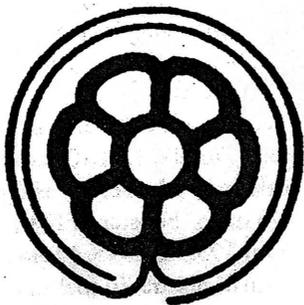


# LaGuardia Community College

## A Case Study in Academic Audacity

Urban studies empowers students and reinvigorates the curriculum at a college inspired by New York's feistiest mayor and America's boldest educational philosopher.

BY JOANNE REITANO



LaGuardia Community College's logo graphically represents the college's namesake, Fiorello LaGuardia.

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Community colleges are curious phenomena, simultaneously assailed and admired for their audacity in challenging the conventional college model. Praised for accessibility, flexibility, and versatility, they are assumed to lack academic integrity. Complex colleges that offer developmental, career, liberal, and continuing education, they are often dismissed as nothing more than academic supermarkets. Some scorn these uniquely American teaching institutions for the very democracy they represent, while others berate them for making "false promises" of social mobility. The fastest-growing sector of higher education, serving over half the nation's first-year students, community colleges still stand on the margins of academia.

Yet they are in the forefront of a remarkable metamorphosis that has occurred across higher education in the United States. This transformation began in the 1960s and has marked the most radical shift since the land-grant colleges were introduced in the 1860s. Indeed, the practices of community colleges, once considered unconventional, now permeate the entire academic structure as career-oriented curricula and work internships proliferate, as developmental education (often camouflaged) infuses liberal education, as controversies over nontraditional students rage, and as pressures to diversify pedagogy mount. At the same time, many faculty fear a loss of academic quality, the balkanization of the curriculum, and the



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trivialization of teaching. In our rush to educate so many students, have we sacrificed educating the whole student? Has the community college movement denigrated or democratized higher education in America?

By way of beginning to answer these questions, it might be useful to consider the history of one community college, whose evolution exemplifies the dilemmas of higher education in transition, but whose stubborn commitments offer possible strategies for resolving those dilemmas. Created in 1970, just as the City University of New York (CUNY) was implementing its controversial open-admissions policy, LaGuardia Community College was in many ways a flower child—the product of a decade that challenged the establishment, including the status quo in higher education.

### **Maverick Institution**

The youngest of CUNY's six community colleges, LaGuardia has grown from 500 students to 11,000 matriculants and 28,000 nonmatriculants who speak ninety-seven different lan-

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guages. The college uses converted factory buildings situated in a transportation hub adjacent to the world's most multicultural neighborhoods. This reality-based institution is particularly interesting, because it was founded in the image of two very different, but oddly complementary, idealists. The first was its namesake, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, the feisty little man who served as dynamic mayor and major booster of New York City from 1933 to 1945. Multiethnic, multilingual, nontraditional in appearance, style, and politics, LaGuardia provided inspiration for a community college that prided itself on being a maverick.

An ardent advocate of public education, LaGuardia built ninety-two schools, reduced average class size, and expanded educational services for the physically challenged. He understood that learning occurs beyond school doors and, besides reading to children over the radio, inaugurated free park concerts, brazenly conducting a few himself.

Throughout his life, LaGuardia championed the underprivileged and underrepresented. Clearly, the urban community college was a perfect place to honor LaGuardia's humble

origins, pluralism, humanitarianism, faith in public education, and love of New York City.

The second source of inspiration for LaGuardia Community College was John Dewey, the renowned Columbia University philosopher and AAUP founder, who represented the other end of the academic hierarchy. Yet Dewey's ideas were hardly elitist. He insisted that intellectual opportunities should be accessible to all and that students should be empowered to participate actively in the discovery process. True learning, he believed, would integrate ideas with experience, offset "narrow specialization," and promote a "sympathetic understanding of different viewpoints." No longer dull, irrelevant, static, and aristocratic, education would become the key to individual freedom, perpetual renewal, enlightened community, and social progress.

These two men were brought together in the original mission statement and organizational plan of LaGuardia Community College. Emboldened by idealism, its founders optimistically proclaimed their intention to "combine practical experience with classroom learning, innovative educational methods with traditional approaches, so that students may be better equipped to deal with the complex society in which they live." Aware of the challenge of making college a real option for nontraditional students, LaGuardia was determined to find new ways to keep the open door from being a revolving door.

Accordingly, LaGuardia's logo graphically represented a little flower (for Fiorello) with its center symbolizing the student. Two stems emerged from and encircled the flower. One stood for education through experience; the other for education through the classroom. Thus were the professor and the politician entwined in LaGuardia Community College's commitment to bridge the ivory tower and the real world for people historically excluded from the academy.

The college pursued its goal by institutionalizing unconventional academic policies, such as a quarterly calendar, an interdisciplinary divisional structure, and creative courses, including a required interdisciplinary social science course organized around the work theme. Grades were limited to Excellent, Good, and Passing, with failing students given No Credit and allowed to repeat courses. Faculty, counselors, and cooperative education advisers formed student support teams.

LaGuardia was the third college and the first community college in the country to make work internships a degree requirement. It also adopted a unique, experiential version of the general education core curriculum focused on studying the city. Equipped with an innovative, pragmatic, and humanistic blueprint, LaGuardia celebrated its inner-city, democratic social mission. Audacity reigned.

Rapid growth and the demands of outside circumstances compelled change; time tamed the lion. Accrediting bodies and licensing exams, articulation pressures from senior colleges,

creeping bureaucratization, serious financial constraints, and conservative educational politics subdued LaGuardia's idealism and undercut its individuality. The process was, however, slow and always incomplete. For example, although the college shifted to letter grades long ago, it only recently adopted plus and minus grading. Although the quarter system was abandoned, it was replaced with a modified, not a regular, semester structure. Our academic year is now divided into two terms, each consisting of one twelve-week and one six-week session.

Because of a university-wide mandate lowering the number of credits required for graduation, the work internship requirements were reduced. Marking an even more drastic departure from the past, the Cooperative Education Division recently became a regular department. Nonetheless, LaGuardia remains committed to the value of work internships and retains them as a graduation requirement. Over the years, the original interdisciplinary academic divisions were split into departments, but three interdisciplinary units remain. The interdisciplinary social

science course became a regular introduction to sociology, but an interdisciplinary capstone course now enriches the liberal arts program.

Even though LaGuardia has regularized much of its curriculum and shifted to a 60 percent adjunct workforce, it continues to support students through learning communities and to demystify teaching through collaborative learning techniques. Keeping abreast of pedagogical innovation, it is busily training faculty to use instructional technology. The college has continually expanded its public service mission with strategies as diverse as a program for the deaf, three alternative high schools, a family college, transfer programs with Vassar and Barnard Colleges, and an extensive, impressive municipal archives. Decidedly more con-

ventional, considerably less audacious, LaGuardia faced reality while adapting or finding new ways to pursue its old dreams.

### Urban Studies

Yet problems remained. Poised precariously between the worlds of the book, the workplace, and the community, faculty often found themselves at odds with one another. Perpetual struggles over credits, resources, class size, and full-time faculty lines—exacerbated by issues of mutual professional respect and the corporatization of the university—have eaten away at the college's unity of purpose. Multiple missions evolved into separate agendas. While classroom-driven faculty became alienated from numbers-driven administrators, faculty increasingly advocated programmatic specialization at the expense of intellectual integration. On many levels, LaGuardia developed precisely the type of academic polarization, replete with "false dualisms," that Dewey considered so destructive to effective schooling.

Fortunately, Fiorello LaGuardia's spirit can rescue the college from John Dewey's dilemma. Like the mayor for whom it

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was named, LaGuardia Community College has always been dedicated to its city. In fact, it was the first and remains the only college in the country to have an urban studies graduation requirement. Early on, it was scaled back from four courses to one, and later it was forced into regular time blocks (instead of having a whole week of concentrated study followed by weekly hourlong sessions). Nonetheless, the urban studies requirement still makes a LaGuardia education unique.

Unless their major specifies a particular course, LaGuardia students can choose any urban studies course from a variety of departments. These courses differ from ordinary courses about the city because they are taught within the context of the community college's academic culture. Each course incorporates independent, hands-on research plus two trips. In the process of using the city as a learning laboratory, students get out of the classroom and are propelled beyond the confines of their own lives. Urban studies courses are educationally empowering.

Because it is student-centered, academically compelling, and socially relevant, the urban studies graduation requirement reintegrates and reinvigorates LaGuardia's core commitments. It provides a meaningful, memorable educational experience that transforms the accident of location into an academic asset and translates our public service function into an educational philosophy. It may even provide a model for helping community colleges nationwide provide a more cohesive and distinctive learning experience for their students.

Urban studies promotes liberal education by encouraging students to reflect upon their taken-for-granted worlds and by exposing them to different ways of interpreting human behavior, ideas, creativity, and organization. Be it through the study of anthropology, art, economics, history, literature, politics, or sociology, the individual is examined in a larger framework. As students test theory against reality, they become more aware, more analytical, more urbane, and better prepared for life in a democracy.

Urban studies is the perfect partner to career education and work internships, which are by definition experiential education. In fact, several career programs have tailored the urban studies requirement to their curricular and internship needs. Employers themselves often remind us that understanding urban life helps equip students for the pressures, diversity, and cultural expectations they will encounter in urban work. Furthermore, abilities developed in critical thinking, analytical discussion, and group cooperation are precisely the liberal arts skills needed for survival and social mobility in the postindustrial economy. In Dewey's terms, marrying career education to liberal education through urban education is a way to avoid falling into the trap of narrow vocational education.

Although the college's urban studies courses have always emphasized reading, oral communication, critical thinking, and writing, LaGuardia has recently decided to maximize their

potential to reinforce skills across the curriculum. Consequently, all urban studies courses have been designated "skills intensive," and students will include in their new LaGuardia electronic portfolios a sample of work done in their urban studies course. The urban studies requirement advances our developmental education mission.

City-based active learning promotes a pedagogy that is particularly successful with nontraditional students. As urban residents, all students have something to contribute to class discussion, thereby compensating for their insecurities as learners while making college-level inquiry accessible, personal, and relevant. The various activities used in these courses accommodate different learning styles, while the group projects and the trips help transform a class into a community.

Urban studies also strengthens the college's connection with its locale. In the long run, understanding and interacting with the city will make our students better citizens of and leaders in their communities. In the short run, every time we invite a

politician to speak, visit a social-service agency, interview an immigrant, poll a businessperson, go to a museum or historic site, seek information from a civic group, or tour a neighborhood, we are goodwill ambassadors for the college. Our name becomes familiar, our curriculum acquires legitimacy, and our students become real people instead of stereotypes. As we reach out to our community, we proclaim our pride in what we do, whom we serve, and where we are.

LaGuardia's urban studies graduation requirement has remained a constant in an ever-shifting academic universe complicated by what often seem to be disparate, and somewhat deteriorating, goals. It reconnects developmental, liberal, career, and continuing education. By grounding learning in experience, it

enriches pedagogy while bridging the gap between the academic and the real world. Above all, it empowers and educates the whole student.

As a case study, LaGuardia Community College provides a cautionary tale. On the one hand, it has lost a lot of its original verve, uniqueness, and sense of community as reality and routinization have muted its deviations from the norm. Pursuing academic legitimacy while being innovative, idealistic, and multifaceted proved to be harder than anticipated.

On the other hand, the college has bent, but it has not broken. It remains committed to its own blend of LaGuardia and Dewey—a vision of education that combines the traditional with the nontraditional, integrates the classroom with the outside world, strives to welcome and nurture all students, hallows education as the key to individual freedom, embraces its environs, and takes public service seriously. These democratic ends are, after all, the hallmarks of the community college movement and may explain why that movement has been so successful despite its many detractors and the difficulties it confronts. Audacity prevails. 

[Urban studies]  
transforms the  
accident of location  
into an academic  
asset.