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5-2023

Academy-Based Learning: The High School Education You Wish You Had

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LS400: Capstone

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May 24, 2023

Abstract

This capstone project focuses on the impact of high school academies on student success. This is important because high school academies provide students with cross-curricular experiences related to a specific pathway or field they are interested. An evidence-based argument is offered that high school academies provide specialized programs catering to students' interests and career aspirations. These academies provide students with a comprehensive and challenging curriculum that enhances their academic performance and prepares them for college and career readiness. By focusing on a particular subject or field, students receive a high-quality education that fosters their skills and knowledge in a specific area. Additionally, these academies allow students to gain hands-on experiences to succeed after high school. The primary stakeholder perspective chosen were four high school principals and two academic counselors because they are the ones who foresee their respective institutions and how to give their students the best education possible. Three theme options emerged from an analysis of the data and were explored as ways to address the issue presented.

Academy-Based Learning: The High School Education You Wish You Had

Growing up, I always watched movies that involved students and their high school experiences. That ranged from musicals to what people would call the "typical" high school experience. I always wondered what my high school experience would be like. Would it be typical for me just to show up, get through my required courses and move on, or would I have a memorable high school experience that wasn't so "typical?" Fortunately for me, I had a great high school experience. I was a part of the Video Academy, where my high school experience was a movie.

Academy-based learning was a curriculum approach that my high school implemented. This style meant that a student could learn in an environment that catered to what they planned to pursue or found as an interest. We took classes like any standard high school would during our first year. The only difference is throughout that entire school year. We were given opportunities to observe the academies offered. Then towards the end of the first year, you find out which Academy you were placed in based on your selected options. The Academy I was placed in was Video Academy. From then on, I spent the rest of my high school years with people who shared my interests. For English, we would read books or poems, then our assignment for those cases was to recreate a moment in the book or poem. For history, we could reenact parts of the chapter, etc. This also gave us better opportunities when it came to field trips. In a general classroom, field trips become the typical museum, aquariums, or some college campuses. In an Academy setting, all our field trips were based on our academies. We learned hands-on in our school with equipment, but we went on field trips to places for that said Academy. For example, we went to news studios, we met with some directors, and when we went to colleges, we made sure they were schools where our career path was popular. Although the video is not what I chose to

pursue as a career path, I am forever grateful for the opportunity it did give me. This Academy

allowed us to be hands-on with our work and learn skills I can take on in my future classes. This

made me realize that we also enable students to remember in a comfortable environment, but this

style also encourages different learning styles. For some people, it also allowed them to branch

out and experience different ways that they may have never even known was possible.

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Literature Synthesis & Integration

More schools should offer an academy-based education. Academy-based learning is a

learning environment that allows students to be hands-on in the classroom. This learning

approach allows students a different perspective on the same content and enables them to think

outside the box. Research conducted by Fletcher and Tan (2022) was a study between high

schools where one was a traditional comprehensive model and the other was a career academy-

based model. These two schools were given the same curriculum to teach but were taught in two

different approaches. At the end of their studies, they concluded that the career academy-based

model did score higher [on what?] then the school that was using the traditional model.

Academy-based learning allows students to be hands-on in the classroom and provides

lifelong skills for their future careers, jobs, or college. Career Academies have become the most

durable and best-tested component of a high school reform strategy to prepare students for

college and careers (Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2010). Putting students in these academy-style

classrooms allows them to have an education built on their interests. In high schools, we allow

these students to be placed in cohorts of students who share the same passion. Maxwell and

Ruben (2000) believed that those who achieved an education that resembled career academy

models vs. education that did not have it implemented tended to leave school with skills that helped them land jobs. In contrast, the other students would face years of unemployment.

More schools should offer an academy-based education. Academy-based learning is a learning environment that allows students to be hands-on in the classroom. This learning approach gives students a different perspective on the same content and enables them to think outside the box (Fletcher, 2022). For example, research conducted by Fletcher and Tan (2022) was a study between high schools where one was a traditional comprehensive model and the other was a career academy-based model. These two schools were given the same curriculum to teach but were taught in two different approaches. At the end of their studies, they concluded that the career academy-based model scored higher on overall grades than the school using the traditional model.

Academy-based learning offers many opportunities for students to be involved in learning in an environment that interests them, whether that is film production, where most of their assignments are geared around content creation. Or in a health profession where their studies revolve around hospitals or other healthcare facilities. Maxwell and Ruben's (2000) studies were out of urban schools with different cultures, backgrounds, and communities. All schools were public schools. Given the other communities, the students were able to find a path they could relate to and started their careers with academy-based education. Districts that don't know how beneficial it would be to their students should try to get one school or few classes that gear towards some pathway.

What Should Be Done?

We can help students learn about these opportunities by making known about academy-based learning and how it can help improve engagement in the classroom. We can start sending letters home or emails to the parents so they can also learn about this approach. If we are trying to push these into high schools, we can hold an assembly for students in their last year of middle school so they can be informed about schools that offer academy-based learning. Another way would be for schools that are not using this approach to provide them with how they can reach out to get funding so this can be successful within their school.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Academy based learning is the route most schools should investigate. We need to start preparing students with skills that prepare them for the real world—allowing them to select a pathway they feel most geared toward their interests. Any school can provide this style of education. Many studies have shown that career academy-based learning has positively impacted students. It has increased test scores, involvement, communication, attendance, and student enjoyment in a learning environment.

Methods

For this Capstone Project, the researchers investigated how teachers and school administrators view academy-based education and what they thought could be done to improve it. Then, based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researchers used what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to the benefits and opportunities

provided by academy-based education in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

W.V. High School is in Strawberry, California, part of the Bird Unified School District. Situated in the suburbs, W.V. High is in a residential neighborhood. According to their School Accountability Report Card from the 2021-22 school year, W.V. High's demographics include 2319 total enrolled students, 95.5% Hispanic or Latino, 3% White, 0.5% Asian, 0.3% Black or African American, 2% Native American, 0.2% Filipino, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.1% Two or more races (citation?). Additionally, 90.5% of the student population is socioeconomically disadvantaged, 25.6% are English learners, 16.6 are students with disabilities, 14% are homeless, and 0.3% are foster youth.

S.A. High School is in Salad, California, and is a part of the Salad Union High School District. Situated in the suburbs, S.A. High School is in a residential neighborhood. According to their School Accountability Report Card from the 2020-21 school year, S.A. High's demographics are as follows: 72.5% Hispanic or Latino, 20.0% White, 2.1% Asian, 1.7% Filipino, 1.2% Black or African American, 0.4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, with less than 0.3% identifies as American or Alaska Native and 1.6% of the population has two or more races. Of a cumulative 2,830 students, a total of 1,867 students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, 315 students with disabilities, about 302 are considered English Learners, 60 students receiving migrant education services, 32 students are considered homeless, and 12 that are in the foster care system.

MTY High School is in Otter, California, part of the Otter Peninsula Unified School District. Situated in the suburbs, MTY High School is in a residential neighborhood. According to their School Accountability Report Card from the 2021-22 school year, MTY High's demographics are as follows: 50.1% Hispanic or Latino, 29.4% White, 6.8% Asian, 4.5% Filipino, 4.5% Black or African American, 2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1.4% of the student population has two or more races, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. In addition, of a cumulative 1 292 students, 48.3% are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 10.2% are homeless, 8.1% are students with disabilities, 7.6% are classified as English Learners, and 0.1% of the population are in foster care.

S.S. High School is in Oceancity, California, part of the Otter Peninsula Unified School District. Situated in the suburbs, S.S. High School is in a residential neighborhood. According to their School Accountability Report Card from the 2020-21 school year, S.S. High's demographics are as follows: 76% Hispanic or Latino, 6.6% Filipino, 5.6% White, 5.5% Black or African American, 3.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 2.6% Asian, 0.6% of the student population has two or more races, and 0.3% American Indian or Alaska Native. In addition, of 1,026 students, 84.4% are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 19.1% are English Learners, 18.5% are homeless, 9.8% are students with disabilities, and 0.3% are in foster care.

Participants and Participant Selection

W.V. High School was chosen because it is one of the few schools that serve students in an academy-based classroom setting. Additionally, two of our team members have prior experience with this curriculum style.

Dr. Flowers. W.V. High School principal who was invited to participate due to her role as a high school principal

Mr. Ross. W.V. High School administrator, who was invited to join due to his responsibilities with registration and academies

S.A. High School was chosen because it is one of the few schools that serve students in an academy-based classroom setting. Additionally, two of our team members have prior experience with this curriculum style.

Mrs. Doe. S.A. High School administrator was invited to participate due to her responsibility as a high school principal.

Mr. Jones. S.A. High School administrator was invited to participate due to his responsibility as a high school counselor in the GREEN academy.

Mrs. Bloom. S.A. High School administrator was invited to participate due to her responsibility as a high school counselor in the FAST academy.

MTY High School was chosen because it is one of the few schools that serve students in an academy-based classroom setting. Additionally, two of our team members have prior experience with this curriculum style.

Mr. Norris. MTY High School administrator was invited to participate due to his responsibility as a high school principal.

S.S. High School was chosen because of its different approaches to student learning (they use the project-based learning approach). Additionally, one of our team members has prior experience with this curriculum style.

Mr. Smith. S.S. High School administrator was invited to participate due to his responsibility as a high school principal and to provide a different perspective.

Researchers

This topic is meant for two team members, Derek and Desiree because they were lucky enough to attend a high school where they implemented academy-based learning into their curriculum. Incorporating familiarity or interest in a field allows students to learn more and be involved in the work in the classroom. Additionally, it allowed them to gain hands-on experience within the academies that they selected at the time. Students were put into cohorts with people with the same interests, making building relationships with those around them easy. Something worth noting as well is that the academies are tied into the curriculum via readings, books, or assignments related to their chosen cohorts. On the other hand, Marion went to a high school with a traditional approach to curriculum, and hands-on courses was scarce and only available through electives or voluntary work outside of school. Therefore, this topic is meaningful to her because despite knowing what she wanted to pursue, which was education, there were not many available resources that the school provides to gain hands-on experience in her chosen pathway.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

1. What do you know about academy-based learning? What do you see as the challenges with having an ABL school; What are you most concerned about when it comes to ABL?

2. What is currently being done to sustain ABL or increase the implementation of ABL - by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?

3.   What do you think should be done about improving the ability of schools with ABL to

sustain the academies, or increasing the implementation of ABL into schools that do not

have it in place yet?

4.   What do you think are the challenges to sustain academy-based learning and/or

persuading others about the benefits of implementing ABL?

5.   Is there anything else that you would like to say about ABL and/or sustaining or

implementing ABL?

Procedure

All participants were interviewed in person. Most participants were school principals,

assistant principals, or counselors who may be affiliated with or oversee the academies. All

interviews took place comfortably and flexibly, where interruptions and distractions were

minimized. Each interview took less than an hour and was audio-recorded (with the consent of

the participants). In addition, a semi-structured interview format was used for online discussions

to allow follow-up questions to unclear, interesting, or unexpected responses or questions. All

interviews and surveys were scheduled based on the availability of the interviewees and took no

longer than approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, four principals, one assistant principal, and two counselors were interviewed to see what they think could improve high school academies and student benefits. This is important because high school academies are beneficial because they provide students with a more specialized education. In a high school academy, students can focus on a specific field of study, such as STEM, performing arts, or healthcare. This will allow them to explore or study their interests in greater depth, taking more advanced courses and gaining hands-on experience through internships and other opportunities. As a result, students in high school academies receive a more comprehensive education in their chosen field, which can be beneficial in college and their future careers. Three themes emerged based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature (see Table 1). First, evidence-based decision-making requires evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: cost, effectiveness, and necessity. Price is essential when implementing high school academies because academies often need significant financial resources to establish and maintain. These resources may range from hiring specialized teachers, purchasing equipment and materials, and developing a curriculum. Effectiveness is crucial when implementing academies because these programs aim to provide students with technical education and skills that prepare them for post-secondary education or employment.

Additionally, suppose the academies are not effective in achieving these goals. In that case, they may not be worth the significant investment of the time and resources required to establish and maintain them. The third criterion is necessity. This is an essential factor to consider when implementing high school academies. These programs should address a specific

need or gap in the educational system that general education programs cannot meet. Based on the

evaluation of each Action option, action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Sustainability	Effectiveness	Necessity
Inequities in Education	Low/Medium	High	Medium
Personalized Learning	Medium	High	Medium/High
Student Engagement	High	High	High

Inequities in Education

Education inequality can be an emerging theme in academy-based learning by developing

curricula and educational resources that address issues. Academy-based learning can provide

equal opportunities for all students to learn and develop their skills, regardless of their

background or socioeconomic status. In addition, by using technology and personalized learning

approaches, students can receive a tailored education that meets their individual needs, which

can help to reduce the impact of inequities in education.

Additionally, academy-based learning can help to bridge the digital divide by providing

access to technology and online resources for students who may not have access to them

otherwise.

Personalized Learning

Personalized learning is a central theme in academy-based learning because it focuses on adapting the curriculum to each student's learning style and pace. This approach recognizes that each student has unique strengths and weaknesses and uninteresting strives to tailor the educational experience to meet those individual needs. By providing students with a personalized learning experience, academy-based learning can help them develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to succeed in college, career, and life.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is critical to successful education, especially for high school academies. Academy-based learning programs are designed to provide a more personalized and career-focused approach to education, and students engaged in these programs are more likely to benefit from their unique opportunities and resources. In this context, engagement involves participation, connection, attachment, and integration in particular settings and tasks (Newmann, 1989). This also refers to the degree to which students are actively involved in their learning, taking ownership of their educational goals and seeking opportunities to deepen their understanding of critical concepts. Research has shown that students engaged in high school academies tend to have higher levels of academic achievement, improved attendance rates, and greater career readiness than their peers in traditional high school programs. This highlights the importance of fostering student engagement in academy-based learning environments (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

During our research on high school academies, this theme emerged consistently across all our interviews. The three principals and two academic counselors we spoke with stressed the importance of keeping students engaged and invested in their education. When interviewing S.A.

High School administrators, they shared several projects that academy students completed,

highlighting the hands-on approach to learning central to these programs. For example, the

woodshop/construction academy students contributed to constructing gates for their respective

parking lots. Here, students applied what they learned about measurements, volumes, and other

aspects of building to successfully execute the project (O. Jones, personal communication, April

24, 2023). The counselor is responsible for the sports academy also said that some seniors who

are not physically involved in sports were already assisting games as sports therapists in a

supervised manner (L. Bloom, personal communication, April 24, 2023). But the project that

surprised us the most was when the principal shared that the solar panels they have that

surrounded the school were campaigned and proposed by their students. Though the students did

not physically participate in the building of these panels, they were the ones that suggested the

idea to the district and showed the plan to several businesses that might be willing to participate

(E. Doe, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Based on these projects, student engagement

is a crucial aspect of academy-based learning, and schools that prioritize this approach are better

equipped to prepare students for success in college and beyond.

Recommendation.

Given the three emerging themes, we recommend parents or middle school students

consider high school academies when choosing the right educational path. One effective way to

gather information about high school academies is to speak with surrounding schools that offer

specific programs. By doing so, parents and students can learn about the different types of

academies, their benefits, and their requirements. Additionally, speaking with high school

administrators can help students and parents decide whether an academy aligns with their

interests and goals.

Concessions.

      While speaking with high schools about academies can provide valuable information, it is

essential to know it may not be the only source of information available. Other resources, such as

online research and guidance counselors, can provide helpful information about these academies'

benefits and potential drawbacks. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that high school

representatives may be biased in favor of their school's academies. However, speaking with

representatives from multiple high schools can provide a more well-rounded perspective on these

programs. Therefore, while speaking with high schools about academies may have limitations

(discussed in the next section), it remains a valuable tool in deciding a child's educational and

career path.

Limitations.

      While academy-based learning can provide many benefits, there are also some

limitations. One potential limitation is the issue of equity and access. Not all students have equal

access to high school academies, and some students may face participation barriers, such as

transportation or scheduling conflicts. This may limit the potential benefits of academy-based

learning for sure students and perpetuate educational inequities.

      Additionally, some critics argue that academy-based learning can lead to tracking and

segregation, as students may be sorted into different programs based on their perceived abilities

or interests (Lauen & Gaddis, 2019). This could have negative consequences for students who

are not selected for or are unable to participate in high school academies, as they may miss out on specialized learning opportunities. Thus, not all academy programs may be equally effective in achieving their intended outcomes.

Potential negative outcomes.

While speaking with high schools about academies can be a valuable tool in making informed decisions about education, there are also some potential adverse outcomes to consider. One potential risk is that high school representatives may provide biased or incomplete information about their academies to promote their schools or program. Additionally, some parents or students may feel pressured to choose a particular academy or school based on information received from high school representatives rather than considering other factors, such as their interests and goals. Finally, some students or families may experience disappointment or frustration if they cannot enroll in their preferred Academy or program due to limited space or other enrollment criteria.

It is essential to approach discussions with high schools about their academies with a critical and discerning eye and to supplement this information with additional research and consultation with other sources such as counselors and academic experts. By doing so, parents and students can make informed decisions about the educational options best suited to their needs and aspirations.

Conclusion.

Despite the limitations, concessions, and potential adverse outcomes, we still recommend that parents of future high school students speak with several surrounding high schools is still the best action option for them to learn about the long-term benefits of academy-based learning.

Through our analysis and research, we have seen significant improvements in student engagement, personalized learning experiences, and bridging inequities in education. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that further research and evaluation are needed to fully understand the long-term effects and potential limitations of academy-based learning. By continuing to study and refine these educational models, we can strive for continuous improvement and ensure that all students have access to a high-quality and impactful learning experience.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

For our capstone project, our primary goal was to spread awareness to parents of students entering high school. In addition, we wanted to give them knowledge about high school academies and the benefits that it provides to students. To spread awareness of high school academies, we have created a brochure that details what an academy is, its benefits, and data that reflects attendance and graduation rate between the academy and non-academy students. What surprised us is how close the data was to the Academy's graduation rate to non-academy students. Additionally, something that we should have expected from the data we collected from an interview was that one of the high schools was prioritizing at-risk students to join their academies.

Initially, we planned to interview teachers and students using surveys. However, we could not complete this process because of time constraints and schedule differences. Using the brochure we have created, high schools that implement academies can distribute this resource to inform incoming Freshmen about the programs they offer at their schools. Before our interviews, we believed that high school academies mainly prioritized cohorts, college, career readiness, and overall high school experience. We did not realize that academies also helped students

considered at risk or those in low-income communities. Something we learned about ourselves and working towards change is that there are different ways that we can reach out to our communities to discuss programs such as high school academies and how they can prepare students for college and beyond.

This project taught me that many students did not experience the same high school experience that I did. Most people had traditional high school experiences or pathway integrations but never got to experience the cohort community that Academy-Based learning offers. For my teaching and learning experience, although I want to work with younger children in an Elementary school setting, I know there are still other ways to integrate more minor activities that can coincide with some of the academy approaches. As part of our group call to action, we wanted to help make it more aware to students and parents who may not have known this model existed so that as a future educator at the Elementary level, I can do my part by providing my students and their families with the information needed on Academy-Based Learning in comparison to your traditional approach high school.

Synthesis and Integration

The Action Research project has impacted my professional development because I was allowed to go back and think about my education. I chose a topic that I felt needed more light. Learning in an environment surrounded by people with the same interests and passions was the best part of my educational experience. Not only was I able to engage in a way that I found exciting, but I was also part of a cohort, a group of students where communication in our Academy was strong. I was allowed to share a style of learning that I wanted others to be aware of. The required coursework was also suitable for my professional development because I was

taught how to research topics, and everything was broken down into clear, distinct sections that allowed us to work at a nice pace rather than get the entire assignment thrown to us all at once.

The Liberal Studies MLOs, MLO 1, allowed me to find my pedagogy because I want to incorporate hands-on learning in my classroom. As part of my service learning, I learned more about diversity and how inclusion happens in the school. I came up with ideas to fix that situation within my service-learning classroom. Through my LS 350 classes, I was shown so many new tools that I could use to help me be more technologically advanced in my classroom. I have already started to use these new tools for my homework or other smaller presentations. For MLO 4, I was allowed to learn about stakeholders in two of my classes, CHHS and LS400. For both research topics, I could interview stakeholders and get their input on my research topics. Lastly, for MLO 5, my service-learning class allowed me to dive into an issue within the education system and make an action plan. To become the Educator I would love to be. I know I must live by these values and aim to continue my action project throughout the rest of my education career.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Photo of our Brochure

Link:

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AFipFhIv18&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=viewer

Appendix 2: Sample Draft for Brochure

Dear ████████████,

We hope this email finds you well. We are following up on our previous discussion regarding academy-based learning at ███████████████. We are delighted to share an informative brochure we have created to highlight the benefits of academy-based education at your school.

The brochure provides a comprehensive overview of the academies offered, their advantages, and their positive impact on student outcomes. This brochure will be a valuable resource for incoming students and their parents, as well as during recruitment events and orientation sessions. We have attached a digital copy of the brochure for your review and would appreciate any feedback or suggestions you have.

Digital Copy:
https://www.canva.com/design/DAFipFhIv18/wnBNqfh8qLcEihnrbJp69A/view?utm_content=DA