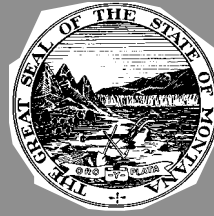


Proficiency Admissions



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Board of Regents Approves Writing Proficiency Recommendation

On January 15, the Montana Board of Regents approved the recommendations of the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee to:

- postpone the adoption of specific admissions standards for composition proficiency until July 2005 so that the revised SAT and ACT tests, which will include authentic writing measures for the first time, may be included; and
- authorize implementation of the Montana Writing Assessment, which will serve as an alternative admissions standard to writing portions of national tests such as AP and CLEP, as well as SAT and ACT once they become available.

Explanation: In response to national concerns that writing instruction is neglected, beginning in 2005, the SAT will add a writing sample, and the ACT will offer an optional test of writing. These measures will help ensure that writing is emphasized more in high school and valued more by students.

The Montana Board of Regents of Higher Education recognized and responded to this concern long before it became the subject of a national study commissioned by the College Board. In 1998 the Regents began consideration of proficiency-based admissions standards and, collaboratively with the Office of Public Instruction, formed a joint committee to align K-12 standards and college-entrance expectations in composition. Based on the committee report, in 2000, the Board of Regents directed OCHE to oversee the field test of a writing assessment for the purpose of college admissions.

However, the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee anticipates that it will recommend five “tests” as sound measures of writing proficiency—the Advanced Placement and CLEP options, the writing portions of the revised SAT and ACT, and the Montana Writing Assessment. All of these measures have been developed to meet externally assessed standards for validity, cultural neutrality, and reliability.



The fifth measure – the Montana Writing Assessment – developed with the assistance of ACT, has been extensively field-tested in Montana, and offers \ specific advantages available through no other instrument.

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Regents Suggest Exemptions for Seniors Facing New Math Standards

In July, 2003, the Montana Board of Regents passed a new admissions standard that affects students applying to the four-year programs of the Montana University System. Those students entering four-year programs in 2005 must earn ACT mathematics scores of at least 16, SAT math scores of at least 390, or have taken four years of math and three years of science in high school.

On November 20, the Montana Board of Regents recommended that the University System’s Admissions Exemptions Policy be applied to students graduating in 2004 who scored below 16 in mathematics on the ACT or below 390 in mathematics on the SAT. Because students register for their senior classes during the spring of their junior year, those low-scoring students may not have taken advantage of the “rigorous core” option provided in the new Mathematics Proficiency Admission Standard.

Although members of the class of 2004 will not be denied admittance to the four-year programs of the Montana University System based on their mathematics scores, ACT math scores below 16 may divert students into remedial mathematics courses during their freshman year. On March 30, a Math Transfer Committee will begin to address the issue of ensuring proficiency of students who transfer from 2-year programs to four-year programs.

ity. Four of the five test providers – SAT, ACT, AP, and CLEP – are nationally recognized and provide widely accessible testing instruments to prospective students throughout the United States and the world.

The fifth measure – the Montana Writing Assessment – developed with the assistance of ACT, has been extensively field-tested in Montana, and offers specific advantages available through no other instrument. Among these advantages are the collaboration of K-12 and higher education in test administration and scoring, and a data-driven and results-oriented dialogue among professionals about what constitutes good writing and good writing instruction at all levels. However, the most important benefits of the Montana Writing Assessment are the benefits that it provides to Montana students: improved instruction, aligned curriculum, locally relevant and accessible writing topics, external validation of students' writing ability, and, best of all, steadily improving writing skills.

The Board of Regents has historically recognized the value of multiple methods of demonstrating proficiency for admissions, including nationally validated instruments and alternative avenues for Montana students. Most recently, the proficiency admissions standard in mathematics suggests a Rigorous Core as an alternative to test scores. After careful consideration, the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee decided that additional English coursework is not a workable option for high schools. However, the Montana Writing Assessment will give students the opportunity to take a prompted, timed writing assessment; receive objective feedback on their writing strengths and weaknesses; avail themselves of remedial resources; and, if necessary take another test or retake the Montana Writing Assessment as one way to demonstrate proficiency.

P-20 Assessments Task Force Charged with Research

The P-20 Committee, a standing committee of the Board of Education, is charged with providing guidance and oversight in the establishment of a seamless education system for Montana students. The committee promotes P-20 initiatives that build smooth transitions and foster improved cooperation and collaboration between the K-12 and post secondary systems to strengthen public education.

One of the Goals adopted by the P-20 Committee is to ensure that the alignment of standards, curriculum and assessment systems across the spectrum of public education are easily understood, non-duplicative, effective and timely. A primary objective is the coordination and alignment of high school assessments with entrance and placement examinations used by colleges and universities, beginning with language arts and math skills.

Since over 75% of Montana's secondary students plan to attend college, the P-20 Committee of the Board of Education is concerned that high schools and colleges measure achievement in ways that accurately reflect student preparedness for college. Among Montana's high school students, about 56% take the ACT, 22% take the SAT, 46% take the Montana Writing Assessment, and 13% take Advanced Placement tests in a variety of courses. Cut scores on these tests are among the admissions requirements for the four-year programs of the University System. In addition, all sophomores take the new Measured Progress test and all juniors take the ITED. In addition to those tests taken in high school, some campuses place students into courses using the results of campus administered entrance exams, COMPASS, or other measures. As actions on tests and admissions are taken and new tests are adopted within the K-12 system and higher education, it is critical that both systems strive toward a seamless transition from high school to postsecondary education. In response to these needs, the P-20 Committee of the Board of Education recommended that a task force be appointed to study the progression of these assessments, primarily in grades 10-14.

The P-20 Committee has an interest in assessments at all levels, from kindergarten readiness tests to the comprehensive exams taken by doctoral students. However, the initial work of the Assessment Taskforce will involve assessments related to the critical transition from high school to postsecondary education. Such an effort can help clearly define the continuum of assessments across levels.

The task force will:

- review the work already done on alignment by writing and mathematics proficiency committees;
- review the work of the CSPAC Assessment Study Group;
- review the data currently collected on writing and mathematics proficiency;
- review the continuum of writing and mathematics assessments (including Measured Progress), 10-14;
- examine best practices for ensuring an aligned P-20 system of assessment;

As actions on tests and admissions are taken and new tests are adopted within the K-12 system and higher education, it is critical that both systems strive toward a seamless transition from high school to postsecondary education.

and make recommendations to the committee that will:

- ensure that Montana’s tests measure progressively higher-level skills, tied to standards;
- advance changes in standards and/or assessments that may be necessary at the high school and/or postsecondary levels;
- identify tests taken by students in grades 10-14 that can serve dual purposes; and
- provide advice to the committee about the future of the NRT currently given at grade 11 by January 1 2005.

For more information about the Task Force, please contact Jan Clinard: jclinard@oche.montana.edu or Linda Peterson: lvpeterson@state.mt.us

COMPOSITION PROFICIENCY AND COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

By Mary Sheehy Moe, Ed.D., Dean, MSU Great Falls College of Technology

Dr. Moe prepared the following Q & A for the Board of Regents in January. Her compelling document, as well as testimony from many educators, persuaded the Regents to support recommendations for Proficiency Admissions.

The issues surrounding composition proficiency and college admissions are numerous and complex. The following are responses to the questions and concerns heard most often about writing proficiency-based admissions.

What is “composition proficiency” at the college admissions level?

Upon admission to college, a student with composition proficiency is able to develop ideas in writing with relevant and clear examples and details; organize ideas coherently and strategically; and express them effectively by following conventions of syntax, usage, form, and mechanics.

Is composition proficiency an essential attribute of the student who seeks to engage in college-level studies?

Yes. Academic writing – the exploration, synthesis, review, analysis, and evaluation of the implications of ideas, events, and experiences – is the primary means through which students learn and demonstrate their learning in the college setting. It is a fundamental component of the general education core required for every baccalaureate degree. It is a common requirement for lower-level and advanced course work in virtually every discipline. Whether students are responding to an essay question on a history mid-term, preparing a mechanism description for an engineering class, taking the comprehensive examinations as the culminating demonstration of knowledge for a master’s degree, or completing a doctoral dissertation, they must be able to engage in academic writing. Conversely, if students are *not* writing to demonstrate, apply, and extend their knowledge in a variety of classes beginning with their first semester in college and continuing throughout their college years, it is difficult to argue that they are getting a good college education.

The emphasis on academic writing in college is not just a quaint relic of a bygone time. As the craft of the critical thinker, writing requires the student to demonstrate his or her intellectual interaction with the subject of study in greater

depth than other measures allow. It is particularly well-suited to the expectations for research, citation, analysis, and criticism which epitomize college-level study. Because it is permanent and transmittable, written discourse can be examined at length and in detail by others, particularly by faculty, to give students the critical feedback they need to mature as thinkers.

Will an admissions requirement for composition proficiency limit access to the Montana University System?

In the broadest sense, no. The current policies for open admissions into the system’s many two-year programs—available in every community with an institution of the Montana University System, as well as in ten additional communities with community colleges or tribal colleges—will continue to provide students who are not proficient writers with access to the system. But strictly speaking, a composition proficiency requirement will undoubtedly delay some students’ access to and progress through the four-year colleges and universities in the MUS.

Of course, ensuring composition proficiency through admissions requirements is not new to the Montana University System. The long-standing requirements for ACT/SAT verbal scores were adopted in the belief that the scores ensured composition proficiency. Unfortunately, these multiple-choice tests of “verbal” skills do not focus primarily on students’ ability to write but on their mastery of syntax, usage, punctuation, and vocabulary. Such skills are important to effective expression, but they are not the only components or even the major components of proficient writing. Montana’s admissions requirements also include the College Preparatory Program, the minimum GPA, and the minimum class rank, all adopted in the belief that they, too, ensured that admitted students had the basic skills, including writing, to engage in college-level study. However, because these high school indicators reflect a broad range of learning experiences, grading factors, and achievement, they are not direct measures of composition proficiency.

Empirical and anecdotal data from within and beyond the MUS have established that the existing admissions requirements do not ensure the composition proficiency necessary for college-level studies. That is why, in 1998, the Board of

Regents charged a committee of writing teachers from K-12 and higher education to explore proficiency-based admissions; adopted that committee's recommendations in 2000 to identify or develop authentic assessments of writing proficiency to use for admission decisions; and charged a new committee to engage in the curriculum alignment, field study, and testing review that have taken place between 2000 and 2004.

The writing proficiency requirement, like the other admissions requirements, does not limit access as an act of elitism, but as an effort to do what is best for unprepared students, prepared students, the four-year colleges and universities in Montana, the taxpayers who support the system, and the value of the baccalaureate degree itself. Students who are not proficient writers upon admission to college cannot engage in the scholarly activity that is a basic foundation for college-level study. The harm that results when students are admitted to college without writing proficiency and retained semester after semester without becoming proficient extends beyond them. Inevitably, the college revises its expectations to accommodate these students, with the result that other students who *are* prepared for the rigors of college-level work are deprived of the intellectual engagement and growth that they deserve, and the diploma they receive has less value.

Seen from this light, an admissions requirement for writing proficiency does not limit access so much as it ensures that the access to a college education is not illusory, an ultimately harmful pretense that one can engage in college-level study without being able to develop ideas effectively, support them convincingly, organize them coherently, or express them clearly.

What is an authentic writing assessment for college admissions?

To be authentic, the writing assessment should reflect the student's ability to engage in the academic writing expected at the college level. The assessment should be constructed so as to allow students to demonstrate their proficiency by *writing*, rather than by identifying and "fixing" discrete components of writing that is not their own (as is usually the case in multiple-choice tests). The writing context (the topic, or "prompt," the scenario, and the time allotted to write) should be designed to elicit a reliable sample of a prospective student's writing ability. Finally, the writing assessment should be scored on the basis of generally accepted standards of composition proficiency at the college-entrance level.

Does any particular group or category of students score differently on authentic writing assessments?

Yes, in some instances. From 1998 - 2000, the K-12 Composition Proficiency Committee studied this issue extensively. As reported to the Board of Regents in 2000, the research literature suggested that, while particular classifications as groups do perform differently on authentic writing assessments, the differences are (1) statistically insignificant

and (2) less pronounced in authentic writing assessments than in the more common multiple-choice tests of writing proficiency. Specifically:

- Females tend to perform better, although not significantly better, than males on essay-response assessments; males tend to perform better, although not significantly better, than females on multiple-choice assessments.
- African-Americans as a group score lower on composition-proficiency assessments, whether authentic essays or standardized multiple-choice designs. These differences are less pronounced when the test features authentic writing. Racial differences are not as pronounced as the gender differences. For instance, African-American females perform as well on authentic writing assessments as Caucasian males.

Very little research specifically devoted to Native American performance on composition proficiency tests exists.

The pilot study of the Montana Writing Assessment from 2001 - 2003 added this information to the existing literature:

- As a group, students who identified themselves as American Indians received significantly lower scores on the Montana Writing Assessment than other groups did. (Many students chose not to identify their racial/ethnic class, and the number of students who did not disclose their race/ethnicity is large enough to confound analysis of the data.) In the three years of the pilot study, however, the mean scores of disclosed American Indians rose each year.
- As a group, males received significantly lower scores on the Montana Writing Assessment than females did. For instance, in 2002, the mean score for girls was 3.34 and for boys, 2.99. In 2003, the mean score for girls was 3.46 and for boys, 3.07. Conversely, the 2002-2003 SAT Montana Score Report shows the average verbal score of 541 for males and 536 for females. (In 2002-2003, the SAT did not include an authentic writing assessment; these scores are on a multiple-choice test.)

Students who are not proficient writers upon admission to college cannot engage in the scholarly activity that is a basic foundation for college-level study.

Interestingly, a factor significantly affecting test scores on the Montana Writing Assessment had nothing to do with a protected classification, but with the time allotted for the test. There was no significant difference in performance between students who were given a 70-minute response time and those who were given a 40-minute response time in 2002. However, in 2003, students who were given a 40-minute response time scored significantly higher than those who were given a 30-

minute response time. None of the students receiving the top scores – a 6.0 or a 5.5 – wrote in the 30-minute format.

This finding was one reason the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee concluded that the Montana Writing Assessment is a crucial measure to include in its recommendation for approved proficiency measures. Of the available instruments, the Montana Writing Assessment is the only recommended measure providing at least 40 minutes to write one essay. Moreover, because the MWA is administered with state-level P-20 oversight, it is the only recommended measure that can be “tweaked” to ensure that the test design and administration responds to Montana data and achieves Montana goals.

Does the writing assessment of composition proficiency put particular classifications of students at an unfair disadvantage?

The real issues lie beyond this question. If a testing situation requiring a written response to an impromptu question within a limited time frame places particular classifications of people at an unfair disadvantage, should all such tests be waived for individuals in these groups? If so, the revisions required in testing practices at the college level and for admission to practice in many fields would be extensive.

The essential question, though, is this: Is the disparity between the scores of these classifications of students and those of other groups (a) a function of the test design or administration, which fails to identify proficient writers, (b) the result of an immutable inability to write, or (c) the result of a lack of experience with, instruction in, and/or expectations for good writing?

The Montana Writing Assessment was carefully reviewed for cultural bias by an ACT group that included Montana reviewers. During the field study, a significant number of males and American Indians demonstrated proficiency on the Montana Writing Assessment every year, and the scores of both classifications of test-takers improved steadily during the three years of field-testing. It appears, therefore, that the difference in scores is not a function of the test or of any innate or immutable disadvantage with respect to writing. In fact, from 2001 to 2003, as students and their teachers learned more about academic writing from the experience of testing, scoring, and discussing results, the scores of males and of American Indians, as well as of the general population of test-takers, improved steadily. This result, reflecting greater emphasis on writing, clearer expectations for writing, better instruction in writing, and improved student performance when writing, is exactly what proficiency-based admissions seeks to produce.

This factor is another reason the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee concluded that it is crucial to include the Montana Writing Assessment among the recommended measures for demonstrating composition proficiency. It is the only measure that provides the opportunity for practicing teachers at the high school and college levels in Montana to engage in a data-driven, results-oriented discussion about good writing and good writing instruction. That this discus-

sion improves instructional practices and ultimately student performance is manifest in the field study results.

Still, we must not dismiss the concern about the performance of males and American Indians on the Montana Writing Assessment – or on the national writing tests that report similar results. Rather, we should respond to this disparity in performance with focused, concerted efforts to eliminate it. First, we should continue to ensure that approved writing assessments truly are culturally unbiased. Second, as long as this disparity exists, we should dedicate resources to develop, assess, and continually improve effective

writing instruction and assessments for lower-performing groups. Writing ability is too important a skill – to learning in college and to success in life -- to be left undeveloped in individual students or in particular groups of students.

What criteria are being used to identify measures that will be further reviewed to establish cut scores in the final recommendation for writing proficiency standards?

The Steering Committee has used the following criteria to evaluate testing instruments:

Validity: Does the test measure what it purports to measure?

Reliability: Is scoring consistent from exam to exam and from scorer to scorer?

Fairness: Does the test, through its design, content, administration, or scoring pose an unfair disadvantage to individuals or groups?

Expense: Is the test affordable for students? For the state?

Availability: Is the test readily available to students throughout the world? Can it be taken during the junior year? Can it be taken more than once in a limited time frame?

Vetted Has the test itself been tested – field studies, cultural bias review, endorsement of accredited groups, etc.

K-12 Aligned: Does the test reflect Montana’s established outcomes for high school proficiency in writing as well as what Montana colleges expect at the entry level?

Bonuses. Does the test provide additional benefits important to the goals of P-20 education in Montana?

Why is the final recommendation on writing proficiency standards for admission being delayed?

The Steering Committee could make its recommendation today if the revised ACT and SAT that include an authentic writing sample were available. Because these tests are so well-known, thoroughly vetted, affordable, and accessible, the Committee is loath to exclude them from its recommendation. However, at the present time, neither the ACT nor the SAT provides a valid measure of writing proficiency, and

Of the available instruments, the Montana Writing Assessment is the only recommended measure providing at least 40 minutes to write one essay.

without that valid measure, the Committee cannot support their use for determining proficiency-based admissions. Moreover, until the initial administration of the revised tests has been completed, the Committee has a weak foundation for recommending a score for admissions purposes.

The Committee anticipates that, when the SAT and ACT with authentic writing assessments become available in 2005, the Committee will recommend scores for five “tests” – the SAT, the ACT, the Advanced Placement exam (in either English Literature and Composition or English Language and Composition), the CLEP test, and the Montana Writing Assessment.

Do we need all these tests?

Probably not. It is likely that the ACT, the SAT, and the MWA will suffice to provide the information needed to determine writing proficiency in valid, reliable, fair, accessible, relatively inexpensive, vetted, beneficial ways. However, many high school students take the AP exam anyway and many other students take the CLEP tests; both are well-

established and well-vetted. It seems sensible to include them so that students are not being tested redundantly.

Not all students would take all of these tests; most would take only one. Having a variety of options, however, is vitally important in this crucial area of college admissions. Montanans regard higher education as a stepping stone to the “successful life.” Loss of access to that life on the basis of a writing assessment is a

high price to pay – unconscionable, if the assessment is not valid, fair, or reliable, or if it does not take sufficiently into account the pressure that a high-stakes test places on the students most desirous and least confident of that access.

Therefore, multiple testing measures and the opportunity for retakes must be built into the recommended standards for writing proficiency. The immediacy, validity, early administration, and state control of the Montana Writing Assessment, balanced by the national reputations and broad availability of the other instruments, will give Montana students many and varied opportunities to demonstrate the writing skills that will be essential to the quality of education they receive in a Montana college and the likelihood of their success there.

Not all students would take all of these tests; most would take only one. Having a variety of options, however, is vitally important in this crucial area of college admissions.

For More Information about Proficiency Admissions, Visit our websites at:

<http://mus.montana.edu/preparingforcollege.htm>
and click on
Writing Proficiency Admissions Standards or
Math Proficiency Admissions Standards

High schools skip over basics in rush to college classes

(from USA Today 2/26/04)

In high schools, the fastest-growing courses offered are Advanced Placement classes, which give students a chance to earn college credit. Increasingly, students and their parents see these academically challenging courses as an admission ticket to the nation's top colleges. In the past 10 years, the number of students taking AP exams has risen from 400,000 to more than 1 million.

In college, however, the fastest-growing courses are remedial math and English classes. The courses are for students who need to make up for basics they didn't learn in high school. In the California State University system, for example, 37% of incoming freshmen last fall needed to take remedial math and 48% remedial English. Nationwide, 53% of college students take at least one remedial course.

In other words, high schools are taking on colleges' work while colleges are forced to do the high schools' job. Obviously, something is wrong with this picture.

The warped system puts a financial burden on students and colleges. Remedial courses cost colleges about \$2 billion a year, according to the Institute for Higher Education Policy. And students must pay tuition for the courses, which offer no college credit.

The problem stems from the failure of high schools to ensure that students are prepared for the academic challenges of college. While AP classes are a proven success at exposing high school students to challenging college-level material, only 15% of students take them, while more than 70% of high school graduates go on to college.

In fact, the value of a high school diploma has plummeted, according to a report this month by Achieve, a non-profit education-reform group, and two other like-minded organizations. Poor preparation is the main reason why fewer than half of those entering college graduate, the report concludes.

Universities and students are not the only ones paying for high schools' failings. A Michigan study estimated that employers in that state pay about \$40 million a year for the remedial training of the students they hire right out of high school. In surveys, 60% of employers give low ratings to the writing and math skills of new hires.

Helping all students prepare for college or work requires more than AP courses:

Strict graduation requirements. Most states have vague requirements, such as three years of math, without specifying which courses. That allows students to take simple math courses that don't teach the algebra, geometry and

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higher-level skills needed after graduation. Mandating specific courses — and ensuring their mastery through exams required for graduation — could sharpen students' skills.

High school-college coordination. A promising experiment unfolds this year in the California State University system. Officials will start using students' performance on the state's 11th-grade tests to determine who needs remedial classes in college. The change will help ensure that skills taught, and tested for, in high school are linked to the knowledge needed in college.

Many high school principals and superintendents say they stress AP courses to motivate all students. In the process, though, they overlook the fact that many students can't even handle high school-level work.

Montana University System Schedules Regional Scoring Sessions

This spring, the Montana University System offered six opportunities for teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and others interested in the improvement of student writing to participate in the Montana University System Writing Assessment. Participants learn how to score student writing holistically and then use their skills to assist with the scoring of the writing assessment, administered to about 6,000 high school juniors and seniors statewide.

On site check-in begins at 8:30 a.m. at each site. On the first day, participants learn to use the rubric by scoring several sets of essays. Scorers end the day by completing a "calibration" set. After a short review on day two, each participant scores about 60 essays, beginning at 8:30 a.m. and ending by 4:00 p.m., depending on the pace of scoring. About one third of the essays are word-processed. Lunch is provided on both days. Each school must cover travel and substitute teacher costs for its teachers. There is no registration fee collected for training or for college credit. No stipends are paid for scoring during this field test.

Thursday and Friday, March 25-26
Wednesday and Thursday, April 7-8
Wednesday and Thursday, April 7-8
Tuesday and Wednesday, April 13-14
Thursday and Friday, April 15-16
Monday and Tuesday, April 19-20

Glendive: Dawson Community College
Billings: MSU-B: College of Education Building
Missoula: Grant Creek Inn
Whitefish: Mountain West Bank Community Room
Helena: Higher Education Complex, 2500 Broadway
Great Falls: MSU-GF COT Heritage Hall

These sessions are coordinated by 38 trainers from throughout Montana who collaboratively train teachers to score holistically. For these 2004 sessions, 192 teachers (K-16) were registered. A similar schedule is planned for 2005.

NWREL Assessment Expert Evaluates Montana Holistic Scoring Rubric

Delane Munson, Senior Advisor for the Assessment Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, shared his research regarding reliability, quality control, holistic and analytic scoring, and the validity of the Montana Holistic Scoring Rubric with Trainers at the first Training of Trainers session on February 23-24 in Helena.

Dr. Munson explained that the primary purpose of holistic scoring is to place students into groups. Conversely, the primary purpose of analytic scoring is to provide diagnostic data. For the purposes of placing students (perhaps into a class or university), holistic scoring minimizes the problem of determining a cut point. When the purpose of scoring essays using a holistic rubric is to determine if the productions are "proficient" or "not proficient" and rigorous training and scoring procedures are used, Dr. Munson expects 95% reliability. With an analytic rubric of six or more features, the chances of inaccurate scoring

are multiplied several times.

In addition, the accuracy of scoring scale values at the proposed cut point is critical. For example, when the Board of Regents sets a "cut score," special care must be taken in distinguishing the features of a score considered "nearly proficient" and one considered "proficient."

In an extended evaluation of the Montana Holistic Scoring Rubric, Dr. Munson showed graphs indicating that the rubric structure does distinguish between six levels of papers in a linear progression. The graph showed some narrowing of the gap between a high "4" and a low "4," indicating that the rubric allows a smaller range of papers at that score point. Scorers admitted they had experienced some problems finding 4's in the past, supporting Dr. Munson's conclusion.

Dr. Munson discussed several issues of concern to test developers and those who use test data. **Content validity** is meas-

ured by whether or not the student groupings are true reflections of significantly different abilities, skills or knowledge. In relation to the writing assessment, the goal is that students who score well enough to be admitted to regular freshman-level composition classes possess the writing skills to succeed in those classes.

To determine **construct validity**, one asks if the assessment instrument measures the respondents' reasoning practices and abilities relative to the content of interest. The Writing Proficiency Steering Committee studied the syllabi of freshman courses to select persuasive writing as the genre most likely to measure the reasoning and writing skills needed by college freshmen.

Criterion reliability refers to the correlation of assessment results with current or future successful performance in the content area of interest—in this case, writing. Studies correlating how students fare in college in comparison to the scores achieved in previous writing assessments are currently underway. Preliminary results show a positive correlation.

To achieve reliability, scorers must balance their knowledge of the rubric with professional judgment, including the comparison of each essay with the anchor sets. Training is key to ensuring reliable scores. Through training, scorers:

- Develop a common understanding of the rubric;
- Learn to accurately apply the rubric to the writing being assessed;
- Develop a common base of scoring ability within the rater pool; and
- Are provided constructive guidance before and during scoring.

In addition, the number of scorers helps ensure that results will be valid and reliable. At least two readers are required for each essay in the Montana Writing Assessment and approximately 130 people score the assessment statewide. Scoring should also be done under adequate environmental conditions—temperature, lighting, comfortable seating, and quiet are important factors at the scoring sites.

Finally, under ideal conditions, all writing samples should be created under essentially equal conditions. In the Montana Writing Assessment, about one third of the test-takers use computers and the other two-thirds write by hand. These conditions are not equal and do not yield equal results. (Students who word process score slightly higher.) Schools that use the word-processing option are encouraged to compare their scores to the statewide word-processed scores rather than to the hand-written or overall averages. However, if teachers follow the instructions in the test administration manuals, other testing conditions are equal.

Trainers were intrigued by the information that Dr. Munson shared and encouraged by his analysis of the Montana rubric and scoring processes. Some revision of the scoring rubric to ensure that achieving scores above “3” is not a function of a tightened range of quality at the “4” level (which indicates accurate scoring based on the rubric), but an accurate reflection of the quality of the essays may be warranted. A score of

3.5 (meaning one score of 3 and one score of 4) is actually the midpoint on a 6-point scale. In 2003, 21.4% of the students earned scores of 3; 17.2% earned 3.5; and 13.6% earned 4's.

Planned SAT essay adds to teen angst

By STEVE GIEGERICH, Associated Press

Excerpted from the Billings Gazette, February 24, 2004

Just a high school sophomore, Claudette Rogers is already anxious about a test that's more than a year away - the college entrance exam that will help determine her academic future. She and her classmates have an extra reason to be. Rogers' class of 2006 will be the first to write a timed essay as part of the SAT, in addition to taking the traditional verbal and math sections. The SAT's chief rival, the ACT, is making an essay an optional part of its exam, with both test-makers adding the writing section to tests taken in the spring of 2005.

To prepare for the "new" SAT, teachers, students and parents have been scrambling to sharpen writing skills, while college counselors are starting to hear from nervous parents. Wells High School (Maine) guidance counselor Stephen Newton thinks the writing exercises on mandatory state exams will also help prepare students for the college tests. "This is the age of assessments," Newton said. "And the more opportunity they have to prepare, the better off they'll be when they exit the schools."

Private college counselors are starting to offer writing tutorials. "The idea is to get some practice writing and to get (students) to read more, especially things like editorials," said Marcy Manning, a private counselor in Sterling, Va.

The College Board, which owns the SAT, is concerned that tutors will teach students to use a set formula to compose the essay. "This thing about 'gaming' the test, and the people who say they can teach kids the essay, is wrong," said College Board spokeswoman Chiara Coletti. "You really can't." The writing sample, she noted, will require students to use specific arguments to support their position on the essay question.

"Essay preparation is a good thing if it helps students to write better. We're not in the least opposed to that," Coletti said. "What worries us, for the sake of the kids, is any attempt to mislead them that they can have an essay in their back pocket and just use it during the course of the test - because that will penalize the kid and result in them getting a zero."

The SAT essay will be scored on a scale of 1 to 6. Those receiving a perfect score, according to the College Board, will demonstrate "outstanding critical thinking, using clearly appropriate examples, reasons, and other evidence to support" the student's argument.

"People are pulling their hair out, saying it's another test to worry about," said Pam Proctor, an independent Florida counselor. "But even though the fear factor may be driving them now, the result is that students who prepare for it are going to be better writers."

