



Testing for Natural Abilities –

A New Way to Achieve the College “Match”

By Dr. Gay Stebbins Pepper

Identifying academic potential in high school seniors has always been a challenge for college admissions deans as they put together an in-coming freshman class that represents a diverse American society. More than in the past, there is a special interest among many top-tier colleges in attracting highly able students who are not within the radar imposed by grades and achievement tests.

Harvard Admissions Dean Bill Fitzsimmons admits that his biggest challenge is identifying these seniors of talent who simply do not show up on the screen but who, if admitted to a top-tier college, can call on their innate abilities to achieve academic success. More often than not, their school culture is based more on daily survival than on achieving grades and test scores which satisfy the traditional measures used in college admissions.

The fundamental question facing those of us who work in college admissions is to find the tools to measure the innate abilities of these students in ways that are respected by the gatekeepers. Can we identify those students who have the natural capacity to grow in the college environment? Is there an abilities assessment we can rely on, something the Scholastic Aptitude Test was originally designed to do? When we learned that the SAT could be coached, we realized that we needed a new tool for measuring the hard-wired abilities of youngsters who are ignored by our methods. We have returned to the nature vs. nurture debate, but with new insight into our obligations as educators.

The study of genealogy has yielded many insights into the ways in which our genes control our lives. Genes have been linked to specific illnesses and to many mental disorders. One researcher has reported isolating the gene that determines whether we recognize sarcasm in another's speech. Isn't it reasonable to expect, then, that our genes also determine our individual personalities and abilities? Clearly, some abilities are genetic. How else to explain the musical genius of Mozart, the voice and phrasing of Pavarotti, the brilliance of Einstein, the art of Shakespeare?

Isn't it time that we, as educators working in the field of student counseling and college admissions, recognize the need to add a valid assessment of natural abilities to our box of tools. Grades and SAT results are important, of course, but an understanding of a child's natural abilities is equally important. Without it, we can miss the pearl in the shell.

Historical Perspective on Competitive College Admissions

For the past decade, we have seen an intensification of the competition among high school graduates to get into the most selective colleges, particularly among bright, high-achieving students at rigorous secondary schools. This comes at a time when the demographics for students have risen sharply, swelling the number of applications to these colleges. The intensification in competition comes at a time when the colleges are faced with internal concerns that affect student selection, the “hidden agenda.”

Traditionally, top-tier colleges have always given competitive advantage to legacies, recruited athletes, and under-represented minorities. That remains the case today. Adding to these established preferences, top colleges are now making a concerted effort to attract under-served students of ability – students who are not making it to the radar screen.

All of these factors combine to make it increasingly difficult for a highly talented and deserving student without the “hook” to compel admission to an Ivy-caliber college. Given the reality of competitive college admission, more and more students and their successful baby-boomer parents are driven, and almost obsessed by, the goal of beating the odds and getting into a “name brand” school. They are determined to game the system, using every tool and resource available to them to climb to the top. They turn to expensive test-prep services, tutors, independent college counselors, private coaches, large donations to the college of choice, resume- and essay-writing advisors, etc. In many cases, the parents ultimately control and micro-manage every detail of the process, forgetting that this is the very process that can be used to test and strengthen the student’s initiative and social skills.

Pursuing their goal to be among the 8% to 12% who are admitted to Ivy League institutions (or to be among the 15%- 20% accepted at other top “brand name” colleges), the students take more and more courses, compete in athletics at higher and higher levels, and take part in more and more activities. The goal, however, is not the joy and satisfaction that come with mastery, but rather to reach the top, a goal, they hope, that will assure acceptance at their top college choice. The irony is that in this marathon to build the perfect resume, students lose their unique identity. In so doing, they lose their “voice” – their ability to talk compellingly about their own unique strengths and personal qualities.

The message they have gotten from the media, from the colleges, from many of the adults in their lives, and from our society is this: “to win”, you have to be better than everyone else in everything you do, excelling at the highest level in every category measured by the traditional standards – the SAT, grades, class standing. Put another way, the message is: “Define yourself as the colleges define you, whatever the personal cost may be.”

As students struggle to fulfill this impossible expectation, they lose a sense of self, of personal identity, of their uniqueness. Even when they make it across the acceptance bar at a top-tier college, they feel empty and inadequate as they face and interact with other students who are their clones. They have missed out on the fun of adolescent development and the thrill of self-recognition. At Harvard, as at many of its peer institutions, mental health issues among students have reached epidemic proportions.

What's Wrong with Competition in College Admissions?

Many complicating factors are driving the “urgency” of competition, including: 1) the belief that attendance at a top-tier college assures economic success; 2) to drive up their ratings in U.S. News and World Report, colleges recruit more students so they can reject more; 3) helicopter parents who define their success through the success of their children; 4) a culture that is defined by status and believes that the more exclusive the admission, the better the value; etc.).

The result is that the child is not at the center of the process. The system puts priority on the outcome, distorting what is normal and desirable in the development of the child and the adolescent. Children are being cheated out of integral parts of their young lives: recreational play, family time together, down-time with peers, healthy patterns of eating and sleep, and unstructured time to develop hobbies, pursue interests, and be themselves. Under the pressure to achieve impossible goals, they find no time for developing personal/emotional relationships, push themselves beyond their endurance, develop eating and sleep disorders, and, most serious of all, lose touch with who they are and what they really want from life.

What Can Educators Do to Reverse the Trend?

Our starting point has to be the well-being of the child, not the college. We should begin by affirming the child's sense of self – the ability to know him- or herself – and to be resilient in times of set-back. We need to avoid “teacup” children, children who are carefully crafted to meet universal specifications and are easily shattered by adversity.

The key is to help each child know what his or her individual natural abilities are, abilities that are hard-wired and innate. These abilities cannot be coached in the way we coach for the SAT, nor can they be acquired through study and dedication.

Some natural abilities are so easy to see, they don't need confirmation in a comprehensive assessment (The ability of Tiger Woods to win tournament after tournament, for example, or the ability of Mozart to compose the world's most beautiful music at the age of six.)

But the majority of critical abilities, especially in more normal individuals than Woods and Mozart, are more difficult to identify. Their identification is a very positive way of affirming a child's identity and offers an authentic starting point for building a program – academic, artistic, technical, vocational, musical, athletic, business, etc. – that allows students to feel validated by developing what they are able to do well.

Over time, as counselors with knowledge of a student's abilities, we can help affirm the student's sense of identity, so that when the time comes to pick a college, the student will be able to articulate personal and career goals that reflect and embrace his or her individual needs. In other words, we will have helped the child build from within to make choices that are much more keenly aligned with his or her natural strengths. In the end, this approach makes for a greater probability of personal validation and life-long learning.

Because a student's natural abilities mature at age 15 – during the average student's sophomore year – we can begin the process of assessing and developing these abilities early in the student's high school life and continue it all through the critical years before college.

What Assessments Can We Use to Test Natural Abilities?

The pioneering work in assessing natural abilities was conducted by Johnson O'Connor in the 1930s. The GE Company asked O'Connor to develop an in-house program called the "human" engineering project that would find the proper position for each employee and train or retrain him for that position. This led O'Connor into a study of inborn aptitudes and to the development of individual aptitude tests that he called "worksamples." Using empirical research, O'Connor developed measures and specifications for specific human abilities, O'Connor became one of the first researchers to document that aptitudes are in fact innate.

A student who is mathematically gifted can learn much more quickly and easily about statistics than can one whose aptitudes in this area are low.

O'Connor's research was translated and perfected into a paper-and-pencil appraisal of natural abilities by the Highlands Company. Over time, the appraisal has been normed, and its reliability and validity confirmed. Since the year 2000, the Highlands Company has offered the assessment in CD and online. The Highlands Company is the only source in the world for assessing innate or hard-wired abilities online. The Company calls its three-hour battery of 19 worksample the Highlands Ability Battery or tHAB.

When students finish the Battery, they get a 32-page Report of their core abilities, including a bar chart showing their scores in each worksample. Each score is converted into a percentile which relates an individual's score to the scores of all students who have completed the Battery. After a student reviews the Report, he or she participates in a two-hour private conference with a certified Affiliate of the Highlands Company. The conference is devoted to a discussion of the student's report and his or her interests, values and goals.

The Highlands Ability Battery can serve as the foundation for college counseling, especially as it helps in the process of exploring college and career options. Because natural abilities are products of our genes, they do not change once they've developed. This makes the Battery a one-time investment in guiding the student throughout his or her work life. Sophomores and juniors will learn that a one-time assessment of natural abilities tells them more about themselves than their grades and test scores. It also provides them with far deeper insight into the right college choice and a career that recognizes and builds on their strengths. ■