

## Improving Communication is Everyone's Responsibility

by Fara Warner

In 2003, Terrence Martell, a finance professor at the [City University of New York's Baruch College](#), encountered a classroom of 80 seniors who could navigate the complex intricacies of the futures markets and commodities trading. But when he asked them to write a report explaining to a commodity pool operator why he or she should retain the student after two months on the job as commodity trading advisor, many failed to live up to Martell's requirements.

"They needed to convince me, to write persuasively about what they had learned and put it in the context I had asked for," remembers Martell, who also serves as the director of the college's [Weissman Center for International Business](#). "They couldn't."

Martell notes that the purpose of the class and the final paper wasn't to show that the students could double their money or even make a profit on the \$1 million in imaginary funds they had traded for two months. More important to the students' learning—and to their grade—was to explain their trading actions and persuade a senior-level executive (Martell in this case) of their expertise, no matter what the outcome of their trades was. While their papers were well-organized and showed strength in basic grammar and usage, Martell says, the majority of the papers displayed little evidence that the students understood the assignment's audience or its purpose.

Frustrated, Martell turned to Baruch College's [Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute](#), which operates across the college to support faculty and advise them on teaching written, oral, and computer-aided communication. Martell asked the Institute what could be done to help the students understand and complete the assignment with better results. The Institute sent in Mikhail Gershovich, then deputy director and now director of the Institute, and John Choonoo, director of institutional research, to diagnose Martell's problem.

Their report noted that the "majority of the cohort did not recognize the role they were asked to perform nor the purpose their writing was supposed to serve. Their engagement with the assignment was superficial at best, and their reports resemble the personal, expository essays often assigned in first-year composition courses." The two major causes for the failure were students' limited experience with writing in previous business courses and a failure to understand that effective communication is much more than writing down what a student has learned. The students had "a difficult time approaching their writing as though it is meant to do something," the report stated.

To explore these issues more deeply, the Institute and the institutional research group conducted a survey of all the faculty members who had taught courses Martell's students had taken to date. Faculty members were asked to comment on student writing overall and the status of writing in the business school in particular. The researchers found that students simply didn't have much opportunity to write, or receive much instruction in writing, during their college careers. Indeed, three faculty respondents said they required no writing at all, given their large class sizes. And even when they did write, faculty members remarked, students rarely encountered "high-stakes" writing assignments—ones that were crucial to their course grades.

Many of the faculty surveyed felt that teaching writing skills was exclusively the role of the English department and complained that Baruch's first-year English courses seemed not to prepare students adequately to write effectively in the disciplines. But Martell, Gershovich, and Choonoo did not accept the argument that freshman English courses should be enough to prepare students for their next three years in college or, more importantly, for the world of work that they would encounter when they graduated.

The Communication Institute recommended a number of changes—and not only for Martell's course. It suggested that Baruch's Zicklin School of Business, which accounts for almost 80 percent of the college's majors, institute changes, including assigning writing in some form in all undergraduate courses, clearly defining the audience and purpose of assignments, reducing course size, and sponsoring ongoing professional development programs on writing-intensive instruction.

These proposals were rooted in writing-across-the-curriculum, or WAC, approaches that have been emerging since the 1980s. The basic philosophy of WAC is that writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community and that writing instruction must be continuous during all four years of undergraduate education. And a fundamental WAC principle is that only by practicing the conventions of an academic discipline will students begin to communicate effectively within that discipline. So the Institute proposed giving students the opportunity to write a draft and receive suggestions for revisions from one of the Institute's communication fellows.

Five years later, after Martell implemented the Institute's recommendations, his students in FIN 4720 have shown marked improvement, he says. "The assignment hasn't changed, but I see improvement in my students every year," he says. "It also shows these 20-something students that communications is important—it's important to me as a faculty member."

Martell's experience is an example of why the Institute is considered one of the most effective programs in teaching written, oral, and computer-aided communication in the country. Its strategy for supporting communication-intensive instruction conforms to a bottom-up, research-driven, faculty- and student-focused consultancy model that evolves as the Institute improves students' abilities to communicate—through, for example, a traditional expository essay, a videotaped speech, or a blog post.

Part think tank and part academic service unit, the Institute operates under the simple mandate that "aiding students in becoming better communicators is everyone's responsibility at Baruch," says Gershovich, who became the Institute's director in February 2006 and is currently a co-coordinator of the WAC program.

### **The Institute**

To understand how the Institute was created—and has grown into a model for developing and supporting communication-intensive curricula—you have to look at the college's history and its extraordinarily diverse student body.

Baruch's beginnings stretch back to 1847. Its Newman Vertical Campus is now located at Lexington and 24th Street in Manhattan, one block from the original site of the Free Academy, the country's first free institution of higher education. In 1919, the City University system created a school of business and civic administration on the site of the Academy. The next year, it added a master's degree in business administration. In 1953, the college was renamed in honor of Bernard M. Baruch, the statesman and financier who had been instrumental in the college's creation. In 1968, Baruch College became a freestanding college within the City University of New York. The College currently encompasses the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, the School of Public Affairs, and the Zicklin School of Business—now the largest school of business in the nation.

Even in its early years, the college was known for its diversity, drawing its student body from the immigrant populations

that called New York City home. Over the years, those populations have changed from Italian, Jewish, and German to today's immigrants from countries such as Turkey, Uzbekistan, and China. Approximately one-third of Baruch students were born outside the U.S., and half are the children of immigrants. About 90 percent of Baruch's undergraduate students graduated from New York City's public and parochial high schools, and more than half come from families with an income of less than \$44,000 annually. The college's nearly 16,000 students speak 110 languages and come from 160 countries—prompting publications such as *U.S. News and World Report* and the Princeton Review to name it “the most diverse university in the U.S.”

“The college always had to operate with the knowledge that for many of its students English wasn't just their second language but sometimes their third or fourth,” says Professor Paula Berggren, who has worked extensively with the Institute to enhance students' writing and oral communication skills in Great Works of Literature courses, which all Baruch students are required to take. Moreover, “in the U.S., we don't know how to communicate even if we're native English speakers.” By the mid-1990s, the combination of a school devoted to teaching business skills and a diverse and underprepared student body had created a situation in which “Baruch was turning out competent vocationally trained students who lacked an ease with communication,” Berggren says.

Baruch faculty members weren't the only ones who noticed the problem. Over the decades, Baruch had gained a reputation for turning out highly capable business majors who got very desirable jobs in accounting and other business sectors. But major employers reported that Baruch graduates sometimes lacked confidence, sophistication, and facility in business communication. The problem wasn't lost on the college's alumni either—including Bernard L. Schwartz, the former chairman and chief executive officer of Lorai Space & Communication, who had graduated from Baruch with a bachelor's of science degree in finance. He believed that Baruch needed to do a better job of teaching students real-world communication skills in addition to their core studies. In 1997 he donated the initial funding to create the Institute that now bears his name, with the expressed wish to help Baruch students become more effective communicators.

There are a number of ways to teach and enhance oral and written communication, from required communication-specific courses and formal academic support units to loose, informal programs driven primarily by individual faculty members. Baruch created an organization that operated somewhere between those two extremes. A few core principles and organizing structures were set down that have guided the Institute, but room was left for creativity and evolution stimulated by the changing needs of faculty and students and by technological developments.

The Institute isn't housed under a specific department—English or communication studies, for instance. In keeping with the idea that communication is everyone's responsibility, it operates under the Office of the Provost and remains independent of any one department's requirements or direct control. It also receives private funds (including ongoing support from Schwartz), giving it flexibility in the breadth, depth, and scope of the programs it offers. It invites outsiders, most notably from the business world, to discuss communication issues that are of importance to the employers who hire Baruch students. Each year, the Institute hosts an annual symposium that brings together faculty and business executives to explore areas of mutual concern, such as the role of new technologies in shaping criteria for effective communication in academic and business contexts.

### **Communication-Intensive Courses**

In addition to consulting and supporting courses such as Martell's, another task was to create specific courses to enhance student writing and oral communication capacities after the compulsory instruction they receive in their first year, when they are required to take two intensive writing courses and a speech communications course. As Gershovich says, “Freshman English isn't a magic pill you take to make yourself write well for the rest of your college career. We're moving away from the idea that written and oral communication are generalizable skills that one can attain in a required course and then apply across all genres and contexts.”

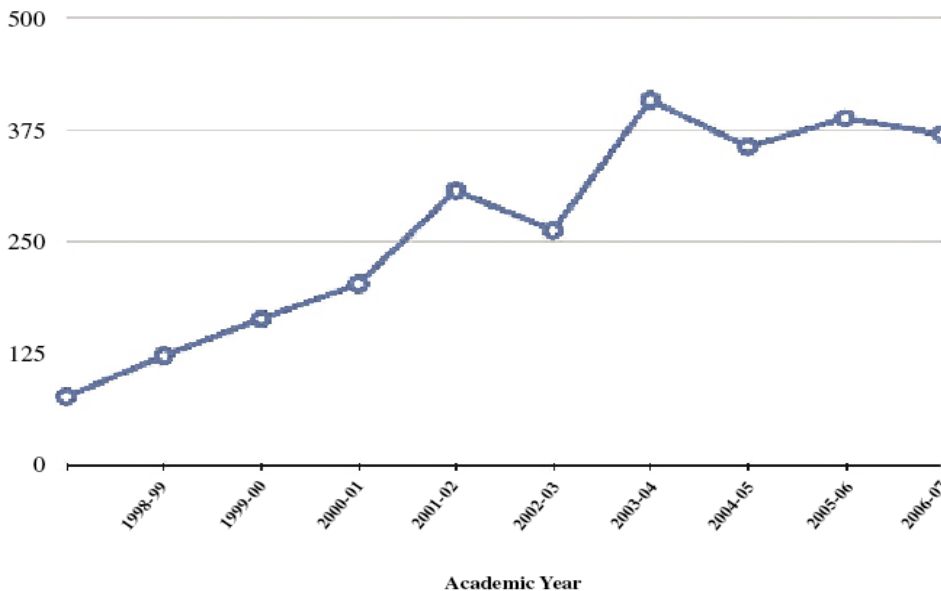
So, with the help of the Institute, Baruch's three schools created communication-intensive courses, or CICs, focused on oral, written, and (increasingly) computer-mediated communication. The CICs' central objective is to improve the students' written and/or oral communications skills. They do so by including substantial written and/or oral assignments as an integral part of the course's curriculum; having communication learning goals for the course; providing substantial feedback on the students' work; and giving students opportunities, as appropriate, to revise their work based on that feedback.

CICs are developed around the idea that it is important to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to practice and receive feedback on their ability to communicate. Teaching communication across the curriculum gives students more opportunities to explore different styles of academic writing and oral communication, not simply the expository writing they are familiar with from their freshman courses. "In CICs, students are put in something of a 'meta-position' thinking about how they communicate," says Diana Rickard, a senior communication fellow at the Institute. "By writing, they also are learning to think critically. Writing is as much about articulating ideas as it is about putting the grammar in the right place."

Understanding that such an intense focus on communication in these courses would add significantly to the workload of faculty, the Institute realized that one of its major functions was to support the faculty with communication fellows such as Rickard. These are doctoral students in a variety of disciplines with expertise in communication-across-the-curriculum strategies. They work within their own departments to help develop syllabi and assignments, conduct workshops for students, and plan and run faculty development seminars. In 2007, the Institute employed 27 fellows and three full-time staff.

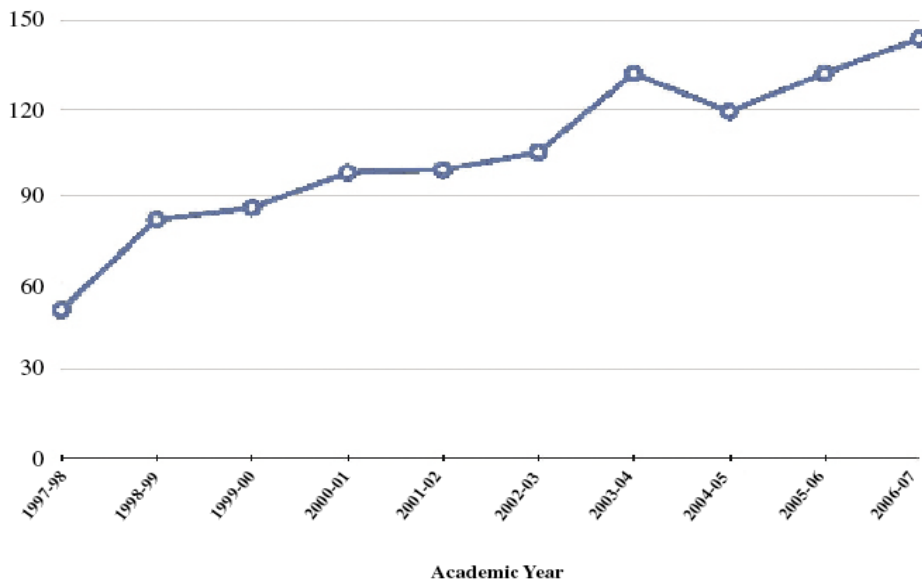
During the past 10 years, the number of CICs has risen dramatically. In 2007, the Institute supported 390 CIC sections with an enrollment of more than 14,000, five times the number of sections offered in 1997 (see Figure 1). The number of faculty members teaching CICs has also increased from under 60 to almost 150 (Figure 2) in 18 disciplines (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF COMMUNICATION-INTENSIVE COURSES OFFERED (1997-2007)**



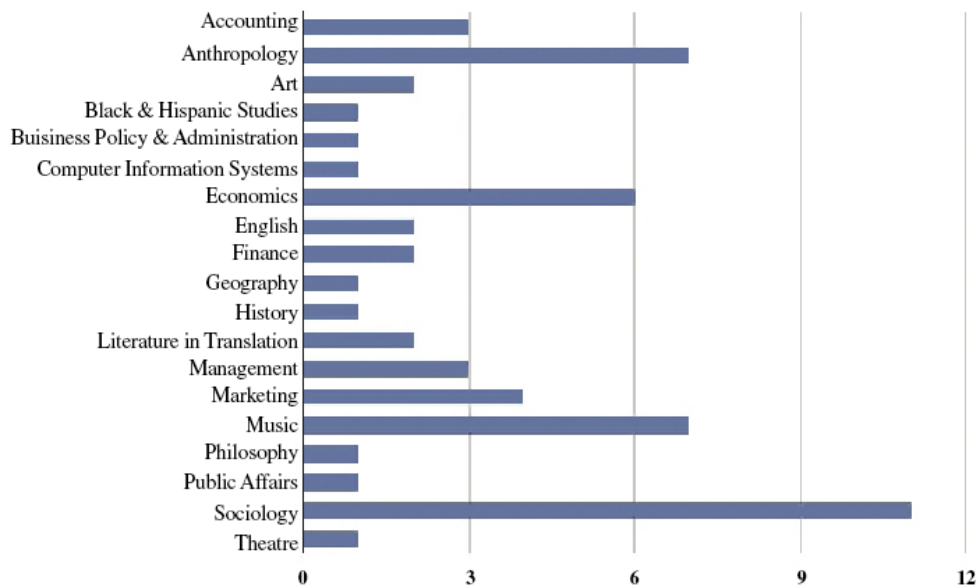
Source: Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, Baruch College, CUNY.

**FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF FACULTY TEACHING COMMUNICATION-INTENSIVE COURSES (1997-2007)**



Source: Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, Baruch College, CUNY.

**FIGURE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNICATION-INTENSIVE COURSES BY DISCIPLINE (2000-2007)**



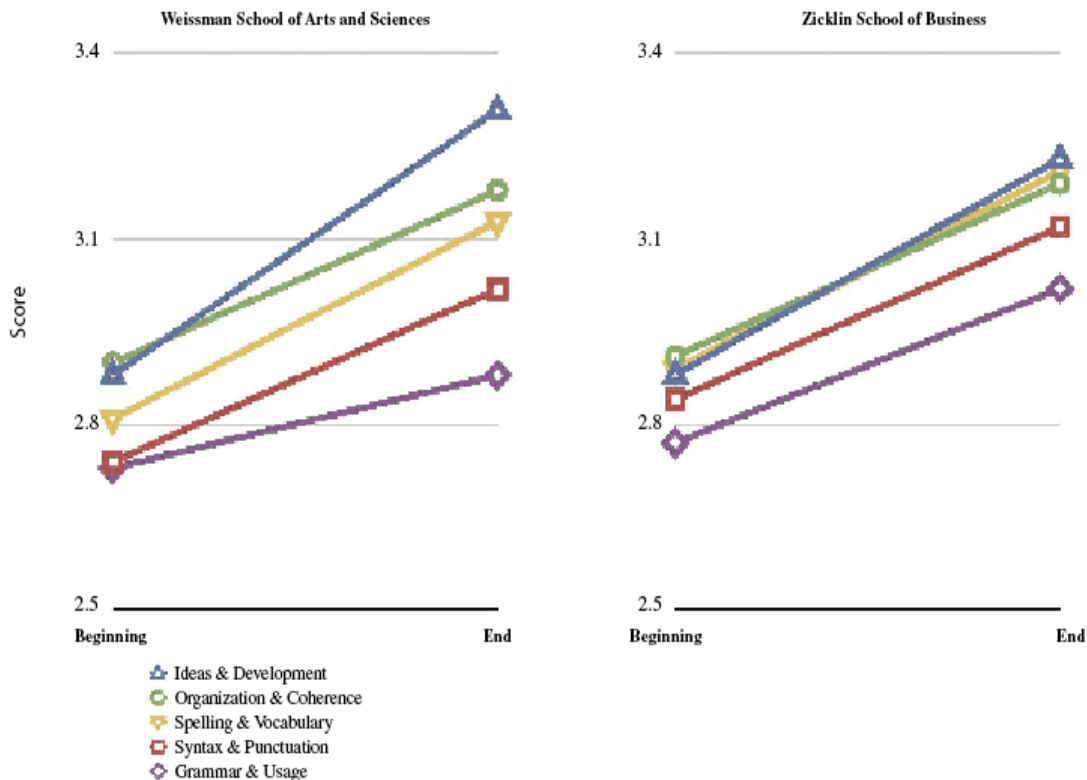
Source: Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, Baruch College, CUNY.

Baruch's Zicklin School of Business requires its students to take four CICs, one in each year of their studies. "We

realized that everyone, even those of us in business, needed to lift the boat,” says Phyllis Zadra, associate dean of the business school. And lift the boat they did. From 1997 to 2007, the Institute collected samples of student writing in CICs from across the disciplines to assess the effectiveness of the courses in improving students’ writing. At the beginning and end of each semester, students also wrote about their expectations for the class they were taking. The samples were scored by the Institute’s fellows according to criteria that focused on both writing quality and the development of student expectations for the course.

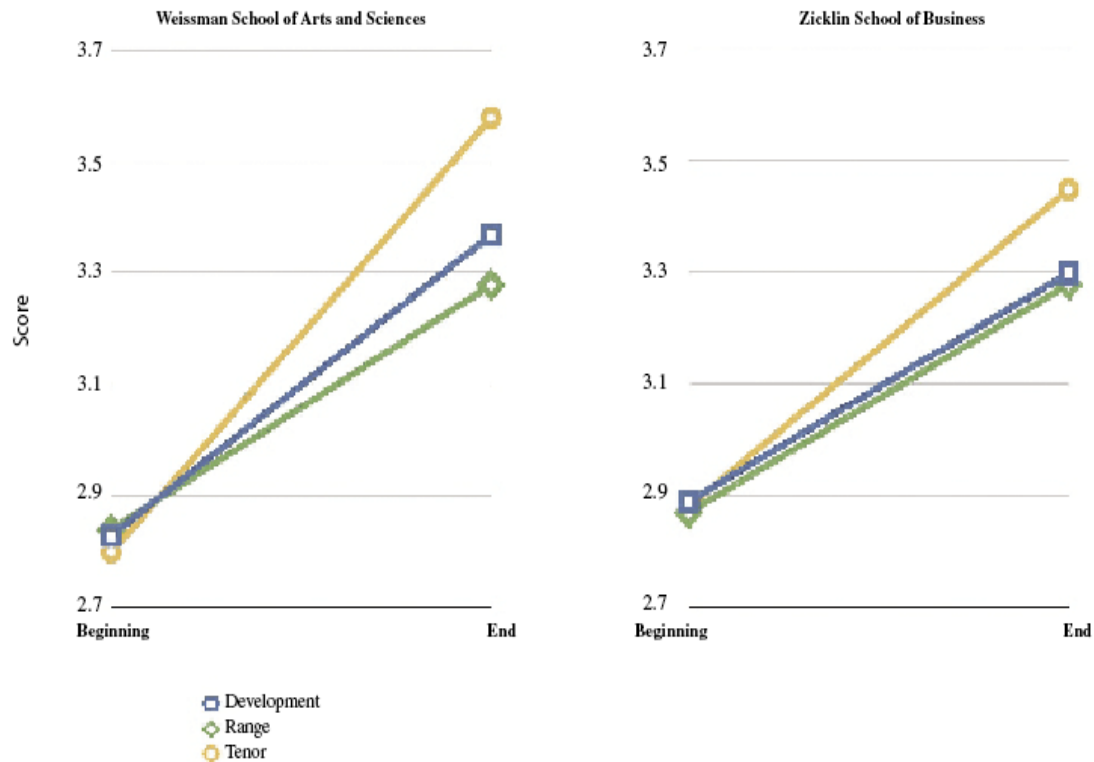
The Institute’s research shows that there was, on average, significant improvement over the course of one semester in a CIC. Figure 4 shows the average change in performance in writing during the past 10 years among students who scored in the low to middle range on writing performance in the Institute’s longitudinal study of student writing in CICs. Students’ attitudes toward the course moved from neutral at the beginning of the class to largely positive by the end. T-tests were conducted that showed that the amount of change in the quality of students’ writing and the expectations they had for CIC curricula were statistically significant (See Figure 5).

**FIGURE 4. AVERAGE CHANGE IN THE QUALITY OF STUDENTS’ WRITING DURING ONE SEMESTER (1997-2007)**



Source: Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, Baruch College, CUNY. Note: These graphs illustrate the average amount of change in five aspects of the quality of students’ writing samples. Fellows scored the students’ writing samples on each of the five dimensions at the beginning and end of each semester.

**FIGURE 5. AVERAGE CHANGE IN STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS DURING ONE SEMESTER (1997-2007)**



Source: Bernard L. Schwartz, Communication Institute, Baruch College, CUNY. Note: These graphs illustrate the average amount of change in three aspects of students' responses (according to assessment-specific criteria for the CIC in which they were enrolled). Fellows scored the students' writing samples on each of the three dimensions at the beginning and of each semester.

### Explaining Success

As educators know, even a great philosophy and a solid real-world strategy for implementing a vision doesn't always lead to success. But during its first decade, the Institute has been able to fulfill to a great extent the mission it was given in 1997. The challenges were outlined by Baruch's then-president Matthew Goldstein, now chancellor of the City University of New York, when he called on the Institute to operate in the context of "shrinking budgets, larger classes, a sense that communication is the province of the speech (now communication studies) and English departments, and above all, a preponderance of first-generation college students, a majority of whom are not native English speakers"—challenges well-recognized by the college's current president, Kathleen Waldron, who actively supports the Institute's efforts.

Both faculty and those working at the Institute say that partnerships and flexibility are the primary reasons for the Institute's effectiveness and its long-term success in meeting the challenges Goldstein elaborated. Instead of establishing a formal, rigid structure for how faculty will work with the Institute and the fellows, the Institute leaves the specific details up to each faculty member.

"We have learned that we can't say, 'This is our program and you have to follow it,'" says Diana Rickard, the Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the City University of New York's Graduate Center who works with the sociology and anthropology departments. "We are here to meet the specific needs of the department." The Institute serves so many different CICs and other programs that the fellows operate very differently from one another based on the specific needs

of each course or faculty member they support—helping out with oral presentations in one course and written work in another. Despite the variety of tasks, “What we do know is that strong faculty development leads us to reach more students than if we were solely reaching out to students through seminars or workshops,” Rickard says.

Consider, for example, the capstone business policy course, BPL 5100. More than 2,000 students will take BPL 5100 in their last year of college. The course is taught in 35-37 sections, with class sizes of about 25 students. A significant portion of the grade is based on a group presentation. “We stress oral communication in this course because in addition to teaching students about companies and industries, we also are teaching them confidence and competence,” says Professor Al Boone, who coordinates the course for the Zicklin School of Business.

But if the professors teaching the course were to spend their time preparing students for their group oral presentations, they would not be able to focus on the course content. So the students meet several times with the Institute’s fellows as they prepare for the presentations and accompanying writing assignments. In addition to coaching the students, the fellows videotape presentation rehearsals and review the videos with students.

For many students, Boone says, the taping and subsequent review provide an opportunity to work on things like accents and making eye contact even if they come from a culture that considers that rude. “It is learning that it is not only what you say but how you say it that will make a difference,” he says. “These students will leave us in about six months, so they must learn to communicate without fear.” Boone says there is no way he could have both taught the course material and readied students for the work world in this way without Institute’s help. He notes that what makes it work so well is that the Institute serves as a resource, not as an outsider that tells him what to do. “It’s not an invasion of my turf,” he says. “It’s not adversarial, it’s not a subordinate with a supervisor—it’s a true partnership.”

Rickard agrees that the system works well when everyone understands that “we aren’t teaching assistants or student tutors.” Rather, she sees her role as providing the faculty with tools that can help improve student writing or public speaking regardless of the course they are teaching. Those range from offering faculty insight into strategies such as low-stakes writing assignments that aren’t a major part of the grade to operating seminars for students if a faculty member wants them to understand a specific task, such as writing an ethnography. She also helps faculty stage assignments and offers them advice. “I de-emphasize the mechanics of writing. I don’t want them to get bogged down in line-editing students’ work,” she says. “I suggest they edit a paragraph to show what the errors are. There are other resources in the school that can help students with the mechanics.”

Rickard determines what the faculty need by being in the middle of the action. “I have a cubicle that’s in the center of the department,” she says. “It can be hard to get faculty members to sit down for 20 minutes, but if they see me sitting there, they’ll throw out a question, we start talking, and soon we’ve had that 20-minute conversation. We’re part of the department, and that helps inform our program. We’re also intellectual colleagues, so we don’t need to be taught the content of the courses.”

Two recent initiatives in blogging and assessment show how the Institute works to vet new communication tools—particularly in technology—and incorporate them into the curriculum.

A few years ago, the Institute began its own blog, [cac.ophony.org](http://cac.ophony.org), as a way to explore that new writing venue—or, as Gershovich calls it, “online personal publishing platform.” The Institute’s blog is an online space where fellows can reflect on their work and contribute to broader, ongoing conversations on teaching communication across the curriculum. It also helps Institute staff to better understand the medium as they help faculty integrate blogs in their teaching through the Institute’s Blogs@Baruch project (<http://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu>), a venture, fully supported by the Baruch Computing and Technology Center, that enables faculty to easily create weblogs for instructional or personal use.

“Our feeling is that any opportunity students have to write is going to improve their writing,” Gershovich says. “Blogging, as written reflection, helps students engage course content. Writing is a way of thinking and, in this instance, a means for exploring the various dimensions of what students are studying, both collectively and more informally than in individual high-stakes writing assignments.”

In keeping with the flexible nature of the Institute, it uses WordPress, highly customizable open-source blogging software, which Gershovich says allows students to engage in a conversation on course material with their classmates and the professor and gives professors the freedom to experiment with the medium.

Rickard says one professor broke her class into five student teams and had each team use the course blog to reflect on the readings and presentations. “That made it easy to keep track of student posts and manage the project,” she says. Rickard says she thinks blogs will be a great way for students to create drafts of formal essays, explore different voices, and “relieve the teacher from grading hundreds of papers that all say the same thing at the end of the term.”

Gershovich is also focusing more attention on oral communication. The Institute, in its role as a think tank as well as consultancy, is making use of the Video Oral Communication Assessment Tool (VOCAT), a web application developed for Baruch, to help improve and assess students’ oral communication skills. VOCAT came out of a theater course in which presentations were videotaped and scored online. But Gershovich saw a broader application for the software. “When you show students videos of themselves speaking, they realize they are doing things they aren’t aware of,” he says. “Playing the videos back to them helps to develop a sense of critical self-awareness that is essential for good public speaking.”

The Institute is now starting to incorporate VOCAT in Baruch’s freshman seminar, in which students are videotaped so they can continue to improve their oral communication skills throughout college. “In the end they will have a portfolio of oral communication, just as they might have a collection of writing,” Gershovich says.

Representing a new direction in the Institute’s work not just in teaching but in formative and summative assessment, VOCAT has piqued the interest of a number of interested parties at the college, including alumni for whom the goals of the VOCAT initiative resonate on a personal level. Walter Barandiaran, a co-founder and managing partner of a private equity firm (the Argentum Group), struggled to gain proficiency in public speaking while he was an undergraduate at Baruch, at a time when efforts to improve student oral communication were largely outside the curriculum. “Given the ethnic and cultural diversity of Baruch students, we need to address the absolute necessity of speaking well throughout the curriculum, in order to leverage Baruch’s outstanding education and ensure a successful future beyond Baruch,” Barandiaran says.

### **Communicating About Cultures**

The Institute was born out of Baruch’s diversity and the acknowledgement that the college’s focus on teaching strong technical skills was insufficient to ensure its graduates’ success in the work world. Today, Baruch faculty say that that same diversity—coupled with students’ stronger communications skills—is giving their students a leg up in a world that will increasingly depend on the capacities of people with diverse languages, cultures, and customs to communicate with each other.

“This isn’t just an issue for us—it’s a national issue,” says Paula Berggren, the English professor who coordinates the college’s Great Works program. As the nation becomes more diverse, she points out, we all need to understand the philosophies and literatures of other parts of the world—the parts that many of Baruch’s students come from. In the 1990s, the faculty began to realize that they were dealing with an international student body but were teaching only Western works in the Great Works course. So they recast it to include Confucius, haikus from Japan, and stories from Southeast Asia. “We wanted to be internationally responsible,” Berggren says.

When the Institute was formed, she saw an opportunity to do even more. “I had students who weren’t native English speakers, and I had students who could answer questions perfectly but couldn’t articulate a point of view.” So she worked to have the Great Works course become a CIC. She wanted to put communication tools in students’ hands so they could bring their knowledge of other cultures into the classroom. Berggren ultimately succeeded in adding a fourth hour to the course for working on writing and oral communication skills, even though students still receive only three credit hours for the course. “The students understood that this was important,” she says. “It has been transformative.”

As with many of the courses that the Institute works with, the changes are sometimes subtle. “We work with faculty on determining the best kinds of assignments. We let them know that they can’t give an assignment that says, ‘Wordsworth says this: Discuss,’ and expect to get what they want,” remarks Berggren. She adds that revisions and rewriting have been built into the course and that there is more “free writing,” simply putting down thoughts about what they have read.

Students are then asked to read out loud and present works from their own cultures in class. “The high-water mark for me was when a Chinese student picked a Chinese poet to discuss, and we worked through the poem, deconstructing it as a class,” she says. “This validates to students that their cultures is as rich as the cultures of the West. It gives the students authority.”

It also gives them a view into cultures, races, and ethnicities that they will encounter as they go out into the world. “We already have the multicultural diversity, and that makes us extraordinary,” Martell says. The Great Works course, as a CIC, gives students the capacity to communicate effectively with each other about their cultural identities. “They are learning to deal with more than one culture, even if they are from cultures that aren’t getting along outside these walls, such as Palestinians and Israelis. I see diamonds in the rough here, and we are here to polish them. We have done something good for these students, for the city, and eventually for the country.