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## Career Programs Stress College, Too, and Give Students a Leg Up, Study Says

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

Forget the old-fashioned “vocational ed” classes that sent students on a decidedly noncollege track. Over the last quarter-century, a new kind of high school program known as a career academy has proliferated, especially in low-income districts, that combines job placement, college preparation and classes beyond the vocational trades, from accounting to health care.

Now, a long-term and rigorous evaluation of nine career academies across the country, to be released in Washington on Friday, has found that eight years after graduation, participants had significantly higher employment and earnings than similar students in a control group.

Poverty experts called the findings encouraging because few interventions with low-income teenagers, especially blacks and Hispanics, have shown significant and lasting effects, and they come at a time when young minority men, especially, are losing ground disastrously in the job market.

Career academies offer students experience in the workplace, and help them get paying jobs while they pursue standard academic coursework. When the study, by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, began 15 years ago, there were fewer than 500 career academies in the United States. Today there are more than 2,500, and the new findings are likely to spur more growth, several experts said.

The participants were mainly Hispanic and black, and the schools had emphases including business, tourism, health care and electronics, with students enrolled for three or four years.

Eight years after high school, when most participants were about 26, the academy group had average earnings 11 percent — or \$2,088 a year — higher than the control group.

“The findings show that you can make an investment in high school that has a measurable payoff in earnings well after,” said James J. Kemple, the author of the study and an education specialist at Manpower, a New York-based group that evaluates poverty programs.

“They also show that you can provide a solid foothold in the labor market without compromising a student’s capacity to go on to college,” Mr. Kemple said.

To compare similar students, all those who volunteered to join a career academy at each school were randomly assigned either to participate in the academy or to serve as part of a control group outside the academy. The increase in earnings was higher for men in the academy group, who showed a 17 percent difference, or \$3,731 per year. The researchers were mystified by the negligible gains for women and plan to study possible factors like the time the women spent raising children and the longer time they spent in postsecondary schooling, which might portend better earnings in later years.

To the surprise of researchers, the groups showed no difference in rates of high school and college completion. Ninety percent of students in both groups finished high school or obtained a G.E.D., and half gained some postsecondary credential — rates far higher than among their school populations over all. Researchers believe that those who initially expressed interest in the academies may have shared similar motivation to succeed, whether or not they were chosen for the special program.

But this also suggests that something about the academy experience, apart from educational achievement, promoted greater success in the job market. One likely factor is the exposure the academies provide to a range of adults in real workplaces, said J. D. Hoyer, who directed a “school-to-work” initiative for the Clinton administration and now heads the National Academy Foundation, which advises career academies on curriculums and other topics.

“The students see what work is like, and they build a network of caring adults at school and in the workplace,” Ms. Hoyer said.

Students in an academy stay together as a group. They usually get paying internships after their junior year, which for some turn into jobs they keep through college or longer. At the tourism academy at Miami Beach Senior High School, for example, many start working on the front desks of major hotels, some with hopes of entering management.

One school in the study is Valley High School in Southern California, where nearly 90 percent of the 3,000 students are Hispanic and about 180 sophomores, juniors and seniors are in its Global Academy of Finance. Along with traditional subjects, students take computer training and accounting courses and study the stock market, real estate and personal finance. They do internships with banks, law and finance firms and in the school district’s administration, among others.

Students seem to benefit from being part of a special, small group, said Mark Bartholio, the academy director. Many do not pursue finance careers but instead go into teaching, social services or criminal justice, he said, but one graduate said the accounting skills he learned in the academy had enabled him to help start a small business.

One student who just graduated, Henry Gomez, 18, started working as a Wells Fargo Bank teller last year and is continuing this summer. "I'm not sure this is what I want to do, but I like the experience I'm gaining," he said.

Before he entered the academy, he had worked at a Target store, said Mr. Gomez, whose parents did not finish high school. He plans to enter a community college in the fall, with the bank wages helping him pay his way.

Another graduate, Cathy Castorena, 18 and working at Wells Fargo, said she would continue at the bank, while she attends a state university and studies psychology. Her dream, she said, is to become a prison psychologist.

"The career academies tell students that if you are willing to make the effort to succeed in a bachelor's degree program, here's a way to do that," said David Stern, an education expert at the University of California, Berkeley, who was an early proponent of career academies. "But if you end up not wanting to apply, or start college and don't finish, you have some work experience and training to fall back on, to give you a little edge in the labor market."

*Correction: An earlier version of this article misidentified the high school in southern California with a Global Finance Academy. It is Valley High School, which is part of the Santa Ana Unified School District, but not Santa Ana High School.*

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