Executive Summary

MAKING IT HAPPEN

How Career Academies Can Build College and Career Exploration Programs

Mary G. Visher
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mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Overview

Preparing high school students for both college and career is a goal that few can disagree with. But while much attention has focused on how to prepare students *academically* for life after high school, less has been directed at the nonacademic skills and knowledge that students need to succeed in college and the workplace. Schools are expected to teach these skills and knowledge, but they are rarely given the support, guidance, and tools needed to do so.

Career academies — small schools within schools that are organized by a career theme — are particularly well positioned to provide these "21st-century skills." Indeed, work-based learning experiences, such as internships, are a central, possibly an instrumental, component of the career academy model. Yet even career academies struggle to make college and career exploration and awareness-building curricula a central part of every student's experience.

With a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education, MDRC and its project partner Bloom Associates piloted a program to help academies build college and career exploration programs. Called "Exploring Career and College Options (ECCO)," the program consists of a series of one-hour in-class lessons, visits to local work sites and college campuses, and a six-week internship with a concurrent weekly seminar that is offered in the summer before or during the senior year. If the program is fully implemented, by the time students graduate from an ECCO career academy, they will have received up to 44 lessons, participated in at least two visits to work sites and two to college campuses, and completed a six-week compensated internship.

This report summarizes findings from a three-year study of 18 academies in three states — California, Florida, and Georgia — that implemented ECCO from 2009 through 2012.

Key Findings

- ECCO significantly improved the capacity of career academies to offer college and career exploration curricula and activities. Academies with little or no existing capacity were able to launch all the components of the ECCO program within the first year.

- As a consequence of this increased capacity, students in ECCO academies participated in career and college exploration activities at substantially higher rates than students who were enrolled in the same academies before ECCO was implemented.

- The ECCO academies were successful in placing into internships most of the students who were interested in and available for them. The internship component of the academy model is often viewed as the most challenging aspect of implementation. Surprisingly, when students did not participate in the internship program, they more likely opted out of it, rather than what has commonly been cited as the reason for low take-up rates — that not enough employers choose to host interns. The students' reasons for opting out of an internship included mandatory summer school and already having a summer job lined up.

Preface

Operating within larger high schools, career academies are small, career-themed schools in which students take classes together as a cohort for three or four years and spend time in local work sites to experience firsthand the world of work. This approach is one of the most durable and popular high school reform models in the United States. Starting over 40 years ago in just a handful of schools, the career academy movement has grown to include over 7,000 academies, ranging from "green" academies in California to tourism academies in Florida to pre-engineering academies in the Northeast. Tens of thousands of students from a wide range of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds, with different academic achievement levels and different educational and career aspirations, enroll in these schools.

The career academy model is also one of the most studied of reforms. Two decades ago, MDRC launched the first random assignment evaluation of career academies to test their impact on academic, labor market, and other student outcomes. The results of that study, which showed that academies have strong and sustained effects on earnings, have helped shape and fuel the growth of the academy movement ever since. One plausible interpretation of these findings is that it was the work-based learning component of the academy experience that drove these positive effects. In 2008, MDRC received a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in the U.S. Department of Education to conduct a second impact study.

The process of recruiting academies for that study, however, led to a surprising discovery: In nearly all the academies visited, the researchers learned that one of the key components of the academy model — internships and other work-based learning experiences — either was nonexistent or served only a handful of students. Although teachers and leaders believed in the value of work-based learning, they explained that they lacked the time, resources, and (sometimes) the know-how needed to approach and recruit employer partners as well as to teach students about appropriate behavior at the work site. So MDRC switched gears and — with the support of IES — launched a different kind of project, whose goal was to create a program and curriculum that would build the capacity of academies to create strong work-based learning programs and to study what it takes for them to succeed. Because career academies are now as much about preparing students for postsecondary education as they are about preparing students to succeed in the workplace, a college exploration component was added to the program.

Eighteen academies in six school districts volunteered to pilot the program, which was developed by Bloom Associates, Inc., in partnership with MDRC and which eventually was named "Exploring College and Career Options," or "ECCO." This report summarizes the findings and lessons learned from the academies' experiences in creating from scratch or rebuilding a program that focused on work-based learning and college exploration activities.

The results show that, within just a year, academies can — with some help and support — build strong work-based learning and college exploration programs that reach most if not all of their students, rather than just a few.

The number of academies continues to grow, thanks in large part to recent federal support for this evidence-based model. The hope is that ECCO and the findings from this research, along with many other capacity-building efforts under way, will help academies fulfill their potential to make a difference for at-risk and low-income youth.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the collaborative efforts of many organizations and individuals, including the career academies that implemented the "Exploring Career and College Options (ECCO)" program, their employer partners, and their districts; the program developer, funders, and advisers; and our colleagues at MDRC. We owe everything to the teachers and students at the 18 career academies and the staff in the district offices of Atlanta (Georgia) Public Schools, Hillsborough County Public Schools (Tampa, Florida), Los Angeles Unified School District, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Mt. Diablo Unified School District (Concord, California), and Oakland (California) Unified School District. Without their willingness to try out the program and so openly share with us their experiences, this report could not have been written.

The program developer, Bloom Associates, Inc., produced the ECCO curriculum and guides and provided support to the academies and districts as they delivered the program to their students. Materials produced by Susan Bloom, Andrea Baker, and Michael Sack with the expert support of Jill Philipson were received with enthusiasm and high praise by the academy teachers and district staff.

We received expert guidance on the materials from David Stern of the Career Academy Support Network, Leslie Haynes of the Completion by Design Assistance Team, and James Kemple of New York University. David Stern also provided invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this report, as did Deanna Hansen of the National Academy Foundation and Lupe Ferran Diaz and Ann Fields of the Miami-Dade County Public School District. Staff at ConnectEd — particularly, Brad Stam, Roman Stearns, Robert Atterbury, and Penni Hudis — were our valued "thought partners" as well as helpful in recruiting the Oakland Unified School District to the project. We are grateful to the Institute of Education Sciences and program officers David Sweet and Hiromi Ono for their thoughtful guidance at critical points throughout the project.

Throughout the three-year project, we often consulted with MDRC colleagues for advice. In particular, we appreciate the support of Robert Ivry, Fred Doolittle, Kristin Porter, Janet Quint, and John Hutchins. Other past and current MDRC staff played key roles in acquiring, entering, and analyzing the data; we thank Alison Black, Micah DeLaurentis, Jean Grossman, Shirley James, Alma Moedano, Shelley Rappaport, and Cynthia Willner. Nicole Clabaugh contributed in ways too many to count. Thanks are also due Robert Weber for his skillful editing and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell, who prepared the report for production.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Overview of the ECCO Program

The phrase "preparing students for college and career" has become so ubiquitous that it has become almost a mantra in educators' discourse in recent years. Whether mentioned in the Common Core State Standards, in the mission statements of high schools, or in political campaigns, improving the college and career readiness of young people is a concept that few can disagree with. Much attention has focused on how to prepare students *academically* for life after high school. But "readiness" also means having the knowledge and skills to make informed choices about careers and postsecondary education options and — once graduated — to successfully navigate both worlds. High schools are expected to teach these skills and knowledge but are rarely given the guidance or tools to do so.

With a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education, MDRC and its project partner Bloom Associates developed and piloted a program to help schools build or strengthen their college and career exploration programs. Called "Exploring Career and College Options (ECCO)," the program was designed specifically for career academies but can be adapted to fit many educational settings. *Career academies* are schools within schools that enroll up to several hundred students. They are organized by a career theme, such as health sciences or media arts. Besides regular high school courses, career academy students enroll in a sequence of career-technical courses centering on the theme area. Finally, students participate in internships and other experiences in workplaces — which is often called "work-based learning" — to reinforce the connections between what they learn in the classroom and their future careers. An earlier random assignment study of career academies conducted by MDRC demonstrated the effectiveness of the model. Over the years, as the number of career academies grew, the parallel pressure to ensure that all students meet high academic standards inadvertently crowded out time for career exploration activities — the very activities that nonexperimental evidence from the MDRC study suggests may have played an instrumental role in causing the large increases in earnings that career academy participants experienced over the eight-year period following high school graduation. Career academies typically cite a lack of time, skills, and resources as the reason for not offering such activities to all of their students.

ECCO is a capacity-building program to help career academies offer opportunities to students to learn about their workplace and postsecondary options through four core components: a series of one-hour in-class lessons, visits to local work sites, visits to college campuses, and a six-week internship offered to all students in the summer before or during their senior year. The curriculum includes guidance for educators on how to arrange and manage students' out-of-school experiences as well as guides for partnering employers. As shown in Table ES.1, by the

The Career Academies Project

Table ES.1

ECCO Components, by Grade Level

Semester	ECCO Component	10th-Graders	11th-Graders	12th-Graders	Total
Fall	Career exploration lessons	5	5		10 lessons
	Career exploration visits	1	1		2 visits
Fall and/or spring	Career development lessons	7	7	5	19 lessons
Spring	College readiness lessons	5	6	4	15 lessons
	College visits	1	1		2 visits
Summer between 11th and 12th grades	Internship and seminar			1	1 internship

NOTE: The number of lessons listed in the Total column is the maximum number of lessons available. Some lessons are considered optional.

time students graduate from an ECCO career academy, they will have received up to 44 one-hour lessons, participated in at least two visits to work sites and two visits to college campuses, and completed a six-week compensated internship along with a concurrent weekly seminar.

This report summarizes findings from a three-year study of the implementation of the ECCO program. ECCO was launched in 18 career academies in six school districts in three states: California, Florida, and Georgia.[1] The purposes of the study are to document the experiences of these schools in adopting the program and to assess the extent to which, when given support and resources, programs like ECCO can be fully implemented. The study also collected descriptive data to assess the promise of the program to improve student participation in career and college exploration activities and to improve their awareness of postsecondary options.

Key Findings from the Project

- ECCO significantly improved the capacity of career academies to offer college and career exploration curricula and activities to their students. Acade-

[1]Nineteen academies volunteered to participate, but one academy withdrew before the program began.

mies with little or no existing capacity were able to launch all the components of the ECCO program within the first year.

- As a consequence of this increased capacity, students in academies that implemented ECCO participated in career and college awareness and exploration activities at substantially higher rates than students who were enrolled in the same academies before ECCO was implemented.
- Most of this increased participation in career and college exploration activities occurred in the first two semesters of exposure to ECCO; an additional two semesters of exposure did not appear to substantially improve participation beyond the boost achieved in the first year.
- ECCO academies that were given generous support in the form of financial assistance and coaching were able to implement the program and sustain it with high fidelity for up to three years. Somewhat surprisingly, however, even those academies in the study that received less support were able to establish or strengthen their programs.
- The ECCO academies were successful in placing into internships most of the students who were interested in and available for them. The internship component of the academy model is often viewed as the most challenging aspect of implementation. Surprisingly, when students did not participate in the internship program, they more likely opted out of it, rather than what has commonly been cited as the reason for low take-up rates — that not enough employers choose to host interns. The students' reasons for opting out of an internship included mandatory summer school and already having a summer job lined up.

Career Academies: A Proven High School Reform Model

The academy model is one of the oldest and most stable of high school reform models in the United States. A number of factors help explain the lasting appeal of career academies. Especially in recent years, academies focus on preparing students for *both* college and career, not one or the other, by offering not only a rigorous college preparatory curriculum but also career-technical education. Academy advocates reject the "false dichotomy" that students need to prepare for college *or* career, arguing that the skills needed to succeed in either arena are the same — or at least overlapping. Second, academies attract and are well suited to serve a broad cross-section of high school students, from those who are at high risk of dropping out to those who are on track to enroll in four-year universities. Finally, the career academy model has been the subject of much

research and evaluation, some of which has generated rigorous evidence of the model's effectiveness and much of which has shaped the evolution of the model over the past few decades.[2]

MDRC's pivotal study of career academies — started in the mid-1990s — was one of the most rigorous evaluations of any high school intervention conducted at that time.[3] The study used random assignment to construct a program group and a control group of about 1,800 students and then tracked them through and beyond high school for several years after their scheduled graduation. The study found strong and sustained positive impacts from participation in career academies on students' labor market experiences — notably, higher earnings. These impacts occurred without any detrimental effects on educational outcomes, such as graduation from high school or postsecondary enrollment.[4]

ECCO: A Career and College Exploration Program

ECCO teaches students about the workplace and postsecondary options through a series of one-hour in-class lessons, visits to local work sites (called "career exploration visits") and to college campuses ("college visits"), and a six-week internship offered to all students in the summer before or during their senior year. The curriculum includes guidance for teachers on how to teach the lessons, arrange and manage students' out-of-school experiences, and work with employers who host the visits and accept interns. To ensure solid program implementation, ECCO includes a professional development and technical assistance component.

As shown in Table ES.1, students who spend tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades in an ECCO academy would experience — by the time of graduation — up to 44 lessons taught in

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[2]David Stern, Charles Dayton, and Marilyn Raby, *Career Academies: A Proven Strategy to Prepare High School Students for College and Careers* (Berkeley: University of California, Graduate School of Education, Career Academy Support Network, 2010), Web site: http://casn.berkeley.edu/resources.php?r=158&c=1.

[3]James J. Kemple, *Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood* (New York: MDRC, 2008). Web site: http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_50.pdf.

[4]More recently, a study used state records data in California to describe the characteristics of students enrolled in California Partnership Academies (CPAs) and compare them with those of students who were not enrolled in academies. The study also looked at differences in graduation rates and test scores. Although the study found that academy students graduated at a higher rate, the design did not permit controlling for students' characteristics. But the study also compared the scores of academy and nonacademy students on the state's standardized tests, controlling for both school and demographic characteristics. No significant differences were detected. See Charles Dayton, Candace Hamilton Hester, and David Stern, *Profile of the California Partnership Academies, 2009-2010* (Berkeley: University of California, Graduate School of Education, Career Academy Support Network, October 2011), Web site: http://casn.berkeley.edu/downloads/CPA_Report_2009-10.pdf; see also David Stern, Phil Saroyan, and Candace Hamilton Hester, *Comparing Students in Each California Partnership Academy with Non-Academy Students at the Same High School, 2009-10* (Berkeley: University of California, Graduate School of Education, Career Academy Support Network, August 2012), Web site: http://casn.berkeley.edu/resource_files/ComparingAcad_%20Non-AcadStudents_2012.pdf.

their regular career-technical or academic classes. They would have gone on two visits to local work sites and two visits to college campuses. In the summer between eleventh and twelfth grades, they would have had a six-week internship in a local work site and attended a weekly, half-day seminar covering a variety of topics that are conducive to success in internship, college, and career.

A total of 18 career academies in five school districts volunteered to participate in this project. Four served as "pilot academies," two of which operated the program for three years and two of which operated the program for two years. These four academies received substantial support in the form of free materials, training, regular coaching, and a grant to compensate the teacher who served as the ECCO coordinator in each academy. The remaining academies were recruited for a "scale-up phase" in which they were asked to operate the program supported by a less intensive "train-the-trainer" model of coaching, to assess the feasibility of scaling up the program in several academies at a time within a district. During the first year of ECCO implementation, for example, whereas the pilot academies received monthly calls and a visit each semester from the program developer, the scale-up academies received monthly calls and occasional visits from a district employee who was trained by the program developer, with periodic participation by the developer.

Key Findings from the Implementation Study

Overall, the pilot academies implemented the core components of ECCO as they were designed. All four academies taught the lessons in the proper sequence; arranged for all the required career exploration visits (in which at least 80 percent of their students participated); visited a range of postsecondary educational institutions, including both community colleges and universities; and placed in an internship about 70 percent, on average, of the students who were interested and available.

This success was almost replicated by the scale-up academies using a train-the-trainer model and reduced support, although three of the fifteen academies did not complete the yearlong program. One academy withdrew before the project began, and two withdrew over the course of the year. The remaining scale-up academies were able to implement each component of the program with good fidelity. They conducted all the required off-campus visits and placed about the same percentage of their juniors in internships as the pilot academies did. But while the pilot sites taught all the required lessons, the scale-up sites taught, on average, about 80 percent of the required lessons.

Factors that appear to be associated with smooth program implementation across all the ECCO academies include:

- A strong district-level employee with the capacity and credibility to effectively support the academies
- A high level of commitment to the goals of the program at the academy level
- Alignment with the district's existing initiatives and priorities
- Flexibility in scheduling, within the academy's calendar, coupled with release time or stipends to compensate ECCO coordinators for the time they spent building and supporting partnerships with employers

Key Findings from the Analysis of Participation Rates and Short-Term Outcomes

The main outcome of interest is whether ECCO, a capacity-building intervention, resulted in increased student participation in career and college exploration activities. Surveys and a variety of other data sources were used to assess the evidence for this, as well as the extent to which ECCO could plausibly have improved other short-term outcomes, such as students' awareness of college and career options and the connections between high school, postsecondary education, and their career aspirations.

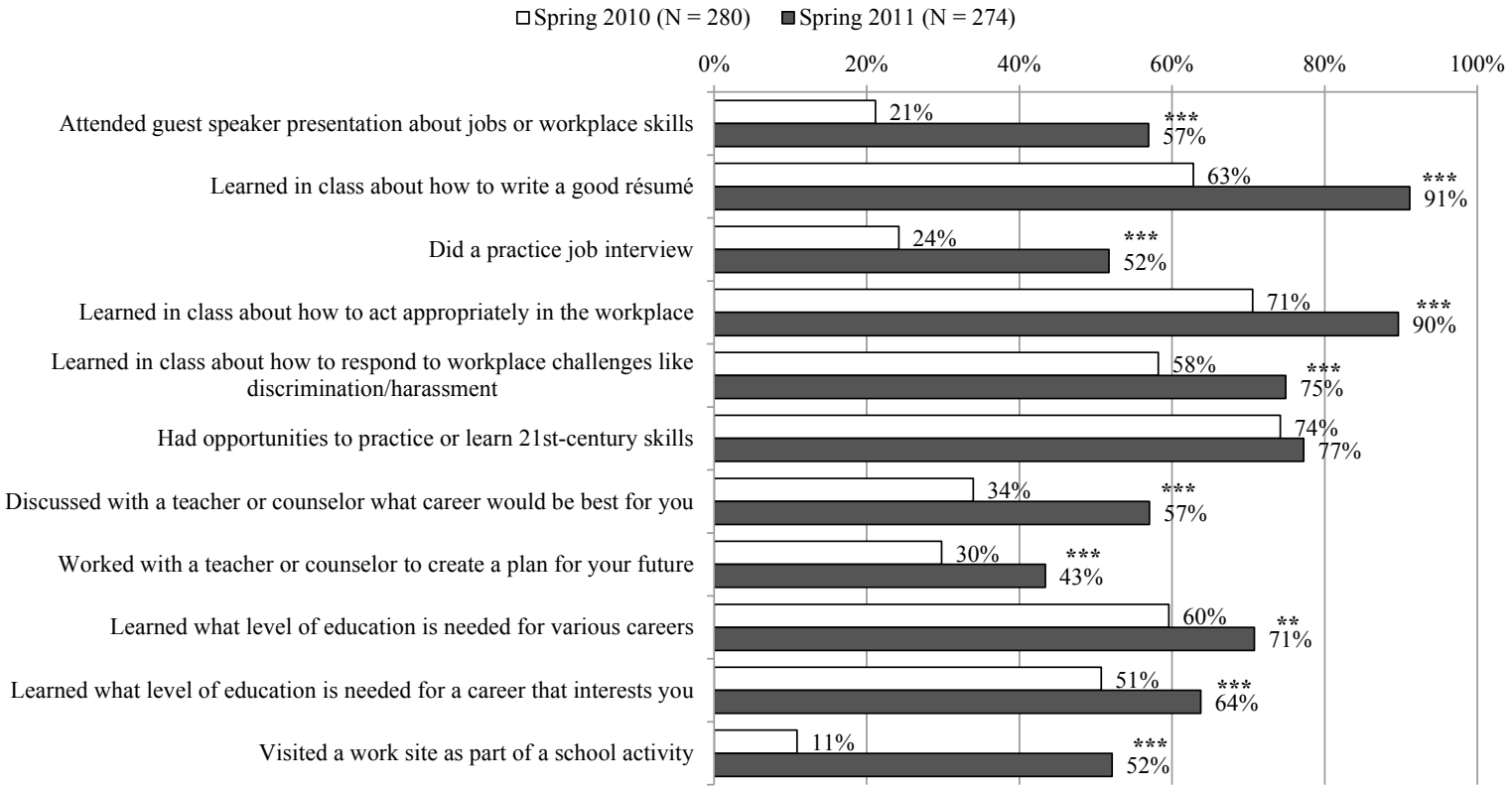
- Students with two semesters of exposure to the ECCO program participated in more career exploration activities than students in the same academies before the program was implemented. For example, after two semesters of participation in ECCO, the percentage of students who visited a local work site as part of their school programming more than quadrupled. The percentage of students who performed a practice job interview more than doubled, and the percentage of students who reported that they had learned about what level of education is needed for various careers increased by 9 percentage points. (See Figure ES.1.) A second year of exposure to ECCO generally resulted in little additional growth in participation in these activities over and above the growth that happened in the first year.[5]

[5]These findings result from comparing participation rates at three points in time: the year prior to the academy's implementing ECCO, one year after implementation started, and two years after implementation. The first comparison (before and after one year of implementation) uses data on students in two academies: the Academy of Art and Technology (AOAT) and the Center for Hospitality, Tourism, and Marketing (HTM). The second comparison (between one and two years of implementation) uses data on students in two other academies: the Culinary Operations Academy (COA) and the Digital Safari Academy (DSA).

The Career Academies Project

Figure ES.1

Participation in Career Exploration Activities During the School Year: Comparison of Tenth- and Eleventh-Grade Cohorts Combined, with Zero and Two Semesters of ECCO, First-Year Academies (AOAT and HTM)



(continued)

Figure ES.1 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations are from the ECCO spring student surveys.

NOTES: This analysis is based on survey respondents enrolled in a given grade in spring 2010 and spring 2011. The white bars are the regression-adjusted outcomes of students who responded to the spring 2010 student survey. The dark bars are the regression-adjusted outcomes of students who responded to the spring 2011 survey.

Outcomes are adjusted for the following student characteristics: academy fixed effects, grade fixed effects, whether a student belonged to a racial or ethnic minority, gender, mother's educational attainment, whether a student was ever held back, whether the student received a D or below in English or math in the previous school year, and missing indicators for each of these characteristics.

A two-tailed t-test is used for all statistical tests presented in this figure. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Due to missing values on some survey items, the number of students included in the analysis varies by activity. The numbers of students reported in the figure are the number of students who responded to the survey.

AOAT = Academy of Art and Technology; HTM = Center for Hospitalty, Tourism, and Marketing.

- Similarly, students with two semesters in ECCO participated in substantially more activities to improve their understanding of their college options and to help them make informed choices. For example, after two semesters of participation in ECCO, the percentage of students who visited a four-year campus doubled, and the percentage of students who reported that they had talked with a teacher about their college plans increased by 20 percentage points. Exposure to ECCO was also associated with a significantly higher percentage of students who attended a college fair, heard a presentation with college representatives, and talked with a teacher about how to pay for college. (See Figure ES.2.)

- Students with two semesters of participation in ECCO showed positive but modest growth on scales measuring awareness of career and college options.

Conclusions

The purpose of the project described in this report was to design and test an intervention that would systematically build the capacity of academies to offer career *and* college exploration activities for *all* their students. The primary question that drove the research is whether academies — if given the resources and the support to do so — *can* launch and maintain a high-quality work-based learning program that includes all students.

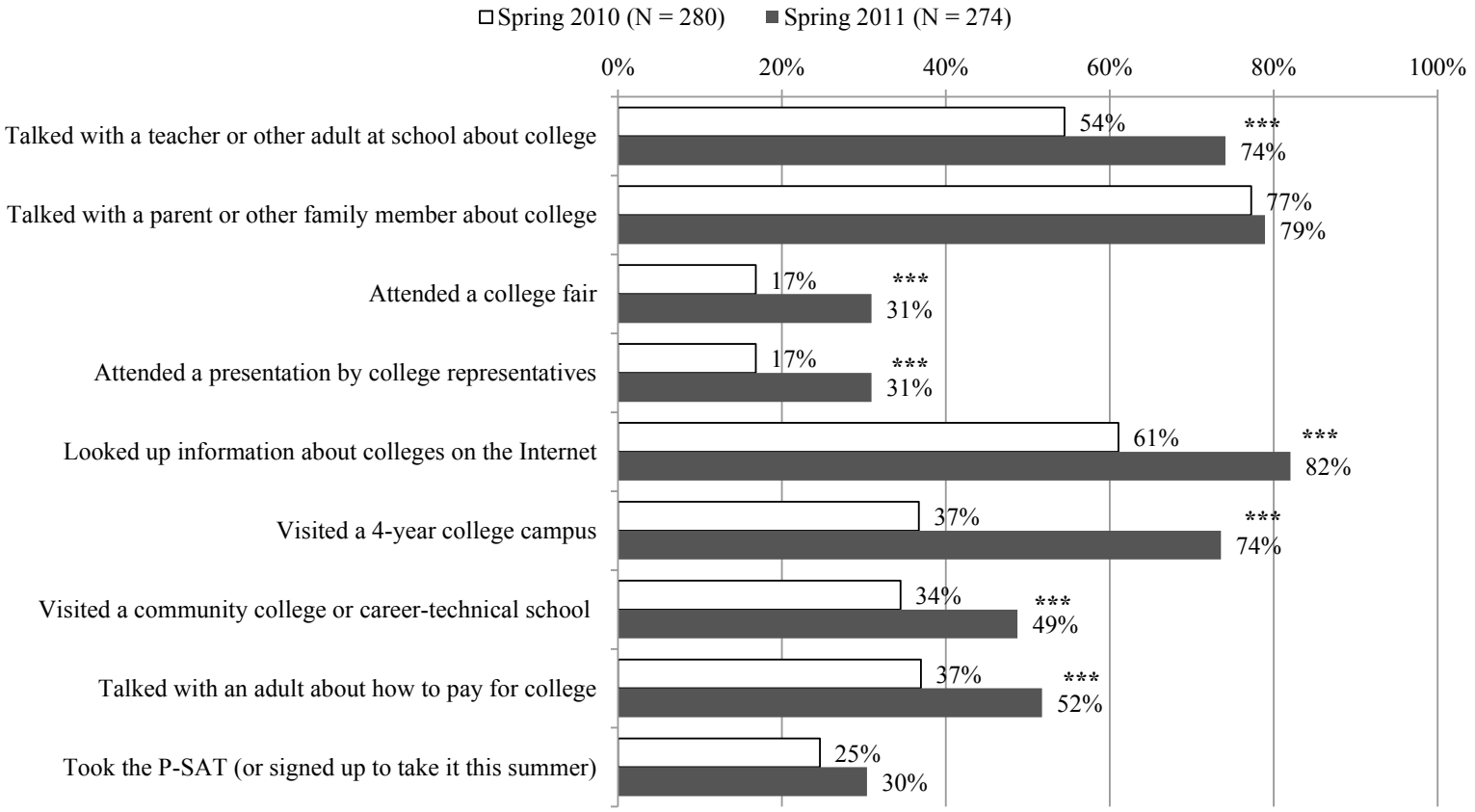
Nineteen academies in six school districts volunteered to implement ECCO — a program consisting of a sequenced set of lessons and off-campus experiences for students in tenth through twelfth grades who enrolled in career academies.[6] All but three academies — those that dropped out early in the project — were able to offer significantly more career and college exploration activities than they offered before ECCO. More students experienced more activities. That being said, the work of building career and college exploration programs was not without significant challenges, even when academies had access to generous resources and support. Fitting new curricula into already-packed courses (whether it was a career-technical course or an English course), arranging visits to workplaces and college campuses, and finding suitable employers to serve as internship hosts took time and skill. Implementation was not perfect. But the accomplishments of the academies in implementing ECCO leave little doubt that the program succeeded in increasing their capacity to build career and college exploration programs that could reach all students rather than just a few, even for the group of academies that received less support.

[6]ECCO was designed for students in ninth through twelfth grades, but, for the purposes of this study, the academies were not required to include ninth-graders.

The Career Academies Project

Figure ES.2

Participation in College Exploration Activities During the School Year: Comparison of Tenth- and Eleventh-Grade Cohorts Combined, with Zero and Two Semesters of ECCO, First-Year Academies (AOAT and HTM)



(continued)

Figure ES.2 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations are from the ECCO spring student surveys.

NOTES: This analysis is based on survey respondents enrolled in a given grade in spring 2010 and spring 2011. The white bars are the regression-adjusted outcomes of students who responded to the spring 2010 student survey. The dark bars are the regression-adjusted outcomes of students who responded to the spring 2011 survey.

Outcomes are adjusted for the following student characteristics: academy fixed effects, grade fixed effects, whether a student belonged to a racial or ethnic minority, gender, mother's educational attainment, whether a student was ever held back, whether the student received a D or below in English or math in the previous school year, and missing indicators for each of these characteristics.

A two-tailed t-test is used for all statistical tests presented in this figure. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Due to missing values on some survey items, the number of students included in the analysis varies by activity. The numbers of students reported in the figure are the number of students who responded to the survey.

AOAT = Academy of Art and Technology; HTM = Center for Hospitalty, Tourism, and Marketing.

While the study clearly establishes the feasibility of building the capacity of academies to offer career and college exploration activities and demonstrates that this increased capacity led to greater student participation in such activities, the evidence is less clear about whether increased participation in those new programs made a difference in the short-term outcomes that were predicted by the theory of change. An analysis of scores on scales measuring changes in career and college awareness, engagement, and 21st-century skills points to statistically significant and substantial differences for some indicators before and after students participated in ECCO. Without a more rigorous research design, however, it is difficult to attribute these differences to ECCO with confidence.

Implications of the Findings for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study of a capacity-building project to help academies offer their high school students a program of career and college exploration experiences suggest several implications for educators and researchers. First, while it is feasible to implement in academies a cohesive program of college and career exploration curricula and activities, this is unlikely to happen without support. Teachers need resources, time, and training. This is particularly true for developing work-based learning programs that directly involve employers. Yet good results can be achieved in a relatively inexpensive "train-the-trainer" model of professional development whereby the school district provides most if not all of the direct support that academies need.

Second, with resources and support, academies in this project were generally able to place about half of their juniors in internships. Although a handful of students were not placed because of a shortage of employer hosts, most of the juniors who did not participate opted out for reasons including obligations to attend summer school, the need to earn money, family summer plans, and the inability to pay for public transportation. This implies that alternatives to the traditional internship model — whereby one student is placed with one employer during the summer — should be considered. Many academies are already experimenting with such alternatives as "virtual internships," group internships, employer mentoring programs, and school-based enterprises that arguably have the same desired learning outcomes of internships. Ideally, the traditional internship should be just one of several outcome-driven options that academies can offer to provide students with work-based learning experiences.

Third, college and career exploration activities should be tightly integrated with the totality of the academy experience. These activities are best not relegated to the career-technical teacher alone. English, history, and math teachers should be involved with teaching an in-class career and college exploration curriculum, and they should find ways to integrate this material with their subject curriculum, accompany students on visits to the workplace and to college campuses, and create and monitor internships. When this occurs, students may be more likely to better understand the connections between what they are learning in their math

and English classes and their futures, leading to deeper engagement in school and better postsecondary outcomes.

Fourth, preparing young people for success in the workplace and college is part of the mission of many programs serving young people, including regular high schools, extended learning programs, youth development programs, job training programs, community colleges, middle schools, after-school programs, and area vocational schools. ECCO — or programs like it — can be adapted and tested easily in a variety of such settings to learn what it takes to move beyond the rhetoric and actually bring effective services to low-income or at-risk young people.

Fifth, many questions remain about the effects that career and college exploration and preparation programs in high school (offered both inside and outside career academies) have on long-term outcomes, such as enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education and participation in the labor market. While such programs hold promise to make a difference in the lives of at-risk, low-income students, without more rigorous evidence than is presented in this report, their true potential remains unknown.

For more information about the ECCO program and how to access it, see www.connectedstudios.org/ecco.

Earlier MDRC Publications on Career Academies

Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood.
2008. James J. Kemple

Career Academies: Course Taking, Test Preparation, and Career Academy Programs — Findings from a Field Study
2002. Thomas Smith

Career Academies: Getting Connected: A Resource Directory for Career Academies
2002. Career Academy Support Network and MDRC

Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Initial Transitions to Post-Secondary Education and Employment
2001. James Kemple

Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School
2000. James Kemple, Jason Snipes

Career Academies: Building Career Awareness and Work-Based Learning Activities Through Employer Partnerships
1999. James Kemple, Susan Poglinco, Jason Snipes

NOTE: A complete list of MDRC publications is available from MDRC and on its Web site (www.mdrc.org), from which copies of reports can also be downloaded.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.