

CAREER ACADEMIES:  
WHERE SMALLER IS  
BETTER

# A MODEL OF THE CAREER ACADEMY CONCEPT

By Susan Reese

**WHEN CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION IS INTEGRATED WITH ACADEMICS IN SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES, IT CAN BE A MODEL FOR STUDENT SUCCESS.**

In New York's Putnam and Northern Westchester counties, the eight career academies of the Tech Center at Yorktown are not only providing hands-on programs that teach job-related skills, but a team of evaluators from the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) describes the eight academies of the Putnam/Northern Westchester Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) as "a model for curriculum integration."

Sandy Mittelsteadt, who was a member of the ACTE team, says, "What a privilege to evaluate the eight career academies in the Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES! Curriculum integration in these eight academies is the best that this evaluator has ever witnessed in an academy undergoing an evaluation. The curriculum integration is threefold: integration between career and technical with academics, intra-curriculum integration within the different pathways of the academy, and inter-curriculum integration between the academies."

At the 24-acre campus of the Tech Center at Yorktown, approximately 1,000 high school students from 18 school districts spend four hours a day taking both career and academic classes. Accord-

ing to the school's Web site, this schedule "frees students to more freely explore their field of interest, better preparing them for work in the 'real world.'"

As the school's director, Kevin Hart, explains, "Teaching academics in an applied way just makes sense. Students never question if this will be on the test, because they see the relationship between the academic principle and its application and understand its importance."

Students have the opportunity to attend the Tech Center for one or two years, and graduates can attain a Career and Technical Education Certificate or a Regents Diploma with a Technical Endorsement. Some courses may also qualify as college credit from the State University at New York (SUNY).

## The Academies

The Communications Academy at the Tech Center at Yorktown has three pathways: commercial art, computer graphics and TV production. The academy integrates English and math with practical work experience in the field. The classes stress communications, problem solving, teamwork and computer skills.

Communications academy student activities include creating publications and calendars, writing articles for newsletters, taking photographs, designing Web sites, working with public relations

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In the Hospitality Career Academy (left) the students learn pastry arts and advanced baking. Commercial art (middle left) and TV production (middle right) are part of the Communications Academy. Students in the Business and Information Technologies Academy study telecommunications technology (right).

counseling, and production for cable TV, radio and video.

The Cosmetology and Related Services Academy includes pathways in cosmetic services and manicuring/nails, with fashion scheduled to be added for the 2007–2008 school year. The students also hear guest speakers and participate in field trips, job shadowing, community service and internships. The courses include the 1,000 hours needed for certification.

The Environmental Sciences Academy offers students what the ACTE team describes as “an innovative and collaborative approach to environmental careers.” The three pathways within the academy are arboriculture/landscaping, floriculture and environmental science.

Environmental students, who also may sit for the AP exam, graduate from the academy well prepared for work in the field or to go on to postsecondary education. The ACTE evaluators also note that, while all of the Tech Center’s academies include critical thinking and problem solving, “this academy goes above and beyond to emphasize decision-making.”

The Health Services Academy includes a skill-based curriculum that equips students with job-specific medical skills, certification or licensure, as well as appropriate credentials to succeed in college. This academy’s pathways are licensed practical nurse, medical assisting, certified nurse aide/home health care aide and pre-med. Very strong community partnerships provide opportunities for the students that include internships, classroom speakers, donations and technical assistance.

In the Hospitality Academy, students engage in applied learning and project-based activities in pathways that include culinary arts and baking/pastry arts. According to Hart, a pathway in travel is scheduled to be added to this academy. Students also participate in the ProStart culinary and hospitality statewide competition.

The Transportation Academy is one of the larger academies at the school and offers a career and college preparatory curriculum to students interested in a variety of fields within the transportation field. The pathways include auto mechanics, auto collision technology and small engine/outdoor power technology. Aviation has been included in the past, and although there were not enough interested students this year, Hart says it will be incorporated into the academy again when the interest is there.

The Engineering Technologies Academy includes six diverse pathways: computer assisted design, welding, masonry, carpentry, electrical construction and HVAC/plumbing. This academy’s

program includes in-depth safety training and its consultant committee was cited by the ACTE evaluators as the most outstanding among the school’s academies.

The Business and Information Technology Academy includes four pathways: business information processing, microcomputer technology, entrepreneurship/retail management and telecommunications. The team from ACTE commended this academy for, among other things, the diversity of its students and its focus on accountability and student certification.

### When Smaller Means Better

“These eight academies are outstanding academies due to a principal who understands the needs of career academies and values the added benefits for students, and the academy team members, who are competent, enthusiastic and dedicated,” says Mittelsteadt. “It was obvious in each academy that students are a priority.”

Her fellow evaluator, Rick Delano, president of Social Marketing Services, adds, “During the evaluation of the eight career academies at this BOCES, I was struck by the passion and dedication of the entire teaching staff. It was striking to see the academic teachers teaching alongside their CTE colleagues in the technical setting. Many of the students sent from home schools had or were in danger of failing New York’s Regents exam. Contextually supported academic instruction is making all the difference in this school, helping these students not only successfully pass their Regents but also dramatically improving their scores on certification tests.”

Delano also notes, “The principal at this school lets the career academy team conduct the first round of interviews when hiring a replacement teacher to ensure that each new hire appreciates the value of contextually supported academics and relishes the idea of working with a cross-curricular team.”

Furthermore, Delano says that the team was so impressed by the program that, “We have recommended to the Ford Motor Company Fund that this BOCES and the community it supports be recognized as a leadership level Career Academy Innovation Community.”

With outstanding programs, enthusiastic and dedicated team members, and effective integration of CTE and academics, the career academies in the Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES are demonstrating the value of smaller learning communities and setting a model for others to follow. **■**