

## Career Academies in 2049?

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Marilyn Raby, Charlie Dayton and I coined the term “career academies” as the title for our 1992 book, which described academies being developed by Philadelphia, California, and the National Academy Foundation. Since then the School-to-Work movement has come and gone, the Gates Foundation small schools initiative has come and waned, and the Obama Administration now is placing highest priority on “college and career readiness” as the goal for high schools. These waves of reform have propelled career academies forward, like surfers. As of 2010, we think there are about 7,000 career academies in U.S. high schools.<sup>1</sup>

Why the surge in career academies? I would say the evidence has a lot to do with it. Beginning with some careful evaluations in the 1980s, and continuing through the landmark study by MDRC, researchers have found that career academies contribute to students’ success in high school and beyond. Researchers like me have become “empirical evangelists,” advocating academies because of this evidence.

Given how important I think evidence is, it’s ironic that what I’m writing about here is a topic on which there is absolutely no evidence: namely, the future! And the rapid pace of change in the past decade or so makes me very humble about

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<sup>1</sup> For the evidence behind this and other factual assertions in this article, see Stern, Dayton, and Raby: *Career Academies: A Proven Strategy to Prepare High School Students for College and Careers* (Berkeley: Career Academy Support Network, 2010), available at [http://casn.berkeley.edu/resource\\_files/Proven\\_Strategy\\_2-25-1010-03-12-04-27-01.pdf](http://casn.berkeley.edu/resource_files/Proven_Strategy_2-25-1010-03-12-04-27-01.pdf)

offering predictions four decades hence. Just think how recently the internet, smart phones, email and texting and Facebook have transformed our lives. If Ray Kurzweil is right, humanity will have passed through the “singularity” in about 20 years, reshaping itself into some kind of carbon-silicon life form, networked in ways we can’t even imagine.

So the first question I’d raise is not whether career academies will exist, but whether high schools will exist in anything like the shape and form we’ve known for the past hundred years or so.<sup>2</sup> Already in 2010 close to 30 percent of teenage students are already enrolled in something other than the traditional large high school with its egg-crate classrooms, bell schedules and multi-period days designed to keep track of instructional minutes and Carnegie units. Current non-traditional options include independent study, home schooling, virtual high schools, alternative schools, continuation schools, and various new small schools and small learning communities, including charters.

Several things account for the current fracturing and fragmentation of the Carnegie-unit high school. First of all, this kind of education has never worked for all students. The fraction of teenagers completing high school “on time” rose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to about 3/4 in the mid 1970s — and has been stuck there ever since. As high school “dropout” reduction becomes a public priority again, the search for alternatives is renewed.

One of the chief advantages of Carnegie-unit high schools is that they’ve been a relatively inexpensive way to keep teenagers out of the labor market and off the streets. One older adult supervises a group of 30 or more teenagers in a classroom. Unfortunately, the teenagers are getting harder to manage, for all kinds of reasons including the internet itself, which has reduced the authority of classroom teachers as sources of knowledge. Providing alternative settings for

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<sup>2</sup> My assertions about changing high schools are discussed more fully in “Expanding Policy Options for Educating Teenagers,” (Princeton and Brookings, *The Future of Children* 19:211-239, Spring 2009).

teenagers usually means fewer students per teacher — and of course that's more expensive.

This is where the internet comes in. Home-schooling, independent study, and other alternative programs are getting a big boost from the internet. Even traditional high schools are making increasing use of on-line curriculum to help students make up classes they missed or flunked, or to access more advanced material.

It seems almost inevitable that the internet — or whatever evolves from it — will play a much bigger role in educating teenagers 40 years from now. This will facilitate a number of structural changes that may help achieve what traditional high schools have been unable to accomplish: preparing all teenagers to become productive adults and responsible citizens.

One structural change that may be necessary is increased involvement of other adults, in addition to professional teachers, in educating teenagers. We already see this in home schooling, where parents play a central role. Programs like career academies, which recruit adults in workplaces to supervise student interns, also demonstrate this idea. "It takes a village" to educate a young person. Improvement of on-line learning resources could enable more teenagers to participate in a much more individualized education, supervised by an older adult who acts as guide, advocate, and counselor for a group of students. The adult advisor could be responsible for guiding each student over a period of several years, orchestrating the student's involvement with other adults through internships, civic enterprises, group activities including traditional classrooms, and independent study with various teachers or mentors. "The Met" schools developed by Big Picture Company are pointing in this direction.

Another structural change would plan for student mobility. Many students change schools because their place of residence changes. But the current school system has no easy way to accommodate students who move, so mobility has been a well-known risk factor for dropping out. The internet, with its burgeoning virtual high schools, will make it much easier to maintain continuity in curriculum for students who move from one place to another.

If this more individualized, internet-facilitated approach is going to become a more prevalent form of education for teenagers, it would have to be accompanied by other structural changes. Funding formulas could no longer be based entirely on “seat time.” Some teachers would have to be prepared as educational guides, not classroom managers. None of this will happen tomorrow. But in 40 years, who knows?

How can career academies position themselves for the future? First, don’t get complacent. It’s been said that if you’re sitting on your laurels you’re wearing them in the wrong place. The MDRC study and other evaluations have found that career academies can produce positive outcomes for students. But just because academies can work doesn’t mean they always do. Among the 7,000 or so career academies in U.S. high schools, no one knows how many actually embody the key elements present in the particular academies that researchers have found to be effective. Worse yet, the research has not yet determined exactly which features of academies really account for their effectiveness. So in addition to trying to build career academies that have the key elements identified by MDRC and others, it’s important to keep the focus on results for students.

Schools, districts, and states that sponsor career academies should routinely check for changes each year in individual students’ performance. Did students this year improve their attendance, credits earned, grades, discipline, and test scores? Did they get promoted to the next grade level, or graduate from grade 12? And how did the growth in performance of academy students compare with the growth of non-academy students in the same school, district, or state? To keep career academies strong, describing and comparing changes in student performance each year should become part of standard operating procedure. If results-based funding ever does come, career academies should be ready!

Second, career academies should actively embrace the internet. Academies that are serious about students taking all required college-prep classes in addition to a strong career-technical sequence often find it very challenging to fit all this into students’ schedules. This will be a challenge as long as schools are using multi-period days to allocate instructional minutes and award Carnegie units. But as

more and better curriculum becomes available on-line, career academies should use it to enable students to complete courses they can't fit into their schedules.

Career academies also may be able to help deal with student mobility.

Currently, if a student leaves a particular school, that school is no longer responsible for the education of that student (though counting the student as a dropout will look bad on the school's accountability report). In a career academy, as in other small schools or small learning communities, one of the advantages is that students and teachers can build more trusting and supportive relationships. If an academy student goes away, those relationships are left behind. But maybe that isn't inevitable. In future, with the internet and all, students who move might be able to stay in contact with one or more academy teachers with whom they had close relationships. This happens informally now. Making this kind of continuity more planned and deliberate could keep academies in the vanguard of educational change.

Another strength of career academies that may sustain their future vitality is the involvement of adults from outside of schools. Workplace supervisors, mentors, parents and other adults have played an important part in career academies. Their involvement keeps academy students and teachers more connected with the economic and civic life of their local communities. In addition to helping to educate teenagers, this connection can help career academies keep evolving along with the world outside of schools.

Career academies have been an important agent of change. Along with *High Schools That Work*, revisions to federal law, and other developments, career academies have contributed to breaking down the 20<sup>th</sup> century segregation between college and career preparation. Career academies have been found to be an effective alternative to 20<sup>th</sup> century forms of tracking in high schools. But career academies in their current form are not a panacea. To lower the dropout rate substantially and prepare much larger numbers of teenagers for college, careers, and responsible citizenship, additional structural changes will be needed in the educational system. Career academies, continually evolving, can and should be part of that change.