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Career Academies Provide Long-Term, Sustained Earnings Gains and Enhanced Family Stability

Effects Concentrated Among Young Men and Higher-Risk Students

(New York) — In urban high schools, too many students who manage to graduate are unprepared for postsecondary education or the world of work. And they often enter a labor market that offers them few opportunities for good jobs. New findings from a long-term study of Career Academies — a popular high school reform that combines academics with career development opportunities — shows that the model produces sustained employment and earnings gains, particularly among young men. While Career Academies had no impact (positive or negative) on educational attainment, they did show modest positive effects on increasing family stability.

The report, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood*, is the culmination of a 15-year random assignment study of Career Academies in nine urban high schools around the country conducted by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization. The study has followed the students from when they entered high school until eight years after their scheduled graduation. More than 80 percent of students in the sample are black or Hispanic. The report will be released at a forum in Washington, DC, on Friday, June 27, 11:45 am – 1:30 pm, sponsored by the American Youth Policy Forum.

The main findings of the new report:

- Career Academies produced sustained earnings gains that averaged 11 percent (or \$2,088) more per year for program participants than for individuals in the control group — a \$16,704 boost in total earnings over the eight years of follow-up.
- These impacts on earnings are concentrated among young men and students at risk of academic failure. Young men saw an annual earnings gain of 17 percent (or \$3,731) — or nearly \$30,000 over eight years.
- Career Academies serve as viable pathways to a range of postsecondary education opportunities, but they do not appear to have been more effective than other options available to students. More than 90 percent of the students graduated from high school or received a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and half earned a postsecondary degree or credential.

- Participants in Career Academies were more likely to be living independently with children and a spouse or a partner, compared to those in the study’s control group. Young men were more likely to be married and to be custodial parents.

Typically serving 150-200 students in grades 9 or 10 through grade 12, Career Academies have three distinguishing features: (1) they are organized as small learning communities to create a supportive, personalized learning environment, (2) they combine academic and career and technical curricula around a career theme (such as business, computers, or health care), and (3) they establish partnerships with local employers to provide career awareness and work-based learning opportunities for students. More than 2,500 Career Academies operate across the country.

“The findings from this study of Career Academies suggest that pitting academic preparation against career development in high schools may be a false dichotomy,” said James J. Kemple, Director of MDRC’s K-12 Education Policy Area and author of the report. “The impressive labor market gains seen by Career Academy students did not come at the expense of their education attainment: eight years after scheduled graduation, 95 percent had finished high school or received a GED and 50 percent had earned some form of postsecondary certificate or degree.”

The report suggests that Career Academy students’ exposure to career awareness and development activities — including job shadowing, work-based learning activities, career fairs, and career-related guidance — may have driven the positive labor market impacts.

“The employment and earnings effects of Career Academies are encouraging news, particularly for young men of color, who are often left behind in the labor market,” noted Gordon Berlin, President of MDRC. “Career Academies appear to offer young men a boost — comparable to the earnings premium of a year or two of postsecondary education — that puts them on a different earnings trajectory.”

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Headquartered in New York City, with a regional office in Oakland, CA, MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization with nearly 35 years of experience designing and evaluating education and social policy initiatives.