

DEVELOPING CORE SKILLS IN THE MAJOR

LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Editor's Note: A new organizational structure that has recently emerged for learning communities is the "academy model." This approach, dating back nearly twenty-five years in high school reform efforts, has been gaining widespread attention for its effectiveness in increasing high school graduation rates. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and numerous other funders are offering financial support for expansion of this effort. There are now more than 775 academies across the nation ("Investment Supports Expansion of Rigorous High School Academy Network with 90% Graduation Rates," National Academy Foundation, downloaded October 26, 2006 from www.naf.org/org/cps/rde/xchg/SID-3F57E0FB-51D28596/naef-2006/hs.xsl/1386.htm).

In their book, Career Academies: Partnerships for Reconstructing American High Schools (1992), Stern, Raby, and Dayton articulate the critical elements in organizing high schools into career academies: (1) creating small learning communities planned by a team of educators; (2) providing a rigorous college preparatory curriculum with a career theme; and (3) building partnerships with employers, community, and higher education (Betsy Brand, "Reforming High Schools: The Role for Career Academies," downloaded October 28, 2006 from <http://casn.berkeley.edu/resources/reforming.html>). As the National Academy Foundation points out, while many academies at inner-city high schools have been established through partnerships with business, the academy approach has been applied to numerous career pathways, not just those in business. The programs often include internships, mentoring, and the involvement of local advisory boards.

A number of colleges and universities are now adopting the idea of academies, usually with the same features that are present in their high school counterparts. Faculty and student affairs professionals, through learning communities organized as academies, are offering more comprehensive integrated services and making the first-year experience more relevant to students' career goals. Several of the earliest academies were at Moorpark College, a community college in California. Other institutions—LaGuardia Community College, Brigham Young University, and Johnson C. Smith University—have established Freshman Academy programs more recently.

Creating Academies to Meet the Needs of First-Year Students

The attrition of first-year students is a disturbingly persistent problem at community colleges across the nation. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 42% of first-year students at two-year colleges drop out before their second year. Since community colleges are the primary gateway for minorities into higher education, this problem contributes to what the documentary *Declining By Degrees* calls the "widening income and education gaps between minorities and blacks and all other segments of the population."

One of the main challenges community college faculty and student affairs professionals encounter is that many freshmen are underprepared. Large numbers of students need developmental skills courses. While the literature is consistent in advocating that basic skills instruction needs to be closely aligned with discipline-area instruction, few colleges implement this type of approach on a large scale. The second consistent theme in the literature about learning imperatives for the first year of college is community building. The "first-year experience" movement, now over twenty years old, has sought solutions to address these problems by creating opportunities for students to develop meaningful connections to their campuses, their faculty, and one another. This is often a difficult proposition at a "commuter" college, one that requires concerted efforts by both faculty and student affairs professionals.

LaGuardia Community College, one of the first colleges to start offering learning communities in the mid-1970s, recently developed first-year academies as a way of providing coherent, integrated services for students in need of developmental education. The academy model is one of the most exciting and challenging projects undertaken at LaGuardia Community College in many years.

First-year academies, which began in 2003, grew out of three college-based task initiatives: the Basic Skills Task Force, the Student Enrollment Management Task Force, and the ePortfolio Initiative. The first-year academy learning community structure provides students with a more cohesive academic experience and allows basic-skills students to begin their work on credit-bearing and discipline-based courses in their first semester. It links student development services with curricular offerings, making it possible for faculty and student affairs professionals to work together more closely and ensure that appropriate services and instruction are accessible to students.

The Structure and Design of First-Year Academies

The first-year academies are designed to (1) contextualize basic skills instruction so as to increase student motivation and improve student learning outcomes; (2) include a variety of co-curricular experiences that contribute to student success and development; (3) foster students' sense of community and connectedness to the institution; and (4) provide an organizing framework for first-year advisement, orientation, and professional development activities.

Three academies are offered to all new students:

- Allied Health Academy, for students majoring in liberal arts/AS and allied health majors
- Business/Technology Academy, for students in computer information systems and in business majors
- Liberal Arts Academy, for students in liberal arts/AA, fine arts, education, and human services majors

Together, these three academies span all the majors offered at the college. Each academy is built around a theme related to its area of study. Within the academies, faculty are encouraged to rethink their courses, using the content material in the Introduction to the Major course as a touchstone for their own work. Themes in the Business/Technology Academy have ranged from *You Are What You Buy: Consumerism and Identity in American Culture* to *Technology Then, Technology Now*. The faculty select texts such as Jim Munroe's *Everyone in Silico*, Max Barry's *Jennifer Government*, and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* that will support the themes, vocabulary, and concepts students learn in their major courses. Many faculty choose to use texts like these that relate to program themes rather than business or computer texts, actively referring to key concepts and vocabulary as part of their class discussions. Additionally, through the other courses in the academy, students receive additional support in writing and college-level study skills.

All students receive orientation and advising by academy and attend special academy registration sessions. During the first semester, all students take a New Student Seminar themed by academy. In their second semester, students take a major-themed cooperative education course, Fundamentals of Professional Advancement, and continue to receive specialized advising geared toward helping them reach their goals. Throughout the year, students are also invited to attend co-curricular events organized by their academy. Each academy includes introductory courses within majors, a common reading, an "Opening

Sessions” event for students, enhanced advisement, and a variety of discipline-focused, co-curricular experiences that contribute to student success as well as fostering a sense of connection to the institution.

Within these learning communities, basic skills instruction and co-curricular experiences are linked directly to course material. All students who test into a basic skills course in reading, math, or writing are invited to take learning community courses that reflect the themes of their academy. For example, students in the Business/Technology Academy are offered specially themed developmental English courses—Introduction to Business and Introduction to Computers—that build on and reinforce the foundation laid in other academy courses. The faculty for these courses associate writing as a practice related to the major. These students also take a New Student Seminar that covers content related to their major while also providing support in critical areas such as study skills, course planning, and career planning. In their second semester, students take a Fundamentals of Professional Advancement Seminar for business/technology students, developing general career-related skills and information as they are gaining knowledge within their chosen field.

All first-year academy students create an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio). These electronic portfolios, aimed at fostering student engagement and encouraging ongoing reflection on the learning process, showcase students’ work in all of their academy courses. In both semesters, students take a “Studio Hour” where they build their ePortfolios. LaGuardia has one of the largest ePortfolio programs in the country. Over 5,000 students constructed portfolios in the 2005-06 academic year. (See www.eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu for more information on this initiative.) The first-year academy Fundamentals of Professional Advancement (FPA) courses, offered in students’ second semester, are a key part of the program. The FPA courses demonstrate how students are able to integrate the various elements of support offered to them in the first-year academy through the work and reflective statements included in their ePortfolios.

Throughout the year, students receive specialized attention from academy coordinators. These full-time student affairs professionals work with faculty and students to provide a rich set of co-curricular offerings, including advisement, study skills workshops, field trips, and programs highlighting career opportunities in particular majors. All of these offerings are integrated into the individual learning community’s larger plan. The academy coordinators are also available to all academy students for advising and other types of assistance. In addition, they

have a rigorous schedule of outreach events aimed at promoting the academies program.

How First-Year Academies Have Performed

The first academies were offered in 2003-04; this first program was aimed at basic skills students enrolled in business and technology majors. In the pilot, twenty faculty worked together to create linked courses, with shared assignments and goals across the curriculum. In Spring 2004, the college ran four Business/Technology Academy learning communities. In 2004-05, an additional twenty faculty began planning and implementing the Liberal Arts and Allied Health Academies. By Spring 2006, the college offered three liberal arts learning communities, two business/technology learning communities, and two allied health learning communities.

In 2006-07, the college began to expand the first-year academy learning community model. The college developed a Learning Community Leadership Team, responsible for working with faculty and student services professionals to carefully plan, promote, and assess learning communities at the college. Involvement of this team also facilitated greater cohesion between the first-year academy learning communities and our already developed ESL and liberal arts cluster learning communities so that all learning communities are now considered part of the first-year academy. In spring 2007, the college began offering first-year academy learning communities for all students, not just those who test into basic skills courses. The college has also expanded its offerings in math-related learning communities and has extended its support of students in developmental math courses.

Assessments of the program to date have been very encouraging. Based on four semesters of data (2004-06), failure rates in both basic skills and discipline-area courses in academy learning communities were reduced by 7.7%; in those same courses, attrition was reduced by 8%. The college has also been utilizing the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the ACT Opinion Survey to assess these programs against national benchmarks. On key CCSSE engagement indicators (e.g., critical thinking, writing, and ability to collaborate in working with others), the mean rating for students in academy courses (3.08 on a 4 point scale) exceeded both the overall LaGuardia mean (2.81) and the national community college mean (2.63). For the ACT Opinion Survey question asking students whether, if they could choose over again, they would still choose to attend LaGuardia, the

mean for first-semester academy students (3.91 on 5 point scale), while not yet reaching the national mean of 3.94, represented a substantial improvement over LaGuardia's overall mean of 3.59. However, when academy students reach the FPA course (second semester), the mean for this question becomes 4.00, exceeding the national figure.

The first-year academy model is working well at LaGuardia. Our initial success is based on a series of factors: an inclusive process to design the initiative (in our case, through a broad-based task force); building upon the existing culture and programs (LaGuardia already offered a number of first-year liberal arts learning communities); taking the time to review data, literature, and best practices nationally prior to developing the program; providing in-depth faculty development (preferably semester- or year-long); engaging in a pilot to determine program feasibility; actively seeking external funding; relying on "early-adopters" among the faculty to launch the program and then help enlist their colleagues; and assessing the program from the outset, which helped to "sell" the program to other constituents at the college as well as to possible external funders. The first-year academy model has been recognized by the college's receipt of the Met Life Award in 2006. The college continues its commitment to innovation and experimentation, seeking to build on our successes and to expand the program to growing numbers of students who need the attention and focus that the first-year academies bring to bear on the curriculum and the institutional structure of the college.

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