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

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LS 400: Senior Capstone

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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 in. 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.

Setting The Stage

Some students say they hated their high school years, some students claim that their high school years were boring and some say that they enjoyed every minute of it. I am one of those students that enjoyed every minute of my high school years. Some people say that college is supposed to be the best time of your life. The time when you will meet plenty of friends and go out and adventure and do things that are fun and exciting. But you know what I think whoever said that must've not had such an exciting high school experience as I did.

I look back in time and try to realize why I enjoyed my high school experience so much. It was freshman year and it was time to finally choose our academy. This was the moment that every freshman waits for. The main reason students in our city choose to go to this school over other high schools in our district. The academy that we choose at this exact moment will determine where and who we will be with for the rest of our high school years. There were so many options: Echo for education, Bata for business, Esnr for the environment, Health for medical, and Video for entertainment. My high school used what is called Academy-Based Learning. The Academy Model is a 3-year program offered to high school students that encourages students to thrive in education by making learning more fun and engaging with customized learning, career-focused meaning the academy targets a specific career or industry, Collaboration all students

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are put into a cohort where they will work with their classmates for the remaining of their high school years which builds on good teamwork and communication skills and lastly more support because being in an academy opens you up to more opportunity. Overall, Academy-based learning has so many great benefits when it comes to our education. Studies show that high schools with academies have higher graduation rates as well as higher engagement inside classrooms as well as better attendance rates.

At the time I was shooting big I was so set on wanting a career in the medical field. I applied and got accepted into the health academy at my school. The teaching style was so fun and creative. I found myself learning all kinds of new things like CPR, how to read vital signs, and wearing really cute scrubs throughout the campus. My favorite part about being in the health academy was job shadowing. The academy offered many great opportunities that helped connect me with amazing people in the medical field such as doctors, nurses, sports therapists, dentists, paramedics and so much more. I had the opportunity to gain experience at the hospital shadowing nurses. Our learning experience was completely different compared to other high schools as well as other academies. We were very hands on which allowed me to gain as much knowledge and help me realize the type of learner I am.

And even though I was in my own cohort doesn't mean that you are not allowed to branch out and explore other opportunities. My twin sister was in video academy and she would always come home and talk about how much fun they are having in their classes. For chemistry, they had to create a fun and engaging video about the periodic table. For English, they had to create a fun and engaging video about the book *The Great Gatsby*. I'm not going to lie, I was a little jealous about how fun their course

assignments were. However, I thought to myself that I would never be able to get behind a camera because I would immediately turn red like a tomato. Then I also started thinking about my future. If I was in the video academy how would it benefit me in the long run? My senior year my sister was able to help me get the opportunity to still remain in Health Academy but take a Video Academy course called “Katz News”. And before you knew my senior year I had become a full-time news anchor in the early mornings.

Academy Based Learning has given me the opportunity to gain so much knowledge as well as get hands-on learning experience. It has given me better communication skills, kept me motivated and more engaged in academics, and given me friends and experiences that I will never forget. My capstone project will be about Academy Based Learning and how it benefits our high school student's education.

Literature Synthesis and Integration

Academy based learning in high schools is a popular model that has gained traction in recent years. This approach involves grouping students into smaller learning communities based on their interests or career goals. The goal of academy based learning is to provide students with a more personalized and relevant education that prepares them for their future careers.

Research shows that academy based learning can be effective in improving student outcomes. Studies have found that students in academy programs have higher graduation rates, better attendance, and higher test scores compared to their peers in traditional high schools. These programs also provide students with opportunities to

explore different career paths and gains hands-on experience through internships and other work based learning opportunities.

Overall, academy based learning in high schools has the potential to provide students with a more personalized and relevant education that prepares them for their future careers.

What is the opportunity:

Programs such as academy-based learning offer a range of opportunities that can greatly benefit students in their educational journey. This innovative approach to education provides personalized and career-focused experiences that help students develop essential skills and enhance their overall academic achievement and post-secondary readiness.

One significant opportunity provided by academy-based learning is the chance for students to explore their interests and passions in a specialized field. Through focused coursework, hands-on projects, and partnerships with industry professionals, students can delve deeper into areas of study that align with their career aspirations (Woods, 2017). This opportunity allows them to gain valuable knowledge, develop specialized skills, and build a strong foundation for future academic and professional pursuits.

Additionally, academy-based learning programs provide students real-world experiences through internships, job shadowing, and industry partnerships. These opportunities allow students to apply their learning in authentic settings and develop

practical skills directly transferable to the workplace (Stone, Alfeld, & Pearson, 2008). By engaging with professionals in their chosen fields, students can gain valuable insights, network, and make informed decisions about their future career paths. Moreover, academy-based learning can contribute to developing essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication. The emphasis on project-based learning, teamwork, and real-world applications helps students cultivate these skills, preparing them for success in higher education and the workforce (Kemper & Snipes, 2000)

What should be done:

Implementing academy-based learning effectively requires careful attention to certain key factors. First, establishing solid partnerships and collaborations between schools, employers, and community organizations is crucial. These partnerships provide students with authentic learning experiences, internships, and mentorship opportunities that bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world applications. Such collaboration foster meaningful connections and exposes students to diverse career pathways, enhancing their understanding of the relevance of their education to future employment (Dounay, 2013).

Secondly, comprehensive and ongoing professional development for educators is vital to ensure the successful implementation of academy-based learning. Teachers need training and support to effectively design and deliver curricula aligned with industry standards, integrate project-based learning approaches, and utilize the latest technologies (Rutschow et al., 2019). Professional development programs can

empower educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage students effectively and create meaningful learning experiences.

Additionally, fostering equitable access to academy-based learning is essential. Efforts must be made to eliminate barriers and ensure that all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from these programs (Dounay, 2013). This includes addressing issues related to transportation, financial constraints, and the need of diverse student populations.

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. 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 located in Watsonville, California, part of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District. Situated in the suburbs, W.V. High is in the midst of 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

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American, 2% Native American, 0.2% Filipino, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.1% Two or more races (SARC, 2021). Additionally, 90.5% of the student population are 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 a high school located in S.A., California and is a part of the Salinas Union High School District. Situated in the suburbs, S.A. High School is in the midst of 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. In a cumulative 2,830 students, a total of 1,867 students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, 315 students with disabilities, with about 302 being considered as English Learners, 60 students receiving migrant education services, with 32 students considered homeless and 12 that are in the foster care system.

MTY High School is a high school located in MTY, California and is a part of the MTY Peninsula Unified School District. Situated in the suburbs, MTY High School is in the midst of 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 a cumulative 1, 292 students, a total of 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 a high school located in S.S., California and is part of the MTY Peninsula Unified School District. Situated in the suburbs, S.S. High School is in the midst of 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 a cumulative 1,026 students, a total of 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

W.V. High School was chosen because it is one of the few schools that serves students in an academy-based classroom setting. Additionally, two of our team members have prior experience with this type of 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 participate due to his responsibilities with registration and academies

S.A. High School was chosen because it is one of the few schools that serves

students in an academy-based classroom setting. Additionally, two of our team members have prior experience with this type of curriculum style.

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

Mr. Jones. S.A. High School administrator who was invited to participate due to his responsibility as a high school counselor in charge of the GREEN academy. **Mrs. Bloom.** S.A. High School administrator who was invited to participate due to her responsibility as a high school counselor in charge of the FAST academy. MTY High School was chosen because it is one of the few schools that serves students in an academy-based classroom setting. Additionally, two of our team members have prior experience with this type of curriculum style.

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

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

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

This topic is meaningful for two members of this team, Derek and Desiree, because they were lucky enough to go to a high school where they implement academy-based learning into their curriculum. By incorporating familiarity or interest in a field, it allows students to learn more and be involved in the work that is involved in the classroom. Additionally, it allowed for them to gain hands-on experience within the academies that they selected at the time. Students were put into cohorts with people

that had the same interests, which made it easy to build relationships with those around them. Something worth noting as well is that the academies are tied into the curriculum via readings, books, or assignments that relate to their chosen cohorts. Marion, on the other hand, went to a high school that had a traditional approach to curriculum and hands-on courses were scarce and were only available through electives or voluntary work outside of school. This topic is meaningful to her because despite knowing what she wanted to pursue, which was education, there were not much available resources for her that the school provides in order to gain hands-on experience in her chosen pathway.

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; or 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 of the participants were school principals, assistant principals, or counselors, who may be affiliated or are in charge of the academies. All interviews took place in a manner that is comfortable and relaxing, where interruptions and distractions were minimized. Each interview took less than an hour and is audio-recorded (with the consent of the participants). A semi-structured interview format was used for online interviews, 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 be done to improve high school academies and its benefits to students. 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 choose to 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. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1).

Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: cost, effectiveness, and necessity. Cost is an essential factor to consider when implementing high school academies because academies often require 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 a crucial factor to consider when implementing academies because these programs aim to provide students with specialized education and skills that prepare them for post-secondary education or employment.

Additionally, if the academies are not effective in achieving these goals, then 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 important factor to consider when implementing high school academies. These programs should be designed to 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
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	Sustainability Effectiveness Necessity
Inequities in Education	Low/Medium High Medium
Personalized Learning	Medium High Medium/High
Student Engagement	High High High

Inequities in Education

Inequities in education can be an emerging theme in academy based learning by developing curriculum and educational resources that focus on addressing issues. Academy-based learning can provide equal opportunities for all students to

learn and develop their skills, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status. 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, weaknesses, and interests, and 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 a critical component of any successful education program, 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). Additionally, this also refers to the degree to which students are actively involved in their own learning, taking ownership of their educational goals and seeking out opportunities to deepen their understanding of key concepts. Research has shown that students who are engaged in high school academies tend to have higher level 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 of our interviews. Each of the three principals and two academic counselors that 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, which highlighted the hands-on approach to learning that is central to these programs. For example, the students in the woodshop/construction academy contributed in constructing gates for their respective parking lots. Here, students applied what they learned about measurements, volumes, and other aspects of building in order to successfully execute the project (O. Jones, personal communication, April 24, 2023). The counselor responsible for the sports academy also said that some seniors who are not physically involved in sports were already assisting games as sports therapist 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, was campaigned and proposed by their students. Though the students did not physically participate in the building of these panels, but they were the ones that proposed 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, it is clear that 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 that 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 make decisions about whether an academy is aligned with their interests and goals.

Concessions.

While speaking with high schools about academies can provide valuable information, it is important to know it may not be the only source of information available. Other resources such as online research and guidance counselors can also provide useful information into the benefits and any potential drawbacks of these academies. Additionally, it is important to recognize that high school representatives may be biased in favor of their own 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 its limitations (which will be discussed in the next section), it remains a valuable tool in making decisions about a child's educational and career path.

Limitations

While academy-based learning can provide many benefits, there are also some limitations to consider. 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 barriers to participating, such as transportations or schedule conflicts. This may limit the potential benefits of academy-based learning for certain student and perpetuate inequities in education. 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 negative outcomes to consider. One potential risk is that high school representatives may provide biased or incomplete information about their academies in an effort 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 own interests and goals. Finally, some students or families may experience disappointment or frustration if they are not able to enroll in their preferred academy or program due to limited space or other enrollment criteria.

It is important 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 that are best suited to their needs and aspirations.

Despite the limitations, concessions, and potential negative 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 the bridging of inequities in education. 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 Reflection

For our capstone project, our primary goal was to spread awareness to parents with students entering high school. We wanted to give them knowledge about high school academies and the benefits it provides to students. In order 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 rates between academy and non-academy students. One thing that 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 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 due to time constraints and schedule differences. So this is why

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we decided on creating a brochure. Using this brochure, high schools that implement academies can distribute this resource to inform incoming Freshmen about the programs they offer at their schools. Prior to starting our interviews, we had the mindset that high school academies were mainly prioritizing cohorts, college and career readiness, and overall high school experience. What we did not realize was that academies also helped students who are considered at risk or those in low-income communities. Something that we took away from this experience 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 it can prepare students for college and beyond.

Overall I really enjoyed working on my capstone project. I was part of a group project where we all contributed to gather information and data about our topic. We set up many interviews with high school principals where we worked together to get as much information from our interviewees as possible.

I learned a lot about myself working with a group on such a huge project. I learned that I need to trust and have confidence in my group members and give everyone the opportunity to speak. This topic was just something that I was very passionate about and found myself constantly talking over my group members. I learned how to better communicate with my team members as well as increase my teamwork skills.

When it comes to teaching and learning and working towards change. We as a group found ourselves learning something new each day. Each interview we had we found another piece of information that was new to us. Even myself having lived the academy learning experience found myself learning things I didn't know. Our goal was

wanting to teach and spread awareness of the benefits academies offer high school students. Working toward change by creating a brochure in hopes high school administrators or academic counselors could use our brochure to show incoming freshmen why academy based learning was so important to our education.

Overall during my time here at CSUMB being in the Liberal studies department I have noticed a huge impact and improvement in my professional development. When I transferred to CSUMB I already knew that my goal was to become a future educator and eventually chase my big dream of becoming a principal. Being here at CSUMB has given me the stepping stones and created the path to help me achieve my goals and given me one of the best educations I have ever had. From the professors to the counselors to even the dean of education. I have had all the support a student can ask for to succeed their way through college. This Action Research Project was the eye opening experience for me to see that I was already at the finish line. Interviewing high school principals and teachers and collecting this data regarding high school academies was huge. Four years ago if someone told me that I would be graduating college while completing such a huge research project that involved heavy interviews with administration. I would probably laugh and think that I wasn't capable of achieving something that seemed so out of reach and difficult. But being here at CSUMB has really impacted my professional development and allowed me to gain my confidence back in education. The next steps I envision myself doing to become that professional I want to become is finishing my credential program, becoming an educator but not ending my education. I want to continue my education here at CSUMB and eventually

apply for my Masters in Administration. Those are my next steps to become the person I want to be.

Reflection

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Photo of our Brochure

Link:

https://www.canva.com/design/DAFipFhIv18/wnBNqfh8qLcEihnrBjP69A/view?utm_content=D&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink

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Appendix 2: Sample Draft for Brochure

Dear [REDACTED],

We hope this email finds you well. We are following up on our previous discussion regarding academy-based learning at [REDACTED]. 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=DAFipFhIv18&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink

Best regards,

Marion Ramos, Derek Gomez, and Desiree Gomez
California State University, Monterey Bay

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