Report and Recommendations from the Statewide Placement Workgroup

to the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

February 11, 2016

Overview

This report presents the initial findings of the Montana University System Placement Workgroup from August 2015 to January 2016. Much has been accomplished in a short time period; however, creating a common placement system is complex and continued work is required. At this point, the top two options are creating a state test using an existing model or expanding on current campus' adoption of Accuplacer. This report serves as a progress report and concludes with recommended next steps.

History and Purpose

Spurred by ACT's decision to discontinue the COMPASS placement test as of December 2016, the formation of the Montana University System Placement Workgroup was approved in July 2015 to engage in a system-wide effort to develop a common placement system, including assessment tools and scores, for MUS campuses. Currently, campuses use different assessment measures to place students into college-level courses and developmental education courses, mainly math, writing, and reading. A common placement system would increase transferability for college students and create a more consistent matriculation for students moving from high school into postsecondary education throughout the state of Montana.

Participants

All public, private, tribal, 2-year, and 4-year campuses were invited to participate in the effort. Campuses nominated individuals, and work group members were approved in August. The group officially consists of 33 participants from 18 institutions, including public, private, tribal, 2-year, and 4-year colleges and universities (see Attachment 1).

Organizational Structure

The workgroup serves as a subgroup to the MUS Developmental Education Council. Within the workgroup, participants are divided into four smaller groups based on expertise: Math, Writing, Testing, and Advising/Admissions/Registrar. Each subgroup is led by a "team captain" to coordinate communication, research and recommendations. The whole workgroup meets once a month via telephone conference to report back, provide campus updates, and establish action items for the next month.

Accomplishments to Date

Since forming in August, the workgroup has met via phone conference every month, formed subgroups, selected team captains to lead the subgroups, sent members to attend the state Math Summit on Sept. 8, gathered information on current practices in the state, researched best practices from other states, identified essential questions to address, identified placement tools for evaluation, established a timeline, worked with local campus placement committees, contacted other institutions, reviewed possible placement tests, participated in several national webinars, submitted a draft report, and is now reporting its findings and making several recommendations for further action.

Specifically, the group reviewed other state tests including Idaho, California, and Wisconsin; Accuplacer; SmarterMeasure; MapleTA; ETS; HiSet; EdReady; The Write Class; LASSI; Noel-Levitz's CISS; and ALEKS. The assessment tests included measures for cognitive ability, existing knowledge and affective factors, such as motivation and self-efficacy. Another test, based on the Wisconsin state model, called Tailwind is launching this month, Feb. 2016, and still needs to be explored.

Initial Findings

- A good placement tool and practice is lacking nationally in higher education. Several states have developed their own placement tests as a result, such as Virginia, California, and Wisconsin.
- Other institutions outside of the state of Montana have also developed their own placement systems that are unique to their students, courses, and systems or campuses.
- With COMPASS leaving, many campuses across the nation are adopting the Accuplacer placement test.
- EdReady has been used as a placement tool at Jacksonville State University; however, much manipulation and subjective artistry was needed to use the software for placement purposes, and EdReady does not recommend its product as a placement test.
- In Montana, two-year and four-year campuses face different challenges in regards to testing. For example, the four-year campuses rely heavily on ACT and SAT scores, which many attendees at two-year colleges do not have. As another example, some of the smaller campuses prefer to hand-score writing assessments, which is not practical for larger campuses.
- Campuses with more traditionally-aged students, such as the four-year campuses, have been able to use ACT scores more readily since all juniors in the state are now taking the test at no cost to them. Anecdotally, math instructors report mixed accuracy. Some students are underplaced based on their ACT because they gain additional skills during

their senior years. Others struggle at their placement levels because they do not take math their senior years and have forgotten or "lost" some skills between their junior year and their college entrance. Again, the majority of non-traditional students do not have ACT scores.

- Consensus exists that multiple measures should be used as a best practice for placing students. Common multiple measures include considering high school GPA, past coursework, and affective aspects such as motivation and self-efficacy through inventories or discussions with advisors. A common system for the state is complicated by the different advising and placement processes on each campus. Some have centralized advising; some do not. Some gather high school data; some do not. In addition, many non-traditional students do not have high school information because they earned a high school equivalency credential through Adult Ed, or their high school information, such as GPA and coursework, is too old to be a valid placement tool.
- Within the state of Montana, most of the two-year campuses are looking at implementing Accuplacer as their placement exam for several reasons: it has high reliability measures, it offers placement tests in a variety of subjects, it can be customized, it can be taken remotely so that distance and high school students have access to the test, it can be administered at high schools, it has the ability to incorporate multiple measures including affective aspects, it is ADA compliant, branching profiles can be created to create different paths for students, its cost is comparable to COMPASS so there is minimum impact to budgets, the company offers a free service that will help campuses assess the accuracy of their placement scores annually (see Appendix 2 for more information).
- MSU currently has a mathematics exam for the MapleTA platform that uses a combination of local and MAA (Mathematical Association of America) items. UM seems to be moving towards using the MapleTA platform as well.
- Most MUS campuses agree that common placement scores would benefit students, especially given that courses have common outcomes because of the Common Course Numbering initiative. However, it is recognized that some variance in course structure exists, such as the size of the class and the experience/credentials of the instructors.
- The workgroup could not find a non-algebraic math placement test that could be used for placing students in non-STEM related math courses, such as M105 Contemporary Math, for example.

Recommendations

- Because of the short timeframe until COMPASS disappears, individual campuses should move forward with a **temporary** or "stop-gap" placement test and process while the system at the state-level continues to move towards a common placement system.
- Focus attention and continue to explore top 2 options: develop a state system (the Wisconsin system could be a model; more information is needed on Tailwind), or pilot and then expand Accuplacer.
- Efforts must include 4-year and 2-year institutions.
- Campuses should continue to work on implementing multiple measures as part of their placement systems.
- Those campuses using Accuplacer should work to align their placement scores.
- Placement decisions need to consider technology issues, such as how the assessment tools will integrate with Banner, what technology is needed to run the software, and how the test will be administered.
- Placement decisions need to consider the K-12 partners and how students can use the system to prepare for college-level work as well as how the test may be administered to high schools students for dual credit purposes.
- Placement decisions need to consider personnel and address the question of who will oversee the testing and what resources will be required to do so.
- Placement decisions need to consider how distance students will be able to access the placement test remotely.

Next Steps

- Reduce the size of the State Placement Workgroup to an effective placement liaison from each campus and a representative from the Math Pathways Taskforce and from the Developmental Writing and Reading Council.
- Create a smaller workgroup to meet in March to align placement scores for the campuses switching to Accuplacer. Mindi Askelson, Perkins and Adult Pathways Program Manager, has volunteered to help with this effort because of her past experience in setting Accuplacer cut scores.
- Arrange a meeting/conversation with contacts in Wisconsin to explore the option of creating a state placement test with a model similar to Wisconsin. Both Dr. Cliff Coppersmith, Dean of City College, and Dr. Robert Hoar, Provost & Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at MSU Billings, would be good resources as they have been involved in creating state placement systems.
- Explore the option of purchasing Accuplacer at the systems level.

- Consider ongoing support at the system level for testing and placement, perhaps partnering with OPI.
- Consider how ACT College Readiness Benchmarks can be integrated as indicators of college readiness for students who have recently completed high school. These scores could be used in place of placement testing.
- Given Montana's participation in the UT Austin Dana Center Math Pathways to Completion Initiatives, the taskforce will monitor and consider how the implementation of math pathways and co-requisite approaches for developmental courses will impact placement strategies.
- Continue the monthly placement workgroup phone conferences with a reduced group membership to gather status updates and discuss implementation issues.

Temporary Solution Timeline: March – September 2016

- March - Representatives from campuses using Accuplacer meet to determine common placement scores
- March – Contact representatives from Wisconsin/Tailwind
- April - Align Accuplacer cut scores for developmental and first-year college level math courses and writing courses
- April - Campuses make any necessary purchases
- August - Campuses implement a placement system for Spring 2017
- September - Taskforce reports on progress

Attachment 1

List of Placement Workgroup Members

Name	Institution	Title
Kathleen O'Leary	Bitterroot College	Advising and Enrollment Services Coordinator
Rebekah Reger	City College	Math Instructor
Joy Barber	City College	General Education Instructor
Cliff Coppersmith	City College	Dean
Holly Dershem-Bruce	Dawson Community College	Career & Tech Ed Director
Bruce Peterson	Dawson Community College	Development Math and Tutoring
Jane Wynne	Dawson Community College	HiSet and Placement Testing Coordinator
Christina DiGangi	Dawson Community College	English Instructor and Tutoring
Elijah Hopkins	Fort Peck Community College	Vice President of Student Services
Grace Wood	Fort Peck Community College	Math Instructor
Whitney Bodle	Fort Peck Community College	College Preparatory Instructor
Sara Maki	Gallatin College	Assistant Dean
Leanne Frost	Great Falls College MSU	Director, General Education and Transfer
Mandy Wright	Great Falls College MSU	English faculty
Carol Berg	Great Falls College MSU	Testing Center Coordinator
Troy Stoddard	Great Falls College MSU	Director of Advising
Elizabeth Stearns-Sims	Helena College	Dean of Student Affairs
Denise Elakovich	Highlands College	Developmental Math Director and Instructor
Michelle Morley	Highlands College	Director of the Associate of Science/College Success Instructor
Mary Linn Horton	Highlands College	Tutor Education Specialist
Erin Niedge	Miles Community College	Dean of Enrollment
David Patterson	Missoula College	Mathematics
Heidi Staebler-Wiseman	MSU	Student Success Coordinator - Math
Christina Hayes	MSU	Math Instructor
Doug Downs	MSU	Associate Professor of English
Alisha Schroeder	MSU Northern	Registrar
Hilary Risser	MT Tech	Associate Professor of Math
Karen Sorensen	MT Tech	Writing Director
Alice McDonough	MT Tech	Writing Instructor
Bethany Blankenship	UM Western	Professor of English
Ashley Koepke	University of Great Falls	Associate Registrar
Rachel Dunleavy	University of Great Falls	Instructor of English, Director of the Writing and Critical Thinking Center
Sharon O'Hare	University of Montana	Admissions/New Student Services

Appendix 2

Accuplacer Information from College Board

ACCUPLACER Test Reliability

Test	Test Reliability
Elementary Algebra	0.92
Arithmetic	0.93
College Level Math	0.90
Reading Comprehension	0.89
Sentence Skills	0.88
ESL Language Use	0.92
ESL Reading Skills	0.91
ESL Sentence Meaning	0.92
ESL Listening	0.84
WritePlacer	0.96*

* rater correlation (correlation between machine scores and human scores)

Admitted Class Evaluation Service - ACES

+ A free service from College Board

+ Validate the results of your placement policies to refine or make adjustments to cut scores

+ Compare ACCUPLACER scores to actual course grades

+ Provides a probability of success based on your placement policy and actual student data

+ Confidential

ACCUPLACER Tests

Placement

- Reading Comprehension (20)
- Sentence Skills (20)
- Arithmetic (17)
- Elementary Algebra (12)
- College Level Math (20)
- WritePlacer
- Computer Skills Placement (30/70)
- "Local" Tests

ESL Suite

- Reading Skills (20)
- Sentence Meaning (20)
- Language Usage (20)
- Listening (20)
- WritePlacer ESL

Diagnostics

- Reading Comprehension (40)
- Sentence Skills (40)
- Arithmetic (40)
- Elementary Algebra (40)

Multiple Measures Functionality

+ Within a course placement context, **multiple measures** refers to using more than a single piece of information to make course recommendations for a student

+ **Multiple Measures** functionality allows institutions to ask **non cognitive** questions about self-motivation, academic behaviors, environmental supports, etc.; answers to background questions **can** be weighted to "bump" student placement recommendations – **composite score**

+ The ACCUPLACER platform allows for the implementation of multiple measures by allowing for the import of "outside" information, referred to as **user-defined fields**
  - HS GPA
  - Other test scores
  - Course grades