

CREATING AND REPLICATING HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A GUIDE FOR BUSINESSES AND SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY

Experiential Learning at the Academies of Nashville

Stacking Experiential Learning to Support Student Success

Nashville, TN



Carl Vinson Institute of Government
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In the late 2000s, Metro Nashville Public Schools were facing a performance crisis. Graduation rates were hovering around 60%, discipline referrals were on the rise, and getting students to show up to school was a challenge. The existing educational model was not meeting the needs of the students, parents, or the community. Through a partnership with the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, the business community, and PENCIL, a local education nonprofit, the school system transformed the high school experience by creating small learning communities (called academies) focused on thematic career pathways. For example, a single high school might have an academy focused on health care, another focused on business management, and a third focused on careers in the entertainment and music industries.

As part of the academy structure, students participate in stacked experiential learning experiences. The chart below shows the progression that academy students follow during their high school career. In ninth grade, all students participate in a city-wide career exploration fair where they explore various industries and career pathways available in Nashville. Because students must select their academy and career pathway at the end of ninth grade, the fair is designed to help them make this decision. In 10th grade, students participate in an industry field trip. For example, health care students may take an industry field trip to a local hospital, or students interested in careers in the music industry may visit CMT (County Music Television). As the students get further along in their high school career, the experiences become more targeted toward their career pathway and goals. In 11th grade, students complete a job shadow experience related to their chosen career pathway. Students wrap up the stacked learning experience by completing a capstone experience related to their career pathway in 12th grade. The capstone experience involves research and developing a portfolio, a paper, and a presentation. Seniors also have opportunities to complete summer internships in businesses aligned with their career pathways.

Launching a systemwide experiential learning program of this scale is a daunting task. The Academies of Nashville rely on more than 300 community partners to assist with this work. The PENCIL Foundation acts as a liaison between the school system and the community partners. Each high school has an academy coach, which serves as the contact person and coordinator for business and community engagement. The academy coach helps organize the various experiential learning experiences and helps classroom teachers integrate the experiences into the curriculum.

