

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter 35 May 2011

Percent of Scores Above Proficient Rises

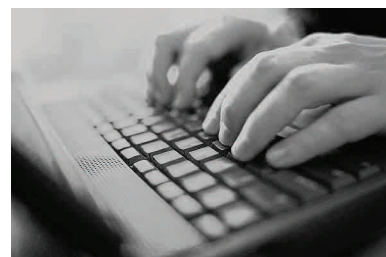
The 2011 average MUS Writing Assessment score was 3.9, compared to 3.8 in 2010. The percentage of students earning scores of 5.5 and 6 increased to 5.6% from 5.2% in 2010. In 2011, 7,685 students earned MUSWA scores and 138 high schools voluntarily participated in this testing program. Writing Assessment Workshops attracted 320 scorers to eight regional writing workshops.

The scoring rubric defines a “4” as proficient, and “3” as nearing proficiency. Essays with scores of 3.5 display enough attributes of “proficiency” to place students into college-level composition at the two- and four-year campuses of the Montana University System. In 2011, 75% of all students taking the MUSWA (including those with and without college plans) earned scores of 3.5 or above compared to 73.5% in 2010 and 52.4% in 2005.

The increase in proficient essays (see the bars for a score of “4” below), indicates that students are learning to “state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt and develop it with some elaboration or relevant explanation; to organize in a generally clear manner; to control sentences, express ideas clearly, and to choose words appropriately; and to demonstrate a basic competency with language. (See *rubric on back page.*)

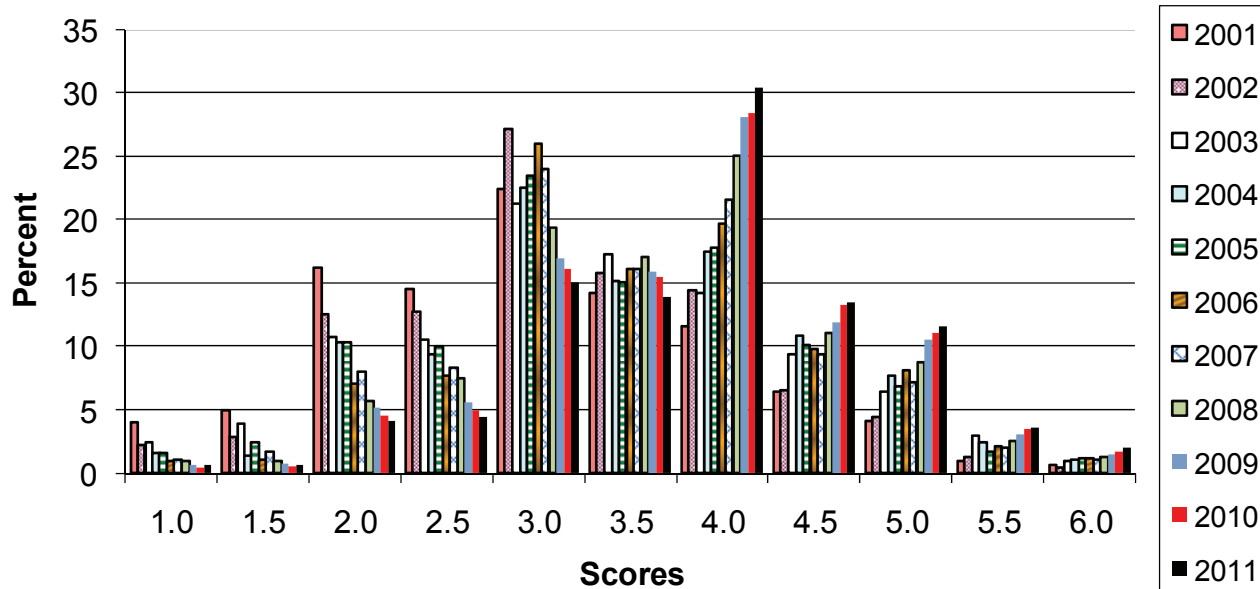
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Distribution of MUSWA Scores Over Eleven Years



Data Table for Graph on Page One

Percent of Students At Each Score Point

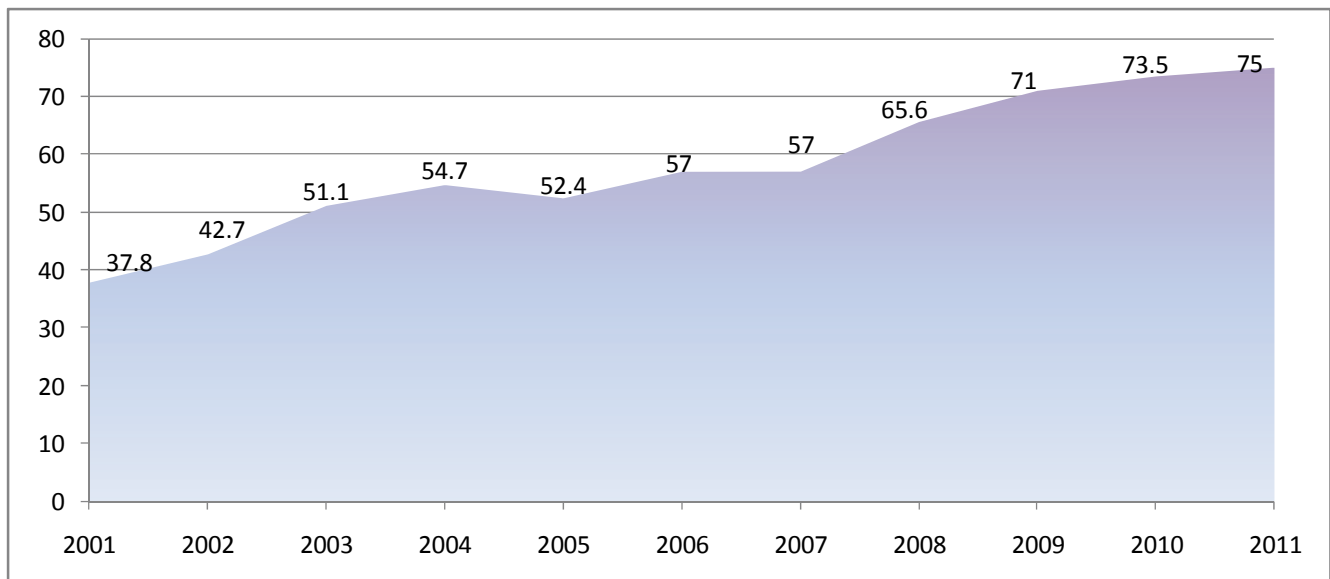
Scores	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
1.0	4.0	2.2	2.4	1.6	1.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.6	0.4	0.6
1.5	5.0	2.8	3.9	1.4	2.4	1.1	1.7	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.6
2.0	16.2	12.5	10.7	10.3	10.3	7.1	8.0	5.7	5.2	4.5	4.1
2.5	14.5	12.7	10.5	9.4	10.0	7.7	8.3	7.5	5.6	5.0	4.4
3.0	22.4	27.1	21.3	22.5	23.4	26.0	24.0	19.4	16.9	16.1	15.1
3.5	14.2	15.8	17.3	15.2	15.0	16.1	16.1	17.1	15.9	15.5	13.9
4.0	11.6	14.4	14.2	17.5	17.7	19.7	21.5	25.0	28.1	28.4	30.4
4.5	6.4	6.5	9.4	10.8	10.1	9.8	9.3	11.0	11.9	13.3	13.5
5.0	4.1	4.4	6.4	7.7	6.8	8.1	7.1	8.7	10.5	11.1	11.6
5.5	0.9	1.2	2.9	2.4	1.7	2.1	2.0	2.5	3.1	3.5	3.6
6.0	0.6	0.4	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.5	1.7	2.0
Number	3365	3467	3465	4714	5458	6910	7270	7114	7753	7563	7685

New Online Tools Nearly Eliminate Missing Scores

Every year, a few students who thought they took the MUSWA have no score returned. For the online test, this year's new tracking method allowed teachers themselves to pinpoint students, during the testing window, who failed to click the "submit" button, exiting the test site without uploading the essay. Teachers who found such records could ask students to resubmit their essays. Only 11 students statewide earned the "0" score based on the essay being off topic, inappropriate, or plagiarized.

Percentage of Students Producing Proficient Essays Increasing

This graph speaks for itself: by 2011, 75% of all students taking the MUSWA score 3.5 or above, compared to 37.8% in 2001. Of those planning to attend college in Montana, as noted on the next page, 78.1% scored at or above the 3.5 threshold.



Montana University System Writing Assessment Results Statewide Frequency Distribution 2011

Score	Total	11th	12th	MT HE	OS HE	Job	Military	Home	Other	N/R
1.0	0.6%	0.6%	1.1%	0.3%	0.4%	1.9%	1.3%	9.4%	2.1%	1.3%
1.5	0.6%	0.6%	1.4%	0.5%	0.4%	0.8%	1.3%	3.1%	2.1%	3.8%
2.0	4.1%	3.8%	7.6%	2.9%	2.9%	11.2%	9.6%	9.4%	7.8%	19.0%
2.5	4.4%	4.2%	7.2%	4.0%	3.5%	6.7%	7.4%	12.5%	7.0%	10.1%
3.0	15.1%	14.8%	18.6%	14.2%	12.3%	23.2%	25.3%	31.3%	22.2%	19.0%
3.5	13.9%	13.7%	17.4%	14.2%	12.7%	20.5%	13.8%	9.4%	14.6%	5.1%
4.0	30.4%	31.1%	22.5%	32.7%	29.8%	23.7%	26.9%	12.5%	26.4%	21.5%
4.5	13.5%	13.8%	10.2%	14.5%	14.9%	7.2%	7.1%	6.3%	8.6%	12.7%
5.0	11.6%	11.8%	9.7%	12.0%	14.1%	3.7%	6.4%	3.1%	7.2%	6.3%
5.5	3.6%	3.6%	3.7%	3.3%	5.4%	0.5%	0.6%	3.1%	1.7%	1.3%
6.0	2.0%	2.2%	0.7%	1.6%	3.7%	0.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Mean	3.9	3.9	3.6	3.9	4.1	3.4	3.4	3.0	3.5	3.3
SD	0.9	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.0	1.1
N	7685	7103	569	3844	2517	375	312	32	526	79

KEY To Student Responses

MT HE: Continue my education at a college or university in Montana.

OS HE: Continue my education at a college or university in another state.

Job: Seek employment after I leave high school.

Military: Join the military after I leave high school.

Chart Explained

The chart above contains the following information:

- The first column to the left lists the score points from 1 to 6. Two or three people scored each essay and scores were averaged, resulting in scores such as 3.5.
- The second column (*Total*) lists student score distribution, with a **percentage** at each score point.
- Columns 3-4 list score distributions based on student grade level. Only seniors who scored below 3.0 as juniors were encouraged to take the MUSWA again as seniors.
- The last 5 columns list score distributions for post-secondary plans. NR means no response.
- Below the *Mean* (average scores) row is the standard deviation (SD).
- *N* is the total number and numbers under each category. Data may be missing if students did not bubble-in information about themselves.

The statewide mean for all essays was 3.9; For the 176 handwritten tests, the statewide mean was 3.7. For all word-processed tests the mean was 3.8; for the 4,654 online tests the mean was 3.8; and for the 2,567 word-processed papers submitted in booklets, the mean was 4.0. These score differences may be more correlated with characteristics of the schools that use the different modes rather than the mode itself.

Questions about plans after high school reveal that 82.8% of these students intend to go to college. Of those planning to continue their educations in Montana, 21.9% scored below the 3.5 threshold for placement into college-level composition.

Forty-two Trainers Lead Workshops in Eight Locations

Experienced scorers convened in Helena February 17-18 to update the Montana University System Writing Assessment training materials by scoring newly submitted essays and selecting those that best represent each of the score points.

One of the 2010 prompts was “retired” and new prompts were developed and field-tested. MUS-WA trainers selected essays written on the surviving new prompt, wrote annotations, and practiced teaching their peers to score accurately.

Each training team found essays that represent assigned score points and then defend their choices to the other trainers. These trainers organized and led regional workshops throughout the state. During Writing Assessment Workshops, scorers study four sets of six to seven scored “anchor” papers and then score four sets of four to eight “practice” papers, discussing each paper’s strengths and weaknesses and how it should be scored.

The Kalispell Workshop, with 44 participants, was held at Linderman School March 7-8. Organizers and trainers were Christy Harkins and Marcey Marony of Glacier High School; Matt Holloway, Whitefish High School; Sandy Chestnut, Columbia Falls High School; Heather Schmidt, Flathead High School; and Luke Johnson, Somers Middle School.

The Missoula Workshop (March 9-10) was coordinated and hosted by UM Professor Beverly Ann Chin and UM COT’s Cathy Corr, who also handled printing of materials. Among Missoula’s 69 participants, 7 were UMCOT faculty.

Trainers and leaders were Beverly Ann Chin, The University of Montana Missoula; Anna Baldwin, Arlee High School; Carla Hinman and Debbie Lowe, Missoula Hellgate; Steve Tull and Beth Keyser, Superior; Cathy Corr, UM College of Technology; Rob Plakke, Corvallis High School; Tim Marchant, St. Ignatius High School; and Sarah Nassem, Stevensville High School.

The Helena Workshop was held March 14-15 at the Colonial Inn for 46 participants. Leader/trainers included Jean O’Connor and Emily Stueven, Helena High School; Jay Pyette and Kevin Shellenberger, Havre High School; Holly Pepprock, Shelby High School; and Kendall Griggs, Conrad High School.

Trainer/leaders for the 2011 Writing Assessment Workshop in Billings (March 21-22) included Glenda Skillen Robison of Hysam High School; Kathy Holt of MSU Billings; Cory Snow, of Billings Skyview; Jon Moore of Shepherd High School; Tichelle Ickes of Huntley Project; and Laurie Nelson and Molly Joyce of Hardin High School. Professor Kathy Holt coordinated and hosted this session, which attracted 55 participants.

The March 22-23 Workshop was held at Miles Community College and attracted 19 participants. Leaders/trainers were Susan Erlenbusch of Circle High School and Greg Hirst of Poplar. Susan baked cookies for us again.

The Bozeman Workshop (March 24-25) was coordinated and hosted by MSU Professor Art Bangert. Held at the Hilton Garden Inn, 34 educators attended. Trainer/leaders were Susan Cotton of Butte High; Shay Witt of Clinton Elementary; and Donna Miller, The University of Montana Missoula.

The Glasgow Workshop (March 28-29) was organized and hosted by Linda Allie Glasgow High school and held at the hospital conference room with 21 participants. Leader/trainers were Mike MacDonald, Wolf Point High School; Linda Allie, Dave Pena, and Libby Weber of Glasgow High School; and Mike Beyer of Whitewater High School.

The Great Falls Workshop (March 30-31) was coordinated and hosted by Bill Krieger, MSU Great Falls College of Technology in Heritage Hall for 29 participants. Leader/trainers included Jared Smith, Browning High School; Laurie Smith, Heart Butte High School; and Annie Fort, Choteau High School.

Among participants were County Superintendents, Adult Basic Literacy Education instructors, as well as K-12 and college-level instructors and administrators.

Evaluations from the Writing Assessment Workshops were filled with praise for the leadership and skills of these outstanding trainers and for the value of the workshops.

Schools of Merit Honored

Awards of Merit are reserved for the schools scoring in the top quartile of all schools participating in the MUSWA. Schools receive certificates, suitable for framing and displaying in trophy cases.

With school averages increasing, the threshold for the top quartile must also increase. To address issues related to school size and set thresholds fairly, the top-scoring schools in each size category received Awards of Merit.

This resulted in 37 Awards of Merit, or 27% of the 138 participating schools.

Awards of Merit went to seventeen **Class C High Schools** that tested up to 30 students. These schools' averages ranged from 4.2 through 4.9: Richey, West Yellowstone, Harlowton, Shields Valley, Sheridan, Winnifred, Geyser, Sunburst, Gardiner, Highwood, Fromberg, Chester-Joplin-Inverness White

Sulphur Springs, Valier, Plevna, Custer, and Roberts High Schools.

Awards of Merit went to seven **Class B High Schools** that tested 32-63 students. These schools' averages ranged from 4.1 through 4.5: Plentywood, Baker, Manhattan, Three Forks, Huntley Project, Florence Carlton, and Cascade High Schools.

Awards of Merit went to seven **Class A High Schools** that tested 50-137 students. These schools' averages ranged from 4.1 through 4.4: Bigfork, Park, Belgrade, Hamilton, Frenchtown, Dawson County, Polson High, and Columbia Falls High Schools.

Awards of Merit went to six **Class AA High Schools** that tested 203-331 students. These schools' averages were 4.0 through 4.2: Flathead, Sentinel, Helena Capital, Hellgate, Glacier, and Missoula Big Sky High Schools.

2012 MUSWA Testing and Workshops

Schools may plan ahead to a **testing window of February 1-24 for the 2012 MUSWA**. Schools should schedule a regular testing date, as well as one day for make-up tests within this window. Training of Trainers may be scheduled around February 16-17. Schools must register to test at www.muswa.com and make any changes to their numbers of students and mode at this password-protected site.

Final scheduling the Writing Assessment Workshops may be postponed and based on participation rates in various regions. The following dates are possibilities: Kalispell: March 5-6; Missoula: March 7-8; Helena: March 8-9 or 12-13; Billings: March 19-20; Miles City: March 20-21; Bozeman; March 22-23; Great Falls: March 26-27; Glasgow, March 28-29. Or—if Helena is scheduled March 8-9; schedule Glasgow and Miles City during the week of March 12.

Although Dr. Clinard's phone number, 444-0652 will remain the same after the move, her email address will change to: jan.clinard@umhelena.edu. Please send suggestions to the new email address or to Dr. Jan Clinard, The University of Montana Helena, 1115 North Roberts Street, Helena MT 59601.

394 Students Receive Letters of Recognition

Letters of Recognition, signed by Commissioner of Higher Education Sheila Stearns and Chairman Clayton Christian, Montana Board of Regents, honored the outstanding performance on the MUSWA of 157 students, demonstrated by the highest score of "6" and 275 students with scores of 5.5. These students scored in the top 5.6% of the state's test-takers.

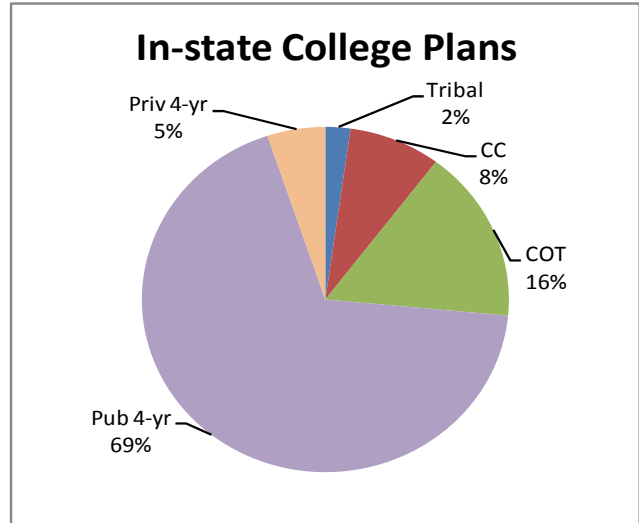
Students are encouraged to include their official Letters of Recognition in college admissions files. The letter includes information to help admissions officers interpret these scores:

- 7,685 students received scores ranging from 0-6 on this test;
- the average score was 3.9;
- each test was scored at least twice by trained teachers and professors;
- inter-rater reliability coefficient has been calculated at .86 for this test;
- students are given a choice of two persuasive prompts;
- students have 40 minutes to hand-write or word process their responses; and
- a score of "6" is described as follows: *These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with extensive and compelling evidence. Organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions. Language use is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent.*

The letters remind students that the Montana University System provides a wide array of quality programs to meet the needs of outstanding students. Students are encouraged to consider applying to one of the MUS campuses.

Students' College-Going Plans Correlate with MUSWA Scores

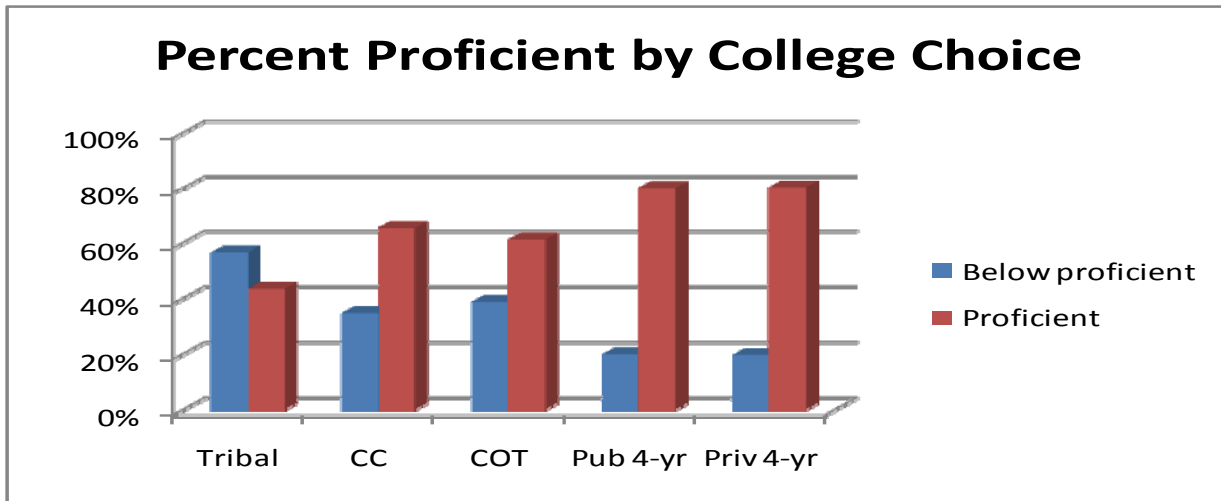
The data table on Page 3 indicates that 3,844 (50%) of the students tested plan to attend college in Montana and another 2,517 (33%) plan to attend college out of state. That means 83% of the students (overwhelmingly juniors) have college plans. The pie chart to the left shows where those who selected “college in Montana” plan to enroll.



The MUSWA data also correlates the type of post-secondary educational institution in Montana students plan to attend in relationship to their scores. Often, students who score below 3.5 plan to attend a two-year program, where several developmental courses are offered and where they can be admitted without provisions.

Among students who scored Proficient (3.5 and above), 44% plan to attend Tribal Colleges, 61% selected Colleges of Technology, 65% selected Community Colleges, and 80% selected Public and Private 4-year Universities

Average Scores				
Tribal	CC	COT	Pub 4-yr	Priv 4-yr
3.06	3.57	3.51	3.99	3.99



Tribal: Percent above 3.0	
2006	14.8%
2007	12.6%
2008	26.9%
2009	38.7%
2010	40.7%
2011	43.5%

Despite the apparent imbalance of students scoring “proficient” who intend to enroll in tribal colleges, the increase in proficiency for students headed to tribal colleges is significant, as illustrated in the table on the left.

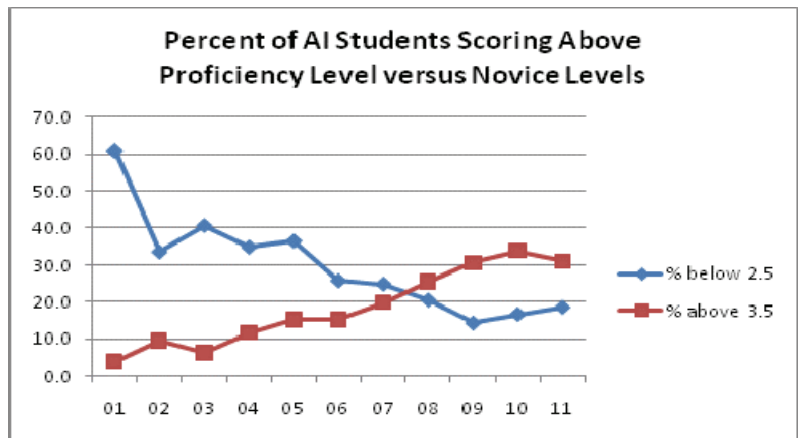
Another important breakout of data would be to determine how students who plan to transfer from two-year campuses to four-year campuses compare with those who seek a one-year certificate or two-year degree.

American Indian Scores Compared to Caucasian Student Scores

Score	2003		2004		2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2011	
	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White
1	6.9	1.7	4.8	1.1	3.6	1.0	3.4	0.8	2.4	0.8	2.5	0.7	1.1	0.6	2.3	0.2	2.9	0.4
1.5	8.0	3.4	7.2	1.2	5.9	1.9	5.2	0.7	5.5	1.2	3.2	0.7	1.5	0.5	2.6	0.4	2.7	0.4
2	24.4	9.6	22.9	8.9	27.0	8.6	17.1	6.2	16.9	6.9	14.8	4.8	11.6	4.5	11.7	3.5	12.9	2.9
2.5	16.4	10.8	19.1	9.7	16.6	9.0	15.6	6.8	14.3	7.6	13.2	6.6	11.4	4.8	10.9	4.2	9.6	3.7
3	22.2	21.4	26.6	23.1	22.1	23.9	27.1	25.5	27.8	23.7	25.1	18.5	21.6	15.9	22.6	15.2	24.0	13.9
3.5	14.6	18.2	7.9	16.4	9.4	15.5	15.2	16.3	13.0	16.4	14.8	17.2	21.4	14.4	16.0	15.6	16.6	13.5
4	4.7	14.5	6.8	18.2	8.1	18.5	9.8	20.5	13.0	22.3	13.9	26.4	19.7	29.1	20.4	29.3	18.2	31.9
4.5	1.1	9.9	3.1	11.0	5.5	11.0	1.8	10.5	3.7	10.0	5.5	11.6	6.0	12.7	7.4	14.1	6.9	14.6
5	0.4	6.9	1.4	7.3	1.6	7.4	2.7	8.8	2.4	7.7	5.3	9.1	4.1	11.3	3.4	12.1	4.4	12.6
5.5		2.6	0.3	2.2		2.0	0.9	2.1	0.7	2.1	0.5	2.7	0.4	3.4	1.3	3.8	0.9	3.9
6		0.8		0.9		1.2	0.0	1.3	0.0	1.1	0.2	1.5	0.4	1.7	1.3	1.7	0.7	2.2
Number	275	3104	297	3984	307	5056	328	5940	454	6175	438	6124	534	6514	530	6317	549	6376
Mean	2.55		2.66		2.73		2.85		2.94		3.08		3.24		3.28		3.21	
% below 2.5	40.7	15.1	34.8	11.2	36.5	11.5	25.7	7.7	24.8	8.9	20.5	6.3	14.2	5.6	16.6	4.1	18.5	3.7
% above 3.5	6.2	34.6	11.6	39.6	15.2	40.1	15.2	43.1	19.8	43.2	25.4	51.3	30.6	58.2	33.8	61.0	31.1	65.2

Downward Trend in American Indian Scores Raises Concerns

Concerns about providing Montana’s American Indian students with a culturally sensitive assessment measure have remained a high priority for the MUSWA leaders and scorers. For the 2011 MUSWA, 7% of the test-takers identified themselves as American Indian (who average 3.2) and another 4% as Multi-racial (who averaged 3.7), many of whom submitted tests from schools on or near reservations. MUSWA’s training materials purposefully include high-scoring sample papers that use narrative to persuade or an organizational technique that postpones the thesis to the end. These approaches to writing may be used more often in non-white cultures.



Although the average score among American Indian students was down a bit this year, two additional schools on or near reservations joined MUSWA and the number of American Indian students testing increased to its highest level since the test was first administered. Twelve high schools on reservations participated in 2012; 5 of which earned average scores of 3.9 and above, representing about 100 American Indian students.

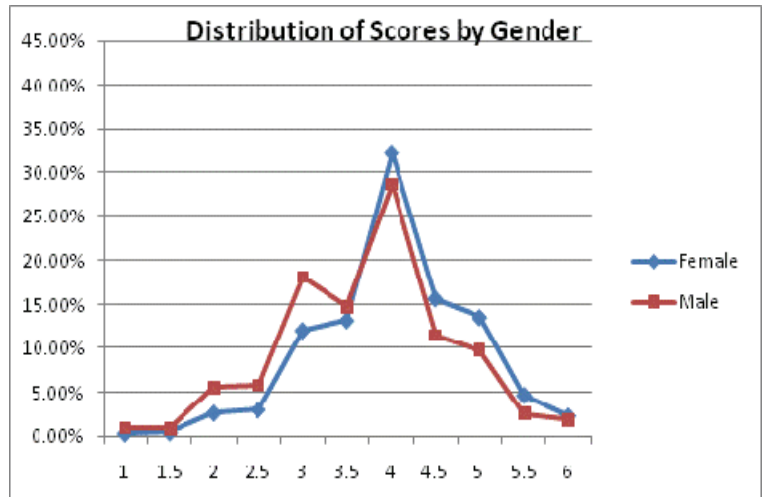


Writing Proficiency Steering Committee Member Greg Hirst, a member of the Blackfeet Tribe who teaches English at Poplar High School, has expressed concern about this downward trend. He wrote: *I hope the results don't indicate that writing instruction and assessment have peaked in the reservation schools. Next year will be a significant challenge for Montana's reservation schools to discuss college readiness and restructure writing instruction to facilitate improved MUSWA scores.*

In December of 2010, Hirst and his Sioux and Assiniboine students, recipients of Awards of Merit in 2009 and 2010, honored MUSWA Director Jan Clinard with a Star Quilt.

Boys Slowly Gaining on Girls Despite Persistent Gap

Every year, girls outperform boys on the MUSWA. In 2011, the female average (4.02) was .3 below the male average (3.72), compared to a .4 difference in 2010. However, in 2011, boys wrote 45% of the 6's compared to 39% in 2010 and 2009, 36% in 2008, and 32% in 2007. At the other end of the scale, boys wrote 68% of the essays with scores of 2 or below, whereas in 2010, they wrote 74% of those "novice" essays.



	Male	Female
2007	3.28	3.66
2008	3.44	3.83
2009	3.57	3.95
2010	3.65	4.03
2011	3.72	4.02
5-yr gain	0.44	0.36

Boys are making faster gains than girls in terms of their average scores gaining .44 points over 5 years, as opposed to .36 points for girls.

Another piece of interesting data regarding the differences in the scores of boys and girls is related to the six different writing prompts. Each year, when one or two prompts are retired and new prompts added, MUSWA

PROMPT	Male	Female	Difference
1	3.71	3.94	0.23
2	3.86	4.23	0.38
3	3.60	3.90	0.30
4	3.82	4.10	0.28
5	3.80	4.14	0.33
6	3.59	3.91	0.32

leaders consider gender differences of prompts, in addition to other factors, such as popularity, inter-rater reliability, balance of options, and scorer comments about the prompts. Prompt 2 generated the highest scores for both genders.

Score	Female	Male
1	0.32%	0.90%
1.5	0.45%	0.80%
2	2.63%	5.52%
2.5	3.00%	5.75%
3	12.04%	18.09%
3.5	13.17%	14.71%
4	32.24%	28.67%
4.5	15.65%	11.46%
5	13.51%	9.78%
5.5	4.69%	2.50%
6	2.29%	1.81%

152 "English as Second Language" Students Score .64 Below Average of Students With English as First Language

Only 152 students reported that English was not their primary language and their average score was 3.24, compared to an average of 3.88 for other students.

However, 29% of those students were able to produce essays that scored 4 or above, as compared to 15.5% in 2010, 12.8% in 2009, and 8.4% in 2008.

Six of these ESL students earned Letters of Recognition, compared to only 2 in 2010.

Score	ENG		ESL	
	#	%	#	%
1	44	0.59%	3	1.97%
1.5	42	0.56%	5	3.29%
2	293	3.90%	19	12.50%
2.5	321	4.28%	15	9.87%
3	1123	14.96%	34	22.37%
3.5	1037	13.82%	30	19.74%
4	2305	30.71%	27	17.76%
4.5	1028	13.70%	9	5.92%
5	887	11.82%	4	2.63%
5.5	271	3.61%	4	2.63%
6	155	2.07%	2	1.32%
Total	7506	100.00%	152	100.00%

Scorers Earn High Reliability and Praise Value of Workshops

Scoring the MUSWA involves one full day of intensive training and one day of scoring, overseen by trained table leaders. Each essay is scored by two people and if both assign the essay the same score, it is considered a “perfect” match. When scores are only one point apart, the score is called “adjacent,” and when the score differs by more than one point, it is “discrepant” and must be rescored by designated “resolvers,” who have been rated as the most accurate scorers. The MUSWA rates as very reliable based on the high percentage of perfect matches and few discrep-

Inter-rater Reliability

Reliability	Total	%
Perfect	4808	62.45%
Adjacent	2769	35.97%
Discrepant	122	1.58%
Grand Total	7699	100.00%

ant scores.

At the end of each scoring session, participants completed evaluation forms, which are helpful to continuously improve the Writing Assessment Workshops. Scorers responded to statements such as the following:

This workshop helps me prepare students for college writing and/or other writing assessments.

99 % of the scorers agreed with this statement. Related comments included:

MUSWA starts high school students thinking about being college ready.

This gives me a firm understanding of what the university system wants in writing.

This helps me develop an appropriate

expectation for college-level writing assignments.

I think the prompts generated useful pieces of writing and were fair and unbiased.

98% of the scorers agreed and some commented as follows:

All students could respond based on personal experience.

The prompts are great—real-life stuff!

Yes, amazing! 😊

With some exceptions, students took this test seriously.

99% agreed and wrote comments such as:

For the most part, they were interesting to read.

Kids are geared up and eager to do well.

Without exception, my students keep asking me when they will receive their scores.

I believe that I can score tests reliably with this rubric.

100% agreed, some commenting:

The rubric was easily understood and explained in great detail.

My table was consistently accurate and efficient.

I love scoring holistically.

Pacing of the training was appropriate.

94% of the scorers agreed and some commented as follows:

At the beginning, we need more practice time.

Not enough time for table discus-

Although it’s hard work, I had the right number of papers and amount of time to score accurately.

100% agreed and wrote comments such as:

I was burned by the last hour, but still effective.

Went so smoothly this year.

I could have scored more.

Scorers were also asked “**What aspect of the training do you find most useful?**” Typical answers were:

Using the MUSWA with my students is by far the single most effective program I have ever used.

Collaboration with others to clarify writing features; affirmation that student writing is improving.

Exposure to data about the assessment’s effectiveness; networking with fellow teachers.

Learning what is important for my students to learn in high school.

Calibration and consensus.

Conversations with my table about the characteristics of effective writing.

Clarification and validation of judgments about student writing.

It helps me focus more on idea development than simple mechanics.

Interaction/communication with others. I enjoyed bouncing thoughts and opinions around.

Content-area professional dialogue.

It fosters respectful collaboration between K-12 and college.

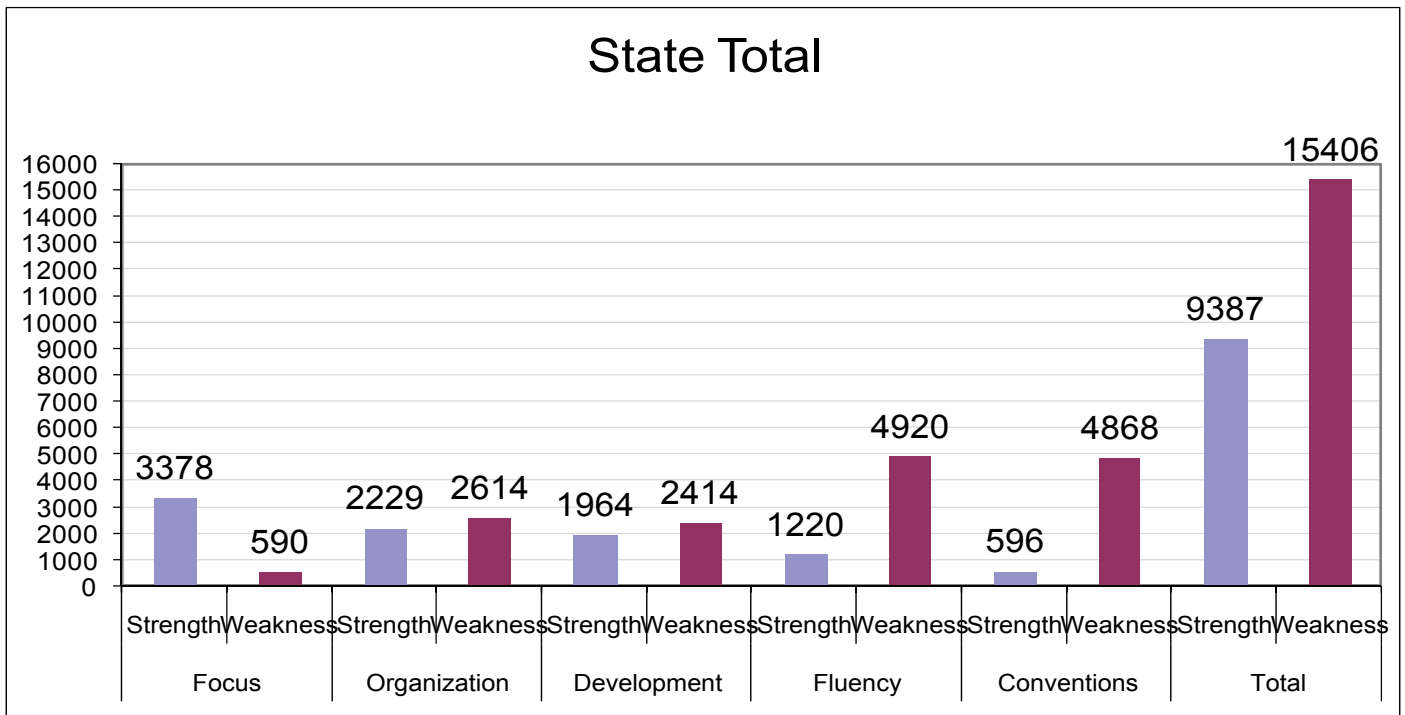
2011 Scorers Nearly Double Focus on Weaknesses

Schools participating in the Montana University System Writing Assessment receive individual reports about the strengths and weaknesses that scorers identified in their students’ essays. Since holistic scoring is the primary objective of this writing assessment, scorers do not always mark a strength or weakness. Scorers mark strengths or weaknesses that particularly influenced the overall holistic score. Each school’s report shows the percent of papers that had at least one strength or weakness marked. Across the state, this percentage ranged from 75% to 100%, with an average of 94%. These numbers are graphed individually for each school to help staff see the data and quickly compare their school’s writing traits with the overall state report. Because schools’ profiles vary widely, this data shows that instructional priorities make a difference in how well students write.

After ten years with development of ideas as the biggest weakness, it has dropped to the second-lowest weakness. More students have learned to provide support for their arguments in order to be effective, persuasive writers. This trait, which reflects thinking skills, can be developed! In addition, students appear to be doing well with focusing on the topic and clarifying their positions, which has also been a strength in previous years.

However, the major weaknesses have become fluency and mechanics. Teachers must continue to work with students to improve their use of standard written conventions—grammar, usage, and mechanics and to develop fluency—sentence control, clarity of expression, and word choice. In past years, organization has been a strength. This year, more scorers marked organization as a weakness.

These changes could be because scorers marked far more weaknesses overall than they did in 2010, when they marked about 9,000 strengths and 8,200 weaknesses. In 2010, the ratio of strengths to weaknesses marked was about 9:8. In 2011, that ratio was about 9:15. Although the average score was higher, perhaps scorers were more critical of the weaknesses they saw. On the following page, these trends in strength and weakness markings are graphed.



# of Students Tested	Average Score	Percentage Marked
7699	3.87	94%

Strengths and Weakness Change Over Time

As evidenced by the graphs to the right, scorers increased the percent of weaknesses marked in conventions, fluency, and organization in 2011 and marked fewer essays as weak in idea development. Focus has remained relatively constant over time as a strength. This change may, in part, be the result of the trainers' consistent focus on the importance of idea development—and perhaps too little emphasis on teaching conventions and fluency. Or, perhaps texting has begun to negatively affect fluency and conventions and these errors are so glaring, that marking idea development as a weakness seems less of a concern. In any case, this trend should generate interesting conversations and research.

MOVING MUSWA

The prospect of transplanting our favorite MOOSE from the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education to The University of Montana Helena College of Technology has many MUSWA lovers worried. Will he be like a fish out of water?

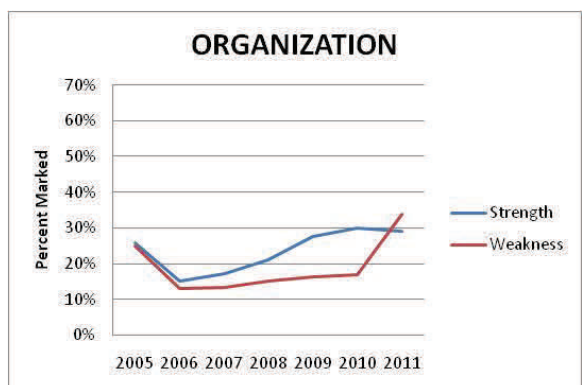
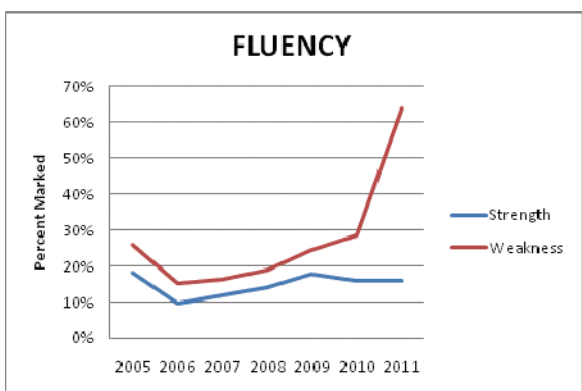
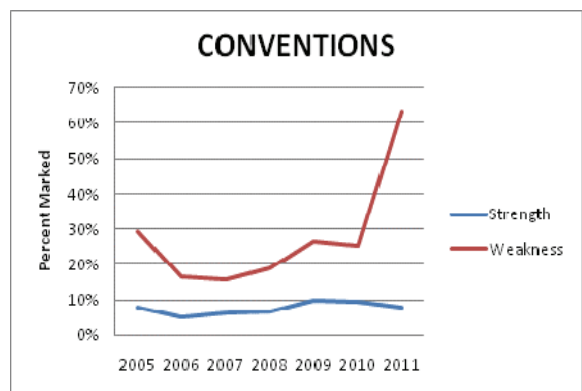
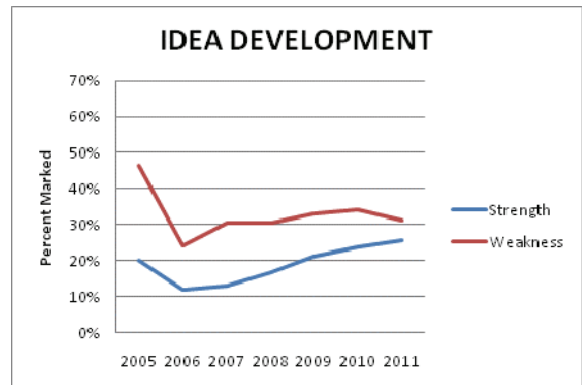
MUSWA participants see the advantages as these:

- *At least the program would continue;*
- *It means the survival of the MUSWA and maintaining a bridge from K-12 to college;*
- *MUSWA would still exist and allow for contextual, local conversations;*
- *It could cement the ownership by both high school and college faculty;*
- *Perhaps a campus could give it more credibility and focus;*
- *Perhaps this would encourage even more collaboration with the universities.*

They also point out necessary conditions:

- *If the MUS uses the data and recognizes the highest scores, MUSWA will continue to thrive no matter where its housed;*
- *It sounds doable if we have OPI and OCHE support;*
- *It should work if the public schools continue their support;*
- *Depends on the willingness of universities to accept the scores;*
- *As long as the MUSWA continues to include Montana's teachers who are here to learn and work together, I will support it;*
- *If we can maintain the integrity.*

Continued funding of this professional development through Title II Improving Teacher Quality is available through the 2014 testing year. With the cooperation and support of Montana's high schools, the 2012 MUSWA may prove that successful programs can be sustained.



Montana University System Holistic Scoring Rubric

- 6 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with extensive and compelling evidence. Organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions. Language use is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent. (Advanced)
- 5 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with moderate and relevant evidence. Organization is unified and coherent and transitions are used. Sentences are almost always well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is often precise. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, a good command of language is apparent. (Advanced/Proficient)
- 4 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with some elaboration or relevant explanation. Organization is generally clear. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is appropriate for the topic. A competency with language is apparent, even though there may be some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. (Proficient)
- 3 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with a little 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. (Nearing Proficiency)
- 2 These papers may state a position on the issue defined in the prompt, but development may be minimal or irrelevant. Organization may lack clear movement or focus, making the writer’s ideas difficult to follow. Sentences may often be unclear, expression of ideas may often be awkward or unclear, and word choice may often be inaccurate or inappropriate. Numerous errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics show poor control of language and may at times impede understanding. (Nearing Proficiency/Novice)
- 1 These papers may not state a position on the issue defined in the prompt or develop an idea. Problems with organization and lack of focus may make the paper very difficult to follow. Sentences may seldom convey meaning clearly, expression of ideas may be very unclear and confusing, and word choice may often be inaccurate or inappropriate. Severe problems with grammar, usage, or mechanics show very poor control of language and may significantly impede understanding. (Novice)
- 0 These papers cannot be scored with the rubric. They may address topics unrelated to the test prompts, be illegible, be a blank page, use offensive language, or be plagiarized.

What’s on that WEBSITE ?

<http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/>

This website is full of information, such as an archive of all newsletters published since 2000, a *Practical Guide to Writing Proficiency* (with all relevant policies and sample essays) Power Point presentations, and links to several interesting sites that can help with preparing students for college writing.

Students are encouraged to use <http://Webwriters.msugf.edu> as a tutorial on persuasive writing throughout the school year. It is open for essay submission November through April each school year to schools that have registered for the MUSWA.