



Performance-Based Writing Assessment: *Barrier or Incentive?*

In April of 2002 the Montana-Wyoming Indian Education Association (MWIEA) passed resolutions opposing University System Writing and Mathematics Admissions Standards, Teacher Admission and Certification Testing, and Standardized and State-Mandated Testing. At the same time, MWIEA endorsed “the increased use of performance-based assessments which judge students, prospective teachers, and teachers on the basis of what they can actually do.”

According to MWIEA, a writing and math proficiency assessment “will serve as a barrier to many American Indian students who may want to attend one of the four-year units of the Montana University System.” If the writing assessment had been implemented in 2001 with a cutoff score arbitrarily set at 2.5, it may have been a barrier for many students, and disproportionately so for American Indian students. However, volunteer schools are now participating in a field test designed to improve writing skills. At this point, no one can predict what role or results performance assessment will have in admissions standards. Steps are underway to avoid potential barriers:

- Cutoff scores will be determined based on three years of field-testing to examine data on demographics, school characteristics, and predictive validity of scores.
- Resources are being provided to help students prepare for the writing assessment and thus improve their scores. For example, Webwriters features sample essays with scores, the capacity to accept practice essays for scoring, and a new, individualized writer-mentor program, funded by the Student Assistance Foundation of Montana.
- Professional development of teachers, including participation in the actual scoring of the assessments, is helping teachers prepare students for the writing assessment.
- Montana educators, including American Indians, are participating in prompt writing, bias review, scoring, test design, and the development of alternate measures.

As educators, we must believe in the capacity of our teachers to teach and our students to learn. In addition, experience tells us that when students and teachers realize that a test has consequences, they will prepare and approach it seriously. As a performance assessment, the Montana/ACT Writing Sample has several characteristics that support the learning process:

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Several Reservation Schools Improve Scores in 2002

Of concern to members of the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee is that, on average, American Indian students scored lower than other students. However, of the 8 reservation schools that participated both years, 5 showed gains ranging from 2% to 16% in their Writing Sample scores between 2001 and 2002. The composite gain for these American Indian schools was .24, over twice the statewide gain of .1 on handwritten essays. With scores from 1 to 6, small gains can be significant.

Writing instruction is now stressed in those schools that showed significant gains. In School A, PLATO learning software is used extensively, curriculum written, and writing instruction, including the use of Six Traits, emphasized. In School B, a writer-in-residence worked with students throughout the school year. Like several others, School C is a GEAR UP school that participates in a scholarship essay contest. School C has

also instituted a tutoring program with Century 21 funding.

School	Point Gain	% Gain
A*	.8	16%
B*	.5	10%
C*	.5	10%
D	.5	10%
E	.1	2%
F	(.1)	-2%
G*	(.2)	-4%
H*	(.2)	-4%

*GEAR UP schools

In 2002, 52% of the American Indian students scored 2.5 or below, compared to 78% in 2001. Their mean score was 2.6 for 2002

- The expository/persuasive essay is commonly used in a variety of subjects in high school and college, as well as in the workplace, and is required in the Montana *Writing Content Standards*.
- Students and teachers know how the writing will be scored.
- Students can practice similar essays and use the scoring rubric to prepare.
- Students and teachers know many details about the test—they will write about a situation with two possible solutions and will be asked to explain the merits of their chosen solution.
- Students are given a choice of two writing prompts and will be able to select the handwritten or computer mode.

Not only is it important that American Indian students “want to attend one of the four-year units of the Montana University System,” it is equally important that American Indian students complete their degrees. MWIEA also passed resolutions about increasing graduation rates, hiring more Indian teachers and administrators, filling the Indian Education Specialist positions at OPI, and strengthening the Indian voice in political processes. It is imperative that our American Indian students learn the skills they need in order to complete their educations and communicate effectively. Consequently, the primary purpose of the Montana/ACT Writing Sample is to ensure that students are prepared for college writing. Specifically, the purpose of the writing assessment is to:

- Promote a K-16 dialogue about standards, expectations, and realities;
- Base discussions about writing on real examples rather than theories and ideals;
- Ensure that students have acquired basic skills to succeed in college, improving college completion rates;
- Decrease the need for remediation in college;
- Set realistic, yet high expectations for students;
- Direct more resources to writing instruction;
- Judge students on the basis of what they can actually do;
- Promote the development of coursework designed to prepare students for college; and
- Help students understand the types of skills needed in higher education.

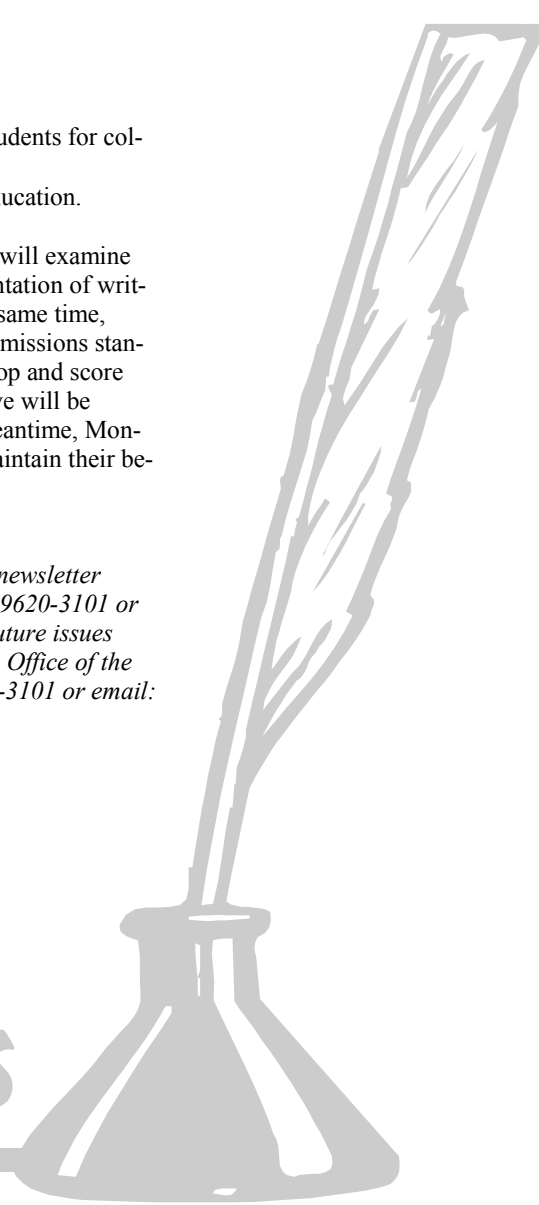
In 2003, after three years of field-testing, the Montana Board of Regents will examine data from the tests and participating schools to determine if the implementation of writing proficiency admissions may, indeed, achieve those purposes. At the same time, MWIEA may wish to determine whether or not to support proficiency admissions standards. If writing instruction and writing skills improve as teachers develop and score tests and as students practice and submit essays for scoring, this initiative will be deemed successful. If not, other strategies should be explored. In the meantime, Montana’s educators, regardless of the constituency they represent, should maintain their belief in the capacity of the learner to learn and the system to improve.

If you have any comments on this or any other articles appearing in this newsletter please send them to: Ellen Leidl, OCHE, 2500 Broadway, Helena, MT 59620-3101 or email: eleidl@oche.montana.edu. Or, if you would like to contribute to future issues please send your articles to: Jan Clinard, Director, Academic Initiatives, Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, 2500 Broadway, Helena, MT 59620-3101 or email: jclinard@oche.montana.edu.

The Montana/ACT rubric describes an essay at the “3” level (on a 6-point scale) as follows:

These papers take and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt with some elaboration or explanation. Organization is clear enough to follow without difficulty. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is at times awkward or unclear, and word choice may at times be inaccurate or inappropriate. A basic control of language is apparent, even though there may be frequent errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics.

Do you think this describes a timed essay written by a student who will be prepared to succeed in college?



Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency
Admissions