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SCIENCE, now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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A Strategy for Developing Talent

Our present policy for identifying and educating talented persons is, in good part, simply the mechanical product of our testing techniques, and there is good reason to question whether this policy is the best possible. Testing techniques, because of their use of certain statistical measures, tend to favor the broad scholar, the student with many interests and abilities. A more consciously directed program, however, might offer a different emphasis. This analysis and a new strategy based on it are given in Dael Wolfle's article on "Diversity of Talent" in *The American Psychologist*, August, 1960. The strategy is to increase our cultivation of persons who are not well-rounded, who are eccentric, one-sided, yet who, at least on that one side, are really superior. The claim is that such cultivation is valuable both from the viewpoint of the young persons whose future we guide and of the society in which they are to make their way.

There is nothing backhanded, according to the article, in the manner in which the broad, well-rounded student is favored by testing techniques. In selecting students for scholarships and fellowships and for admission to the next higher educational level, the present tendency is to use general measures of ability, to use the sum or the average of separate scores for separate types of ability, for example, rather than the separate scores directly. And there are good scientific reasons for this tendency. The use of sums or averages gives the best correlation between test scores and later achievement. Our measures of achievement in life, for the most part, are composites of several factors, and they are best predicted by tests that are also composites of several factors.

Good scientific grounds, however, may also be offered for not letting a concern with degree of correlation dominate talent development. For one thing, so the analysis continues, although different kinds of ability are often associated with one another, the association is far short of perfect. Some psychologists hold that a small number of primary abilities is sufficient to describe human ability, others find that a great number of special abilities is needed for this purpose, but all are agreed that ability is not a single, undivided trait. Another point about which psychologists are generally agreed is that an assortment of patterns of ability is consistent with achievement in a given profession. There has been a search for characteristic patterns of ability for various professions and it has failed. This means, according to the present analysis, that medicine, law, engineering, various branches of science, and other vocations all will profit by embracing diverse patterns of ability.

The strategy proposed, of course, does not call for slackening in the attention paid to the student who scores high everywhere. This student would get the same support he now gets, but attention would also be paid to the person who is exceptional in only one area. The strategy might mean poorer correlation between tests and subsequent achievement. The bet is, however, that it is a more productive way to increase the talent pool than simply to dip below the generally superior level, continuing to base awards on averages. In fact, the bet is that the strategy will enlarge the talent pool without loss in over-all quality. Students who, because of high gifts and intense interests along one line of endeavor, have neglected other lines would themselves no longer be neglected.—J.T.