

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter Twenty-five January 2008

Testing and Professional Development Schedule Set

Montana's high schools may administer the 2008 Montana University System Writing Assessment on any day during a month-long window, **February 4 through March 7**. Over 8,000 students are expected to test this year, 5,000 of whom will submit essays online (www.muswa.com). One advantage of selecting the online version is that these tests can be electronically retrieved should questions arise about their scores.

Training of Trainers, designed for experienced scorers who want to refine their leadership and training skills, will be held **February 21-22** in Helena. A registration form and tentative agenda can be found on the Writing Proficiency Website: <http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm>. Trainers' lodging in Helena, four days of substitute teacher costs, and college credit are grant-funded.

Schools that participate in the MUSWA must send teachers, administrators, and/or counselors to assist with the scoring process, learn how the tests are scored and discuss the features of proficient writing with others, including college instructors. These annual workshops are making a positive impact on the quality of student writing.

Training and Scoring Sessions have been scheduled throughout Montana so that all interested teachers can find a site and a date that is convenient.



Registration materials are available on the website. Participants may earn Renewal Units at no cost or College Credit at a significant discount.

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Visit our website :

<http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm>
All newsletters are on the website.

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency
Admissions

Montana Board of Regents Adopts Composition Placement Policy for System Consistency

- A. Composition Placement Policy is based on Writing Proficiency Policy 301.16, which sets thresholds for full admission to the four-year programs at Montana State University-Bozeman, Montana State University-Billings, Montana State University-Northern, The University of Montana-Missoula, Montana Tech of The University of Montana, and The University of Montana-Western. This placement policy applies to the programs listed above, as well as Montana University System programs with open admissions and dual enrollment programs that offer composition courses offered for college credit.
- B. This policy reflects the Montana Board of Regents' expectation that students should not be required to take multiple writing examinations as part of their initial matriculation in the System.
- C. This policy provides campuses with the flexibility to select assessment measures based on their own course offerings, course content, and predictive studies. Campuses must clearly communicate their placement practices to students, counselors, staff, and advisors.
- D. Students who earn the following **minimum** scores on tests taken during high school will be placed directly into a college-level freshman composition course without further testing:
- 7 on the Writing Subscore or 19 on the Combined English/Writing section of the Optional Writing Test of the ACT;
 - or
 - 7 on the Essay or 400 on the Writing Section of the SAT; or
 - 3.5 on the Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA).
- E. Students who score below the thresholds set in D will be placed into developmental courses. Campuses have the discretion to allow students who do not meet the thresholds in D, but scored at least 5 on the ACT or SAT essays or 2.5 on the MUSWA, to challenge this placement through one of the following approaches:
- A campus-administered writing assessment modeled upon the MUSWA, giving the student 40 minutes to respond to a persuasive prompt and holistically scored using the MUSWA rubric and scoring process;
 - or
 - A campus-specific measure, such as portfolios, approved by the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee;
 - or
 - Regular and supervised participation in a tutoring program/learning center from which students can exit with the threshold scores set in section H of this policy.
- F. Students will be placed into developmental courses, without further testing, if their writing scores are below 5 on the ACT or SAT or below 2.5 on the MUSWA or the campus-administered writing assessment modeled upon the MUSWA.
- G. Students may be placed into advanced composition courses, where they are available, based on MUSWA, ACT, SAT, or Advanced Placement scores as determined by the English Department of each campus.
- H. Students without writing placement examination scores, whose writing scores were earned more than three years before enrolling, or students exempted under Section H of Policy 301.16 Writing Proficiency (nontraditional students, summer-only, and part-time students) are placed into college-level composition by taking examinations offered by the two-year or four-year campuses and earning the minimum scores listed below. Students with scores below these thresholds are placed into remedial composition courses:
- 50 on the CLEP Subject Examinations in Composition; or
 - 7 on the COMPASS E-Write Examination; or
 - 90 on the COMPASS Writing Skills Test; or
 - 71 on the COMPASS Writing Skills Test if a proficient essay is also submitted; or
 - 3.5 on a campus-administered writing assessment modeled upon the MUSWA, giving the student 40 minutes to respond to a persuasive prompt and holistically scored using the MUSWA rubric and scoring process.

University System Sets Rules for Provisional Admission Status

Operational Rules: Provisional Admissions Status

For Application of Policy 301.16, Writing Proficiency, and Policy 301.15, Mathematics Proficiency

Montana Board of Regents' Policy 301.16, which establishes writing proficiency standards for the Montana University System, states in Section I.D.:

*A student who has not yet demonstrated the ability to meet these standards may be admitted (without condition) to a two-year degree program or **admitted provisionally** to a four-year degree program on any campus of the Montana University System. (Emphasis added.)*

Policy 301.15, which sets mathematics proficiency standards, sets thresholds in Sections I.B. at which a student “meets the mathematics requirement for admission without condition to a two-year degree program or provisional admission to a four-year degree program...” To provide guidance for the institutions that make up the Montana University System, as they work with provisionally admitted students, the following operational rules have been implemented:

1. The institutions that make up the Montana University System will send admission letters to students, explaining their provisional status and how they can test into full admissions or take courses that will qualify them for full admissions. For example:
 - Letter A will be used for students who completed at least one of the proficiency measures outlined in Policy 301.16, but their writing proficiency is below the thresholds established in that Policy. Those students may be provisionally admitted to a four-year degree program, and Letter A explains what they need to do to be fully admitted.
 - Letter B will be used for students who completed none of the proficiency measures outlined in Policy 301.16. Those students may be provisionally admitted to a four-year degree program, and Letter B will explain how they can obtain a writing score and what they need to do to be fully admitted. Letter B will be discontinued after the 2006–2008 transitional years of Policy 301.16.
 - Letter C will be used for students whose mathematics scores fall into the range described in Policy 301.15 for provisional admission.
2. If students have been provisionally admitted, they must change that status to full admission before the end of three semesters or the completion of 32 credits in the Montana University System, whichever event occurs first. The criteria for full admission are set out in Montana Board of Regents' Policy 301.16.I.E. and Policy 301.15 I.A. If students do not comply with this operational rule, their provisional admission status will be revoked and they will not be able to continue their matriculation in a four-year degree program. The Registrars at each of the four-year campus will monitor student progress to assist with the implementation of this rule.
3. Students who are provisionally admitted to the Montana University System may declare a major.
4. Students who are provisionally admitted may be advised and encouraged to take a reduced number of credits while they work on their writing skills, but their credit load is not limited by this status.
5. By Fall 2009, when the Montana University System Writing Proficiency standard is fully operational, all students who apply to a four-year degree program must be able to demonstrate their writing skills under the methods described in Policy 301.16.I.A. and C.
6. The term “provisional admission” has a particular meaning in the Montana University System, under Montana Board of Regents' Policies 301.16 and 301.15. It cannot be used to describe any other admissions status or situation in the System.
7. Because provisional admission has a particular meaning associated only with writing and mathematics proficiency expectations, it does not change existing rules within the Montana University System concerning financial aid, scholarship eligibility, satisfactory academic progress, academic probation or suspension rules, and so on.

University-Bound Students May Score Higher on MUSWA

This graph divides students who took the 2007 Montana University System Writing Assessment into two groups: those who indicated that they plan to attend college (any college, anywhere) and those that indicated they plan to attend one of the MUS four-year campuses. In general, students who take the ACT with the Optional Writing Test aspire to attend a four-year university, either in Montana or in another state.

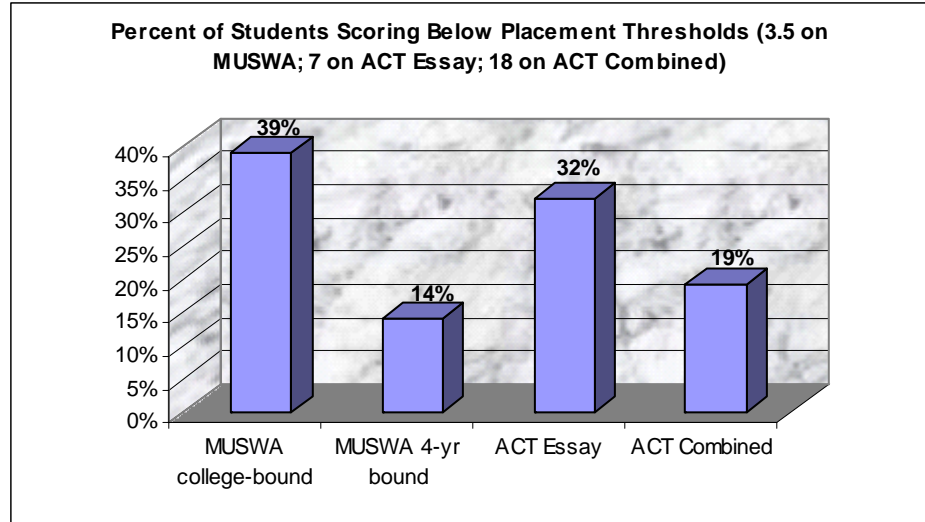
Beginning with the class of 2009, the four-year campuses

of the Montana University System can only “provisionally” admit students scoring below the 3.5 threshold on the MUSWA, 7 on the ACT essay alone, or 18 on the ACT Combined score, which weights the essay at 1/3 and the multiple choice questions at 2/3. As illustrated in the policies reprinted on the previous pages, students who score below these thresholds will be placed into developmental composition courses unless they successfully challenge this placement. In order to become fully admitted, these students must successfully complete this developmental within their first three semesters or 32 credits.

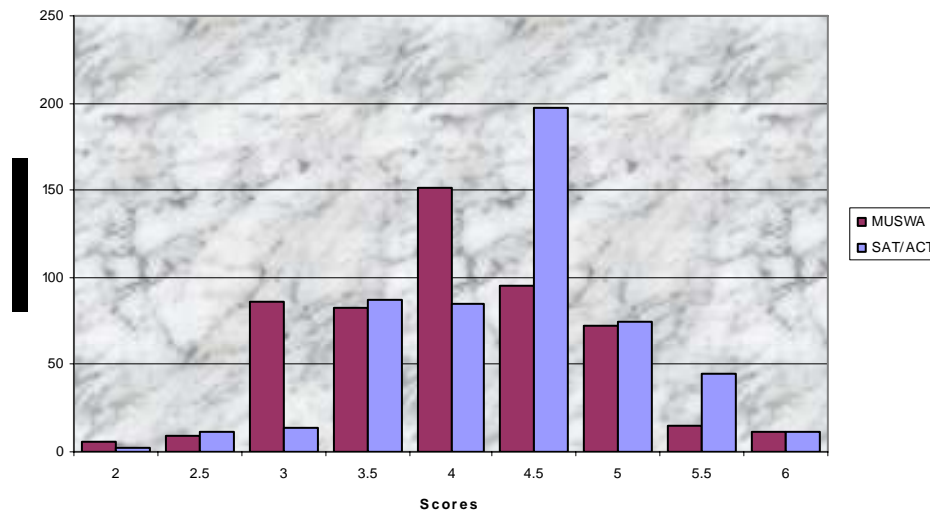
This data may be interpreted to show that fewer university-bound students will be placed into developmental courses based on the MUSWA than on the ACT scores and that the ACT combined score of 18 is easier to obtain than the ACT essay score of 7. The data could also mean that many students who plan to attend a two-year college take the ACT and its Optional Writing Test, which would render these scores more comparable.

A study conducted at Montana State University showed that students admitted with both MUSWA and ACT writing scores tended to have higher scores on the ACT in the lower score range and lower scores on the ACT in the higher range. Could this reflect the notion that students use the MUSWA to practice for ACT?

This graph converts the SAT and ACT score to a 6-point scale (like the MUSWA), and shows the scores



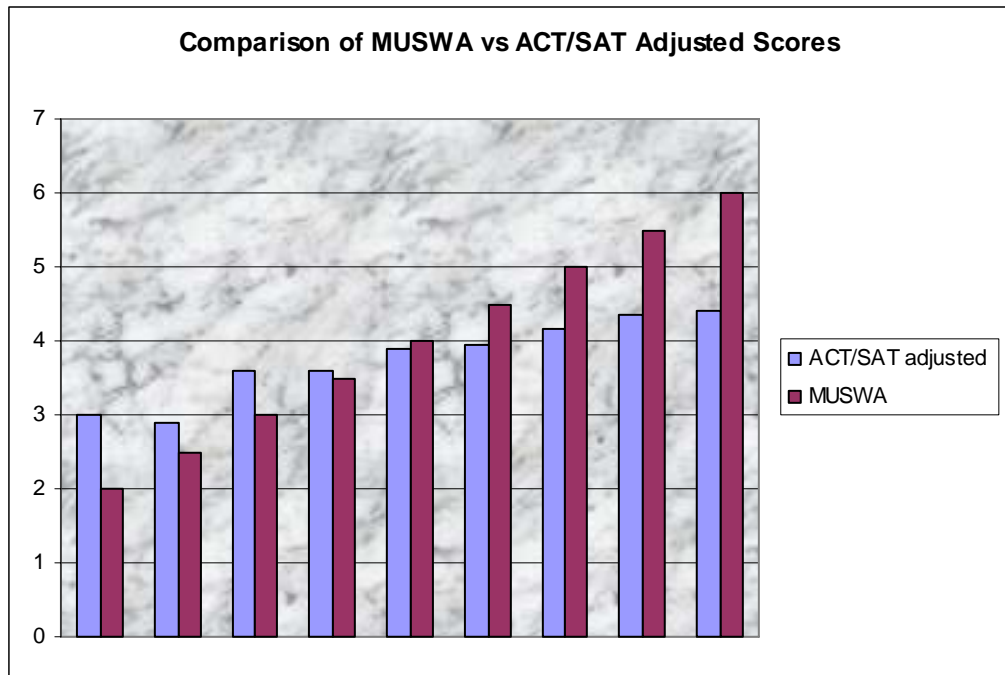
Score Distributions



of the 529 students who entered MSU with both scores on their records. Notice that for this subset of students, there are significantly more MUSWA scores of 3.0 and 4.0 than on the SAT and ACT. Also, there are nearly twice as many 4.5 scores on the ACT and SAT than on the MUSWA. A study to determine when students took these tests could answer the question, “Did students with 3’s work hard to score higher on their SAT or ACT essays? Did it provide practice and feedback?”

Montana State University Study Compares Average MUSWA Scores with ACT and SAT Essay Scores

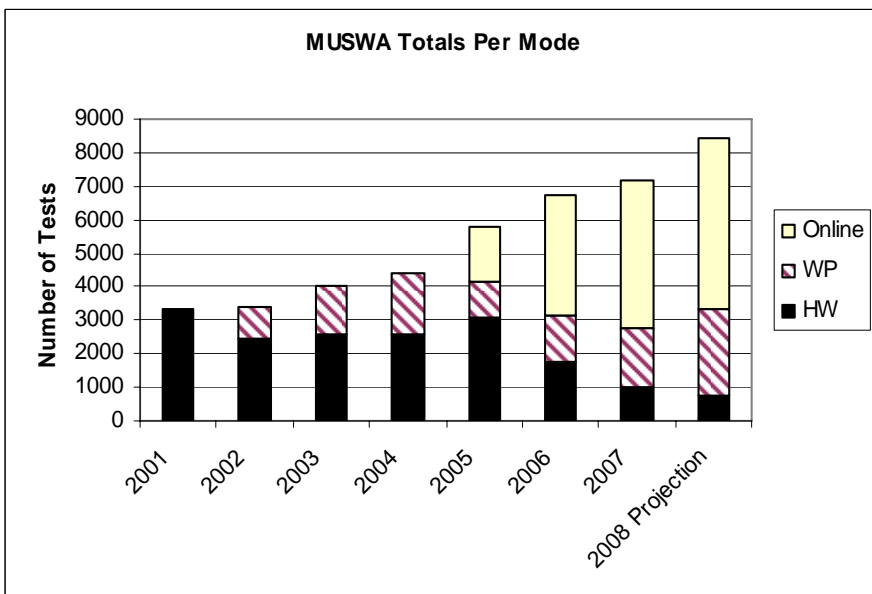
This graph was created by first taking all the students who scored at each MUSWA score point and determining their “average” ACT or SAT essay score. The ACT and SAT essay scores have been adjusted to the MUSWA scale of 1-6 (an ACT score of 5 was converted to a 2.5). By studying the data in this graph, one could summarize that on average, a student who scored “2”



on the MUSWA was able to earn a “3” on the ACT or SAT essay. At the same time, it appears to be more difficult, on average, for students to earn the highest scores of “4” and above on the ACT and SAT essays. Once again, questions are raised about how often students take the MUSWA first as a practice test for the ACT or SAT and also about which tests are more likely to use the full scoring range.

Online Testing Catches On

The graph below shows the number of students who tested or will test in 2008 using the three modes now available: handwritten in a test booklet; word-processed, printed, and inserted into a test booklet; and online. It appears that the introduction of online testing and the adoption of the Writing Proficiency Policy have substantially increased the number of students participating in the MUSWA. For 2001-2007, these numbers represent actual tests submitted and scored. For 2008, this is a projected number, based on the number of tests ordered by schools and the number of students each school projected would take the online test.



When tests are finally scored in March, generally there are at least 200 students statewide whose tests are not submitted or scored due to absences.

Students who are college-bound should be given the opportunity to make up the test. Also, it is important that student names are correctly submitted so their scores can be reported.



After schools register for the 2008 Writing Assessment, their school names and codes are sent to MSU Great Falls to be uploaded on the pull-down menu of the Webwriters website. Schools can expect a delay of several days. Please remember that the number of webscorers is limited.

The Montana University System appreciates the generosity of the Student Assistance Foundation, which funds Webwriters.

Transferability Council Begins Work on Freshman Composition Outcomes

The Montana University System-sponsored Transferability Initiative kicked off its foundational efforts at the Park Plaza Hotel in Helena on November 9. Four faculty councils—math, writing, accounting, and anatomy & physiology—comprising participants from all units of the MUS, tribal colleges, and high schools, convened to agree upon student learning outcomes that are associated with specific courses in particular disciplines. The writing council built upon prior work done by Writing Proficiency Committees working on assessment and placement issues to articulate a set of outcomes or competencies expected of all freshman composition courses. The council will meet again at the Park Plaza on January 25. Members of the Writing Outcomes Council who have served on Writing Proficiency projects include Jan Clinard, Susan Emerson of Dawson CC; Carole Bergin of FVCC; Sue Brown, Flathead HS; Geroge Dickie, Miles CC; Kirk Branch, MSU-Bozeman; Jack Crowley, Montana Tech; Kate Ryan, UM-Missoula; and Cathy Corr, UMCOT.

The Transferability Initiative, directed by Dr. Bill Macgregor, is a high-profile, high-stakes project funded to the tune of \$1.5 million by the last Montana Legislative session. Its aim is to remove long-standing barriers to student mobility throughout higher education in the state, and it places the crucial decision-making in this effort in the hands of faculty from across the state's many institutions. Agreed-upon course outcomes will be represented throughout the system by a common course number, title, label, and credit assignment, so that in the future, no school will have cause to question the equivalence of a given course: freshman comp at one unit will be treated as if it were freshman comp at the receiving unit because its learning outcomes have been deemed to be comparable. Macgregor, a Professional and Technical Communications professor from Montana Tech, hopes that "especially in the case of foundational courses like freshman composition, an outcomes-based approach will build trust and confidence among our highly varied institutions that will help students move more seamlessly among our different academic environments to attain their desired goals."

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