

*NCAC, as the convener of the national partners  
who framed the National Standards of Practice (NSOP) for Career Academies,  
presents...*

# NATIONAL STANDARDS OF PRACTICE FOR CAREER ACADEMIES

## **INCLUDED ORGANIZATIONS**

Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)  
The Center for Secondary School Redesign (CSSR)  
The College and Career Academy Support Network (CCASN)  
ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career  
The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), High Schools That Work (HSTW)  
The National Academy Foundation (NAF)  
The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEC)  
The National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC)  
The Talent Development High Schools

**PREFACE**  
**NATIONAL STANDARDS OF PRACTICE (FOR CAREER ACADEMIES)**  
**Introduced in December 2004 and refined in April 2013**

High school career academies date back over forty years and have been a growing presence in the country for the last quarter century, especially in the states that have provided grants for them (CA, FL, AR) and the many cities and districts that have embraced the approach. There are an estimated 7,000 career academies in operation, enrolling about one million students. Extensive research (MDRC experimental study; Johns Hopkins, UC Berkeley quasi-experimental studies) has shown that their impact has been felt from an academic, economic, workforce development, and social perspective. Career academies are designed to prepare students for both college and careers. They are schools within schools that link students with peers, teachers, and community partners in a structured environment that fosters academic success. The career academy concept has three key elements:

- A small learning community (SLC)
- A college-prep sequential curriculum with a career theme
- An advisory board that forges partnerships with employers, higher education institutions, and the community

Teams of teachers (grades 9–12 or 10–12) work across several academic and technical subjects, grouping students in cohorts for these classes and follow a program of study. The advisory board helps to identify a sequential set of experiential components that show students the applications of academic subjects to the career and college field and deliver work-based learning experiences (e.g., shadowing, community service, mentoring, internships, and apprenticeships). The career theme can be any of the 16 in the national Career Clusters® taxonomy or variations on these (e.g., “green,” health sciences, media arts).

While career academies have grown quickly, for the most part they have spread in a grass roots fashion. Thus, there are many interpretations of what a career academy is and what a high quality career academy should look like, as well as many instances where the term “career academy” is used to describe other configurations. To address these concerns, a broad group of organizations supportive of career academies came together to develop a set of ten standards, first issued in 2004. With continued feedback from the field, it was determined that it was appropriate to refine and reaffirm these standards. The group of original and additional organizations now includes:

- Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), Alexandria, VA
- The Center for Secondary School Redesign (CSSR), West Warwick, RI
- The College and Career Academy Support Network (CCASN), UC Berkeley and UC Irvine, CA
- ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career, Berkeley, CA
- The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), High Schools That Work (HSTW), Atlanta, GA
- The National Academy Foundation (NAF), New York City, NY
- The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc), Washington, DC
- The National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC), Nashville, TN
- The Talent Development High Schools, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

## NATIONAL STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

### I. Defined Mission and Goals

The career academy has a written definition of its mission, goals, and benchmarks. These are developed by and available to the administrators, teachers, students, parents, advisory board, and others involved in the academy. These include at least the following elements:

#### Criteria

##### a. *College and career connections*

A career academy's aim is to prepare all students for *post-secondary education and careers*. Academies enable students to complete post-secondary entrance academic requirements while exposing them to a vertical segment of the occupations within a career field, encouraging them to aim as high as they wish.

##### b. *Student aspirations*

An academy seeks to raise, maintain, and increase the level of students' motivation while in high school by giving a focus to the program of studies that reflects their own talents, aspirations and interests. Continued personal awareness and exploration, along with curriculum and experiential components and extracurricular choices, also help to provide guidance. The biggest limiting factor in many youths' future plans is not ability, but how they perceive their future.

##### c. *Student achievement*

So as not to become either a bastion of top performers or a dumping ground for unsuccessful students, an academy provides support to all of its students to maintain and increase their achievement in high school. This support comes through close relationships with teachers and fellow students, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and experience with career and education options outside the high school, including a strong focus on personalization with a collaborative environment for all stakeholders.

##### d. *Commitment to equity*

Each school ensures that the career academy reflects the demographic mix of the school as a whole, including students with disabilities and English language learners.

##### e. *Stakeholder involvement*

Stakeholders involved in the career academy have developed the mission and goals. Additionally, there are clear benchmarks for assessing how the mission and goals are met.

### II. Academy Design

An academy has a well-defined design within the high school, reflecting its status as a small learning community.

#### Criteria

##### a) *Cross-grade articulation*

The academy incorporates at least a two, a three, or an overall four-year experience, ending in the senior year, with articulation in its teacher team, curriculum, and instruction across grade levels. An

introduction to the academy's encompassing career exploration precedes the academy experience. The academy has a clear program of study that includes a definitive course sequence.

**b) *Student selection***

Entry into the academy is voluntary and accessible to every student. The recruitment/selection process is written and widely available. New students are provided an orientation to the academy based upon their own talents, aspirations and interests. Parents or guardians participate in this process and approve of the choice made by their son or daughter. Academy enrollment reflects the general high school population, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

**c) *Cohort scheduling***

Academy classes consist of academy students who take a series of classes together each year. The academy students take at least two courses per grade level as a cohort with at least 80% of the enrollment in these courses academy students.

**d) *Physical space***

Where possible, both academic and career and technical education (CTE) academy classrooms are near each other in the high school building. Rooms allow for flexible configurations required by project-based learning.

**e) *Small size, supportive atmosphere***

The academy maintains personalization through limited size, academy staff teamwork (including counselors, librarian/media specialists, academy-based administrators, and other support staff), and a supportive atmosphere.

**f) *Academy planning***

There is ample opportunity for the academy staff, advisory board, and others to plan the academy together. The ideal time would be during the school day.

### **III. Host Community and High School**

**Career academies exist in a variety of district and high school contexts, which are important determinants of an academy's success.**

**Criteria**

**a. *Support from the Board of Education and Superintendent***

Academies are an integral part of the high school improvement strategy for the district and school choice options. The district Board of Education is aware of the academy and its mission and goals and is on public record in support. Likewise, the Superintendent publicly endorses the academy and offers active support. Both serve as academy liaisons to the broader community and encourage coordination of similar academies across the district.

**b. *Support from the principal and high school administration***

Academies are an integral part of the school improvement strategy. The high school principal and other administrators are knowledgeable about the academy, advocate for it publicly, and are actively involved in its funding, staffing, and support. They contribute to a positive academy profile within the high school.

**c. *Adequate funding, facilities, equipment, and materials***

District and high school administrative support results in appropriate academy scheduling, adequate academy funding, facilities, equipment, and learning materials. Support also advances opportunities for student internships, early college and career, and technical training. These reflect a serious commitment from the community, district, and high school to the success of the academy.

#### **IV. Faculty and Staff**

**Appropriate staff selection, leadership, credentialing, and cooperation are critical to an academy's success.**

**Criteria**

**a. *Teacher Leader(s)/Coordinators***

One teacher (sometimes two) and a dedicated school administrator take the lead, serving as the Academy Coordinators. They attend advisory board meetings, interact with school administrators and board members, manage the budget, help to coordinate teacher professional development, and coordinate employer, higher education, and parental involvement. Release time and/or a stipend may be provided for this role.

**b. *Academy staff***

Academy staff are credentialed in their field, work in the academy, and are committed to its mission and goals. Since a career academy's success rests on good teaching and teamwork among a cross disciplinary group of staff, they must be well qualified and willingly involved in this role. They understand and support the philosophy and purpose of the academy, work together as a team, and teach a majority of their classes in the academy. The academy staff design instruction and curriculum around a career theme and cooperatively share the duties of operating the academy.

**c. *Support from the counselors, non-academy teachers, and classified staff***

Counselors are members of the academy team, are well versed in the theme of their dedicated academy, and are experts in supporting post-secondary and career opportunities within the academy theme. They understand the need for cohort scheduling and ensure academy students are scheduled appropriately. Non-academy staff are also important to its operation. They understand the value of the academy and help in recruiting students for the academy and providing departmental support. Classified staff help support the academy facilities, equipment, and learning materials.

#### **V. Professional Development and Continuous Learning**

**Since an academy places teachers and other adults into roles not normally included in their previous training, providing adequate professional development time, leadership, and support is critical.**

## **Criteria**

### **a. Common planning time**

The site administrator ensures that academy staff are provided common planning time within the high school schedule for purposes of program coordination, curricular integration, business involvement, and resolution of student challenges.

### **b. Professional development**

Experts from outside the high school provide academy staff (administrators, teachers, counselors, media specialists, etc.) with training in the academy structure, project-based learning, performance assessment, curricular integration, student support, and employer involvement.

### **c. Volunteer and parent orientation**

Business, community, and post-secondary volunteers are adequately prepared for their roles as speakers, field experiences hosts, mentors, internship supervisors, etc. Parents are adequately prepared for their involvement (if any) as classroom aides, field experience chaperones, social event organizers, and exhibition judges.

## **VI. Governance and Leadership**

**The academy has a governing structure that incorporates the explicit roles of all stakeholders and the leaders of the advisory board.**

## **Criteria**

### **a. Network of support**

The academy is connected to an advisory board at the school level or the district level and has members from the district and high school administration, academy staff, employers and post-secondary education. It may also include community representatives, academy parents, and students. The board incorporates viewpoints from all members. All educators participating on the board may or may not be voting members of the board.

### **b. Regular meetings**

Meetings of the advisory board are held at least quarterly, with defined agendas, outcomes and meeting minutes. The advisory board helps to set policies for the academy. It also serves as a center of resource development.

### **c. A healthy partnership**

Both through the advisory board and other interactions there is evidence of a partnership between the academy/high school and its host community that recognizes both employer and school district short and long term needs. Evidence exists that the advisory board is engaged and exhibits as much ownership of the academy as the staff does. There needs to be a set of by-laws or a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that clearly defines all roles.

### **d. A student voice**

Students have avenues through which they can provide input to the academy policies and practices, thus providing opportunities for student leadership such as through Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs).

## **VII. Teaching and Learning**

**The teaching and learning within an academy meets or exceeds external standards and college entrance requirements while differing from a comprehensive high school by focusing learning around a theme.**

### **Criteria**

#### **a. *External standards***

The academic curriculum is framed around the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), national standards, or adopted state standards. The career and college curriculum is framed around national, state, post-secondary, the Common Career Technical Core and/or career readiness standards.

#### **b. *Rigorous learning***

Coursework reaches high levels of English and mathematics, generally four years of each, in addition to substantial coursework in science and social studies. All graduates are qualified to attend a full range of post-secondary education options without the need for remediation because they have mastered curriculum that meets college entrance requirements.

#### **c. *Sequenced, integrated, and relevant curriculum***

Curriculum articulates from the beginning of an academy through the senior year with a defined course sequence and at least two core academic classes and one career/theme class each year. Curriculum is integrated among the academic classes and between these and the career class. Learning illustrates applications of academic subjects outside the classroom, incorporates current technology and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and includes authentic project-based learning.

#### **d. *Post-secondary planning***

Students have access to career and post-secondary information, are provided guidance and advisement in these areas, and begin a written post-graduate plan during their sophomore year, which will be reviewed and refined each semester. The plans begin with goals that each student sets, which become an ongoing personalized learning plan. Progress on this plan is reviewed by the student as well as parents/guardians, counselors, and advisors.

#### **e. *Dual credit options***

Options for post-secondary credit exist in a variety of ways and may include articulation agreements, dual credit and/or college credit for upper classmen, concurrent credit, trans scripted credit, AP, AICE and IB credit. The academy articulates its upper level curriculum with relevant post-secondary programs.

#### **f. *Development of a portfolio and participation in a capstone project.***

The student portfolio and capstone project are reflective of the academy in which the student is participating.

### **VIII. Employer, Post-Secondary Education, and Community Involvement**

**A career academy links high school to its host community and involves members of the employer, post-secondary education, and civic community in certain aspects of its operation.**

#### **Criteria**

**a. *Local industry/economic needs***

The academy career field is selected to align with the economic and workforce development needs of the community and the state. This will ensure that there is adequate preparation of the future workforce and that there are sufficient opportunities for persons currently in this field to be engaged with the academy.

**b. *Community involvement***

Representatives of employers, post-secondary education, and the community help to guide the academy's curriculum, and provide experiential components such as guest speakers, real-world projects field experience sites, shadowing opportunities, mentors, student internships, community service opportunities, college and other post-secondary education tours, and teacher externships.

**c. *Citizenship***

The academy fosters a culture of respect for others regardless of background and encourages student contributions as global citizens.

**d. *Work-based learning***

The academy offers work-based learning opportunities for all interested students either through internships, community service, or other community-based work programs that the advisory board and the school district planning team determine are the best approach for that academy and community.

### **IX. Student Assessment**

**Improvements in student performance are central to an academy's mission. It is important to gather data that reflect whether students are showing improvement and to report these accurately and fairly to maintain the academy's integrity.**

#### **Criteria**

**a. *Student data***

Student data include those necessary to describe the student body within the academy (e.g., grade level, gender, and race/ethnicity) and its relationship to the high school in general, as well as student performance on a variety of outcome measures.

**b. *Multiple academic measures***

Measures include a variety of accepted indicators of performance (e.g., attendance, retention, credits, grade point averages, state test scores, graduation rates, college going rates), as well as rubric-based assessments on performance tasks. Multiple measures need to be aligned to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and longitudinal data are collected.

**c. *Technical learning***

Measures include knowledge of the field's terminology, technical concepts, and ability to apply English, math, and other academic skills to authentic real world projects. Where appropriate, industry recognized credentials, certifications or licenses are incorporated.



**d. *Accurate reporting***

Analysis of the data elements is reported accurately and fairly regardless of the results.

**e. *Evidence of impact***

These measures show whether, and how much, the academy improves student performance. Teacher teams use student assessment to evaluate the quality of the education provided in the career academy and to make improvements to curriculum, instruction, and program structures. A longitudinal study shows whether there are improved student outcomes in terms of reduced dropouts, increased academic success, career readiness preparation and greater entry into post-secondary education.

**X. Sustainability**

**No new academy functions perfectly. Even well established and highly functioning academies benefit from self-examination and refinement. Ensuring and improving the quality of a career academy requires engaging in a regular cycle of improvement.**

**Criteria**

**a. *Academy implementation***

Program leaders regularly assess the academy's functioning, studying its strengths and weaknesses. This involves gathering feedback from key stakeholders, including students.

**b. *Academy refinements***

All stakeholders, including students, are surveyed regularly and input considered. These reviews lead to plans to address any problems. Such plans include timetables and benchmarks for improvement.

**c. *Reflection of the academy's mission and goals***

The refinements refer back to the academy's underlying mission and goals and are supported by data, evidence and/or survey results.

