



Fall 2021 Newsletter

Grounding a Community College Education in Social Justice and Civic Engagement

By: Dr. Meghan Gilbert-Hickey, Area Coordinator, Writing Program

Dr. Daniel Collins, Program Coordinator, First-Year Experience

Dr. Allyson Bregman, Director, First-Year Experience and Curriculum

The Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, the first City University of New York (CUNY) community college to open in over forty years, welcomed its inaugural class in August 2012, and it has since become a high-profile hub of innovation in higher education. Guttman is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a diverse student body across race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and neurodiversity. The educational model of the college is grounded in student-centered learning and incorporates a series of high-impact practices (HIPs), including learning communities, integrative learning, and experiential learning. The college recently transformed its First-Year Experience (FYE) curriculum with the inclusion of two new courses in social justice and civic engagement and a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy.¹ The creation of *Introduction to Social Justice and Civic Engagement in a Global Society* occurred alongside complementary changes to the college's composition program, change informed by Guttman's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. The college is also reviewing the remaining courses in the FYE program (Ethnographies of Work I and II and Statistics) with the goal of decolonizing the curriculum. Taken as a whole, this transformation of the FYE underscores the ways in which Guttman is dedicated to being an academic institution grounded in educating for equity and social justice.

In response to both the recent movements for racial and social justice and Guttman students' calls for curricular change and activism at the college, this work is informed by a broad and robust body of scholarship on culturally responsive pedagogy. *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad has been of particular influence. This work traces the history of Black genius and the productive and disruptive ways that Black individuals and communities have used reading, writing, and learning practices to create, solidify, and celebrate Black identity and to decenter oppressive modes of thought and action. Using this history as a framework, Muhammad details a pedagogy that values and sustains Black genius. In a recent virtual visit to Guttman, Mohammad presented to faculty, staff, and administration her framework for student success. This workshop commenced work to incorporate linguistic, racial, and social justice across the whole FYE experience while deepening ongoing efforts to advance culturally responsive pedagogy throughout the program.

The two new courses, *Introduction to Social Justice and Civic Engagement in a Global Society*, both within the field of American Studies, are designed to anchor the integrative FYE curriculum. The first course introduces social justice with a particular focus on U.S.-based issues, while the second builds upon that foundation with an exploration of civic engagement and social movements across the globe. Launched during the 2021-2022 academic year, the courses will

provide a core set of concepts, mindsets, and tools related to community engagement. They will also incorporate experiential learning opportunities, asking students to examine their own neighborhoods and apply what they have learned to issues of importance to them. This sort of engaged practice links the production of knowledge to a given community's social, economic, and cultural development and, ideally, the advancement of social justice in that community and beyond. As American Studies courses with an interdisciplinary approach, mixed methods, and a focus on U.S. culture in a global context, *Introduction to Social Justice* and *Civic Engagement in a Global Society* provide extensive tools for unpacking social structures and exposing students to the many ways in which meaning, and understanding, can be constructed.

Likewise, Guttman's Composition program has recently restructured its practice around a linguistic justice framework informed by such luminary scholars as Gholdy Muhammad, Bettina A. Love, Ocean Young, Asao B. Inoue, April Baker Bell, and others. This initiative began with an overhaul of the program's Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) to be more dynamic and student-centered and, significantly, to be more accessible and assessable. Writing faculty next restructured Composition assessment based on the revised CLOs. The goals of these changes include increasing students' agency as thinkers and writers, creating and expanding spaces within which they ask and answer hard questions about identity and positionality, and examining how these goals relate to and are informed by writing practices and products. At the same time, writing faculty engaged with the task of decolonizing language and decentering deficit ideologies around writing, particularly those ideologies that upheld standardized academic discourse conventions (e.g., diction reflecting middle class values; veneer of objectivity; conventional uses of grammar and punctuation) as the sole marker of linguistic competence or excellence. This work culminated in a reading list (poetry, prose, academic writing), as well as sample assignment prompts and rubrics that interrogate and value linguistic variety. Here, the goal is to ensure that students see themselves represented in writing and, thus, envision and enact their roles as writers and creators of knowledge.

As the writing program solidified its new focus, writing faculty also began to think about the ways in which the first-year Composition sequence could inform writing in the Programs of Study (i.e., academic majors). A group of writing instructors created and implemented a training and certification process for instructors of writing intensive courses that emphasizes equitable writing pedagogy and assessment. Here, we relied on the first-hand experiences of Guttman's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Fellows. Within CUNY, a Writing Fellow is an advanced Ph.D. student from the CUNY Graduate Center who works at a campus WAC Program. At Guttman, WAC Fellows work with faculty and instructional teams to support the development of curricula, assignments, classroom activities, and assessment measures grounded in WAC best practices. In particular, Fellows work with faculty to plan and refine writing activities that support students with diverse backgrounds and differing levels of preparation in order to implement equitable, linguistically just writing pedagogy. In partnering with Guttman's WAC Fellows, the writing instructors were able to tap into a broad set of pedagogical experiences and expertise.

These changes to the First Year Experience exemplify Guttman Community College's commitment to addressing civic empowerment as a pedagogical imperative. The next steps in this work include establishing robust partnerships with local community-based organizations and regional affiliates of national and international organizations working on behalf of social justice

and civic engagement. We seek to provide students with a range of experiential learning opportunities with agencies directly involved in community change in New York City. We also strive to establish Guttman as a community college invested and actively engaged in the pursuit of community betterment, fully realizing our potential as a public institution.

Notes

1. Our FYE is a set of required courses students take across their first year. Taking classes in learning communities created for the academic year, students take the two American Studies courses, Composition I and II, Ethnographies of Work I and II, and Statistics. They also take a no-credit course on academic preparation: LaBSS, or Learning About Becoming a Successful Student.

Works Cited

Mohammad, Gholdy. *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. New York: Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2020.