

Perspectives on Student Services in Higher Education: Germany and the United States

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ABSTRACT

In this article we reflect on the similarities and differences among student service offices in the United States versus higher education institutions in Germany. Specifically the Studentwerk organization is discussed, which provides student services to institutions across Germany.

Keywords: Germany, higher education, student affairs, student services, United States

I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world.
– Mary Anne Radmacher

Study abroad experiences expand students' perspectives and help them gain a greater sense of the world. Student affairs offices in the United States work with college students to help them become responsible citizens in their communities and in the world by providing services and resources to help them develop in college. One of these services provided is setting up study abroad programs for students. We believe in the importance of expanding one's horizons and we encourage the students whom we advise to consider an experience abroad during their studies. That said, while Shannon has been out of the country multiple times teaching on study abroad programs, I had not yet had such experiences. I felt that I needed to take my own advice and learn about culturally diverse places and the universities and administrators

that help students do the same. I recently participated in a study abroad experience that focused on international student affairs practice. This article summarizes and reflects on my experience at two German institutions.

During my time abroad, I visited four higher education institutions in Europe. As someone who was only familiar with student affairs practice and the higher education systems in the United States, I was fascinated with the multitude of differences and similarities among the institutions' student services. Two of the universities I visited were in Germany, which are the focus of this reflection. While visiting these, we learned about the higher education system in Germany as well as Germany's National Association for Student Affairs, known as *Studentenwerk*. *Studentenwerk* is responsible for providing student services in Germany and works with state and federal legislatures to ensure that regulations are met. The organization operates under the premise that in order for students to be successful in their educational endeavors, their essential needs must be met (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2016).

GERMANY'S STUDENTWERK

Studentenwerk serves as a voluntary association of Germany's 58 student service organizations, known individually as *Studentenwerke*. While each *Studentenwerke* operates independently and has autonomy, the organizations are very similar. As a whole, the *Studentenwerk* organization serves over two million students at more than 300 institutions throughout Germany (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2016). *Studentenwerke Berlin* has about 1,000 employees who manage and maintain facilities and provide services to students (Morgenstern, 2016). This shows the potential impact these services and administrators can have on students and local economies throughout Germany.

The *Studentenwerk* is similar in the student-centered approach that dominates U.S. higher education student services. Each *Studentenwerke* is a non-profit organization, and this, combined with being independent from individual higher education institutions, guarantees that any revenue goes back to the students (Schaferbarthold, 1999). This is different from student services in the US, which are typically connected to colleges and universities. Each of the 58 *Studentenwerke* operates individually, and the overarching organization serves as a support for the individual members. *Studentenwerk* provides support through representing the social interests of students regardless of politics, serving as liaison to federal and state legislative bodies, and providing professional development opportunities to support each *Studentenwerke* in its everyday work (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2016).

While students in Germany do not pay tuition, they do pay social fees, including a fee for the *Studentenwerke* services offered in their region. Each

Studentenwerke is funded primarily through student fees and housing and dining revenue, along with state and federal grants and subsidies. On average, students pay €58 per semester (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2016). In 2016, students served by *Studentenwerke Berlin* paid €50 per semester (Morgenstern, 2016).

Students also play a large and salient role in the function of *Studentenwerke* organizations across Germany. *Studentenwerk* takes a student-centered approach to its services by ensuring that students are present on each of the boards and that student voices and opinions are taken up to the federal level when applicable. *Studentenwerke Berlin*, for example, has a supervisory board with 14 members, seven of whom are students (Morgenstern, 2016)—showing the commitment that *Studentenwerke Berlin* has to including the student voice in decisions about the services provided throughout its service area.

STUDENTEWERK SERVICES

Responsibility for German higher education regulation lies within the *Länder*, or the 16 federal states, so the scope of student services varies from state to state (Schaferbarthold, 1999). The organizational structure varies by each *Studentenwerke* as well, and the federal and state laws that regulate the organization impact these structures. Additionally, each *Studentenwerke* has the autonomy to create its own statutes that affect the operations and services. Most *Studentenwerke* have both a board of representatives and a management board. These boards are made up of students, university representatives, and, in some regions, representatives from the community.

The depth of services offered to students varies by region, but in general *Studentenwerke* provide counseling and support services, dining facilities, day care centers, student housing, cultural affairs, employment agencies, and education assistance programs (Morgenstern, 2016). Many *Studentenwerke* organizations also provide free childcare for students and are funded through local subsidies (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2016).

Studentenwerk is also required by *Bafög*, Germany's financial assistance program, to administer financial support to students. The law states that all students have a right to state-funded educational support if the financial means to cover educational expenses and cost of living are not available through other sources (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 2016). This is a similar concept to federal Pell grants and loans offered to students in the United States. The educational assistance program also takes parental income into account. This financial support is 50 percent grant, and 50 percent loan. The loans are interest free (Morgenstern, 2016). Support is disbursed to students through a monthly stipend program. At *Studentenwerke Berlin*, the average disbursement was €548 per month, with a maximum of €600 per month.

REFLECTION

Although there were many similarities between student services in the US and in Germany, the differences provided valuable insight for me into ways student affairs and higher education professionals in the US can better serve students.

For example, while in Berlin and Dresden, I also learned about the housing and dining services provided to students. At both universities I had the opportunity to eat in the dining halls, which provide low-cost meals to students. The structure mirrored the dining halls found in U.S. universities, providing several meal options to meet a variety of dietary restrictions and preferences. In Dresden, I also stayed at the *Studentenwerke Dresden's* International House (residence hall). This house provides short-term housing (up to 6 months) for exchange students and staff members associated with the *Technische Universität Dresden*. The housing entities at both institutions (including the International House) and the dining services are different from the other services provided in that they are revenue funded, similar to auxiliary services at institutions in the United States.

Overall, I was impressed with the services provided by the *Studentenwerke* organizations. It was interesting to learn how successfully these non-profit organizations operate separately from the institutions they serve, yet they also work so closely with higher education, legislators, and the students who attend the universities. *Studentenwerk* faces issues similar to those we experience in higher education in the US. The staff talked about tight budgets, lack of personnel, and the inability to accomplish as much as desired due to those budgetary restrictions.

Beyond the differences in the daily logistics of providing services to students, a major difference was the absence of graduate degree programs in student affairs. In the US a degree in student affairs is often needed to work in student services areas in colleges and universities. Many of the staff of the *Studentenwerke* have backgrounds in business or in the service sectors. Because they do not have the student development education background that many higher education professionals in the United States have, the employees have a unique perspective to the services and support they provide to students. Another major difference was the lack of demographic information about students who attend these institutions or receive *Studentenwerke* services. In Germany, laws prohibit organizations from collecting demographic information, because collection of personal information paved the way for the Third Reich to identify certain populations under Adolf Hitler's reign. Due to this history, demographic data is virtually nonexistent compared with the way it exists in the United States.

A final difference was the way higher education is viewed by society in these countries. Students, and those who work with them, view higher

education as a right, rather than as a privilege. This is epitomized in Germany where students are provided the monthly stipend to cover their living expenses. On the contrary, in the United States, higher education is often viewed as a privilege, and this is reflected in the costs for tuition, fees, living expenses, and eventually interest rates while paying back loans.

My experience abroad taught me many things about the higher education system in Germany. Because of my experience, I will continue to reflect on the ways I serve students, advocate for them, and continue fighting for higher education as a right within the United States. I truly think we can learn a lot by taking a closer look at how our German counterparts have alleviated tuition costs for their students. By doing so, they have created more inclusive environments for students to learn and grow. My perspective about higher education and the world has grown, and I will continue to take these lessons with me as I serve students locally and encourage them to explore the world and become better citizens in their communities and abroad.

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