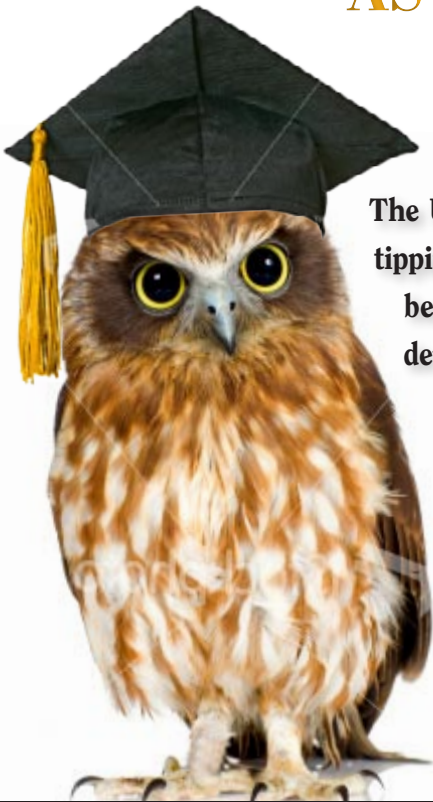


# Career Academies

## AS A REGIONAL GROWTH STRATEGY



**The United States is at a critical tipping point in the relationship between education, workforce development, and the success of our economy, an economy in which “rewards go to those who know what to do with knowledge, information and technology,” and where “judgment, intuition, creativity and insight are essential.”**

By Scott Cheney



We find ourselves in a world where “creativity, innovation, and flexibility will not be the special province of an elite”; indeed, they “will be demanded of virtually everyone who is making a decent living, from graphic artists to assembly line workers, from insurance brokers to home builders.” Yet far too many students leave school without the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in either the workplace or

higher education. Chambers of commerce can and must play a critical role in ensuring that all students are engaged in and complete high school ready for careers and college.

### CAREER AND COLLEGE

Career academies are one of our country’s most successful high school redesign strategies. These small learning com-

munities are designed around targeted regional industries to bring real-world relevance to academic instruction. When successfully implemented—that is, when properly focused on teaching rigorous academic knowledge and skills in a career context—career academies have been shown to improve attendance, grades, test scores, graduation rates, college-going rates, and post-secondary earnings.<sup>2</sup>

Let’s be clear; these career academies are not your father’s (nor your mother’s) vocational education! Career academies are intended to fully prepare students for careers as well as college. By having students learn, practice, and apply workplace skills through on-going real-world projects and school-based enterprises, the 21st Century skills demanded by employers become an integral part of the overall academy curriculum. Career academies also incorporate and teach as many of the technical skills that employers require as possible. And successful career academies link this real-world focus to rigorous, standards-based, and college-preparatory academic content. By working directly with business and industry to design the curricula and projects used in classrooms, and by offering students at the secondary and post-secondary level the opportunity to gain industry-based certifications and/or dual-credit, career academies benefit both students and their future employers.

The Ford Motor Company Fund has recognized the success of career academies and has made their expansion one of its primary educational initiatives. Focusing on regions rather than individual schools or districts, Ford leverages business, education, and community leaders to identify and achieve shared objectives across workforce and economic development *and* improved educational outcomes. Ford further recognizes the invaluable role that chambers can play as intermediaries among these leaders and the many stakeholder organizations.

### CHAMBER LEADERSHIP

The **Chattanooga (TN) Area Chamber of Commerce** is both the largest business association in Hamilton County, Tennessee, as well as the economic development arm for the

city and the county. In November 2005, in response to a growing need among the region's business leaders for improved skill levels among the regional labor force, the Chamber's Board of Directors adopted "The Education Initiative." The Education Initiative's strategic plan includes the vision of the Chamber engaging the business community, public education, and other community organizations in a collaborative effort to develop a more highly skilled labor force in the Chattanooga/Hamilton County area.

There are two primary goals for the Education Initiative: to bring business and education leaders to the table to jointly identify challenges and solutions, and to improve awareness across the region of the value of education and skills development for both community and individual success. The Chamber is actively working with a wide range of partners to coordinate efforts and leverage investments on this second goal.

Hamilton County's history of creating and supporting career academies started with a five-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation in 2001. The end of the grant meant the potential end of their hard-won and award winning career academies. The Education Initiative picked up where the grant left off to ensure the commitment to academies, using their natural, successful connection between education, employers, and economic development as a strategic initiative. The Chamber has successfully coordinated business engagement and support for academies in the school system, has worked to ensure that the academies are aligned with targeted regional economic and workforce growth industries, and has given the school system invaluable public support.

The **Pensacola Bay (FL) Area Chamber of Commerce** has also recently adopted a regional approach to career academies. Lacking the same history with career academies as Chattanooga, Pensacola first convened a group to conduct a self-assessment based on 12 Indicators of Success created by Ford Fund for building regional networks of career academies (see box at right). They also sent representatives to Ford Fund's 2007 Next Generation Learning Communities Institute, where they met and learned from other communities engaged in using career academies as core elements of regional growth. "This was an opportunity as a Chamber to participate in something definitely beyond the confines of traditional chamber-education programs," says **Natalie Prim, vice president of community affairs**.

## FORD FUND NEXT GENERATION LEARNING COMMUNITIES INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

1. Development of a regional career academy master plan.
2. Career academies are aligned with regional economic and workforce strategies.
3. Academies include academically rigorous course offerings and programs of study.
4. Career academy entrepreneurs rally and align business support.
5. Career academy evaluations support continuous improvement.
6. Districts centralize all programs likely to involve business.
7. All relevant and related funds are channeled toward career academies.
8. The community looks to identify and collaborate nationally.
9. A career academy marketing plan builds awareness and support.
10. Business leaders constitute an advisory board to align support.
11. Communities understand, defend and fund career academies.
12. Articulation plans cement post-secondary partnerships.

Working with Ford provided an opportunity to refine the Chamber's education strategy, resulting in a strong focus on the creation and expansion of career academies. While the Chamber has been just one player in this effort (others include area school districts, post-secondary institutions, other chambers, businesses, and regional planning agencies), the bottom line is that the Chamber is developing the pipeline for its economic development needs by insuring the workforce is ready and able to fill jobs in targeted industries.

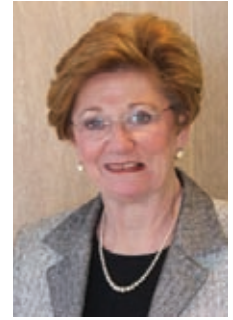
As a result of the strong partnerships in their communities in support of career academies, and their success on the 12 Indicators of Success, the Ford Motor Company Fund

In the Chamber's eyes, education is economic development. Without the skilled workforce necessary, Hamilton County can't compete locally, nationally, or globally.

—Tom Edd Wilson, president and CEO,  
Chattanooga (TN) Area Chamber of Commerce



“This has brought clarity and focus to our educational endeavors, and has elevated our standing in the education community. Working with Ford, we have concentrated our efforts on improving both education and economic development. This is a winning combination for Chambers.”



—Evon Emerson, president and CEO,  
Pensacola Bay (FL) Area Chamber of Commerce

designated Chattanooga and Pensacola each as a Ford Next Generation Learning Leadership Community. Like Chattanooga and Pensacola, ten other communities have incorporated these twelve best practices into strategic plans to build an education system that supports and maximizes the value and potential of career academies to meet economic development goals. ☐

*Scott Cheney is a principal at PAROS Group, a consulting firm specializing in the regional partnerships between economic development, workforce development, and education. He is also a national advisor to the Ford Motor Company Fund's Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies and Ford Next Generation Learning Community Initiatives. He can be reached at [scott@parosgroup.com](mailto:scott@parosgroup.com).*

<sup>1</sup> Competitiveness Index: Where America Stands. Council on Competitiveness. 2007  
<sup>2</sup> For a summary of current research on career academies, visit [www.fordnglc.org](http://www.fordnglc.org)

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**WHAT CHAMBERS CAN DO**

State chambers:

- Ensure that state standards are strong in key areas that business leaders have identified as critical for success.
- Insist on ways to follow student achievement following high school to determine long-term success in career and post-secondary education.
- Advocate for changes in how the performance of guidance counselors is measured by increasing recognition of the value of alternative post-secondary options.
- Advocate for legislative initiatives that promote the career academy model. Florida and California can serve as models in this regard.

Local chambers:

- Organize business members to serve on advisory groups to support the development of targeted career academies.
- Hire career cluster entrepreneurs to coordinate specific involvement of business leaders in career academies.
- Be a positive, reliable, and vocal advocate for effective public education.