

OPEN ADMISSIONS AND LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Report by Abraham I. Habenstreit

June 1, 1972

This report, undertaken at the request of Dean Freeman Sleeper, is based on three visits to LaGuardia Community College, discussions with numerous members of the administration, faculty and student body, both in pre-arranged interviews and at random, and a careful review of written materials provided by Dean Sleeper and other members of the staff.

I wish to state at the outset, however, that this report is as impressionistic as it is objective, and should be viewed in that light.

LaGuardia Community College is new. While there are many problems in launching a new institution, there is every indication that the launching of the College was handled efficiently and well.

There also are advantages to being new, and these are very much in evidence at LaGuardia. The College is small, so people know each other. There is a sense of adventure in being a part of a new undertaking that permeates the College community. And since the College was started after the advent of Open Admissions, all of the staff came to the College with the knowledge that they would be a part of an open-door college; many, indeed, came because they especially wanted to be involved in the challenge of Open Admissions.

These "advantages of newness" have resulted in a relaxed, congenial and optimistic atmosphere at the College, an atmosphere hospitable to the College's achievement of its educational mission. It goes without saying that newness alone has not produced the existing

life-affirming and education-affirming atmosphere of the College. The faculty and administration are to be commended for making the College's first year one in which the advantages of newness were so evident and the disadvantages of newness were held to a minimum.

It is my strong feeling that the greatest challenge now facing LaGuardia Community College is to retain as much of its present spirit as possible as the "advantages of newness" begin to fade -- as the College gets much bigger, quickly, and as the nitty-gritty problems of Open Admissions and expanding operations begin to preoccupy the faculty and, especially, the administration.

The remediation programs developed during the Spring '71 planning year were well-conceived and based soundly on accepted although somewhat traditional educational practice, especially in the English (reading and writing) areas. In mathematics, there seems to be more of an interest in developing more flexible and innovative remediation programs, through the use of the modular approach, emphasis on imaginative texts and indirect motivation.

The following suggestions are offered for consideration by appropriate college bodies. Not all of them are exclusively related to Open Admissions and remediation programs as it is difficult -- and self-defeating -- to consider these areas as isolated from the mainstream of the College.

THE PROBLEM OF DISAPPEARING STUDENTS: Many of the people interviewed were concerned about the numbers of students who

"disappear" from the remediation courses -- and from the College itself -- during the course of each quarter. This, of course, is a problem which is present at all of the CUNY community colleges and which no college has solved completely. But given the fact that LaGuardia's students were better prepared than those entering any of the other community colleges last fall, (according to pre-entrance standard testing), and given the fact that LaGuardia students seemed well-motivated in general and pleased with the College, this problem deserves immediate attention before the College begins to lose the "advantages of newness" outlined above. I would suggest that this matter be the subject of a community or town meeting of the entire faculty at an early date and that an appropriate student-faculty-administration committee be established to investigate the problem intensively and make recommendations for implementation before January 1, 1973. Some of the suggestions which follow may be appropriate for consideration by such a group, although the possibilities are certainly not exhausted by what is mentioned in this report.

ACADEMIC EARLY WARNING SYSTEM: A system should be considered whereby teachers, especially in the remediation classes, compile a list of students in each class who seem to be headed for academic difficulty because of excessive absences, lack of interest, possible drug use, etc. These lists should be submitted every two weeks to a central coordinator who would have the responsibility of seeing to it that every person on the list is seen by a counselor within five days. The teachers' lists should contain not only the student's name but some indication of the problem. After a counselor sees the student, he should

send a written report immediately to the teacher with his recommendations. Teachers and counselors should meet regularly regarding these students, and the College administration should provide the necessary time for such meetings. It is essential for the success of such a system that no more than 10 days elapse from the time a teacher identifies a problem until the teacher and counselor jointly develop a proposed solution. Among other advantages, such a system would integrate the teaching and counseling aspects of the College and bring teachers and counselors together around real problem-solving.

THE ACADEMIC CALENDAR: It is too early to determine whether the quarterly calendar results in serious educational problems. There seems to be a widespread feeling among faculty that condensing a semester's work into nine or ten actual teaching weeks may not be the wisest thing to do in some courses. The experiment with the quarterly calendar should continue, in my opinion, but a mechanism should be established whereby it can be evaluated at regular intervals. Faculty discussion of the quarterly calendar should be encouraged at both the departmental and college-wide levels. The calendar is not necessarily an "either-or" situation. It is quite possible that some courses should be condensed into seven or eight weeks while others should be stretched out to cover fourteen or fifteen weeks. Such a flexible system, of course, could confuse students, not to mention teachers and administrators. The problems could very well be insurmountable. But this possibility should be explored, among others relating to the academic calendar.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE: There seems to be some vagueness about administrative responsibility and accountability in the remediation programs. In the math area, the remediation efforts seem to be unmistakably an integral part of the Natural Environment Division. The division chairman played a key role in the initial development of the remediation program and he continues to devote a major part of his time and interest to the operation and refinement of remediation efforts. In the reading and writing areas, on the other hand, most of the administrative direction seems to come from the Office of the Dean, although the chairman of the Language and Culture Division has been asked to accept responsibility for evaluating teaching personnel in this area. While there is no indication that this administrative vagueness has adversely affected either academic performance or faculty morale, it is important that accountability be clarified by the College administration as soon as possible, before the staff in these areas is enlarged significantly.

ACADEMIC RANK DISTRIBUTION: Most of the initial staff has been retained in the instructor and assistant professor ranks, and it is suggested that the College could benefit at this point from an infusion of more senior and experienced faculty at the associate and full professor levels. This would make for a more diversified and broader-based faculty and would lend added substance and maturity to the faculty corps. This suggestion is made in full knowledge that the College administration will be under intense pressure to provide as many teachers as possible to cover the anticipated doubling of enrollment in 1972-73. Still, the value

of a diversified faculty should not be underestimated or overlooked, and some reasonable balance should be struck between the two valid and admittedly conflicting needs -- for more senior people on the one hand and for ^{as} many teachers as possible to serve the students on the other. Special efforts should be made to recruit additional Black and Puerto Rican faculty.

READING AND MATHEMATICS LABS: The labs seem to be very stocked with self-study materials and the lab technicians appear capable and dedicated. Although the student's lab work is integrated into his classroom studies, greater collaboration between the lab technicians and the classroom teachers is strongly recommended. Lab technicians should feel that they are as important to the academic program as members of the faculty. It is suggested that every lab technician should spend at least two or three hours a week sitting in on classes and/or actually teaching. Teachers should be encouraged to spend an hour or two a week filling in for the technicians in the labs. Lab technicians and teachers should meet together on a regular basis both to discuss the problems of individual students and to exchange teaching ideas in general.

PEER TUTORING: It is strongly recommended that the College institute a student-to-student tutoring program. Such a program could be financed in part through work-study funds. Tutoring within the College could also be one of the internship options offered to students. It was indicated that some students, especially majors in the liberal arts, are bored with their co-op assignments and would prefer to work on tutoring or other meaningful assignments within the College. A portion of the

College's regular instructional budget could also be assigned to support a tutoring program. My personal experience at Staten Island Community College with a student-run tutoring program has been extremely positive and this program has proven to be an efficient and wise use of college funds. Consideration could also be given to the establishment of advanced Honors Courses in the English and Math areas in which a significant portion of the student's work for credit could be devoted to tutoring students in the remediation program. This, too, has proven highly successful at Staten Island Community College.

INTERNSHIPS: LaGuardia was organized as a cooperative college and this thrust should in no way be changed or compromised. Inevitably, however, there are some students who find after their exposure to work-study that this form of education is not suited to them. Others may have not wanted to be a part of an internship college from the beginning but found themselves at LaGuardia because of the luck of the draw at the central Admissions Office. The College has a responsibility to help these students find alternative ways of pursuing their education, and these alternatives should include options both within LaGuardia and elsewhere.

CONTINUING PROGRAM OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT: In addition to the basic remediation programs in reading, writing and mathematics, students should have supporting academic services available as they need them throughout their college experience. It is suggested that the proposed tutoring service, for example, be available to students in "regular" as well as remedial courses and programs. Similarly, lab services should be

available to all students, and teachers should be encouraged to integrate the lab situation into advanced as well as preparatory courses. Furthermore, it might be useful to view the library as a lab and the labs as a part of the library; the premise here is that collaboration between the library staff and the remediation lab technicians could produce fruitful results.

REMEDICATION TEACHING PROGRAMS: Teachers whose primary responsibility is in remediation should be actively encouraged to teach a portion of their time in non-remediation courses. Similarly, teachers whose primary responsibility is elsewhere should be actively encouraged to teach at least one remediation course a year. This would go a long way towards integrating the remediation efforts into the mainstream of the College.

FACULTY IN-SERVICE PROGRAMS: LaGuardia does not do very much in the way of staff development through in-service programs. In this, it is like 96 per cent of America's colleges, according to a recent federal survey. But because LaGuardia's faculty tends to be young and in the lower academic ranks, the College probably has more of a need than most for such programs. A start might be made by asking the faculty through a questionnaire about the type of in-service programs they would like to have, if any. Federal funds are usually available for such programs.

COUNSELING: The counseling program is in the process of being reorganized, under new leadership. The Director of Counseling is full of interesting ideas and has made a good start in implementing some of them.

The faculty in general seems to have a hazy notion of what the counseling program is all about, probably in part because of the reorganization of the program in mid-year. Like faculties almost everywhere, the teaching faculty at LaGuardia seems to have a "show-me" attitude about the value of counseling. It is important that the counseling program become as visible as possible as soon as possible and that counseling and teaching -- and counselors and teachers -- be as closely integrated as possible.

INTENSIVES: Although I did not look at the Intensives in any depth, I want to endorse the idea of the Intensives and wish them well. I think the Intensives are an intriguing way of building flexibility into the academic program of an institution. Imagine! Courses that self-destruct after one semester, before they can even be printed in a bulletin. A wonderful experiment, I think.

ATTENDANCE POLICY: Several students seemed uneasy about the absence, as far as they knew, of a college-wide policy on attendance. Personally, I have no objection to what appears to be the present practice if not policy at LaGuardia, namely letting each instructor set his own attendance policy as long as he lets the students know early on what is expected of them. But whatever the College's policy is, even if it is to have a policy of not having a college-wide policy, the students should be informed. This matter, of course, is a perennial subject for faculty discussion and debate.

FACULTY ROLE IN POLICY-MAKING: Some faculty members interviewed indicated that there was insufficient consultation with the faculty regarding policy decisions at the College. The criticism was mild,

however, and expressed more in terms of sadness than anger, especially by those who were a part of the Planning Year when there apparently was a sense of communal participation which did not carry over fully into the first operational year. There also seemed to be some genuine confusion about the relative powers and responsibilities of Deans, department chairmen, and the faculty as an official body. None of the students I spoke with mentioned governance or seemed concerned about it when I brought up the subject. This leads me to the conclusion that students (not only at LaGuardia) may need remediation in self-government and self-esteem as much as they need help in skills development.

FINALLY, like most students and faculty I met at LaGuardia, I enjoyed the College and found being there an interesting and productive experience. I hope this report will be distributed widely among the College community and that it proves of some use in the further development of an exciting new institution of which I am now quite fond.