

Hostos WAC Initiative

From the Writing Desk



Greetings from the WRAC coordinators

by Drs. Kris Burrell and Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to the Spring 2016 edition of *From the Writing Desk*, the newsletter of the Hostos WAC/RAC Initiative. We are pleased to share with you the articles in this year’s publication that reflect the projects, initiatives, and insights of the 2015-16 cohort of Writing Fellows. In this year’s edition, you will find articles highlighting the many ways WAC supports the presence of writing and reading at Hostos. This year our Fellows have worked to develop WIs, led faculty workshops, developed in-class workshops for students, collaborated with the Writing Center, supported our college’s new First Year Seminar, engaged in an assessment project, and worked with grant activities on campus. This edition of our newsletter speaks to the prevalence of writing and reading opportunities and activities on



From L to R: (top row) Sean Gerrity, Mercedes Vega-Villar, Jennifer Hamano, Rebecca Salois, Evangelia Lydia Manatou, Nicole Webb and Elliott Liu; (bottom row) Kris Burrell and Andrea Fabrizio.

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campus, and the many ways the WAC Fellows work to support and implement them. We hope that you will find these articles not only informative, but also inspiring, as you consider the ways you can draw on WAC/RAC pedagogy and practice to enhance your classes and provide our students with more meaningful and engaging opportunities for reading and writing.

As the articles demonstrate, writing is not only happening across the curriculum at Hostos, it is happening in the disciplines throughout the college, and in many places on campus. These articles offer insight into creative ways of building writing into a course or project. They also offer guidance for effective strategies that lead to meaningful opportunities to write.

We would like to thank our team of WAC Fellows, Sean Gerrity, Jennifer Hamano, Elliott Liu, Evangelia Lydia Manatou, Rebecca Salois, Mercedes Vega-Villar and Nicole Webb for their outstanding commitment and contributions to the Hostos WAC/RAC Initiative this year. They are all coming to the end of their Writing Fellowship, and we hope you will join us in wishing them much success in their future endeavors. They have been indispensable to the success of WAC at Hostos. In the fall, we will be welcoming a new group of Fellows. By mid-September they will be available to work with you on developing a Writing Intensive (WI) course, revising/revisiting an existing WI, building reading/writing assignments into your non-WI course, running mini-workshops for your students, or certifying you to teach an existing WI.

Please contact us if you would like to collaborate with WAC in any way. We encourage you to visit our website: <http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/> where you can find a variety of support materials for yourself and your students.

Wishing all a wonderful summer,

Kris Burrell and Andrea Fabrizio, WRAC Coordinators

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KEYWORDS of WAC

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Pedagogical movement that began in the 1980s. Generally, WAC programs share the philosophy that writing and reading instruction should happen across the academic community and throughout a student's undergraduate education. WAC programs also value writing and reading as methods of learning. Finally, WAC acknowledges the differences in writing conventions across the disciplines, and believes that students can best learn to write in their areas by practicing those discipline-specific writing conventions. In recognition of the interconnectedness of reading and writing, the WAC Initiative at Hostos is also referred to as WRAC: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum.

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Special thanks to the Duplication Services at Hostos Community College

Strategies For Student Errors Error Correction

by Jennifer Hamano

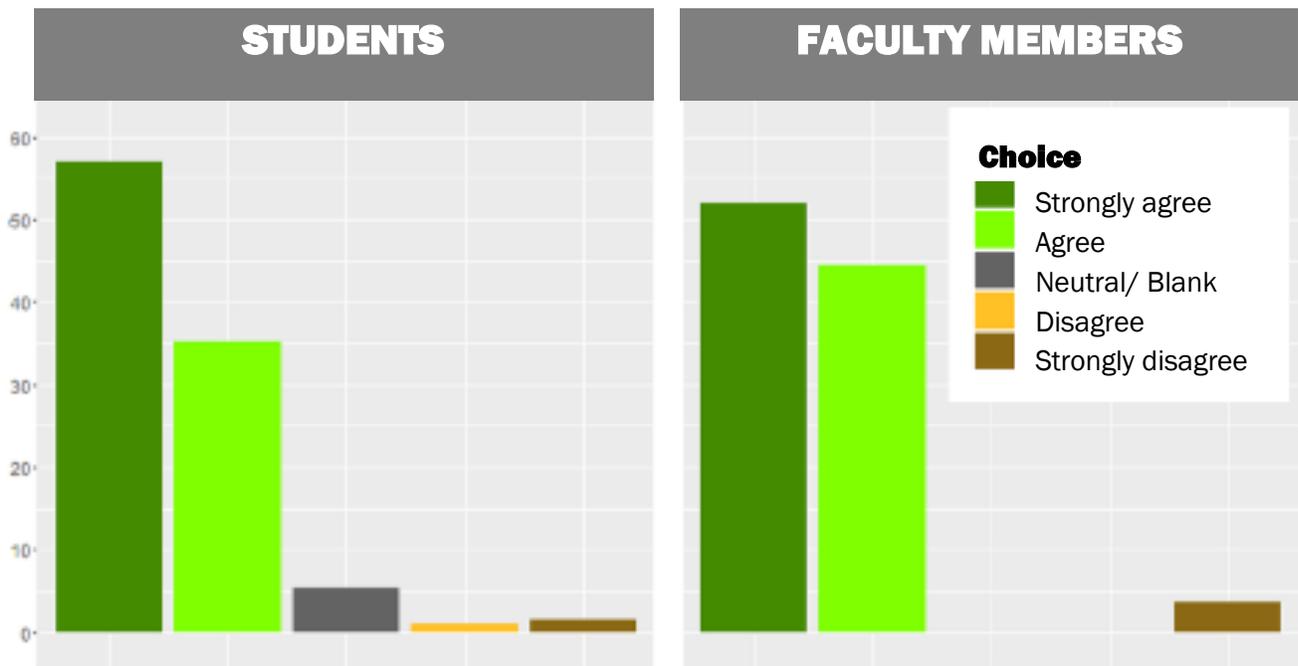
How much is the right amount of correction on student writing? How can we give students the tools they need to become better writers without placing an undue burden on faculty? How do we make students care about improving their formal writing skills? Faculty voiced a frustration with correcting student work, and we listened! In fall 2015 and spring 2016 I presented a faculty workshop called “What’s Wrong with this Paper: The Role of Grammar in Student Writing.”

Workshop participants responded enthusiastically to the strategies offered for marking student work.

Several participants reported appreciating the discussion of minimal marking strategies. Richard Haswell’s 1983 article, “Minimal Marking,” suggests marking an “x” in the margin next to lines of text that have an error (and multiple marks for multiple errors). When you hand the papers back to the students, allow them to find and fix their errors, and resubmit the paper. Haswell reports that students can typically correct 60%-70% of their own errors. This method actively engages students in the process of finding their own patterns of error, and faculty save time correcting papers.

“Asking students to submit multiple drafts will help them solidify their thoughts about a topic, and that will lead to higher quality written work.”

Another topic discussed was recognizing causes of student error and prioritizing correction to the most distracting errors. One participant reported, “[discussing] causes of errors made me think



On the importance of feedback. Answers to the question “Did professors’ written comments help improve student writing?” from a survey administered to students and faculty members in the Spring of 2015.

about the difference between errors due to rushing/carelessness and errors based on misunderstanding grammar rules or the challenge of high level content.” For example, unclear writing can indicate that students are struggling with a concept. Asking students to submit multiple drafts will help them solidify their thoughts about a topic, and that will lead to higher quality written work. John Bean’s 2011 book, *Engaging Ideas*, addresses these and other causes of student error, concluding that when teachers know where errors

KEY WORDS of WAC

Writing Intensive Course (WI): An academic course in which a substantial part of the final grade is based on writing projects which incorporate opportunities for feedback and revision, and in which writing to learn activities take place frequently.

are coming from, they can better prioritize the types of errors they want to address. Further, Constance Weaver’s 1996 book, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, provides a ranking of errors, from “very serious” to “minor or unimportant”, based on a survey distributed to hiring managers.

The workshop ended with a reminder that as educators concerned about writing, it’s important for us to express to students **why** they need to care about formal writing and grammar use. There’s a stigma attached to speaking and writing in “nonstandard” (low prestige) varieties of English. Telling students that sloppy writing shows sloppy thinking can cause them to internalize the thought that if they can’t write well, their ideas are not worth hearing. This criticism often leads to a loss of motivation to improve writing. Try instead framing the issue this

way: formal writing is a choice. Just as most of us would choose to dress more formally for a job interview in order to make a good impression, using formal written English is a strategy people use when trying to reach a certain communicative outcome. Using these WAC best practices can help students improve their relationship with writing and use formal writing as a tool to move past gatekeepers and achieve their goals.

“Telling students that sloppy writing shows sloppy thinking can cause them to internalize the thought that if they can’t write well, their ideas are not worth hearing.”

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WI Certification: One Size Does Not Fit All

by Rebecca L. Salois

I have had the honor and privilege to serve as a WAC fellow here at Hostos for two years. During this time, I have worked with many professors, in many departments, certifying WI syllabi. They have been both full-timers and adjuncts

and have had many different obligations both inside and outside of Hostos. In some instances they wanted to develop their own syllabi, in others, they were seeking to be certified to teach already existing WI courses.

But many, especially those being certified for the first time, had one thing in common: they wanted to know how long the process would take.

The biggest difference between professors was not in their course content, but in the circumstances that would allow them to become certified. Some wished to design a WI syllabus from a non-WI syllabus in one semester; some had been spending time developing a syllabus already and just needed a final push to finish; others were in no particular hurry, using a full year or more for certification; and others still, chose the online modules that we offer for part-time and evening professors. Throughout my experiences I learned that there is, of course, no one-size-fits-all way of becoming WI certified. And it's important for all those interested in certification to know this.

We all know the demand for WI courses is high at Hostos, and that in many cases your department would love to increase the number of WI offerings, but it is important that you feel comfortable with the process and with the assignments you develop. As Professor Daniel Shaw, a newly certified adjunct professor in the Humanities department, explains, “the relaxed back and forth with the writing fellow and the fact that the work was spread out over the course of

the semester was helpful.” He took a little over a semester to complete his syllabus, but in the end, had created WI assignments that worked in conjunction with his content and teaching style.

This does not mean that you couldn't finish in one semester. Professor Jorge Silva-Puras in the Business department points out, “I was able to complete the certification in one semester, but only because I had been teaching a similar class in previous semesters as a non-WI option, so the majority of the content was already created.” And while he completed the work in a relatively short time, many others did not. English Professor Tram Nguyen was involved in additional outside projects during her certification. She worked with two different fellows and took “two semesters to design the course and a third to get it through the WI team.” And while we don't like to drag the process out, it is important to know your obligations and limitations. Don't set yourself up for disappointment; it will take away from the enjoyment of implementing the material when the time comes. Even those seeking online certification should figure out a schedule that works for them. While our eight

blackboard units are designed to be completed in a semester, we understand that many of those using this method are adjuncts and simply do not have the time to dedicate to completing everything that quickly.

We all know the demand for WI courses is high at Hostos (...), but it is important that you feel comfortable with the process and with the assignments you develop.”

Considering the varied needs of Hostos faculty, if I were to give one piece of advice to those considering WI certification here, it would be don't rush. In the end you will thank yourself and enjoy your WI experience even more. You will have to implement these newly designed assignments in your class, so you might as well plan something you will enjoy teaching (and grading!) in the future.

KEY WORDS of WAC

Formal Writing (a.k.a. high-stakes writing): Assignments that are expected to be completed according to formal academic and disciplinary conventions and often count for a significant part of a student's grade. Examples: essays, research papers, lab reports, essay exams and critical response papers.

Bridging The Gap

by Evangelia Lydia Manatou

There are different ways of aiding a learning environment and being a bridge between professors and students is one among many. My task as a Writing Fellow has been to work alongside professors to provide support to students and deepen their writing skills. I have tutored students both through individual sessions and in-class workshops. I have also assisted them with the writing process by helping them think about the topic they will work on and strategies for narrowing it, articulate effective research questions, build arguments, and discuss their work in progress. I also assisted ESL students with the revision of their essays, helping them find their grammar mistakes and clarify their ideas.

“Of course, mastering academic writing in English is very important for students, but it should be acknowledged that many students at Hostos are bi/multilingual.”

However, my task as a Writing Fellow went beyond English-centered language instruction. A

very culturally diverse college such as Hostos reveals that language is intrinsically connected to the process of globalization, something which has also affected the college’s demographics. Of course, mastering academic writing in English is very important for students, but it should be acknowledged that many students at Hostos are bi/multilingual. Being multilingual myself, I was in a very good position to facilitate bilingual students mastering academic English. Many fellows at Hostos are either bilingual speakers themselves, or second language learners, and have developed their competence and awareness regarding complexities related to diversity.

To deal with bilingualism, I used Spanish, when necessary, as a support strategy that helps students overcome their linguistic barriers and makes them feel more comfortable expressing their ideas. Instead of suppressing Spanish, I used the students’ mother tongue as a frame of reference for metalinguistic explanations, to fill lexical gaps, identify false cognates and examine morphological and syntactical features in English. Finally, I had long conversations with students that enabled me to better understand how external cultural and social factors influence their

behavior, life and academic performance.

My deeper understanding of students’ needs enabled me to work for the First Year Seminar, which has adopted a dynamic approach to facing linguistic diversity. I collaborated with Professor Lewis Levine to create reading comprehension, vocabulary exercises, and PowerPoint presentations that complement the readings and help students better understand the articles. The course emphasis on history, art, and monuments demonstrates that students can acquire college skills and apply them across the course curriculum if they are able to make connections between the course content and their social realities.

It has been really inspiring to work with nontraditional students who seek to continue their studies while learning English, working, and raising families. Despite their difficulties, these students are very motivated and are eager to deepen their knowledge in topics of their interest. Overall, being a writing fellow has been a rewarding challenge that created a positive synergy with my pedagogical interests and the academic dynamics at Hostos.



A Meeting Of The Minds

by Elliott Liu

Just across the Harlem River from the Bronx, freshmen are completing their first year at Columbia University. As part of their introduction to higher education, these students have all engaged with a standard set of works assigned in first-year courses, in what is known as the “Columbia Core Curriculum.” This curriculum exposes students to a range of texts—from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*—and provides a set of shared reference points for the entire student body. Yet curiously, writing instruction for Columbia students takes place in a separate first-year course. At Hostos, by comparison, the required English sequence deeply embeds writing into the students’ learning process—but few students have had the opportunity to engage with the same tomes as those at Columbia.

Could these two approaches be combined? How might Columbia faculty benefit from the ways Hostos makes texts accessible to students through writing, and what might Hostos faculty draw from the curriculum at Columbia? These questions have been at the center of an ambitious yearlong collaboration on our side of the Harlem River, known

as the “Columbia Core at Hostos” project.

Columbia Core at Hostos, funded by the Apgar Foundation, brings together faculty from both campuses to explore how the texts used at Columbia may be taught in the classroom and received by students. Each meeting welcomes a different Columbia faculty member to Hostos, to present their pedagogical approach to a given text. After an afternoon of rich discussion (plus coffee and cookies) Hostos faculty and Writing Fellows work to synthesize a pool of assignment prompts that could be used to teach the core text at Hostos, taking into account the particular skills, needs, and experiences of our remarkable student body. By year’s end this process will have produced a website featuring sample assignments and syllabi templates, providing curricular content which faculty will have the option of drawing upon in the required English sequence in fall 2016.

Taking the baton from Writing Fellow Danielle Stewart, I have the pleasure this semester of participating in Columbia Core at Hostos, and will be helping to synthesize course materials alongside participating faculty. Already the project has proven inspiring, and the discussions

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electric. Our most recent meeting featured Professor of Philosophy Katja Maria Vogt, presenting Homer’s *Odyssey*. Prof. Vogt elaborated a range of themes in Homer’s epic that students have been able connect with their own lives—including hospitality, homecoming, and the role of untruth in the art of storytelling—while Hostos faculty engaged in a lively discussion of each. Participants brainstormed creative ways to make the *Odyssey* come alive for students, including asking students to perform a part of the poem in their own words on social media. Afterward, I collaborated with Hostos faculty to craft these ideas into a series of informal, short answer and essay prompts, which carry students from a personal

engagement with Odysseus to an analytic engagement with the text.

WAC pedagogy centers the notion of “scaffolding” syllabi: designing assignments that build upon one another, so that low-stakes writing helps students establish the skills needed to master more complex assignments later in the course.

With Columbia Core at Hostos, Writing Fellows are stretching this concept to its limits. This collaboration will not only produce materials to help Hostos students grasp complex texts; it will also contribute to the development of a shared curriculum for Hostos students, providing a set of skills and experiences to “scaffold” their college experience.

Check out the materials generated by the “Columbia Core at Hostos” initiative at:

<http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/columbiacommons@hostos>

KEY WORDS of WAC

Scaffolding: it is the support given to students before they can handle a learning task independently. This refers to implementing multiple small, informal (or semi-formal) writing assignments that build up to a more formal high-stakes project in a course.

Getting Your WI Syllabus In Shape With WAC

by Sean Gerrity

WAC principles and pedagogy are grounded in adaptability: the idea that writing and writing assignments can be adapted across all academic disciplines in order to enhance student learning outcomes in a variety of ways. The WAC program here at Hostos prides itself on also being able to adapt to the changing needs and goals of faculty members who wish to design Writing Intensive (WI) courses through partnership with a Writing Fellow.

In a very exciting first for the program, Hostos will soon have a Physical Education WI course. This year I have been working with Dr. Michael Gosset, of the Education department, to develop a WI version of his course

“Principles and Foundations of Physical Education.” While several WI courses already exist in the Education department, this is the first coming out of Physical Education unit. It is a 200-level, classroom-based course that encompasses a wide array of academic material from the interrelated fields of Physical Education, Exercise Science, and Sport. At the same time, the course is intensely practical, as students learn about diverse career opportunities, read from up-to-the-moment professional literature, and observe a physical education class in a local public school, among other things. The course can also resemble Biology at times when students get to the Exercise Science portion, which is more technical and scientific.

Our main task in designing this WI has been to find a way to use writing to help students apply the

“Through writing, students demonstrate their knowledge of subject matter in ways that physical demonstrations cannot. This can include knowledge of game strategies, health-fitness content, and sportspersonship.”

expansive content knowledge they gain through the course to professionalization activities that would be meaningful should they go on to pursue a career of whatever kind in the broad field of Physical Education. One way we have tried to accomplish this is through informal writing assignments designed to reinforce difficult concepts, introduce students to the discourse levels of professional and academic publications in the field, and help them grapple with newfound understandings of just how multifaceted and complex the discipline of Physical Education really is. It's not to be confused with what you might remember as your experiences with middle school and high school gym class! In an example formal writing assignment, students are asked to first

produce a kind of annotated bibliography of professional organizations in the field, and then to choose a job opening listed on one of the organization's web sites and compose a mock letter of interest regarding the position. The assignment asks students to "talk the talk," to demonstrate their immersion in the language, concepts, and discourse of the field, and to apply that knowledge to the occasion of a real-world professional opportunity.

Dr. Gosset is passionate about Physical Education as an academic discipline and about incorporating writing into his courses whenever possible: "Physical Education is the only school subject that deals with all three domains: physical,

cognitive, and affective. Through writing, students demonstrate their knowledge of subject matter in ways that physical demonstrations cannot. This can include knowledge of game strategies, health-fitness content, and sportspersonship." We hope his story will influence faculty members who might be considering designing a WI, but aren't sure whether it will work for their discipline or particular course, that we in the WAC program are dedicated to "writing across the curriculum" in the broadest possible sense of the phrase. So whether you're just mulling over the idea of designing a WI, or already have the basis of a syllabus or some assignments, get in touch with us if you want to get your materials in shape with WAC.

KEY WORDS of WAC

Informal Writing (a.k.a. low-stakes writing): Activities which provide students with opportunities to experiment with ideas on paper without the pressure associated with correctness. Such writing-to-learn assignments involve students in their own learning by teaching them to become active learners; helping them discover what they already know and what they still have to learn; and relating subjects to their lives and values. Examples: journals, reflective responses, creative drafting and free-writing.

Writing Allies Commence!

by Nicole Webb

A supportive environment that facilitates continual professional growth for students and faculty is the hallmark of a successful WAC program. Here at Hostos, the campus's WAC program

maintains a strong network through constant collaboration. Some of the most notable instances involve partnerships between Writing Fellows and faculty members, each

representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds. My work this year with the College's Writing Center Director, Professor Matt Moses, was one such productive collaboration. When Professor

“It is important to remember that because tutors interact directly with students they are in a great position to serve as additional reinforcers of the “writing-to-learn” philosophy that is promoted in WI courses.”

Moses and I originally met, it was to develop a Writing Intensive (WI) version of the syllabus for his “Tutoring Writing” course. After discussing potential project ideas, however, we quickly realized that engaging the tutors directly was another great way to introduce WAC pedagogy outside of the classroom. Since the primary role of tutors is to help students develop and improve writing skills, increasing tutors’ exposure to WAC principles seemed a worthwhile endeavor. As the year winds to a close, we were able to accomplish both goals: getting “Tutoring Writing” WI certified, and training tutors in WAC pedagogy through professional development initiatives.

It is important to remember that because tutors interact directly with students they are in a great

position to serve as additional reinforcers of the “writing-to-learn” philosophy that is promoted in WI courses. As such, providing additional WAC training/support to tutors is an effective way to simultaneously strengthen the resources available to both faculty and students. When students come to the Writing Center and are struggling to understand course content, tutors can integrate useful informal writing exercises to make the information more accessible to their clients. In terms of faculty support, if the tutors understand the structure of a WI course, specifically concepts like scaffolding, they are better suited to help students achieve the process-centered learning experience that the course instructor is seeking for them. Faculty may even find it helpful to communicate directly with these tutors to make sure that expectations are clear and that fundamental WAC principles are being integrated into tutoring sessions. These interactions are vital for the continued success of

the WAC initiative. As Professor Moses puts it, “We’ve been working with WAC Fellows in the Writing Center since the fall semester 2013, and they continue to be valuable additions to our tutor training. Recent work with ENG 238 (“Tutoring Writing”) and the development of workshops geared specifically towards tutors have been great additions to our writing program this year.”

My experience with the Writing Center was so much more than just imparting useful WAC strategies via scientific writing workshops. It was a learning experience that reassured me that despite my strict science background, I could make meaningful contributions to student writing.

The support available to all members of the Hostos community explains why our WAC program is one of the best out there. It is continually expanding and, with the help of amazing allies and creative collaborations, we are sure to reach our common goal of producing successful writers. I would like to personally thank Professor Moses and the tutors I had the privilege of working with; your support of faculty and students is essential to the WAC program’s success.



Are WI courses worth the effort? We asked the data.

by Mercedes Vega Villar

Every time I try to explain the role of WAC fellows to someone who is not familiar with the program, I get the same reaction: “All that work to write a syllabus?” I have to admit that, at first, I also wondered why so much time and energy was needed in order to generate a Writing Intensive (WI) syllabus. That was, of course, until I read some of these syllabi. The assignments were creative, thoughtful and relevant. The prompts were unambiguous and perfectly aligned with the course goals. Meticulous timelines set a rhythm that alternated between new material and revision, progressively building up to a satisfying final project. Of course it is hard to generate such precious pedagogical devices! The question is, is it worth it?

In the Spring Semester 2015, 529 students and 28 faculty members who had been taking or teaching a WI course were asked to share their impressions in a structured survey. Overall, I am pleased to report that most surveyed participants seemed to have had a very satisfying experience. 9 out of 10

students and faculty members would recommend others to take/teach a WI course. A detailed examination of the results of the survey shed some light on why WI courses elicited such positive reactions among those who had taken part in one.

“Strengthening students’ writing skills within the period of a few months is just one of the benefits of WI courses. Our results show that writing exercises also helped students assimilate hard-to-digest concepts”

Writing is a challenging task for many students. Professors are usually aware of the struggle, but frustrated with it nonetheless. According to our survey, 84% of students and 96% of professors believed that the WI course improved student writing overall. Even when we specifically inquired about grammar –which is

perhaps the main source of discouragement among writers and readers-, 87% of students and 77% of faculty members perceived an improvement. But strengthening students’ writing skills within the period of a few months is just one of the benefits of WI courses. Our results show that writing exercises also helped students assimilate hard-to-digest concepts (96% of students and 100% of professors agreed with this statement!). As one student in the LAW101 class explained: “Every essay I wrote was on my own ideas and my own words, and that helped me improve my understanding.”

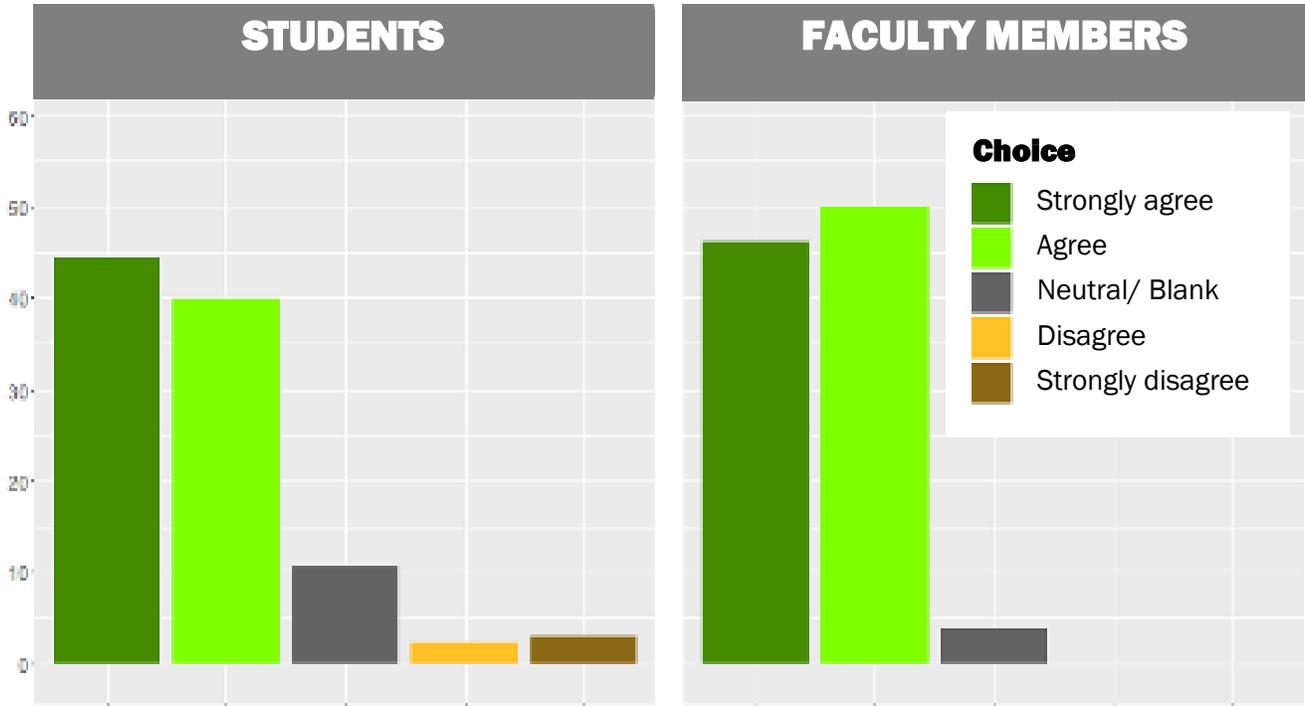
There were two particularly interesting general findings. The first one is that even though WI syllabi are built around a set of guidelines, they seem to come in all shapes and sizes. Such flexibility reveals an important strength of WI courses: their ability to cater to all kinds of pedagogical needs across the academic spectrum. Another interesting pattern was the high degree of synchrony between students and professors. Not only they did they agree on objective features of the course (e.g.

frequency of assignments), but also on issues such as what sources of help were more beneficial and the importance of revisions. Such findings raise the possibility that putting so much thought into a

syllabus may enhance the learning experience by helping students and professors be “on the same page.”

In sum, WI courses are definitely worth the effort.

They turn students into better writers and better learners, helping them get on the right track for achieving success at Hostos and beyond.



WI courses help students improve their writing. Answers to the question “Did student writing improve overall after taking a WI?” from a survey administered to students and faculty members in the Spring of 2015.



Hostos Community College

Visit our website to find useful information and resources about WAC pedagogy and teaching WI courses!

<http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/>