Interim Report

MUS Developmental Education Taskforce
Assessment/Placement Workgroup

Workgroup Members
Doug Downs, MSU Composition (Chair)
Bethany Blankenship, UM-Western, English
Leanne Frost, Great Falls, Development and Transfer
Karen Henderson, Helena College, Dev Writing
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Carole Pinnell, Flathead Valley CC– College Reading Lab instructor
Mary Ann Sojda, MSU Math
Joyce Walborn, Helena College, Dev Math
(David Hall – OCHE Staff)

Charge
- To research and compile current assessment/placement MUS models in math and writing
- To research their effectiveness,
- To identify and research the effectiveness and efficiency other assessment/placement tools, and
- To make specific recommendations for a system-wide assessment and placement policy based on
  these analyses, guided by the mission differentiation of the campuses within the MUS.

Work to Date (February)
- Established a list of tasks and a timeline for February, March, and April work
- Commenced collection of rich data on math and writing placement systems used by the 15 MUS
  units. We have rich data on both writing and math for six units (Helena College, UM-Western,
  MSU, Gallatin College, Great Falls College, and Miles CC) and general math data for all units.
- Begun discussion to define “effectiveness” in dev-ed/gateway placement/assessment. (See notes
  from conference call 2/19/13.)

Ongoing Work
- We are continuing to establish what campuses are actually doing and their reasons for doing so.
  (For example, why they've chosen the placement tools and cutoffs they have.) This includes
  collecting rich math data and all writing data for 9 additional units (UM, Missoula College,
  Montana Tech, Highlands College, MSU-Billings, City College, Flathead CC, and Dawson CC).
- We are analyzing data on current placement systems as they come in to compare systems and
  identify patterns. We expect to have a report out to the TaskForce on this question by the end of
  the week of March 3.
- Extending discussion of definitions of effective placement in order to derive categories and types
  of data we’ll need to collect to assess effectiveness of the current system.

Future Timelined Tasks (Overview)
- Create intra-group research terms in order to launch research on alternative methods and tools for
  dev-ed placement and assessment (first week of March)
- Develop data requests to measure current effectiveness and initiate collection of that data (first
  week of March)
- Workgroup discussion of effectiveness data and results of research on alternatives (late-March – mid-April)
- Draft of workgroup recommendation report (Apr 24)
- Final workgroup report to TaskForce (May 1)

**Interim Findings, Recommendations, and Requests**

- We are finding significant variability among placement methods, tools, and measures (cut scores). For example, at least three instruments are primarily used for math placement (COMPASS, ALEKS, and MPLEX). We need to develop further qualitative data on the reasons for and histories of these choices campus by campus.

- In designing our assessment of placement effectiveness, we are finding a wide range of variables impacting dev-ed success, and thus are grappling with how to account for all these variables in our evaluation. For example, in the case of low pass rates or low completion rates, we do not yet know how to distinguish between system failure, student failure, and student success that simply doesn’t look like success until we understand the circumstances. This difficulty in distinguishing causality is shaping up to be this workgroup’s most significant challenge.

- We are concerned about how to account qualitatively for reasons for both existing placement systems and results—in terms of collecting, tracking, and reporting data. We will need reporting systems that allow for instructor and student narratives if we are to fulfill the BOR mandate of understanding dev-ed effectiveness and sources of it.

- Already the workgroup recognizes tremendous value in collecting this data, doing this assessment, and researching alternative methods of dev-ed placement and student learning assessment. We are simultaneously cognizant of the risk of jumping to conclusions about causes of system performance based on desired outcomes—that is, for example, assuming that a lower-than-desired pass rate is a certain indicator of sub-optimal system performance. We want to ensure that an available hypothesis to test is always that the system is working largely as intended and its results are the inevitable consequence and cost of working with particular underprepared students in their particular circumstances.