School Not-As-Usual
Evaluating Montana’s First Career Academy

Background: The Health Science Academy at Big Sky High School was launched in the fall of 2012 and is currently serving 240 students. At the time of implementation, 50% of Big Sky H.S. graduates were not pursuing post-secondary education. Career academies are designed to engage students, and provide them with the interpersonal support and academic foundation necessary for college and career readiness.

What is unique about the Health Science Academy?
- Thematic education based on health science
- Industry certification prior to graduation
- Multiple job-shadowing opportunities junior and senior years
- 4-year health science curriculum from Project Lead the Way
- Regular “edventures” that support classroom learning
- Frequent academy social events
- Small learning community and strong interpersonal connections
  - Academy students take core courses together
  - Academy is staffed with selected teachers and administrators

What the literature says about career academies:
- The career academy has become a widely used reform models to reduce dropout rates and increase college readiness (Brand, 2004).
- Students enrolled in career academies had a higher graduation rate, a lower dropout rate and better attendance than comparative control groups (Sterns, 2010).
- High-risk or low-income students experience the most substantial benefits from career academies (Kemple and Snipes, 2000).

Research Questions/Data Collection/Analysis Methods

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<td>Does the HSA improve academic achievement?</td>
<td>HSA vs. non-HSA 10th grade CRT scores</td>
<td>HSA vs. non-HSA ACT scores</td>
<td>HSA vs. non-HSA grade point average</td>
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<td>Does the HSA increase college readiness?</td>
<td>Credits earned by HSA vs non-HSA students in the 12th grade</td>
<td>HSA vs. non-HSA ACT scores</td>
<td>12th Grade Student Expectations survey</td>
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<td>What sub-groups receive the most benefits from the HSA?</td>
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<td>What are students’ attitudes about school and the HSA?</td>
<td>HSA Student Voice, survey measured satisfaction with the HSA</td>
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Key Findings:
- HSA students appeared to have a greater level of college readiness based on the results of the 12th grade student expectations survey.
- Student surveys indicated that HSA students had a high level of confidence, sense of belonging and sense of accomplishment.
- Student surveys indicated that interpersonal connections, between students and teachers, could be improved upon.
- Students found the HSA engaging.
- HSA students earned significantly more credits towards graduation than non-HSA students.
- The HSA did not enhance the academic achievement of students.
- The HSA attracted students who entered high school as higher academic achievers.
- The HSA served an abnormally low percentage of students from low-income households.
- Student interviews indicated that students found the HSA challenging yet rewarding.