and a cultural appreciation for skilled trades and other sub-baccalaureate degrees, which are not as widely embraced in the U.S. He also mentioned the in-depth career counseling that is available to apprentices as another reason for the program's strength and popularity. Marti noted that Switzerland's unemployment level is currently 3.5 percent and that apprentices are allowed to leave their apprenticeships if they decide to pursue another type of career. This fluid movement between companies is not viewed as a problem but rather a strength of the system that prepares students for the workforce more comprehensively than if they were to work in only one field.

Presenter Daniel Roth, an instructor at Buhler's Apprenticeship Academy in Minnesota, discussed how Buhler's apprenticeship program trains students to become customer service engineers, a multifaceted position that requires completion of tasks as wide-ranging as setting up and troubleshooting machines, training other employees, and communicating with customers. He explained how Buhler began their American apprenticeship program for the same reason as many other companies, an inability to find employees with the necessary skills to fill open positions. Because apprentices in the U.S. must be at least 18, Buhler has partnered with



Minnesota's Dunwoody College of Technology to administer their program, which lasts three years. Apprentices in this program work full time, receive a salary and benefits, and participate in a retirement program from the outset of their experience, while devoting a great deal of time to relevant classes like machine safety and customer interaction. Upon completion, many apprentices choose to work for Buhler, but receive a certificate that qualifies them to work for other companies as well. Roth described this program as a "win-win-win-win" in that Buhler, the apprentices themselves, their mentors, and customers all benefit. He concluded by stating that while Buhler recruits apprentices from local high schools, lack of prior knowledge of apprenticeships presents a significant challenge to those efforts.

Current apprentice Isa Brady developed her interest in welding during high school before entering an apprenticeship for machine operation and engineering at Buhler. When emphasizing the benefits of the program, Brady stressed the many opportunities to learn both hard and soft skills, company travel, and small class sizes. She also alluded to the variety of paths that will be open to her within Buhler when she completes her apprenticeship, which is an advantage for her and others who are learning specific technical skills but have not yet decided on their exact career paths. During her question and answer session, she expressed how her experiences as a female student interested in welding have demonstrated to her how important it is for educators and counselors not to stereotype their students or attempt to guide them toward career fields in which they are less interested. Brady noted that the courses she will take during her apprenticeship will position her to obtain a robotics degree, should she be interested in continuing her formal education.

Jill Lutz from Central Piedmont Community College (CPC) in Charlotte described how her institution collaborated with individual businesses and the organization Apprenticeship 2000 to connect students with apprenticeship opportunities. This work led to the development of the new Apprenticeship Charlotte program for the same purpose. Meghan Wills of the National Governors Association discussed how the number of registered apprentices in the U.S. has grown every year since 2012 and provided an overview of the programs that fund apprenticeship in the U.S. Of these, the American Apprenticeship Initiative is the largest, but there are many other strong federal and state programs as well.

The final speaker, Caroline King, highlighted the work related to apprenticeships that is taking place in her home state of Washington through both her organization of Washington STEM and the state government. Washington STEM is focusing on ways to reach students even in elementary and middle school, while the state just received a grant from the Department of Labor to build youth apprenticeships and is currently seeking additional funding.

Following the program, attendees visited the nearby residence of Swiss Ambassador Martin Dahinden. The Ambassador expressed his appreciation for the dedication of the CTE community and the opportunity to learn from one another's educational systems. As an emphasis on the strong relationship between our two nations, he noted that Switzerland is America's seventh-largest foreign investor. ACTE president Lorri Carlile shared remarks about the importance of learning from the Swiss model and presented the Ambassador with several gifts. Attendees enjoyed drinks and dinner compliments of the embassy. The Swiss experience and early efforts to replicate that model in the U.S. demonstrate that establishment and proliferation of such educational pathways is possible, and that there are many opportunities for those in the midst of their journeys to improve career and technical education.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.dol.gov/ilab/diplomacy/Switzerland-JDoI.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/eta/eta20160802>

Visit <https://www.flickr.com/photos/135650742@N04/albums/72157680007304110> for all photos from the event.

ACTE's March 2017 issue of *Techniques*, featuring more on the Swiss apprenticeship model, can be found at: <http://digital.graphcompubs.com/publication/?i=384369&p=16>



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