

Testimony of Associate Dean and Professor of English Cheryl C. Smith, Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY)

The New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
The Reading and Writing Crisis Among College Students
Tuesday, October 28, 2025

Good afternoon chairperson Dinowitz and members of the NY City Council Higher Education Committee. It's a privilege to speak to you today about contemporary pressures on reading and writing education and some of our responses to evolving student literacy needs at CUNY. I'm happy to provide insight into our classrooms, practices, student support services, and work with students across the general education and humanities curriculum, which is dominated by reading and writing intensive coursework and requires students to master new intellectual challenges.

My name is Cheryl Smith and I'm currently in my fourth year as Associate Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, where I oversee our general education, major, and minor curricula; new student onboarding and registration; scheduling and enrollment; and student academic progress. In this role, I work closely with students and faculty as well as partners in academic advising, enrollment management, career services, testing and evaluation, and academic support services. I am also full professor of English at Baruch, where I have been on the faculty since 2003. During my tenure in the English department, I directed the Writing Immersion program and Great Works of World Literature program. I have also served as coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum, faculty liaison to the Center for Teaching and Learning, and Faculty Fellow for Transformative Learning in the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center.

I have taken on these roles because of my commitment to the humanities and their connection to student learning, including how students develop literacy competencies, how they engage in their learning process, when and why they disengage, and the teacher's role in these processes. I find working with our diverse and driven students incredibly rewarding, and I am indebted to colleagues who are committed to the CUNY mission and dedicated to helping students develop the advanced literacy skills they need for academic success, professional advancement, and civic engagement.

Students at Baruch take two first-year writing classes, standard across CUNY, plus the Great Works of World Literature course, which is part of Baruch's unique core. These three classes are scaffolded; the directors of writing and great works work closely together, and many faculty teach in both programs and share resources, such as faculty-run professional development. Therefore, students spend up to three, usually consecutive semesters engaged in the work of developing their proficiency in advanced reading and writing, which are linked in the classroom. That is, writing is done in response to a text or informed by source texts. If students are not doing and understanding the reading, they are unable to meaningfully write for their classes.

Students struggle in these three classes and with the demands of college-level reading and writing. They come to college with some deficits in advanced literacy competencies, including

the ability to close read very dense, difficult texts; use evidence effectively; apply reading and writing standards appropriate to the audience and discipline; and structure their writing for optimal clarity and impact. I do not see their deficits and struggle as a literacy crisis. If students aren't struggling, they aren't being challenged enough, and the deficits I see in reading and writing have been consistent over my time at Baruch and before. I have teaching college writing since 1994.

I will talk about how we support students as they struggle, but first I want to point out that despite their struggle, students largely love their first-year writing and great works classes because they're small, students get to know one another and their professor, and perhaps most importantly, they have the rare benefit of a having a careful reader of their work. In our first-year writing and great works courses, we operate from a simple premise: students write well about texts and topics they care about for a reader they believe cares about them. We intentionally cultivate an environment of care in our classrooms, which provides a space to experiment, try something new, perhaps fail, recover, and try again. In my experience, CUNY students are willing to try, falter, and try again. They are profoundly motivated to succeed academically and professionally, and there's no need to sell them on the importance of learning to write effectively as key to their success. I say this as someone who taught at two elite, private liberal arts colleges before coming to Baruch. CUNY students are uniquely motivated.

We support their learning process and success in coordination with our writing center, staffed by professional writing tutors who provide in-person and online appointments as well as workshops and in-class support. Students can also choose to work with peer tutors in our Student Academic Counseling Center. Similarly, faculty have ongoing support with teaching from the moment of new faculty orientation. They are introduced to academic support services and invited to join faculty mentorship pods at the School and College levels, which include teaching guidance and resources. The writing and great works programs in English run monthly faculty development meetings during the school year, and the Center for Teaching and Learning and Digital Learning Hub offer ongoing workshops and events to provide teachers with resources and a community of practice.

Many of these CTL events in the past three years have centered on Artificial Intelligence, which we know is expanding rapidly and impacting both the landscape of education and the workforce we're preparing students to enter. In the 2023-2024 academic year, the Center for Teaching and Learning at Baruch partnered with a group of student research fellows to investigate whether and how undergraduate students at the College were being impacted by the increasing availability of generative AI tools. The main research question was: *How are college students at a large urban public university in the US using and experiencing generative AI as a tool in their learning contexts?* The researchers sought to explore this question using multiple methods, including surveys and focus groups, in efforts to shed light on students' motivations, attitudes towards and evolving use of generative AI, and to help us guide faculty and inform policy around the use of AI in classrooms at Baruch. The CTL hosts this study's findings on a robust AI Resources page that includes sample AI use statements for syllabi, sample assignments with faculty reflections, research from external partners, and the CTL's own research and resources: <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/ctl/ai-resources/>

Finally, the Weissman School has a grant from the Teagle Foundation to support the inclusion of “transformative texts” in the humanities and gen ed curriculum. Our Teagle-funded initiative, called “Reading is Human,” creates defined pathways through general education humanities courses that center students’ active engagement through both reading and writing with these transformative texts while elevating the value of the humanities in their developing cultural awareness, civic involvement, and educational and professional success. We also aim to cultivate students’ softer skills such as empathy, inter-personal connection, and aesthetic appreciation.

Using the Teagle funds, we are embedding transformative texts in select courses as determined by panels of faculty in the participating programs and departments, which include first-year seminar, first-year writing, great works, philosophy, and Black and Latino studies in the pilot year. With the support of our Center for Teaching and Learning, faculty are developing active learning strategies for reading and responding to difficult texts: ways to engage in the slow and recursive processes that research shows help develop critical, close reading skills. These processes include reading a text first for surface understanding; annotating the text while reading, with or without guidelines; briefly free writing in response to an initial reading; re-reading part of the text aloud with the whole class while isolating parts that are harder to understand; and discussing the text in small groups, annotating collectively, and then reporting out to the whole class. This scaffolded practice builds reading community in the classroom and helps ensure comprehension and engagement with the text. Our approach aims to make reading a positive not punishing experience. Students are then better prepared to take on higher stakes writing tasks that engage with the reading.

Students do not come to college having mastered reading and writing. They are still on that journey. They will encounter more readings, longer readings, and more difficult readings in college, and they need time to develop the muscle to rise to the challenge of reading more complex texts. Similarly, they will encounter more challenging writing requirements in college and will need to ethically navigate evolving digital tools. Their success with these challenges is determined by their ability to read critically and carefully in collaborative environments, and accurately evaluate the unique contexts, audiences, and purposes for discrete writing tasks.

I hope my testimony has provided some insight into how our colleges are providing the time and tools for students to build their literacy muscle and graduate with the reading and writing competencies we know they need for academic, personal, and professional success. Thank you for your interest in our work to advance student literacy, and for your ongoing support of CUNY.

**Testimony of Interim Vice Chancellor
for Academic and Faculty Affairs Anne Lopes
The City University of New York (CUNY)**

**The New York City Council's Committee on Higher Education Hearing on
Reading and Writing for Today's CUNY Students**

Tuesday, October 28, 2025

Good afternoon chairperson Dinowitz and members of the City Council Higher Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about reading and writing education at the University. I am Anne Lopes, Interim Vice Chancellor for Academic and Faculty Affairs. I am joined today by my colleague Cheryl Smith, Associate Dean of the Weissman School of Arts & Sciences, Professor of English, former Director of Writing Immersion, Coordinator of Writing across the Curriculum, and Director of the Great Works of World Literature program at Baruch College, who will also provide testimony. Andrea Soonachan, University Dean of K-16 Initiatives, is here as well to answer any questions you may have in her area.

Introduction

Whether or not we are facing a “reading and writing crisis” among college students today, particularly in the era of artificial intelligence, is a critical question we must ask ourselves as educators and as a society that is undergoing rapid transformations in how people learn, teach, and work.

At CUNY, we do not perceive the current shifts in student reading, writing, learning and communication habits as a crisis. What we have seen and continue to see since the arrival of the internet are transformations in how students learn, read, write, and communicate. We have been addressing these changes with clear expectations, research-based strategies, and the supports students need to succeed at the University and beyond.

Unlike many higher educational institutions, CUNY has always educated a very large, extraordinarily diverse, and multilingual student body from every borough of New York City. Over 80% of our entering students are educated in New York City's public schools, and we collaborate with New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) to ensure our students are prepared for college-level writing. Thirty percent of the first-year students enter with CUNY credits, and our schools of education conduct extensive professional development for in-service teachers as well as educate those entering the profession.

Serving such a broad range of learners underscores our mission of access and excellence. The diversity of our students as learners has taught us to continually update and adapt the approaches we use that undergird access—from course placement criteria to our general education requirements, from our pedagogies to our academic support. The latter includes

professional tutoring, peer tutoring, supplemental instruction, review sessions, formalized student-led study groups, and other services. For our students with disabilities, we provide additional innovative support programs, based on best practices to support their academic success and personal development, including arranging for crucial auxiliary aids and services, assistive technology services, note-takers, readers, sign language interpreter services, distance learning networks, priority registration, alternative testing arrangements, and counseling and referrals. We meet students where they are and move them to high levels of academic literacy.

Our admissions and support model for both associate and bachelor's degree programs are focused on student readiness and supporting their success.

Reading and writing skills are important for college success regardless of the student's degree program. We changed how we assess readiness in reading and writing in 2019. Prior to that year, CUNY used separate tests for reading and writing course placement. Nationally recognized research—including work led by CUNY researchers— demonstrated that high school performance is a stronger predictor of college success than one-off placement exams. That research helped set a new national standard and guided our own policy shift. Even before that time, nearly all CUNY colleges treated reading and writing as inextricably linked. Students routinely write in response to readings, integrating comprehension, analysis, and expression.

Today, we use multiple measures to place students that reflect sustained academic performance and integrated literacy. These include the New York State Regents Exam in English Language Arts (which itself combines reading and writing), high-school GPA, and SAT/ACT English when available. Based on these measures, we place students in developmental English Composition.

Entering Students

Information we compile about our entering students tells us that their reading and writing skills have not changed considerably in recent years.

1. To start, we place nearly the same percentage of entering students in developmental English composition today that we did in 2018. The percentage was 14.9 in 2018, and it is 14.3 today.

In 2018, we placed all students who needed developmental work in stand-alone remedial (non-credit) courses. Based on the multiple measures we use, students identified as non-ESL who need added support are now placed in a credit-bearing course with co-requisite support. Co-requisite support means that rather than three hours of weekly instruction, students typically have five hours of weekly instruction with faculty in English Composition. In-class peer tutoring, supplemental instruction, and limited class size are strategies that are used. While many students identified as ESL entrants are still well-served by non-credit ESL courses that focus on language acquisition, several CUNY colleges also offer more advanced students English

Language Learning (ELL)-adapted credit-bearing English Composition courses that include linguistic support. This approach has substantially decreased the time it takes for students to earn credit in English composition. This is important because passing English composition allows a student to move forward in their degree program.

2. Our gateway completion rates in English Composition have rebounded since COVID. Whereas the rate of completion was 77.2 for all first-time freshmen in 2019, it dipped appreciably to 71.7 during COVID (2020). It stands now at 81.8 for the 2024 cohort.
3. Overall grade distribution in English composition has remained relatively consistent over the last 5 years.

Ongoing Preparation and Support in Reading, Writing, and AI

Throughout an undergraduate's academic journey at CUNY, literacy and communication are not siloed—they are built into the curriculum across disciplines. Under our Pathways General Education Framework, every student completes two English Composition courses. The emphasis on reading, analysis, and argument continues throughout the remaining general education requirement and within the majors. Reading, critical thinking, and evidence-based communication are expectations for all CUNY undergraduates, not just for English majors.

In the post-COVID period, we have also focused on preparing our students to read and write well in an AI-rich world. Our faculty teach students to evaluate sources, detect bias, and maintain authorship and voice amid digital and AI-generated text. Many instructors now include AI literacy—not as a shortcut, but as a critical skill. To succeed as undergraduates, excel in graduate school, and enter the work world, students must learn when and how to use AI tools ethically and productively, and when not to.

As part of the expansion of generative AI, CUNY recently updated its academic honesty policy after deep University-wide dialogue about AI's role in academic work. The policy was fully updated in 2024 to integrate AI explicitly throughout. The policy provides clear guidance on appropriate and allowed uses of AI, so that students can practice transparency and integrity while developing modern communication skills. The policy makes clear that faculty retain the freedom to determine when and how AI can be used in their courses.

To support faculty, the University has invested in professional development for our faculty from the beginning of the AI boom. The CUNY Innovative Teaching Academy (CITA) has long been central to integrating AI into sound pedagogy and rethinking assessment where appropriate. CITA has offered six major AI-focused workshops and events over the last 14 months, from an orientation on AI tools to a session on “How AI Can Support Growth Mindsets.” A book club on Teaching with AI was also introduced along with a CUNY-wide Faculty Fellowship Program, supported by the Building Bridges to Knowledge initiative, funded by the Lumina Foundation.

Over 900 faculty participated in AI-learning activities. They are among our most popular programs, with some filling every available space even in large virtual formats.

And that describes only the central activity—campuses across CUNY have run their own intensive AI professional-development series. At Lehman College, for instance, the Center for Teaching and Learning offered seven different sessions on AI to over 550 faculty in Spring and Summer 2025.

Through evidence-based placement at the start, academic supports, an integrated curriculum, policy, faculty development, and responsible AI pedagogy and research—CUNY demonstrates how a large public system can lead in literacy education. More of our students are completing first-year composition on time; more are progressing into writing-intensive work across the disciplines, and faculty are increasing their abilities to help students navigate an AI-rich world for learning and beyond.

We welcome ongoing collaboration with the Council to share data, scale what works, and ensure that every New Yorker has access to the reading, writing, and communication skills that power opportunity and civic life.

That concludes my testimony. Thank you for your time. To further describe the reading and writing experiences of students at one of our colleges, I turn now to my colleague Cheryl Smith, Associate Dean of the Weissman School of Arts & Sciences at Baruch College.

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