

Career Academy Top-Ten FAQ

1. HOW MANY CAREER ACADEMIES ARE THERE?

While no one has a precise count, since no federal agency oversees them, researchers estimate between 2,000 and 3,000 career academies exist in the United States. California has about 500, 285 of which enjoy state grants.

2. WHAT CAREER FIELDS ARE THEY IN?

They range over some 25 different fields, although the majority are in a handful of popular fields: health & biosciences, business & finance, education, tourism & hospitality, information technology, law & public safety, arts & communication, engineering & construction, and environmental science & natural resources.

3. WHAT KIND OF STUDENTS ARE THEY FOR?

They are generally open to any students who are interested, and serve a cross section of students at a high school. They don't aim for any particular type of student, other than those with an interest in the career field. They do prepare students for college.

4. HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION?

Traditional vocational education prepares high school students with specific job skills and usually points them away from college and toward lower-end jobs. Academies combine academic subjects with knowledge of a career field, and point students toward college and a broad range of jobs.

5. HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT FROM REGULAR HIGH SCHOOL?

For most students, high school curriculum has no focus. It is comprised of a series of unrelated subjects, with no connections to each other, or the outside world. Academies provide a focus and show the relevancy of academic learning to college majors and careers.

6. IS THERE ANY RESEARCH TO SHOW THEY WORK?

There have been a number of rigorously designed studies, both in California and elsewhere, one a \$15 million national study. These generally show improvements in attendance, retention, graduation rates, and grades. They also show that both students and teachers like them better than traditional high schools. With one exception, however, they haven't shown improvements in test scores.

7. HOW MUCH DO THEY COST?

They don't cost students anything more. But, they do add costs to the high school, mostly for the time teachers need to work together to coordinate their curriculum, and to involve employers as speakers, field trip hosts, mentors, and internship supervisors. While there are no precise figures, researchers estimate they add about 10% to the cost of a high school.

8. DO THEY CAUSE PROBLEMS?

They can. They take a substantial amount of work to implement, can be difficult to schedule, and may alienate teachers and parents who like traditional approaches. While the data show that on average academies bring student improvements, within those averages there are failures. They're not a panacea; most successful ones are usually the ones in which the most time, money, and effort have been expended.

9. HOW WOULD I GO ABOUT GETTING MY CHILD INTO ONE?

Check with your high school district office or local high school to see if they have any. Entry is voluntary, and usually involves an application process during the spring semester of the freshman year. Most academies operate in grades 10-12, although for a few it's grades 9-12 or 11-12.

10. HOW CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THEM?

There are several organizations that support and study academies. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Career Academy Support Network (CASN) at the University of California at Berkeley maintains a Web site (casn.berkeley.edu) with lots of information, including links to other such organizations. The California Department of Education also has a Web site for its network of "Partnership Academies" (www.cde.ca.gov/partacad).