

Citation

Maxwell, N. (2001). Step to College: Moving from the High School Career Academy through the 4 Year University. *Evaluation Review*, 25(6), 619–654.

Highlights

- The study aimed to examine the effect of attending a Career Academy on students' secondary and post-secondary academic outcomes. The authors compared the outcomes of students who had attended a Career Academy in a large, inner-city school district in California and had applied to a medium-sized state university in California, with those of peers who had graduated from a traditional public high school in the same district and had applied to the same university.
- The analysis was based on university records, which provided information on student demographics, high school grade point average (GPA) and college GPA, enrollment status, and major of those students who actually attended the university.
- The study found that students from Career Academies had higher GPAs in college and less need for remediation in English at the university level. Students from career academies still had a high need for remediation in math and low college graduation rates, but they graduated at a 4-percent-higher rate than students from traditional high schools.
- 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, nor for students' pre-intervention financial disadvantage. This means that we are not confident that the results estimated in the study are attributable to Career Academies; other factors are likely to be 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 the employers' needs, and employers often provide summer work experience and mentoring to Career Academy students.

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

Features of the Study

The study examined several measures of educational achievement, including high school GPA, route to college (including whether the student transferred from another college or university, and whether the student required remediation in math or English), entrance into college, college GPA, and type of exit from the university (graduated, dropped out, or was dismissed). The study had 1,402 participants. All participants graduated from high school between 1990 and 1997 and applied to the university between 1990 and 1998. One-quarter of the applicants to the university from the school district studied had graduated from Career Academies. The authors estimated the effects of high school program track—Career Academy or traditional high school—on these academic outcomes, controlling for student race and gender as well as for high school campus attended.

Findings

- Students who attended Career Academies had higher college GPAs and less need for remediation in English at the university level than students from traditional high schools.
- They had a high need for remediation in math and low college graduation rates, but they graduated at a 4-percent-higher rate than students from traditional high schools.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

Students in the Career Academy were self-selected. Characteristics of the students and their families, such as previous academic achievement and degree of financial disadvantage, could shape both selection into the Career Academy and later outcomes, but the study did not control for these. In the absence of these controls, it is likely that the estimates of program effects are confounded by the initial student self-selection into the program.

The university and school district studied had built a strong relationship with one another, to help students successfully transfer from the districts' high schools to the university. While this relationship minimized the institutional barriers for post-secondary admission for students, the findings from this university may not be relevant in other contexts, where the university does not have the same type of relationship with the school district.

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 that we are not confident that the results estimated in the study are attributable to Career Academies; other factors are likely to be responsible.