

**Understanding the Challenges of Teaching Writing Online  
during the Pandemic at an Urban Community College**

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**Abstract**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented changes to higher education and left particularly damaging effects for the underprivileged population. Colleges suddenly shifted into online modality in March 2020, forcing both students and faculty to quickly adapt to the new learning environment. While much of the recent literature has focused on the challenges from the student perspectives (Black et al 2020; Malik, 2020), there has been little insight as to how Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) faculty are dealing with the challenges. The purpose of this study is to better understand the impact this major shift has had on the challenges faculty faced in this process. To examine how our faculty rapidly adapted to teaching in distance learning modality, we analyzed a faculty survey conducted by the Writing Across the Curriculum program in Fall 2020. Eighty-six faculty members participated in a survey about pedagogical applications and concerns including responses to two open-ended questions. In response to the study, the recommendation is to expand professional development opportunities for faculty regarding online pedagogy that is systematically integrated into pedagogy in general.

**Keywords:** Hispanic, Latinx, Higher Education, Writing, Composition, pandemic, COVID-19, teaching online, Bronx Community College, CUNY

### **Teaching during the pandemic at the epicenter of the epicenter**

Shortly after New York City became the epicenter of the pandemic in March 2020, the Bronx became the epicenter of the epicenter. According to New York City Councilmember Ritchie Torres, “It’s hardly an accident that the Bronx, which has the highest rate of racially concentrated poverty, has become the epicenter of the New York City outbreak” (Chang et al., 2020). Being the poorest congressional district of the nation, the pandemic has disproportionately hurt the Bronx, which has the highest hospitalization rates, death rates, and unemployment rates (Center for Disease Prevention and Control [CDC], 2020; Hu et al., 2020). COVID-19 has been particularly deadly in the borough that has the largest average household size, high instances of pre-existing conditions, and a large number of essential workers. The most affected neighborhoods had the lowest median incomes and high concentrations of black and Latino people, with the South Bronx being one of the biggest hot spots (“New York City,” 2021). Needless to say, the lives of our students, the majority of whom come from the Bronx, have been shaken to the core.

Bronx Community College (BCC), located on a 45-acre landmarked campus, is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with over 61% Hispanic population and 77% from the Bronx (“Facts,” n.d.). It not only has the second highest Hispanic enrollment in the City University of New York system, but is also an institution with one of the highest concentrations of Hispanic students among the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) member schools (“CUNY,” 2021). With over 98% minority

enrollment and 72% with household income below the NYC poverty line (“Profile,” 2020), Bronx Community College faces the typical challenges of a low-income minority population. Most of the students attend college while juggling full- or part-time jobs and are likely to have childcare or other family responsibilities.

Thus, when the pandemic hit and the college started offering all courses fully online in March 2020, students were forced to adapt to a new modality while dealing with increased hardships and challenges from the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by the Office of Institutional Research in July 2020, two-thirds of the students (65%) responded that they had never taken an online course, and approximately one-half of students reported increased need for food (52%) and other COVID-related challenges, including mental health (49%), and job loss/decrease in hours (46%). Additionally, studies have shown that distance learning often does not favor the low-income student population (Brenneman, 2020; Levin, 2020; Jaggars, 2011). Our students have always been struggling financially, but the pandemic and the sudden shift to distance learning struck them with a crippling blow, making it almost impossible to focus on academics when they were overwhelmed with financial and personal challenges.

The task has been no easier for faculty who were asked to teach online. Many instructors felt unequipped to address technical difficulties and unprepared to teach online. A large majority of faculty identified that students lack appropriate devices (88%), access to the internet (86%), and technical skills for distance learning (78%) (“Survey,” 2020). Many students reported that the instructor’s discomfort or unfamiliarity with technologies (64%) was one of the most challenging issues for taking courses online. According to the survey conducted by the BCC Office of Institutional Research, only one-third (37%) of

faculty reported prior experience teaching online and only one-quarter (24%) reported that they were very well prepared to teach online (“Survey,” 2020). Only 8.4% of courses were offered in online or hybrid (partially online) format before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> While there have been online faculty development programs offered at the university, college, and department-levels, mostly after spring of 2020, teaching the most vulnerable demographic during the pandemic has been a daunting task. To this end, our study aims to capture a better understanding of how HSI faculty are dealing with the challenges of teaching writing online.

### **Literature Review**

Since we are still in the midst of the pandemic, there is little research available about the impacts of the pandemic at HSIs. Research published in the latest *HETS Online Journal* are mostly focused on students’ perspectives such as assessing the needs and experiences of Hispanic first-generation students through the pandemic (Black et al., 2020) and improving online student engagement at HSIs (Malik, 2020). Therefore, there is little information on how the faculty are dealing with challenges germane to HSIs in the pandemic. Existing literature on teaching writing at HSIs has focused on the importance of going beyond the “traditional ESL paradigm” or not assuming Latinx students are “foreigners” who are linguistically and culturally alien to the writing taught at post-secondary educational institutions in the U.S. (Kirklighter et al., 2007, pp.23-24). More recent literature has highlighted translanguaging and more nuanced concepts like *familia* to

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<sup>1</sup> According to the data from the Office of Institutional Research, 4.2% of classes were offered fully online and 4.2% of classes were offered in hybrid (between 33% to 80% of scheduled class meetings are replaced with online activities or virtual meetings) in Fall 2019.

make the writing pedagogy inclusive and supportive for Latinx students (Baca, 2020). On the other hand, studies have shown how community college students are uneasy about the decrease of instructor presence in online classes (Jaggars, 2014; Bambara et al., 2009). In respect to the present contingencies instructors are facing through the pandemic, many have stressed the importance of engaging students for active learning by being flexible and adaptable to the challenges students are going through (Rizga, 2020; Davidson, 2020).

### **Methodology**

In Fall 2020, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at BCC conducted a faculty survey to better assess the needs and concerns of the faculty, and, accordingly, to improve the program's support for faculty and students. The BCC WAC program oversees the Writing Intensive (WI) courses and supports writing instruction across disciplines. There are approximately 400-500 WI sections offered in every discipline every semester and every student needs to take two WI courses before graduation. There was a total of 8 questions in the survey, including two open-ended qualitative questions asking faculty about their key concerns and challenges regarding teaching writing online (See Appendix A). The survey was conducted between 9/25/20 and 10/31/20. A total of 86 faculty (13% of the entire faculty) participated in the survey. Our study closely examines the results of this survey since it is the only survey that collected qualitative data from faculty across disciplines on teaching writing during the pandemic.

### **Participants**

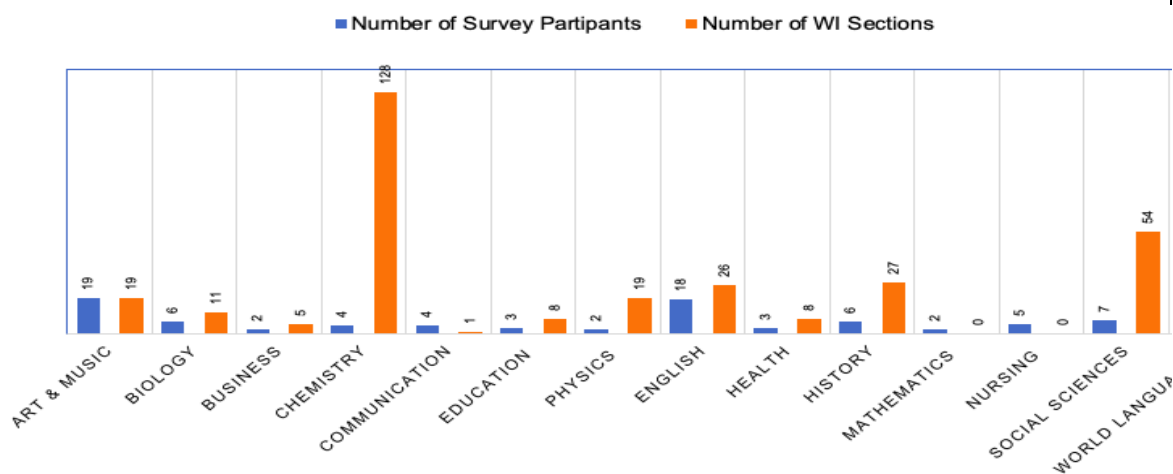
The number of faculty that participated in the survey (N=86) was compared to the number of Writing Intensive (WI) course offerings by the academic department (See Figure 1). The comparison shows that the numbers correlate for most academic departments, with

the exception of two academic departments that offer the highest number of WI sections.

For instance, the department of Chemistry, Earth Sciences, & Environmental Sciences and the department of Social Sciences have the highest number of WI sections (N=128 and N=54 respectively), yet only a fraction of the faculty participated in the survey. However, for other academic departments, the number of faculty that participated in the survey is proportionate to the number of WI course offerings. The department of Art & Music and the department of English were the departments with the highest number of faculty (N=19 and N=18 respectively) that participated in the survey.

**Figure 1**

*Survey Participants & Writing Intensive Sections by Academic Department*



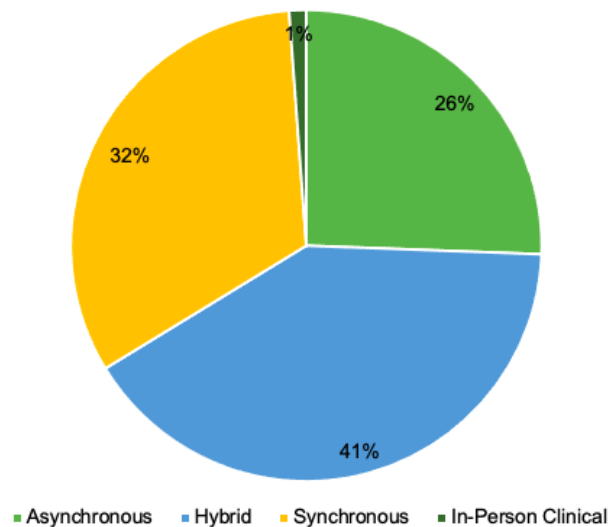
*Note:* Names of the academic departments have been abbreviated. See Appendix A for full names of the academic departments.

### Modality and Platforms

The survey shows that faculty are utilizing various modalities and platforms to teach online courses. Faculty seem to be divided almost equally amongst the three modalities, with a slightly higher rate for hybrid modality: Synchronous (32%), Asynchronous (26%), Hybrid (41%). (See Figure 2). Considering that these were the only available modalities, this division of offerings is comparable to the modality preference of students; according to the Fall 2020 student survey by the Office of Institutional Research, students are almost equally split in preferences of different modalities (“Highlights,” 2021).

**Figure 2**

*Modality*

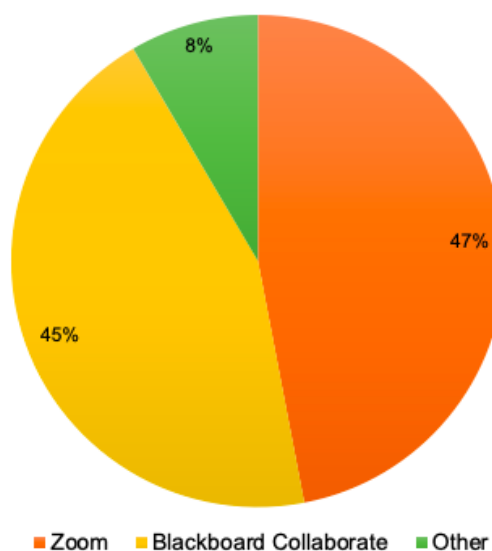


*Note:* Hybrid has been defined as a mix of synchronous and asynchronous

In terms of synchronous platforms, BCC faculty were divided almost equally in the use of Zoom (47%) and Blackboard Collaborate (45%) (See Figure 3). Both platforms are supported by City University of New York (CUNY), thus instructors had access to professional accounts. Since the college uses Blackboard as the Learning Management System (LMS), use of Blackboard Collaborate allowed the course to take place in one platform. Instructors utilizing Zoom had to alternate between Blackboard and Zoom. Even though Microsoft Teams was supported by the college in Spring 2020, none of the respondents included it as a synchronous platform.

**Figure 3**

*Synchronous Platforms*

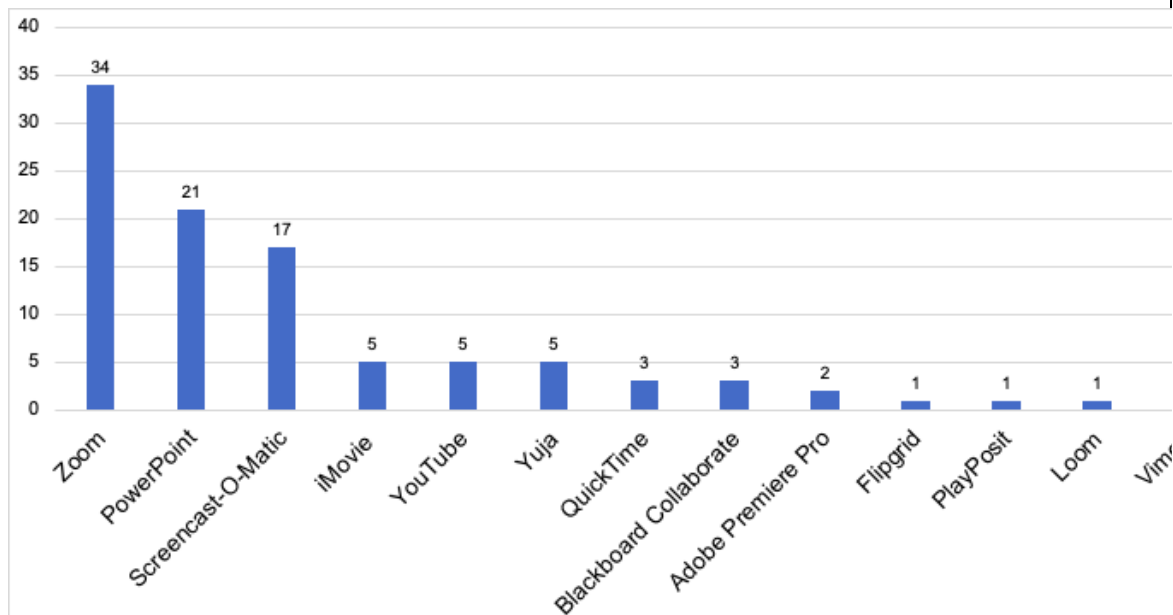




For asynchronous classes, the survey showed that instructors were using various different applications (See Figure 4). Many (55%) were utilizing the recording function of live conferencing applications like Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate. More than one third of the faculty (36%) were utilizing software not supported by CUNY, which does not qualify for technical support. Screen-Cast-O'Matic (17%) seemed to be the most popular application used by instructors teaching asynchronous courses. Six percent of the respondents stated that they were using popular video hosting sites like YouTube and Vimeo for asynchronous courses. Even though Yuja is the only video application supported by the college, only 5% of respondents stated that they were using Yuja for video creations.

**Figure 4**

*Asynchronous Applications*

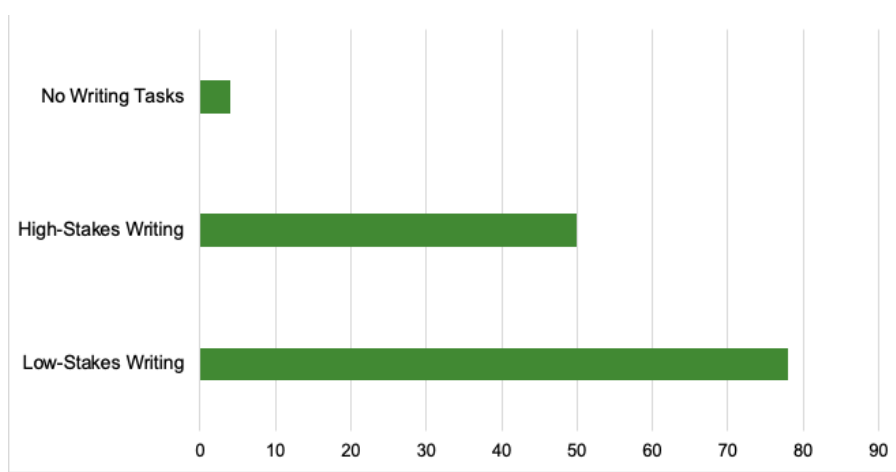


### Writing assignments and types of writing support in demand

When asked about the types of writing tasks or assignments in their courses, a vast majority of faculty (90.6%) reported that they are using low-stakes writing in their classes (See Figure 5). The survey offered examples of low-stakes writing assignments such as journals, self-assessments, free writing, online discussions, peer reviews, reflective essays, and short responses. On the other hand, examples of high-stakes writing were research papers, lab reports, expository essays, and poster presentations. Close to two-thirds of the faculty (58%) stated that they were offering high-stakes writing in their courses. Considering that previous studies of the WI courses noted how many were only assigning high-stakes writing assignments before the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in low-stakes writing assignments (Kim & Guarnieri, 2017).

**Figure 5**

#### *Writing Tasks*

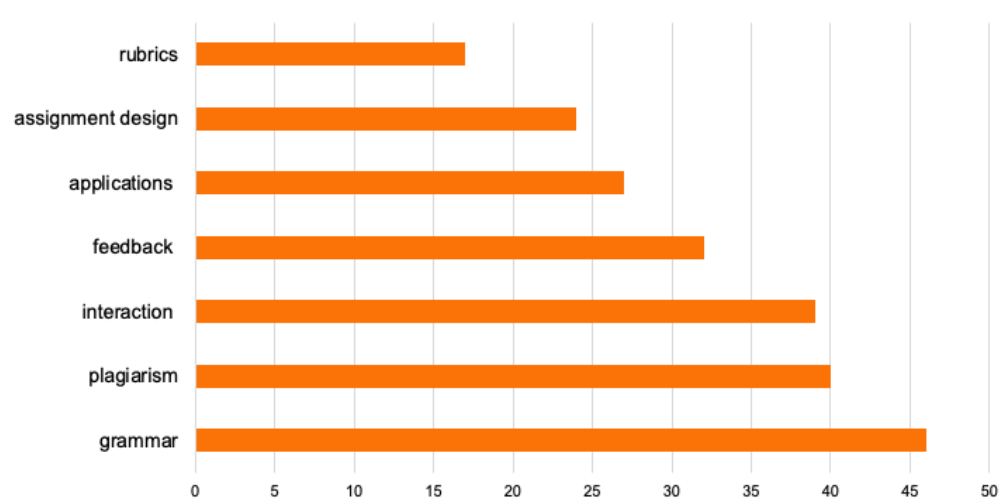


The survey also asked the type of support faculty would most like from the WAC program (See Figure 6). Faculty were allowed to select multiple options and the options

were derived from the types of support the WAC program already offers. Faculty wanted to see the most support with student grammar (53.5%), plagiarism (46.5%), student interaction (44.2%), and feedback (36%). Other responses included creating short videos on writing principles, lab reports, time management, and proper email writing. Grammar has consistently been an area for which faculty have been seeking support from the WAC program (Kim & Guarnieri, 2017), but concerns about plagiarism have spiked during the pandemic. Based on the survey results, the WAC program launched 3 short videos for faculty focusing on grammar, plagiarism, and feedback, with better student engagement in mind (“Bronx Community College (CUNY)”, 2020). Since there is a plethora of video resources for students, the WAC program focused on tailoring video content for the BCC faculty. As of Spring 2021, the WAC program has continued to create more resources for both faculty and students on evaluating evidence, feedback, and anti-racist pedagogy.

**Figure 6**

*Types of WAC Support on Demand*



*Note:* For the full description of types of support listed in the survey, see Appendix A.



particularly concerned about not seeing students on camera and had “the feeling that some students [weren’t] ‘tuning in’ when they [didn’t] have their cameras on,” or that “the students [weren’t] there on the other end of Zoom when they [didn’t] turn on their camera.” Many felt that turning on cameras would encourage more student interaction, and that “making the class interactive” was necessary “for the best learning experience,” but one faculty member reported that only “roughly 25% of the students [were] willing to participate.” Most distressing to faculty was that they felt that the lack of student engagement in the learning process was directly linked to poor student retention. They struggled with “student engagement and interaction during class to ensure [students were] understanding the course content.” Because creating and monitoring levels of students’ engagement were difficult, faculty feared that “students [might] drop the course,” and reported they had “lost many more students” than they “usually do.” The challenge of creating community and fostering student engagement in an interactive online classroom was not easily overcome for a variety of reasons, including the second most pressing faculty concern, which was technology issues. Faculty reported that students did not know how to navigate the online classroom and struggled to complete their coursework online: “Students [were] not trained [by the college] on the required technology.” Faculty struggled with this as well, with one saying, “I was not oriented to this LMS. I am basically teaching myself.” An equally pressing technology issue for faculty in terms of instruction and assessment was the problem of students not having a computer or a high-speed internet connection that would allow them to attend and fully participate in online classes. Faculty struggled to “make sure that everyone [in the classroom] had the access and the technology that they need[ed] for the course.” Faculty found that students who had to attend class and

submit assignments as text submissions using their phones were at a distinct disadvantage because they “[didn’t] get to edit/comment in the margins of [these students’] papers at all.” Faculty found that the college was not providing students with the computers and internet access needed, and they also stated that the college’s internet server was not always reliable. Finally, faculty respondents were worried about the relationship between issues of plagiarism and student assessment, as well as the large amounts of time they had to spend emailing and reaching out to students who had fallen behind in their classes.

### **Key concerns and challenges with student writing**

Faculty’s largest concern about teaching writing online was plagiarism. As seen in Figure 8, the term “plagiarism” was one of the terms with the highest frequency. Faculty reported “the misuse of internet research.” Students were consulting online sources and “cutting and pasting” online materials into their writing without developing their own responses and without acknowledging their use of outside sources by documenting them. Faculty found that students would just “Google” the answers to the questions asked. Faculty reported an increase in plagiarism cases and new forms of plagiarism cases in the online learning environment.

The second largest concern of faculty about teaching writing was the high levels of “illiteracy” in their courses in terms of both reading and writing. Faculty reported that their students had “extremely weak writing skills,” “a lack of familiarity with basic grammar rules,” and that “they [didn’t] know the basic structure of sentences, or how to write a paragraph.” In terms of reading, faculty reported that “students’ difficulties with reading skills translat[ed] into underperformance on writing tasks.” “Students [had] trouble with

summarizing and paraphrasing.” “They also demonstrate[d] varying levels of reading comprehension with few functioning at the higher level of understanding” needed for the “nuances of [the] essays read” in courses. Faculty felt “students’ literacy skills [were] on the middle-school level,” and that the college “need[ed] remedial English back” for many of the students. Faculty reported having larger numbers of English Language Learner (ELL) students in their classes who struggled with “language barriers” in their courses, “and others with severe writing/illiteracy issues despite [college-level writing] placement.” They found online teaching made helping students improve in their grammar extremely difficult because “it [was] hard to give feedback on grammar” in the online venue. They said it was more “difficult to provide” “students who need significant help understanding texts and writing mechanics” online. Faculty also found it more difficult to provide students with tutorial support services in the online venue, even though students needed even more support than in in-person classes because of their difficulties with online learning. Faculty found it difficult to monitor which students were receiving online tutorial support.

Finally, faculty found that students not having a computer or a quiet place to work was affecting their writing. A “key concern” was “that some of the students [were] trying to write on their phones because they [didn’t] have laptops or tablets, which [didn’t] allow them to save their work properly or even write or edit their work properly. Many students [didn’t] have the infrastructure needed to [attend] online classes. When students unmute[d] themselves, [faculty] often hear[d] [the sounds of] a household [full] of children they [were] taking care of at the same time [they were doing coursework]”. Clearly, students’ lack of access to the technology that they need to succeed in an online course and not

**Figure 8**  
*Key Concerns or Challenges with Student Writing*



*Note:* Data visualization of faculty responses on key concerns or challenges with student writing. (Visualization via WordClouds.com)

Overall, in Spring 2020, faculty were finding a larger range of student proficiencies in terms of writing in their college-level classes.<sup>2</sup> They noticed more ELL students with

<sup>2</sup> In Spring 2020, when BCC switched to 100% online learning, it also switched to using a “multiple measures” placement mechanism that relies heavily on high school GPAs instead of high-stakes skills testing. Additionally, most English as a Second Language (ESL) and remedial English classes and all reading



language interference in their writing. Faculty found commenting on students' grammar trouble spots and trying to help students improve their language skills in the online venue more difficult. In addition to grammar, many faculty reported students were having difficulty with organization, style, and spelling. They also noted that students were not familiar with the writing process of notetaking while reading, planning, drafting, and revising. They wondered if students were reviewing and considering faculty feedback on their writing. The online venue made peer reviews for revision agendas more difficult than in in-person classes. Faculty also noted that students were having trouble understanding what they were reading and therefore were having difficulty summarizing and paraphrasing texts. In general, faculty felt students were struggling to read and write on the college-level and to engage in academic discourse while learning online. Most found teaching writing to be more effective in the in-person classroom. Faculty noticed that students were not participating in writing assignments as much as they did in in-person classes, and that students were not handing in assignments in a timely fashion. Faculty see students' lack of engagement in the online course venue interfering with their completion of writing assignments. Faculty see technological issues interfering with student writing as well. Students who had to submit their work from their phones could not engage in the writing and revision process as easily as those who had a computer.

### **Recommendations & Conclusion**

The sudden switch to online learning in response to the coronavirus pandemic found both students and faculty to be unprepared for this change in venue. Overall pass rates

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remedial classes have been eliminated. These two additional factors may explain why faculty are seeing a larger range of student abilities in their courses.

dropped in Spring 2020 (-0.4%) and fell even further in Fall 2020 (-2.5%) compared to the previous semesters, and course withdrawal rates increased in Fall 2020 (+4%) as well (“Pass Rates,” n.d.). While some may feel that the switch to online learning was a temporary response to an emergency situation, it is more likely that online learning is here to stay, and that the number of online courses will increase and more online degrees will be offered.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, since Fall 2020, online tutoring services, such as tutor.com, are being offered for all disciplines. Clearly, both faculty and students must adapt to the online teaching and learning modality.

The coronavirus pandemic ravaged the BCC community. Combining the results of this faculty survey and the student survey will allow us to see a better picture of the issues at stake. Considering that most faculty expressed their concern with student engagement, faculty will need to get a better grasp of how the students are coping with the hardships in the pandemic. In a Fall 2020 survey of students conducted by the Office of Institutional Research, students reported that during the pandemic they experienced increases in general living expenses (48%), decreases in income (47%), food (26%) and housing (32%) insecurity, and approximately two-thirds or more of respondents reported feeling bothered for several days or more feeling anxious (73%) or not being able to control worrying (63%). Indeed, when students were asked what factors were interfering with their ability to do coursework, the number one answer was their emotional and mental state (40%). Students reported that their lack of motivation and focus in their courses were due to their

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<sup>3</sup> In Spring 2021, the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) approved BCC’s first degree to be taught completely online. “The Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences will be available in a distance learning modality even in non-pandemic conditions.” (“A Virtual,” 2021).

mental health issues. Both BCC and CUNY have been providing students with more psychological support by increasing psychological support services for students, such as the Crisis Text Line (“Not Alone,” n.d.; “Mental Health,” 2021). While the faculty survey reports show that faculty may have some glimpses into the challenges students are going through, given how the online modality often limits the opportunities for the instructors and students to have informal exchanges, these student survey results should be more widely shared and discussed with the faculty to implement more mindful pedagogy in classrooms. In addition, to make up for the lack of physical presence and to build stronger rapport with the students, faculty should also expand individual conferences with the students. Guiding students through individual conferences has consistently proven to be one of the most successful strategies in writing pedagogy (Shvidko, 2016; Bayraktar, 2009; Lerner, 2005).

The survey also suggests that there is a strong need for faculty to improve online pedagogy. Faculty can take the initiative of improving their online pedagogy, as one faculty noted in the survey, “I am basically teaching myself,” but there should be expanded opportunities for faculty development for online pedagogy. Even though a vast majority of faculty have gone through professional development programs for online pedagogy since March 2020, for most faculty, there is still plenty of room for development. In a Fall 2020 survey of students, students reported that the most challenging issue for them in their online learning is their “instructors’ discomfort and unfamiliarity with technologies” (64%). Students were struggling to learn online because faculty did not know how to teach online. At BCC, only 8.4% of courses were offered fully or partially online before the pandemic, which means that over 90% of the courses had to make a sudden shift to online teaching without sufficient preparation. In the English department, for instance, only 20% of the

faculty were certified to teach online before the pandemic. To solve this problem, there must be more faculty development programs for teaching online. Online pedagogy should be integrated into regular professional development, such as the Writing Across the Curriculum faculty certification program, and teaching excellence should be rewarded in reappointments and promotions. Since March 2020, there have been many online pedagogy professional development opportunities available through the college, such as the Online Course Development workshop, departmental online course faculty mentors, departmental liaisons with the Center for Teaching and Learning, and “Online Teaching Essentials” through CUNY’s School of Professional Studies (SPS). Nevertheless, online pedagogy cannot be perfected through a single faculty development workshop and there is need for more specific and tailored workshops on designing syllabi and assignments for online classes, as well as opportunities to receive feedback on online courses. For instance, faculty can consider improving their online pedagogy through professional development opportunities such as the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE)’s Best Practices in Teaching Online and In-Person, Mindset: Promoting Mindset-Supportive Practices in Face-to-Face and Online Space, A Language-Aware COIL: How to build on language diversity in virtual exchanges, and CUNY Western Governors University Collaborative Online Faculty Development, which focuses on student engagement (“Innovative,” n.d.).

Finally, existing support services can be streamlined and strengthened for student success. There should be more active intervention of academic advisors to guide students and stronger lines of communication between academic advisors and faculty so that students succeed academically. Technology support staff from the Center for Teaching and

Learning should be increased so that faculty and students can teach and learn more effectively online. Currently there are only 2 full-time technology support staff for the entire college who are helping faculty with their online teaching technology concerns. On-campus and online tutoring services should also be expanded so that students can forge relationships with members of the campus community; the Writing Center in particular should continue to lead community-building on campus. The WAC program should continue to reach out more to assist with faculty teaching writing online. Instead of having students work with a faceless tutor who may only focus on the mechanics of writing, students should be working with Writing Center tutors who are from the community and WAC fellows who are aware of the specific context of the course and can help students think more critically.

BCC was recently identified as one of the top five institutions in the state in awarding the most degrees to Latinos (Excelencia, 2021). Celebrating the state approval of the Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences in distance learning modality at BCC, President Iskenegbe stated, “I am optimistic that offering more online options to our students, even in ‘normal’ times, will benefit both our students and the College.” As a virtual degree becomes a reality at BCC, and, in order to continue to be a leader in education for the Latinx students, we should continue to build a community of excellence and foster student success. There are many advantages to online learning if it is done correctly and understanding the challenges of teaching writing online will allow us to do so.

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## **Appendix A**

### WAC Survey for Faculty

Q1. What is your academic department?

- Art & Music
- Biological Sciences
- Business Information Systems
- Chemistry, Earth Sciences, & Environmental Sciences
- Communication Arts & Sciences
- Education & Academic Literacy
- Engineering, Physics & Technology
- English
- Health, Physical Education & Recreation
- History
- Mathematics & Computer Science
- Nursing & Allied Health Sciences
- Social Sciences
- World Languages & Culture

Q2. What is the mode of your class?

- Synchronous (please continue to Question 3.)
- Hybrid (mix of synchronous and asynchronous) (please answer both Question 3 and 4.)
- Asynchronous (please continue to Question 4.)

Q3. If you are teaching synchronous classes, what platforms are you using? (Select all that apply)

- Zoom
- Blackboard Collaborate
- Google Meet
- Other

Q3-1. If you chose "Other" above, tell us what platforms they are.

Q4. If you are teaching asynchronous, what software are you using for videos? (Select all that apply)

- Screencast-O-Matic
- QuickTime
- PowerPoint (with voiceover)
- Camtasia
- Screencastify
- Zoom
- iMovie
- Adobe Premiere Pro
- Other (please specify below)

Q4-1. If you chose "Other" above, tell us what software they are.

Q5. What are your key concerns or challenges about teaching online?

Q6. What kinds of writing tasks or assignments are you using in your classes? (Select all that apply)

- Low-stakes writing (journals, self-assessments, free writing, online discussions, peer reviews, reflective essays, short responses)
- High-stakes writing (research papers, lab reports, expository essays, and poster presentations)
- No writing tasks or assignments

Q7. What are your key concerns or challenges with students' writing?

Q8. What kinds of support would you like to see from WAC? (Select all that apply)

- designing assignments for better student writing
- developing and integrating effective rubrics
- offering feedback on student assignments
- preventing plagiarism
- improving interaction with and amongst students with writing
- dealing with student grammar
- Short videos on implementing new softwares (e.g. Slack, Remind, etc.) to promote writing
- Other (please explain below)

Q8-1. If you selected "Other" above, please explain.