

# Portal to the Future: Creating Community across Complex Boundaries

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## **Abstract**

*LaGuardia has created a successful first-year experience for the most diverse student body in the history of higher education, a population that is a harbinger of the future of higher education in this country. After outlining how we implemented our program relatively quickly by building upon our history of innovation and community building, we describe the process of launching the program, activities, assessment, and next steps.*

Every era thinks of itself as being on the precipice of change, facing startling new developments with exhilarating or frightening consequences. The beginning of the twenty-first century is no exception. As has been written so many times, the current era is characterized by the globalization brought about by technology and the interconnection of capital and markets that flow like thick rivers throughout the world. The challenge for higher education is to understand the currents of change flowing under our students and our communities, and to prepare our students to steer through the rapids to their future destination.

In this article, we wish to outline some of the challenges faced by LaGuardia Community College. We do this because national demographic trends indicate that our student population is a harbinger of what is to come for most of the United States. This article discusses our experience with creating first-year experiences for the most diverse student population that has ever come together as a “freshman class” in the history of higher education. We hope that we may provide some beginning analytic structures from which to view the challenges that face all of higher education as we look toward the future. We know that we must do so with the understanding that what awaits us is more complex, more diverse, and potentially more exciting than any of us may have predicted only twenty years ago.

The national trends in higher education are clear:

- one-third of undergraduates are now “minority students,” up from 25 percent a decade years ago, with the pace of change expected to increase in decades to come;

- forty percent of undergraduates are now part-time students, with 40 percent over the age of 24, and 80 percent commuting to campus;
- more than a quarter (27%) of undergraduates are already parents, and 80 percent are employed (39% full-time);
- forty-three percent of undergraduates attend community colleges, with that total predicted to rise to almost half (49%) by 2011.

These changes are part of broader changes shaped by increased access to higher education, increased need for an educated citizenry and workforce, and the power of movement of peoples across national borders. Sixty years ago, only 25 percent of people in the United States graduated from high school. Today, high school graduation is over 80 percent, with over half of all high school graduates attending some college, and 25 percent completing a baccalaureate degree (American Demographics, 2003).

Immigration must be added to the list of variables that enrich and make students' lives enormously complex. Over 1 million people immigrate to the US every year. The futurist Jeffrey Passel projects that the number of immigrants living in the US will increase from 31 million in 2000 to almost 50 million in 2025, and will account for 13 percent of the population (American Demographics, 2003). If we can presume that America's still vibrant offer of freedom and opportunity remains untarnished and accessible, immigrant students of the near future, those we term the New Americans, will be an important additional dimension of the diverse population of students.

If one wants to see the future of America today, one should take a walk in our halls. LaGuardia Community College is serving these students today. Queens, New York has become the portal for a global influx of immigrants. The 2000 Census identified Queens as the most diverse county in the country. The students at LaGuardia, one of the 17 campuses of City University of New York, are representative of Queens, coming from over 150 countries and speaking over 110 different languages in addition to English. Here are some figures for the Fall 2002 incoming class:

- LaGuardia's student body is overwhelmingly "minority," a complex blend of 39 percent Hispanic; 18 percent African-American, African, and Afro-Caribbean, 20 percent Asian, Asian-American, and Indo-Pakistani-Bengali; and 16 percent white (many of them immigrants from Eastern Europe).
- LaGuardia's student body is heavily immigrant—66 percent are foreign born, and 49 percent of the freshman class has been in the US for fewer than five years.

And yet in some ways LaGuardia's students look like many community college students in urban America:

- LaGuardia's students are poor and working class—over 64 percent have an annual household income of \$25,000 or less; 45 percent of new students have jobs, 63 percent work more than 20 hours a week;

- LaGuardia’s students are first generation college students—37 percent of students’ mothers didn’t complete high school, with an additional 31 percent completing high school only.
- Almost 20 percent come to LaGuardia with a GED, and 5 percent come with a Baccalaureate degree or higher.

The distinctiveness of the immigrant status of our students and the negotiating of multiple cultures makes the daily work of the faculty and staff at LaGuardia both difficult and rewarding. There is a pulse to the halls of the college, a rhythm that is unmistakably a world beat. If we were going to be able to create a valuable first year experience for these students, we knew we had to see beyond the demographics to truly understand the complexity of student lives. The complexity goes beyond language or native origin. For example, many students arrive in the US as their second or third country from their birthplace—from the Punjab to England to the US, or from China to Venezuela to the US. Many have lived in different countries for a period of years, and as they do they move in with different family groupings—from parents to grandparents to sisters or uncles.

So, the students of the future face multiple challenges. Our role as educators will require a re-conceptualization of much of our approach. While making the transition from high school to college is always difficult, a hurdle so high that almost 40 percent of American high school graduates do not achieve in their first try, think of how difficult this is when multiple cultures and multiple languages are involved. The emotional upheavals so common with the transition from adolescence to young adulthood are exacerbated when a student experiences multiple homes with various family members. And at LaGuardia Community College, we imagine what life on campus might be like as sworn national enemies sometimes sit side-by-side in class.

We believe that the First Year Experience initiatives of the future must consider these new sets of student challenges. We knew that our initiative would need to find ways to allow students to remain tied to another country and yet become acculturated in the US. Our services needed to recognize that many of our students were remembering terror and war, yet developing the intellectual and emotional building blocks that would allow movement toward peace. And in this context, and for multiple reasons (class, race, sexual preference, gender), too many of our students would be remembering oppression, potentially acknowledging their new American home’s and their native country’s history of oppression, yet working for tolerance and freedom. This presents quite a challenge for any skilled educator.

As we develop programs to help our students transition across multiple boundaries, we find that we are learning more about the world. As we find ways to create experiences that ground students in American culture and academic life, we find that our pedagogy, our student activities, and our sense of how to develop academic leadership have expanded.

## **Continuing a History of Creating Community**

One of the resources LaGuardia had in building a powerful First Year Experience program was its history of community building for students and faculty. As the youngest of the City University of New York's six community colleges, LaGuardia was founded by a group of visionary pioneers who were committed to enhancing life for their students through organized action and engaged pedagogy. The college is proud of its history of integrating a range of student activities and classes that respect the wholeness of a student's life. The tradition recognizes that students have families, work experiences, and cultural perspectives that must be used in the process of education. Two traditions in particular, the requirement that all students participate in credit-bearing internships in the civic or business community, and an urban studies requirement that focuses on New York City as both a home town and the site of exploration and analysis, are symbolic of the College's integrating traditions.

Faculty have a strong history of creating community within the classroom as well. Community college students are often pulled in multiple directions, making out-of-classroom experiences difficult to schedule; we realize this is particularly the case in commuter colleges such as LaGuardia. The establishment of thematic learning communities that link students and faculty across different courses, new student houses (a learning community for developmental education students which integrates basic writing and basic reading classes with a college course and counseling), and the New Student Seminar (a semester-long orientation to college, a non-credit experience) are all ways faculty create community within the classroom.

We believe it is this history that led to the overall conceptualization of LaGuardia's first-year initiatives. Our experience told us that our students would respond best if we could find multiple points of connection. We knew that we needed to do so in a holistic way, to be sensitive to time pressures for our students, and to think actively about the multiple linguistic and cultural barriers that our extraordinarily diverse student body faced. Thus, the focus of our First Year Experience initiative became the continuation of our history of creating a community across complex boundaries. The notion of "continuation" is key—we were able to launch the First Year Experience program quickly, and obtain buy-in easily, because we were building on an existing tradition and culture at the college.

With this as background, we turn to an overview of how LaGuardia Community College created an integrated First Year Experience Program.

# **Strategies for Creating a Comprehensive First Year Experience**

While LaGuardia had successful learning communities, new student seminars, and summer intensive courses in place for incoming students for many years, it was nevertheless felt that the college could do more to support students during their critical first year. Much at the college had changed since these programs had initially been established; enrollment at the college had grown to over 11,000 matriculated students, causing many of us to feel we were no longer providing students with the personalized education we had long prided ourselves on offering; diversity had continued to increase, with two-thirds of the students now foreign-born; and part-time enrollment had increased over the past decade from 29 percent to 40 percent. Clearly, it was time to take a new look at the first year, with the idea of expanding upon what was working as well as adding new initiatives to address the changing needs of students—with all changes to be implemented within one year. While the creation of every first year experience must be tailored to the students and environment of the local campus, we found that the following seven strategies were essential for launching the successful FYE at LaGuardia Community College.

## **Create a Collaborative Team**

A more comprehensive and integrated first-year experience would necessitate the close cooperation of the two college divisions most directly involved with students: Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management & Student Affairs. However, as the college became ever larger, and functions more specialized, the two divisions had grown apart—the typical situation at many higher education institutions. Thus, the project of enhancing the first year experience served a strategic function for the college: it was intentionally conceived as a vehicle to foster collaboration between the two divisions. To ensure this, high-level administrators from the two divisions were appointed co-chairs of a First Year Experience (FYE) Committee: the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and the Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs. A team was assembled by considering which individuals, groups, and offices in these two divisions had the greatest impact on first-year students—and then recruiting faculty and senior administrators from all those areas to constitute the FYE Committee: academic faculty who were already involved in first-year learning communities as well as the directors of Freshmen Programs, Advising, Enrollment Management (which included admissions and registration), Student Development, and a specialized college program for at-risk students.

## **Formulate Goals and Strategies Based on Research**

We began formulating the goals and strategies for our First Year Experience with two guidelines in mind: that the program first and foremost be responsive to student needs and that strategies be developed in light of the research literature and practices in the first-year experience field. We have found that encouraging research-based exploration is essential in moving groups of faculty and staff not only to explore new formats but

also to jettison cherished ideas which research does not show as promising. Along with the literature review, initial research therefore involved reviewing LaGuardia Community College student demographic and survey data.

Creating a sense of community and connectedness to the college quickly emerged as a central goal, given its prominence in the literature as well as a number of demographic factors that we felt tended to work against the students having a strong sense of affiliation with the college. These factors included an increasing part-time population, the large number of students with jobs, and the multiple boundaries that existed in students' cultural and academic backgrounds. In addition, results of regularly administered student surveys (the ACT College Opinion Survey and College Outcome Survey, as well as an in-house New Student Survey) indicated student disconnectedness. For example, the College was below the national norm for items such as "concern for you as an individual," 35 percent of the students said they did not plan to stay at the college until they graduated, and LaGuardia was not the first-choice college for about 40 percent of the students.

As an open access community college, we also had to craft a first-year experience that would provide academic support for a large population of students needing developmental work. Less than 10 percent of the incoming student population in 2001 needed no developmental support in mathematics, reading or English, with 21 percent of students requiring at least one, 35 percent requiring two, and 34 percent requiring three developmental classes.

As the final aspect of our research process, we had the entire First-Year Experience committee attend a First-Year Experience international conference. Keeping our review of student demographics and needs in mind, each committee member was responsible for finding a project that he or she could start and direct at the college. Several projects were selected to pursue—all derived from presentations of best practices at the conference. These projects included "freshman interest groups" (a new learning community model for the college), an "opening sessions" event for students, a common reading for incoming students, and a mentoring project.

### **Build Upon the Institution's Existing Practices and Culture**

Knowing that changes are easier to effect when they are congruent with an institution's history, mission, and culture, we wanted new FYE activities to build upon the college's tradition of community-building for students and faculty as well as its long-standing commitment to open admissions students. With this in mind, enhancements to the first-year program were designed to integrate with existing programs. For example, the college's long-established New Student Seminar was programmed into the new freshman interest groups; the new common reading became a required text for many of the first-year learning communities already in place; the new opening sessions event provided opportunities for faculty, staff, and continuing students to promote their own existing programs, such as internships, urban studies, and student clubs; and mentoring was offered to students in existing learning communities.

## **Obtain Broad-Based Faculty and Staff Support**

Building on the institution's existing ethos goes a long way toward ensuring a broad-based buy-in for new projects, as does having faculty and staff involved from the very beginning in the conceptualization of activities, as we did with our FYE Committee. It is also important to communicate the goals of the program frequently and keep the college community abreast of how projects are developing and what successes they are achieving.

Memos and e-mail updates are sent from one of the FYE Committee co-chairs to all faculty and staff on a regular basis; it has also proved effective to take advantage of any large-scale meetings to promote the program. At LaGuardia, we have a number of college-wide gatherings for all faculty and staff each year. One such meeting was used to report on the results of the initial programs we piloted in 2000–2001. Including student voices also enhances broad faculty and staff support, and we therefore provide faculty with the students' written feedback and have invited students themselves to report on their experiences at faculty and staff gatherings.

Perhaps the most powerful interaction between students, faculty, and the First-Year Experience program occurred when we invited the author of the common reading, Esmeralda Santiago, to a closing session. At this event, over 400 students, faculty, and staff listened to the author speak with feeling about her life as an immigrant student from Puerto Rico. "You must not be ashamed of your poverty," she said to students. The student response was overwhelming. One Japanese student told her that it had taken her over an hour to read and really understand each page, but she had persevered because of the power of Santiago's message. She then related aspects of Santiago's experience with her own, as did many students. The faculty, and the author herself, were moved by the power of the common reading to create a deep sense of community and interaction in the auditorium.

## **Involve Individual Faculty and Staff Members**

### **According to Their Interests**

We have found that the best way to increase faculty and staff participation in FYE activities is to involve people based on their interests. While we had had mixed success in the past eliciting faculty participation in new student orientation events at which faculty had typically been asked to provide information about the college and programs, for our new "Opening Sessions for New Students" event we asked faculty instead to conduct discussion groups with students on the college's common reading. Asking faculty to do what they enjoy doing and do best—engaging students intellectually—has resulted in robust faculty participation at opening sessions. Faculty enjoy the experience and most continue to volunteer for this event each year; not surprisingly, students consistently rate their discussions with faculty as the most meaningful part of the day. Matching people's interests with relevant projects has also helped us to staff first year committees. As noted earlier, the original FYE Committee members selected their own projects to develop and direct. Over time, the initial FYE

Committee membership expanded into subcommittees to develop and implement various activities, each with a mix of faculty and professional staff. Members of the subcommittees volunteered based on an interest in the proposed project. For example, when faculty selected “Personal Narratives and Memoirs” as the theme for the first common reading, the director of our archives, a historian, was a natural person to approach. He was not only eager to participate, but made the project his own by collaborating with faculty to expand the common reading into a “Living in History” project based on the personal narrative theme; students wrote about their experiences of the 9/11 tragedy in New York, with selected writings placed in the College’s archives. These active assignments not only drew faculty deeply into the FYE experience, but also created a sense for students that their work was part of history to be preserved in the archives for future generations.

### **Demonstrate the Support of the President and High-Level Administrators**

It is a truism that presidential and administrative support is critical in launching and sustaining any large-scale project, but how is such support demonstrated to the college community? At LaGuardia, the president ensures that FYE projects are made prominent in the College’s Strategic Plan and regularly reports on the progress of these projects in her addresses to various college groups. The president demonstrates her commitment to the program by being an active participant in FYE activities, addressing the students at each Opening Sessions for New Students event, and by becoming a mentor in the First Year Mentoring Program. A number of the College’s Vice-Presidents and associate deans have also been mentors, as has the Dean for Academic Affairs who also regularly teaches a seminar in the first-year learning community program.

### **Provide Adequate Institutional Support**

LaGuardia provides consistent institutional support for first-year initiatives. The College has established an Office of Academic Collaborative Programs & Services, with two professional full-time staff members to support first-year programs. This Office reports directly to the Dean for Academic Affairs who takes an active role in first-year planning by co-chairing the First Year Experience Committee, participating in the planning of Opening Sessions for Students, and recruiting faculty for first-year projects. The College has a strong commitment to providing fiscal resources to the first-year experience; for example, for the last two years, the College has received Supplemental Academic Funding from the University and has channeled approximately 90 percent of this money into programs for first-year students (including expanded face-to-face tutoring, a new online tutoring program, and special intensives and workshops). In addition, the Division of Enrollment Management and Student Development regularly funds first-year activities, including travel to First-Year Experience conferences and monies for events such as Opening Sessions for New Students. Students themselves agreed to fund a number of the new first year activities

from the student funds they control, indicating to us that our focus was “on-target” and meaningful to the students.

## **Elements of the First Year Experience Program**

LaGuardia Community College’s program is a combination of existing and new programs, knitted together into a whole cloth; this section of the article will describe several of the key elements of the FYE program. Each activity is described in some detail, in order to give the flavor of each. However, it is also important to note that each of the described activities requires sustained faculty and staff interaction, creativity, and administration to maintain it at successful levels.

### **Learning Communities**

*I found the sharing of the cluster with the same people to be the most beneficial of all the aspects in the program. When you share with the same people, you form a special bond with the group and it carries through the following semesters after the cluster has ended. It serves as a jumping off point to developing strong friendships as you share common memories and stories. You become comfortable in your new environment and it makes the following semesters seem less difficult because you have gone through a semester where you are given opportunities to learn the new world of college with other people.*

—A first-year learning community student.

LaGuardia’s initial effort at developing first-year programs was in the area of learning communities for first-year students. The College has a long history and national reputation in this field. As the nation’s college population becomes increasingly diversified, particularly with increasing numbers of non-native speakers, LaGuardia’s experience offers a model for achieving success in the first year. Specifically, our experience suggests that the most effective basic skills instruction occurs when such instruction is coordinated with discipline-based college course work. In other words, academic skills are best acquired in a college setting in which students can apply their developing skills to the academic subject matter at hand, rather than in the framework of a model that assumes skills instruction in all cases occurs separately from and prior to content-area instruction. Therefore, first-year learning communities at LaGuardia typically link developmental courses with credit-bearing courses in the disciplines. The College’s Academic ESL Program has taken the lead in developing such communities, typically offering twenty-five or more sections each semester pairing ESL with courses such as Accounting, Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers, Introduction to Sociology, and Biochemistry. In the College’s “New Student House” model, students register for a full-time program linking two developmental courses with a discipline-area course as well as the New Student Seminar. Faculty collaborate to produce an integrated curriculum that includes joint projects, library instruction provided by one of the college librarians, a library project, and field trips. The counselor teaching the New Student Seminar works closely with faculty to support students, particularly as any

academic difficulties arise. For non-ESL students, New Student House links basic writing and basic reading with oral communication, critical thinking, computers, or business. The ESL version of the House has used themes such as “Immigrants in the US” and “The Women’s Rights Movement in Early 19th Century America” to create a unified curriculum. Liberal Arts students who do not need developmental courses are required to participate in a “Liberal Arts Cluster.” These exciting learning communities integrate English Composition, a research paper course, and an Integrating Seminar hour with two courses from various disciplines in the humanities or social sciences. Recent successful learning communities have included “Harlem on My Mind” (American Music and The Art of Theatre), “Movies and the City: Intercultural Images” (American Film and Intercultural Communication) and “Women’s Lives/ Women’s Struggles” (Introduction to Sociology and Women & Society).

Assessments of the learning community program have been conducted on an ongoing basis. Based on consistent data showing improved learning outcomes such as higher pass rates in courses offered in learning communities, there was no doubt that our efforts to enhance the first-year experience would need to include expanding learning communities.

The college had made substantial increases over the last several years in the number of such communities available to ESL students: approximately 50 percent of ESL courses are now offered in this mode (34 percent of the incoming students are placed in ESL). Nevertheless, only about 25 percent of the total number of incoming students were being served by learning communities. We faced two major difficulties. First, learning communities made great demands on faculty time, so we needed to devise a model that would require less intense faculty collaboration. Second, it was not possible to block large numbers of course sections specifically into communities for incoming students. Continuing students took many of the same courses and sufficient seats had to be available for them. We were constantly facing pressure during registration to allow continuing students to take only one course in a learning community because it was the only seat available during a particular time slot. To deal with these issues, the college has piloted a new model, Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), with 10–12 sections offered per semester. A FIG consists of four courses: two basic skills (selected from English, ESL, Mathematics, Reading), a credit-bearing, discipline-area course, and New Student Seminar. In addition, a faculty-taught “Integrating Seminar” hour is attached to each FIG; the purpose of the hour is to integrate the group into a community. Thus, faculty teaching the individual courses in a FIG are not required to develop joint syllabi or assignments as they are in other learning communities. Fifteen (out of 28) seats in the FIGs are reserved for incoming students; at that point, continuing students are allowed to fill the remaining seats in the individual courses in the FIGs. Thus, only the “core group” of 15 incoming students becomes a learning community cohort attending all the courses and the Integrating Seminar. In this way, faculty have a “mixed grouping” in their classes, and we avoid reserving so many sections exclusively for incoming students, which would concurrently limit the scheduling choices for continuing students.

## **New Student Seminar**

*I still talk to the friends I made in new student seminar. The connections that I made in my first year help me a lot. The behaviors I learned in the seminar helped me a lot, too, because it taught me how to behave in a college class.*

—A first-year student.

The College requires all new students to take a freshman orientation course, the New Student Seminar, designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college. Approximately 40 sections of this course are being offered this semester. New Student Seminar is also incorporated into freshman learning communities, including New Student House and the new FIGs.

The counseling faculty who teach the seminar create a very individualized curriculum, responding to the range of ages, class sizes, and majors that are found in any seminar. The seminar seeks to blend traditional counseling (identifying issues, referring pathology, etc.) with a clear focus on career development and methods for helping students to blend the many strands of their life into a coherence that supports academic engagement. “Many of our students come to us demoralized, having been beaten-up by their secondary school experiences with very low self-esteem as a result,” one of the counselors said. “The seminar helps them learn how to change their lives, balance the many aspects of their lives, and learn to lean on us as teachers and as counselors.” The College has not collected assessment data to evaluate the impact on student retention and success, but anecdotally the counselors report that students report high levels of satisfaction with the non-credit, one hour a week seminar.

## **“Quick Start” and other Intensives**

The College offers an array of free “pre-freshman” intensive courses in its Quick Start summer program designed to accelerate first-year students through the basic skills course sequences. These skills courses include a “Strategies for Success” counseling component as well. Approximately 400 incoming students participate each summer. Another intensive is “Second Chance,” a one-week course for students who “nearly pass” a basic skills course, designed to assist them in passing without having to retake the course for an entire semester. Students are only allowed into the Second Chance course by faculty recommendation, so as to ensure that the student is close enough to passing to give them a reasonable chance of success in such a short, intensive experience. A new intensive now being piloted is the “prep,” designed to provide preparation for key courses that prove challenging to many students, such as Pre-Calculus and a number of science courses. Students take a free week-long intensive prior to the course itself, during which the faculty go over foundational concepts and methods of inquiry in the discipline.

## **Common Reading**

*Meeting Esmeralda Santiago showed me how strong she is, her strong character. In the book, we read how a person with so little became so important. I felt she was a role model for other people; many students in similar situations said this when they met her.*

—A first-year student.

Best practices in successful first-year experience programs include the creation of common, shared experiences that foster a greater sense of community and connectedness to the college. As an entry point to higher education for many students who might not otherwise have access, we felt that establishing a common reading would create a shared intellectual experience that would immediately establish an academic tone for our new students, setting a particular expectation for them upon their entry: that the ability to read critically is a key to their academic success. A faculty committee selected “Personal Narratives and Memoirs” as the theme for the reading, with the idea that the personal narrative genre would be particularly accessible to students in basic skills and ESL while also being rich enough in content to exploit in discipline-area classes as well. The theme has proved so successful that we have retained it for three years, though the book itself has changed each year: from *Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters’ First 100 Years* to Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* to Tamim Ansary’s *West of Kabul, East of New York*. These texts have been chosen to resonate with the complex and culturally diverse backgrounds of our students.

All incoming students receive the book free-of-charge at registration, and faculty are given a gratis copy as well. While it is not mandatory, we encourage faculty to use the book in their classes. To facilitate this, a small faculty team is compensated each year to create a website and study guide for the book, with links, ancillary resources, suggested assignments, and essay topics. A series of common reading events is also held each year, such as a visit by the author, films on related themes, and visits to relevant cultural sites in the area.

As mentioned above, the reading is also used as the basis for faculty-led discussions during Opening Sessions for Students, giving students the opportunity to become acquainted with faculty in an informal setting while beginning their intellectual engagement with faculty and text.

## **Opening Sessions for New Students**

*Opening Sessions gave me an idea of what college would be like. I liked meeting with a faculty member and my small group to get a feel for what classes would be like.*

—A first-year student.

Rather than inviting students to an orientation-type event that focused on giving them information about registration, financial aid, and the like (most of which is provided to students anyway in written form as well as in a CD-ROM), we wanted to have an event that, as our student says, gave students a feel for what college would be like. And what lies at the heart of what college is “like” is engaging with faculty in the world of ideas. To create this intellectual tone, the day is set up as an academic conference with a plenary session, concurrent workshops, and small-group colloquia with faculty members. Workshops are led by LaGuardia faculty and students on topics such as leadership, women’s issues, communication, student clubs, student success stories, community activism, and diversity.

Each year thirty to forty faculty members have volunteered to lead the colloquia, which are small-group discussion sessions on the common reading. Faculty are provided with a list of possible discussion questions to use with the reading, always including some “pre-reading” questions, as there are always students who receive the book only a few days before the event and have not had time to read much of it ahead of time. Students consistently rate these faculty-led discussions as the most significant part of the day; sharing this positive feedback with the entire faculty in the form of students’ written comments has been important in acknowledging faculty for their participation and in generating greater numbers of volunteers.

## **Mentoring**

*My mentor has been instrumental in my success during my first year of college. As an international student, the American college culture was entirely new to me and I felt a “fish out of water.” The advice and counsel I received allowed me to stay focused as a student—I have been on the Dean’s list for my first two semesters and I am looking forward to being on it for the rest of my college life.*

—A first-year mentee.

A mentor provides the student with what John Gardner refers to as a “significant other” at the College—someone to help foster social integration and involvement in the academic community. LaGuardia’s mentoring program has created a cadre of mentors for first-year students consisting of advanced students, faculty/staff, and alumni. Mentors are asked to assist students in finding their way through the system and are trained on how to connect students with support services on campus.

Advanced students who wish to become peer mentors for new students are first required either to take a multi-session training seminar or a credit-bearing course, *Mentoring: The Helping Relationship*, which covers topics including peer tutoring, problem solving, peer counseling, and career development. Students who successfully complete the training become paid peer mentors, and receive additional training and supervision from the directors of the mentoring program.

Faculty, staff, and alumni mentors are recruited on a voluntary basis. A manual and training program was developed for these mentors; an online newsletter, the “Mentor Connection,” serves as a vehicle for ongoing communication to the mentors. In its first semester, the program provided services to 270 mentees by 132 mentors. Now in existence two years, the program has matched over 60 peer mentors and 150 faculty and staff mentors with approximately 1,500 students.

## **Technology**

“This past semester I was given the opportunity to participate in an online Virtual Interest Group at LaGuardia Community College in my liberal arts cluster. It was extremely beneficial in many ways and assisted me in gaining a better perspective on my education. The amount of resources that were shown and provided to me through the course helped me to understand what I needed to accomplish in order to transfer to a four-year college. The type of interaction that I had with other students in my course was incredibly interesting. I liked the fact that students could respond to my writings and that I could respond to theirs. It added another level of feedback from my peers that helped my understanding of the assignments and the information that I gathered. The fact that this course was online allowed me to utilize my current skills as well as learn new ways of finding information online. I think that this class helped me to have a better understanding of a liberal arts education and what it can offer me as well as provide resources that will help me make the most out of my education.”...A first-year student.

First-year programs at LaGuardia are now being enhanced through the use of educational technology in a variety of ways. Funded by a major Title V grant, the recently established Center for Teaching and Learning offers a year-long seminar in incorporating technology-based pedagogies into the classroom. A major emphasis in this program has been to train faculty who teach developmental courses for first-year students. Faculty have developed online tutoring programs for basic writing and ESL classes, discussion boards designed to assist ESL students in developing fluency, websites for learning communities, and a host of student-authored technology projects.

Funded by a second Title V grant, the College is currently in the beginning stages of instituting electronic portfolios (e-Portfolios) for all students. Designed to encourage student self-reflection on learning, serve as an electronic résumé, and aid in programmatic assessment, e-Portfolios are first being introduced in FIGs and other freshman learning communities. The e-Portfolio allows students to assemble a web-based collection of work that represents their entire academic career at LaGuardia. It is also designed to provide access that will allow the College to collect baseline data on the skills of incoming students and document growth over the course of their academic career. In addition to serving as an outcomes assessment tool for the College, e-Portfolios are designed to encourage student reflection on their learning process and will be used extensively with first-year students to assist them in defining their college goals and in acquainting them with college services. For example, students in first-year

learning communities are creating their e-Portfolios using a template that includes a page to record their academic and career goals, which they formulate with the assistance of faculty who teach the New Student Seminar or Integrating Seminar in each community. The template also contains a “My Links” page, for which students are asked to create links to pages on the College’s website, including support services, the courses required in their majors, and student clubs.

Given that our new student surveys indicate over 80 percent of incoming students aspire to a baccalaureate or higher, the College has also recently initiated an “e-Transfer” program, funded by a FIPSE grant. The e-Transfer program is designed to familiarize students with the transfer process and offer career development early in their academic careers. This program is being integrated into the College’s learning communities by being offered to first-year students in Liberal Arts Clusters. As a requirement in the Cluster’s Integrating Seminar hour, students join a “Virtual Interest Group” (VIG), an online forum in which they are given a variety of transfer and career development assignments such as interest and skill inventories, academic majors and career exploration, and college and scholarship searches. As VIGs are offered by discipline area (e.g., social sciences, media and communication, education), assignments are also designed to acquaint students with the career paths, professional associations, terminology, and discourse associated with a particular discipline. Students’ completed assignments are posted on an online discussion board and responded to by the VIG facilitators, who are a faculty member, a transfer advisor, and a peer mentor. The peer mentors are paid a stipend for their semester-long participation; all are LaGuardia graduates who have successfully transferred and are currently attending a senior college. Affording first-year students this opportunity to interact with successful advanced students has proven to be one of the most powerful aspects of the project.

## **What Have We Learned So Far?**

LaGuardia, through its Office of Institutional Research, is committed to ongoing assessment that leads to improvement of first-year programs. This means that the College conducts regular internal outcomes assessments, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as comparing the College to national benchmarks. As an example of the latter, one measure of the impact of the College’s first year initiatives is the first-year retention rate. According to the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, one-year persistence rates at LaGuardia (averaging 65% over the past five years) exceed the national average by about seven percentage points.

The College’s decision to put more resources into the development and maintenance of learning communities has resulted from repeated assessments of learning communities that have revealed the benefit of this approach in improving the learning outcomes of first-year students. These assessments have been conducted on an ongoing basis; three examples include studies done in 1997, 1999, and 2002.

In the 1997 study of ESL learning communities that had been offered for at least four semesters, the data showed ESL students in pairs (in which students are “mainstreamed” into discipline-area courses earlier than usual in their academic careers) overall do as well as or better than non-ESL students and ESL students taking those discipline-area courses in a non-paired mode later in their academic careers. In addition, the pass rate for the ESL part of the pair increased in paired sections over non-paired sections.

The 1999 study showed that, of the 37 courses in Fall 1998 that included at least one section also taught in a learning community, 25 of those sections (68 percent) had higher pass rates than the pass rates for the other sections of that course. In Spring 1999, of 35 courses offered with at least one section taught as part of a learning community, 25 (or 71%) had pass rates higher than the pass rate for the other sections of that course.

This past year, to further document the success indicated in these studies, the College conducted a massive quantitative study of ten years of data on ESL learning communities, analyzing over 90,000 course sections. The data showed a significant increase in grade point average in learning communities. In addition to higher grades, there was a direct relationship between passing and participating in a learning community course; that is to say, students were more likely to pass a particular course (whether a content, basic skills, or ESL course) when the course was in a learning community.

Also, recent assessments of New Student House and Liberal Arts clusters, which analyzed data collected over an eight-year period, demonstrated improved outcomes in these communities. Students in New Student House passed the basic reading and basic writing courses at higher rates than students who took both courses in the same semester, but not in the House setting. Passing rates for Freshman Composition offered in Liberal Arts clusters were ten percent higher than in stand-alone sections. In addition, data collected since 1996 show that pass rates for the ESL course offered in ESL New Student House on average have exceeded those for the same level ESL course not offered in the House by 10 percent.

Other aspects of the first-year experience are also regularly assessed; for example, “Quick Start” intensives have been highly successful at accelerating significant numbers of students through developmental courses, with 1,133 students accelerated through one-level of required developmental courses over the 2000–2002 period. Over the same period, “Second Chance” enabled 445 students to pass a developmental course after a one-week intervention.

The College’s newer initiatives (Opening Sessions for New Students, Common Reading, and Mentoring) have not yet been in place long enough to undergo an extensive outcomes assessment, particularly in regard to long-term effect on retention. Nevertheless, preliminary assessments, though with data for relatively small numbers

of students at this point, have indicated a favorable response to these projects. A study conducted on retention of students who participated in the College's Opening Sessions and Mentoring Program showed that year-to-year (Spring 2001–Spring 2002) retention increased by approximately 8 percent for students who attended Opening Sessions, and by 14 percent for those who received mentoring (though we realize that at this point we have not controlled for the self-selection factor). Since the College administers the ACT Student Opinion Survey on a periodic basis, we also have been able to compare the responses of participating students on a number of questions to those of non-participating students, with the former consistently rating the college higher on these criteria: “assistance provided when entering the college,” “concern for you as an individual,” and “[quality of] the college in general.”

## **Next Steps**

Although we have made significant strides in enhancing our first-year experience over the last few years, there are challenges and problems remaining: some elements of the first year are still fragmented (e.g., extra-curricular activities are not well-integrated with the curriculum); most students are still not receiving enough information about career development, as indicated by their survey responses; the pedagogical approach of linking skills and content is not widespread enough; students don't feel that basic skills courses are related to their majors; the demands of skills courses and discipline courses are not consistently aligned; there is not enough collaboration between skills and content faculty; and the college's sheer size makes it difficult to offer successful initiatives such as learning communities and VIGs on a scale that would serve the majority of incoming students.

To address these issues, the College will soon pilot a “First-Year Experience Academy” model. We believe that the FYE Academy offers a potential structure for creating a cohesive and comprehensive first-year experience for students, linking student development services with curricular offerings. It is important that students perceive all first-year activities and courses as connected to their overall goal of obtaining a degree. This is a challenge that commuter institutions in particular must address if we wish to engage students who otherwise would probably spend even less time on campus.

Thus, the proposed FYE Academy is designed to (1) contextualize basic skills instruction so as to increase student motivation and improve student learning outcomes; (2) include a variety of “extra-curricular” experiences that contribute to student success and development; (3) develop a greater sense of community and connectedness to the institution by, in effect, creating four smaller-scaled organizational units for the first year; and (4) provide an organizing framework for first-year advisement, orientation, and professional development activities.

Students will be required to complete a first year academy experience conceived of as a year-long “package.” To satisfy this requirement students will take the New Student Seminar in Session I of their first semester at the College; participate in a year-long series of extra-curricular activities and orientation events throughout the year; set up an electronic portfolio (each course in the Academy will require that a minimum of one assignment be placed in the e-Portfolio); and take the introductory Cooperative Education seminar (Gateway to the Workplace) in their second semester, which will be much earlier than when students traditionally took this course. Both New Student Seminar and Gateway to the Workplace will be offered in discipline-related versions corresponding to each academy area; the curricula of the two courses will be coordinated to create, in effect, a one-year experience across both courses. Additionally, students requiring Basic Skills will take newly-developed, specialized Basic Skills courses designed to contextualize basic skills instruction. These courses will be offered in four versions, with content and readings corresponding to the disciplines in the four academies:

- Health/Science Academy: for students in Liberal Arts and Allied Health majors.
- Technology Academy: for students in Computer Information Systems majors.
- Business Academy: for students in business majors.
- Liberal Arts Academy: for students in Liberal Arts, Fine Arts, Education, and Human Services majors.

### **Extra-Curricular Activities**

In discussing the importance of extra-curricular activities to the undergraduate experience, researcher Richard Light (2001) notes that students “who make connections between what goes on inside and outside the classroom report a more satisfying college experience” (p. 14). Yet despite what Light calls the “clear relationship” between participation in extra-curricular activities and satisfaction with college, our students are very much on their own regarding such participation, with very few structures in place to integrate these activities with the curriculum. We believe that at a non-residential, community college in particular, where students face many competing demands on their time, it is critical to link extra-curricular activities tightly to the courses students take. As part of the Academy experience, students will thus be required to complete a number of extra-curricular activities (e.g., student development activities; career workshops; study skills workshops; discipline-based Virtual Interest Groups) all linked in theme and content to the discipline-areas in each academy. Each course in the FYE Academy will integrate participation in at least one extra-curricular activity into the course requirements. A first-year handbook (and/or website) is being developed for each academy with a calendar of activities posted in advance for the year.

## **Orientation**

Given the fact that increasingly the bulk of new students are registering close to the beginning of the semester, orientation is being conceived as an ongoing process throughout the first year experience rather than the traditional events before a student's entrance. A series of orientation activities will be developed for each Academy, centered in academic departments and supported by Cooperative Education and Counseling faculty, in addition to the departmental faculty.

## **Existing First-Year Programs**

Current first-year programs will be adjusted as necessary to dovetail with the FYE Academy model. While it may be difficult to expand the learning community program to serve the bulk of an incoming class, the college will nevertheless seek to expand ESL and other learning communities. Whenever possible, the specialized basic skills courses developed for each academy will also be offered in a learning community mode (that is, paired or clustered with discipline-area courses). "Opening Sessions for New Students" will incorporate an academy-based orientation activity as part of the day. The Mentoring Program will organize its mentor outreach and professional development in the context of the academies. For example, an incoming student in the Technology Academy will be assigned a peer mentor majoring in a technology-related field. Quick Start and other intensives will also be redesigned to fit into the academy experience, so that these courses also include content related to students' majors.

Establishing the FYE Academies is an extremely ambitious undertaking for the College, but one we are willing to attempt given what we see as the potential advantages of the model:

- creates a more relevant educational experience for students: first year activities will be more closely related to each student's major and interests;
- engages students more completely by linking extra-curricular activities to courses;
- helps to personalize students' educational experience by creating a smaller "communities" for students;
- provides a focus for cross-disciplinary faculty exchange: basic skills and content-area faculty can engage in joint professional development, aligning skills development with content course demands;
- facilitates advisement: faculty and advisors can affiliate with an academy and focus on mastering advisement issues for a limited number of related majors;
- better integrates Cooperative Education with discipline areas: faculty can work together on developing academy activities; new experiential education activities can be developed for the Gateway course once it is moved to the first year; and
- increases collaboration between counselors and discipline areas: counselors and faculty can work together on developing academy activities such as study-skills workshops for particular discipline areas.

## **Conclusion**

The First Year Experience at LaGuardia Community College is clearly shaped by our history, our local demographics, and our commitment to a global perspective on learning. We have been fortunate to have a history of collaborative programs that link student affairs with academic affairs, but the activities of the First Year Experience initiative have made this link more robust. Our history of multiple and innovative pedagogical structures, such as learning communities and freshman seminars, have provided an important basis for moving ahead with new programs, such as virtual interest groups and opening session activities.

Overall, it has been our experience that a program, whether at a two-year or four-year college, must model with faculty and staff what it seeks to achieve with students, namely, a deeply engaging practice that acknowledges past experience and provides ample opportunity for communication, creativity, and connection.

The challenge is always to maintain and move such initiatives ahead, and to do so at community colleges where funding is always limited and often precarious. To develop a First Year Experience for the future, we would strongly encourage all colleges to understand the changing demographics of incoming students. As the world comes to the American community college, we must be able to craft ways to engage students in dialogues about identity and belonging at the same time as we affirm a global perspective on learning and achievement. At LaGuardia Community College, we believe the First Year Experience has sharpened our focus and enhanced our ability to serve these diverse students.

## **References**

*American Demographics* 25 (3, April 2003): 8.

Light, R. J., *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

### *Useful Web Sites*

The following web sites provide more information on LaGuardia's first-year experience activities:

<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/stuinfo/firstyear/>

<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/MentorProgram/>

<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/STUINFO/firstyear/learningcomm.asp>

<http://www.eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu/>

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