

## **Learning Communities at LaGuardia Community College City University of New York**

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### **Overview**

LaGuardia Community College has a variety of fully integrated, learning community programs. Entering liberal arts and science majors choose from a menu of 6-8 clusters. These thematically organized clusters all have two courses from the core liberal arts curriculum, English Composition, The Research Paper, and an integrated hour that is team-taught. Topics for the research paper course are interdisciplinary and based on materials in all the other courses. A developmental cluster, The New Student House, offers Basic Reading, Basic Writing or ESL 099 along with a college-level content course and a Freshman Seminar. In addition, 50% of LaGuardia's ESL courses are paired with college-level content courses throughout the curriculum. In the Spring of 2004, LaGuardia will be piloting First Year Academies, which offer entering students developmental courses with a course in their major. LaGuardia's learning communities reflect a truly integrated practice: each is organized around a theme and faculty meet regularly to plan, refine, and evaluate curriculum integration and student success. For more detailed information about each program, including data on retention and comparative success of students within and outside learning communities, click on the individual links below.

### **Liberal Arts Clusters Frequently Offered**

Harlem on My Mind: American Music, The Art of Theatre, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour

Names, Labels and Stereotypes: Oral Communication, Critical Thinking, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour

Sociology and Culture of the Family: English Composition, The Research Paper, Introduction to Sociology, Sociology of the Family, Integrated Hour

The Moral Thinking Cluster: Introduction to Philosophy, American Film, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour

Movies and the City: Intercultural Images: American Film, Intercultural Communication, English Composition, The Research Paper

Media, Power and Justice: Introduction to Sociology, The Art of Theatre, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour

From Movies to the Internet: Media for the Masses: American Film, Mass Media and their Evolution, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour

"I am what I am": Identity, Performance and Poetic Justice: The Art of Theatre, Introduction to Philosophy, English Composition and The Research Paper

Reefer Madness: a Philosophical Inquiry into Drugs and Society: Introduction to Philosophy, Drugs and Behavior, English Composition and The Research Paper

Fighting for our Rights: Introduction to Sociology, Social Movements, English Composition and the Research Paper

Creativity and Composition: Introduction to Music, Creative Thinking, English Composition and the Research Paper

### **Developmental and ESL Learning Communities**

LaGuardia has a variety of integrated programs for developmental and ESL students. In the New Student House, students register for a full block of courses that include Basic Reading, Basic Writing, Freshman Seminar and a college-level content course. Recent house clusters have been taught with Oral Communication, Critical Thinking, Introduction to Business and Computer Science. Faculty teaching in this program plan a highly integrated curriculum which includes joint readings, projects, field trips and large group meetings (for debates and role playing activities). A counselor, who teaches the Freshman Seminar, meets regularly with faculty teaching in the House during the semester to offer guidance and feedback especially for the most at-risk students. In the first year, the program had a 95% retention rate compared to a 25% retention rate for students taking stand-alone versions of Basic Skills courses. An ESL version of the House, designed around the theme of "Immigration," offers Basic Reading, ESL and Communication for the Non-Native Speaker. In addition, each semester approximately 20 sections of ESL are paired with college-level content courses including Introduction to Business, Computer Science and Human Services. A recent five-year study by the ESL program has shown that ESL students taking these college-level courses in these pairs have a higher retention and grade average than college students taking these courses in stand-alone versions (publication of this study forthcoming).

Learning communities have been evolving at LaGuardia since 1976 when the first liberal arts clusters were designed. They are a natural fit in a college that values collaborative and problem-based learning. Because LaGuardia admits students from more than one hundred and forty different countries, special attention to teaching and learning styles is essential to student success, and learning communities provide a space where faculty and students can experiment and learn from each other. Students report that freshman year learning communities have played a major role in creating "community" for them in a commuter college, in providing not only curricular but extra-curricular support and connections to the larger college community through joint projects and a personal relationship with a group of faculty.

### **Learning Communities and Diversity**

The integrated curricula and pedagogy that derives from learning community initiatives is central to LaGuardia's mission and values because it promotes inclusion and reflective examination of a wide range of diversity issues. The collaborative nature of much learning community work (student-led seminars, role playing activities, problem-based learning assignments, team taught classes, and interdisciplinary research and field trips) promotes shared responsibility for learning and a social constructivist approach to knowledge. Students in learning communities, especially at commuter colleges, often experience a greater sense of community and belonging; moreover, the learning community environment offers a more intimate space for faculty and students to build trust and mutual respect across cultures.

### **Some Vignettes from Current Learning Communities: Faculty and Student Voices**

For students who come together from profoundly diverse backgrounds, learning communities provide a context not only for dialogue across cultures but for critical thinking and a deeper understanding of American culture. In the "Harlem on My Mind" cluster, Jim Wilson (English) and John Williams (Music) take students on a walking tour of Harlem for a research project on the Harlem Riot of 1935. Students have previously examined historical documents in

the LaGuardia/Wagner archives (housed at LaGuardia) and have noted that there are conflicting reports about the Riot. Wilson tells his students that the tour will help them investigate the "scene of the crime." It also deepens their understanding of the Riot and changes their perspective on Harlem, which most have never visited. "It's not the scary, crime-ridden place I thought it was." "It's a pretty decent neighborhood where some of the most historical events in New York took place" students comment.

In a "Movies and the City: Intercultural Images" cluster, Leonard Vogt (English) takes students to visit the Tenement Museum to deepen their understanding of immigrant conditions as they do research projects based on the novel and film, *Ragtime*. With Louis Lucca (Humanities), this cluster also visits the Museum of the Chinese in the Americas, the Museo del Barrio, the Museum of the City of New York and the New York Historical Society. For an Intercultural Communication project, students visit four neighborhoods on the lower east side of Manhattan (Chinatown, Little Italy, Orchard Street and LoIsaida). Each group must purchase some small item they have never seen before, bring it to class and explain what the purpose of the item is. Each group must also present a tableau, "a living sculpture without words or sounds," of a scene they have observed during their trip.

In the "Moral Thinking" cluster last year after September 11, Gail Green-Anderson (English) asked her students to reflect on some of the ethical dilemmas raised by this terrible event. For example, "Is it right for workers in wheelchairs to jeopardize rescue worker who, in the case of an emergency, may need to carry them out of their offices? Is it right for employers to deny disabled persons opportunities to work in certain locations because of concern about the safety of those individuals?" To answer these questions, students researched Federal and New York State laws, visited the Center for Independence of the Disabled for a tour and meeting with its director. In their research projects, students integrate ideas from readings in Philosophy, Sociology and English with the primary research material provided by the field trip.

The learning community structure also facilitates creative, integrated, approaches to difficult conversations. Katie Hogan (English) teaches Esmerelda Santiago's *America's Dream* in a "Women's Lives; Women's Struggles" cluster and carefully plans how to deal with male resistance. "Since this is a novel told from a woman's point of view and it is about abuse," Hogan observes, "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. This gets things on the table. 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." Readings in the Women and Society course complement this activity by raising relevant questions about the importance of women's 'voices' in contexts where they have been historically silenced.

In a gender issues unit of their Drama, Cultures and Communication cluster, Will Koolsbergen (Speech and Theatre) and Phyllis van Slyck (English) begin a unit on homophobia by asking students to respond to the well-known questionnaire, "What do you think caused your heterosexuality?" Although Koolsbergen comes out to the class at the beginning of the semester, this unit is so highly-charged that he and van Slyck team teach several classes, and the students commit to a set of collaboratively designed ground rules. Koolsbergen and van Slyck note that students' religious beliefs are often in conflict with the college's explicit commitment to a pluralism, which includes respect for a different sexual orientation—but see this ethical dilemma as an opportunity. They encourage students to think about how religious documents came to be written, who wrote them, in what historical and cultural context, and to look at other practices these documents support (slavery, oppression of women) that we would oppose today. More broadly, discussions of cultural context open a conversation about the complex web of values every individual inherits, some of which will inevitably be challenged in many college courses.

Despite the difficult nature of these conversations, since learning community students are traveling together for their entire first semester and working closely with faculty who are in touch with each other, they are also building trust and finding commonalities—in many cases, across cultural and experiential differences.

### **Integrated Learning, Diversity and the National Picture**

“Universities, it seems, are organized to promote individual, isolated, passive learning and forms of discourse that are very much limited to the narrow boundaries of separate disciplines. Yet we know that student learning is greatly enhanced when students participate in shared, collaborative learning experiences—when they are active, rather than passive, in the learning process and when their discourse is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary.” (Vincent Tinto) As the above vignettes show, LaGuardia learning community students are frequently engaged in collaborative projects—inside and outside the classroom—and encouraged to analyze and synthesize materials, ideas and experiences from each of the classes. The collaborative nature of much learning community work (student-led seminars, role playing activities, problem-based learning assignments, team taught classes, and interdisciplinary research and field trips) promotes shared responsibility for learning. From the seminal work of William Perry to more recent scholarship of Robert Ibarra, it has been repeatedly shown that integrated learning strategies promote the development of higher order thinking and constructed knowledge and that the learning community environment is more supportive of context specific, group oriented learning styles of culturally diverse students.