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LaGuardia Community College inspires first community college in South America

BY CLARE TRAPASSO DAILY NEWS WRITER

A local [Queens](#) college has become an unlikely muse for higher education in a country half a world away.

[LaGuardia Community College](#) in [Long Island City](#) is the inspiration for [South America's](#) first community college, expected to open in [Chile](#) in March 2010.

LaGuardia President Gail Mellow said the Community College at Universidad Central in [Santiago](#) will give more students from low- to middle-income families a chance to attend college.

And she believes Chilean students will be excited to learn that their diplomas will be honored as LaGuardia degrees.

"The Chilean country has just emerged from 20 years of a pretty brutal dictatorship, and they want to enter the global economy," Mellow said. "To do that, you've got to educate more people to a higher level."

The idea for the community college grew from an exchange program between LaGuardia and Universidad Central, a four-year private nonprofit university in Santiago. When Universidad officials visited the Queens school, they were impressed, recalled [Jose Orengo](#), LaGuardia's director for government relations.

"They were interested in the two-year transferrable degree," Orengo said. "It's something that does not exist in Chile."

So they decided to start their own and model it on LaGuardia, Orengo said. The problem in Chile, he said, is that students must choose a career right out of high school.

Only the top few percent are accepted into the country's low-cost public universities. The rest must attend private schools, which are not affordable for many Chileans. If students switch careers, they lose all their credits.

[Sergio Quezada](#), the dean of math and physical science at the Universidad, said he

hopes the new school will change that.

He said the college will cost about a third less than private schools in the country. It will initially offer engineering and computer science courses, he said, and later add health and political science programs.

"I think it's going to be a great opportunity," said [Yazmin Saavedra](#), 29, a Universidad student studying English for a semester at LaGuardia.

"People could afford a short degree, and have the opportunity to change from one major to another without losing the credits," she said.