

# Montana University System Writing Assessment

## Promising Practices: Academic Preparation

MHEC    November 2011

<http://www.mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.asp>



# College Readiness: A National Concern

- Because **too many students are not learning the basic skills needed to succeed in college** or work while they are in high school, the nation loses more than \$3.7 billion a year.
- America's high schools are not preparing many of their students for the demands of both college and the modern workforce. Weak curricula, vague standards, and **lack of alignment between high school content and the expectations of colleges and employers result in the need for remediation**...If students are effectively taught what they need to know in high school, the need for remediation in college will drop dramatically.

Alliance for Excellence in Education, Issue Brief 2006



## College Readiness: Still A National Concern

- The laments about America's higher education system are long and loud: tuitions are too high, colleges are increasingly hard to get into, classes aren't available, and students aren't learning anything. And **remedial education -- the 'catch-up' work now required for the nearly 40 percent of students who come to college** lacking basic skills needed to succeed -- is a prime candidate for elimination on almost everybody's list.
- Because colleges have not clearly articulated the skills that students must possess to be college-ready, **students are blindsided when they are placed into remedial courses**, and high schools don't have a clear benchmark for preparing students for success.

Jane Wellman and Bruce Vandal, Inside Higher Education, 2011



# Promising/Proven Practices

- Can Higher Education play a role in improving the readiness of students who come to our campuses?
- What steps did one program (MUSWA) take to improve academic readiness?
- What were the results?
- How was it accomplished?
- What political considerations impact such practices?
- What parallels can be found in another promising practice (Transfer Initiative)?



# Before Launch, You Need:

- A visionary leader with the power to act
  - *Deputy Commissioner Joyce Scott*
- A Board willing to set standards of performance
  - *Proficiency Admissions Requirements and Developmental Education in the MUS*
- A Director valued as a leader in the field
  - *Jan Clinard, Ed.D., with 11 years as state's Communication Arts Specialist, leadership in MATELA & NCTE NW Regional Conferences*
- A respected committee, representing the full constituency:  
K-12 through university; city, urban and reservations



# Proficiency: A Chance of Success

In 1995, the Montana Board of Regents approved **Proficiency Admission Requirements and Developmental Education in the MUS**, requiring “a uniform assessment tool to be used in determining if students have the basic proficiencies in math and English to provide them a **reasonable chance of success in postsecondary education.**”

1997-2000, the Commissioner of Higher Education convened several meetings about Mathematics and Writing transitional issues with committees from HS & College



# Move Quickly

- Set clear goals with timeline
  - July 2000: BOR endorses Writing proposal and field test
- Gain consensus on strategies
  - October: Director hired & Steering Committee formed
- Find volunteers
  - October: 77 schools volunteer
  - December: ACT selected as consulting vendor
- Launch the program as a pilot
  - January-February 2001: Orientation Workshops
  - April 4-10: Field test
  - April 30-May 5: Tests scored at three regional sites



# Base Program on Research

Linda Darling-Hammond's chapter, "New Standards and Old Inequalities: How Testing Narrows and Expands the Opportunity Gap," describes **productive approaches to standards in the early 1990's**, where states created complex performance tasks, then "convened and trained teachers to score this work according to common standards, often in moderated settings where they could calibrate their scoring, much as teachers do in other high-achieving countries" (p. 68).

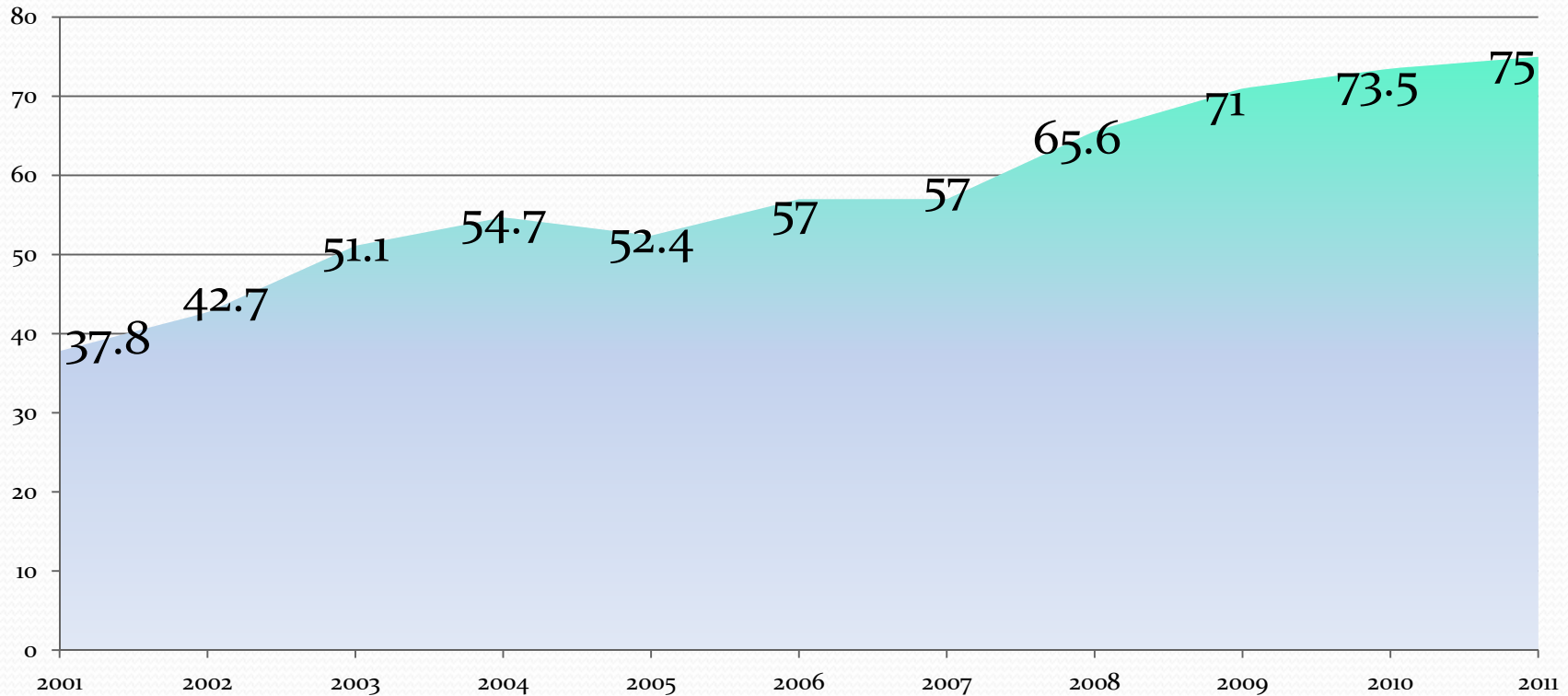
Darling-Hammond cites several studies showing that **these practices led to dramatic achievement gains**. (The Flat World and Education, 2011)



# Communicate

- Present in various formats
  - 5 newsletters in first year
  - Website
  - Orientations, workshops, conference presentations
- Collect Data and Publish Results
  - Scores and demographic data
  - Surveys and evaluations
  - Open discussions about challenges
- Deliver on Promises
  - Writing Proficiency Policy adopted in 2004 to set clear standards for admissions to 4-yr campuses

# The Result? Improved Achievement



This graph shows percent at or above Proficient level and includes data on ALL students, not just those with college aspirations.

N = 3,365 in 2001; 7,685 in 2011

# Writing Proficiency Policy

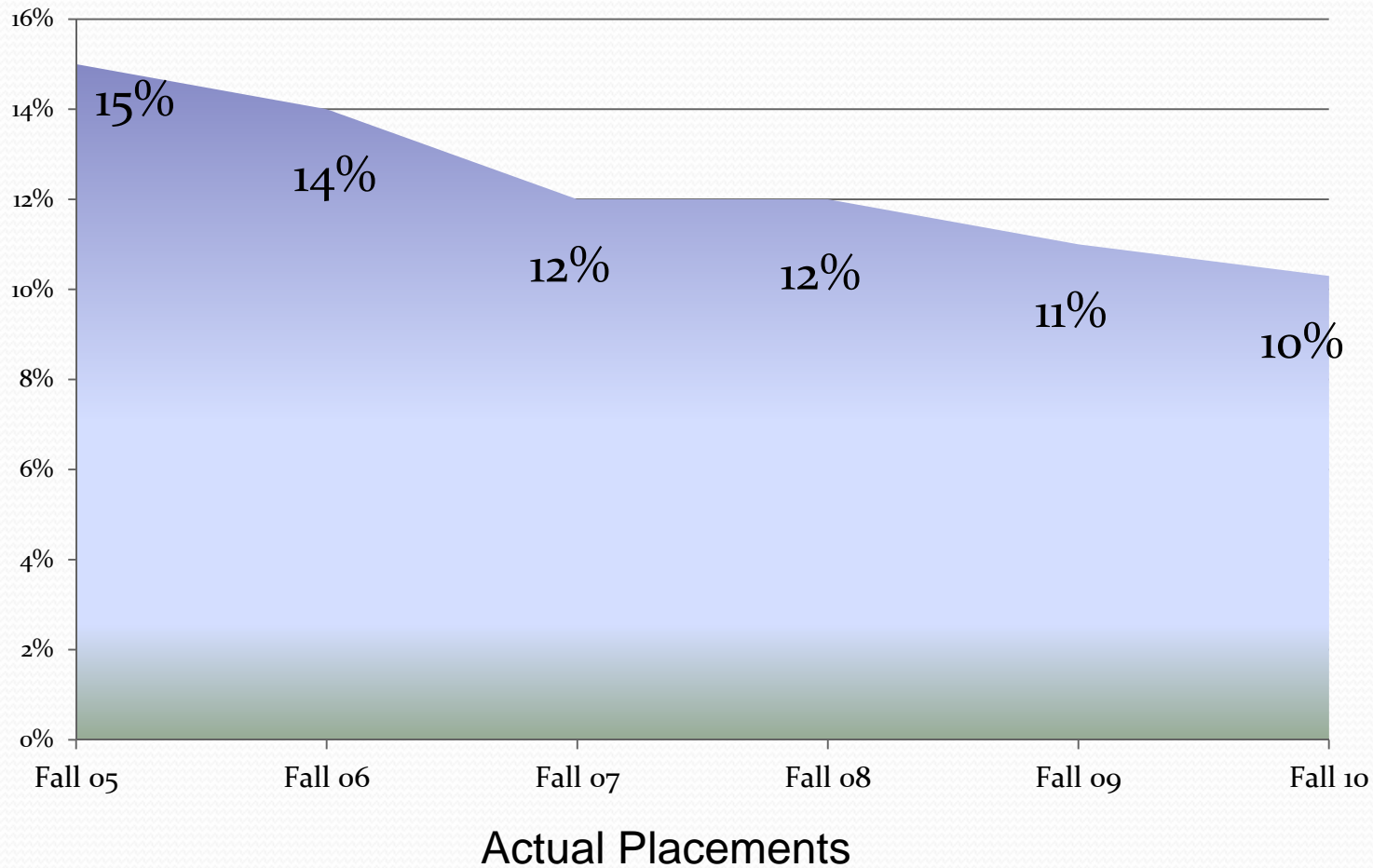
- A. Any student seeking full admission to a four-year degree program... must earn a minimum score of:
- 7 on the Writing Subscore or 18 on the Combined English/Writing section of the Optional Writing Test of the ACT; or
  - 7 on the Essay or 440 on the Writing Section of the SAT; or
  - 3.5 on the Montana University System Writing Assessment; or**
  - 3 on the AP English Language or English Literature Examination.
- 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.
- E. Before gaining full admission status to a four-year program, the student may prove that he/she has the appropriate proficiency in the following ways:
- 1) retake one or more of the listed writing assessments to earn the required score; or
  - 2) within 3 semesters, earn a grade of C- or better in the composition course that is the prerequisite to the composition course that satisfied the general education program requirements described in Board Policy 301.10.

# Involve Minorities in Meaningful Ways



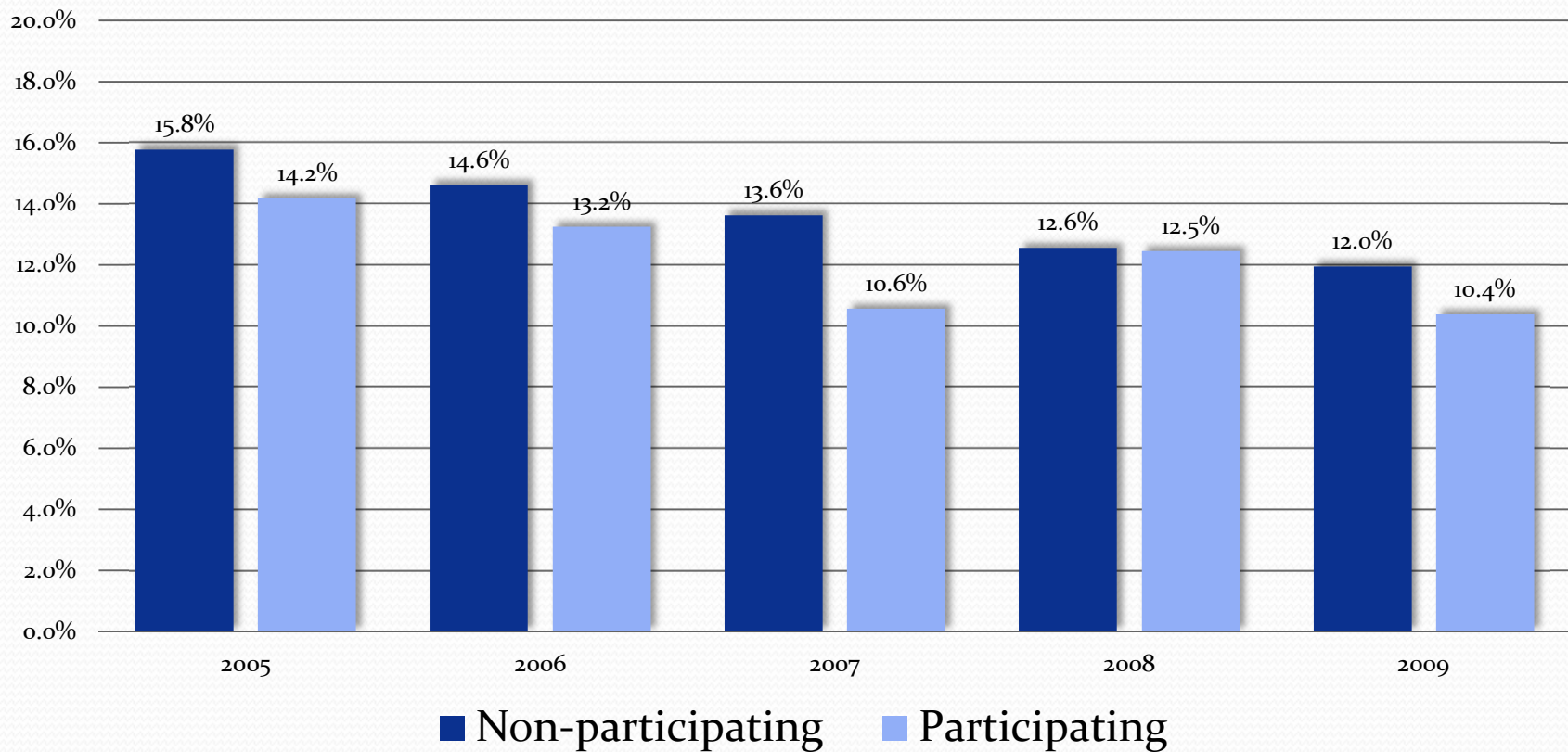
- 12 High Schools on Reservations participated in 2011; 5 of which earned average scores of 3.9 and above, representing about 100 AI students.
- By 2011, 31% of the self-identified American Indian students earned scores of 4 or above, compared to 6.2% in 2001.
- 17% of MUSWA's Trainer/leaders are from reservation high schools.

# The Outcome? Reduced Remediation in College Composition



# The Proof? Remediation Rates from Participating Schools are Lower

Writing Remediation Rates: MUSWA vs. Non-MUSWA Schools

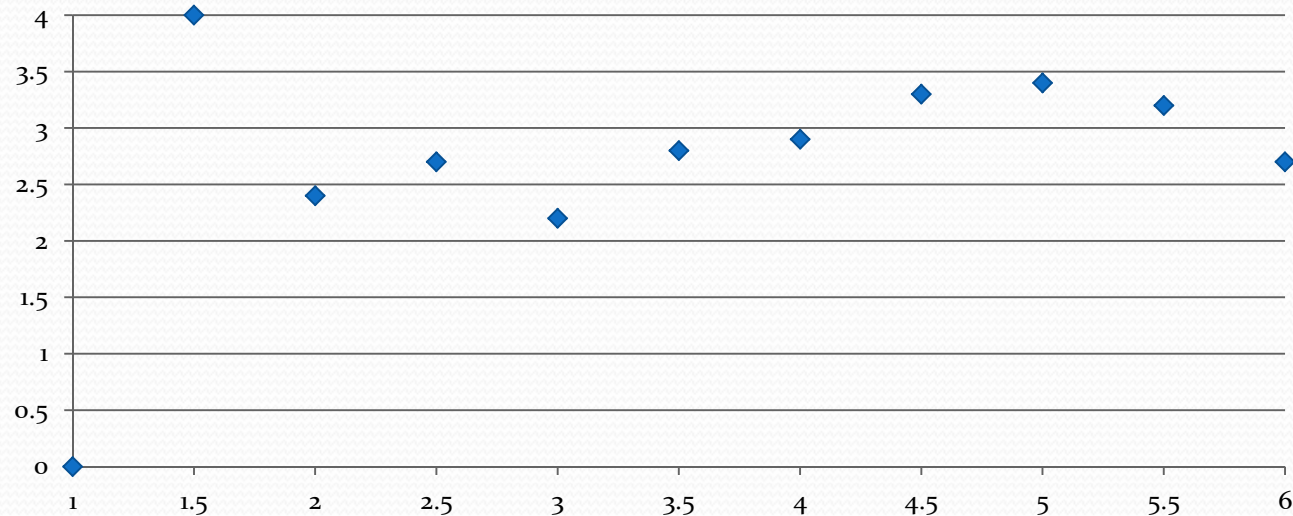


# The Follow Up?

93% of Scores (3-5) Correlate Well with Grades in Freshman Comp

## System GPA vs. MUSWA Score: Fall 2009

Number = 745; Average = 2.92



#	score
11	6
12	5.5
97	5
121	4.5
229	4
170	3.5
76	3
20	2.5
6	2
1	1.5
0	1



## Adapt/Evolve to Meet Constituent Needs

### 2001

- 3,365 students tested
- 73 high schools
- 96 scorers
- 3 regional sites
- 3.0 average score
- 0.6% earned “6”
- 37.8% scored college-ready
- 100% of tests handwritten

### 2011

- 7,685 students tested
- 138 high schools
- 320 scorers
- 8 regional sites
- 3.9 average score
- 1.7% earned “6”
- 75% scored college-ready
- 77% of tests word-processed and submitted online (2% handwritten)

# Sustain the Practice by Building Ownership Over Time

2001 First Grader

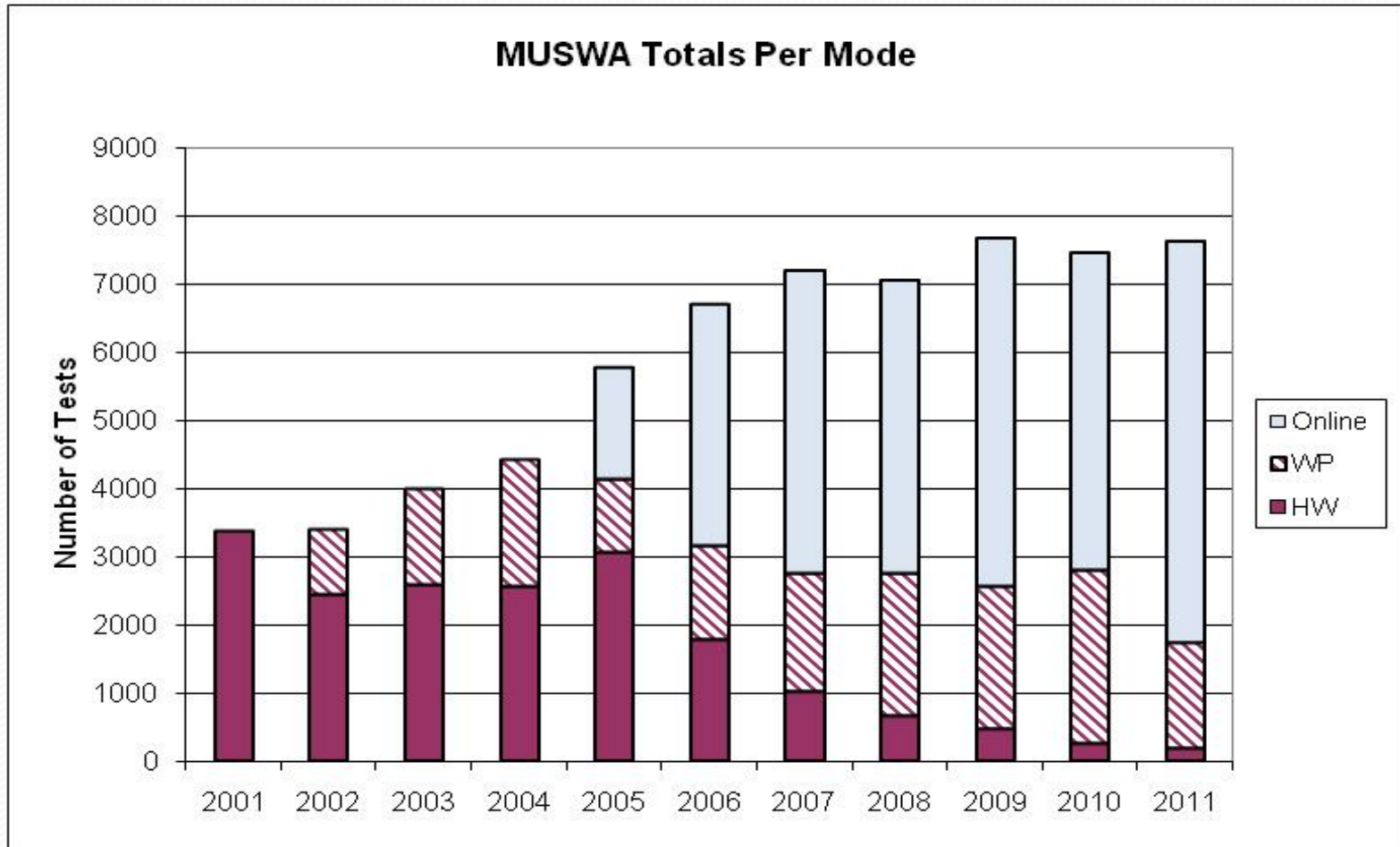


2011 Junior



Holden Pepprock, Shelby High School, Earned a “6” on 2011 MUSWA

# Utilize Technology





# Keep it Fresh

- 2001: 3 prompts from ACT
- 2002: 16 prompts written and tested by Montanans
- 2004: ACT develops its own optional writing test
- 2006: Prompts added a third option
- 2007: Pool of yearly prompts expanded to 6
- 2011: Prompts with language from Common Core (College and career Readiness Standards) added
- 2012: Consider prompts that encourage online research

# Keep it Meaningful

## From ACT to MUSWA

- 2001-2003
  - Training by ACT
  - Qualifying Set
- 2004
  - Training of Trainers
  - Calibration Set
  - Strengths and Weaknesses
  - College Credits
- 2005-2006
  - Online testing
  - Mixed prompt packets

## Expansion & Refinement

- 2007
  - Eight scoring sites
  - Over 300 scorers
- 2008
  - Consensus Set
  - Learning > Scoring
- 2009
  - The AHA! Essay
- 2011
  - Common Core



# Focus on Quality

- 99% of participants believe workshops help them prepare students for college writing
- “As always, improving my instruction of writing is probably the most valuable aspect of MUSWA.”
- “The MUSWA workshop is a high point in my yearly professional development; for without MUSWA, I am certain that my abilities as a teacher and evaluator of persuasive writing would not be nearly as sophisticated as they are now.”
- “MUSWA is by far the single most effective program I have ever used.”
- “It is the highest and most productive level of professional development I have ever been involved with in 19 years.”

# Encourage Participation

- 300 to 370 workshop participants give two days to MUSWA each year. (Renewal Units, College Credit)
- 40-50 Trainers give two days to preparation and two days to workshops each year.
- Evaluator codes feedback into six benefits:
  - Improved teaching skills
  - Increased confidence as teacher and leader
  - Useful tools—prompts, rubric, training process
  - Important role of MUSWA for students, teachers, state
  - Collaboration among teachers
  - Personal regeneration from stimulating conversations...



# Provide Data in Useful Formats

- ONLINE website for score retrieval: [www.muswa.com](http://www.muswa.com)
  - Distribution tables for state, school, classroom
  - Student scores (with S & W) by teacher and class
  - Spreadsheet, by student, with all data
  - Individual memos, by student, to parents explaining score
- MAILINGS with:
  - Awards
  - Transcript labels
  - Newsletters

# Celebrate Excellence

- Awards of Merit for Schools in Top Quartile
- Letters of Recognition for students with scores of 6 and 5.5
- Sioux-Assiniboine Poplar High School Won Awards of Merit in 2009 and 2010.
- In 2011, nine American Indian students received Letters of Recognition for earning scores of 5.5 or 6.





# MUSWA Turned Policy into Practice

- Defined College Readiness in Writing
- Provided high school students with information about placement into college-level or developmental courses
- Provided feedback to HS staff on curriculum and instruction for the transition to college
- Established a forum for K-12/Higher Ed collaboration
- Provided ongoing professional development in writing
- Gave students & high schools an avenue for celebrating student success in writing



# MUSWA's Formula for Success

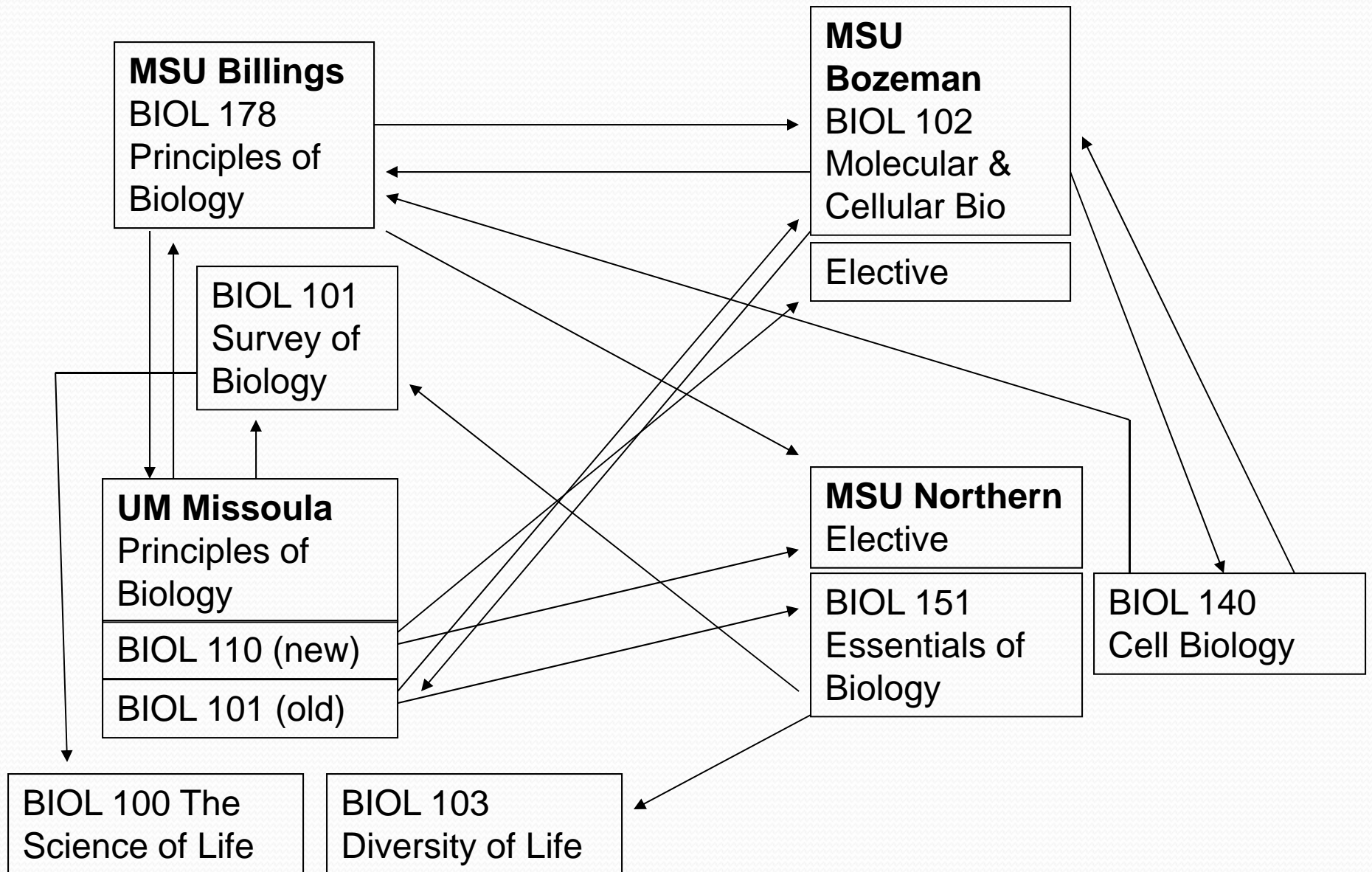
- Provide leadership; but get down in the trenches
- Build ownership and leadership from the field
- Focus on purpose: *Prepare students for college writing*
- Take action: Just try it; then adjust; then adopt policy
- Provide value:
  - Meaningful, collaborative professional development
  - Positive data, tangible results, awards for excellence
  - Significance and quality
- Keep costs low, with most expenses for participants, in order to sustain program for 12 years

# Politics: Battle for the Proven, A Nod for the Promised

- November, 2007 Board of Regents Meeting
  - 4 hours of objections from K-12 leaders while moving forward with THE PROVEN, based on 6 years of data
    - Align Composition Placement with Proficiency Admissions
    - Update Mathematics Proficiency Policy
    - Standardized Developmental Education Practices
  - 4 minutes to launch THE PROMISE
    - “Transfer problems can be solved with Common Course Numbering”
    - “Assigning Common Course Number for ALL Undergraduate Courses can be accomplished relatively quickly.”

# Common Course Numbering

## Example of Transfer Confusion





# The Problem with Proven Practices

- “Local, state, and sometimes, federal policies frequently force schools to change course based on political considerations rather than strong research about effective practices”
  - Linda Darling-Hammond, The Flat World and Education , 2010, p. 14

# 2007 Transferability Initiative: Parallels to MUSWA?

- Impetus/leadership came from Legislature:
  - Legislative funding kick-starts effort “to make transfer of credits in the MUS more transparent and predictable for students”
- Moved quickly on focused purpose *to improve transfer*:
  - Board of Regents passed Transfer Policy
  - Director hired
  - Schedule set for course numbering
- Sought ownership from field:
  - FLOCs (Faculty Learning Outcomes Councils)

# Transfer Parallels

- Provide Value, Meaning, & Significance:
  - Valued by 2-yr campuses; questioned by 4-yr campuses
  - FLOCs became professional learning communities
  - Equivalent courses identified
  - Common Course Numbers apply across all institutions
  - Tribal Colleges participated



# Parallel Perils

- Manage Costs?
  - “State” can no longer fund either program
  - Legislature expects “transfer initiative” to be finished
  - MUSWA is adapting to short-term Title II Funding:  
Improving Teacher Quality
  - Collaborative aspects (robust conversations at scoring workshops and FLOC discussions about outcomes) may not be valued as defensible costs



## MUSWA Faces the National Testing Scene

- In 2013, all of Montana’s juniors will be required to take the ACT Plus Writing, paid for through new GEAR UP funding.
- In 2014, all of Montana’s juniors will be required to take SBAC tests.
- *“The current assessment scene is designed to undermine faculty assessment expertise while underwriting the expertise—and thereby the vended products—of testing industry experts”*

-Gallagher, Chris, “Being There: (Re) Making the Assessment Scene,” College Composition and Communication, NCTE, February 2011)

# Promises and Politics

- How do you sustain promising, or even proven practices when leadership changes?
- How do you sustain proven practices when funding is lost?
- How do we assure that our Promising Practices will “Do No Harm”?
- Can any of our proven practices survive alongside national policies, products, and political promises?

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