

Citation

Maxwell, N., & Rubin, V. (1997). The relative impact of a Career Academy on post-secondary work and education skills in urban, public high schools. Hayward, CA: The Human Investment Research and Education Center discussion paper.

Highlights

- The study aimed to examine the academic and labor market outcomes of students who were enrolled in a Career Academy track in a large, West Coast, urban high school district, compared with peers enrolled in general, vocational, and academic track programs.
- The analysis is based on a 1996 survey of students who were high school sophomores in 1990 to 1993.
- Career Academy graduates reported higher graduation rates (8.7 percentage points) and higher rates of enrollment in a two- or four-year college (11.6 and 17.9 percentage points, respectively) than students in the general education track.
- The quality of causal evidence presented in this study is low because the authors did not adequately control for the academic achievement of students before they enrolled in a Career Academy. This means we are not confident that the results estimated in the study are attributable to Career Academies; other factors are likely responsible.

Features of Career Academies

Career Academies aim to make the high school experience more academically rigorous and relevant to subsequent careers. They achieve this by creating small learning communities; integrating academic and vocational curricula (typically focused around one occupation, profession, or industry); and offering work-based learning experiences, often through partnerships with local employers and post-secondary institutions. Career Academies work with the employers to ensure that the curriculum reflects their needs, and employers often provide summer work experience and mentoring to career academy students.

This study examined Career Academies in one large, West Coast, urban school district. The district first opened a Career Academy in 1985 and had 12 at the time of the study. The Career Academies varied in their career focus and were at different stages of implementation. Students self-selected into attending a Career Academy or continuing in an academic, vocational, or general track. The direct costs of the Career Academy were \$1,000 more per student than the standard high school offering.

Features of the Study

The study examined measures of educational achievement, such as on-time high school graduation and two- or four-year college enrollment, as well as various educational and labor market skills. The authors estimated the effects of high school program track—Career Academy, vocational education, or academic track—on these achievement and skills outcomes, controlling for students' and schools' characteristics. In addition, the authors attempted to control for students' program track selection by estimating the effect of retrospective student-reported assessments of their own pre-program awareness and skills. This information was gathered through a post-graduation survey mailed to 10,102 students who attended school in the district as sophomores from 1990 to 1993. The authors also collected district records for these students. Students returned 1,223 surveys. The authors reported estimates for the full sample and for subgroups based on gender, ethnicity, and English language ability.

Findings

Career Academy graduates reported higher graduation rates (8.7 percentage points) and higher rates of enrollment in a two- or four-year college (11.6 and 17.9 percentage points, respectively) than students in the general education track.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study authors attempted to control for students' program selection by adjusting their results to account for known correlates between observable student characteristics and program selection. They also attempted to compensate for low survey response rates by corroborating their findings with a nationally representative National Educational Longitudinal Study sample. However, although the authors intended to control for standardized achievement test scores, these data were unavailable for almost half the study sample.

Without additional controls for the baseline nonequivalence of students from each of the three program tracks, and evidence of the representativeness of the survey respondent sample to the fielded sample, it is likely that the estimates of program effects are confounded by the initial student program selection and subsequent survey response bias.

Causal Evidence Rating

The quality of causal evidence presented in this study is low because the authors did not adequately control for the academic achievement of students before they enrolled in a Career Academy. This means we are not confident that the results estimated in the study are attributable to Career Academies; other factors are likely responsible.