

FLORIDA'S CAREER ACADEMIES, 2006-07

CAREER ACADEMIES DEFINED

Career academies are secondary-level programs that are designed to provide students with integrated academic and technical skills to seek employment in a career area while preparing them for transition to post secondary education. In most fields, a high school diploma is not sufficient for entry-level positions, so college preparation in these cases is essential. In the national literature and research, career academies have three defining characteristics: college preparatory curricula with an integrated career theme, small learning communities, and partnerships with employers and postsecondary institutions. In addition, the state of Florida has placed emphasis on the importance of industry certification to ensure that students who complete career academy programs leave with industry-recognized credentials that validate the acquisition of essential technical skills.

POLICY BACKGROUND

Since their inception in the 1970s, career academies have evolved from a dropout prevention program to a key strategy for high school reform in the 21st Century. Policymakers have come to realize that the traditional high school model no longer serves well in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Secondary education must equip students with skills that will make graduates competitive in the global labor market. This means aligning curricula with essential occupational skills and preparing students for entry into the workforce, preferably after continuing postsecondary education. Career academies are designed to engage students with a rigorous college preparatory curriculum integrated with hands-on instruction in relevant occupational skills. This blended curriculum requires strong partnerships with both business and industry and postsecondary institutions.

From 1993-2001 the Legislature appropriated funds for the planning and implementation of 38 career academies across the state. In 2004, the Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement (CEPRI) issued a report on career and professional education that recommended the development of career academies with small learning communities, strong academics in a career context, and partnerships with the local business community.¹ CEPRI recommended that a high level office coordinate state planning grants to high schools for the development of career and professional academies. In 2005, the Legislature initiated the SUCCEED, Florida, Career Paths program, which awards planning, implementation, and redesign grants for the development or continuation of career academies. Beginning in 2005-06 the state implemented a competitive process that sought applications from regional workforce boards for projects to replicate Okaloosa County's Career High Skill Occupational Initiative for Career Education (CHOICE) academies. Funding for this initiative came from an allocation to the Youth Development Council and totaled \$1 million in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds. To date, 16 districts have been funded through this process for a total of \$2,909,216. In 2006, the Legislature defined "career and professional academies," and SUCCEED grant criteria were revised to align with this definition.

In 2007, the Legislature passed the Career and Professional Education Act (F.S. 1003.491), which repealed the CHOICE project section and amended the career and professional academies statute. The law requires districts to develop 5-year plans collaboratively with business and postsecondary partners and establish at least one career and professional academy no later than the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year. Students completing a career and professional academy must receive a standard high school diploma, the highest available industry certification, and opportunities to earn postsecondary credit if the academy partners

¹ CEPRI, September 2004, *Career and Professional Education: Preparing Florida's Students for the Knowledge Economy*

with a postsecondary institution approved to operate in the state. All career courses offered in a career and professional academy must lead to industry certification or college credit linked directly to the career theme of the course. In 2007, Workforce Florida, Inc. (WFI) awarded \$1 million of federal Workforce Investment Act funds to Okaloosa County's CHOICE Institutes to form The Banner Center for Excellence – Career Academies/Secondary to provide technical assistance to districts that are developing or redesigning career academies.

OPPAGA'S STUDIES ON CAREER ACADEMIES IN FLORIDA

The Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) has published two reports on Florida's career academies.² The first report was a survey study of career academies operating in 2004-05 designed to determine the extent to which districts were incorporating nationally-recognized core elements and industry certifications in their career academies. The core elements OPPAGA identified based on the national literature were a college preparatory curriculum with a career theme, small learning communities, and partnerships with businesses and postsecondary institutions. Thirty-six districts identified 544 career academies in operation in 2004-05, and OPPAGA collected data from 379 of them for the study. The most common career themes were information technology followed closely by health science.

Eighty-five percent of the academies were implementing at least two of the three core elements, and 51% were implementing all three. Most (89%) of the academies were implementing to some degree an integrated college preparatory curriculum with a career theme. Seventy-six percent had some aspects of a small learning community, and 69% maintained partnerships with postsecondary institutions and business and industry. The depth and completeness of the implementation of these elements varied, particularly the small learning community element.

The study found that among stakeholders, school and district personnel were most likely to provide input in selecting the academy's career theme. Local business and industry was involved in career theme selections among almost two-thirds of the surveyed academies. Local employers provided input in career theme selection for 63% of the academies, and 40% of the academies reported that local workforce boards had input in selecting the career theme. Industry experts and local employers provided input in curriculum development among 69% and 64% of the academies respectively. Local employers partnered with career academies in a number of ways including providing guest speakers, hosting field trips, offering job shadowing opportunities, and administering internships.

Regarding industry certification, 35% of the surveyed academies incorporated student industry certifications as an element of the curriculum. Among the academies that did not have any form of industry certification (program-, teacher-, or student-level certification), 56% reported that no certification was available for their program or that further postsecondary education was necessary to obtain a certification.

The second OPPAGA report analyzed career academy student data to compare their academic and employment outcomes with similar traditional high school students. The study found that career academy students were less likely to be chronically absent, more likely to score at grade level on the FCAT, and more likely to graduate than comparable peers who were not in career academies. Post-graduate employment outcomes for the two comparison groups were similar, but students who attended career academies that culminated in an industry certification had higher earnings than their peers.

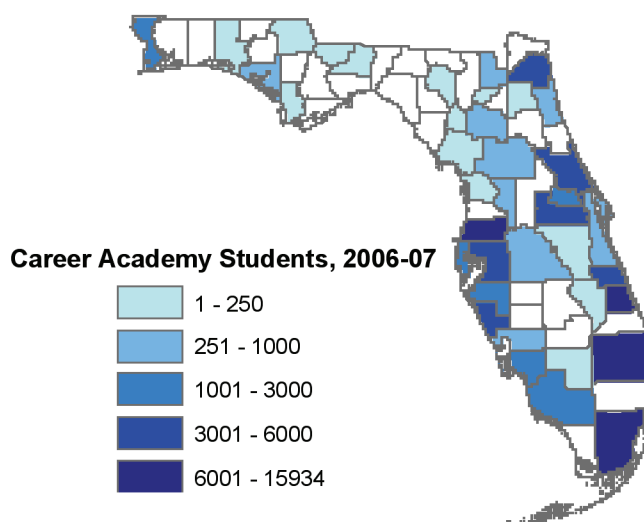
THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S 2006-07 FINDINGS

Over 90,000 career academy participants were reported in the state in 2006-07; on average they performed well compared to traditional students

² OPPAGA reports 06-55, *More Than Half of the State's School Districts Have Career Academies, Most Operating in 2004-05 Incorporated Nationally Recognized Core Elements* (July 2006) and 07-40, *Career Academy Students Perform Better Than Other Students During High School; Later Outcomes Vary* (October 2007)

According to the Division of Workforce Education’s analysis of district data reported to the state, in the 2006-07 school year, there were 90,751 career academy participants in the state, representing 10.4% of the total high school population (871,062). Exhibit 1 displays the distribution of reported career academy students by district. Fifty-two percent of career academy students were female compared to 48% among non-career academy high school students. There was a higher percentage of white students among career academy students (53.9%) than among traditional high school students (48.2%) and correspondingly lower percentages of minority students (see Appendix, Exhibit A1). Career academy students were less likely (10.1%) than traditional students (15.1%) to have on record a physical, mental, emotional, or learning disability. Career academy students were less likely (2.1%) to be English language learners than traditional high school students (5.9%).

Exhibit 1
Distribution of Career Academy Students by District



Source: Florida Department of Education

Career academy students outperformed traditional high school students in a number of areas (see Table 1):

- The one-year dropout rate among career academy seniors was 1.5% compared to 4.0% among traditional high school seniors.
- Career academy seniors maintained a higher cumulative grade point average (2.66) than traditional high school seniors (2.36).
- Career academy seniors also had a better average attendance record than traditional high school seniors.
- Career academy seniors missed 6.6% of the school year on average compared to 7.6% for traditional seniors.
- Career academy seniors were less likely (16.0%) to have had disciplinary action taken against them than traditional high school seniors (17.1%).
- Career academy students who completed three career and technical education (CTE) courses in a single program were higher performers than career academy participants as a whole.³

³ Students who complete three CTE courses in a single program are designated “CTE concentrators” for accountability purposes according to the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006.

