

Phone conversation between the National Academy Foundation (Jessica Stepman, Alumni and Corporate Relations Manager, and Rebecca L. Batterman, Development Assistant) and GiveWell (Elie Hassenfeld and Simon Knutsson) on August 10, 2010

GiveWell: What role does the National Academy Foundation play in supporting career academies? Do you provide technical assistance (e.g., curricula, consulting)? Do you fund new or existing academies? Is your support continuing or start-up support?

National Academy Foundation (NAF): Our work focuses on helping academies in our network implement our proven model through professional development and technical assistance. We also provide them with nationally developed curricula. There is some funding that we pass through to our academies, but it is limited and not the primary way that we support them.

Schools have to apply and successfully complete our Year of Planning program before they can open a NAF academy. They may learn about our work through other schools, colleagues, their districts, or industry work like the MDRC Career Academies Evaluation. In some cases, the school might already have its own version of a career academy that it hopes to improve by using the NAF academy model. For example, they may have a finance academy in their high school, but might not meet all of the standards for being a NAF academy, such as having an advisory board with community members that work in finance, along with other characteristics.

Our model includes four components: the academy structure, industry-based curriculum, an active advisory board, and work-based learning activities like paid internships.

The advisory board offers guidance to the academy and contributes to generating work-based learning experiences for the students. We strive for all NAF students to have paid internships, which typically take place during the summer of between the junior and senior year. The Advisory Board members are community members who can help find these internships for students.

We consider the demographics the students served by schools when deciding which schools to accept into the Year of Planning, and the majority of our academies are in urban areas.

We have about 20 staff in the office at our headquarters in New York and about 30 around the country. The regional staff members assess what the academies need help with, and they're very involved in the regions, with the academy directors, and in what is going on at those schools. For example, they check that academies use our curriculum and are able to implement it in the classroom. The NAF regional staff members also collect feedback on areas where academies need more support or training.

Once accepted, academies go through our Year of Planning program, a structured process in which they prepare to become NAF academies. The schools are all part of their local

school districts and the teachers, principals and administrators are employees of the district.

At our the annual conference in July, we have a year of planning “graduation” and then when the school year starts, they’re officially NAF academies and they continue to receive ongoing support from our field staff. We have a staff member whose job it is – or was, it’s changed now – to support academies in each region. This year, we launched a more robust regional field team structure to provide even more support to academies. The new teams are being piloted in two of our regions. There they have four or five staff members each focused on different areas of our model, such as curriculum or work-based learning, as opposed to having one regional director responsible for helping academies with all of the aspects of our model.

The funding that NAF gets from partners and corporate grants covers the cost of these resources and developing the courses and the curricula. We also have partners who are interested in funding specific initiatives, such as our most recently developed theme - Academy of Engineering.

GiveWell: How much funding are you giving to career academies?

NAF: Direct funding to career academies is very limited and not the focus of our work. Rather, we build programs and tools that will support all the academies.

GiveWell: What type of support does NAF provide to career academies over time?

NAF: We do professional development for the teachers and develop courses and curriculum to help the students develop the skills they need to pursue the career of their choice. We don’t hire the teachers or have a NAF person come in and teach the class, instead we give the teacher support to teach in accordance with NAF’s methodology. What we do is mostly professional development, developing curricula and courses, research, starting internship programs, and providing the academies support on how to reach out to the community to get internships. There are more details than this, and I can send you more information about all of this.

GiveWell: Do you monitor fidelity to the model, for example, do you monitor whether classrooms are run as you expect? And do you do long-term monitoring of student achievements or outcomes?

NAF: Over the last two years, a big focus of ours has been building the infrastructure necessary to track these outcomes in a much deeper way. For example, we have recently added a research associate and Vice President of Research and Evaluation to our staff.

In terms of monitoring fidelity, we have a self-assessment tool for all academies to complete annually that helps them and NAF understand both how they are meeting the standards we have identified as being the most important to realizing the best outcomes for students and what kind of support they need to advance their practice.

In terms of outcomes over time we were part of the MDRC ten-year study of career academies, which measured academic and career outcomes like high school completion, college attendance, and earnings impacts, and what happened with students who were in career academies compared to students who weren't.

GiveWell: It sounds like, up until now, you haven't been that focused on monitoring outcomes.

NAF: We've been focused, but up until now, we have only been able to look at the aggregate outcomes for our academies. For example, the academies graduation rate compared to the rest of the school operates in or the percentage of students that are completing internships.

Through a new data collection system we are building, we will be able to have access to student-level (though non-identifiable) data for our academies and the comparison data for their districts. We're also starting an alumni program that will add to our ability to monitor the success of the students and where they go down the line.

GiveWell: Do you have data on employment for students, say, a year out of the career academies?

NAF: We don't. We do look at graduation rates and how many are going to college.

GiveWell: What theory is there behind your career academies, how do you expect them to work? You train students for work in a particular industry, but on the other hand, you focus on college enrollment. Is there a tension between college enrollment and vocational school?

NAF: We don't expect that every student in an engineering academy will become an engineer. We use the career theme as tool make what young people learn in school relevant. And then through projects they work on in school and the work based-learning experiences they have, students gain skills, such as interview skills, and knowing how to work in a group. They definitely learn more about, for example, engineering or finance than other students. They meet engineers, go to factories, do group projects, and receive work-based learning. The goal is to have students get the skills you need to have a professional career, not necessarily in finance or engineering. The theme is not the most important thing but most important is to learn the soft skills: what to wear to work, how to succeed in an interview, getting role models and mentors, and how to become the CEO or achieve ones career goals. The idea behind bringing the career-centered work to schools is that our students will be more engaged in school because the content will be more interesting and relevant to them, and that they leave the academy both college and career ready.

GiveWell: So, I guess you wouldn't know if most students end up in careers that their academy focused on? That is, whether those who go to a nursing academy later become nurses, or those who go to a finance academy later do finance?

NAF: I would need to send you information on that.

GiveWell: Can you elaborate on how you have monitored the quality or fidelity of your model? For example, whether career academies are implementing the curriculum as you intend?

NAF: I will refer you to someone else at NAF, since that is not my department.

GiveWell: How do you choose program types? Is that coming from the schools, or coming from you?

NAF: The first academy started with finance. Then came academies with hospitality and tourism, IT, and engineering. We consider where the country is going and the future of careers, that is, what opportunities will be out there for the students in ten years from now. We've started to consider health sciences.

As far as which academies open, an academy applies to be a certain type. It applies to, for example, engineering because of its students' interests and its community's needs.

GiveWell: So a school applies to open an academy of only one of the academy types you offer?

NAF: Yes.

But one school can have several different career academies. There is a high school in Baltimore that has four separate academies in one building with all our academy types. And a high school with a NAF career academy may also have other career academies that are not NAF academies.

GiveWell: What's the NAF's value added relative to average career academies?

NAF: Our advisory board is a key to our model, but this isn't my area so I would need to find out.

GiveWell: Are the curriculums and course materials available publicly or do you only provide it to schools you accept?

NAF: I would have to find out.

GiveWell: How many schools apply, and how many aren't accepted? Why?

NAF: I would need to find out.

GiveWell: Are you looking for donations or are you in a good financial position?

NAF: We are looking for individual donations and we are in a good financial position. A small percentage of our donations come from individuals; our funding from private and corporate foundations and our gala is bigger. We hope that our alumni program will result in funding, as we hope that down the line people that go through our academies want to give back.

GiveWell: How would you use additional funds?

NAF: I can get you in touch with William Taylor, Associate Vice President, Programs, he could give you additional information.