

Citation

Kemple, J. (2004). Career Academies: Impacts on labor market outcomes and educational attainment. New York: MDRC.

Highlights

- The report's objective was to evaluate the impact of Career Academies on labor market and educational outcomes four years after participants' scheduled high school graduation. Earlier reports presented impact findings over a shorter time horizon, and a subsequent report presents impact findings over a longer period (eight years).
- For this evaluation, about 2,000 9th-grade students were randomly assigned to the treatment group, which could enroll in a Career Academy, or the control group, which continued to participate in general education. The study team administered a survey to treatment and control group members 48 months after their scheduled graduation from high school.
- The study reported statistically significant, positive impacts on average monthly earnings, average hours worked per week, and average hourly wages over the four years following scheduled high school graduation. There were no statistically significant differences in educational attainment of the two groups.
- The quality of the causal evidence presented in this report is high because it was a well-implemented randomized controlled trial. This means we are confident that the estimated impacts are attributable solely to Career Academies, not other factors.

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 four years following the participants' scheduled high school graduation dates, approximately eight 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 statistically significant, positive impacts of Career Academies on average monthly earnings over the four years following scheduled graduation. Career Academies students earned an additional \$107 per month, on average, compared with the control group. This increase was due to higher hourly wages and more hours worked per week among the treatment group.
- There were no statistically significant differences in any of the educational attainment outcomes between the treatment and control groups. However, high school graduation rates were higher than the national average in both groups.
- With regard to gender, impacts were specific to young men; the monthly earnings for young men who attended Career Academies increased significantly—by \$212, on average—compared with the young men in the control group. Additionally, Career Academies participation significantly decreased the likelihood of post-secondary education enrollment, from 82 to 76 percent, among young men.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study was a well-conducted randomized controlled trial. The study's authors estimated multiple related impacts on labor market participation; performing multiple statistical tests on related outcomes makes it more likely that some impacts will be found statistically significant purely by chance and not because they reflect program effectiveness. Because precise p-values and standard errors were not provided in the report, CLEAR could not confirm whether the main impacts remained statistically significant with an adjustment for multiple comparisons.

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.