

I have been thinking seriously about the educational development of America's counterintelligence and national security workforce since my 2012 deployment as Assistant Editor of the US and ISAF Commander's daily intelligence publication. The Editor and I felt strongly that, after editing over 1,000 articles it was clear there was a massive skills gap among intelligence professionals. Some analysts with years of experience still could not perform some of the basic functions of the job. It seemed more could be done to empower, enhance, and enable the next generation of this workforce, particularly by making sure we are hiring the most qualified candidates and deploying personnel to the most appropriate assignments.

In Afghanistan, many analysts lacked reading comprehension, critical thinking, logical argumentation, and basic writing skills. These are critical tools that are necessary for success in this field and I often wondered how people were being hired for highly sought after positions without first demonstrating they had the necessary skills to do the work. The CIA requires applicants to pass a number of tasks and requirements before hiring candidates but many other intelligence community (IC) Departments and Agencies do not. Greater effort should be made to verify whether applicants have the required skills before employment offers are extended. We owe this to the taxpayer, policy-makers, and most importantly – the men and women of the Armed Forces who depend on our intelligence and national security workforce.

The Department of Defense already does this through the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) which is used to determine if applicants are qualified to enlist in the Military and assign appropriate occupational specialties. An exam establishing a baseline level of competency is also required to become a barber, real estate agent, teacher, social worker, accountant, pharmacist, police officer, doctor, lawyer, and many other occupations. Is the job of an intelligence professional not important enough to warrant the same type of scrutiny?

Most colleges and universities require an entrance test – usually the ACT or SAT – and evaluate scores simply as one part of an overall application. They do not require a minimum score to obtain admission and neither should the IC. However, a well-designed test could help measure applicant's knowledge, skills, and abilities and help Departments and Agencies evaluate how well prepared applicants are for the requirements of the job.

Such a test would not be an entrance exam with a required minimum score but simply a tool used to better understand candidates' strengths, weaknesses and competency for work in the IC. The test could also identify areas for greater emphasis, training, and other assistance for incoming employees. Isn't it time to explore the creation of such a tool?

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