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More Talent for the Asking

A recent publication of the U.S. Office of Education reports the estimate that one-third of the top quarter of the nation's high-school graduates fail to go to college because they lack funds. But no one has firm statistics on which people do not go to college or on the factors that may dissuade or prevent them from going. To get better information on such matters, a two-day battery of tests will be given during the coming school year to about half a million students in approximately 14,000 secondary schools throughout the country. The program is supported primarily by the U.S. Office of Education, with other government agencies assisting, and is administered jointly by the University of Pittsburgh and the American Institute for Research.

One of the program's objectives is to take an accurate inventory of the talents of the nation's secondary-school students. A second, and longer range, objective is to correlate test scores of individuals with their subsequent histories, and thus to provide information for use in school counseling. A third objective is to evaluate the effects of such educational practices as accelerated programs for gifted students. There have been earlier studies along these lines, but nothing approaching the present scale has been attempted before.

The sample of half a million, which is 5 percent of the present secondary-school population, is large enough to insure that a significant number of cases will fall in various small but important categories. In the study of aptitudes and motivation of students, for example, it might be interesting to have such categories as atomic physicists from underprivileged neighborhoods. And, in the study of the effects of different educational practices, it might be interesting to have such categories as women engineers from small schools.

The tests will seek to assess not only a student's aptitudes but also his interests, personality, and achievements, especially in reading and mathematics. The tests will parallel many of those now employed and judged successful, but will be prepared for use only in this program. In addition, a student will be asked questions about his aspirations, family and community background, and health. Also planned are follow-up studies at intervals up to 20 years from the time of the test. Although contact with some students may be lost, it should be possible to trace back important groups. Thus, if the sample is well selected, then 20 years from now about 5 percent of, say, the fellows of the American Physical Society of the proper age range will have taken the test, and they can be matched with their test records by their names and other information.

Studying people in the social sciences differs from studying things in the natural sciences, for people may resent what they interpret as another person poking his nose in their business. The subjects to be investigated may refuse to cooperate with the investigator. Last June in Houston, Texas, for example, 5000 answer sheets in a student testing program were destroyed by the Houston School Board because some parents objected to certain questions designed to measure attitudes and background. Among the questions objected to were a few that were being tried out for use in the coming nationwide effort. The possible contribution of the test program to the more effective use of the nation's talents is great, but success will require circumspection in choosing the questions as well as a cooperative attitude on the part of the students and their families.—J.T.

