Greetings from the WRAC Coordinators

By Dr. Linda Hirsch and Dr. Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to this latest edition of From the Writing Desk. Thanks to the hard work of faculty and Fellows, the Hostos WRAC program continues to flourish since its inception in 1999. To date, we have 126 Writing Intensive sections, all created by faculty and covering a broad range of disciplines. This newsletter is one way of sharing the many different approaches to WAC and RAC at Hostos and speaks to the rich culture of writing that exists on our campus. The articles highlight work done this academic year on WAC assessment, student research, tutoring grammar, avoiding plagiarism, and redesigning the liberal arts. We think you will find a number of suggestions and approaches to use in your own classrooms.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our team of WAC Fellows for all their efforts. So many faculty have attested to the enriching experience of working with a Fellow. We are grateful for their presence at Hostos and wish them success in their educational and career paths. In addition, we are pleased to announce our upcoming WRAC Workshop on Thursday, May 30th on Teaching Readers in Post-Truth America with Professor Ellen Carillo of the University of Connecticut. Enabling critical readers is the responsibility of all disciplines and a crucial response to the current climate of honoring opinion over evidence. We look forward to seeing you on May 30th!
Mentoring Student Research: WAC and Title V at Hostos

by Dagmawit Getahun

Going into my assignment as a WAC Fellow at Hostos Community College, I had some of the usual expectations. I expected to collaborate with faculty to integrate more writing in their courses or work one-on-one with students to improve their writing. What I didn’t expect was that I would be able to combine mentorship, which is one of my personal passions, with WAC pedagogy while getting to know the wonderful students and faculty at Hostos along the way.

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Students participating in SURF are expected to attend workshops and seminars organized by Reyes and Title V Faculty Activity Director, Sarah Brennan. We started out the Fall 2018 semester with an orientation for the students to familiarize them with the program as well as the research topics and faculty they would be working with. I was able to play a hand in drafting writing activities to help students evaluate their expectations and goals for the semester. Here I drew on WAC pedagogy to include writing activities to help them understand their faculty member’s research topic and communicate it to fellow SURF students. One such activity was the Message Box, which is a writing tool developed to help researchers at any level to conceptualize and communicate their research topics. The Message Box consists of five sections designed to help sort and distill a research topic in a way that is understandable to whatever audience is being targeted. The students were given a blank...
"...we were able to follow their journey in navigating the research world and help in bolstering their research and communication skills. Research projects spanned the entire range of disciplines at Hostos. For example, some students worked with Prof. Asrat Amnie from the Education Department on compiling a literature review on “the biopsychosocial basis of ADHD and the use of adaptive technology for neurodiversity challenges in the classroom.” Other students worked on data collection for English professor Louis Bury’s book-in-progress on poetry, visual art, and climate change.

At the end of the semester, we organized a seminar to give students an opportunity to share their research experiences and reflect on their time in the SURF program. It was gratifying to witness the progress that the students had made in both their writing and presentation skills.

Overall my WAC experience at Hostos has allowed me to draw from and integrate the different aspects of my professional and academic life and meet so many of the exceptional students and diverse faculty and staff that make up the Hostos community.

Creating a Grammar Guide for Tutors
by Sara Rychtarik

In the Fall 2018 semester, to support tutors who work in the Writing Center and the Tutors in the Classroom/Student Involvement Project (SIP), a WAC Fellow was asked to create “A Hostos WLP Guide to Tutoring Grammar.” As a former sufferer of grammar anxiety, I immediately volunteered to work on the project. Although English is my first language, I learned most of my grammar terminology in French class. I often explain my relationship to grammar by citing Joan Didion’s 1976 essay, “Why I Write”: “Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power.”

Grammar may seem challenging, complicated, and difficult, but most of it is actually already firmly rooted in our brains. Every time we speak or write, we’re using grammar and (mostly) using it correctly. We may not be able to diagram subordinating conjunctions, but that doesn’t mean that we aren’t using them every day. For English language learners who are attuned to the grammar of their native language, though, the desire to use English grammar “correctly” in their writing can feel overly burdensome and becomes the focus of their efforts, sidetracking them from developing the ideas that they seek to convey.

The purpose of the guide for the Writing Center tutors was twofold: to take the pressure off of the tutors having to feel like grammar experts, and to help them focus on and be able to address the most common errors that appear in undergraduate student writing. In the 27-page guide that I helped create, I included funny grammar memes that match up with the grammar topics that the tutors will address with the most frequency. For example, the meme that introduces the section on subject-verb agreement is the “agree to disagree” cartoon by Mark Anderson pictured below. Matt Moses, Program Director of the WLP, and Delsy Vargas-Ortiz, Program Manager of the WLP, asked me to address seventeen of the most common surface errors that are seen in undergraduate writing, which include subject-verb agreement, dangling modifiers, faulty sentence structure, and unnecessary or missing apostrophes among others.

Each grammar topic also includes a note that
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The Table of Contents for the Grammar Guide listing the most common surface errors in student writing.

and what grammar concerns they might have. What did they struggle with when they were writing this particular paper? Are there certain grammar concepts that give them trouble on a regular basis? By first working with the students on the errors that they found most problematic in this particular paper, the tutors can then move on to addressing the less difficult but perhaps more frequent errors.

The guide also reminds tutors that while they are there to help students identify and correct the grammar errors in their own assignments, the tutors are not on hand to “just check the grammar.” It is not the role of the tutor to read through a student’s assignment and locate every grammatical mistake. Instead, tutors are directed to ask the student to explain the assignment in their own words, and also ask to see the assignment sheet or prompt that was given to the student by the professor. The guide also encourages tutors to talk to the student about what they are trying to convey in their paper. By helping the student focus on content and organization, the tutor will also be able to help them distinguish between grammar errors that interfere with understanding and those that do not, to better tap into that “infinite power” of grammar.

2 This list was inspired by the 2008 study by Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford, “Mistakes are a Fact of Life: A National Comparative Study.” College Composition and Communication 59.4 (2008): 781-806.
Student and Faculty Perceptions of WI Courses: A Look at the Data

by Patrick Lee

The effectiveness of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) pedagogy in enhancing student learning seems intuitive to anyone familiar with the program. It is not difficult to imagine how we can utilize formal and informal writing assignments to engage students with course material while also improving their writing abilities through extensive opportunities to write, receive feedback, and revise. However, assessment is a crucial component in establishing and measuring program effectiveness, and it is important to have evidence to back up the assumptions we make.

In a 2015 study, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) examined the relationship of writing to student outcomes across 80 bachelor’s degree-granting institutions in the United States. The major takeaway was that interactive, meaning-making, and clear writing assignments significantly enhance undergraduate students’ learning and development. Since its inception in 2000, the Hostos WAC Initiative has undertaken its own program assessment, and improving our assessment instruments is an ongoing WAC component. We want to know: does the NSSE study’s conclusion apply to Hostos as well?

At the end of each semester, the Hostos WAC program administers surveys to students and faculty in Writing Intensive (WI) courses. One major goal is to understand the ways that students have improved their writing proficiency and mastery of the curriculum. Assessing the extent to which students and instructors agree with one another regarding their experiences with WAC pedagogy can support our findings. In Spring 2018, we surveyed 526 students and 32 faculty members who had been taking or teaching a WI course. Overall, the results are very positive. Ninety-four percent of students and 100% of faculty agreed that writing helped further students’ understanding of course topics and concepts. For example, a student in the Psychology of Women (PSY 140) course wrote that an assignment about Latinas in politics “allowed me to identify culturally, examine psychological reasonings and explore how politics in the US has affected women’s representation in politics.”

In another key finding of our survey, 93% of students and 100% of faculty believed that their WI course improved student writing overall. We also asked about specific writing skills, such as the organization of ideas, statement of arguments and thesis statements, use of details and evidence, quoting and paraphrasing, and grammar. For each one of these, over 95% of students and professors agreed that their writing assignments helped with skill development.

Meaning-making writing tasks require students to engage in critical thinking and create personal meaning, rather than just reiterating established concepts.
One student in the History of the Caribbean (LAC 108) course wrote, “It [the course] was very interesting and it helped a lot with my writing because the professor utilized revisions and rewriting.” This comment highlights the fundamental process by which WI courses enhance student writing: drafting, professor feedback, and revision.

It should be emphasized that the benefits described above apply to all disciplines. The Hostos WAC Initiative is distinguished by the many WI courses in areas both within and beyond the humanities. In Spring 2018, there were WI courses in departments such as Allied Health, Business, Mathematics, and Natural Sciences. While the sample sizes for these areas were smaller than for departments such as Education and English, the important thing to note is that the survey results displayed a consistent pattern of student learning improvement across all departments. Furthermore, incorporating WAC into fields not traditionally associated with writing can help students forge unexpected personal connections with the new material, which is a hallmark of cognitive development. For instance, a Microbiology (BIO 310) student remarked, “Writing about cholera was beneficial because I learned about the bacteria that almost took my life as a child.”

A telling indicator of whether students have had an overall satisfying experience with a course is whether they would endorse the class to others. Of the students surveyed, 89% stated that they would indeed recommend their WI course to a friend. In addition, 81% of faculty expressed an interest in developing additional WI courses in the future. These figures suggest that the strong majority of respondents consider taking and teaching WI courses to be worth the effort.

In sum, the survey results indicate that both students and faculty at Hostos perceive the WAC program to have a positive impact on student writing and cognitive development. Writing Intensive courses are powerful tools for turning students into better writers and content learners, which in turn increases their odds of success in college and beyond.

Early in the winter of 2019, the Hostos WAC Initiative was approached with a problem: there had been a proliferation of posters across campus advertising custom-written term papers. The paper mills that provide this service are designed to profit off students’ anxieties regarding course work. These businesses guarantee a custom paper created by one of their employees specifically to answer a professor’s prompt. Sometimes, they will even guarantee students a particular grade. This arrangement not only allows students to hand in work that is not their own, but also makes the cheating much less likely to be flagged by any of the typical anti-plagiarism strategies usually deployed by professors. So what do we do?

To attempt to address this question, we designed a professional development workshop, “Plagiarism Proof? Designing Assignments to Promote Academic Integrity,” to familiarize Hostos instructors with the practice of scaffolding assignments. Scaffolding is a strategy for breaking down a complex assignment or learning objective into a series of successive stages. Scaffolding has many potential benefits for instructors and students alike. A scaffolded assignment encourages students to start thinking and working early and helps keep them on track throughout. It gives the instructor the opportunity to weigh in with feedback and advice as the student is working, rather than just at the finished paper stage.

Scaffolding can foster greater transparency in the classroom, demystifying assumptions and steps hidden within complex academic projects and flagging discipline-specific conventions and transferable skills. If an assignment is scaffolded into manageable sections with a clear pathway to success, students may find themselves less tempted to plagiarize. Plus, any students determined to cheat will find it much harder to do so when the assignment is handed in piece by piece, and instructors might find it a bit easier to detect plagiarism when it has occurred.

On April 1st, with these ideas in place, we offered workshop participants a dedicated space to share their experiences and their skills and to think about the complexities of their own assignments. Where are the places that their students might feel confused, lost, or underprepared—and therefore be more likely to jump online and try to find an easy solution? Our opening presentation alerted participants to the myriad types of plagiarism the internet now facilitates and described some ways that scaffolding can prevent or discourage them. We then outlined the basic premises of scaffolding, and
some basic strategies for implementing it. Most of our participants were already familiar with the principle of scaffolding but had different approaches to it, reflecting their different disciplines, teaching philosophies, and assignments. Then we began a series of hands-on activities, designed to allow workshop participants to put the theory into practice.

First, we presented a sample humanities research paper assignment to the group and asked them to identify complex steps within the assignment that might confuse students. The assignment was lightly scaffolded in the way a lot of papers are: outlining was encouraged and revision was required. But workshop participants quickly identified that there were plenty of complex steps in the assignment that had been glossed over: choosing a paper topic, conducting research, evaluating sources, putting sources into dialogue with the writer's own original ideas, and more. At each of these steps a student might get lost, confused or discouraged, and the instructor could productively guide them by breaking down the task into a series of more manageable activities. Throughout the workshop, participants were asked to identify the skills students would need to complete a given task and think about where in the process students might be most likely to plagiarize. We handed out a worksheet (see below) with a series of questions participants could use to rethink the scaffolding of an existing assignment. The session finished with time for participants to sketch out a new, scaffolded version of their own assignment and discuss their experiences. The materials from our workshop are all accessible on the Hostos WAC website: https://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2019/04/Hostos-WAC-Plagiarism-Proof-workshop.pdf

We tried to be frank and manage expectations throughout the workshop—scaffolding isn't a magic bullet. Plagiarism will probably always be one step ahead of our efforts to catch it. But even our most beloved assignments might be more opaque to our students than we first realize. One of our participants remarked that it was humbling, as a professor in the humanities, to realize that he didn't understand how to go about doing a first year philosophy paper. Scaffolding can help us meet our students where they are, guiding them through the skills and techniques they need to complete our assignments and go forward in their college careers.

Questions that guided workshop participants in critically examining their own assignments, identifying and improving scaffolding.

Looking at one of your assignments, ask yourself:

- What steps are already built into my assignment?
- What skills do students need in order to complete these different steps?
- What are the most complex steps that may tempt students to plagiarize?
- What further or subsidiary steps can be added to prevent that temptation?
Charting Information for More Effective Learning: My Contribution to the A.A. Committee

by Dainy Bernstein

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) pedagogy provides teachers with many strategies for fostering learning through writing activities. One of the most basic techniques is used for every grade level, from elementary school through college: table charts, mind-maps, and flowcharts, often referred to as graphic organizers. Most of us take for granted that providing students with information via charts and graphs is more effective than text without graphics, but this method is effective not only for students but also for faculty. We may not think of faculty committees or faculty development as similar to an undergraduate classroom, but in fact WAC pedagogy is just as effective in these environments.

For the past two years at Hostos, I was privileged to witness the committee tasked with evaluating and redesigning the Liberal Arts degree. When the A.A. Degree Committee convened over two years ago, information about the Liberal Arts Options was difficult to find anywhere on the Hostos website or in the catalog. The most information that was readily available was simply a directive to “check Degree Audit.” After some digging, the committee found further information on each Option, which was essentially a list of courses offered by each unit or department beyond the first thirty credits. When these lists were presented to the departments and units, however, most faculty were surprised the lists even existed. They also noted that some courses hadn’t been offered in years and that new courses were not included. It became clear that the Options, developed during the creation of Pathways, needed to be rethought and redesigned if they were to serve students in any significant way.

For over a year, I watched dedicated faculty come together month after month, gathering data, reading the latest scholarship, discussing, brainstorming, and re-evaluating how the Liberal Arts degree could serve Hostos students. The committee’s goal throughout this whole process has been to make sure that the Liberal Arts degree equips students with all the classes, skills, and ideas they need to go on to senior colleges and/or careers.

I value my experience on the Liberal Arts degree committee for many reasons. Among them is the opportunity I had to distill essential information into a chart that was an important component in clarifying the goals of a Liberal Arts degree for the committee and for a later faculty workshop on November 16, 2018. I was tasked with preparing a chart comparing the structure of the Liberal Arts degrees and Options offered at various CUNY community colleges. The committee had already studied Liberal Arts degrees from community and senior colleges across the US, but they wanted to see what was happening closer to home, and they also wanted to show other
faculties the various possibilities in a clear, easily comprehensible manner.

I began by browsing each college's website and copying their Tracks, Options, and Concentrations into a simple text document. It was an overload of information, and I wound up with a document over 30 pages long. I needed to boil down the information so that it was visually accessible and not overwhelming to faculty, but each college organized its information differently. For example, some included general education requirements as part of each Liberal Arts Option or Track, while others included general education requirements once at the start of the Liberal Arts degree description and listed only Option-specific courses under each Option. Some included detailed descriptions of each course, while others simply listed course numbers. Even within colleges, Options were organized differently: some were a list of four or five courses, while some were divided into sections with instructions to choose two or three from each section.

I decided to focus on the few main points of comparison, drawing on what the committee had been discussing for the past few years: a breakdown of Options offered, and whether specific courses were required or suggested for each Option. The chart ultimately consisted of a "cover page" with a quick summary for easy comparison across all colleges (see below), followed by an expansion of a few Options for easier visualization of the various kinds of Options.

When I presented this chart to the committee, their reaction surprised me. I had spent so much time with tiny, minute details of each college and each Option that I almost began to think that there was no way to convey the information simply and clearly. But my chart had accomplished just that — the committee, who had been (voluntarily!) bombarded with so much information
over the past few years, saw another tool for moving forward. They presented the chart at a general faculty meeting, and they got a similar response from faculty who had not been elbow-deep in the material as they had for two years. Using the visual chart rather than relying on verbal explanations made it clear that there is no uniformity across CUNY colleges; that even within the CUNY system, there are many different approaches to handling the Liberal Arts degree; and that each college’s degree is tailored to its students’ specific interests and goals. And most significantly for the committee’s work, most campuses had Liberal Arts Options that were more detailed than those at Hostos.

It was clear that the Options provided by Hostos critically lacked guidance for students within each Option. Apart from the lack of easily accessible information about the Options, the information that advisors had mostly left students to choose from a dizzying array of courses with no clear rationale for how they should organize their studies. Faculty on the committee could see clearly, from their research and the information presented on this chart, that students would benefit from more guidance as to the purpose and value of an Option, its relevance to their academic and professional lives, and a path to completing each Option. This led to a wider call for departments and units to design new, more meaningful Options.

In the Fall 2018 semester, the committee brought its findings and recommendations to the rest of the Hostos faculty and began the process of facilitating the creation of new Options. These new Options consist of carefully selected courses and a rationale that will help students choose the Option that best aligns with their interests and goals. At the time of this writing, there are new Options in the pipeline, with six on their way to the Hostos Senate, and one exciting new Option is already approved.

For more information about WAC at Hostos, visit the website at http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/ or contact the WRAC Coordinators

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