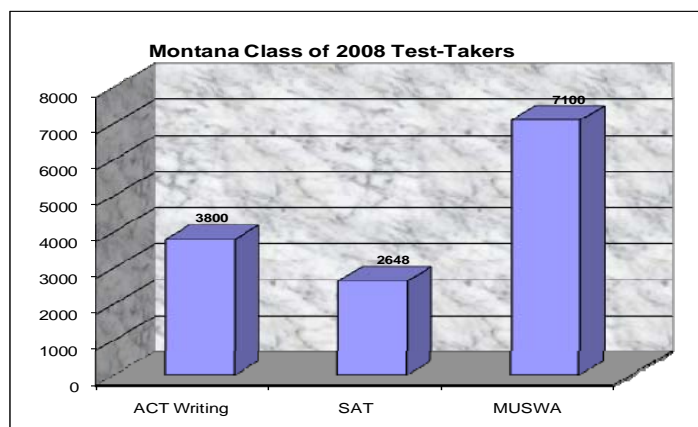


Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

The Montana University System Writing Assessment Provides Preferred Measure of Proficiency

In 1999, the Montana University System and the Office of Public Instruction convened committees of high school and college mathematics and composition instructors to study the transition of students from high school to college and reduce remediation rates. The results were the Board of Regents' Mathematics Proficiency and Writing Proficiency Policies; a series of publications and workshops, webpages, and the implementation of the *Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA)*, one avenue by which students can demonstrate their writing proficiency.



For placement into college-level freshman composition, students may submit scores from the ACT Optional Writing Test, the SAT writing section, AP English, CLEP, or the MUSWA. However, nearly 80% of Montana's high schools offer the MUSWA to students. They may do so because the writing prompts are developed in Montana; the essays are scored by Montana educators; there is

no cost to students or schools (except that participation in writing workshops is mandatory); the essays can be submitted online; and students are given a full 40 minutes to compose (as opposed to 25 and 30 minutes for SAT and ACT).

MUSWA's popularity among Montana's high school teachers and college instructors is further evidenced by their enthusiastic participation in the writing assessment workshops, held each spring at eight regional sites for two days each and facilitated by a cadre of 45-50 peer trainers who have assembled training binders by selecting student essays from the current test year that represent all score points (in four anchor and practice sets) and will also generate the engaging discussions that bring scorers back year after year. In 2009, the workshops attracted 322 volunteers, including 36 pre-service teachers learning how they will grade essays.

For less than \$15,000 per year, MUSWA employs Apperson Digital Technology Services of California to print tests for schools with limited internet access, host the online testing website, and to collect and report test data. In addition to test scores and distribution tables, schools and the Montana University System get data on college-going aspirations, demographics, and writing strengths and weaknesses. Students who earn the highest scores receive *Letters of Recognition* for their scholarship and college application files. Schools with scores in the top quartile receive Awards of Merit suitable for framing. Teachers earn college credit or renewal units for the professional development activities. Participating schools can use Webwriters (funded by Student Assistance Foundation), an online tutorial site to which students can submit practice essays. Teachers can take an online course to discuss instructional challenges.

MUSWA also provides a vehicle for communicating to teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and students about college admissions and scholarship criteria. For example, along with each student's score, schools are sent personalized memos for the student and his/her parents explaining the meaning of the score, how to improve the score if necessary, and the other admissions criteria for the Montana University System.

Montana University System
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59601-3201

Jan Clinard, Director
Academic Initiatives
Phone: 406 444 0652
FAX: 406 444 1469
Email: jclinard@montana.edu



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

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Academic & Student Affairs

Proficiency Measures Strengthen Preparation of Montana Students

Typically, of the 3,500 students who graduate from a Montana high school each year and enter the Montana University System, about one third begin by taking at least one developmental class, resulting in an annual remediation cost of about \$8 million (excluding community and tribal colleges). However, the overall remediation rate of recent Montana high school graduates has dropped from 37% in Fall 2006 to 29.3% in Fall 2008. These reductions coincide with the implementation of policies in mathematics and writing proficiency.

Because Montana's school district leaders embrace the concept that every student should graduate college-ready or prepared for family-sustaining work, many have raised their graduation standards above the state minimum to match college admissions standards. As a key indicator of how well they are preparing students, the majority of Montana's high schools participate voluntarily and at their own expense in the MUSWA. For nine years, the MUSWA has been administered to high school juniors and scored by college and K-12 staff members and pre-service teachers in workshops that focus on conversations about what it means to be college-ready. Students know as juniors if they will be placed into developmental or college-level composition and can use their senior year to improve writing skills. High school teachers know what skills their students must acquire for college success. Pre-service teachers sample the instructional issues they will face.

The Montana University System approach to improving college-readiness in writing includes:

- a Writing Proficiency Policy that sets a clear standard defining college-readiness;
- 18 full days of professional development each year;
- websites, publications, and conference presentations; and
- detailed data for high schools, colleges, and students about writing skills.

As a result, the percentage of students scoring at or above proficiency on the MUSWA has been increasing for all student populations. In fact, the achievement gap between Montana's white students and its minority population is closing, despite the fact that the number of test takers overall has increased from 3,365 in 2001 to 7,753 in 2009, and the number of American Indian test takers has increased from 228 in 2001 to 534 in 2009.

For mathematics, booklets, posters, and leaflets were published, a policy based on ACT and SAT benchmarks for readiness adopted, and a "rigorous core" advocated. This work has also yielded positive results. As the mathematics standard's proficiency levels have increased, more students are entering the MUS prepared for college algebra. In Fall 2006, 30% of the students entering the MUS directly from a Montana high school were placed into a developmental mathematics course. In Fall 2007, that number was 28.5% and in Fall 2009, 24.2%.

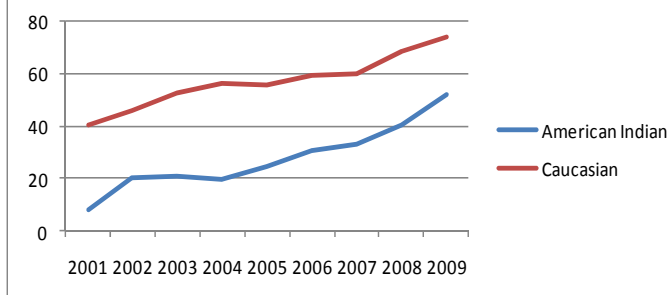
The Mathematics Proficiency Policy designates a Rigorous Core, which can be used as an alternative to the threshold mathematics scores on the ACT (22) or the SAT (520) required for full admissions to the four-year programs of the Montana University System beginning in Fall 2010. (The current thresholds are ACT math 18 and SAT math 440.)

To ensure alignment and consistency in admissions, placement, and remediation practices across the system, the Board of Regents has also adopted rules for Provisional Admission and Developmental Education. The MUS webpage on College Readiness (<http://mus.edu/collegeprep.asp>) describes this work in detail and contains links to these aligned Board of Regents policies:

- 301.15 Mathematics Proficiency
- 301.16 Writing Proficiency
- 301.17 Composition Placement
- 301.18 Developmental Education

These policies align placement thresholds among the two-year and four-year campuses, clearly communicating to two-year students that the same level of proficiency is required for college-level courses, regardless of the setting.

Percent Scoring at or above Proficiency (3.5)



This Rigorous Core is required for students to be awarded the Montana University System Honors Scholarship, which waives tuition for students for up to four years.

The Rigorous Core is four years of math (including a course beyond Algebra II, such as Pre-Calculus); four years of English (including a course with college-prep composition or research writing); three years of science; three years of social studies, and two years of electives, among which two years of world languages are recommended.