

Summary of Vocational programs in the United States
Prepared for Flex Day committee presentation by Saul Rubin

The existence of technical training in schools, alongside more fundamental academic training, or in separate specialty schools, has been around in the United States for about a century and half. It has evolved and grown considerably and adapted to changing social and political climates. Most appropriately, it has proven to be especially valuable in times of economic downturn. In fact, technical programs had a major upswing during the Depression, coinciding with mandatory attendance laws and an influx of middle-class students into public schools. Compulsory school laws brought students who didn't have an interest in staying in school to study traditional courses

The idea of technical training in conjunction with a broader education goes back much further, to the Middle Ages, with the advent of guilds and apprenticeship systems. If you were master of an apprentice, you would not only teach the skills of the trade, but also be responsible for the upbringing of the individual in all aspects of an education and welfare, including certain life training. So training for a skilled craft, whether in apprentice or intern positions, or in special guild schools, also included other general education instruction as well.

In the U.S. the rise of technical schools and Industrial Arts programs in regular academic programs, began in the late 19th century. The first University programs emerged in the 1870s with Ohio State University as an early pioneer. Certainly by end of the 19th century there was widespread acceptance of the value of vocational training as part of a regular curriculum. A major motivation was economic development of the country. Rapidly developing technology required that there be a formal education program to make sure that the country was producing skilled labor.

Industrial education was also seen as great equalizer, or as a way of providing opportunity for people to get economic security. Unfortunately, this notion ran afoul of anti-socialism in U.S. and the Red Scare period and many programs retreated because of this. There was a push to return to core classes and away from technical training.

Legal developments helped ensure the development of vocational education in the United States. The Morrill Act of 1862 provided funds for agricultural and mechanical colleges later known as land-grant colleges, linking vocational education with colleges, and making U.S. unique in that in Europe, vocational education had been separated from academic studies.

That followed through the ensuing decades a series of funding bills passed by the federal government in support of vocational programs as part of academic instruction in high schools and later two and four year colleges.

One of the most comprehensive of these bills was the Vocational Educational Act of 1963 which allocated money to states, which prompted many states to set up state boards for administering these funds, which could go to high schools, community colleges or

even universities, further cementing the relationship between academic schools and vocational programs.

The role of community colleges in vocational education has been dynamic one. The greatest growth in community colleges was in the 1950s, as states sought economical ways to provide post secondary education to many students close to home and at low cost and more importantly, as a way to provide vocational education because of complex jobs emerging that required additional vocational training and semiprofessional training. Emphasis was on preparing students for an area of work, rather than for a limited occupation. Thus people studying automotive training would benefit from being in a school with a broader range of educational classes because they could also learn other useful skills, such as mathematics, science of hydraulics and computer systems, industrial materials, writing, etc.

Rather than being the first programs to be cut, vocational programs in fact may be just the programs that are most sorely needed in a time of economic upheaval. Displaced workers must learn new skills, and this is an important function for vocational training. Also, technical developments require that even people already employed need to stay up with latest and technical advances and would require formal training so as to improve their chances of maintaining employment in times of possible layoffs.