

What Germany Can Teach the U.S. About Vocational Education

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For years now, U.S. educators have invested massive amounts of talent and money on two goals: preventing students from dropping out of high school and increasing the percentage of high school graduates who go on to college.

We do everything possible to encourage college attendance. In the 2011-12 academic year, for example, one program alone—the federal [Pell Grant program](#), intended to help low- and moderate-income students finance college—cost taxpayers \$34.5 billion, about half the entire U.S. Department of Education budget.

Yet many Pell Grant recipients never graduate. They flounder; they drop out; they become statistics.

How can we prevent such waste?

A new [report](#) from the College Board, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, offers a variety of useful ideas, such as larger grants for students who take heavier college course loads. Tougher schedules show that students are serious about graduating.

That's one good approach. But let me suggest another, which Germany has pioneered.

Our friends in Germany know—as we should—that some students are bored by traditional studies; some don't have the aptitude for college; some would rather work with their hands; and some are unhappy at home and just need to get away. They realize that everyone won't benefit from college, but they can still be successful and contribute to society.

Americans often see such students as victims. Germans see these students as potential assets who might one day

shine if they're matched with the right vocation. And it has a system in place—a partnership of employers and unions with government—to do the matching and provide the necessary training.

As the *New York Times Magazine* [recently noted](#), Germany's vocational education program doesn't focus entirely on factory work. Consider the story of the noted chef Claus-Peter Lumpp.

"Lumpp's culinary ascent began with the simple urge to drop out of high school around the time of his 16th birthday," the *Times*' Nicholas Kulish reported. "His widowed mother had remarried, and the family moved to another town. Everything felt off: the new school, the new people. His mother gave him permission to leave school, but only if he found an apprenticeship." Lumpp found that apprenticeship in the kitchen of the Hotel Bareiss. Today, Lumpp's [Restaurant Bareiss](#) has a three-star rating from the prestigious Michelin guide—and most of the chefs in his kitchen were mentored under the same system that brought his talents to the fore.

As a result of this system, few Germans find themselves unemployable. The youth unemployment rate, for example, was just 7.7 percent in [February](#), well below that of the [U.S.](#) (16.2 percent officially, excluding those who have dropped out of the labor market) and the euro zone as a whole (23.9 percent). Overall unemployment in Germany was just 5.4 percent in February.

Administered by the [Federal Institute for Vocational Training and Education](#), Germany's vocational education program is a dual system: Students learn in the classroom, and they learn by doing. Typically, trainees attend vocational school one or two days per week, studying the theory and practice of their occupation as well as economics and social studies, foreign languages, and other general subjects. They also do a working apprenticeship in their chosen field. During this period, trainees receive about one-third of the salary of a trained skilled worker.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, a majority of German students (some 51.5 percent) choose this path.

America for too long has attempted a cookie-cutter approach to secondary education: Stay in school; go to college; and we'll all be happy. To our continued consternation, it doesn't always work.

If America wants to remain competitive, we have to keep our young people engaged. Germany has the right formula. U.S. business and political leaders should learn from the German approach and invest in creating and supporting a German-style vocational education system. Businesses will get the skilled workers they need, young people will see new career opportunities open up to them, our middle class will be strengthened, and our economy will benefit.

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- Tsai sends frigate to safeguard interests in South China Sea
- Court quashes claim to exclusive zone at Taiwan-held Itu Aba

China and Taiwan are finding common ground after an international court dismissed their shared claims to more than 80 percent of the South China Sea.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen sent a naval frigate to patrol the disputed waterway Wednesday, to show the government's "determination" to defend its national interest. The order came hours after the Permanent Court of Arbitration found China's -- and therefore Taiwan's -- claims to much of the area have no legal basis.

Specifically, the court found the [largest natural feature](#) in the contested Spratly Islands, the Taiwanese-held Itu Aba, was a "rock" rather than an island and didn't qualify for a 200-nautical mile (370 kilometer) exclusive economic zone. The frigate's planned patrol included a resupply stop at the feature, which Taiwan calls Taiping, a defense ministry spokesman said.



Taiping island.

Photographer: Sam Yeh/AFP via Getty Images

The decision to deploy the warship could further escalate tensions in the area after the arbitration tribunal ruling. China has said it doesn't recognize the court's jurisdiction and warned Wednesday it may yet seek to set up an air defense identification zone over disputed waters.

The ruling, resulting from a challenge brought by the Philippines, invalidated China's "nine-dash line" claim. China's assertions cross over with those from countries like Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, and are based on a map created by Taiwan's Republic of China government in 1947. Taiwan has administered Itu Aba since the 1950s.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin on Wednesday praised Taiwan's efforts to defend rights shared by the one-time civil war foes. "The arbitration has damaged the rights of all Chinese, and it's the common interest and responsibility of both sides to protect the maritime rights of the South China Sea," Liu said at a briefing in Beijing. He accused the tribunal judges in the case of bias and a lack of common sense.

While China refused to participate in the tribunal proceedings, it did submit a paper outlining its position and worked behind the scenes to lobby the court, according to the decision. Taiwan, under former President Ma Ying-jeou, filed a brief to the panel stating a case for an exclusive economic zone around Itu Aba, citing its ability to [support life](#).

At Odds

In a statement echoing China's own response Tuesday, Tsai said the Hague ruling [had no binding](#) effect on Taiwan and undermined her government's rights. The former law professor, who ousted Ma's Nationalist party in a landslide election in January, called for multilateral talks to promote stability in the region.

The remarks put Taiwan's new leader at odds with its chief security protector, the U.S., which has called on China to abide by the ruling. They also provide a rare area of agreement between Tsai and Communist Party leaders, who have cut off communications over her refusal to affirm the contention the two sides represent "one China."

Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party officially supports independence for Taiwan. New York University law professor Jerome Cohen, a specialist in Chinese law who counts Ma among his former students, said Tsai was struggling to "adjust to an uncomfortable situation."

'Big Mistake'

"Today's response openly rejecting the decision is a big mistake and different from what even Ma would have done," Cohen [wrote](#) in a blog post Tuesday. "Tsai will be criticized at home for following Beijing's lawless line at the same time that Beijing was responsible for excluding Taiwan from participation in the arbitration."

Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration also [stations vessels](#) at Itu Aba, and another Wei-Shin frigate arrived at the feature late Tuesday, the agency said.

Defense stocks were mixed in Wednesday trading on Chinese exchanges. AVIC Aircraft Co. and AVIC Helicopter Co. fell 0.8 percent while Jiangxi Hongdu Aviation Industry Co. slipped 1 percent. AviChina Industry & Technology Co. rose 1.4 percent and AVIC Jonhon Optronic Technology Co. gained 3.1 percent.

Tsai Ing-wen's position "is really hard" because the claims of Taiwan and China are practically identical, said [Nick Bisley](#), a professor of international relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne. "How you chart a course that maintains a Taiwanese position without sounding like you are China is very tricky. "

The decision by the tribunal that none of the features in the Spratlys are islands -- meaning they generate at most a 12-nautical-mile territorial zone -- could open a path for negotiations between China, the U.S. and other claimants.

"Suddenly, you are back to large areas of the South China Sea that are high seas, open to freedom of navigation and travel," said [Eric Shrimp](#), a former U.S. diplomat who's now a Washington-based policy adviser at law firm Alston & Bird. "The question then becomes: how do the interested parties cooperate to secure those high seas?"

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