

# Career Academies

## The Promising Practice

Career academies are organized as small learning communities and offer curricula that combine academic and occupation-related course requirements designed to promote applied learning and to satisfy college entrance requirements. Academies establish partnerships with local employers to build sequences of career readiness and work-based learning opportunities for their students.

## Research Question

What are the long-term impacts of career academies on labor market outcomes, educational attainment, and transitions to adulthood?

## Target Audience

High school students

## Research Design

Since 1993, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) has been studying the career academy approach using a random assignment research design in a diverse group of nine high schools in medium- and large-sized school districts across the United States.

The MDRC 2008 Evaluation Report, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood*, summarized here, describes a longitudinal random assignment evaluation of career academies serving more than 1,400 young people from nine high schools located in or near a large urban school district with substantially higher percentages (85%) of African American and Latino students than in school districts nationally, as well as higher dropout rates, higher unemployment rates, and higher percentages of low-income families. Random assignment was chosen because:

Using a random assignment research design is the best way to ensure that there are initially no systematic differences between the two groups that make up the study sample. Each of

the students in the sample applied for a place in one of the participating career academies and was deemed to be appropriate for the programs. Because more applicants were appropriate than the programs could serve, a lottery was used to choose which students would be invited to enroll. Approximately 55% of the students in the applicant pool were randomly selected to enroll in a career academy, and they constitute the study's Academy group. The remaining students (about 45 percent of the applicant pool) continued or enrolled in the high schools' regular education programs and constitute the study's non-Academy control group. The outcomes for the non-Academy group are the best indicators of how students in the Academy group would have fared if they had not had access to the programs. Therefore, the impacts — that is, the differences in outcomes between the Academy and the non-Academy groups — represent the changes that the career academies produced over and above what students were likely to achieve in non-Academy environments. (Kemple & Willner, 2008, p. 4)

## Results

The June 2008 MDRC report describes the long-term effects of career academies on outcomes associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood, particularly on labor market participation, educational attainment, and family formation, over the eight years following scheduled graduation from high school.

Participating students were divided into the following three risk subgroups:

- **High-risk subgroup:** Students in the study sample (approximately 25% of both the Academy and the non-Academy group) who had the combination of characteristics, measured prior to random assignment, that are associated with the highest likelihood of dropping out;
- **Medium-risk subgroup:** Students in the study sample (approximately 50% of both the Academy and the non-Academy group) who had characteristics, measured prior to random assignment, indicating that they were not particularly likely to drop out but were not highly engaged in school; and
- **Low-risk subgroup:** Students in the study sample (approximately 25% of both the Academy and the non-Academy group) who had the combination of characteristics, measured prior to random assignment, that are associated with the lowest likelihood of dropping out.

The following long-term impacts were reported:

### **Labor Market**

The career academies produced sustained earnings gains that averaged 11% (or \$2,088) more per year for Academy group members than for individuals in the non-Academy group — a \$16,704 boost in total earnings over the eight years of follow-up (in 2006 dollars).

These labor market impacts were concentrated among young men, a group that has experienced a severe decline in real earnings in recent years. Through a combination of increased wages, hours worked, and employment stability, real earnings for young men in the Academy group increased by \$3,731 (17%) per year — or nearly \$30,000 over eight years.

### **Educational Attainment**

Educational attainment levels and impacts were generally similar for young men and young women in the study sample.

The career academies did not have systematic impacts on educational attainment for either young men or young women, although more than 80% of both groups earned a high school diploma and roughly 50% earned a postsecondary credential.

The academies had no systematic impact (positive or negative) on educational attainment for the high-, medium-, or low-risk subgroups.

Overall, the career academies had no impact (positive or negative) on postsecondary education enrollment and attainment rates.

### **Family Formation**

The career academies produced an increase in the percentage of young people living independently with children and a spouse or partner. Young men also experienced positive impacts on marriage and being custodial parents.

In interpreting their findings, the authors concluded the following:

The findings demonstrate the feasibility of improving labor market preparation and successful school-to-work transitions without compromising academic goals and preparation for college. Investments in career-related experiences during high school can produce substantial and sustained improvements in the labor market prospects and transitions to adulthood of youth. In fact, career academies are one of the few youth-focused interventions that have been found to improve the labor market prospects of young men. At the same time, career academies have proven to be challenging to implement on a large scale with high levels of fidelity, and the evidence from this evaluation may not apply to programs that are partially implemented or that use only selected features of the academy approach.

In summary, the career academies produced sustained employment and earnings gains, particularly among young men. While career academies had no impact (positive or negative) on educational attainment, half of the young people in both the Academy and non-Academy groups earned a postsecondary credential. The career academies also showed positive effects on increasing family stability. (Kemple & Willner, 2008, p. iii)

## Source

Kemple, J. J., with Willner, C. (2008, June). *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions To Adulthood*. New York, NY: MDRC. Retrieved from: [www.mdrc.org/publications/482/full.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/publications/482/full.pdf).

For a summary of the report, see:  
[www.mdrc.org/publications/482/overview.html](http://www.mdrc.org/publications/482/overview.html).

## Other Resources

National Career Academy Coalition: [www.ncacinc.com](http://www.ncacinc.com)  
National Academy Foundation: [www.naf.org](http://www.naf.org)

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Promising practices as a concept has many operational definitions. The NRCCTE approach to this designation is to identify research from reputable sources (e.g., major funded studies, institutional research, district or state analyses of data) and share this with you. Some of the research identified here is a result of very rigorous research (e.g., longitudinal designs with carefully matched samples, experimental designs). However, other studies may not rise to that level of rigor but nonetheless suggest a practice worth examining. We invite readers to follow the links provided and form their own judgments regarding the quality of the research.