

Career Academies: An Overview

Career academies have been growing in popularity in recent years, and now operate in thousands of high schools. Spreading through local initiative, career academies are not defined by any national law, and the term is now being applied to very different kinds of programs. This has created confusion and the danger that some academies will be created without key elements that effective career academies possess. Several leading networks of career academies have joined for the first time in agreeing on a common standard.

Three versions of this definition have been developed:

Narrative (What is a Career Academy?)

Chart (Key Features of Career Academies)

Graphic (Linked Components of Career Academies)

All three include the same consensus definition, which consists of three structural elements:

- A small learning community, comprising a group of students within the larger high school who take classes together for at least two years, taught by a team of teachers from different disciplines;
- A college preparatory curriculum with a career theme, enabling students to see relationships among academic subjects and their application to a broad field of work;
- Partnerships with employers, the community, and local colleges, bringing resources from outside the high school to improve student motivation and achievement.

Career academies differ from traditional academic and vocational education because they prepare high school students for both college and careers. Academies provide broad information about a field such as health care, finance, engineering, media, or natural resources. They weave this theme into an academic curriculum that qualifies students for admission to a four-year college or university. Studies have found that students in career academies perform better in high school and are more likely to continue into postsecondary education, compared to similar students in the same schools.

The first career academy appeared in 1969 in Philadelphia, where thousands of students now enroll in academies. In the early 1980s the model was brought to California, starting with two high schools in the Sequoia Union High School District just north of Palo Alto. Based on a series of evaluations that demonstrated significant improvement in student performance, the State of California began replicating the model in 1985, and now supports approximately 300 career academies across the state. Many other academies in California and elsewhere have started on their own without state grants. In the 1980s, New York City created the first Academies of Finance, sponsored by American Express, which subsequently joined with other companies to create the National Academy Foundation (NAF). NAF provides technical support for over 500 academies across the country. NAF academies are focused on Finance, Travel and Tourism, and Information Technology.

Career Academy Track Record

Academies have been evaluated since their inception, and have a strong track record of improved attendance, credits, grades, and graduation rates among participants.¹ Follow-up surveys have shown that about two-thirds of Academy graduates go on for some form of post-graduate training, and that almost all are engaged in some productive activity (either attending some form of college, working, or doing both). MDRC in New York City is conducting a longitudinal, random-assignment evaluation of nine academies in different parts of the country to examine further the evidence of their effectiveness. Summaries of this research are available at the MDRC website. This record of positive results has prompted a number of communities around the country to convert entire high schools into sets of career academies. For instance, a high school with 1500 students might be organized into five academies with 300 students each. The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At-Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University has developed its Talent Development Model, with a focus on ninth grade preparation, as a basis for the schoolwide application of career academies, and is currently supporting high schools and districts engaged in this approach.

¹Evaluations up to 1992 were summarized in D. Stern, M. Raby, and C. Dayton: *Career Academies: Partnerships for Reconstructing American High Schools* (Jossey-Bass, 1992). Subsequent studies include F. Linnehan: "Measuring the Effectiveness of a Career Academy Program from an Employer's Perspective" (*Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Spring 1996); J. McPartland, R. Balfanz, W. Jordan, and N. Legters: "Improving climate and achievement in a troubled urban high school through the Talent Development Model" (*Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 3 (4): 337-361, 1998); J.J. Kemple and others, a series of reports on their longitudinal random assignment evaluation of nine career academies nationally (New York: MDRC, 1996-2001); D. Stern, C. Dayton, and M. Raby: *Career Academies: Building Blocks for Reconstructing American High Schools* (an update of the research since the 1992 book, U.C. Berkeley, 2000); and N.L. Maxwell and V. Rubin: *High School Career Academies: A Pathway to Educational Reform in Urban School Districts?* (Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2000).