

**Learning More, Learning Better:  
Developmental and ESL Learning Communities**

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*You learn to think, re-think, and even re-re-think in the different classes. You not only learn more this way, you learn better.*

–LaGuardia student

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LaGuardia Community College is located in Long Island City, Queens, just over the Queensborough Bridge from Manhattan. Queens itself is one of the most ethnically and economically diverse boroughs in New York, possibly in the United States, and LaGuardia's student profile mirrors this diversity. Its students come from every borough of New York City, and from more than 140 different countries. Nonetheless, LaGuardia students have a number of things in common with students attending public community colleges around the country. The median age of LaGuardia students is about twenty-two, and many are working class (64 percent have an annual income of \$25,000 or less) and are the first in their family to attend college. Only 38 percent of entering students come directly from high school; 47 percent are already working. In an incoming survey, these students express concern about their ability to perform well in college and 80 percent are worried about having enough time to keep up with their studies. This is understandable since 45 percent have jobs, 63 percent of those work more than twenty hours a week, and almost 20 percent have children, two-thirds of whom are under six years of age.

In terms of academic preparation, 91 percent of incoming LaGuardia students need at least one developmental course; however, in the last few years an increasing number of students are placed into ESL courses rather than basic writing courses (1999-2000: 23 percent to 35 percent). As of 2001, 65 percent of new students are foreign born and 49 percent of these students have been in the United States for less than five years. Many, but not all, foreign and immigrant students read and write in their native language proficiently and a large number do not use English outside of the LaGuardia classroom.<sup>1</sup> Given the complex skills issues suggested by this information and competing demands on working students with family obligations, concern about success in college is clearly justified.

LaGuardia faculty and administrators have addressed the needs of entering students through an array of First Year experiences including a daylong introduction to the college with workshops (Opening Sessions) taught by faculty, a common reading, mentoring services, and new student seminars.<sup>2</sup> We also offer end-of-semester, one-week intensive courses in Basic Writing (English Express) and Basic Math (Second Chance) for students who have failed these courses but are close to passing. But perhaps the most important kind of support we offer incoming students occurs through our learning communities.

A primary way LaGuardia has sought to create community and enhance support for ESL and developmental students in particular is through its New Student House program, first piloted and assessed in 1992, and targeting our most at-risk incoming students, those who need basic skills courses in three areas: reading, writing, and speech. Our goal has been to create a fully coordinated learning experience and foster a sense of belonging for students who have not traditionally felt connected to academic life and who face competing demands of family and work.

The New Student House, in its original configuration, consisted of the three developmental courses Basic Reading, Basic Writing, and Oral Communication and a Freshman Seminar taught by a counselor. (All developmental courses at LaGuardia include an additional weekly hour of tutoring in writing, reading, and speech labs.) The original House consisted of three “apartments,” each with a cohort of twenty-five students. This meant that teaching in the house constituted a full schedule for each faculty member (each taught three sections of the developmental course). It was also a complete schedule for the students. This structure made it possible to have individual “apartments” with different levels of the Basic Writing and Basic Reading courses. One apartment, for example, was taught with a six-hour version of Basic Writing and Essentials of Reading I; another was taught with a four-hour version of Basic Writing and Essentials of Reading II. Placement into these sections depended on testing results, but one unique advantage to the program was that students could be moved around during the semester and thereby given additional support according to their individual needs. Faculty teaching in the house met regularly with the counselor to evaluate student progress, and decisions were made on a weekly basis about the kind of support each student needed. The flexibility and individual attention offered by the structure of the program and the collaboration and dialogue of the faculty and counselor were essential to the success of the original program.

Since participation in the New Student House Program is voluntary, a little needs to be said about how students are selected and the role of faculty in initial recruitment and support. Institutional research helps us identify students who would place into this program and an individual letter, followed by a phone call, is sent to each student. In this letter, students are given a snapshot of the program, including a block schedule (four days 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.) that they would be unable to duplicate taking these courses separately. The letter includes an invitation to a special day of advisement and registration for the program—a short-cut through registration for basic skills students who must meet with an advisor. On this day, faculty teaching in the program are on hand to meet students, answer questions, and describe the integrated curriculum they have planned together. This registration and advisement day is very important in the message it sends to these students: yes, LaGuardia has 11,000 students and you are part of an incoming class of 3,000, but you are special and we will give you the individual attention you need—on your first day, and throughout your first semester.<sup>3</sup>

One semester prior to teaching in the learning community, faculty meet to plan an integrated curriculum. They agree on common readings, choose films and field trips, and develop a joint syllabus. When possible, this coordinated curriculum includes sequenced and/or simultaneous assignments based on these common materials so the materials and activities from one discipline can serve as a resource for work in another. Coordinated activities are developed and refined throughout the semester. In one program, for example, the reading professor assigned Richard Wright’s *Native Son* so the Writing and Speech professors designed parallel writing assignments and activities to deepen students’ understanding of the themes and issues raised by the novel. The speech professor, for example, led his students in preparing a trial of the main character, Bigger

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Thomas, and divided the three apartments of the House into prosecution, defense, and jury, with individual students volunteering to play the main characters. The writing professor created a parallel argumentation assignment (including research into the democratic system) in which students had to defend their position regarding Bigger Thomas’s guilt or innocence. A culminating event for the semester was an actual staging of the trial. In an end-of-term evaluation of the program, one student wrote, “I learned how to speak in public for the first time without being afraid,” and another said, “The best thing about the New Student House was when all three classes got together and made a show.”

Faculty teaching in the House stress not only the importance of curriculum integration but also the need for ongoing dialogue and flexibility. Faculty have many anecdotes about the team support necessary to effect a change in plans. One English professor remembers asking other members of the teaching team to give up a group film viewing and discussion because students were anxious about a recently returned writing assignment and needed more time for revision. Not only did the other faculty members agree to postpone the film, they asked the English professor how they could help and, together, reading, speech, and writing instructors designed activities directly related to the writing assignment. This was a moment when students as well as faculty members felt powerfully supported.

Faculty teaching in the House meet on a weekly basis to evaluate the effectiveness of their curriculum and pedagogy, and to discuss the needs of individual students. (It should be noted that faculty teaching in a House for the first time receive, when possible, an hour of release time for this collaboration.) The counselor who teaches the Freshman Seminar plays an essential role in this ongoing evaluation by administering early and later self-assessment assignments to students and by attending one or more classes taught by the reading, writing, and speech faculty and giving these instructors—and the students—feedback. The counselor might suggest, for example, that the instructor vary her pedagogy to reach students whose learning style is more visual; in his own Freshman Seminar he might make observations about the importance of note-taking or participating in the group. In an end-of-term evaluation, one faculty member notes, “We wouldn’t have been able to give focused and consistent support to our most at-risk students without the help of a counselor teaching in the program.”

In its first year, Vincent Tinto, a professor of education and sociology at Syracuse University, conducted a study to assess whether the goals of the program were being met. The primary goals were to increase the retention and success of developmental students. Our data showed a 15-20 percent higher retention rate one and two semesters beyond the learning community and a substantially higher pass rate in individual courses.<sup>4</sup> (In the English course, which is the most difficult to pass, House students achieved a 24 percent higher pass rate in 1992 and a 33 percent higher pass rate in 1994, compared to students taking these courses separately.) But the program was also successful for both faculty and students in unanticipated ways. The students’ experience in the learning community strengthens their engagement in and commitment to the college community beyond the classroom and many become involved in student government and clubs.<sup>5</sup> In responding to end-of-semester surveys, a high

percentage commented on the community that was created by the House, including a recognition of the encouragement and support they received in each of their classes, benefits of small and large group activities, an appreciation of close relationships developed with teachers, an awareness of intellectual links among the different courses, and an increased confidence in their writing and their ability to speak in large groups. Finally, many students commented on the importance of friendships developed and asked about participating in future learning communities.<sup>6</sup>

Faculty, too, had an overwhelmingly positive response to working in the House but warned of the intensity of the experience. As is often the case with truly integrated learning community work, they noted the value of in-depth dialogue with colleagues about pedagogy and curriculum, the creativity and excitement of synthesizing ideas and classroom practice in team-taught sessions, and the importance of ongoing evaluation of student progress, so that the most at-risk students were receiving the kind of support typical of much smaller private colleges rather than a large public institution. Reflecting on the level of engagement necessary to work effectively in the program, some faculty suggested that one should not teach in the House for two consecutive semesters. The initial team and several subsequent teams stressed the importance of faculty members choosing their own teams and having adequate planning time before teaching together. Some faculty also emphasized the need for extreme availability and attentiveness to student needs and indicated that this kind of teaching is not for everyone. Overwhelmingly, students in this kind of developmental program have had in the past less than positive educational experiences: they may have experienced repeated failure in high school; poor work habits and study skills may interfere with their ability to focus in class or complete homework assignments; and self-esteem issues may make them especially fragile. Seasoned and flexible faculty who are willing to evaluate student progress and adjust their pedagogy to meet individual student needs are essential to the success of the program.

Since 1994, the New Student House at LaGuardia has replaced one of its basic skills courses (Oral Communication) with a college-level version of that course, and we have experimented successfully with other college-level courses such as Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers, and Reading Biography.<sup>7</sup> During the 2002-03 academic year, a Basic Skills Task Force met to consider how to build on the success of LaGuardia's learning communities and reach a larger population. One result is a new pilot of Freshman Academies, which is in the planning stages. Its goal is to offer two basic skills courses and a college-level course in the major to virtually all developmental students in that major. The first two pilot majors for these academies will be Business and Computer Science, two of our most popular majors for incoming students.

A year after the original New Student House was piloted, an ESL faculty team designed a new version of the program: a two-apartment house, each with a six-hour ESL course, a speech course (Communication for the Non-Native Speaker), Essentials of Reading I or II (one in each apartment), and a New Student Seminar. This faculty team chose "Immigration" as its theme and designed a complete joint syllabus with common texts and articles, research

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projects on issues such as illegal aliens, conflicts between cultural tradition and American law, intercultural relationships, jobs filled by immigrants, and a field trip to Ellis Island. Having worked together for more than six years, the faculty team recently redesigned their curriculum around the theme of “Women’s Issues and Women’s Rights,” with research projects on the history of women’s rights in America and globally.

In addition to their version of the New Student House, the ESL Program at LaGuardia has been working steadily for more than a decade to support ESL students and provide them with college-level courses. Currently, 50 percent of the highest-level ESL courses are paired with 100 level colleges courses in a variety of disciplines including business, accounting, computer science, sociology, theatre, and human services. ESL faculty have initiated many of these pairs, seeking out faculty in a discipline that interests them and designing ESL readings and assignments directly related to the discipline. ESL faculty speak enthusiastically of the satisfaction they derive from working with faculty in other disciplines and of the immense benefits for students. A recent ten-year study shows that ESL students are outperforming non-ESL students taking these college-level courses independently.

Based on learning community work for more than twenty years, LaGuardia faculty and administrators have recommendations, concerns, and goals for future learning communities, especially for developmental and ESL students. First and foremost, LaGuardia faculty feel strongly that these learning communities work best when they are faculty driven, that is to say, when faculty choose their own teams and design their integrated curriculum. They are most successful when faculty are engaged in recursive evaluation of student progress and of their own curriculum and pedagogy, in individual classes and in linked activities and assignments. Essential to this is adequate time for planning and evaluation before and during the semester the learning community is taught (and, whenever possible, some compensation for this work in the form of released time or a stipend).

In our developmental learning communities, faculty speak powerfully about the importance of the counselor, and, whenever possible, a New Student Seminar taught by the counselor is attached to each of these learning communities. When faculty teams are meeting regularly and the counselor has the opportunity to visit their classes, he or she has the opportunity to help the whole team recognize and support the most at-risk students. Early intervention for these students, including additional tutoring, and the concentrated awareness and support of the faculty team can make all the difference in these students’ success in the program. In terms of curriculum content and advancing the skills levels of students, one clear benefit (in addition to overall higher retention and pass rates) is that the synthesis of activities across disciplines enables students to engage in deeper analytic tasks than would be possible in a stand-alone basic skills course.<sup>8</sup>

While faculty and administrators feel that developmental and ESL learning communities at LaGuardia have been highly successful in the last decade particularly, and our institutional data supports this conclusion, a major goal is to expand these offerings for a larger cohort of incoming students. (Currently a two-

or three-apartment house serves only fifty to seventy-five students.) Within our incoming class each fall of approximately 1,500 students, more than 90 percent need at least one developmental course. We need to expand the learning community offerings so that a majority of these students can benefit from the level of integration and support offered in such programs as the New Student House. Perhaps in another year we will be able to report on the effectiveness of the Academy model piloted in the spring of 2004.

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### **Endnotes**

1. Data on LaGuardia student diversity and skills are taken from the Institutional Profile. For more detailed information, see our website: [www.laguardia.edu/facts/archives/facts2001](http://www.laguardia.edu/facts/archives/facts2001).
2. In 2003 The Policy Center on the First Year of College, a national research center funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Atlantic Philanthropies with a basic mission to improve the first year of college, selected LaGuardia as an “Institution of Excellence in the First College Year.” LaGuardia was among thirteen institutions nationwide chosen from a field of 130 nominees through a competitive selection process.
3. The procedure described in this paragraph has evolved and been modified as more registration moves online and as pre-freshman summer immersion programs have expanded at LaGuardia. There are now a variety of ways students learn about and enter developmental and other first-year clusters.
4. Data on pass rates in individual courses in the House continue to suggest that learning outcomes can be directly related to the learning community experience. Data on retention have varied from semester to semester. A 2002 survey indicates that the majority of students who drop out do so for reasons completely external to college life (for financial or family reasons).
5. We have not been able to document consistently higher retention in the House but do have data supporting higher pass rates in the developmental courses in the learning community.
6. For a booklet on the New Student House, including program design, data on retention and success, and student and faculty interviews, contact Phyllis van Slyck, English Department, LaGuardia Community College, [vanph@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:vanph@lagcc.cuny.edu).
7. This change was implemented in part because of changing financial aid regulations in New York: incoming students need at least one college-level course to qualify for financial aid.
8. For an example of this kind of research-oriented activity in the ESL New Student House, contact Rashida Aziz, ESL Credit Program, [azizra@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:azizra@lagcc.cuny.edu).