

## Board of Regents Proposed Writing Proficiency Initiative

### Recent Questions and Answers

#### Student Concerns

- How would a writing proficiency assessment affect college access?

*With the draft policy, no students will be denied admission to the MUS college or university of their choice unless they fail to meet other currently existing admissions standards. The draft policy proposes to use writing proficiency test scores as guidance for distinction between full and provisional admission, and for placement in the appropriate English composition courses.*

*It is anticipated that Montana students' test scores will continue to improve dramatically as they have during the pilot period, once the assessment is included in Board policy. Given current data for the hundreds of students who have taken the Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUS-WA) in the pilot project, the proposed standard potentially could place about 8% of Montana's university freshmen in a developmental English composition course, before they could enroll in a composition course that would meet general education requirements. Developmental writing classes are not offered at all campuses, but advisers can assist students toward simultaneous, high-priority enrollment in a developmental writing class with an affiliated two-year college. The desired outcome is to ensure that each student has or quickly achieves a higher level of writing proficiency as a basis for success in all college classes.*

- How can a writing proficiency test result in closing the achievement gap, especially for American Indian students, without closing doors to postsecondary education?

*The writing proficiency initiative will not close the doors to postsecondary education for any student. The MUS-WA builds upon past and current writing initiatives that have benefited thousands of Montana students. From the Montana Writing Project and the passage of the Significant Writing Standard, to the Communication Arts Model Curriculum (1990) and its companion Student Assessment Appendix (1991), to Writing Across the Curriculum, Six Traits, and Step Up to Writing workshops, the language arts community has worked diligently to improve the writing of all students. Through these efforts, American Indian students and many other Montana students have shown dramatic improvement in their writing proficiency. Partly as a result of the MUS-WA writing workshops, school districts are earmarking more resources to writing instruction, which will result in improved writing and greater probability of college success for all students.*

- Will the attempt to improve writing proficiency through a writing proficiency test create unintended negative consequences?

*The proficiency-based policy, including the tests that measure proficiency, can be updated, revised, and amended to respond to negative consequences if they occur. This is the case with all Regents' policies.*

*The attempt to improve writing proficiency through a pilot test has had many positive consequences. First, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education and ACT expected about 20 schools, not 75 schools, to participate in the first year's pilot. As a consequence of increasingly large numbers of volunteer partner schools, the number of training and scoring sites has increased annually. The Writing*

*Proficiency Steering Committee did not anticipate the level of professional development that has occurred; the dramatic increase in writing scores in all populations of students, but particularly among American Indian students; or the breadth and depth of the true collaboration between high school and college faculty that has taken place.*

- How can students' writing be improved in K-12 without a high stakes test for college?

*The many changes in procedures during the pilot period and in policy revisions under consideration have resulted in a test that is not "high-stakes." If they meet other admissions standards already in place, students with low scores on a writing proficiency test will continue to be able to enroll provisionally in the college of their choice. The burden then will be on the student as well as on the college or university to ensure that placement in the appropriate writing course takes place in the first semester of enrollment. Moreover, rather than a single test taken at a single time, the proposal includes an array of options with multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency in writing.*

### **Research and Data Concerns**

- What are the predicted outcomes of implementing a writing proficiency test for four-year college access?

*Data collected during the pilot period alone demonstrate one predictable outcome: students' preparation for college-level writing will improve. More teachers will receive professional development and encouragement each year as they witness rising student scores and examine best teaching practices.*

*Over time, upon adoption of the policy, higher retention and completion rates in both two-year and four-year programs are predicted. More students will enter college with writing preparation at the high school level that has been designed together by high school and college teachers. More students will complete a transitional composition course in the first year of their post-secondary experience, before or simultaneous with enrollment in other college classes.*

- What data are necessary to predict college success?

*Useful data include high school GPA, test scores, and high school curriculum. ACT studies, for example, show that students who take a rigorous core in high school have higher college GPAs and retention rates. Studies by ACT and the College Board show that writing proficiency measures are excellent predictors. According to the California University System, the best predictor of college success has been the SAT II Subject Area Test in Writing.*

- What are the components of programs/systems that have successfully improved or increased student writing proficiency to acceptable levels for success in higher education?

*Teachers who participate in the MUS-WA complete questionnaires about their approaches to writing instruction. 626 Montana teachers have participated in the pilot project since 2001. Assigning analytical essays, using computers, teaching outlining skills, emphasizing critical thinking, and employing the writing process produce higher scores on the MUS-WA.*

- How effective are the existing admission requirements (e.g., mathematics) in meeting MUS objectives and what have the consequences been in implementing these requirements?

*The class that entered the University System this fall (2005) was the first to be affected by the Mathematics Proficiency Admissions Standard. It will take several years to fully evaluate the outcomes of this standard.*

### **Technical Concerns**

- Should writing proficiency admission tests be adopted, what research, development, and monitoring protocols will be used to ensure validity and reliability over time?

*Statistical studies of the MUS-WA have shown consistently high inter-rater reliability coefficients (.864 in 2004, for example). The studies will be ongoing to ensure their continued reliability.*

*At the national level, ACT and SAT conducted national curriculum surveys and convened panels of experts before implementing their tests to ensure validity. Likewise, the MUS-WA began with K-16 experts who established validity by aligning the Montana Writing Assessment with the expectations for student writing at the transition point between high school and college, and with ACT and SAT scoring criteria. The Montana Writing Content Standards expect students to be able to produce a persuasive essay upon graduation. College composition teachers on the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee recommended the persuasive mode because it aligns most closely with the skill set that college freshmen need across the curriculum. The Writing Proficiency Steering Committee believes that the context for all these tests—the type of question, the amount of time provided to respond, and the criteria for scoring – are very similar to the experience college freshmen face when they take their first mid-term exams.*

- What are the technical requirements, processes, and associated costs that would ensure that this or any assessment instrument would withstand challenges inherent through use in a high-stakes manner?

*The primary means of making such assurances is that the student may select from one of five options for testing and may retake three of these options if not satisfied with the result. The technical requirements and processes for the development of the ACT, SAT, Advanced Placement Examination and CLEP tests are well known. MUS-WA was developed with assistance from ACT and follows ACT's procedures for prompt development and scoring.*

*Students who challenge their scores may take another test, retake the same test, or document a disability. In addition, they can be provisionally admitted to the University and placed in a transitional composition course.*

### **Policy Concerns**

- Should the identification and alignment of writing proficiency standards in K-12 and higher education precede the final adoption and implementation of a writing proficiency test?

*Yes. That work has been completed and thoroughly documented.*

- Is a high school diploma a guarantee that a student has the writing skills to succeed in college?

*No. The Montana Board of Public Education's standards for writing describe "upon graduation" performances at advanced, proficient, nearing proficiency, and novice levels. According to these standards, a student can graduate, but "needs assistance to write effectively," only "occasionally writes clearly," and "often lacks purpose in writing." Although they graduate, these students are not ready for writing tasks at work or in college. Writing courses are not specifically required in high school, but*

*embedded in the English curriculum. In some schools writing is a strong focus, and in others it is not. Since beginning a Writing Proficiency Initiative, many high schools have invested more resources in their writing curriculum, striving to graduate more students whose writing performances are at least proficient.*

- What communication and monitoring mechanisms would be most beneficial to provide specific information regarding writing proficiency?

*It is anticipated that all Writing Proficiency Steering Committee members will continue deliberations regarding proficiency, communicate information, workshop agendas, policies, etc., to their constituencies, send staff to workshops and meetings, and bring concerns to appropriate officials. In addition, staff will continue to apprise the Board of Regents and the Board of Public Education of details concerning test administration, results, and training.*

- What is necessary to take the work of the MUS writing proficiency pilot project to scale in the state of Montana?

*Participation in the MUS-WA has been voluntary with partner high schools. Nothing in the proposed policy requires full participation. Were that to occur, however, the cost of professional development could increase by about 35%. The number of training/scoring workshops would need to increase from about 7 statewide to perhaps 10-11. At the same time, the cost of printing and data collection (\$24,000) could decrease if the majority of schools select the online test. Cooperation among MUS and K-12 partners will continue to be very helpful. Formation of assessment consortia would also ease the way. Guidelines regarding these consortia can be found on the Writing Proficiency website: <http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.asp>.*

- What other related policy issues need to be discussed?

*Other policies that promote the collaboration of post-secondary and K-12 teachers, designed to improve student preparedness and college retention should be discussed. For every 100 freshman now attending a Montana high school 78 graduate within four years. Of that 78, 42 are admitted to college the following fall. Of that 42, 28 return for their sophomore year. And of that 28, 17 will graduate within 6 years of enrolling. This “leaky pipeline” is the result of many factors, one of which is the level of preparation they have for college studies. It is the goal of many Montana educators to reduce the loss of educational opportunity at every juncture. The primary purpose of this policy is to take one of the steps necessary to do that.*

*The P-20 Assessment-Alignment committee should monitor the progress of this policy as well as other partnerships that bring high school and college faculty together to improve opportunities for successful lifelong learning for Montanans, from pre-school through college and beyond. Other policies with the potential of grass roots support should be pursued.*