Overview

The dropout rate in American high schools is around 30% on average, and as high as 45% for certain minority groups; however, research has shown that extracurricular activities can be especially beneficial for students at risk of dropping out. Recent research has also found that career and technical education (CTE) can play a role in keeping youth in school by exposing them to skills that are directly applicable in the real world. In addition to engaging students through hands-on learning in classrooms and work-related activities, CTE programs also offer organizations known as Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs) that are targeted toward more intense involvement in a particular field. Eight CTSOs are currently recognized at the secondary level by the U.S. Department of Education: Business Professionals of America; DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America, known as Delta Epsilon Chi on the college level; the CTSO for students in marketing, management and entrepreneurship in business, finance, hospitality, and marketing sales and service); Future Business Leaders of America; Family, Career and Community Leaders of America; FFA [Future Farmers of America]; Health Occupations Students of America; SkillsUSA; and Technology Student Association. Facilitated by a teacher-advisor, CTSO activities include leadership development, competitive events, professional development, and community service.

Although CTSOs have been touted as developing leadership and employability skills in students, there has been little research definitively showing the benefits of participation in CTSOs. This study asked, “To what extent do CTSOs affect important aspects of the high school experience (above and beyond stand-alone CTE programs)?” Specifically, three research questions were of interest:

1. Is CTSO membership over one academic year associated with an increase in positive outcomes compared to non-CTSO students (CTE-without-CTSO and general classes)?
2. Is the degree of involvement in the activities of a CTSO over one academic year associated with increases in CTSO students’ positive outcomes?
3. Which organizational elements of CTSOs (leadership, professional development, community service, and/or competitive activities) are associated with increases in CTSO students’ positive outcomes?

Surveys were administered in the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005, with identical questions asked of each group at each time point. General and CTE student surveys were similar, asking about the class they were in while taking the survey, whereas the CTSO student survey asked additional questions about CTSO activities.

What We Learned

In response to the first question, we found that being in CTE with a CTSO was associated with higher beginning (fall) levels of academic engagement, civic engagement, career
self-efficacy, and employment skills, as well as higher levels of motivation. However, although both groups gained in these measures over the academic year, those in CTE-with-CTSO classrooms gained less (but still ended at the same level or higher) than those in CTE-without-CTSO classrooms. Compared to being in a general classroom, being in a CTSO was only associated with higher levels of career self-efficacy in the fall, and although both CTSO and general students gained over the school year, CTSO students gained significantly less.

With regard to the second research question, the amount of CTSO participation did matter. The more students participated in CTSO activities, the higher their academic motivation, academic engagement, grades, career self-efficacy, college aspirations, and employability skills.

Finally, we found that the only element of CTSO participation that did not have a specific benefit was leadership, perhaps because students in leadership positions come in with high scores on these measures to begin with, and therefore have little more to gain.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Future research on the effects of CTSOs should examine student transcripts for achievement, attendance, and on-time graduation data, and follow-up studies with students who participated in CTE and CTSOs in high school should be conducted to examine their post-school trajectories into work and/or college. More analysis could also be done with existing student data on race and gender and school district data on average family income. However, as a whole, our findings suggest that CTSOs do have beneficial effects on the experiences of high school students, although in general not more than other types of classes. The CTSO students in this study started out and ended up with higher levels of academic engagement, civic engagement, career self-efficacy, and employability skills than CTE-only students. It appears that students who are drawn to participate in CTSOs are good students to begin with; however, we did find evidence that the benefits of CTSOs can be enhanced the more a student participates, and the effects for academic engagement are particularly strong. This may mean that positive outcomes for individual students could be enhanced by participating in CTSOs at high levels, particularly in competitive events, which we found to have effects on the most outcomes.

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The complete report is available at: www.nrccte.org.