

Dispelling the Big Myth about the Military

By Janet E. Wall

A recent analysis by the Education Trust (http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/6879/p/salsa/web/common/public/signup?signup_page_KEY=2946) shows that a substantial percentage of high school graduates do not meet the minimum academic standards to join the US Army. This statement is based on standardized test results on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).

Understanding the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Scores

The ASVAB contains eight basic tests including General Science, Math Knowledge, Paragraph Comprehension, Arithmetic Reasoning, Word Knowledge, Electronics Information, Auto and Shop Information, and Mechanical Comprehension.

The ASVAB results are used by the military services in two separate ways – first for selection and later for classification. For initial selection, the Armed Forces use four of the ASVAB tests -- Math Knowledge, Paragraph Comprehension, Arithmetic Reasoning, and Word Knowledge in combination to form the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT). The results of each person's score on the ASVAB/AFQT is compared to the results of a nationally representative sample of individuals ages 18-23 who took the ASVAB – the norm group.

By federal law, people scoring at the low end are prohibited from entering the military– no exceptions. These individuals will need to find work and training by other means in the civilian sector or take action to improve their scores to qualify for enlistment.

Each service has minimum standards for entry. For the Army and most other services, the minimum standard is an AFQT percentile score of 31; that is, the person would score as well as or better than 31% of people in the national norm group. In reality, the services are not enthusiastic about applicants that score close to the minimum. Additionally, the higher the AFQT, the more likely the person will receive bonuses and have control over job selection and training programs available in the military.

Once accepted into the military, the next step is to determine which training programs the individual is qualified to enter. At this point, various combinations of the eight ASVAB tests that have shown predictive validity in determining success in various occupational training programs are employed in the decision making process.

In summary, scoring well on the ASVAB determines whether or not a person has the opportunity to take the training she/he prefers, and to qualify for career advancement available through military service.

Findings of Interest to Career and School Counselors

The Education Trust analysis determined that:

- More than one in five high school graduates do not meet minimum educational standards to enlist in the Army.
- Persons of color are less likely to meet minimum standards than whites.
- Persons of color who qualify for military enlistment have fewer job and training choices because they have lower scores on the ASVAB. (This trend is not different from the results of other standardized tests.)
- The qualifying rate differs by location with Hawaii, Mississippi, DC, Louisiana, and South Carolina having the highest ineligibility rates (i.e., a lower percentage of youth meet the minimum standard), and New Hampshire, Nebraska, Indiana, and Wyoming with the highest qualification rates (i.e., a higher percentage of youth meet the minimum standard).

As concluded by the Education Trust, the military is “forced to turn away a very high percentage of applicants who, despite their high school diploma, lack the reading, math, science, and problem-solving skills needed to serve in the Armed Forces.” Because the “ASVAB specifically assesses readiness in a wide-range of vocation pathways, it's equally likely that the men and women who do not pass the ASVAB are unprepared for the civilian workforce.”

This information is a call to action to schools that are not preparing individuals to obtain the necessary basic skills to succeed in either the military or civilian workforce.

Other Criteria

Academic smarts is not the only criterion for military entrance. Three additional important criteria are behavior, fitness and high school graduation. The Pentagon reports that 75 % of those aged 17 to 24 do not even qualify to take the ASVAB because they are physically unfit, have a criminal record, or didn't graduate from high school!

Persons with criminal records are prohibited from joining the military. In some limited circumstances, there may be waivers for less severe offenses.

Of great concern is the physical fitness of our population. It's no secret that obesity rates are on the increase in the US. Mission Readiness (<http://www.missionreadiness.org/>), an organization supported by hundreds of military officers, reports that at least nine million 17- to 24-year-olds in the United States are too fat to serve in the military. Obesity rates among children and young adults have "increased so dramatically that they threaten not only the overall health of America but also the future strength of our military."

Furthermore, the high school dropout rate in this country is frightening. Those who drop out and eventually earn a GED are not attractive to the military because they are more likely to attrit. Under some circumstances the military will accept GED holders, but the individuals must score very high on the ASVAB and/or have specialized skills of importance to the military.

Conclusions

If one is concerned about our national security, it is obvious that schools and society need to provide better academic preparation for all young people. School staff, including school counselors, and parents need to be vigilant over the lack academic preparation, job readiness, lack of skills, health, and behavior issues that are obstacles to post school career success and/or progress.

The lack of preparation of our youth does not just apply to our military strength, but also to our global competitive position. If the nation is lacking in energetic and academically capable individuals working and contributing to our economy, then our country's status on the world economic stage will be significantly diminished or compromised. School and career counselors are uniquely positioned to assist the youth of today in attaining the level of preparedness needed to compete in today's economy by preparing youth for the realities and requirements of success in the workforce.



Dr. Janet E. Wall, CDFI, is a career development professional with interests in assessment, technology, labor market information, and evaluation. She has produced several online courses related to technology tools, O*NET, and the green economy. She led the development of the award winning ASVAB Career Exploration Program for the US Department of Defense, and is the author of four ASVAB test preparation books published by McGraw-Hill. She is also an expert witness on the ASVAB for the Hawaii Department of Justice. Contact her at sagesolutions@earthlink.net.

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