

# TESTING THE TEST

Career interest tests can be an important tool in a school counselor's repertoire. Not, however, if the tests aren't valid. Learn how to separate the wheat from the chaff.

BY LAWRENCE K. JONES, PH.D., NCC

Are you harming students by using an invalid Internet-based career test? At first glance, this question may seem absurd, perhaps offensive. On the other hand, you may know that numerous articles have sounded the alarm about the quality of these measures and the ethics of their use, particularly in the *Journal of Career Assessment*. This is a sensitive topic, especially challenging for many honest, well-intentioned people and organizations who want to help students. Since I am a test developer, you may also consider my writing this article self-serving. But as you read on, I believe you will agree

that this is a fair question and a disturbing one for school counselors.

The Internet's growth in popularity has led to a proliferation of career tests, many of them free. There are also businesses that offer schools Web-related products that include career tests. Typically, they include an assessment of Holland's six personality types and relate the results to careers and college majors. They go by a variety of names such as profiler, sorter, finder, test or quiz.

Unfortunately, most of them are invalid measures; there is no proof they measure what they purport to

measure. Any test must be considered invalid unless there is evidence to show otherwise.

Invalid career tests can harm students. For a moment, imagine the effect of students getting the results of an invalid test of Holland's six personality types. Specifically, consider those students who most closely resemble the Enterprising type, ones that like to lead and persuade people and are good at it, who see themselves as energetic and sociable. Consider how they will react when the test tells them they are Investigative and "Like to study and solve math or science problems; general-

FARMER

CHEF

DESIGNER

PSYCHOLOGIST

KINDERGARDEN TEACHER

ACCOUNTANT

DISC JOCKEY

CIVIL ENGINEER

NURSE

MARKETING EXECUTIVE

LIBRARIAN

POLICE OFFICER

CHEMIST

REPORTER

PILOT

SOCIAL WORKER

LAWYER

SECRETARY

ZOOKEEPER

SYSTEMS ANALYST

URBAN PLANNER

VETERINARIAN

PHOTOGRAPHER

JOURNALIST

ly avoid leading, selling or persuading.”

In addition to causing confusion and disbelief, how will this misinformation affect their career exploration and decision making? Their understanding of themselves? Their confidence in you? And, what happens to those Enterprising students who are actually misled, who pursue science or math careers – career directions that don't fit them?

Does this scenario sound far-fetched? Unfortunately, it is not.

Numerous Internet career “meas-

test results. For some, it will have little or no impact. But those who are highly motivated are likely to have strong, negative reactions. We all know them: the students who are full of anticipation, looking forward to the results, eager to learn about themselves and to explore college majors and careers. Disbelief, confusion or frustration is what they likely will experience. These negative feelings will be heightened when they are asked to apply the results to a career exploration activity, such as identifying the occupations

understand how their personality interacts with work environments to affect their job satisfaction and success. Most of these insights are lost if students get invalid test results.

Parents, teachers and others may become frustrated in their efforts to help guide students in their development, and their perception of school counseling may be diminished. And, of course, school counselors are at risk of being negatively affected. Their effectiveness in implementing their school counseling program may be lowered. Their credibility and stature among students, school colleagues, parents and the public may be put at risk. The issue of unethical practice is also raised.

Lastly, the widespread use of invalid career tests discourages researchers and test developers from developing effective career assessments. Why spend the time (often years) and expense in developing a measure when virtually anyone can create a “career measure” in a few hours time for the Internet?

The role and ethical standards for school counselors are clear. According to the ASCA role statement, “The professional school counselor is a certified/licensed educator trained in school counseling with unique qualifications and skills to address all students’ academic, personal/social and career development needs.” One of those unique qualifications is the counselors’ knowledge of psychological assessment. School counselors in training generally take a course in tests and measurements. They are instructed to follow, “all professional standards regarding selecting, administering and interpreting assessment measures.” (ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors).

With the role and standards so clear, why aren't school counselors following them? Cost? Unfamiliarity? Lack of confidence or training?

Holland's theory may shed some light on this. Many counselors most closely resemble the Social-Enterprising personality types – across the hexagon and basically opposite from the Investigative type. People of the Enterprising type generally avoid activities that require

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## SOME STUDENTS MAY ACCEPT THE ERRONEOUS RESULTS AS TRUE AND PROCEED ACCORDINGLY, EXPLORING OCCUPATIONS OR COLLEGE MAJORS THAT DO NOT FIT THEM.

ures” are widely used by students, parents and school counselors.

Compounding this problem, prominent people in the counseling field extol the virtues of these “cool career counseling tools” through Web sites, books, articles and public appearances.

There are many factors to consider in selecting a career test, but none is more important than validity.

### Harmful Effects

Counseling research has focused on the benefits of valid career measures. To conduct a study of the harmfulness of invalid measures would be unethical. Consequently, we will probably never know the extent to which using invalid career measures is harmful. But, from our experience and thoughtful consideration, we can make some reasonable assumptions about the impact of invalid career measures.

Students are likely to vary in their response to receiving erroneous career

matching their high scores. For many students, invalid results are going to lower their motivation to continue. And, some students may accept the erroneous results as true and proceed accordingly, exploring occupations or college majors that do not fit them. And, others may make important decisions based on these incorrect results. Those with low self-confidence will be the most vulnerable.

But developing a list of good career options to explore – ones that fit your personality – is not the only value of a valid career test. A good test gives you insight about yourself. It helps answer the question, “Who am I?” What is the impact of giving students an invalid measure telling them they are something they are not? A valid measure of Holland's theory also gives individuals the opportunity to learn about the theory and apply it to themselves and the world about them. Students can learn how to apply Holland's theory, to

careful observation and scientific, analytical thinking, such as a course in tests and measurements. Often, this course is the least popular and most anxiety-provoking among students in counselor education programs. Upon graduation, there may be a strong temptation to diminish its importance and to avoid further study in the area.

Regardless of the explanation, most school counselors realize that evaluating tests is their role and responsibility, and it is crucial to students' welfare. They know how important it is to grow professionally in this area and do the hard work of analyzing the claims of test developers.

So just how do you assess whether or not a particular career test is valid? Follow these tips:

- Check for a test manual and how accessible it is. Publishers and Web sites offering career tests should provide easy access. If they don't, be wary. If there is no manual, avoid using the test.

- Look to see if the measure's manual cites research studies published in respected professional journals. If none exist, avoid the measure.
- Beware of career tests that are called something else, such as career quiz, profiler, sorter or finder. If students are being asked to assess their values, interests, abilities, temperaments or personality, it is a career test and should meet professional standards for its validity and reliability.
- Check any career assessment carefully before linking to them on your school Web site. The public doesn't have the benefit of your training, knowledge and experience to judge the merits of career assessments. Parents and students depend on your professional judgment.
- Use your professional analysis and judgment in considering testimonials, sales pitches or recommendations, regardless of

whether they are from friends, state or national leaders, respected organizations or companies. This includes industry endorsements or certifications; their standards are often vague and depend on loose self-assessments of compliance. Ask for a professional manual to study. School counselors have the unique and exciting opportunity to make a real difference in students' lives – to help them learn how to make good career decisions, ones that lead to success and satisfaction. And, there are a number of excellent Internet-based career tests that can make a solid contribution to this effort. ☞

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*Lawrence K. Jones, Ph.D., NCC, is a professor emeritus in the College of Education at North Carolina State University. He specializes in the areas of school counseling and career counseling and development. He can be reached at [lawrencejonespb@earthlink.net](mailto:lawrencejonespb@earthlink.net).*

## Additional Information

For more details about harmful career tests, including a specific example, read [Beware of Harmful Career Tests](#) at [The Career Key™](#) website.

## The Author

Lawrence K. Jones, Ph.D. is the author of The Career Key™ measure and website ([www.careerkey.org](http://www.careerkey.org)), the [Self-Employment Key](#), *Occ-U-Sort*, and the [Career Decision Profile](#). More than 3 million people used The Career Key worldwide in 2007. His books include, *The Encyclopedia of Career Change and Work Issues*, selected as one of the "Outstanding Reference Sources" by the American Library Association and most recently, *Job Skills for the 21st Century, A Guide for Students*.

A National Certified Counselor, Dr. Jones is a member of the National Career Development Association, the American School Counselors Association, and the American Counseling Association. He has written extensively for professional journals, served on the editorial boards of the *Career Development Quarterly* and the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, and was a vocational expert for the Office of Hearings and Appeals, Social Security Administration. He received the annual Professional Development award of the American Counseling Association.

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