

[INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE AND HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES]

The First Year at LaGuardia Community College

■ **PAUL ARCARIO**, dean for academic affairs at Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York

Since accepting its first incoming class in 1971, Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College has been a gateway to college for thousands of students—immigrant, minority, low income, and first generation—who might not otherwise have access to higher education. One of seventeen undergraduate colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY), LaGuardia serves over 15,000 degree-seeking students and 39,000 students in noncredit and outreach programs. Among our degree-seeking students, approximately 60 percent are foreign-born, representing 156 countries and speaking

one developmental skills course. Our students must also cope with the demands of their outside lives: almost half of new students work, 40 percent are enrolled part time, and all students commute. These contexts make it difficult to instill in students the sense of connection to the institution so necessary to college persistence. To translate access to success, our faculty and administration felt we would need to craft a multifaceted approach to the first year. We focused on two major goals to improve persistence and success: (a) fostering seamless transitions between developmental, English language

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118 different languages, and almost half of these students have been in the United States under five years. Seventy-eight percent of our students are racial and ethnic minorities, 60 percent are first-generation college students, and nearly three-quarters of independent degree students report a family income of less than \$25,000.

LaGuardia's rich diversity is a definite asset, as students learn to prosper in an environment that reflects the increasingly multicultural demographics of our society. But at LaGuardia, this diversity also translates into a campus of students who have been traditionally underserved by the educational system. In many cases, students are academically underprepared, with almost 80 percent of first-time degree-seeking students needing at least

learning, and discipline-area work, and (b) creating a sense of community and heightened engagement with the college.

Integrating Developmental and Disciplinary Work

A central aspect of community college education—certainly a large part of who we are and what we do at LaGuardia—is defined by developmental courses. At many institutions, basic skills reside at the fringe of the curriculum in a set of “precollege” courses that students must complete before pursuing courses in the major. At LaGuardia, for example, basic writing, reading, and English as a Second Language (ESL) are noncredit courses and are prerequisites to many introductory courses in the majors.

Unsurprisingly, incoming students have complained that their developmental course work is not connected to their reason for coming to college—that is, to study a particular field. As a result, students in developmental courses often do not feel connected to the college, their classes, and their academic aspirations.

Seeing this disconnect, we asked: How can we challenge our students, foster connection-making, and incorporate basic skills learning into the disciplines? Our answer has been to contextualize skills development within disciplinary coursework. We believe that students learn best when they can apply their skills to academic subject matter, rather than when skills instruction is separate from and prior to discipline-area instruction. In fact, LaGuardia has a long history of integrating basic skills and discipline-area instruction through our first-year learning communities, which have paired ESL classes with courses such as accounting, introduction to business, and biochemistry. Despite their success, our learning communities have historically served a relatively small percentage of incoming students. We saw a need not only to expand the learning communities, but also to connect extracurricular activities with the curriculum and provide students with more information about career development. We knew we could extend the learning communities' reach and improve our existing program in multiple ways.

First Year Academies

To create the cohesive and comprehensive first-year experience we envisioned, the college established First Year Academies. Linking student development services with curricular offerings, the academies are designed to focus the first-year experience around the major. Based on their intended majors, all incoming students now enter one of three academies (business/technology, allied health, and liberal arts). These academies function



LaGuardia Community College students work on their e-portfolios within the learning communities.

as “schools-within-a-school,” combining a range of activities including discipline-specific New Student Seminars, a newly developed second-semester career development course titled Fundamentals of Professional Advancement, initiation of student electronic portfolios (e-portfolios), and an array of discipline-relevant cocurricular activities (such as career orientation and speaker events).

The academies’ learning communities are particularly important to this integrative approach. The academies have both embraced existing ESL learning communities and created new communities focused on non-ESL basic reading, writing, and mathematics. Each academy now offers a series of learning communities that link developmental courses with credit-bearing disciplinary courses. Thirty-six percent of eligible students (that is, day students who need basic skill training) enroll in these communities. The faculty within each learning community collaborate to forge connections between classes. Learning communities place students who require basic skills courses in contact with their majors upon entering college, providing the opportunity to earn credits toward the major or general education requirements. ESL, for example,

has been paired with courses such as Accounting, Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers, Introduction to Sociology, and Biochemistry. The learning communities also include a freshman seminar that offers academic and career guidance, as well as a “studio hour” where students begin constructing e-portfolios. Most importantly, the learning communities provide all students with the chance to *be* college students, both in name and through meaningful academic and social experiences.

Common Intellectual Experiences

As an entry point to higher education for many students who might not otherwise have access, LaGuardia needs to foster first-year students’ sense of community and connectedness to the college. To create an intellectual experience that is shared among students in the First Year Academies, establish an academic tone for new students, and communicate our expectation that critical reading skills are key to academic success, we developed a common reading program. Each year a faculty committee selects a book that is accessible to students and rich enough in content to connect to discipline-area classes. Selections have included *Having*

Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years; Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*; Tamim Ansary’s *West of Kabul, East of New York*; *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre Project; Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*; Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*; and Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*. All incoming students receive the book free of charge, and a faculty team creates a Web site and study guide with links, resources, and suggested assignments. LaGuardia also holds a series of common reading events, which have ranged from a field trip to New York City’s El Museo del Barrio to a multimedia and dance presentation on Afghanistan and the Islamic Diaspora. In addition, we have organized lunchtime book discussions with the college president, encouraged students to enter our annual essay contest, and provided students the opportunity to meet and question authors on campus.

The common reading also provides the basis for faculty-led discussions during Opening Sessions for New Students, an event designed to give students a feel for the college experience—the essence of which is engaging with faculty in the world of ideas. To set the intellectual tone, we plan the day as an academic conference, with a plenary session, faculty-led small-group colloquia, and concurrent workshops on topics such as leadership, women’s issues, communication, student clubs, student success stories, community activism, and diversity. Survey assessments of our Opening Sessions program indicate that students consistently rate the opportunity to discuss the common reading with faculty members as the most significant part of the day.

E-portfolios in the First Year—and Beyond

Electronic portfolios are a key part of students’ experiences at LaGuardia. LaGuardia’s e-portfolio initiative provides students with a tool for collecting and

sharing their academic work and reflections on their learning. Students begin their e-portfolios during the First Year Academies and continually refine them as they move forward with their educations, always reflecting on their processes of growth and improvement. Students have integrated original paintings, drawings, oral interviews, family photographs, poetry, résumés, and a range of class projects that represent who they are as students and emerging scholars.

In the first year, e-portfolios place particular emphasis on guiding students to define and clarify their academic and career goals—prompting them from the outset of their academic careers to take responsibility for and reflect upon their learning. All sections of the second-semester career development course, Fundamentals of Professional Advancement, have an attached studio hour for intensive e-portfolio work. At the institutional level, e-portfolios also allow the faculty to assess student development by comparing students' work at the beginning of their academic careers with work created later. The work first-year students place in their e-portfolios thus provides a baseline for faculty to measure growth as students progress toward graduation. For more about LaGuardia's e-portfolio project, visit www.eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu.

Outcomes

While these programs continue to expand and evolve, we have been encouraged by their outcomes to date. Semester-to-semester retention rates for academy learning community students are 75.6 percent (compared with 71.7 percent for the college as a whole). Pass rates in academy learning community courses average 77.1 percent, versus 72 percent for the same courses offered as “stand-alones.” For the learning communities' basic writing course, the pass rate is six percentage points higher than in stand-alone sections (69.5 percent versus 63.6 percent).

The academies are a work in progress. We are continually experimenting with how to use this structure to achieve what we believe are important first-year goals: creating opportunities for students to develop meaningful connections to the campus, to the faculty, to their chosen discipline, and to one another. ☐

[PERSPECTIVES]

First-Year Learning Communities: A Student's Experience

■ SUZANA SJENICIC, first-year student at LaGuardia Community College

In September 2008, I started classes at LaGuardia Community College. Not knowing what to expect from my professors, my classes, or my classmates, I was extremely nervous. I felt like I was entering foreign territory where anything could happen. I was anxious to find out what was waiting for me.

My nervousness didn't last long. At the beginning of the semester, Professors William Koolsbergen and Phyllis Van Slyck greeted us with friendly faces. They introduced us to the topics we would cover in the learning community cluster and explained that they would teach five classes, including one they would teach together. I loved the idea of having the same students in all my classes, and I was glad that Drs. Koolsbergen and Van Slyck would be my only professors. I was eager to begin my journey and had high expectations.

The cluster focused on the 1960s. Knowing that the sixties was a period of change and liberation for many social groups in the United States, I was excited to learn more. By writing essays, working on presentations and group activities, watching movies, and discussing topics as a class, we learned about the Summer of Love, the women's movement, gay liberation, the Vietnam War, and civil rights. Through my research, I discovered what different groups had been through, and I wrote many essays exploring my beliefs about equality.

Professor Phyllis and Professor Will made me feel at home in class. I loved going to school, no matter how much I had to study or how many essays I had to write, and I completed assignments with pleasure. The professors were always ready to help with assignments, answer questions, and make lessons fun.

I bonded with other students through the cluster, and we became great friends. We came together as a group to help each other learn, both inside and outside of school. We shared our different thoughts, beliefs, and interests, and we helped each other when we had questions about homework or assignments. We made each other's lives much easier. I believe that some of us will remain friends after we graduate.

Through the cluster, our professors showed us how exciting it is to follow our dreams and how many opportunities college offers. I am grateful that I was able to work with great professors and make good friends in my first semester. This experience has motivated me to move forward and reach toward the highest goals I have set for myself. ☐