Background
Writing instruction is a foundation of undergraduate education at New York University. The majority of undergraduate students at NYU fulfill formal writing requirements through the Expository Writing Program (EWP) in the College of Arts and Science (CAS). This includes students in CAS; the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development; the Silver School of Social Work; the Tisch School of the Arts; and the Polytechnic School of Engineering. Several schools have developed writing curricula independent of EWP, including the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, Liberal Studies, the School of Professional Studies (SPS), and the Stern School of Business. Writing course requirements differ across schools at NYU and include either one or two courses, taken during the first year.

Although all NYU students complete formal writing coursework, students’ writing competencies vary widely. At the end of the undergraduate experience, some students demonstrate strong, effective writing, while others continue to have difficulty with written expression. Irrespective of a student’s writing skills upon admission to NYU, an array of factors may contribute to the range of writing abilities seen among students. These include the content of writing courses, the degree of individualized attention students receive from writing instructors, the amount and the type of writing across the curriculum, and the availability and use of student support.

Subcommittee on Undergraduate Writing
During the fall 2013 semester, the Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee (UAAC) formed a subcommittee on undergraduate writing. This subcommittee was charged with gathering an inventory of writing requirements across the schools at NYU. Subcommittee members met with contacts in different schools, including directors of writing programs (where such positions existed). Information was obtained on the following topics: (1) the structure and objectives of the writing program; (2) the strengths of writing instruction and areas in need of improvement; (3) feedback from faculty and students regarding writing instruction; and (4) the resources available to faculty and students.

The committee identified six points of interest regarding writing instruction at NYU. The first point concerns the philosophy of writing instruction. The philosophies of the writing programs across NYU differ, and thus the writing objectives that are presented to students also differ. Some programs, for instance, focus on expository writing with little emphasis on writing mechanics, while others assess competencies in mechanics as part of writing instruction. A related point is that faculty outside the writing programs may not be aware of the learning objectives of the writing courses. This has led to confusion over who is responsible for writing instruction and where certain skills should be learned. Several schools have established writing objectives across the four-year experience. There are also programs that focus on writing across the disciplines.

The second point relates to writing support for students. Each of the writing programs at NYU offers students the opportunity to meet with an instructor or a peer to discuss their writing. (These services either require an appointment or are offered on a walk-in basis.) The aspects of this support that
warrant attention are the goals of the services (e.g., “focus on the task vs. the competency”), the identification of students in need of support, the awareness and utilization of such resources, as well as their accessibility to students. The latter varies across the schools: while at least one school (Gallatin) with its own writing program makes its resources available to its own students, the support offered through EWP (via the Writing Center) is available to all students, regardless of whether they enroll in EWP courses. There is also wide variation among NYU’s eleven global sites in terms of the writing support that is available to students when they study away. Technology may facilitate the expansion of writing support to students who are having difficulty accessing it—e.g., while they are studying away or during periods of high demand such as midterms or finals. Support could be provided either “synchronously” (e.g., through web conferencing) or “asynchronously” (e.g., through online videos).

The third point concerns support for instructors who are interested in improving writing instruction in their courses. While the level of support in this area varies from school to school, in general there are fewer resources available to instructors than are needed. Two groups that would benefit from increased levels of support are “new” instructors (not only first-time faculty but also graduate students who teach) and faculty who teach at the global sites.

The fourth point of interest is feedback about writing instruction. Faculty satisfaction with writing instruction, as reported by school contacts, varies greatly. Recurring themes were that first-year writing courses do not always prepare students for college or professional writing, that there should be more emphasis on writing across the curriculum, that writing courses do not take into consideration a sufficiently broad range of disciplinary expectations (e.g., scientific writing), and that there is a need to focus on writing mechanics. With regard to student feedback on writing instruction, several school contacts reported that this is often tied to students’ perceptions of and interest in writing, which differs across schools and disciplines.

A fifth area of concern is communication. There is a wide disparity in the degree of communication, both among instructors within the same program and between instructors and students. In addition, there is little communication among the writing program directors (or their equivalents) in different schools. Several writing programs are engaged in an ongoing assessment of their writing courses, the performance of their instructors, and the needs of their students. The degree to which this level of interaction occurs within other schools/programs is unknown.

The sixth and final point of interest is writing instruction and support for international, transfer, and nontraditional students. Students for whom English is a second language currently benefit from specialized writing instruction offered by EWP and by the American Language Institute in SPS. These two units have collaborated productively to meet the needs of individual students for both writing and ESL instruction. But given the large increase in the international student population (which, at the undergraduate level, has doubled in the past five years), it has become clear that greater coordination is needed among a number of parties, including not only EWP and the ALI but also Undergraduate Admissions and the various undergraduate schools. In addition to specialized instruction, there may also be a need for different types of writing support for international students. With regard to students transferring to NYU from two or four-year institutions, the writing requirements that they must fulfill vary by school, which suggests a degree of incoherence across the University. Finally, nontraditional students may also present unique writing challenges. The extent to which writing instruction and support at NYU meets the particular needs of these three groups of students should be assessed.
Recommendation
Based upon the points of interest described above, the committee recommends that the writing directors in the various schools be asked to convene regularly as a group. The broad objective of the group would be to identify best practices in writing instruction upon which all schools and programs can build. This is not to suggest that a “one size fits all” approach is preferable; rather, by focusing on shared objectives among the various writing programs a common platform for writing instruction at NYU may begin to emerge.

This group should include representation from each school and/or writing program at NYU (including NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai). It may also be appropriate to include other faculty and students on this group, as well as representatives from Undergraduate Admissions. The broad makeup of this group will facilitate communication among the relevant parties. In particular, discussions with Undergraduate Admissions will provide an opportunity to explore the relationship between admissions expectations (with respect to writing), the objectives of writing courses, and the resources needed to improve writing instruction at NYU.

Here are a number of suggestions for tasks (grouped by category) that the group of writing directors should consider:

Objectives:
- inventory the writing objectives of the various schools/programs (including objectives for international, transfer, and nontraditional students), with the goal of identifying and/or establishing a set of common objectives (i.e., an NYU “platform” of writing);
- explore ways of addressing writing objectives across the undergraduate experience;
- examine how the objectives of writing courses align with disciplinary expectations and student needs;
- examine the relationship between, on the one hand, student credentials and the writing standards and expectations that Undergraduate Admissions uses to select candidates, and, on the other, writing course objectives across NYU; and
- determine whether students are achieving these various objectives (e.g., by reviewing the outcomes assessments that are currently in place for these programs and courses).

Resources:
- identify resources available to faculty in all schools to improve writing instruction in courses (including resources available to schools/programs to explore ways of teaching writing across the curriculum);
- explore the relationship between student needs and the availability of writing support (e.g., the possible need for additional resources, including online materials, during periods of high demand);
- examine the specific needs of international, transfer, and nontraditional students; and
- identify mechanisms for increasing student awareness and use of resources.

Feedback:
- conduct a faculty survey about writing at NYU; and
- conduct a student survey about writing at NYU.
Evaluation:
• explore methods for the ongoing evaluation of students’ writing across the schools, as it develops through formal writing courses, as well as through disciplinary and professional courses taken throughout their undergraduate career.