

# Groups Charge Bias in Merit Scholarship Testing

By LEE A. DANIELS

The competition to determine winners of the prestigious National Merit Scholarship awards for high school students is substantially flawed by reliance on a test that is "biased on the basis of sex, race and family income," according to an group that monitors standardized testing.

The group, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, has banded together with several legal, feminist, civil rights and other educational advocacy groups to urge changes in the test program. In a letter released yesterday they asked the National Merit Scholarship Corporation, which administers the program, to use other criteria, such as high school grades and class rank, to determine who receives the scholarships.

National Merit, based in Evanston, Ill., awards nearly 6,000 scholarships worth more than \$23 million a year.

## An Academic Focus

Officials of the scholarship corporation defended the use of a standardized test to select scholarship recipients, saying they had found no flaws. The officials also said that in fact the test questions were now only one of several factors they considered in choosing National Merit scholars.

"Ours is an open competition that is very keenly academically focused," said Marianne Roderick, senior vice president of the corporation.

In the letter to the scholarship corporation, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, which is also called Fair Test, said, "We are alarmed and dismayed by the relatively small proportion of minority and female winners of the scholarships you administer."

Fair Test said it had estimated that nearly two-thirds of the National Merit awards went to males even though female students as a group earned higher grades in high school and college.

## Different Experiences Cited

The organization also estimated that members of minority groups, who make up more than a fourth of

## Sample Questions

Word association questions taken from recent Scholastic Aptitude Tests. Groups calling for changes in tests say such questions discriminate against students who are unfamiliar with activities of upper-middle-class Americans. Asterisk denotes answer sought by testing service.

### RACQUET: TENNIS

- springboard: diver
- horse: polo
- glove: boxing
- club: golf\*
- gun: hunting

### CONSERVATORY: MUSIC

- anthology: books
- aerie: birds
- bivouac: army
- seminary: religion\*
- arbor: grapes

### HEIRLOOM: INHERITANCE

- payment: currency
- belongings: receipt
- land: construction
- legacy: bill
- booty: plunder\*

### BRIDLE: HORSE

- bone: dog
- olive branch: dove
- valor: soldier\*
- precept: conduct\*
- devotion: duty

Source: National Center for Fair and Open Testing

more than \$23.5 million in scholarships, excluding the programs for minorities, Ms. Roderick said.

Among the groups signing the Fair Test letter were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the National Organization for Women.

The focus of the latest contentions by Fair Test is the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, which students take in October of their junior year.

## References to Tennis and Polo

Fair Test contended that the disparities it found in the proportion of scholarships won by black, Hispanic, and female students resulted from a bias inherent in the examination and based on sex, race, and class. The letter included examples from what the group said were recent aptitude tests. Fair Test said the sample questions showed that students who took the test were expected to be familiar with upper-middle-class sports like sailing, tennis and polo and dance terms like minuet and pirouette.

The Fair Test letter said that there were far more test questions based on what could be considered normal activities of white males, rather than of females or black or Hispanic students. It said that many female and minority students might find such questions disconcerting.

Fair Test also questioned whether the two-hour, multiple-choice examination on which the National Merit competition is based was the best way alone to evaluate the students. Fair Test asserted that many students "who have worked hard and with distinction throughout four years of high school had their hopes dashed by this same exam."

Sarah Stockwell, a spokeswoman for Fair Test, maintained that using the test in awarding scholarship money meant that those students most in need of college aid were least likely to get it.

Aptitude Test, which most colleges use as one measure of which high school students they admit, was biased against girls, again pointing out that they as a group scored lower on that test even though they earned better grades than boys.

And last month, the Cambridge, Mass.-based group released a report that said there was an excessive use of standardized tests by elementary and secondary school educators.

The National Merit scholarships are among the best-known and most sought-after grants for college. Ms. Roderick said that this year 1.2 million students in 19,000 secondary schools took the qualifying test for the competition.

## Winnowing Process

The scholarship corporation then winnows that pool first to 15,000 semifinalists, then to 14,000 finalists, and, finally, to 6,000 scholarship winners. Last year the corporation awarded

high school seniors, received a much smaller share of scholarships. This is the case, Fair Test said, even though about 11 percent of National Merit Scholarships are earmarked for black and Hispanic students through the Achievement Program and the National Hispanic Scholars Program, respectively.

Ms. Roderick replied that the differences in test performances among women, blacks, Hispanics and white males "doesn't mean that the test itself is biased." But she said, "it does indicate that differences exist in the academic experiences of those groups."

## Use Called Excessive

The newest charges by Fair Test and the steadfast defense by testing services underscore how contentious the debate over the validity and use of standardized tests remains.

Last year, Fair Test charged that another examination, the Scholastic