

Scholars at Work connects high school seniors to the workforce

In their 2019 report, "Preparing New York City High School Students for the Workforce," the RAND Corporation (RAND) presents findings from evaluating the implementation and outcomes of the Scholars at Work (SAW) program. RAND's evaluation aimed to understand how SAW operated on the ground and its impacts on participants' postsecondary education enrollment, employment status, and, if employed, industry of employment and earnings.

The evaluation included interviews and focus groups with program staff, employers, and participants. The study also compared outcomes for SAW participants to a similar pool of New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program applicants using New York State Department of Labor data.

"I like that [Scholars at Work is] giving us an opportunity to see the workforce, have a real-world experience, and prepare us for what's after high school."

-Scholars at Work participant

Key Findings

Scholars at Work effectively introduced participants to the workforce. Interviewed employers considered the internship a good opportunity for participants to get firsthand experience in the workplace. Student participants said the internship was helpful for career advancement and that they particularly appreciated SBS staff's mentoring.

Employers appreciated SAW for providing them with needed labor and contributed to participants' professional development. The internship provided them with a pipeline of talent, cost-free. Interviewed employers reported that they spent significant time on mentoring, supporting, and training interns, who could be future employees of local businesses.

What is Scholars at Work?

Scholars at Work (SAW) served high school seniors enrolled in participating Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in NYC public schools. The program exposed them to career opportunities and work experience in key economic sectors, and helped them develop workplace skills.

SAW had two main components: 1) a semester-long career exploration program, typically offered in schools during the fall semester, which allowed students to develop soft skills and meet with industry experts, and 2) an approximately 13-week paid internship during the spring semester. Most students participated in only one of the two components.

The program started in 2009, and was run by the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and the Department of Education (DOE). The program ownership transitioned to the DOE starting in 2017, and SAW has since been folded into the DOE's CTE Industry Scholars Program (Industry Scholars). Industry Scholars is similar to SAW but has four significant differences: 1) it does not have a specific industry focus, 2) it has a summer component of the program, 3) it has work-based learning activities that are lighter-touch than SAW's internship component, and 4) it uses the same provider that operated SAW, but this provider in some cases subcontracts with other organizations that have expertise in particular industries.

SAW cultivated relationships between participating CTE schools and employers. SAW staff had ongoing processes to incorporate employers' feedback, with the goal of developing a pipeline of talent to local small business owners.

Student placement in internships did not always result in a good match. Students' interests and skills were not always a good fit for their employers' needs, and employers were not always familiar with what students had learned in their CTE programs nor what kinds of tasks students could complete. Four out of six of the interviewed companies expressed dissatisfaction with internship matching and the DOE agreed the process could be improved.

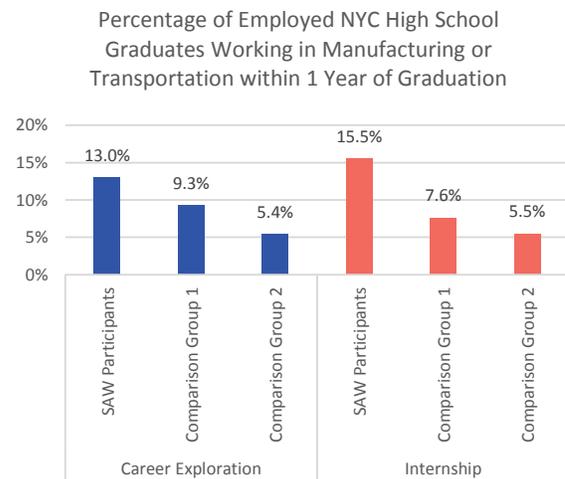
The DOE and SBS had conflicting views on SAW's goals. Interviewees perceived that SBS focused primarily on employers' priorities, while the DOE focused on students' needs.

College enrollment and the likelihood of employment were not affected by participation in SAW. This was true for both the career exploration and the internship components of the program.

SAW participants were much more likely to work in manufacturing or transportation than comparison group members in the year after high school graduation. This was true for both the career exploration and the internship components of the program.

SAW participants earned considerably more one year after high school than non-participants, but this might be driven by a bias in the estimates. Both the career exploration and the internship components of SAW were found to double earnings for participants one year after high school. However, this sizeable effect is likely due, at least in part, to unobservable differences between SAW participants and the comparison groups used in the study. The two comparison groups were drawn from a pool of New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program

applicants who either 1) attended SAW schools but did not participate in SAW, or 2) attended non-SAW CTE schools. These comparison groups were weighted on demographic and academic characteristics and arguably had similar motivation as SAW participants as their members applied for a program that offered similar services to SAW. However, unobservable differences related to the sector focus of SAW (students who sought to work in the industrial and manufacturing sectors might be different from those who did not) and the different seasons the two programs operated in (school year versus summer) might still have biased the estimates. The quantitative methodology was as rigorous as possible given the evaluator's inability to randomize SAW participation, but impacts this large are unusual for workforce programs, particularly for interventions as light-touch as SAW's career exploration component.



Comparison Group 1: SYEP applicants attending SAW schools
 Comparison Group 2: SYEP applicants attending non-SAW CTE schools
 Both comparison groups were weighted to match SAW participants' academic and demographic characteristics.

Looking Ahead

RAND's report suggests that SAW was effective at connecting students to the workforce, providing employers with needed labor, building relationships between participating schools and employers, and, with the caveat that the impacts are likely overstated, increasing participants' earnings after graduation. SAW is now being integrated into CTE Industry Scholars, but the report's recommendations to enhance SAW, including better aligning all stakeholders' visions for the program, will inform the future development of Industry Scholars and other workforce development programs that target high school students in NYC.

Further Reading: [Evaluation of Scholars at Work](#), [DOE Response to Evaluation](#)