There is a quiet revolution taking place at Choate Rosemary Hall, one that is likely to be watched closely at independent schools—and perhaps colleges and universities around the country: A new paradigm for admission assessments is being created that goes beyond test scores and grade point averages, to measure the “intangibles” of successful intelligence.

For Choate, this means a new battery of student assessments that could be in place by the fall of 2006. It already has led to small, but important, revisions to the current admission application, direct questions that encourage creative and practical responses. The new model is geared to enroll students for whom Choate’s program is the appropriate fit, and could enable Choate to help students better capitalize on their own special strengths for future success (whether in college or elsewhere in life).

This does not mean that the school will do away with test scores and pre-Choate GPAs as an important measure of a student’s ability to succeed at Choate. Instead, the new paradigm is based on Sternberg’s “triarchic” theory of intelligence. This model divides learning into three categories: analytic (typically measured by testing), creative, and practical intelligence, as well as qualities such as resilience, responsibility, and adaptability.

This revolution in admission procedures has created a buzz. In November, more than 60 representatives from feeder schools and colleges from across the United States came to Choate’s Successful Intelligence Seminar, featuring Dr. Robert J. Sternberg of the PACE (Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise) Center at Yale University, architect of the new assessment tools. Sternberg is also IBM professor of psychology and education at Yale and author of a seminal work on the subject, Successful Intelligence: How Practical and Creative Intelligence Determines Success in Life (Penguin Books: 1997).

“Those of us involved in admission selection have been looking into different kinds of assessments beyond the traditional standardized tests,” says Julie Goodyear, executive director of the Icahn Scholars Program and one of the forces behind the movement at Choate. “Everyone nods their heads and their eyes light up when you talk about it.”

Deke Smith, an educational counselor based in Portland, Oregon, who helps students select and apply to private schools, wasn’t able to come to the seminar, but listened to an audio tape of the event.

“It makes all kinds of sense,” says Smith, who led the admission offices at both Harvard and Radcliffe during his career. “A community is made up of people with different skills. You need more than one yardstick [to ensure that the community flourishes].”

No one would argue that the system of admission selection used in the past has been flawed. But Choate has a history of always seeking to improve. And, importantly, there are certain realities that have changed the landscape, too. Fifteen years ago the school accepted 50 to 60 percent of its applicants. In the last few years, Choate has
been accepting not quite 30 percent. In a more competitive environment, it is important to have the best measures available.

Admissions remain a conundrum: How do you know which prospective student will do well at Choate? Most applicants have high grade point averages (GPA) and excellent Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) scores. Most are already involved and motivated students.

Director of Admission Ray Diffley pondered this dilemma during a break from reviewing applications in late February.

"Who, among those who did very well on tests, has the personal and creative skills to do well at Choate?" he asked. "And among those who might not have had the strongest test results, we know there will be some who will be wonderful additions to our community."

It is not until students arrive on campus that other factors come into play. Do students have the adaptability to thrive away from home? Can they dig into the workload with ease? Do they accept responsibility for problems in class work and seek out teachers for help when they need it? Or do they blame external factors for their disappointments?

Diffley and Goodyear, a former admission officer at Choate, had felt that something was missing in the selection process as it stood. Both had seen that high SSAT scores did not necessarily predict success at Choate (and, conversely, that a student with somewhat lower scores could end up an honors student).

The question underlying each deliberation at admission time is "fit." But how could the school predict a successful fit while relying solely on the traditional measures?

The answer, coincidentally, lay down the road at Yale. There Dr. Sternberg had been developing his theory of successful intelligence, which looks at how people use their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses in creating their own success in life.

Sternberg had already applied his work on successful intelligence to university admissions testing in the Rainbow Project, which involved more than 1000 students at institutions around the country, and the Michigan Project, which targeted around 700 business students at the University of Michigan. And as a parent of two Choate graduates (Seth ’97, Sarah ’98), Sternberg had already consulted with the school on several occasions, and was familiar with the unique environment at Choate when he was approached by Goodyear in 1998. She was looking into the question of why SSAT scores did not always lead to the highest GPAs, specifically in the new Icahn Scholars Program at Choate. The Icahn Scholars Program was created to enable bright, motivated students whose families qualified for full financial aid to attend Choate with a full scholarship. Eighteen students were admitted each year in ninth grade, with an ultimate total group of seventy two Icahn Scholars in the school. Sternberg’s head researchers at PACE, Elena L. Grigorenko and Linda Jarvin, got to work and came up with two questionnaires; one looked at variables in a student’s profile that were “hard-side” (academic and practical intelligence) and the other at “soft-side” (self-reported character, values, and motivation) variables.

"Traditional measures look at memory and analytical skills, which are very important to school, college, and life," says Sternberg. "But they don’t measure practical skills. For instance, when a student comes to a new environment, it’s strange and different and they don’t have their parents to turn to. It helps to have good adaptive
skills. Many fail or don’t do well, not because they are not skilled academically, but because they can’t make the environment work for them and they can’t work for the environment.”

The questionnaires were initially administered solely to both incoming and returning Icahn Scholars, highly talented students who come from families below a certain income level. Goodyear was hoping to find better ways to gauge readiness for a competitive boarding school environment.

“The goal is to make the best match,” says Goodyear. The school wants “students who thrive on what Choate has to offer.”

The results from the first questionnaires were better than expected in helping to predict academic success for Icahn Scholars, and the school and the PACE team decided to try out the measures on all students in an entering class (more than two-thirds of that class participated). Again, the results showed that these new measures substantially increased the ability to predict academic success beyond what SSAT and pre-Choate GPAs had done. What mattered to the small, specific sample of Icahn Scholars was the same for all students.

How do the Yale measures work? Can an admissions office make an assessment based on the theory of successful intelligence that will reasonably predict how a prospective student will do at Choate? Though the assessment tools slated to be in place for class the of 2011 candidates are still being designed, the groundwork laid in the earlier work with Icahn Scholars and the general Choate population shows clear promise of its potential efficacy.

Ray Diffley has taken a leadership role to bring this concept to his peers in the independent school world. In the fall of 2003, at a national conference in Montreal, Diffley presented this concept to experienced colleagues from across the US and Canada, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Diffley had studied assessment in graduate school but until he came upon Sternberg’s work, the science behind the intuition was not available. Sternberg’s work integrated into the independent school environment left experienced colleagues more curious than ever about what’s happening at Choate. Diffley likes to underscore that there is a science behind the use of successful intelligence measures, not “emotional quotient fuzziness.”

This confidence comes straight out of the PACE team’s initial work. The study sought to assess several attributes of students to find out which, if any, were commonly present in academic success. Some of those attributes included:
Type of tasks preferred
Self-awareness
Self-confidence
Commitment to learning and achievement
Locus of control
Sources of support
Resilience to educational challenges

The team initially queried students, teachers, and parents about each student. Students were asked to rate various sentences on a scale of 1 to 7 (one being "strongly agree," seven being "strongly disagree"). For example, to get a sense of type of tasks preferred, students were given the statement "You think that if you put enough work into it, you will do well in any academic subject."

Student responses were generally "useful supplemental measures of potential achievement," Sternberg reports. Parents did not fare as well—parental pride seemed to mar the ability to honestly assess their progeny. As Sternberg told seminar participants in November, "never ask parents about their own kids … every parent has wonderful kids." Teachers also did not prove to be reliable—not enough teacher rating forms were returned.

A "School-Life Questionnaire" was constructed to measure students' management of themselves, of others, and of tasks one could encounter at Choate. Drawn from interviews with alumni, current students, and teachers, these measures look at how students are motivated, interpret situations, behave, follow directions, and organize their lives.

During the initial study of Icahn Scholars, teachers and staff in the Icahn Scholars Summer Orientation Program evaluated the students weekly, and students completed the School Life Inventory daily, also. This allowed the researchers to track changes in the students' knowledge and ability to adapt to the school environment.

After the success of the first study of Icahn Scholars, the second study of an entire incoming class was even more successful. When looking at the three different tools (SSAT, pre-Choate GPA, and the Yale measures) used to predict academic success, the Yale measures combined with the SSAT increased prediction substantially.

In both studies, three consistent variables among students best predicted a student's ability to thrive at Choate:
- A good internal locus of control—the ability to shoulder the blame when things weren't working, and also to take credit for one's own successes.
- "Sensible self-confidence." Students who were overly confident or lacked confidence did not adjust as well.
- A tacit knowledge about how the independent school environment worked. Students with such knowledge did a better job of mastering the environment over time. In other words, do students know what it takes to succeed at a boarding school without being explicitly taught?

Successfully intelligent people defy negative expectations, even when these expectations arise from low scores on IQ or similar tests. They do not let other people's assessments stop them from achieving their goals. They find their path and then pursue it, realizing that there will be obstacles along the way and that surmounting these obstacles is part of their challenge.

creativity, teachers at Choate will also incorporate
and encourage these strategies in their instruction.

Says Diffley, “These are skills that will help
our students better lead fulfilling lives, by being
equipped to manage in the world they live in
while also making significant contributions to
that world.”

As Sternberg noted in his November lecture,
successful intelligence is “flexible, dynamic, and
modifiable,” something that can be developed.
Indeed, sending a child to Choate Rosemary Hall
is an effort to better develop his or her abilities,
not merely to get certain information inside his or
her brain.

Julie Goodyear says the information gleaned
from the team’s work has already affected her work
with the Icahn Scholars.

“My senses have been fine-tuned to look for
the qualities that the Yale team has determined are
important,” she says, including the tendency to
work hard or to seek out learning, as opposed to a
specific grade. “Those students will naturally grav-
itate to the kind of program that Choate offers.”

“It’s very exciting to see this come to fruition,”
says Goodyear.

And are other schools interested in Choate’s
ground-breaking commitment to a new kind of
assessment? The number of people at the
November seminar would seem to indicate so.
Rachael Beare, Director of Admissions and
Financial Aid at Lakeside, says her school is watch-
ing the Choate project carefully. “We know that
wholly analytical measures haven’t told the whole
story [about students],” she says. “We try to struc-
ture our admissions process to take that into
account. [But] the notion that you can measure
those non-analytical pieces is exciting.”

Notes Diffley, “The point of using an evaluative
tool like Successful Intelligence is to select and pro-
vide opportunity to those who have the essential
qualities for success across the talent spectrum.”

Though the PACE team is under contract
to create the actual tools for Choate, all
involved hope that the tools can eventually be
applied to other schools, though they might
need to be calibrated for different academic
emphases and traditions.

Sternberg praises Choate for taking ownership
of the idea of using a wider lens to assess students.
“My impression is that [Choate] welcomes the
opportunity to be a pioneer,” says Sternberg.
“They are taking a leadership role.”

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Rockville, VA. She has written on education issues for
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SAMPLE QUESTION: *In day schools you rarely see your teachers outside of class. Some of them might be engaged in sports or other extracurricular activities, but mostly you only see them in school-related circumstances. At boarding school the situation is quite different, because many teachers live on campus and you get to see them outside the classroom a lot.*

Given this situation, rate the quality of the following choices in response to the situation:

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The responses, rated on the 1-7 scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), include:

- **A** Always greet teachers and smile, but avoid seeing them outside of class.
- **B** Take advantage of the situation to talk to teachers about your school-related problems.
- **C** Wait and see if teachers approach you, and if so, what kinds of things they talk to you about.
- **D** Talk to your teachers but avoid discussing your problems as this might give them a negative impression of you.
- **E** Try to be sensitive and make a distinction between situations when teachers are available and are not available to you.
- **F** Always try to be noticed – the more that teachers talk to you, the better your grades will be.
- **G** Always ask whether it is a good time or not to discuss your problems with teachers.