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Universal Screening in Gifted and Talented Identification: Implementation and Overcoming Challenges

By Dr. Joni Lakin and Victoria Driver

We've been excited to see gifted and talented education in so many popular press articles in recent months. One of the motivators of this surge in interest seems to be a series of research reports by economists, including Card and Giuliano's 2015 paper "Can universal screening increase the representation of low income and minority students in gifted education?" Dr. Lakin was fortunate to be asked to contribute to a special issue of the *Journal of Advanced Academics* where she and Dr. Matthew McBee wrote independent reviews of this paper translated for the gifted research field.

In the original study, Card and Giuliano took advantage of a "natural experiment" where they were able to compare program diversity in a school district that moved from an identification process initiated by teacher or parent referral to a new process that began with every second grade student completing a screening assessment. This is called universal screening. The researchers were interested in the proportion of historically underrepresented minorities (such as English learners, Hispanic students, and African-American students) identified with the new program.

Basics of Universal Screening

Universal screening is an identification practice where all students in a targeted grade are administered an initial **screening instrument**. Scoring at or above a pre-determined cut-score on the screener leads to further consideration for placement and/or services in a gifted and talented program, usually involving at least one additional **placement** or **confirmation** assessment. The

alternative to universal screening is often a referral process where parents or teachers recommend students for screening (or testing) for gifted services. Some research has suggested that a referral only process introduces bias into the identification process and may lead to less representative gifted programs.

The key finding of their study was that the universal screening system was **more effective** than the previous teacher and parent referral system in addressing the underidentification of African-American, Hispanic, female, low socioeconomic status, and English learner students. Another important finding was that using universal screening greatly increased the number of students referred overall in the first screening stage and therefore requiring the second stage placement test to be identified for services. Because the district in the study used individually administered intelligence tests for placement, this led to substantial resource demands.

