

Citation

Kemple, J. (2001). Career Academies: Impacts on students' initial transitions to post-secondary education and employment. New York: MDRC.

Highlights

- The report's objective was to evaluate the impact of Career Academies on labor market and educational outcomes 14 months after participants' scheduled high school graduation. Subsequent reports presents impact findings over a longer period (up to eight years after scheduled graduation).
- For this evaluation, about 2,000 9th-grade students who applied to participate in a Career Academy were randomly assigned to the treatment group and admitted into a Career Academy, or to the control group, which continued to participate in general education. The study team administered a survey to treatment and control group members 14 months after their scheduled graduation from high school.
- The study reported that participation in Career Academies had no impact on primary educational outcomes, including the likelihood of high school graduation and post-secondary education enrollment over the 14 months following scheduled high school graduation. It also had no impact on employment outcomes, including the likelihood of employment, hours worked per week, or average earnings over this period.
- The quality of the causal evidence presented in this report is high because it was a well-implemented randomized controlled trial.

Features of Career Academies

Career Academies were first established some 45 years ago and have become a widely used high school reform initiative. They are designed to keep students engaged in school and improve their employment and educational outcomes. Students apply for admission into Career Academies during 8th or 9th grades (depending on the rules of the program to which they are applying).

Career Academies have three distinguishing features, and the study authors pointed out that a true Career Academy must exhibit all three:

1. They are organized as small learning communities, or schools within schools. They typically serve 150 to 200 students from grades 9 or 10 through grade 12. This smaller size fosters a more personalized learning environment.
2. The curriculum is organized around one career, occupation, or industry and combines academic and technical aspects relevant to the career.
3. The academies offer work-based learning experiences, often through partnerships with local employers. These can include summer employment, internships, and mentoring.

Features of the Study

The study was a randomized controlled trial conducted in nine high schools located in or near large urban school districts. Districts served a substantially higher percentage of African American and Hispanic students and a higher percentage of low-income families compared with school districts nationally. They also had higher rates of high school dropout and unemployment.

All study participants applied for admission into one of the Career Academies. Because there were more applicants than the programs could serve, a lottery system was used to assign approximately 2,000 applicants to Career Academies. Approximately 55 percent of the applicants were randomly assigned to a Career Academy and formed the treatment group; the rest of the applicants enrolled in general education and formed the control group. The study examined labor market and educational outcomes in the 14 months following the participants' scheduled high school graduation dates, approximately five years after random assignment had taken place.

Study Sites

- Baltimore, Maryland
- Miami-Dade, Florida
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- San Jose, California (two sites)
- Santa Ana, California
- Socorro, Texas
- Watsonville, California
- Washington, D.C.

Findings

- The authors found no impacts of Career Academies on the likelihood of high school completion or post-secondary education enrollment measured 14 months after scheduled high school graduation. There were small, statistically significant impacts of participation on the likelihood of receipt of a general equivalency diploma (7 percent among Career Academies participations compared with 5 percent among the control group).
- There were no statistically significant differences in any of the employment outcomes between the treatment and control groups, including the likelihood of employment, hours worked per week, and earnings.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study was a well-conducted randomized controlled trial. The study's authors estimated multiple impacts on educational outcomes and labor market participation one year after expected high school graduation and found only one to be statistically significant. This lack of findings could be attributable to the fairly short follow-up period; subsequent reports from this evaluation found statistically significant differences in labor market outcomes over longer follow-up periods.

Causal Evidence Rating

The quality of causal evidence presented in this report is high because it is based on a well-conducted randomized controlled trial. This means we are confident that the effects estimated in the study are attributable solely to Career Academies, not to other factors.