Welcome to this latest edition of From the Writing Desk, the newsletter of the Hostos WAC Initiative. This year’s edition highlights professional development including an innovative, newly-designed online professional development seminar for those unable to attend on-campus events such as evening and adjunct faculty and an article on some of the unanticipated benefits for faculty of our Writing Intensive (WI) certification workshops.

Inside you’ll also find strategies for helping students achieve success on the new CAT-W writing exam and features describing creative CUNY Writing Fellow/faculty collaborations in developing WI sections for courses in statistics and music.

We know you join us in thanking this amazing group of Fellows and wishing them success as they move on to pursue interests and careers beyond CUNY. Next year we welcome a brand new group of Fellows. Changes in the Graduate Center Writing Fellowship program have resulted in Fellows being assigned to campuses for one year rather than two. We will be designing and implementing intensive professional development for our new Fellows, so that this group is prepared to meet your needs and can be integrated into the WRAC Initiative as quickly as possible.

We hope you’ll find much to interest you as you read these pages. As always, please contact us if we can be of any assistance.

Greetings from the WRAC Coordinators
By Dr. Linda Hirsch and Dr. Andrea Fabrizio

The 2010-2011 WRAC Coordinators and Writing Fellows. Pictured (Tudor Protopopescu, Sarah Archino, Elisa Legon, Linda Hirsch, Andrea Fabrizio, Angelina Tallaj, Christopher Smith, Mark Alfano, left to right):
Coming to You Soon:  
Online WAC Professional Development  
By Elisa Legon & Sarah Archino

The Writing Fellows have focused on professional development this year. They have created a series of workshops to prepare professors to teach Writing Intensive (WI) sections and to provide support for the creation and revision of WI syllabi. Christopher Swift writes about these workshops in “Building Community Across the Concourse: Interdisciplinary WAC Workshops.” There remained, however, a need to offer professional development and support to faculty members who teach part-time, in the evenings, or online, and are unable to attend our on-campus events. While the face-to-face workshops will continue to provide support for most faculty members, the creation of a new online professional-development workshop is designed to satisfy this need for faculty who cannot come to campus for this important project.

The online Blackboard workshop will mirror the format of our on-campus sessions, building on the positive reviews received from participants. Designed as a series of eight units, the workshop will address the major aspects of Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) and the structure of WI courses. Professors will be introduced to WAC principles, practices, and terminology while collaborating virtually with a Writing Fellow facilitator. Over the course of the workshop, participating faculty will design formal assignments that include a scaffolded structure of informal, low-stakes activities. In particular, we will encourage faculty members to consider alternatives to the standard research paper by creating formal writing assignments that more closely reflect the professional writing done in different disciplines. In this way, the writing becomes integrated into the course material of the WI section and students have an opportunity to produce meaningful, discipline-specific projects. In addition to writing assignment support, participating faculty will also receive assistance with responding to student writing and the construction of WI syllabi.

Much like an online WI course, the workshop uses a variety of informal- and formal-writing exercises that build towards a WI syllabus. The series of activities are designed to benefit faculty members interested in incorporating WAC philosophies and activities in their classes; it will be particularly helpful to those developing a new WI syllabus or refining an existing one. While participating in the online workshop, faculty members will be paired with a Writing Fellow facilitator who will help address the challenges that are often faced in designing a WI syllabus. Depending on individual needs and expectations, the Fellow and pro-

“The series of activities ... will be particularly helpful to those developing a new WI syllabus or refining an existing one.”

(Continued on page 7)
You might have thought that statistics and writing are like oil and water: they just don’t mix well. We disagree. In fact, we think that writing is an essential component of adequate statistical training. Statistics is the branch of mathematics that deals with the collection, the organization, and – crucially – the interpretation of data. Interpretation is an essentially linguistic practice. To interpret something is to explain what it means. Because we were worried that introductory statistics classes too often focus primarily on the collection and organization of data and insufficiently on its interpretation in writing, we developed a writing-oriented statistics course here at Hostos.

To see why writing is essential to statistics, consider this little nugget of economic data: According to the US Census Bureau, in 2004, median household income in the United States was $44,389, whereas mean household income was $60,528.

To handle this information appropriately, one would need to know quite a few things, such as how the median and the mean of a dataset are calculated and what the differences between these two measurements are. One would also need to understand the distinction between household income and individual income. One would want to know, further, what is entailed when the mean for a dataset is significantly (in this case, 36%) higher than the median. (It means there are a number of outliers on the high end, i.e., that a small number of Americans are pulling in an extraordinary amount compared to everyone else). Not to put too fine a point on it, when dealing with economically, politically, and personally important statistical information, one wants to know not just how the numbers were crunched but what they mean.

At Hostos Community College, Prof. Flek and I collaboratively developed a section of Statistics (MAT 120) that uses writing to help students learn both the quantitative and the interpretive aspects of statistical analysis. We crafted a semester-long project that uses the methods of statistics to answer an important question about human life and society. Throughout the semester, in addition to working out quantitative solutions to quantitative problems, students engaged in the analysis of a problem concerning Human Development. The Human Development Project (http://hdr.undp.org/) is a United Nations initiative to investigate global and regional progress in measures of economic, environmental, political, educational, medical, and social wellbeing. In this statistics course, students take on the role of statisticians by proposing a research question related to human development, identifying variables from the Human Development Project’s database that are relevant to the problem, then analyzing those variables using several statistical tools to generate an interpretation of the data. All of their work is compiled and presented at the end of the course as a cohesive data analysis project.

Much of the time, courses in statistics deal with questions alien to the lives of students, not allowing for a personal connection to the work studied. Because students in this course were able to choose a problem that interested them, they felt personally invested in the work required for the project. For example, this semester many students decided to study such relevant issues as crime, poverty, and educational and employment opportunities around the world. Many were surprised by the initial results and became even more motivated to explore their chosen topics. Did you know that in 2008 Belgium had the highest reported robbery rate? Or that Australian children can expect the highest number of years of schooling in the world? These facts surprised us too, calling out for written interpretation!

“When dealing with economically, politically, and personally important statistical information, one wants to know not just how the numbers were crunched but what they mean.”

(Continued on page 7)
WRAC and the CATW

By Tudor Protopopescu

Last semester, CUNY introduced the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (the CATW) to replace the ACT exam. Given the short time between the announcement of details about the exam and the time of the initial test, the WAC Initiative wanted to help the Hostos community prepare our students for the new exam. Preparation for the exam can take place campus-wide, so we have included some suggestions for how the exam can be integrated into the classroom and an outline of some model projects the WRAC Initiative completed to help our students prepare for the exam. Specifically, we created two handbooks. The first was designed to inform students how to go about preparing for and taking the exam. The second was a collaboration with the Writing Center tutors to design materials for use in their intensive winter semester CATW preparation class.

The CATW draws on two skills: reading and writing. Students read a 250-300 word passage, at approximately a 10th to 12th-grade reading level, and then “write an essay responding to the ideas it presents.” The prompt asks students to summarize the passage in their own words stating the author’s most important ideas. The essay is then developed by identifying and explaining one idea that the student thinks is particularly significant; students are asked to support their claims using evidence or examples from the passage they read and from their knowledge and experience. The exam is 90 minutes long; students are allowed to use a non-electronic dictionary.

Since the use and development of reading and writing is at the heart of WRC Initiative’s mission, we were particularly excited by the opportunity to work on preparing students for the CATW. The CATW, in contrast to the ACT, asks students to demonstrate the types of writing and reading skills which they will be asked to exercise during the course of their college career, and as such, exam preparations can be more closely integrated into developmental courses than was possible with the ACT. Indeed the kinds of assignments that can help students prepare for the exam are exactly the kinds of assignments that will help them succeed in their developmental classes. In particular, the exam is an opportunity for professors to have their students work on responding to readings, since this is the central task of the CATW.

The exam affords ample scope for the use of informal writing assignments. For example, 1) students could be asked to write a list of questions they have after reading a particular passage; 2) they could brainstorm a response with their fellow students or; 3) they might be asked to find two or three points in a reading they consider important. This could be done under timed conditions as a short quiz at the beginning or end of class. Another alternative is to ask students to write a short paragraph asking for their reaction to what they consider most important in the reading. Indeed, for every skill the CATW asks from students an assignment could be given in class which both practices that skill, and thereby prepares students for the exam, whilst simultaneously helping professors teach the content of their courses.

In addition to these general suggestions for integrating the CATW into the class, we also created a short handbook for English 091 students and faculty, outlining what students need to do and understand about the exam in order to negotiate its various requirements successfully. The handbook was intended as a complement to the official CUNY handbook for students and faculty to give some additional direction and detail as to what to expect of the exam, and how to prepare for it.

We also collaborated with the Writing Center tu-
Writing About Music: The Challenges of Teaching Students to Listen Critically

By Angelina Tallaj

In the fall of 2010, I assisted Prof. Craig Bernardini in a course titled Writing About Music: ENG 242. Although students start to learn to read critically in elementary school, serious talk about music in a classroom is rare even though music is a big part of many students’ lives. While musicologists use musical analysis to connect music to culture, Hostos students, as well as most college students, lack these skills. Instead, they resort to registering their mood when describing music. (“It makes me want to dance;” “It makes me sad;” “It is boring.”) How can such an abstract art be written about beyond merely describing one’s feelings and reactions? As Prof. Bernardini himself wrote in his blog, “It’s not that the emotional response to music isn’t valid. It’s that they [the students] can neither describe these emotional states with any sort of nuance or depth, nor can they connect those emotional states to what is happening in the music.”

The assignments for this course needed to teach students different modes of listening and the vocabulary to describe them. While the focus of the class was not on reading, we found examples of different kinds of writings done in the field that would expand the vocabulary and knowledge base of the students. These included descriptions of music pieces, performance reviews, CD liner notes, short stories and poems based on music, as well as readings that connected music with issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. The class’s first few assignments emphasized describing pieces outside of their cultural context. Only after the students developed some language/writing skills did the class consider the performance context, and later started incorporating poems, stories, and music videos into the listening. On descriptive assignments, students were asked to pay attention to musical features such as rhythm, melody, and timbre, and describe what they heard using as many nouns, verbs, adjectives, and analogies to other arts as possible. In order to come up with enough images and metaphors, they were also encouraged to make use of their senses (sight, taste, smell, touch).

In a compare-contrast assignment, students were asked to compare an original song and a cover of it by a different artist. The steps included were: 1. Listen to the original piece and write a paragraph describing your overall impression of it, 2. Describe the lyrics, instruments, and structure, and pretend you are a music critic figuring out what the intention of the composer or performer is in making his or her musical choices, 3. In a second paragraph, comment on what you think the overall impact or the most important meaning or messages of this song are, and 4. For a third paragraph, do some basic research about the artist and place the piece (Continued on page 7)

1. First Choice: Formal Compare-Contrast Essay
   a. Introduce both the original piece and the cover song (first paragraph).
   b. Compare musical features of both songs (two to three paragraphs). Notice changes from one to the other in lyrics, instrumentation, structure (verses-chorus), timbre of vocals, and anything else you find significant.
   c. Comment on changes in overall meaning. Some issues you may want to consider: How did the meaning change from the original song to its cover? Was the cover aimed at a different audience? Why do you think that the artists made those specific changes? How does each version reflects and comment on the time and place out of which it came?
2. Second Choice: Contrasting Reviews
   Take the role of a music critic and write two short (two or three paragraphs each) reviews: one that likes the cover version, and one that dislikes it. Make sure to develop your (specific) reasons for either liking or disliking the cover in each case.
3. Third Choice: Creative Assignment
   Pretend you are the creator/artist behind the cover version. Respond in writing (one or two paragraphs each) to the following questions:
   a. What made you decide to cover the original song?
   b. Can you explain your reasoning behind some of the changes you made to the original?
   c. Do you think the original artist would like your version? Why?
I have often heard professors at CUNY and other learning institutions say that because professional and teaching demands are so intense, there is little time to develop meaningful and productive relationships with colleagues. The teaching commitment at community colleges is especially demanding making it hard to pause and reflect on one’s own work or find time for productive conversations, affirmations, and contact among peers. Despite being surrounded by people all day, teachers can often feel isolated on campus. This article focuses on an unanticipated beneficial outcome of workshops organized by the WAC Initiative in order to prepare faculty to teach Writing Intensive courses: the production of a profound sense of community, bonding, and cooperation among peers.

This spring semester, eight faculty members from a wide variety of disciplines (theatre, biology, nursing, English, Latin American and Caribbean studies, and digital media) came together to collaborate on three Writing Intensive (WI) workshops. The general goals of the workshop were to familiarize the faculty with the pedagogical principles of WAC and help them develop new WI syllabi and classroom materials. We clarified course objectives, designed informal in-class and take-home writing exercises, prepared formal writing projects, and learned new ways of integrating writing into disciplinary-specific tasks (including minimal marking, staged writing, group projects, and web interaction). By the end of the three workshops, faculty had developed a number of creative, engaging writing exercises and tools for their WI courses. Although the workshops were structured around WI curriculum development, some of the most satisfying and informative moments occurred informally, in group discussions and through collaborative problem solving. In these moments, faculty and writing fellows recognized commonalities and registered pleasure and good will when sharing success stories.

About the final workshop, Prof. Vania de Paoli from Natural Sciences wrote that the workshop was “very helpful because you heard about the experiences and approaches of colleagues that worked, or at least seemed promising. I think this was one of most useful workshops I have participate in because we discussed our problems and experiences in class and received excellent feedback, new ideas and pedagogical strategies for dealing with student writing.” Prof. Aragona from Early Childhood Education discovered a number of new and compelling approaches while workshopping her ideas with Prof. Olga Steinberg (Natural Sciences) and myself (Performance Studies), disciplines that, at first glance, do not seem to have much in common. I believe the interdisciplinary disposition of the group helped everyone “think out of the box” when designing assignments and provided opportunities for faculty to discover novel, fresh ways of engaging students with writing.

In addition to offering the Hostos community with invaluable support for improving student writing, WI workshops offer ideal opportunities to pause, contemplate, and connect with intellectual peers. In this particular series of workshops, faculty found that—in addition to a small stipend, sandwiches, and cookies—they were rewarded for their efforts in the form of job satisfaction and pleasure. In her description of the “very helpful” workshops, Prof. Steinberg wrote,

(Continued on page 8)
Online Professional Development

(Continued from page 2)

Professor can agree on a goal for the workshop, and work towards the creation of informal assignments, restructuring a formal assignment, creating a syllabus from scratch, or fine tuning a syllabus for task-force approval. At the end of the workshop series, the faculty will have a well-developed, discipline-specific syllabus or a series of writing-based assignments.

By using Blackboard, a cohort of professors may take the workshop simultaneously, working with a Writing Fellow as facilitator. Among this cohort, the Fellow will work to capture the successful exchanges and conversations that occur in face-to-face workshops by using the Discussion Board. The facilitator will ask and encourage feedback among colleagues, particularly among faculty teaching in different disciplines. We have learned from leading live workshops that participants benefit from sharing their experiences; hearing about the issues and successes of others also help to identify common challenges and successful exercises. The workshop will provide a virtual space for reflection on effective pedagogical techniques. Since many participants may be faculty teaching online courses, their experience throughout the workshop may reveal the challenges of teaching in an online environment.

We want to encourage adjuncts, part-time faculty, and faculty who teach online courses to participate in the WAC Initiative. This workshop offers an opportunity to develop their WI syllabus online with the support of a Writing Fellow in an asynchronous environment. As Hostos moves more classes online, it is important that we support faculty leading these sections. Working collaboratively through Blackboard, the Fellow will be able lead faculty through the workshop and to clarify and streamline the process of syllabus design. Ultimately, the purpose of the online workshop is to offer effective strategies for incorporating writing into the classroom and to forge a community among faculty who do not have the opportunity to engage with their colleagues at on-campus workshops.

Writing about Music

(Continued from page 5)
in historical context. Students then repeated these steps for the cover version of the song. After students completed this exercise, they were given three choices for the formal paper:

Other assignments included the writing of a short story where students were encouraged to let the music guide them through a plot. Students also reviewed a performance, analyzed a music video in terms of a theme, or wrote a letter to the artist condemning the video for encouraging the sexual exploitation of women. Some chose to write from the vantage point of the artist defending his position. A final assignment, which was scaffolded throughout the semester, was the writing of program notes for a concert or the liner notes for the recording of a historically significant piece of music or album.

Ultimately, what this class showed me was the value of using a subject that students already were invested in to help them obtain critical thinking and writing skills. Whether students were previously aware of it or not, the importance of language and ideas in relationship to the experience of music is one that they engage with almost every day. By putting music at the center of their writing experience, and writing at the center of their music experience, I hope we began to show students the importance of writing as a living activity, not just something they need to

Writing to Learn Statistics

(Continued from page 3)

Oftentimes, courses in statistics focus primarily or even solely on putting the numbers together in the right way, yet inexpensive, sophisticated statistical software makes such number-crunching obsolete. We’ve given up the slide rule. Perhaps the time has come to downplay the importance of the tedious rote calculations of such statistical measurements as the standard deviation and the correlation coefficient, and emphasize their meanings and applications. Although computational and theoretical understanding of statistics is valuable, it can be difficult for students at the introductory level to appreciate the underlying mathematical theory. However, they are still capable of understanding the goals and results of statistical analyses and writing can be a means of facilitating this greater comprehension.
I had an opportunity to discuss my ideas.... I also appreciate the input of other faculty who participated in the workshops.” Theatre Professor Teresa Martinez wrote, “I loved creating informal writing assignments that can lead students to writing stronger formal essays. I also found other professors' feedback and ideas particularly helpful and on target. Some of their ideas were very creative and inspiring.” Throughout the workshop series, faculty and writing fellows responded positively to the interpersonal format and informative discussions. Everyone seemed energized and excited about putting his or her ideas into action. It was even suggested that the participants maintain communication in the coming semester to share ideas and offer support and WAC Initiative will be providing opportunities for this ongoing conversation.

Dr. Glenn Omatsu from California State University, Northridge has suggested that the rewards for carving moments out of our busy days to connect and create mentoring relationships with students and faculty (“mentoring on the run”) cannot be measured in terms of “time spent” away from other pressing duties. Prof. Omatsu believes that the effort put out sharing ideas and teaching practices creates a supportive, vibrant academic community, one that can reenergize a system under stress. These workshops bear witness to this philosophy. The demands on us all are overwhelming at times, and unexpected moments of camaraderie and revelation are far and few between. Despite these demands, WI faculty and writing fellows gave precious hours to offer support and make intellectual and personal connections. We were repaid with a wealth of ideas and a sense that our work mattered to the larger community.

Interdisciplinary Workshops

Visit our website!

For more information about WRAC at Hostos, contact the WRAC Coordinators
Dr. Andrea Fabrizio
AFabrizio@hostos.cuny.edu
(718) 518-6697
or
Dr. Linda Hirsch
LHirsch@hostos.cuny.edu
(718) 518-6760

WRAC & the CATW

(Continued from page 4)