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Selection Procedures in Jesuit High Schools: 
Time for Re-examination

ROBERT R. NEWTON, S.J.

When Fr. Lorenzo K. Reed remarked to an institute of Jesuit high school administrators, "for the first time in the history of the American Assistency, the Jesuit educational apostolate must be justified to the younger men," he was referring to a variety of dissatisfactions that have recently found growing support among those interested in the high school apostolate. One of the many questions hidden in Fr. Reed's statement involves the type of student who attends the Jesuit high school; it asks: are Jesuits devoting their time and resources to the group of students among whom they can be most effective? Put in Fr. Reed's terms the question becomes: can a Jesuit be confident that working with the type of student who attends the Jesuit high school is really selling his religious life for the highest price, both spiritually and intellectually? A small number would answer no; a larger number would feel that the question warrants serious consideration.

In the background of any discussion of this area must be an awareness of the extent of secondary education in the United States. In both public and nonpublic high schools there are 13,300,000 students, approximately 3,500,000 of whom are Catholics. Thirty-one percent or about 1,100,000 of this number are enrolled in Catholic schools; the Jesuit high school apostolate touches 35,000 students. This means that Jesuit schools directly encounter about 3.5 percent of those in Catholic secondary schools, about one percent of the Catholics of secondary school age, and slightly less than 0.3 percent of the total high school population of the United States. Although the population will continue its gradual expansion, it is doubtful that the numbers attending Jesuit high schools will be significantly enlarged; thus the percentage of students reached by Jesuit schools will continue to decline.

All schools, and especially private schools, want students who

have a strong desire and the personal capacity to take advantage of what the individual school has to offer. Just as each student has particular needs and abilities, so each school has individual characteristics which suit it to excellence in training and drawing the best out of certain types of students. Jesuit high schools are no exception to this rule. Even more obviously than in the past the success of Jesuit education—whatever Jesuit schools have to contribute to secondary education in the United States—will depend on the extent to which it is maximally effective with the relatively few who are directly encountered. And this effectiveness will be proportional to the degree that these schools can successfully identify the caliber of student whose talents, character and interests are suited to the type of training traditionally associated with Jesuit education. Careful selection thus becomes essential to the goals of the Jesuit secondary school apostolate.

The process is not one-sided; the student and his family must decide what type of school best suits his personal needs and abilities. The number of students who enter Jesuit high schools but for various reasons are not able to continue should be a serious concern for Jesuit administrators since admission to the Jesuit school frequently means exclusion from other Catholic schools. Comparing the number of freshmen in Jesuit high schools in 1962-63 (9,463) with the number who were seniors in 1965-66 (7,611), we find that approximately 20 percent (1,852) or one of five of those who were originally selected never graduated. Likewise, account must be taken of the significant number of students whose ability is sufficient for the course of studies but whose personal adjustment to the school has left them seriously dissatisfied. Such considerations point to the need for a more clearly defined evaluation by both school and student.

At this point a number of questions suggest themselves. What type of student is the Jesuit school set up to work with and how concretely do the schools describe this student? What are current selection procedures and how effective are they in identifying potential students? How do these methods compare with the procedures followed by other private schools with similar goals? Finally, what additional factors and techniques could be brought

into use and how could Jesuit schools explore their effectiveness? In the following pages tentative answers to these questions will be attempted.

I SELECTION PROCEDURES IN JESUIT HIGH SCHOOLS

The Jesuit High School Student

The Ratio Studiorum of 1599, the first blueprint of Jesuit education, had advised the Prefect of the Lower School to examine those who sought admission and to admit only those whom he knew to be “well instructed and of good character and disposition.” More recently, the International Conference on the Apostolate of the Secondary Schools, held in Rome in 1963, pointed to the need to select those who showed promise of becoming distinguished Catholics and who gave hope that they would exercise influence in their communities. In an attempt to discover in the concrete what individual schools envisioned as the norm for their schools, letters were sent to seventeen Jesuit high schools in the United States requesting descriptions of the type of student they felt their school was intended for. Nine replies (53 percent) were received from schools in various sections of the United States. The following summary is presented as generally representative of Jesuit high schools.

Eight of the nine schools stated explicitly in their literature that their course of studies was geared to the academically talented student, many noting the exclusively college preparatory nature of their schools. Five mentioned strong character in describing the type of student they desired. Only one school gave a further delineation of this quality, describing concern about “effort in studies and general perseverance, dependability, emotional stability, cooperation at school, and ambition to succeed.” One school indicated that the prospective student should be above average not only in ability but also in ambition, while another noted an earnest desire to attend the school as essential. Promise of service to the community was a concern indicated in the literature of two schools. Leadership potential was mentioned by two schools in descriptions of admission policies, though this notion was practically universal in the stated objectives of each school.

Two generalizations are possible on the basis of this evidence: (1) the schools are geared to the academically talented, college-bound student, and (2) ideally the prospective student pos-
sesses more than mere scholastic ability. With one exception, a
certain vagueness surrounded precisely what other qualities were
desired, the most frequent generalization being “strong character.”

Admission Procedures in Jesuit High Schools

The second part of the request sent to these schools consisted
in a questionnaire on the admissions procedure they employed,
and in particular the part played by testing, grammar school
record, interviewing, recommendations and character evaluation in
the decision to admit or reject an applicant. The findings indi-
cated that each school required applicants to take an entrance
examination. Seven of the nine respondents made use of stand-
ardized examinations or participated in a program that was con-
trolled outside the school, e.g., diocesan entrance examination.
Eight of the nine schools surveyed replied that the result of the
examination was the major determinant in their admissions proc-
есс. Six of the nine schools took note of grammar school records
in formulating their decision, though only two indicated that this
factor had more than a minor role in their overall procedure. One
school insisted on an interview with each student; three others
responded that interviewing was occasionally employed for special
cases. Three schools used recommendations from grammar school
teachers, two of the three placing some weight on this factor. In
answer to the question: do your procedures attempt to evaluate
the character or personality of the prospective student?, one
school reported an extensive program of home visits, consultations
with pastors and grammar schools during a period extending from
October to April. This same school noted that ninety percent of
its decision to admit a student depended on these interviews. Two
other schools noted some effort at character evaluation: one
employing it only in negative cases, another relying somewhat on
a self-report by the applicant.

Summarizing briefly: eight of the nine schools relied heavily
on an entrance examination; six of the nine placed some weight on
grammar school records; one school made extensive efforts at
character evaluation primarily through interviewing.

Independent NonCatholic Schools

As part of the survey of Jesuit high schools reported above,
identical requests and questionnaires were sent to seven independ-
ent nonCatholic schools. Seven replies (100 percent) were re-
ceived. Since these schools bear some similarity to Jesuit high
schools, particularly in their aims and selective student bodies, it was hoped that a survey of their admission procedures would provide additional information as well as a point of comparison. Catalogs from the seven schools gave generally full descriptions of the type of student sought by the school. With the exception of one school sound character was explicitly noted. This quality was expanded in various ways to include seriousness of purpose, range of interests, potential for personal contribution and future promise. In all cases it was assumed that the applicant would possess the intellectual capacity to meet the rigorous standards of the school.

Admission procedures at these schools followed a regular pattern. Testing (in six of seven cases the Secondary School Admission Test) and grammar school record were used to determine academic qualifications. Emphasis was then shifted to investigation of the student’s character and potential for contribution to the school and society. The interview was considered an important instrument for determining this factor and in all cases an interview was required. If travel to the school was impossible, an interview with an alumnus was arranged in the applicant’s locale. Stress was also placed on recommendations received from former teachers and occasionally from persons outside the school experience of the applicant. Three of the schools required a personal statement from the applicant. The information gleaned from these sources was used to form a general impression of the student on which the decision to accept or reject was based.

Summary and Comparison

It is unrealistic, of course, to expect uniformity among a system of fifty-three Jesuit schools which are geographically so disparate; of necessity local conditions dictate specific operational procedures. Nevertheless, it seems logical to expect that the similar orientation and identical goals of the men who operate Jesuit schools should result in certain common objectives. The sampling of Jesuit schools on the type of student desired seemed to bear out this conclusion and the general statement was offered that the schools surveyed wanted students of above average ability, of good character, with some potential for future leadership.

Investigation of the admission procedures used by Jesuit schools indicated that testing was universally employed to judge the applicant’s aptitude; in some cases grammar school achievement
was added to this consideration. With one or possibly two exceptions, however, little or no effort was made to assess the personal qualities or character of applicants. A comparison with the seven independent schools in the survey showed similar norms for selection of students—insistence on aptitude and sound character. In contrast to Jesuit schools, the independent schools regarded character evaluation, accomplished through personal interviewing, recommendations and sometimes the applicant's personal statement, of either equal or more importance than scholastic aptitude. The independent schools' procedure is obviously more exhaustive and revealing; it likewise involves considerably more time and energy.

**Dangers in the Exclusive Use of Intellectual Criteria**

When account is taken of the aims of the Jesuit high school apostolate, the exclusive use of intellectual criteria for selection of students appears to hold certain dangers. The first and most obvious disadvantage is that only one aspect of the student is considered or evaluated. The student's personal traits as well as his special interests and talents remain uninvestigated and consequently are not considered in the admissions decision. The student subsequently enters the school with the faculty knowing little more about him other than his name and examination score. Such a one-sided analysis seems to run counter to a more complete understanding of the process of education and certainly counter to the traditional Jesuit concern for "the whole man." The exclusive emphasis on intellectual ability seems built on the assumption, at least implicit, that the student has little more to offer and the school no reason for evaluating anything other than this capacity.

One of the advantages of any school is that it draws together a group of people who learn as much from one another as from those who are assigned to teach them. The school that can gather a student body from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide range of talents can obviously create a situation where this mutual sharing becomes an integral and important part of the educative process. Exclusive reliance on aptitude as a means of selection runs the risk of excessive and perhaps stultifying homogeneity within the student body. The Fichter Report on Jesuit high school formation indicates that whereas 48 percent of

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American males between 45 and 54 years of age earn under five thousand dollars a year, only 7 percent of the students in Jesuit schools come from families whose annual income is under this figure. Sixty percent of the student body comes from families whose income ranges between five and fifteen thousand dollars. Though it is obvious that this phenomenon is due in great measure to the necessary tuition rates of Jesuit high schools, a not improbable case could also be formulated to show that the aptitude or intelligence test is unavoidably geared to a middle class background. It is now well known that intelligence tests are measures of general intellectual achievement, a combination of ability and experience, rather than some innate culture-free quality. Children from depressed educational, social or cultural backgrounds on the average score significantly lower than children from middle class backgrounds. The gap widens as the children grow older in school. It thus becomes generally impossible to identify the high ability student from a deprived background by using the normal interpretation of aptitude scores. This phenomenon is obviously true of students from radically disadvantaged backgrounds; but it seems quite likely that it is true of students whose development has been hindered though perhaps not as dramatically by low socio-economic status. In this context the question must also be raised whether the concern to communicate a spirit of Christian social justice can ever be successful if efforts take place in a context where the disadvantaged student plays no part, where the Negro, for example, remains to the impressionable high school student someone to be tutored.

A final consideration involves the question: to what extent does the traditional aptitude test indicate the student with creative potential? In a study on creative and academic performance among talented students, Holland found that creative performance was generally unrelated to scholastic achievement and scholastic aptitude. He concluded that the traditional predictors of academic achievement were of little or no value in identifying the creative student. In previous studies in the same area Holland had attempted to discover the personal characteristics of students with superior high school ranking as well as the traits of stu-

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dents who received good college grades. In both cases the socialized individual who was unlikely to express very much of his own individuality was the one most likely to be successful. Holland's findings are not presented as conclusive; but such research does pose an interesting question for schools whose criteria for selection center around aptitude testing and previous school record.

II TOWARDS A MORE COMPREHENSIVE SELECTION PROCEDURE

One of the results of the International Conference on the Apostolate of the Secondary Schools was an outline of criteria for the selection of Jesuit high school students. The Conference Report pointed out that intellectual qualifications could be assessed by the use of standardized and well validated tests. An evaluation of the religious and moral character of the student, it was felt, could not be as easily or accurately determined. A convergence of probabilities would be required. Three methods were offered as suited to this task: reports from previous teachers, investigation of the family and home, and an interview with the applicant himself. In the pages that follow each of these techniques will be briefly explored and both possibilities and reservations noted. The supposition will be that the selection procedure best suited to Jesuit schools is a combination of the various methods to produce a maximum amount of information for decision.

Aptitude Tests

The college preparatory nature of Jesuit high schools demands some accurate assessment of the student's ability. As noted above, standard aptitude tests were in fact being used by all of the Jesuit high schools investigated. Because of the large number and variety of scholastic aptitude tests available for evaluation of 7-9 grade students, careful inspection of individual tests is necessary to determine their usefulness for the selection process in a Jesuit high school. The technical data supplied with each test must be analyzed to insure reliability and validity as well as the suit-

9 "The Prediction of College Grades from the California Psychological Inventory and the Scholastic Aptitude Test," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, L, pp. 135-142.
ability of the test for the group under consideration. A test which may give valid results when used with a group representative of the population in general may be virtually useless when employed with applicants who have already undergone some type of screening process. Likewise, a test which proves valuable in the original selection process might be invalid or unreliable when its results are used to determine the placement of students. The aptitude test published by the Scholastic Testing Service and in use in some of the schools surveyed, for example, is criticized both for its failure to provide sufficient validity data and for the incompleteness of statistical information necessary to interpret scores.

With any aptitude test it is important to realize that test scores should not be regarded as an absolute measurement of the student’s ability. A large number of factors connected with the construction and standardization of the test introduce elements of relativity into the meaning of the test score. No test, for example, is a completely consistent measure of aptitude. The degree to which the entire test or its various subdivisions are consistent measures is expressed by means of a reliability coefficient. The standard error of measurement based on this coefficient provides the range in which the obtained score of the individual should be interpreted. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (Verbal Section), for example, one of the most accurate measures available, has a standard error of measurement of 30 points. A score of 500 on the SAT-V, therefore, is not to be interpreted absolutely but should be taken as an indication that the student’s true score will fall between 470 and 530 two-thirds of the time. The use of a cutoff point with an aptitude test thus appears unrealistic to the degree that it treats the score as an absolute rather than as a range.

The question of validity likewise introduces a note of relativity into the use of a test. The extent to which test results can be said to correlate with future learning success, for example, is a variable which is expressed in a correlation coefficient for predic-


12 Oscar K. Buros, The Sixth Mental Measurements Yearbook, pp. 93-96.

tive validity. Though a high degree of accuracy can be expected from a good test, once again the test scores should not be used as though they were infallible guides.

By way of summary, it can be said that tests of scholastic aptitude have generally proved to be reliable and valid instruments for measuring ability and predicting classroom success. But the danger also exists that the aptitude may be misused by expecting it to measure or predict with a degree of accuracy which is both unclaimed and unrealistic.

**Grammar School Record and Rank**

The previous grammar school performance of the student is regarded by many as an important element in the selection process. The consistent achievement of an applicant through eight years of schooling quite logically can be expected to be a more reliable predictor of future scholastic performance than an hour-long aptitude test. The use of grades and class ranking, however, does give rise to certain difficulties when it involves a variety of schools which are either not comparable or use different grading standards. Recently methods have been proposed to enable colleges to adjust for differences between high schools and consequently increase the predictive value of school marks. Kinkead, for example, describes how Yale University has over the years built up its own system, a special cooperative relationship with certain secondary schools on whose reports it can rely for predicting a student's success at Yale. A high school that draws its student body from a limited number of grammar schools could develop similar norms to take full advantage of previous school record as a prediction factor.

An obvious difficulty inherent in the use of school grades has been mentioned previously—the tendency of teachers to reward with good marks the students who are more willing to conform to the patterns they set. The possibility exists, therefore, that the imaginative, nonconforming student will not be easily identified by this norm. In spite of this, grammar school record

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should be regarded as an important and valuable instrument in the selection process.

Assessment of Personality Factors: Recent Research

Within recent years the large number of intellectually qualified students who have failed to complete college as well as the increased number of highly talented applicants to certain selective colleges have stirred investigation of non-intellectual factors as predictors of college success. Harvard College, for example, finds that the number of intellectually qualified students has so increased that the group refused admission is quite similar in aptitude to the group actually admitted to the College. As a consequence, the decisions of the Harvard Admissions Committee have gradually shifted over the past decade to place more and more emphasis on personal qualities. With the increased interest in personal characteristics as a factor in college admission, various methods have been developed to assess these personal qualities. In this section an attempt will be made to summarize and comment briefly on the more psychological approaches to this task; in the following section, use of the interview and recommendations in personal assessment will be described.

A recent College Entrance Examination Board publication has attempted to review the psychological literature pertaining to evaluation of personality in admissions and summarize the research in this area between 1950-60. It was found that the existing research could be organized under four different approaches: the pilot experience, the social or demographic approach, the psychological approach, and the transactional model.

The "pilot experience" is an approach which uses the student’s personal adjustment to his previous schooling as a predictor of his future performance in a similar situation. Though this adjustment is measured through the symbols of school marks and rank in class, the focus here is not the intellectual ability of the student but the personal characteristics which are essential to success in the type of experience which the school presents. Though this approach yields excellent results as a predictor of adjustment, the danger exists, as has been previously noted, that it will fail to identify the talented student who finds it difficult
to conform to the more routine demands of school life. The technique is also concerned not so much with a deeper understanding of the student as with accurately predicting how he will react.

The demographic or social approach investigates the characteristics of the environment of the individual, factors over which he has no control. A generalization can be made on the basis of past experience, e.g., with applicants from a certain ethnic or socio-economic group, about the probability of success in a particular situation. The demographic approach has proved to possess a certain validity as a predictor but runs the obvious risk of contributing to the continuation of stereotypes. The method aims at highlighting the attributes of the environment rather than the characteristics of the individual student; consequently it provides little understanding of the student and can neglect to take account of the applicant's unique adaptation to his environment.

The more strictly psychological approach involves research with both projective and objective tests. Psychological testing is the area of personality assessment which has been the subject of much popular criticism in recent years. This has been true especially with regard to its widespread use in industrial hiring and promotion. Proponents of the use of psychological tests in education maintain that such testing can reveal important factors about individuals which will provide new understanding of their educational potential, limitations and needs. Though it seems difficult to quarrel with this aim, there do seem to be serious reasons to doubt whether psychological tests can presently accomplish this purpose. Anastasi summarizes her lengthy evaluation of personality tests: "The field of personality testing is still in a formative stage. Few if any available instruments have as yet proved their value empirically to the same extent as have aptitude or achievement tests. Consequently, the tester must proceed warily—at his own risk." Other critics hold that psychological testing involves serious ethical problems, especially the violation of the individual's right to privacy. Though psychological tests may provide useful understanding at some future date, the current status of this technique would argue against their use in the selection process at the present time.

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The final approach analyzed by Stein, the transactional, is based on the assumption that success in a school situation is a function of transactions between the individual and his environment. The transactional method proposes to understand both the individual and his environment by bypassing the criterion used in the other predictors, school grades, and substituting in their place the psychological make-up an individual will need if he is to be successful in the environment of a particular school. Essential to this approach is the construction of a model delineating the psychological characteristics that an individual school will demand of the student. The success of this approach would depend on the skill and willingness of the school to analyze the psychological demands of the situation and discover methods of evaluating prospective students in terms of these demands.

By way of summary, it might be concluded that each of the methods discussed possesses some merit in evaluating students for admission to school situations. The pilot experience and demographic approach permit good prediction but, as was seen, little understanding. The psychological approach holds the possibility of valuable information but currently needs serious development. The transactional aims at fuller understanding of the student and school but demands a painstaking, though perhaps rewarding, study of both.

Interviews and Recommendations

Personal interviews with the candidate and recommendations from his teachers are probably the most widely used methods for evaluating personal qualities in the admission process. The brief survey of independent schools’ admission procedures presented earlier in this paper shows that heavy emphasis was placed on these two techniques in the evaluation of the student’s character. Admission policies of some of the more selective colleges indicate the extensive use of alumni and staff interviews as well as recommendations from teachers and principals to form a total picture of the candidate. The rationale behind this procedure is obviously the conviction that the soundest evaluations of a student’s character will come from those who know him best—his teachers, counselors, and principal. Likewise the stress on the

21 See Glimp and Whitla, art. cit., and Kinkead, op. cit.
personal interview is founded on the supposition that the skilled interviewer with a clear idea of the personal demands of his school (similar to the transactional model discussed above) will be able to evaluate the applicant with reasonable accuracy. The information derived from these sources is compiled to present a rather thorough description of the applicant’s personal qualities. Misrepresentation or misinterpretation are obviously possible; it is improbable, however, that such difficulties would survive the convergence of evidence from various sources. Careful use of recommendations and interview data thus seems the most effective method of evaluation currently available. The increasing use of these measures points to their wide acceptance as useful instruments for selection purposes.

III SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has touched upon a number of areas. Initially selection of students in Jesuit high schools was isolated from the variety of concerns which make up the unrest current in Jesuit thinking on the educational apostolate. The importance of this area was briefly indicated and an analysis of the type of student desired by Jesuit schools was presented. A sampling of admission procedures currently in use in the Society’s schools was followed by a comparison of these procedures with the methods employed by independent schools which profess similar aims. The disadvantages involved in the use of purely intellectual criteria were suggested and brief descriptions and evaluations of available selection procedures—aptitude testing, previous school record, psychological testing, interview and recommendation—were presented.

A definite theme has constantly been in the background of these discussions. It is the conviction that selection of the student body in Jesuit high schools is one of the keys to the success of the Society’s educational apostolate and as such is worth serious time and effort. It seems obvious that the goals of the Jesuit system require more than intellectual ability in its students. It follows logically, therefore, that whatever means are necessary should be employed to identify boys who possess the interest and personal capacity to take full advantage of what a Jesuit high school has to offer. A professional attitude should dictate a constant search for better evaluative criteria; increasingly accurate
decisions should be possible on the basis of carefully observed successes and failures.  

The importance of the selection process to the effectiveness of Jesuit high schools as well as a sense of obligation to those who are accepted do not permit an unwarranted and unquestioning confidence in a single criterion to the neglect of other valid and useful methods. As a result of the rapid upgrading and expansion of both public and private school education, the luxury of a more passive approach to the selection of students is fast becoming less and less possible. The fact that the Jesuit school no longer stands as everyone's first choice argues for a more carefully planned and aggressive admission policy. The problems which face Jesuit schools at large in this area could easily be the subject of a national research effort, an effort which would take advantage of the experience and resources of the extensive Jesuit high school system. But whether this problem is confronted on the national level or studied locally, the general improvement within Jesuit secondary education indicates that it is time for a re-examination of the selection procedures in Jesuit high schools.

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22 Admittedly the considerations presented do not speak directly to the problem of the school forced into a diocesan entrance examination; the ideas offered, however, may both suggest reasons why it is important to explore new possibilities and indicate some of the ways in which selection of students can become a more active process.