

A Community College Examines Its Community

By Fern June Khan

TO DETERMINE the direction of college expansion, the Division of Continuing Education at LaGuardia Community College, New York City, undertook a community needs assessment in collaboration with the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC). LaGuardia was one of six urban community colleges designated to participate with AACJC in a project to demonstrate the ability of the urban community college to become more responsive to the varied needs of its community.

The experience of project staff during the assessment process were similar to procedures reported elsewhere,* but the LaGuardia experience had unique qualities, too, involving the variables of staff, college location, heterogeneity of the community, and mission of the college.

Located in Long Island City, Western Queens, LaGuardia Community College is in the heart of an area once reputed to have the broadest concentration of diversified light industry in America. The area also has a rich diversity of ethnic and racial groups, who live in predominantly ethnic enclaves within neighborhoods. The selection of the college's physical location was the result of demographic surveys by the Board of Higher Education, which revealed that area residents were among those with the lowest average family income and educational attainment in the entire city and were not being served by any colleges within the City University of New York. Hence, the very reason for the college's existence was to meet the educational needs of an economically disadvantaged, ethnically diverse, and industrially committed community.

*Refer to *New York State Continuing Education Needs Assessment*, January 1977, or to Patricia Cross, *The State of the Art in Needs Assessment*, April 1979.

The Assessment Process

The project goal was defined as enhancement of LaGuardia's ability to develop an effective working relationship with its community, and through combined effort and resources to jointly meet identifiable needs and interests within the community. This goal seemed both reasonable and manageable to project staff and to the college's policymaking body. The project objectives were:

1. To initiate a study of the community—its needs, strengths, and resources.
2. To develop a community profile.
3. To establish communication systems with the community that would facilitate dialogue, networking, and sharing of resources.
4. To develop processes for involvement of the college community in identifying college needs and resources relative to the community.
5. To establish an advisory board with college and community representation.
6. To determine priority issues in light of identified needs and resources of the college and the community.
7. To plan and implement programs addressing priority issues.
8. To develop instruments and systems for continual evaluation of

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programs and ongoing assessment of needs.

The initial phase of the project was a community needs assessment; the dual aim of the assessment was to produce a report on the continuing education needs of residents and to compile a community profile of Western Queens. Questions were designed to elicit attitudes toward employment, neighborhoods, and continuing education, as well as information on age, sex, race, education, marital status, and income. The goal was to reach 1,000 residents through telephone interviews.

Letters were mailed to 48 community organizations requesting specific information about the community served and the potential for college-community collaboration in meeting community needs. Simultaneously, project staff visited 14 community organizations; the visits included each of the five community districts in the survey sample. District managers were helpful in providing an overall description of the residents and their needs as well as suggesting organizations that should be contacted.

The college also formed an advisory committee representative of the college and the community to review the survey findings and make recommendations for increasing community-based activities and linkages.

The community definition was limited to relatively local neighborhoods. This was not intended to deny the LaGuardia commitment to New York City as a whole; rather, it represented an effort to focus that commitment, particularly in relation to community education, on those populations most closely associated with the college geographically or through current participation in college programs. A survey of students registered in Division of Continuing Education programs during the fall of 1979 indicated that 75 percent of the Division's population

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came from neighborhoods represented by Queens Community Districts One through Five and neighboring Brooklyn Community Districts One and Four. Collegewide statistics indicated that more than 50 percent of the student body came from the Borough of Queens and 21 percent from Brooklyn.

The college provided monies to hire part-time staff for the telephone survey and to engage the services of a public opinion research firm, Kane, Parsons, and Associates. The latter assisted project staff in the development of a questionnaire to find out how residents perceive neighborhood problems, their personal and educational needs, their interests, and basic demographic information. The firm also assisted in drawing the sample and in coding, analyzing, and reporting on the findings. Some monies for consultation, as well as for a project assistant for a six-month period, were provided through the Center for Community Education, AACJC. Sister Edith Kane, S.N.D., was hired as project assistant.

The Telephone Survey

Using a nine-page, 36-question instrument with translations in Spanish and Greek, and with six weeks during which to complete the calls, the survey began. Calls were made Monday through Friday from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. To facilitate supervision of the interviewers, who had received orientation and training, calls were made from adjoining offices.

The Survey Results

The telephone calls yielded 1,800 eligible respondents and 840 completed interviews, providing a success rate of 84 percent (the project goal was 1,000 interviews). Respondents had to be aged 18 and over and not currently registered as full-time students; 67 percent of the respondents were white, 14 percent black, 13 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent other. The median age was 36.6; 13 percent were in the 18-24 age group, 17 percent over 65, and 43 percent were 25-44. In general, re-

spondents were better educated than the population of Queens as a whole; 15 percent were college graduates, while 27 percent had not completed high school.

Survey data showed that community residents were most concerned about the lack of neighborhood recreational facilities and adequate health care information. Younger adults and adults in the labor force placed greater stress on inadequate adult education facilities. Approximately one-third of the sample was interested in changing jobs, a desire strongest among blacks, younger workers, persons who had attended college, and white-collar workers. A sizeable number of adults seemed ready to avail themselves of continuing education for personal and career growth. About one-third of the sample had previously participated in continuing education programs.

With this information, the college staff increased its publicity efforts to focus on *Career Change for Adults* and supplemented its quarterly brochure with attractive posters, shopping bags, and more recently, radio spot announcements. The survey results and recommendations spurred increased effort to reach community residents who were ready for more education but who had not thought of LaGuardia Community College as a resource.

Other outcomes have included increased outreach to community organizations to acquaint them with the college's wide variety of programs and program possibilities, such as off-campus courses, and collegewide participation in community health fairs, street and borough fairs, and presentations to neighborhood groups. A divisional publicity committee developed as a natural offshoot of the survey; this committee now makes recommendations on divisionwide publicity activities.

The Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee's tasks were to review the findings of the survey, assign priority to the areas of need, and

establish subcommittees to work on those areas. The long-range goal was to encourage active involvement of committee members in articulating the needs of their communities that the college could realistically address. The Advisory Committee members represented a variety of social, governmental, political, and religious agencies within the community as well as being community residents themselves.

In spite of the problems inherent in organizing individuals with diverse interests and needs into a cohesive group, the college representatives on the Advisory Committee developed a sensitivity and awareness of the special organizational needs and interests of agencies that serve community residents.

Summary

To undertake a community survey of this magnitude, a college must expend roughly \$12,000 in salaries and assign the supervisory staff necessary to oversee the project. Tangible results can lead to more effective recruitment and a more positive image for the college as well as to incidental learning and deepened community understanding for the staff.

The survey process has continued to provide useful insights, ongoing relationships, and, of course, program ideas for LaGuardia Community College. The process involved the cooperation and support of almost all areas and levels of the college, academic as well as administrative. The result was a renewal of interdisciplinary relationships and, hence, programs that reflect a holistic orientation. Programs designed to enhance the growth of community residents also, in the long run, aid the growth of the community itself. One example was the combined involvement of the Social Science Division faculty and Continuing Education staff with the Astoria Reformed Church to plan a fitting celebration for Martin Luther King's birthday in February 1981; LaGuardia Community College President Joseph Shenker was one of two guest speakers at this event.

Two community basketball clinics have been held in cooperation with LaGuardia's recreational program. One featured New York Knicks' Mike Glenn and attracted more than 250 deaf youngsters from New York City.

Most of the project objectives have been accomplished. The college has recent data on neighborhood demographics and needs, and clearer indications of promising areas for community and college collaboration. With a heightened awareness of community diversity, the college staff are now involved in an ongoing process of developing programs to meet immediate and long-term community needs. One example is a deliberate reaching out to community women through a series of Saturday workshops to identify areas of interest and to provide academic and career counseling. One outcome of the workshops is an Office Automation Training Program for women funded by the New York State Education Department; more than 250 women applied for 40 available spaces. In addition, the Community Service Program sponsored, in cooperation with the Women's Program, three major conferences during 1982-83:

- "Midlife Crisis Conference,"

which attracted many women and a few men of all age groups, mainly from the Western Queens community.

- "Employment Opportunities for Visually Impaired Women," which drew 250 participants from various parts of the U.S.

- "Third-World Women's Conference," which brought together women of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and cultures; this very successful conference will be repeated in 1984.

These conferences attracted more than 600 persons from throughout the metropolitan New York community.

Another program developed in response to community needs identified in the needs assessment is the College for Children, a combination of academic and leisure courses offered to community residents on Saturdays. More than 450 children have participated in this program since it started in 1982. Classes are designed to provide pleasurable learning experiences through a variety of activities, including gym fun, reading, math, and computers for children. All Children's College classes are held on Saturday mornings; parents who wish to take credit and noncredit courses frequently enroll for classes at the same

time. New classes to be added this year include Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Children, Myth and Fantasy, and Theatre Arts Workshop for Children. LaGuardia has been asked to replicate the College for Children in a nearby school district where similar programs for children are sorely lacking. Grants are being sought to permit expansion of the program and inclusion of handicapped children.

In the process of responding to the community needs assessment, the college has renewed old commitments and effected new linkages to community groups, individuals, and agencies. □

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