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Selecting Talented Negro Students: Nominations Vs. Test Performance

Warren S. Blumenfeld

NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP CORPORATION

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John M. Stalnaker, President

The National Merit Scholarship Corporation was founded in 1955 for the purpose of annually identifying and honoring the nation's most talented youth. Merit Scholarships, which are awarded on a competitive basis, provide financial assistance that Scholars use to attend the colleges of their choice.

The NMSC research program was established in 1957 to conduct scholarly research related to the source, identification and development of intellectual talent. NMSC Research Reports are one means of communicating the research program's results to interested individuals.

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Abstract

Students were identified for participation in the third annual National Achievement Scholarship Program by two methods: (1) all United States high schools were asked to nominate talented Negro students and (2) high scoring Negro students were identified on the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. Of the 5,624 participants, about 20 percent entered the competition by nomination only, about 20 percent by test only, and the remainder were both nominated and took the test.

A comparison of these groups indicated that the test tended to identify students of higher socioeconomic status, they had higher test scores and lower high school grades, and they attended larger and better equipped high schools than did those identified by the nomination procedure.

SELECTING TALENTED NEGRO STUDENTS: NOMINATIONS VS. TEST PERFORMANCE[1]

Warren S. Blumenfeld[2]

In a national academic talent search, what is the best strategy for insuring that the most able students will be included in the competition? Is it better to have schools nominate candidates or to select candidates on the basis of test results?

The data in this report were derived from the National Achievement Scholarship Program (NASP), which is administered by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. The purpose of NASP is to identify outstanding Negro high school students and to give them financial aid to help them finance attendance at college. It is hoped that, by encouraging public recognition for intellectual achievement, the program will help to make academic success more attractive to Negro students.

During the first two years of the program, the procedure for identifying students of academic promise was as follows: all high schools in the United States were invited to nominate outstanding Negro students, and then a committee evaluated these nominations, and, after further assessment, selected the Scholars. In the first year of the program, 224 Scholars were selected from among 4,288 nominees (for a description, see Roberts and Nichols, 1966), and in the second year, 252 Scholars were selected from among 5,600 nominees (Blumenfeld, 1966). Since these students were chosen after a nation-wide search, it is likely that they are among the most academically able Negroes of their age group in the nation.

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[1] An earlier draft of this paper was read at the Midwestern Psychological Association Meeting, Chicago, May, 1967.

[2] The author, now Manager, Advertising Research, Coca-Cola USA, Atlanta, Georgia, was a research psychologist at the National Merit Scholarship Corporation when this study was conducted. He would like to thank John M. Stalnaker, Robert C. Nichols, and Laura Kent for helpful comments.

In 1967, the third year of the program, an additional avenue for entering the competition was offered: high-score performance on the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (NMSQT) (Science Research Associates, 1966), a test administered nationally in the spring of 1966 (National Merit Scholarship Corporation, 1966). A Negro student could enter the NASP competition by requesting on the NMSQT answer sheet that his test performance be considered in the Achievement Program, Of the 30,028 students who requested such consideration, the 3,043 who scored highest on the NMSQT were included in further steps of the NASP competition. Approximately one-third of these students were also nominated independently by their school in response to the request for school nominations. The schools of the 1,922 high-scoring students who had not already been nominated were asked if they would recommend the students for the competition. Only the 1,104 students so endorsed were included in subsequent stages of the competition along with the nominated students. The test scores were not available until near the end of the school year and the requests for school endorsement of high-scoring students were mailed out when many schools were preparing tor summer closing. It is not known to what extent this timing of requests is responsible for the low rate of school endorsement. Thus, in the 1967 NASP, a student could participate by being nominated by his school or by scoring high on the NMSQT.

Since two distinct talent search methods were used in the same program, it is legitimate to ask whether one proved to be superior to the other. Which procedure if used alone, would identify the more talented Negro students?

The purpose of this study was to determine the differences, if any, in the kinds of students selected by the two procedures. The criteria used for judging the relative efficiency of each method were indices of breadth of coverage and rate of success in the competition.

Procedure

In all 5,624 Negro second-semester high school juniors (2,209 boys and 3,415

girls) participated in the 1967 NASP after the initial screenings. They were either nominated by their school, or had attained a score above an arbitrary level on the NMSQT, or both. All participants completed a common application form; 81 percent had taken the NMSQT. In addition, their high school principals filled out a form to describe the school.

On the basis of their avenues of entrance and their test performance, subjects were classified into four groups: (1) nominated, no test score, (2) nominated, test score below cutting point, (3) nominated, test score above cutting point, and (4) not nominated, test score above cutting point. The four groups were compared on the basis of (a) certain student input characteristics indicated on their application forms and descriptive school data given on the form completed by the principals; and (b) their success at progressive stages of the competition (i.e., an initial staff screening, a first committee judgment to select Finalists, and a second committee judgment to select Scholars). Separate analyses were performed for each of four geographic regions (the Northeast and Midwest, the Southeast, the Southwest, and the West) and for all regions combined. Differences among the four groups were evaluated by analyses of variance or chi square, both for the total group (N=5,624) and for a subgroup somewhat more controlled for ability (N=3,017) (i.e., those participants who survived the initial staff screening which eliminated students with very low scores on standardized tests, very poor grades or several negative recommendations). A second screening test, similar in item type to the NMSQT, was administered to the subgroup that passed the staff screening and was included in the analyses for these students.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the distribution of students divided into the four groups and classified by geographic region. Table 2 presents the comparisons described previously for the total group in all geographic regions; and Table 3 presents the analogous information for the subgroup presumably more homogeneous in ability (those who passed the staff screening).

Table 1

Number of NASP Participants by Geographic Region and by Test and Nomination Groups

	Total	Group 1 Nom., no test	Group 2 Nom., lo test	Group 3 Nom., hi test	Group 4 No Nom., hi test
All regions	5624	1068	2331	1121	1104
Northeast & Midwest	2306	344	692	580	690
Southeast	1425	249	779	224	173
Southwest	1300	364	672	169	95
West	593	111	188	148	146

Table 2

Characteristics which show Significant Differences among the Four Groups for all Participants

Characteristics	Total (N=5,624)	Group 1 (N=1,068)	Group 2 (N=2,331)	Group 3 (N=1,121)	Group 4 (N=1,104)
Student Characteristics					
Percent Male	39	40	33	45	46
NMSQT Selection Score	101.20[a]		84.87	119.66	117.01
Rank in Class	41.35	48.25	28.48	35.19	73.05
Percentile Rank in Class	11.79	12.12	9.63	9.82	19.05
Grade Point Average Index	2.64	2.70	2.55	2.35	3.11
Academic Aspiration Index	6.00	5.67	5.95	6.30	6.12
Class Size	343.39	312.42	281.50	416.91	428.75
Father's Education Index	3.34	2.66	3.02	4.11	3.87
Mother's Education Index	3.55	2.95	2.28	4.18	4.06
Peer's College Aspiration Index	1.69	1.97	1.70	1.47	1.62
Length of Residence Index	4.73	4.81	4.81	4.68	4.56
Age (months)	206.28	207.31	206.78	205.21	205.29
School Characteristics					
Percent Negro Index	5.43	5.90	6.74	4.27	3.36
Library Books Index	9.25	8.95	9.08	9.50	9.61
Percent Public School	87	95	90	83	80
Percent National Honor Society	92	87	92	92	95
Percent Dean's List	95	90	97	95	95
Competition Success					
Percent remaining after:					
Staff Screening	54	37	42	88	59
First Committee Judgment	20	7	10	53	22
Second Committee Judgment	5	2	2	17	4

Note:--Each over-all F and chi square significant beyond .01 level for all items listed.

[a] All values are means unless otherwise indicated.

Table 3

Characteristics which Show Significant Differences Among the Four Groups for Participants Surviving the First Committee Judgment

	Total (N=3,017)	Group 1 (N=399)	Group 2 (N=978)	Group 3 (N=985)	Group 4 (N=655)
Student Characteristics					
NMSQT	108.91[a]		90.98	120.24	118.67
Second Screening Test	149.81	133.68	132.90	165.11	161.01
Rank in Class	27.23	27.81	17.05	28.32	43.25
Percentile Rank in Class	8.21	6.99	5.53	8.01	14.12
Grade Point Average Index	2.30	2.25	2.15	2.21	2.70
Academic Aspiration Index	6.17	5.90	6.13	6.32	6.18
Class Size	371.30	338.25	317.16	416.37	404.15
Father's Education Index	3.63	2.89	3.27	4.08	3.96
Mother's Education Index	3.81	3.14	3.46	4.21	4.14
Peer's College Aspiration Index	1.56	1.80	1.57	1.44	1.59
Length of Residence Index	4.73	4.82	4.85	4.67	4.60
Age (months)	205.80	206.45	206.26	205.23	205.58
School Characteristics					
Percent Negro Index	5.30	6.07	7.11	4.50	3.24
Library Books Index	9.35	9.22	9.11	9.48	9.58
Percent Public School	87	95	91	83	81
Percent National Honor Society	93	88	94	92	94
Percent Dean's List	95	92	96	95	94
Competition Success					
Percent remaining after:					
First Committee Judgment	38	19	23	61	38
Second Committee Judgment	10	6	4	19	6

Note:--Each over-all F and chi square significant beyond the .01 level, except chi square associated with Dean's List which is significant beyond the .05 level.

[a] All values are means unless otherwise indicated.

Groups 2 and 3 are, of course, included in the competition regardless of the talent search method used. Therefore, attention will focus on Group 1 (nominated, but did not participate in the NMSQT) and Group 4 (not nominated, but entered via high NMSQT score). These two groups contrast most sharply with one another since each entered the competition by one avenue but not the other.

Before the first committee evaluation 19 percent of the participants were in Group 1 and 20 percent were in Group 4. These figures are somewhat artifactual, however, because the cutting point on the NMSQT score was arbitrary. After the

staff screening, which eliminated those students who were obviously below the scholarship level of ability, these figures were 13 percent and 22 percent respectively. This means that students who entered the competition on the basis of test scores rather than by nomination more frequently survived to the second stage. Comparing the geographic regions, we find that the nomination method tends to favor Group 1 in the Southeast, whereas the test method favors Group 4 in the Northeast and Midwest. Over all regions, however, the test avenue brought slightly more students into the competition.

The characteristics of Group 4 members (and of their schools) differed from those of Group 1 members, both before and after the staff screening. The direction of these differences was consistent in the analyses for both the total group and the subgroup. In summary, the two groups differed in these ways; the typical student who entered solely through the test route (Group 4):

* made a higher score on the second screening test
* ranked lower in class
* had a lower grade point average
* aspired to a higher academic level
* came from a larger high school class
* had parents with higher educational attainment
* had more friends planning to attend college
* had resided in his community for a shorter period
* was younger

than the typical student who entered solely through the nomination route (Group 1). Moreover, the members of Group 4 were more likely to come from a high school which:

* had a lower proportion of Negroes
* had more books in the library
* was less apt to be a public school
* more often had a chapter of National Honor Society
* more often had a Dean's List

These data reveal one seeming contradiction that is of considerable interest: the members of Group 4, who made high scores on the NMSQT and (in the case of the subgroup) on the second screening test, had lower high school grades and class ranks than did Group 1 nominees. Apparently these capable young people were in superior

schools where they were not as visible to the nominators as were their counterparts in relatively less competitive schools where it takes less ability to stand out academically. Had the nomination by school method been relied on exclusively, these students would have been overlooked; the nationally administered test identified them.

As to the subsequent success of the four groups in the second committee judgment, the order was groups 3, 4, 2, and 1. A larger percentage of the high test performance groups was selected for scholarships by the committee. Prior to the staff screening which provided a control for ability, more winners came from Group 4 than from Group 1, and the differences were large. After control, this difference tended to diminish and disappeared entirely at the final decision. That Group 3 was most productive is not surprising, since its members had passed over both the nomination and the test hurdles.

Two limitations of this study, both involving the criteria of success in the competition, should be mentioned. First, the committees knew which nominees had taken the NMSQT. This knowledge may have been subconsciously used by the committee in making judgments. Second, committee judgments are only intermediate criteria of success; the student's performance in college, when it becomes known, will be a better criterion.

As mentioned previously, a desirable procedure for a talent search such as NASP is one which covers a broad range of students and results in the selection of the most talented, regardless of such characteristics as the student's socioeconomic background and the quality of his high school. In addition, the procedure should be economical to carry out. The data indicate that the two procedures --nomination by schools and entrance on the basis of high test scores-- yield roughly the same proportion of successful participants, although the latter results in slightly more. The nominated group tended to have a broader range of

personal characteristics and to come from a greater variety of schools; on the whole, they seemed to be less advantaged in their socioeconomic and educational background. The test method, on the other hand, identified individuals of high academic promise who came from apparently good schools and who might otherwise not have participated in the competition because they were passed over by the nominators in the schools. Relative to their number, the test group tended to succeed in the competition more frequently than did the nominated group. Finally, the use of the nationally administered testing program, which was already being conducted for another competition, was less expensive than was the nominations system, which had to be administered for the Achievement Program alone.

In conclusion, both the nomination and the test procedures have much to recommend them. The choice between them will depend upon which goal--breadth of coverage or selection of the most able students--is more highly valued. While the use of both is probably desirable, the evidence tends to favor the test procedure.

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