Who Participates in High School Career Academies?
A Descriptive Analysis of Six-Year Enrollment Trends in a Southeastern School District

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ABSTRACT

In response to increasing high school graduation requirements along with emerging skills in the workforce, the focus of career academies has evolved from one of keeping students enrolled in high school through graduation to a more robust preparation for college and careers for all students. This new focus may have resulted in a demographic shift in the students participating in career academies. To that end, the purpose of this study was to describe the demographics of students who participated in career academies in one Southeastern school district over a six-year period from 2007 – 2012. Findings indicate that a gender gap continues to exist among career academies. Additionally, when compared to the population across the district’s high schools, while the career academies are becoming more diverse, participation of minority groups in career academies still lags behind that of their Caucasian counterparts. Implications for administrators and future research opportunities are also articulated.

Keywords: Career Academy, Career Education, Enrollment Trends, Student Participation, Technical Education

INTRODUCTION

In response to new workforce skill requirements emerging over the past few decades, the goals and objectives of a “new vocationalism” shifted from specific training for work to a more rigorous academic/technical grounding focused on preparation for careers for all students (Hernández-Gantes, Phelps, Jones, & Holub, 1995; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Levesque &
Hudson, 2003a, 2003b; Levesque, Laird, Hensley, Choy, Cataldi, & Hudson, 2008; Levesque, Lauen, Teitelbaum, Alt, & Librera, 2000; Silverberg, Warner, Fong, & Goodwin, 2004). The underlying premises of career and technical education (CTE) have emphasized an increased rigor in vocational programs, a shift to high-wage and high-tech career preparation, and increased integration with academic education to support further preparation for post-secondary education or work (Levesque & Hudson, 2003a; Levesque & Hudson, 2003b; Levesque et al., 2008; Levesque et al., 2000; Silverberg et al., 2004).

As a result of the shift to prepare all students for college and careers, CTE program areas experienced considerable enrollment transformations over the past two decades. While still popular in the mid-1990s, trade and industry related programs suffered a marked decline in enrollments, while at the same time, enrollment in programs focused on communications, health care, and technology nearly doubled (Levesque et al., 2000). This shift in enrollment led more students away from the general education pathway to one aligned with preparation for either college or work.

Historically, students considered to be low achieving and not headed for college following high school graduation were often tracked in occupational programs (Agodini & Deke, 2004; Agodini, Uhl, & Novak, 2004; Levesque & Hudson, 2003a, 2003b; Levesque et al., 2008; Levesque et al., 2000; Silverberg et al., 2004). As the field has changed in the last two decades with emerging program designs such as career academies, students participating in CTE programs have become more eclectic and diverse with nearly one in five students transitioning to post-secondary institutions earning a minimum of a bachelor’s degree (Silverberg et al., 2004). That is, students across the country were enrolling in more academic and college-prep courses due in part to increased high school graduation requirements (Levesque & Hudson, 2003b; Levesque et al., 2008; Levesque et al., 2000).

In CTE, career academies in particular have become commonplace around the country due to their perceived impact on academic and other student outcomes. Career academies were originally developed to keep students considered at-risk of dropping out enrolled in school through graduation (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). However, as the value of career academies became more evident, there were unintended consequences regarding enrollment, in particular for students at risk for dropping out. As the benefits of career academies became more widely recognized, students with stronger academic skills began to enroll in career academies (Castellano, Stone, Stringfield, Farley-Ripple, Overman, & Hussain, 2007; Kemple & Snipes, 2000). As a result, career academies began attracting greater numbers of high-performing students. So while career academies were originally designed to help students who needed academic assistance, the opportunity appears to have been seized by more academically robust students.

To that end, there could be further implications to the growing challenge of increasing the high-skill workforce, particularly in terms of increasing enrollments of female students and students of color within STEM occupation fields (Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Syed & Chemers, 2011; Whalen & Shelley, 2010). For school districts experiencing changing demographics, this situation may be compounded. From a practitioner’s perspective, there should be a clear alignment between the demographics of the students enrolled in career academies and the communities in which their families live and work. That is, the CTE programs which serve as the foundation to career academies within the schools and the community should also align with employment opportunities within that community.

Agodini et al. (2004) confirmed that while there are numerous research studies which identify the populations of students enrolled in CTE programs generally, those findings do not indicate the factors that influence participation nor the student demographics of each program under the CTE umbrella. Furthermore, there is a gap in the CTE literature on program participation, supporting the notion that the demographic (gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic