



The Research Alliance for
New York City Schools

Why Do RCT Impact Evaluations?

Notes from Career Academy Research and Practice

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Based on work conducted while at MDRC (www.mdrc.org).

Presentation Outline

- *Framework for Impact Evaluations*
- Background on the Career Academies Study
 - Policy Context
 - Career Academies
 - Research Design
 - Overview of Findings
- *Why Methods Matter*
- Implications of the Career Academies for Policy and Practice
- *Conditions for Rigorous Impact Evaluations*

Framework for Impact Evaluations

- Learn “what works:” Determine the causal effect (or lack of effect) of “interventions” on outcomes
- A long-term and cumulative process
- Questions drive methodology, not the reverse
- Multiple questions require multiple methods
- Methods matter
- Must balance research ambition against operational and political realities
- Knowledge-building should be an integral part of policy development and continuous improvement, not an add-on or after-thought

Context for the Career Academies Evaluation

- Youth employment rates falling
- Wages and earnings stagnant, declining for disadvantaged youth (especially males of color)
- Out of wedlock childbearing rising
- Transition to adulthood lengthening
- Emphasis on academic achievement and “college for all”
- De-emphasis on CTE and STW
- Disappointing evaluation results from school reforms, 2nd chance programs for youth

Career Academies

Program Characteristics and Goals

➤ Key Features

- *Small learning communities* to promote interpersonal supports and program coherence
- *Career theme* to combine academic curriculum with career-related course sequence
- *Employer partnerships* to support career awareness and development activities and work-based learning

➤ Goals

- *Dropout prevention*
- *Career development and academic achievement*
- *Pathways to the labor market and post-secondary education*

What Can Career Academy Research and Practice Offer Evidence-Based Policy?

Practice

- 34-year track record of implementation, planned expansion, and efforts at continuous improvement
- Intervention with goals and core features aligned with important problems in high schools and prominent policy options

Research

- 25 years of non-experimental research and a commitment to learning what works
- 15-year random assignment field experiment involving 9 sites, over 1,700 students, and 12 years of follow-up
- Positive effects on labor market outcomes without compromising on academic goals

Features of the Evaluation

- 9 sites reflecting “typical” Career Academy implementation and urban contexts
- Random assignment field experiment involving over 1,700 students who applied to Career Academies in 1993, 1994, 1995
- Qualitative information on program implementation and context
- Baseline and outcome data:
 - Surveys administered during high school (4 waves)
 - School records data
 - 4-year post-high school follow-up survey
 - 8-year post-high school follow-up survey

Key Findings (High School Years)

Strengths

- Higher level of interpersonal supports from teachers and peers
- Increased exposure to career awareness activities, work-based learning, career-technical courses
- Greater benefits to “higher risk” students

Potential Limitations

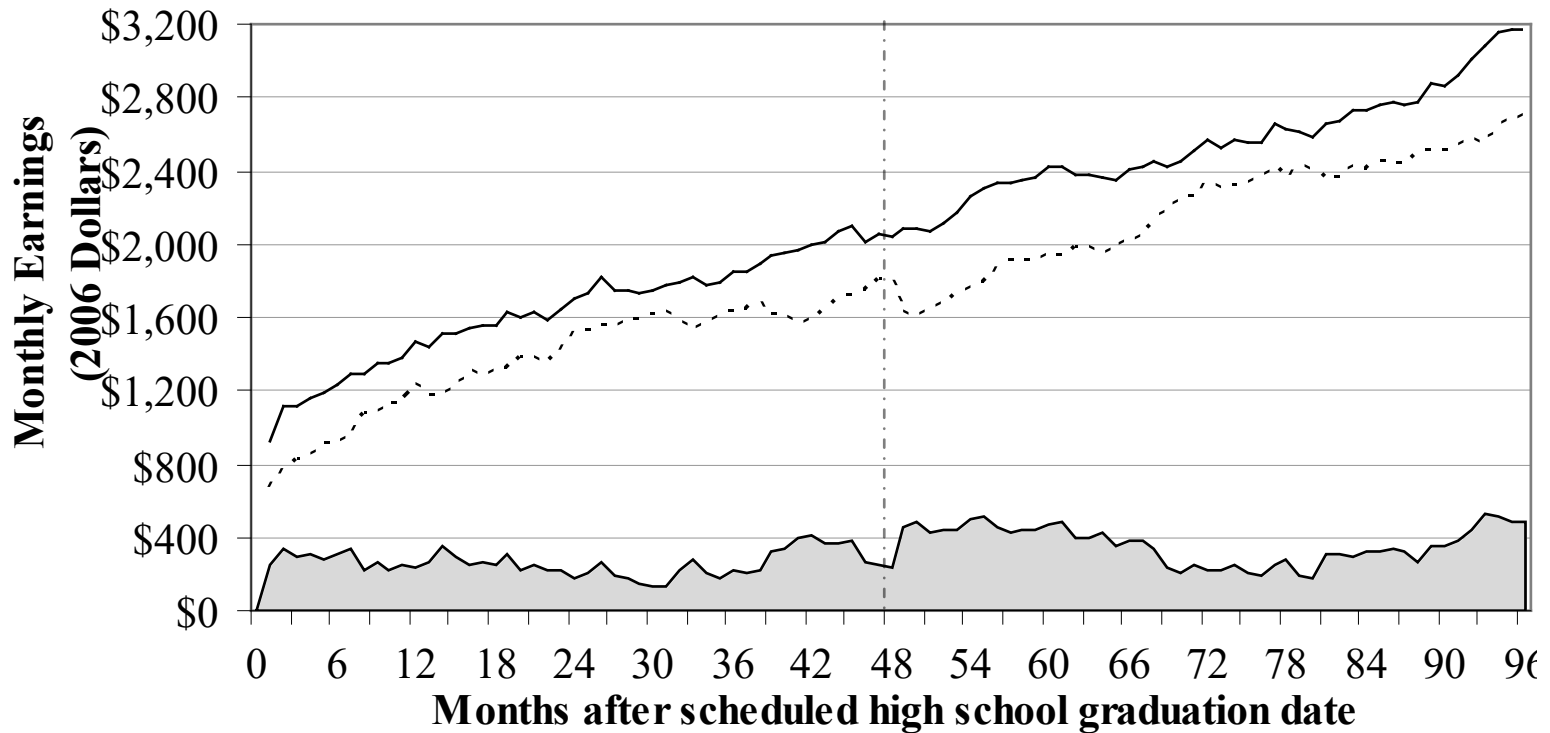
- High attrition rates
- Uneven quality of curriculum integration and internships
- Little or no impact on academic performance indicators

Key Findings

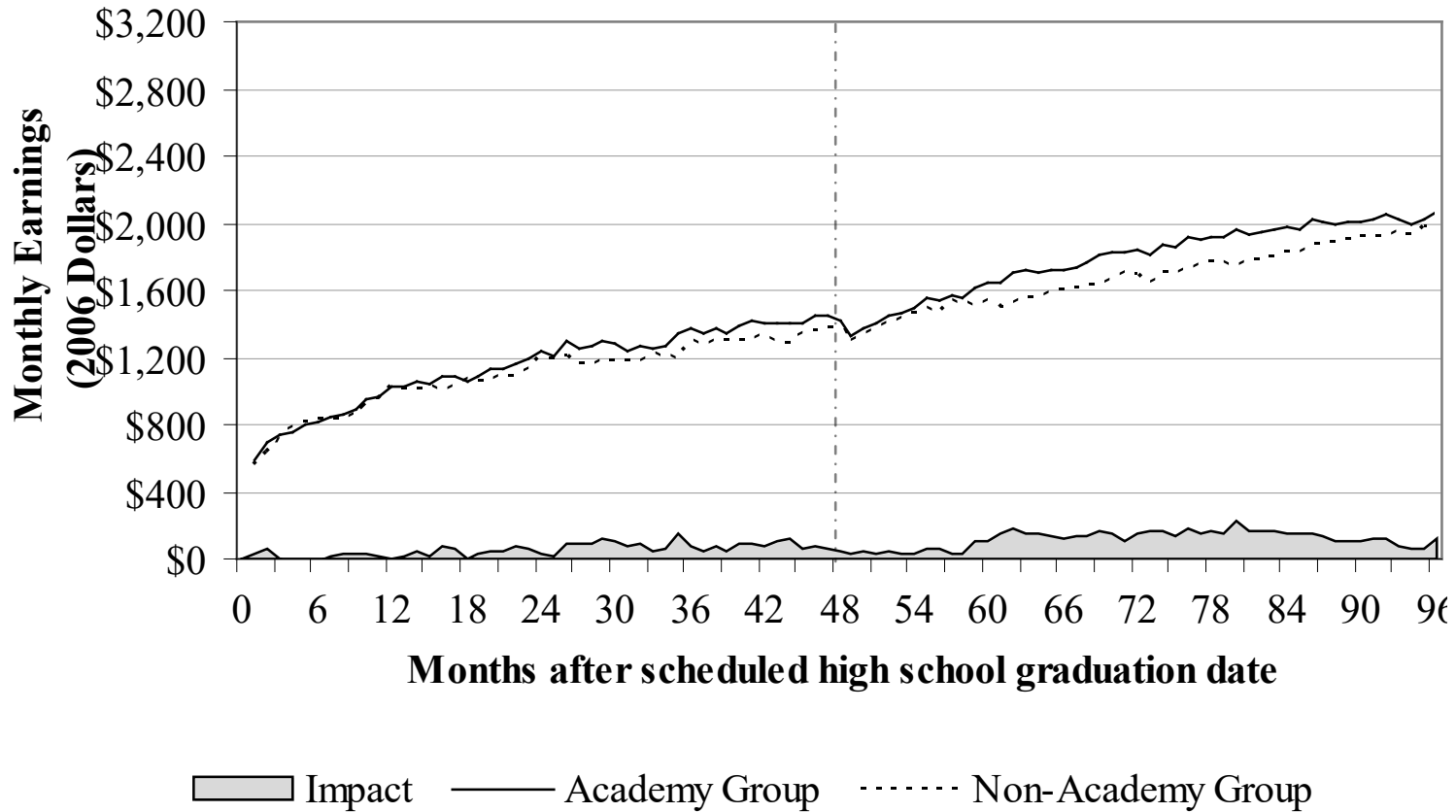
(8 Years Post-High School)

- Positive and sustained impact on employment and earnings through 8 years following scheduled high school graduation.
 - Impact for full sample: \$2,088 per year (11 percent increase)
 - Impact for young men: \$3,724 per year (17 percent increase)
 - Impact for young women: \$1,026 per year (not statistically significant)
- High levels of educational attainment, but no impact (positive or negative) from Career Academies.
- Positive impact on family formation and independent living.

Impacts on Monthly Earnings for Young Men 8 Years Post-High School



Impacts on Monthly Earnings for Young Women 8 Years Post-High School



Why Methods Matter

- Outcomes vs. Impacts

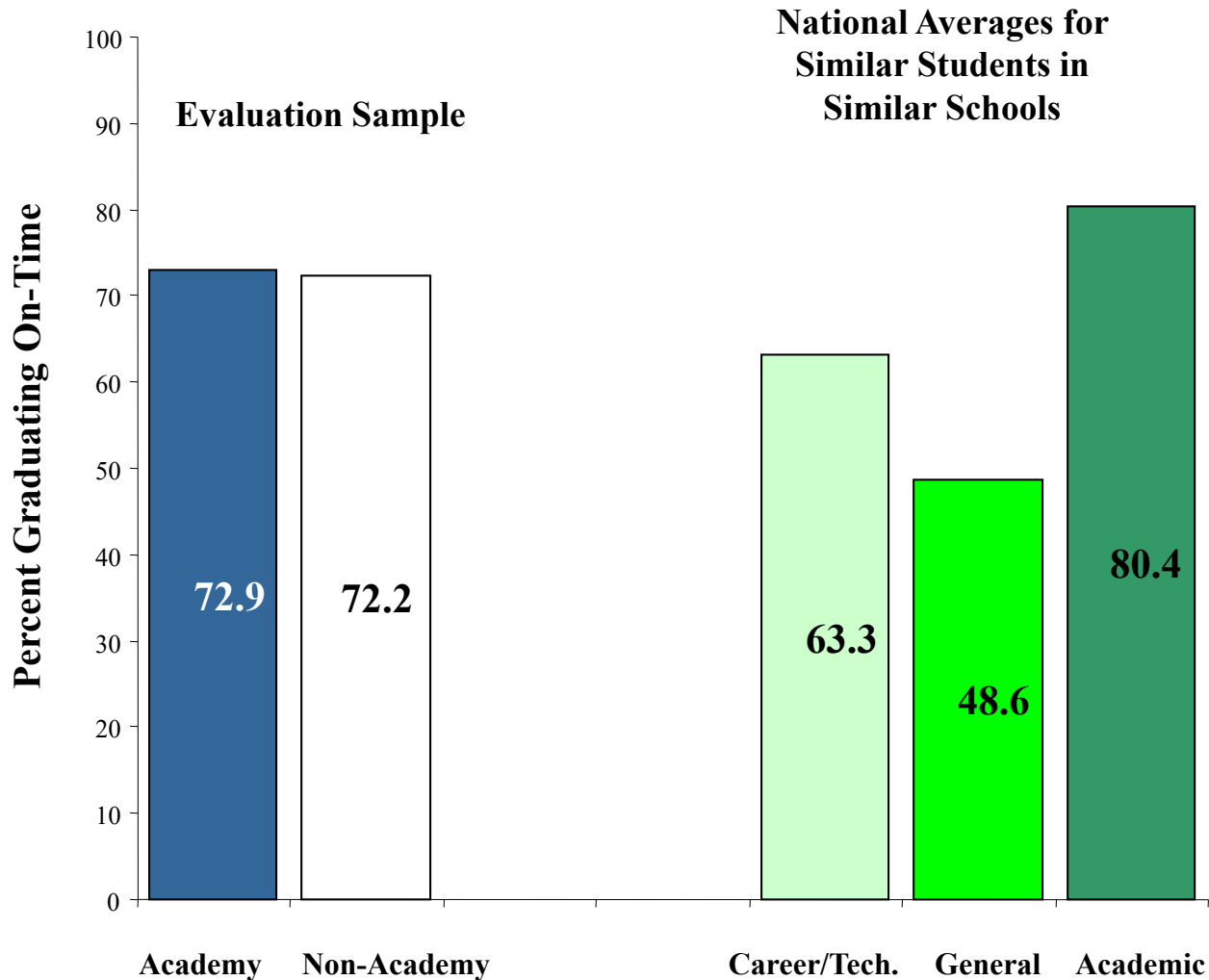
- **Outcomes** = *Measures of behavior or performance.*
- **Impacts** = *Effects of an intervention on outcomes.*

Difference between outcomes for program and outcomes for counterfactual.

- The wrong counterfactual risks offering the wrong answer to the right question
- Outcome standards risk rewarding programs:
 - based on who they serve, rather than what they do
 - that operate under promising conditions, rather than use promising practices

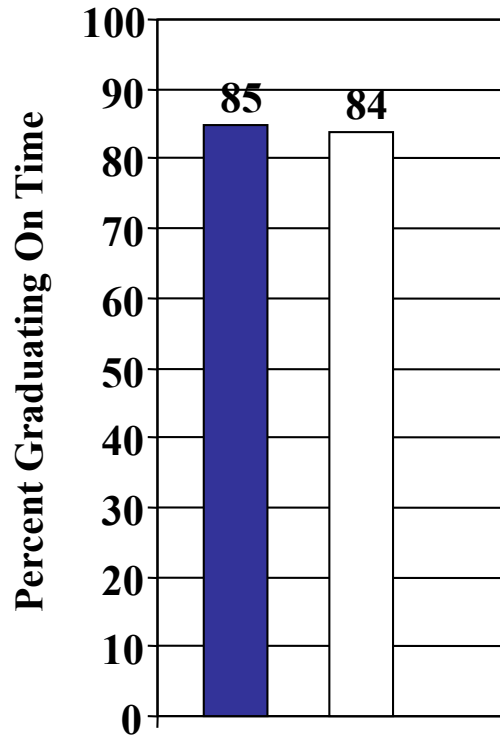
Impact on On-Time Graduation

High Outcomes/No Impact

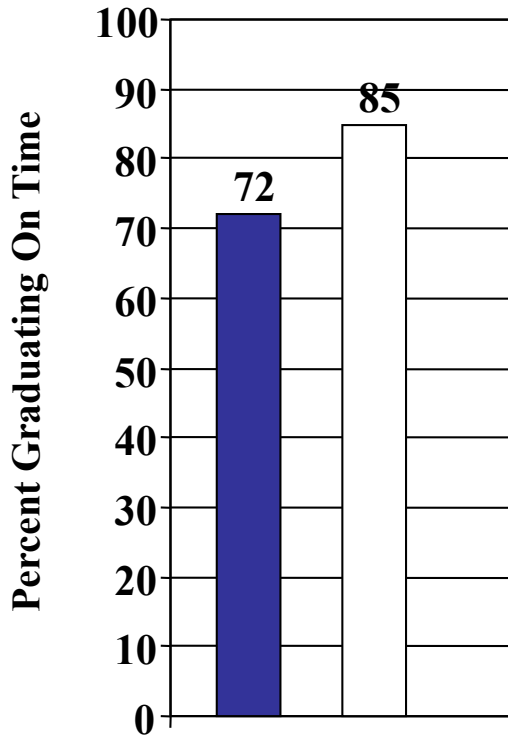


Note: National average estimates are adjusted to represent a sample with the same background characteristics as those in the Evaluation Sample.

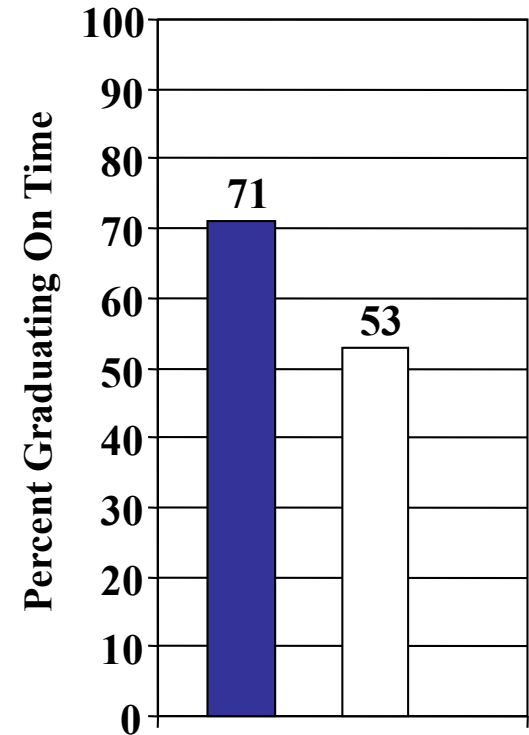
Judging Program Effectiveness: Outcomes vs. Impacts



Program A



Program B



Program C

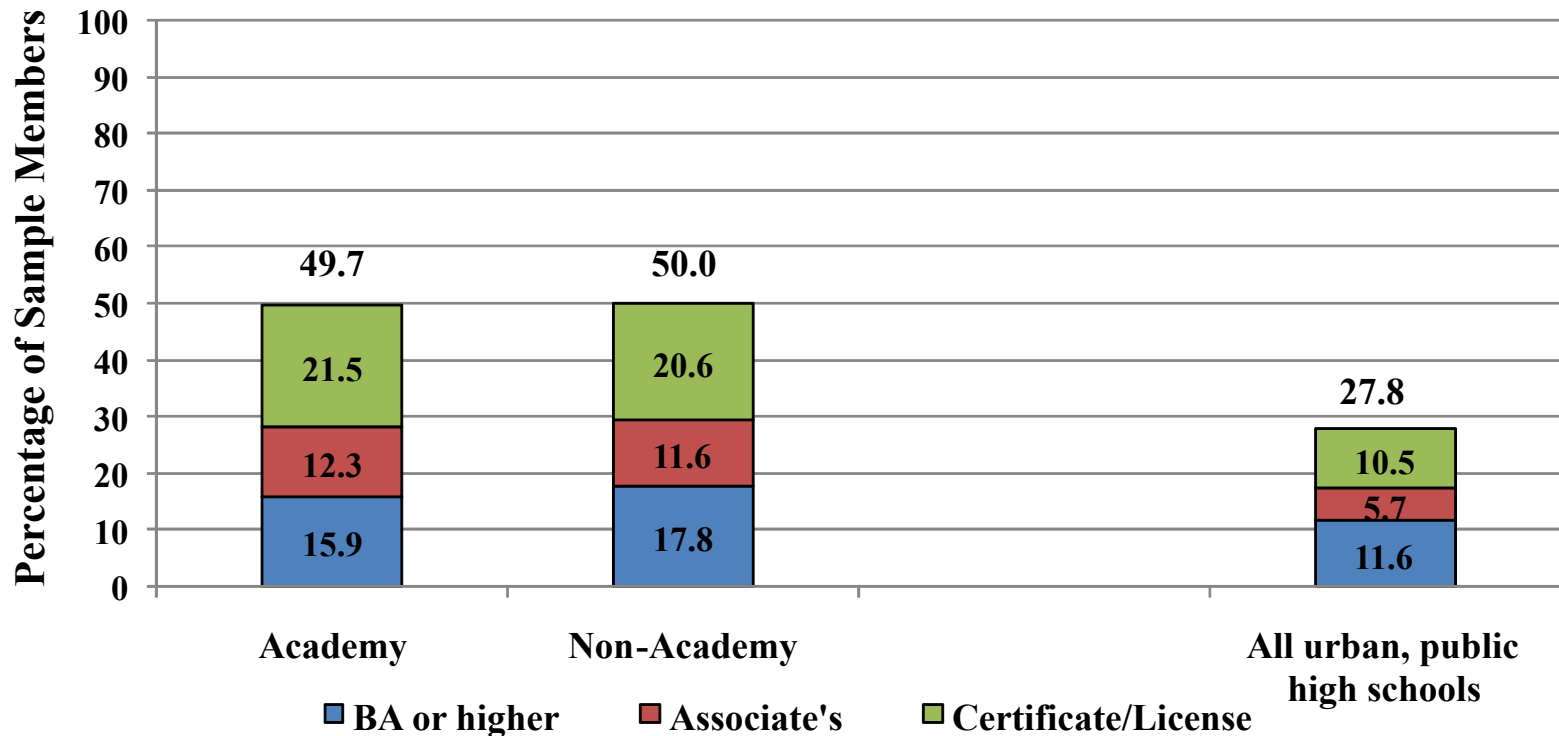
■ Academy Group

□ Control Group

National Comparisons Post-Secondary Completion (8 Years Post-High School)

CA Evaluation Sample

NELS Sample



Implications

- Random assignment provided findings that could not have been obtained with other designs
- Increased investments in career-related experiences during high school can improve post-secondary labor market prospects.
- Career Academies serve as viable pathway to post-secondary education, but not necessarily better than other opportunities.
- Career Academies demonstrate feasibility of accomplishing goals of school-to-career and career technical education without compromising on academic goals.

Conditions for Random Assignment

- Priority Question: What is the impact?
- Ethical and legal standards
 - No denial of services to which otherwise entitled
 - No reduction in expected service levels
 - Informed consent and data confidentiality
- Operational Realities
 - Structured process for program entry or access to resources
 - Excess demand: more eligible applicants than available program slots or resources
 - Fair method for allocating scarce resources

Conditions for a “Fair Test”

- Strong contrast with “status quo”
 - Implementation of program being tested
 - Participant exposure to program services
 - Well-understood alternative to program service
- High quality methods for answering questions about *why* programs are effective (or not) and *for whom*
- Dissemination of findings about what works *and* what does not work

Sustained Investment in Knowledge Building

- Building evidence not just the domain of researchers: partnership among funding agencies, content experts, administrative systems, and researchers
- Set high standards of evidence: grounded in theory, designed for causal inferences and precision, and informed by context
- Mutually reinforcing commitments from partners to balance research ambition and operational realities

Thank you!

For more information on
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