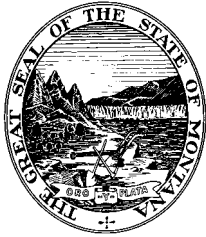




Visit our website :
www.montana.edu/mus/writingproficiency/index.htm



Office of the Commission
of Higher Education
Montana University System
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620-3101

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

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency Admissions

Why Writing Proficiency Admissions?

Students who are admitted to college without the requisite writing skills struggle to become truly engaged in the discourse that is so integral to higher education. Writing proficiency ensures genuine access by giving students tools to participate fully and to demonstrate their knowledge and thinking skills. As many universities and educational agencies recognize the important role that writing plays in college, testing companies and states are adding direct writing assessments to their programs. According to Richard Atkinson, President of the University of California, "Analysis of three decades of undergraduate data at the University of California...show the SAT II Writing Test is the best single predictor [of success in college]." College Board member Linda Clement acknowledged "Many colleges have said that they would love to see a writing sample under controlled conditions." SAT and ACT announced the addition of writing samples to their tests in 2004-2005.

In July 2000, the Montana Board of Regents moved to begin implementing proficiency-based admissions standards for the Montana University System (MUS). Current admissions policy requires that a student take the College Preparatory Program AND obtain a score of 20 on the ACT or 960 on the SAT, obtain a 2.5 GPA, or rank in the upper half of the school's graduating class. The proposed measures for an additional score for proficiency in writing include a Montana version of the ACT Writing Sample, an Advanced Placement Examination in English, and the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Freshman College Composition test. A Steering Committee representing college composition directors, high school teachers and school administrators was formed to advise OCHE in the development, implementation, and data analysis of the field test.

The voluntary participation of significant numbers of schools and teachers indicates a keen interest in writing assessment. High school teachers and their students want clarity about what it means to be proficient in writing. A writing assessment tied to college admissions gives real meaning to Montana's Writing Content Standards, adopted by the Board of Public Education in 1999.

Read to
understand
the world...
Write to
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Understand
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What are some Benefits of Proficiency Admissions?

- The development of resource materials and the field-testing of a writing assessment have promoted a K-16 dialogue about standards, expectations, and instruction.
- Setting admissions standards in writing and mathematics ensure that students have acquired basic skills to succeed in college, improving college completion rates.
- Proficiency admissions should decrease the need for remediation in college.
- Clear standards set high expectations for students.
- A writing assessment may direct more resources to writing instruction and promote the development of coursework designed to prepare students for college.
- With proficiency admissions, students understand the types of skills needed in higher education.

How Did Schools Participate in the Writing Field Test?

Volunteer high schools began field-testing a Montana version of the ACT Writing Sample in April 2001. All of Montana's high schools are invited to participate in the field test. Schools can also "sign up" from the Writing Proficiency Website. Between 70 and 90 schools volunteer each year to include their students and teachers in the study. Schools decide how many of their juniors take the test. Most schools test all their juniors and some schools volunteer to test seniors to study the relative importance of senior year writing instruction. In 2001, nearly 3800 students wrote for the Montana/ACT Writing Sample. In 2002, over 3500 essays were written and scored, and in 2003, the number of essays written and scored topped 4,000. The writing committee is considering new options for the 2004 test, to serve either as a model for regional writing assessment consortia or practice for the new ACT.

HOW IS THE FIELD TEST ADMINISTERED?

Customized test booklets, with scan sheets to collect data about students and their post-secondary plans, are sent to participating schools for March testing. In order to collect data on different test formats, students have been given 90, 70, 40, or 30 minutes to pre-write, draft, edit, and revise a persuasive essay. Schools select either hand-written or word-processed versions. Tests are generally administered during English classes.

HOW ARE THE FIELD TESTS SCORED?

Tests are scored on a six-point rubric aligned with Montana's K-12 Writing Standards, the six-trait rubric commonly used in Montana's high schools, and skills basic to freshman composition. ACT, the Steering Committee and field test sites contributed to the development of the rubric. Scores and an analysis of the collected data are sent to schools each spring.

OCHE strongly encourages schools to send teachers to the regional training and scoring. This valuable professional development is free to any Montana teacher, professor, administrator, or pre-service teacher. About 225 scorers have been trained; 27 of them have scored three times and 67 have scored twice. An expert from ACT conducts the training and oversees scoring of the essays each spring at three or four regional sites in Montana. High schools support the process by sending their teachers and paying for travel and substitute teachers.

HOW SHOULD STUDENTS PREPARE?

Students will be well prepared if they have experienced a writing curriculum with opportunities to write about sophisticated topics; to produce effective argumentation; to demonstrate critical thinking, organizational and language skills; and to cite opinions, facts and sources.

Many teachers participate in regional test preparation workshops in order to become familiar with the type of prompt, scoring rubric, and test characteristics. In addition, <http://webwriters.msugf.edu> provides hints for teachers, direct instruction to students and an interactive feature for practice essays.



In 2003, Webwriters, sponsored by the Student Assistance Foundation of Montana (SAF), added the Webcoaches feature, providing writing coaches for students wanting extra, anonymous help with their writing.

During the short time that Webwriters operated from January 2002 -

March 2002, there were 916 visits to the Web site and 102 essays were submitted for scoring. Between October 2002 and June 2003 there were 1,374 visits to the website and 199 practice essays were submitted and scored.

WHAT RESULTS ARE EMERGING?

During the field test period, research has been conducted to help schools improve their writing programs, determine the relationships among targeted variables, and study the possible impact of such measures on college enrollment.

With data from over 11,000 tests, conclusions can be drawn with confidence. For example, the more often students generate multiple drafts, the higher their mean scores on this writing sample. Since the mean scores improved with each year from 2001 to 2003, perhaps this attention to writing is having an effect. Further analysis of score results can be found on the OCHE website under Writing Proficiency and in numerous Writing Proficiency newsletters.

One of the most dramatic emerging findings is the predictive validity of the test. For a small group of 94 students who provided social security numbers, took the test in 2001, and were in attendance at the University of Montana in the spring of 2003, the Pearson *r* correlating GPA and writing assessment score was .96. This assessment may be an extremely good predictor of GPA.

WHAT ARE SOME OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE?

In the summer of 2002, both ACT and SAT announced the addition of direct writing assessments to their national tests. Now, the Montana University System (MUS) has several options, among which are:

1. Conduct one additional field test in 2004, with tests offered to all Montana juniors, concentrating on research and professional development related to preparing students for a timed, direct writing assessment. Because the national tests will not be available until 2005, the continuity of annual data and professional development would be lost without a state writing assessment offering.
2. Require that students applying to the four-year units of the MUS take the optional ACT Writing Test, new SAT with writing sample, or an AP English Exam. The BOR would set cut scores. Students would pay an additional test fee of at least \$10.
3. Explore the use of a Montana Writing Sample to serve two functions: a component of the K-12 comprehensive assessment system AND an admissions exam for Montana students. Cut scores would be recommended to BOR, based on research from field tests by OPI and OCHE collaboratively. Funding would be requested from the state or federal government by OPI and OCHE, or local school districts would cover costs as part of their assessment budgets. Out-of-state students would submit scores from the ACT, SAT, Compass e-Write or AP English exam.
4. Establish Writing Assessment Consortia of volunteer schools that offer a college admissions writing test as part of their assessment programs. Students in other districts would take the ACT, SAT, Compass e-Write, or AP English exam.
5. Design a challenge process for students who do not score well on the ACT or SAT, perhaps allowing students to submit a portfolio, a score on the Compass E-Write, or another measure.