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The Face of the Future: Engaging in Diversity at LaGuardia Community College

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Marisol de Leon is a 22-year-old student at LaGuardia Community College. Born in New York City to first-generation immigrant parents, she lives in a tightly knit Dominican-American community. “I’ve been taught that it’s important to stay close to family regardless of where education and career may take you,” she says. Marisol’s relationship with her family grew tense when she came out as a lesbian at age 14. But when her mother developed a terminal illness, Marisol took on the role of caregiver. “I became my mother’s mother...I cared for her as if she were my own child.” After her mother died, Marisol was determined to go to college, but “with only a minimum wage and no parents to rely on for financial assistance” she was “in school one semester and out the next.” Two years ago she found her way to Queens and LaGuardia, where she began taking evening courses while working full time.

Today, Marisol is preparing to graduate from LaGuardia while she works as an HIV health educator for New York Presbyterian Hospital, leading sessions on self-esteem, sexual decision-making, teen dating violence, and HIV education.

Gail O. Mellow is president and professor of social science at LaGuardia Community College. A past member of the AAHE Board, she has also served as president of Gloucester County College and in various academic positions in community colleges. Phyllis van Slyck is a professor in the LaGuardia English department and is involved with a range of professional development activities at LaGuardia. With colleagues she coordinates learning community initiatives and seminars on diversity related issues. Bret Eynon is a historian and director of the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, where he leads programs on pedagogy, technology, and diversity, including LaGuardia’s new ePortfolio initiative. He is also national co-director of the Visible Knowledge Project, an 18-campus scholarship of teaching project.
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The wave of immigration that swept the country in the 1990s is a key factor in these changes. Over a million people a year now immigrate to the United States from around the globe. The consequent growth of a diverse, multilingual community of American residents is one of the major developments of our era. There are 31 million foreign-born residents in the United States (a 65 percent increase in the past decade). Both educated and uneducated immigrants enter the United States to flee poverty and war in their homelands. As these new residents and their children enter the educational system, colleges nationwide must scramble to serve students with an ever-broadening spectrum of cultural and educational backgrounds.

Based in the borough of Queens, which has emerged as New York City's immigrant portal—today's Lower East Side—LaGuardia Community College is actively working to address this exciting and important challenge. One of 17 campuses of the City University of New York, LaGuardia has developed a student body that is astoundingly complex. Walking the halls of LaGuardia is an experience of being immersed in a riot of cultures, colors, and languages—a swirl that mixes traditional heritage with the beat of contemporary music and style.

Here are some facts about LaGuardia's fall 2002 incoming class:

- One-third of American students are now minorities, up from 25 percent a decade ago, and the pace of change is expected to increase in decades to come;
- 40 percent of undergraduates are now part-time students, 40 percent are over the age of 24, and 80 percent commute to campus;
- More than a quarter (27 percent) of undergraduates are parents, with 80 percent employed (39 percent full-time); and
- 43 percent of undergraduates attend community colleges, and that total is predicted to rise to almost half (49 percent) by 2011.

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Here are some facts about LaGuardia's fall 2002 incoming class:

- Its student body is a blend of 39 percent Hispanic-American, 18 percent African-American, 20 percent Asian-American, and 16 percent white students (many of the latter from Eastern Europe).
- The student body is heavily immigrant—66 percent foreign born (from over 150 different countries and every continent), and 49 percent of whom have been in the United States for fewer than five years.
- LaGuardia's linguistic profile is dizzying—more than half of the college's students speak a native language other than English, for a total of 108 different languages.
- The college's students are largely poor and working class—over 64 percent have annual household incomes of $25,000 or less, and 45 percent of new students have jobs, with 63 percent working more than 20 hours a week.
- They are generally first-generation college students—37 percent of the students' mothers didn't complete high school, and 31 percent completed high school only.

Even these facts underplay the complexity of student lives. Many arrive in the United States via two or three other countries—from the Punjab to England to the United States, or from Venezuela to Columbia to the United States. Many have lived in different countries for a period of years, moving from parents to grandparents to sisters or uncles. In and out of class, students' stories reveal their lived experiences of war, discrimination, and personal transformation; their determination and resourcefulness as they juggle employment, course work, and family commitments; and their extraordinary hopes and dreams of careers in law, medicine, business, veterinary technology, mortuary science, and opera.

LaGuardia faculty has developed a wide range of strategies for working with this complexity. Probably none is unique. What makes LaGuardia stand out is the pervasive attention to the issue of diversity, the multiplicity and interconnectedness of its approaches, and the degree of institutional focus on its students. The college's diversity has forced a systematic, layered dialogue about appropriate pedagogy and curriculum content, led to innovations that create community, and stimulated faculty introspection.

**Pedagogy: Dialogues on Diversity**

Lorence Long, chair of the human services program, asks: "If immersion is the best way to understand a culture, what do we do with one hundred cultures?" His answer? "Prepare to be surprised." And diversity at LaGuardia means many things besides culture, ethnicity, or nationality; it also refers to age, social class, educational background and expectations, level of acculturation, fluency in English, sexual orientation, disability, parenthood status, learning styles, academic preparation, and knowledge of academic discourse. The interaction among these factors adds to the challenge facing the faculty.

Encouraged by the LaGuardia Task Force on Pluralism, by the college's professional development center, and by farsighted administrators, LaGuardia faculty have tested a wide range of strategies for responding to this formidable challenge.

The effort to help LaGuardia students better understand and deal with difference begins as soon as students enter the college. Counselors Kyoko Toyama and Lynn Teplin teach the "New Student Seminar," a one-credit course required for all incoming students. They use students' own experiences and
attitudes as source material. “We have our version of racism in this country,” says Toyama, “but there’s also racism and class prejudice all over the world.” She mentions historical bitterness between Japanese and Korean students as one example, and cultural tensions between Afro-Caribbeans and African-Americans as another. “Our students want to be cool, young Americans,” Toyama explains, “At the same time, they feel the ties of neighborhood, family, and tradition. We want to help them retain what they want from their traditional cultures and yet function in the mainstream.”

Students’ cultural identities play a major role in curricular and pedagogical decisions, because the classroom dynamic almost inevitably brings difference to the surface. While LaGuardia’s largest population is Latino, within this group are Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Peruvians, Colombians, and Ecuadorians—each with distinct cultural traditions. Similarly, while a majority of students who self-identify as black are African-American (with long family histories in the United States), an increasing number are from Trinidad-Tobago, Nigeria, Senegal, and Cote d’Ivoire. Immediately after September 11, as students and faculty began to deal with tragedy, the Muslim Student Organization offered seminars to tell the stories of students from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. And when Muslim students heard about reprisals nationwide, they talked through these fears in LaGuardia classrooms, where students from around the world volunteered perspectives on war, violence, persecution, and flight, drawing on both historical and personal experiences.

Recent LaGuardia faculty seminars on diversity have succeeded in part because they are premised on the idea that no one instructor has the “right answer.” Teachers define diversity in different ways, and their views on discipline and pedagogy also shape classroom approaches. “I am now 62 years old, and I am an old-fashioned teacher,” says anthropologist Terence Julien, who grew up in Trinidad. “In my classes, I set up the structure and I control the class.” Nevertheless, students’ lives and experiences have reshaped Julien’s courses. “Is our goal to help students assimilate, or to help them transform society?” asks Julien. “I know most of our students come to school wanting to assimilate. So we discuss that. And I tell them it’s a paradox. I’ve been reading Parker Palmer’s The Courage to Teach, and he says to get to depth of understanding you have to deal with paradox. Assimilation is a paradox because it will eventually involve the transformation of society.”

Rethinking the Curriculum: The Intersection of Multiple Identities

In classes from sociology and English to nursing and Web design, students encounter an evolving curriculum based on faculty efforts to rethink the canon. This is in part a reflection of changing patterns of scholarship nationwide and educators’ efforts to challenge what is sometimes labeled “Euro-centrism.” At LaGuardia, that often means finding ways to address the experience of living across boundaries, what postcolonial scholar Homi Bhaba calls “hybridity.” LaGuardia student Arzo Anwar explains: “All my life I have had to live two different lives. I was born in Kabul, but moved to the United States at the age of three. I have lived my whole life in [this] country as an American and as an Afghan. I call it being a ‘stranger in a strange world.’” Many LaGuardia courses are evolving to help students understand and manage what Stephen Greenblatt heralds as the “daring intersection of multiple identities.”

Faculty member Sally Mettler (humanities) identifies one of the paradoxes of diversity work: “When you have extreme diversity in the classroom, the content must be a unifier—your goal is to bring people together from various vantage points.” In her “Exploring Humanities” course, for example, she uses a film version of Nadine Gordimer’s “A Chip of Glass Ruby,” the story of an Indian woman living in apartheid-era South Africa. Living between the dominant white society and the African majority, the woman makes a commitment to resistance, a position her husband opposes. “Fifty
percent of the students find the woman heroic; 50 percent feel she is putting her family at risk for her beliefs," Mettler comments. "This is directly related to students' lives, for many of them recognize that they themselves are, willingly or not, agents of change."

One of the authors of this article, Phyllis van Slyck, teaches a course in the novel that begins, not with the European tradition but with the Japanese, as represented by Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*. Her course, entitled "Character, Culture and Desire," includes works by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Columbia), Tayeb Salih (Sudan), Caryl Phillips (St. Kitts), and Fumiko Enchi (Japan), as well as Emily Bronte, Henry James, and Zora Neale Hurston. Concerned about avoiding what her colleague Brian Gallagher calls "a shallow multiculturalism," van Slyck talks about the depth that derives from a thematic approach and the interplay between diversified content and students' lived experience.

When LaGuardia faculty discuss pedagogy, the value of student voice and student knowledge is a recurring theme. For example, the student vignettes scattered throughout this article are drawn from a set of life histories gathered by LaGuardia students in a course that helps students see the college—and their own lives—as a part of history. "Going Places! Immigration, Education & Change in New York City, 1900-2002" is taught by one of the authors, Bret Eynon, as a liberal arts capstone course. In Eynon's course, students examine the immigrant experience, past, and present. Their final project is a life-history interview with another LaGuardia student and a 10-page paper examining links between that student's life and the themes of the course. "LaGuardia is the equivalent of the Henry Street Settlement House," Eynon says, evoking an image of New York City's Lower East Side of 100 years ago.

Settlement houses were border zones between the immigrant world and the dominant culture, places where differences were negotiated and new identities and cultures created. Historians would be thrilled to find a cache of interviews about life in the settlement houses. We're documenting the complex life of this institution at this time—its members' lives and its surrounding communities. And it's particularly exciting that the students, the immigrants, are the ones asking the questions and writing the interpretations.

The oral history project is a challenging assignment, requiring students to conduct primary research and integrate their findings with insights from a range of sources. The project and course help students examine their own lives and experiences and place them in a larger social and historical context.

Physical therapy faculty, too, have had to find creative ways of addressing diversity issues. Debra Engel explains:

Most of our classes involve a hands-on lab where the students need to wear shorts and tank tops and practice procedures on their fellow students. Orthodox Jewish women and Muslim women are often uncomfortable wearing shorts and working with male lab partners. We have accommodated these students by pairing them with women partners—and in some instances, we have allowed them to work behind portable screens in the lab so that they will feel comfortable wearing lab attire.

As Engel's example suggests, the diversification of the curriculum extends well beyond the humanities—in part because the world of work is itself increasingly diverse. In LaGuardia's nursing program, Rosalie Octaviano and other faculty members seek to prepare student nurses for serving the diverse population of the New York metropolitan region. Students explore the different cultural attitudes about health care that patients might bring to the nurse-patient relationship, and consider unspoken cultural patterns, such as attitudes that might affect patients' feelings about being touched. "Some groups have strong feelings about personal space—what's OK and what's not," Octaviano explains. "Students know a lot about those kinds of things. We set it up so that they can share what they know."

One of the challenges of diversity at LaGuardia is the broad range of cultural and educational backgrounds students bring with them. The educational systems they come from also are very different. As a result, faculty at LaGuardia cannot assume a common knowledge base. Lorence Long describes a creative response to this variation in his "Orientation to Human Services" course.

We create a timeline, marked off in decades from the 1930's to the present. It has a layer for U.S. history, for U.S. cultural developments, and human services milestones. I now add a fourth layer for events from the countries of the students, which they fill in. Since more than a dozen countries of origin are usually represented, students recall a variety of events, mostly political—revolutions, wars, or coups. Most of them know the history of their own cultures, so this is an opportunity to share important cultural events that can be related to human services.
There is a common thread to these stories—paying ongoing and close attention to who students really are, what they know, and what they need to know. LaGuardia faculty members have found responsive, learner-centered pedagogy to be an invaluable tool in creating handholds and, ultimately, transforming diversity into a learning opportunity.

CREATING COMMUNITIES

An active member of the learning community movement since the 1970s, LaGuardia Community College asks all first-semester liberal arts majors to take an interdisciplinary, thematically integrated “cluster” in which collaborative learning activities prompt them to negotiate their differences, learn from each other, and come to a consensus. As they engage in collaborative projects, they must synthesize not only the material of the course but also the perspectives of students from all over the globe.

Sometimes cultural differences can cause problems for classroom participation. Judith Gex (ESL) suggests that the cultural background of Asian-American students sometimes affects their willingness to talk in class. “There are many students who feel it is the role of the faculty member to talk, and that their role is to be silent and take notes. Changing that is a slow process,” she explains. Many faculty members find that group work creates a safe space for students whose cultures frown upon classroom assertiveness.

A collaborative environment can also create a space for students with physical disabilities. Renan Sezer (mathematics) describes her use of collaborative learning in a basic math class: “With two legally blind students in my class, I did not need to change my teaching approach even though neither of the two students had note takers. Because the class was student-centered, most of the action took place in groups. The class emphasized expressing mathematical approaches in students’ own words, so they were able to take their own notes in the group setting.”

Learning communities can also provide a safe space for students to begin to explore their own assumptions. As Lorraine Cohen (sociology) observes, for deep learning to occur, “something disturbing should be happening.” When raising emotionally charged topics, especially regarding gender and sexual preference, faculty at LaGuardia have learned to anticipate resistance, even disruption. When Katie Hogan (English) teaches Esmerelda Santiago’s America’s Dream in a “Women’s Lives, Women’s Struggles” cluster, she carefully plans how to deal with resistance.

Since this is a novel told from a woman’s point of view and it is about abuse, I know that the men in the class are likely to become angry and defensive—they think it is “male bashing.” So I have everyone in the class, men and women, free-write a passage from the point of view of the abuser. We read these passages and talk about why Santiago chose to tell her story from the woman’s point of view and chose not to give us the man’s perspective.

Lorraine Cohen, who teams with Hogan in this cluster, helps the process unfold. “Students at LaGuardia, like students elsewhere, need to recognize that they are often both oppressed and oppressor.” Making the question of perspective explicit helps Hogan, Cohen, and their students deal with painful issues.

While race, ethnicity, and language are the most visible forms of difference at LaGuardia, issues of gender, disability, and sexual preference often prompt the most difficult conversations. In a “Gender Issues” cluster, van Slyck and Will Koolsbergen (humanities) teach a unit on homophobia. Although Koolsbergen identifies himself as a gay man early in the semester, this unit remains so highly charged that he and van Slyck have the students commit to a set of collaboratively designed conversational ground rules. Students also answer a questionnaire that begins by asking, “What do you think caused your heterosexuality?”

“There are many students who are open, interested, supportive,” van Slyck reports, but there are also painful comments: “That’s disgusting,” “It’s not natural,” and “God tells me to love the sinner but not the sin.” Point by point, they process these comments: “There is a conversation about judgments, about what we mean by ‘natural,’ how we learn gender roles. We
talk about the difference between this conversation and earlier conversations we have had about racism and the oppression of women. But no matter how prepared we are, this dialogue is harder than any other we have with students.”

If learning communities inherently demand an analysis of issues from the perspectives of different disciplines, and LaGuardia’s diversity renders these conversations more layered and complex, this does not mean they will necessarily be easier. Yet LaGuardia educators suggest that unresolved conversations do not mean failure. “If they leave class talking, even arguing, then something is happening,” observes Leonard Vogt (English). What many faculty members emphasize is the importance of creating a safe space for dialogue. Discussions of cultural context open a conversation about the web of values every individual inherits, some of which will inevitably be challenged by the college experience. Ultimately, faculty report that students rise to the challenge. “If we trust them enough and allow them time to do what they have to do,” suggests Vogt, “students often end up being the ones who really teach the class.”

**Faculty Self-Reflection**

When working with such a complex student body, and challenging them to learn and change, faculty members find they are pushed to engage in a reflective process about their own views and assumptions.

“I’ve had to learn to challenge my own stereotypes, for example, that students from black and Latino backgrounds are all low income, or have all had poor education, or automatically identify with what I consider progressive policies,” explains Lorraine Cohen. “I have learned that Muslim women can be very conscious of women’s oppression. Confronting these stereotypes can be liberating and transformative. I am much more careful about opening up discussion and allowing students to come to their own conclusions through a process of reading, writing, speaking and listening to others.”

In a similar vein, English Professor Hayan Charara shares his experiences and reflections after screening the film Promises, in which seven Palestinian and seven Israeli students offer conflicting personal histories and accounts of events in the Middle East. “I am Arab. Is that going to determine how students hear me, whether they trust me?” he asks. Charara feels it is important to be open and state where he stands—that this can set a model for students. In light of September 11, Charara, himself a poet, saw added relevance to this side of his identity as well. “Poetry reclaims the social from the political,” he says. “It brings back what the violence takes away—it puts a face before you, gives you an everyday life.”

**On-Going Challenges**

One of the lessons we have learned at LaGuardia is the importance of programmatic and institutional support for innovative practices. LaGuardia faculty and administrators have worked together to create professional development programs for faculty on a host of topics, operating within and across departments. With support from the college, the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning offers faculty-development days, seminars, and brown-bag lunches where faculty members focus on issues of teaching and diversity.

Other programs link the discussion of diversity to key institutional issues, such as writing across the curriculum or the integration of new technologies. New programs—such as curriculum seminars with the Museum of Modern Art and the College’s Electronic Student Portfolio initiative—are explicitly designed to incorporate diversity issues. The ePortfolio project, in particular, will give LaGuardia students new digital tools for telling their individual stories and presenting their academic work on the Web.

Much recent faculty development work at LaGuardia responds to the need to support ESL and academically underprepared students. To date, almost 40 percent of full-time faculty members have participated in the “Writing in the Disciplines Seminar,” in which faculty across disciplines learn how to teach staged writing assignments. The college also is in the process of designing a Writing-Intensive requirement for students. “Students come to us needing special support,” says the co-director of the Writing in the Disciplines program, Marian Arkin. “They need to write in all their courses if they are to succeed in college.”

When Sander Khine was 8 years old, the Burmese government squashed a wave of student demonstrations and strikes, and her memories from that time are filled with “guns and blood and the night.” Now she lives in Sunnyside, Queens, with her extended family, in a household of 18 people. Studying at home is difficult, due to noise and crowding, so she often stays in the LaGuardia library until it closes. Her father, who had been a teacher, now works in a restaurant. Sander is studying statistics and hopes to go on to a four-year college and become a mathematics teacher herself one day.
Many ESL students are prepared for college-level work but are not proficient in academic English. LaGuardia Dean of Academic Affairs Paul Arcario has championed curricula in which ESL courses, basic skills courses, and college-level courses are integrated. For more than a decade, ESL faculty have worked collaboratively with a range of disciplines across the college to offer these paired courses and clusters. Students do better in them than in stand-alone versions of the same courses. At a time when basic skills and ESL students across the country often feel discouraged by repeated failure, Arcario sees paired courses and other learning communities as a valuable model for success socially as well as academically; students become part of a smaller community within a larger community and become more connected to the institution.

Despite programmatic initiatives and dedicated teaching, overlapping academic and social problems still hamper student success at LaGuardia. Some students come from overcrowded local high schools and arrive at LaGuardia under-prepared and demoralized. Many repeatedly fail basic writing as well as new high-stakes examinations. Many students drop out for months or years in order to earn tuition or because of family obligations. When they return, it is difficult to recover the momentum they may have achieved as English speakers, writers, and critical thinkers.

Moreover, the powerful innovations that faculty at LaGuardia and other places have begun are often undercut by perennial under-funding. Faculty and administrators know that smaller classes, lower teaching loads and up-to-date equipment, especially in media and technology, would make a profound difference in the quality of education at LaGuardia, but funding formulas rarely address this kind of investment. Most of the curricular, pedagogical, and structural innovations spring from small amounts of reassigned time associated with grant funding. The systemic changes needed within the institution are difficult to sustain past the grant period.

Partly because of the lack of funding, authentic and rigorous assessment of its programs in relation to diversity issues remains one of LaGuardia’s biggest challenges. Student success is affected by many variables, from the age he or she first encounters English and the amount of education in the home country to the number of rigorous high school courses taken and culturally prescribed norms of classroom interaction. But few funding streams allow college faculty members to determine specifically which kinds of pedagogy work for which sets of students. In the context of high-stakes multiple-choice examinations, it is difficult for a campus to put its money into evaluating innovation rather than providing test-taking techniques for non-native speakers.

Because part-time faculty teach large numbers of LaGuardia’s course sections, there are limits to the number of learner-centered, diversity-sensitive courses that can easily be offered. In addition, not all or even a majority of the full-time faculty members are involved in the crucial innovations and responsive pedagogy described here. Junior faculty members who want to get involved struggle with low starting salaries in an expensive city; heavy course loads (four or five courses each semester); and the competing demands of departmental, collegiate, and professional commitments. And like many other public institutions, LaGuardia faces many difficulties in attracting and retaining minority faculty members.

**Lessons Learned at LaGuardia**

In this article we have reflected on some of the ways diversity defines the culture of LaGuardia and shapes its curriculum, pedagogy, and programs. How might these experiences be helpful to faculty and administrators nationwide, as a more diverse generation of students brings richness to and encourages a more complex dialogue in colleges across the country? For LaGuardians, these are some of the most important lessons learned:

- **Faculty members have much to learn from students who understand what it means to negotiate multiple identities.** Student experiences can be a valuable resource to learning when they are deeply integrated into curricular themes and classroom practices. A safe space and responsive pedagogical strategies permit faculty to encourage and respond thoughtfully to student voices.

- **Reflective conversations about diversity, and the changes it requires, should emerge contextually.** An iterative revisiting of what works should occur in both formal and informal contexts. Faculty members, too, need a safe space to confront their own cultural and curricular assumptions.

- **Creative redesign of curriculum, pedagogy, and co-curricular experiences, with an emphasis on collaborative models, is a valuable way of exploring diverse perspectives.** Diversity awareness should inform discussion and shape decisions about all aspects of institutional life.

- **A revisioning of program structure is essential to meeting the needs of a diverse student population.** ESL and developmental students make greater progress in programs that foster integrated learning, and every effort must be made to personalize education and to create smaller communities within the larger one.

- **Academic leaders must provide opportunities for faculty members and students to reflect on their work within and across disciplines, build community, and create an intellectual and emotional space for difficult work.** Everyone’s contributions to diversity practice should be recognized and honored, individually and collectively, inside and outside the classroom.

Students of the 21st century, coming to American colleges from all over the world, are simultaneously resilient and fragile. A great number have experienced war, oppression, abuse, and dislocation, and for many this is not their second but their third, or even fourth, home—and language. They want to be American, even while they cherish their communities of origin; they are deeply committed to making a better life for themselves and their families, but family commitments (as well as economic and personal circumstances) often interfere with as well as support their progress. Faculty members of the 21st century must be patient and responsive; humble and willing to take risks; they must be sensitive to their own epistemological positions and to the academic and personal needs of their students. They must become as resilient as their students: willing to listen, adapt, experiment, and challenge. And academic institutions of the 21st century must support students and faculty by providing a space for research, reflection, and revision as everyone involved—students, faculty, administration, and staff—participates in creating a truly inclusive, pluralistic academic culture.