

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

American Indian Data: October 2004

Writing Assessment Showing Positive Results

With assistance from ACT, the Montana University System began field-testing a writing assessment in 2001. Each year, 75-90 high schools participate on a voluntary basis, the average score increases slightly (from 3.0 in 2001 to 3.4 in 2004), and the number of essays increases (from 3,365 in 2001 to 4,717 in 2004). The intent of the field test was to conduct research regarding the level of college-readiness in writing, to communicate standards and expectations for college preparation, and to set a writing proficiency admission standard. Because of widespread participation, professional development has become a major benefit.

To date, 416 teachers have been trained to score holistically and 38 trainers have learned to train others. Scorers describe this bonus of the writing assessment in glowing terms. Dr. Carolyn Lott, outside evaluator for the Title II grant that funded Training and Scoring in Missoula, wrote:

“The sense of pride and professional accomplishment felt as a result of this training session among these teachers is profound. They all expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to participate, felt that all teachers should have common experiences, and formed a common bond across English teachers in the state. One teacher put it this way: ‘I have had the opportunity to participate in a variety of professional development seminars, and the Montana Writing Assessment seminars provide, by far, the most relevant, most useful, and most important information and practice for what I do each day in the classroom.’ To continue to put complimentary adjectives here would be redundant. The experience may well have changed attitudes toward writing by teachers and ultimately students in Montana.”

This professional development would not have its power without the writing samples that students provide. By assessing student writing, scorers see the range of writing skills, discuss specific writing problems and instructional solutions, and collaborate with teachers from a variety of grade levels and school cultures. In addition, test scores tell teachers whether or not their instructional methods work and inform students about their level of preparation. Participation in the writing assessment results in higher scores and more students prepared to achieve in college.

Professional development is planned for the 2004-2005 academic year. In addition to training and scoring, workshops will be offered on or near Montana’s Indian Reservations for teachers of American Indian students. Dates and details will be available by calling Jan Clinard at 444-0652.

Montana University System
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620-3101

Jan Clinard, Director
Academic Initiatives
Phone: 406 444 0652
FAX: 406 444 1469
Email: jclinard@oche.montana.edu



Visit our website :
www.mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency Admissions

Questions Answered about American Indian Scores and Data

Representatives Carol Juneau and Norma Bixby brought several questions to the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee in August 2004. In the following pages, those questions are answered, based on data from previous tests.

- How have American Indian students scored in comparison to Caucasian students?

The tables below and on the next page show score comparisons for the 2003 and 2004 test data. Studying the number of students who score in the lowest range is also helpful, as shown in the two-row table below the larger table.

WRITING PROFICIENCY									
Percentage at each Score Point									
Years	2001		2002		2003		2004		
Scores	Am Indian	Caucasian	Am Indian	Caucasian	Am Indian	Caucasian	Am Indian	Caucasian	
0	3.5	4			0.36	0.29			
0.5	0.4	0.1			1.09	0.1			
1	15.8	2.4	5	1.6	6.91	1.68	4.78	1.11	
1.5	12.7	3.7	5	2.4	8	3.41	7.17	1.16	
2	28.5	13.7	23.5	10.6	24.36	9.57	22.87	8.92	
2.5	16.7	13.8	17	11.3	16.36	10.76	19.11	9.72	
3	14	22.3	28	27.9	22.18	21.42	26.62	23.07	
3.5	4.4	14.8	10.5	16.6	14.55	18.17	7.85	16.4	
4	3.5	12.3	7.5	15.8	4.73	14.47	6.83	18.19	
4.5	0.4	7	1	7.1	1.09	9.92	3.07	10.98	
5	0	4.3	0.5	4.7	0.36	6.89	1.37	7.28	
5.5	0	1	0.5	1.3		2.55	0.34	2.24	
6	0	0.7	0	0.4		0.77	0	0.93	
Number	228	2793	200	2679	275	3104	297	3984	
% below 2.5	60.9	23.9	33.5	14.6	40.72	15.05	34.82	11.19	
% above 3.5	3.9	25.3	9.5	29.3	6.18	34.6	11.61	39.62	

The following breakdown is also useful:

78% or 178 of 228 students identified American Indian scored below 3 in 2001

52% or 104 of 200 students identified American Indian tested scored below 3 in 2002

(note: 286 students marked "prefer not to respond")

56% or 152 of 271 students identified American Indian scored below 3 in 2003

54% or 158 of 293 students identified American Indian scored below 3 in 2004

- What will be used as the cut score for admissions for the University of Montana 4-year programs on the writing proficiency assessment on a scale of 1-6?

The cut score has not yet been determined. Because we want to consider ACT and SAT Writing Assessments as part of our recommendation, the Board of Regents postponed setting a cut score until the ACT and SAT field studies are complete. In the meantime, suggestions about the appropriate cut score for the Montana Writing Assessment would be helpful to our deliberations.

- Will the writing proficiency assessment replace any of the current admission requirements for the University System: College Preparatory Curriculum; and 2.5 GPA, ACT or SAT score, or standing in the upper half of class?

The math proficiency admissions standards, adopted by the Board of Regents in July 2003, did not replace any of the existing admissions standards. For that reason, we anticipate that the Board will approach the writing proficiency assessment standards in the same way; that is, we anticipate that the writing proficiency assessment will not replace any of the current admissions standards. However, that is for the Board of Regents to decide.

- What will be the options for students who do not make the cut score but have already met the other admission requirements of the University System that are already in place?

Students may retake the test or submit a score from the ACT or SAT writing tests instead. Other alternatives, such as submitting a portfolio of writing or completing a designated writing course, are under consideration. Suggestions about alternative routes are welcomed.

Ethnicity Data

- Will students who fail the writing proficiency assessment and go to a 2-year college be required to re-take the writing proficiency assessment?

This decision has not been assigned to the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee. A designated Math Transfer Committee is working on this issue for math, examining coursework in the two-year units. Most likely, if the composition courses are deemed appropriate and the student has earned grades of "C" or better, he/she may be admitted.

- Will Tribal College students who transfer to 4-year units have to pass the writing proficiency? If so, are they being involved in anyway in this writing proficiency assessment now?

We anticipate that tribal colleges will have the same requirements as all other two-year units. Instructors are invited to training and scoring. Some have attended.

- What will be the cost of the writing proficiency exam to students? Will it be offered in both Junior and Senior year in all high schools in Montana every year or will students have to go to a central place to take it?

If continued in its current form, the cost of the test is not levied on the student. The University System pays for administration costs (printing, mailing, etc.) and contributes some scores, including pre-service teachers. Participating schools send staff to scoring sessions and support the assessment in that manner, helping their teachers to get the professional development needed to prepare students adequately. Students can take the test in their high school, if their high school chooses to participate. They can take it twice, once as a junior and once as a senior.

- How many American Indian students could be denied admittance to the University System, based on current data?

We tested mostly juniors, which statewide has about 958 American Indian students. We tested 26% of those juniors. (We tested 45% of all juniors statewide.) To make a prediction based on 2004 data, we could first take the number of American Indian students who plan to attend a four-year campus AND scored below possible "cut scores." If the cut score were set at 2.5, this could impact 34 students in the test pool, but could impact a total of 130 Indian students statewide. If the cut score were set at 3, this could impact 61 students in the test pool, and potentially 234 Indian students statewide. However, this prediction assumes that students could not increase their scores on a retake; that their schools and teachers could not improve writing instruction once the test becomes operational; and that students would not try harder on an operational test. Our data shows improving scores as more teachers become involved in training and scoring.

Scores	#	%
1	4	3.96%
1.5	7	6.93%
2	27	26.73%
2.5	12	11.88%
3	29	28.71%
3.5	17	16.83%
4	4	3.96%
4.5	1	0.99%
5		0.00%
5.5		0.00%
6		0.00%
blank		0.00%
	101	100.00%

Scores	#	%
1	3	2.44%
1.5	4	3.25%
2	27	21.95%
2.5	27	21.95%
3	34	27.64%
3.5	10	8.13%
4	10	8.13%
4.5	5	4.07%
5	2	1.63%
5.5		0.00%
6		0.00%
blank	1	0.81%
Total	123	100.00%

- Using data collected through the Montana University System Writing Assessment, how many American Indian and Caucasian students plan to attend college?

Although the student questionnaires show that 81.6% intend to go to college, only 53% plan to attend a four-year program in Montana. Tables on the following pages show this data by ethnicity for the most current test years: 2003 and 2004.

- What is the admissions policy for students with GEDs?

Currently, students with GEDs are admitted under the exemptions policy. The GED includes a writing sample (often with persuasive prompts), scored with a rubric similar to the Montana University System Writing Assessment. However, our data from the campuses shows that students who enter with GEDs rather than with high school diplomas are more likely to require remediation.

Scores	#	%
0	3	0.19%
0.5		0.00%
1	17	1.07%
1.5	41	2.58%
2	128	8.04%
2.5	147	9.23%
3	338	21.23%
3.5	332	20.85%
4	249	15.64%
4.5	173	10.87%
5	116	7.29%
5.5	39	2.45%
6	9	0.57%
	1592	100.00%

Scores	#	%
1	15	0.75%
1.5	18	0.90%
2	128	6.38%
2.5	152	7.57%
3	479	23.87%
3.5	367	18.29%
4	399	19.88%
4.5	241	12.01%
5	137	6.83%
5.5	38	1.89%
6	25	1.25%
blank	8	0.40%
Total	2007	100.00%

Students' Post Secondary Plans Indicate That Most Want to Attend Some Kind of College, Regardless of Race

Students were first asked what they plan to do after high school. Between 45% and 48% of all students, in both years, plan to attend a college in Montana. Next, students were asked to select the type of college they planned to attend in Montana.

	#	%	MT College	#	%
Mt College	1831	45.96%	Tribal	21	0.74%
Out of State College	1477	37.07%	CC	213	7.55%
Job	167	4.19%	COT	427	15.14%
Military	163	4.09%	4-year	2007	71.17%
Home	11	0.28%	Private	152	5.39%
Other	303	7.61%			
No Response	32	0.80%	Total	2820	100.00%
Total	3984	100.00%	No Response	1164	
			Total	3984	

	#	%	MT College	#	%
Mt College	1444	46.52%	Tribal	5	0.23%
Out of State College	1202	38.72%	CC	134	6.06%
Job	106	3.41%	COT	348	15.73%
Military	160	5.15%	4-year	1592	71.94%
Home	7	0.23%	Private	134	6.06%
Other	179	5.77%	Total	2213	100.00%
No Resp	6	0.19%	No Resp	891	
Total	3104	100.00%	Total	3104	

Workshops for Teachers of American Indian Students Planned for 2004-2005 Academic Year

People who can write persuasively and effectively are empowered in many ways. For example, the cover letter for a job application must be persuasive. People who wish to influence their governments often must write persuasively. And, persuasive and expository writing are the primary genres assigned in the college classroom. Therefore, it is important that schools on or near reservations have teachers who have learned effective and culturally appropriate strategies for teaching Indian students to write persuasively.

A series of workshops during the 2004-2005 school year, at five sites on or near reservations, will introduce teachers to persuasive writing strategies. Through Title II, the Montana University System

	#	%	MT College	#	%
Mt College	134	45.12%	Tribal	77	30.92%
Out of State College	82	27.61%	CC	11	4.42%
Job	15	5.05%	COT	28	11.24%
Military	42	14.14%	4-year	123	49.40%
Home	1	0.34%	Private	10	4.02%
Other	18	6.06%	Total	249	100.00%
No Response	5	1.68%	No Resp	48	
Total	297	100.00%		297	

In terms of plans after high school, the most significant differences based on race are that about 10% more Caucasian students plan to attend colleges out of state and 6-19% more American Indian students plan to join the military.

Regarding the question about which Montana postsecondary institutions students hope to attend, about 30% of the American Indian student plan to attend tribal colleges and 45-49% plan to attend the four-year units as compared to about 74% of the Caucasian students.

For the 2004 data, a total of 104 students marked that they plan to attend tribal colleges; 77 of those students identified themselves as American Indian. About 30% of the American Indian students plan to attend tribal colleges.

	#	%	MT College	#	%
Mt College	132	48.00%	Tribal	67	29.65%
Out of State College	74	26.91%	CC	19	8.41%
Job	17	6.18%	COT	28	12.39%
Military	30	10.91%	4-year	101	44.69%
Home	3	1.09%	Private	11	4.87%
Other	16	5.82%	Total	226	100.00%
No resp	3	1.09%	No Resp	49	
Total American Indian	275	100.00%		275	

will offer this quality professional development to teachers and college instructors; encourage participation in training and scoring for the Montana University System Writing Assessment; and require that teachers engage in follow-up activities in writing instruction, applying effective teaching strategies in their classrooms.

The workshops will include elements of a writing curriculum with a debate/read/write cycle and tap in to concepts of storytelling to teach writing. Teachers will be expected to incorporate the instructional strategies into their writing curriculum before the February test dates. For more information, contact Jan Clinard, jclinard@oche.montana.edu,

Of Barriers and Bonuses

Perspectives from Jan Clinard, Ed.D, Director of Academic Initiatives

When the Montana Board of Regents first proposed a Writing Assessment as one standard for college admissions, some argued that it would create an unfair “barrier” to postsecondary education. Commissioner of Higher Education Richard Crofts responded, “the test is not a barrier, the inability to write is the barrier.”

Various educators and documents recommend that we “remove barriers to postsecondary education” and some people interpret that to suggest that we relax admissions standards.

Having worked on the issue of proficiency admissions for the last five years, I’m convinced that finding ways to ensure students are academically prepared for college (even if that means testing) does not create a “barrier,” but rather helps them select their most viable pathway to success. The problem with the word “barrier” is that it is defined as “a structure built to bar passage; a gate; a boundary” (*American Heritage Dictionary*) and implies that it looms in front of you, can be built or torn down, and once you’ve passed it, you’re “in.”

Montana University System data shows that entering college is not enough. Overall, about 40% of our college students earn degrees and only about 16% of the American Indian students admitted earn degrees. Students must exit higher education with some kind of degree or certificate for their time and tuition to pay off.

In documents from the Board of Regents’ Shared Leadership project, “barriers” are described as:

1. slipping high school graduation rates;
2. low college matriculation rates;
3. high remediation rates; and
4. increasing costs.

However, it’s much easier to relate the word “barrier” to a test than to relate the word “barrier” to abstract concepts like poor preparation, which cannot be fixed by simply changing a policy or opening a gate.

Representatives from the Montana Advisory Council on Indian Education have expressed their appre-

ciation for the professional development the Montana University System Writing Assessment provides (and think perhaps it should be mandated), but worry it will create a barrier. However, the professional development would not exist without the test. When the Board of Regents asked the Commissioner of Higher Education to field test a writing assessment, they didn’t realize that the Commissioner’s Office was embarking on a large-scale professional development project. The professional development component has proven to be effective and more popular with each ensuing year.

This professional development would not have its power without the writing samples that students provide. By assessing student writing, scorers see the range of writing skills in the state, examine specific writing problems and discuss how to address them instructionally, and collaborate with teachers from a variety of grade levels and school cultures. In addition, test scores tell teachers whether or not their instructional methods work and inform students about their level of preparation.

Another bonus of collecting and analyzing student writing has been the opportunity to glimpse into the minds of high school students across the state, as they wrestle with the problems presented to them in the writing prompts. How students would handle extra school funding, limited school funding, improving student achievement, school climate issues, and problems related to safety provide perspectives that adults may want to consider.

Without the writing assessment, these professional development and data bonuses would not exist.

The Montana University System offers a variety of paths to success. Testing (including admissions and placement exams) helps students select the path that best fits their needs. To those who consider assessment a barrier to higher education, perhaps it’s time to visualize the barriers erected along the edge of a steep roadway or dangerous cliff—designed to keep us safely on the path to our destinations.

Disaggregating Scores By Ethnicity May Not Clearly Reflect Differences

Students who identified themselves as American Indian tend to score lower than students who identify themselves as Caucasian. However, in 2004, 149 students who did not respond to the racial/ethnic group question, had a mean score of 3.12. In 2003, when students could select the option "I prefer not to respond," 321 did not or "preferred not" to respond. Their mean score was also 3.12. In addition, in 2004 there were 150 students who classified themselves as multi-racial or other, with a mean score of 3.27. In 2003 the mean score was 2.9 for those students who classified themselves as "multi-racial" or "other."

Many school districts use data warehouses that alleviate potential self-reporting errors and maintain consistent data for their students across the grade levels. Some have proposed that using statewide student ID numbers, with embedded demographic data, could help with these kinds of reporting errors.

Student Assistance Foundation Funds Web Assistance

The Student Assistance Foundation of Montana (SAF) is interested in ensuring that students will be successful when they enter the University System. SAF is into its third year of funding this forward-thinking web-based tutorial designed to help Montana students prepare for and/or improve their scores on the Montana University System Writing Assessment. The website includes the scoring rubric, with excerpts from sample essays. "Articulations" describe how certain features of an essay were scored and there are released and non-operational prompts for students to write about as practice.

Although Webcoaching has been available for two years, few students who need help with their writing apply for a coach. How can this website become more user-friendly? Your ideas are welcomed.



Writing Proficiency Steering Committee

Beverly Ann Chin 243-2463
Department of English
The University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula, MT 59801
bchin@selway.umt.edu

Jocelyn Siler 243-4204
Department of English
The University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula MT 59812-1013
jfsiler@ism.net

Kathy Holt 657-2337
College of Education CAFÉ Office
Montana State University – Billings
Billings MT 59101-0252
kholt@msubillings.edu

Marsha Davis 447-8344
Superintendent of Schools
Lewis and Clark County
316 North Park
Helena, MT 59601
msdavis@state.mt.us

Bruce Messinger 324-2001
Superintendent
Helena Public Schools
55 South Rodney
Helena MT 59601
bmessinger@helena.k12.mt.us

Phil Gaines 994-5194
English Department
Montana State University
PO Box 172440
Bozeman MT 59717-2300
gaines@english.montana.edu

Arlene Walker-Andrews
Associate Provost
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812-3324
Arlene.Walker-Andrews@umontana.edu

*Committee Members welcome your input.
Please contact them with your comments.*

*Writing Proficiency
Admissions Standards*

Steve Tull
PO Box 400
Superior MT 59872
stull@bigsky.net

Greg Hirst 653-1771
211 Dawson
Wolf Point MT 59201
Middy@nemontel.net

Katie Myers 268-6009
GFPS PO Box 2429
Great Falls MT 59403
Katie_myers@gfps.k12.mt.us

Mary Moe 771-4310
Dean
MSU GF College of Technology
PO Box 6010
Great Falls MT 59406-6010
mmoe@msugf.edu

Judy Snow 444-3656
Office of Public Instruction
1300 Eleventh Avenue
Helena, MT 59620
jsnow@state.mt.us