

# Exposure to diverse career paths can help fill labor market 'skills gap'

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When Patrick Rottinghaus began college, he had no idea what he wanted to do with his career. He started out as an "Open" major while he explored possibilities.

Today, Rottinghaus, an associate professor in the University of Missouri College of Education, is helping young people eager to find their place in the world by identifying their strengths and connecting them with careers that match their skillset, interests and personality. As the father of three children, including a daughter soon to enter high school, he wants to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to succeed as they prepare to enter the modern workforce.

In an effort to fill the United States [labor market](#)'s current "skills gap," Rottinghaus and graduate student Chan Jeong Park collaborated to study how certain tools could better help students to know their strengths. In his study, Rottinghaus partnered with YouScience, a web-based aptitude assessment system, to distribute an online career aptitude test to more than 7,000 [high school students](#) across 14 states. The skills gap is defined as the disconnect between the skills employers look for when recruiting potential employees and the number of job-seekers with those skills.

While most career exploration surveys focus mainly on students' interests, the aptitude test Rottinghaus distributed also inquired about the strengths and skills the students possess, which enabled them to explore more potential careers than they had originally considered. The aptitude assessments helped identify female students with the talent for careers in

construction, technical [health care](#), manufacturing and computer technology, areas they may not have previously considered based solely on their interests. The assessments also helped identify males with the talent to pursue jobs in patient-centered health care.

"When you look at rapidly growing employment sectors like manufacturing, computer technology, health care and construction, there is a pipeline concern, as we need more [young people](#) equipped with the skills to enter these fields," Rottinghaus said. "Not only does the aptitude test help [high school](#) students identify potential career paths, but it also helps them identify classes they can take now or in college that will strengthen their skillset and potentially open up doors for their future."

According to Rottinghaus, one approach to mitigating the "[skills gap](#)" is to encourage more women and underrepresented groups to pursue high-demand careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM.

"Due to traditional societal norms and gender stereotypes, young women have historically not been as likely to pursue STEM careers," Rottinghaus said. "But when we looked at their aptitude scores, the system would often indicate many of the young women surveyed have the aptitude to be successful in these areas. We can also help men consider more nontraditional fields, too, such as nursing or health care, which tend to be predominantly female."

Rottinghaus believes providing aptitude tests to young students and having a trained counselor review the results with them can help in overcoming gender stereotypes. He encourages his own children to expand their career possibilities by exploring fields not traditionally considered in the past.

"I don't want my daughter to feel constricted in her career exploration by

only considering fields traditionally held by women. I want her to consider a full array of opportunities," Rottinghaus said. "My overall goal is to help people intentionally identify aptitudes and interests to find their fit with educational pathways and labor market needs so they can be happy and productive members of society. There are also implications for institutions of higher education, as students who don't know what they want to major in are more likely to drop out before graduation."

**More information:** Rodney A. McCloy et al, YouScience: mitigating the skills gap by addressing the gender imbalance in high-demand careers, *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/iop.2020.73](https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.73)

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