

‘Rocky Mountain Talent Search’ at the University of Denver

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The ‘Rocky Mountain Talent Search’ (RMTS) at the University of Denver was developed based on the talent search model developed by Dr Julian Stanley of Johns Hopkins University. This article summarizes the establishment of RMTS and outlines its contemporary programs. Guided by the philosophy that gifted students have unique needs, require academic challenge and crave interaction with their intellectual peers, the RMTS program continues to offer assessment, recognition and summer enrichment programs for academically gifted students. Now in its 23 year, RMTS is flourishing and expanding its offerings annually.

Introduction

Though it is the smallest of the four regional talent searches in the USA, the University of Denver’s ‘Rocky Mountain Talent Search’ (RMTS) is equally committed to providing opportunities and resources to the gifted community throughout the Rocky Mountain region and nationally. RMTS uses the talent search model developed by Professor Julian Stanley at Johns Hopkins University to identify and serve students with advanced academic abilities (Stanley *et al.*, 1974; Lupkowski-Shoplik *et al.*, 2003). Utilizing above grade level aptitude tests, RMTS sponsors annual talent searches, primarily for students who reside in Colorado, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana, and invites high scorers to participate in challenging academic summer programs. Based at the University of Denver, the RMTS is now in its 23rd year and continues to grow in the size and scope of its offerings.

Establishment of the RMTS

In 1982, in cooperation with Julian Stanley, as well as colleagues at Duke and Northwestern Universities who were also developing talent search programs at that

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time, a group of motivated individuals, Holly Hultgren, Elinor Katz and Ken Seeley, organized the University of Denver's first annual RMTS. Invitations to participate were sent to middle-schools and junior high-schools throughout the Rocky Mountain region. Schools were asked to disseminate talent search applications to Grade 7 and 8 students who scored at the 95th percentile or above on a grade level standardized achievement test. Approximately 400 students participated in the first RMTS and, like their peers in the Johns Hopkins University talent search, took the SAT I college entrance exam. Dr Stanley and his colleagues had found that for gifted students the SAT provided a more accurate measurement of their intellectual abilities than standardized achievement tests designed for their grade level (Stanley, 1977).

High scorers were invited to participate in the first RMTS 'Summer institute' on the University of Denver campus in the summer of 1983. These young scholars were offered a selection of unique courses that were designed to challenge them and provide an academic experience more closely aligned with their abilities. Approximately 60 students participated. Faculty instructors, who expected students to be fairly low performers based on their age, were astonished at the academic ability of their students, who mastered their entire course curriculum within the first 2 days.

Over time the RMTS program blossomed and student participation grew. The talent search was expanded to include younger students, and the age range in the summer program expanded to include students younger than Grade 7 and older than Grade 8. An awards ceremony was instituted on the University of Denver campus to honor the top scoring students each year.

The RMTS today

Today the RMTS continues to offer assessment, recognition and summer enrichment programs for academically gifted students. The RMTS program is based in the Office of Academic Youth Programs, a department of the University of Denver's College of Education, and is coordinated by one full-time Program Director and six part-time graduate/undergraduate student staff members. The talent search serves over 3400 students annually in Grades 5–9.

Students establish eligibility for the program by scoring at the 90th percentile or higher on the mathematics and/or verbal sub-test of a national standardized academic achievement test or by scoring 'advanced' on a state level, criterion-referenced achievement test. Teacher or counselor recommendations are accepted in lieu of test scores. Students in Grades 5 and 6 are invited to take the 'PLUS academic abilities assessment'. Developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) in cooperation with the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth and normed at Grades 8–9, the PLUS test is an appropriate above level assessment for gifted Grade 5 and 6 students. Students in Grades 7 and 8 may choose to take the SAT I or ACT college entrance exams. The program also invites Grade 9 students to participate and take the ACT assessment.

There are significant benefits for students who participate in the talent search. RMTS participants receive a certificate of participation, a recommended reading list

and a *Summer opportunities guide*, which outlines academic summer opportunities available throughout the Rocky Mountain region. Each participant also receives an *RMTS Interpretive guide*. This report summarizes the annual results for the talent search and provides statistical analyses, such as mean scores, top scores and the score ranges for each grade level on each test, as well as guidance for interpreting scores and suggestions for educational planning.

Every spring the RMTS program coordinates award ceremonies for the students who obtain the highest scores on PLUS, SAT and ACT. Ceremonies are held on university campuses in Colorado, Utah, Nevada and New Mexico and are typically sponsored by the host university. RMTS is currently in partnership with University of Utah, University of Nevada–Las Vegas, New Mexico Tech and the University of Denver to recognize the achievements of these outstanding young people. At the ceremonies each student receives a certificate of excellence and is presented on stage with a medal acknowledging ‘Honors’ or ‘Highest honors’ status in the annual talent search. The award ceremonies provide the talent search with an opportunity to personally honor and recognize the students while providing them with a sense of accomplishment.

The ‘Summer institute’

Held on the beautiful University of Denver campus, the RMTS ‘Summer institute’ is a culminating experience for talent search participants. The Institute offers students the opportunity to study with bright, motivated peers, enhance their preparation for advanced coursework in the years ahead and establish long-lasting friendships with students from across the country and around the world. Annually the program hosts over 250 commuter and residential students during two sessions. The first is a 2 week program in June for commuting students completing Grades 5–7. The second session is a 3 week commuter and residential program in July for students completing Grades 7–9.

Students qualify for ‘Summer institute’ courses based on SAT, ACT or PLUS test scores. Verbal/reading scores are used to determine eligibility for humanities courses and mathematics/quantitative scores determine eligibility for mathematics and science courses. The chart below outlines the minimum scores required to enroll.

Table 1. RMTS Summer Institute Eligibility

Session I		Session II	
Humanities courses	Mathematics/science courses	Humanities courses	Mathematics/science courses
SAT-Verbal \geq 480	SAT-Math \geq 460	SAT-Verbal \geq 500	SAT-Math \geq 480
ACT-Reading \geq 18	ACT-Math \geq 17	ACT-Reading \geq 20	ACT-Math \geq 18
PLUS-Verbal \geq 360	PLUS-Quant. \geq 360	PLUS-Verbal \geq 370	PLUS-Math \geq 370

Students who have not participated in the talent search may apply for the program 'by portfolio'. Portfolio applications require submission of grades, test scores, teacher recommendations, writing samples and an admissions essay. Portfolio applications are reviewed each week by a committee to determine whether the student appears to be a good match for the program. A very limited number of portfolio applicants are admitted into the program each summer.

Like the other talent search summer programs, the 'Summer institute' provides students with a challenging academic experience as well as the opportunity to interact with their intellectual peers. Course titles have included: forensic science; mock trial and the legal system; molecular and cellular biology; global issues and conflict; robotics; introduction to Egyptology and hieroglyphs; astronomy; chemistry; creative writing; physics; introduction to psychology; statistics; anatomy and physiology; genetics and cell biology; optoelectronics; Shakespeare on film; twisted literature; Latin; contemporary social issues; investigating geometry; actor's workshop: improv; marine and terrestrial ecology.

Unlike most other talent search programs where students choose only one course to study intensely during a summer program, the RMTS 'Summer institute' allows students to choose two courses for a 2 or 3 week enriched experience. Each class runs 3 hours, one morning class and one afternoon class, yielding 6 hours of accelerated learning each day. Although it is not recommended, commuting students have the option to participate in just one course and spend half days on campus. Participants are expected to complete 1 hour of homework per class, per night to enrich their learning and assist in the development of good study habits. The residential counselors, who are typically academically talented college students and are often RMTS alumni, provide any necessary tutoring to residential students during their 2 hour study period each weeknight.

'Summer institute' instructors are university faculty/instructors, accomplished high-school teachers, outstanding graduate students and content experts. Science laboratory classes are taught in university laboratories and students often complete the same laboratory exercises as the university's undergraduate students. Courses are typically limited to 18 students, and may include field trips and guest lectures. Science classes often have teacher's aides to assist students with laboratory work. Instructors often take advantage of the dazzling Colorado summer climate by supplementing traditional classroom learning with outdoor experiences.

In addition to the academic components of the Institute, the program also boasts many social benefits. Each weekday afternoon students may select from a wide variety of sports, crafts and social activities. The residential staff takes students off-campus on weekends to explore local amusement parks, museums, festivals and sporting events. Activity periods and weekend field trips provide students with numerous opportunities to interact and connect with peers. Students often return to the program for several years and more than 50% of the Institute's participants each summer have attended in prior years. Many students form life-long friendships with their 'Summer institute' peers and stay in touch long after they 'age-out' of the program.

The RMTS 'Summer institute' is evaluated annually through anonymous student and parent evaluations. Feedback is carefully reviewed and used to continually make improvements to the program. Most comments from families are very positive. Parents commonly state that their child's experience at the Institute was the first time he/she was ever challenged academically, that the experience made a positive impact on their child's self-esteem and that their child made many new friends with whom they are still in contact. Students state that they enjoy being on the university campus, experiencing the challenging coursework and meeting other motivated kids like themselves.

Conclusion

Since its establishment in 1982 RMTS has served close to 60,000 students through its talent search and summer programs. Clearly, the principles and practices pioneered by Julian Stanley of utilizing above level testing to identify advanced students and providing them with advanced academic coursework has been effectively applied to the region served by RMTS. Since much of this region is rural in nature, the program has been particularly important for rural students who may lack intellectual peers and opportunities for advanced academic work in their schools and communities.

The growth of the RMTS has been particularly dramatic in recent years, with as much as 5–10% increased participation per year for the past 5 years. As RMTS looks to the future, additional growth is expected and new programs must be developed to meet the needs of more students. In particular, plans are underway to expand the talent search downward to include students in Grades 2–4 and to establish a summer commuter program in Denver for this age group. Collaborative efforts by RMTS with other talent searches are in progress (e.g. the development of a web site for highly gifted science students) and RMTS is also hoping to expand its research efforts in the near future.

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