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Cultivating a Community of Excellence

GAIL O. MELLOW, PRESIDENT

LaGuardia Community College/CUNY

HONORS DIRECTOR: KARLYN KOH

At LaGuardia Community College, we have a saying: Challenge expectations. As fitting as these words are in an essay on the unique value of an honors program at a community college, they also reflect the creation, growth, and ultimate goal of our program and its amazing students, faculty, and staff, who embody these words every day.

That an unprecedented widening and deepening of students' knowledge takes place in honors courses is a given, but the singularity of the LaGuardia Community College Honors Program centers on expansion of our students' conception of themselves as more than intellectuals. Our honors philosophy of helping students own their learning process and educational experience gives students a sense of agency in their lives that builds their self-esteem and self-confidence and allows them to see their limitless potential.

Cultivating a community of support is essential in planting these seeds of excellence. We engage not just past and present students of the program but also bring the talents and skills of faculty and staff from every area of the college to bear in myriad ways. The result: our students become leaders, empowered

to organize for themselves and their peers on the topics of transfer, scholarship, research, civic engagement, and diverse co-curricular activities.

For the honors students at LaGuardia, the shift in self-awareness and positive image is life-altering, going far beyond the average student's expansion of intellectual capacity. The change has the power to raise the bar on the goals they set and achieve: from an accountant with an associate's degree at a local firm in Queens, NY, to an MBA working at one of the top three financial institutions in the country.

"Honors" is typically associated with a self-selecting group of polished, academically accomplished, focused, and/or privileged students who arrive merely needing to be nurtured and mentored to reach their full potential. One assumes that honors students are not "at risk" and they don't need much support. However, community college students provide a different story about the meaning and value of honors; they demonstrate that—counter-intuitive though it may be—open-access community colleges need programs like honors to fulfill their mission of serving students who have been underserved and are under-represented in higher education. This is the population we serve at LaGuardia, and seemingly the odds are against them. Not the least of the obstacles to their success are financial, making it difficult to afford tuition, commuting costs, and textbooks and often necessitating such choices as whether to pay the rent or register for classes next semester. An honors program at an urban, commuter campus serving low-income, under-represented, first-generation community college students can seem beyond pie in the sky.

LaGuardia has always excelled at precisely this kind of challenge. The college was founded in 1971 in response to the City University of New York's query, "What if we made CUNY's founding principle—opening the doors of higher education to all—a reality?" The college was named after one of New York's most courageous and idealistic leaders, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia, a champion of the underdog. Now, over 160 countries are represented among LaGuardia's full-time students with 111 native languages. The results speak for themselves: family income for LaGuardia students climbs 17% upon graduation, and LaGuardia graduates transfer to four-year colleges at a rate 20% higher than that of their peers at community colleges nationwide.

An imperative for innovation has led us to shatter misperceptions of community college students' academic and professional abilities from the moment we opened our doors over forty years ago in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. This same drive is what has helped us to push boundaries in order to expand the traditional conception of honors programs as "elite,"

showing us how they can be, and at our institution are, engines to increase accessibility to higher education and the workforce. In fact, our challenges—how to tailor honors education to the needs of first-generation, low-income, often academically under-prepared students for whom, regardless of immense native talents and enormous personal ambition, college and academic culture is foreign, and how to foster a culture of support on an urban commuter campus—have become the key ingredients in our success.

The honors program has grown from its first honors course in 1994 to now offer over twenty honors sections each semester in all disciplines from literature, social sciences, humanities, business, and STEM courses, serving 350–400 students. The program now also has an honors student advisory committee (HSAC) and an honors house that serves as a student-centered hub for peer- and alumni-led advisement, mentoring, and organizing.

The honors program balances selectivity, by virtue of a minimum 3.2 GPA requirement, and accessibility through the creation of an inclusive student community for co-curricular programming. “The Program’s philosophy is that Honors students are not so much born but made,” Honors Program Director Karlyn Koh explained to me. “This means that we offer individuals an opportunity to become ‘Honors students’—courageous, curious, and motivated students who seek intellectual challenge, and who also use their academic strengths to transform their lives and, more importantly, the lives of others,” she said.

This experiential learning philosophy provides students with a chance to stretch their intellectual muscle in the classroom and through such research opportunities as LaGuardia’s first Interdisciplinary Student Research Conference in May 2015. This event drew students from outside of the program as well as inside and served as the launch celebration of the *Honors Journal*, which gave students a chance to experience the academic editing and publication process.

Our alumni’s successes testify to the enduring impact of their honors experience at LaGuardia. “To be mostly students of color from lower class backgrounds, working multiple jobs, literally sustaining family systems whether with children or not, while also striving to achieve a formal education hardly allows room to cultivate solidarity in pursuit of success, and is oftentimes a lonely endeavor,” said LaGuardia honors alumna Freda Raitelu (now at Smith College), who was named the NCHC Student of the Year in 2012 and also served on the executive board of the Northeast Regional Honors Council (NRHC), on which Dr. Koh also serves. Raitelu continued, “Yet,

the Honors Program and HSAC facilitate solidarity through concrete initiatives like essay writing, financial aid and scholarship literacy workshops, and community building activities.”

This engagement of students both in and out of the classroom is a signature element of LaGuardia’s honors program and is instrumental in its success. HSAC students and alumni have—with the support of honors faculty and staff—put together “fireside chats” during which faculty discuss their research and civic engagement events like a fundraiser for victims of Hurricane Sandy in 2013 as well as regular transfer and scholarship workshops and off-campus events that support student research. This involvement allows students to gain ownership of what they want from their time at college.

The LaGuardia Honors Program has been active at the regional and national level as well. Students and alumni routinely make the news with their transfer, scholarship, and post-graduation successes. For example, Wai “Kat” Lam won the 2013 NCHC Best Poster Presentation for Math and Science. After graduating from LaGuardia, she transferred to Johns Hopkins University as a science major. All five of LaGuardia’s Jack Kent Cooke Undergraduate Scholars have been honors students, and program graduates have been accepted to a wide range of selective four-year colleges, including Columbia, Brown, NYU, Swarthmore, Amherst, and Sarah Lawrence; they have also gone on to work at such organizations as the United Nations and Teach for America.

The honors model of small, student-centered classes lends itself well to the community college setting as it provides students with a strong network from which to get multi-level support: peer, faculty, and alumni. By clearing the space for them to form community, which is hard to cultivate on an urban, commuter campus where students do not have four years to develop relationships, the honors model at LaGuardia has helped create a strong, sustainable alumni-student network. Alumni of our honors program are empowered learners who have set and achieved important goals, often ones that seemed impossible given who they are and where they came from. They serve as powerful role models who return to share their triumphs with the next group of students willing to take on the honors challenge. “A private four-year university was not even considered as a school I could transfer to when I first got to LaGuardia, but the revelation that various past alumni who were in the Honors Program have transferred to several prestigious four-year universities made me challenge myself and expand my horizons,” said 2012 honors alumnus Tremaine Wright, who graduated in June from NYU with a Bachelors

in Applied Psychology. “From my experience in the Honors Program and HSAC, I extended my target four-year schools to include prestigious private universities such as Columbia University and NYU, no small dream for the average community college student.”

There is no denying that remediation and graduation rates remain priorities at two-year colleges, and it may seem that “honors” and “community college” are incompatible, but the stories of our students demonstrate the efficacy of honors in supporting and fulfilling the college’s mission. Although 54% of students who took honors courses between the spring of 2007 and fall 2014 were required to take 1–3 remedial courses in writing, reading, and/or math, the graduation rate of students who have taken honors courses routinely exceeds that of the baseline group at the college; our three-year graduation rate among the fall 2011 freshman cohort is 55% versus 12% of the baseline cohort.

“The incredible support I received from the entire Honors community while at LaGuardia pushed me to believe in myself and never run away from a challenge,” said Rafael Tejada, honors program alumnus of the class of 2013. Rafael felt restricted and ashamed by his remedial status and subsequent low grades, but, driven to achieve greater goals, he persevered until he found the honors program. “Most importantly, I’ve learned that I can accomplish anything I want no matter how many times I may fail,” said Rafael, who is now pursuing a joint NYU/Sarah Lawrence master’s degree.

This is a special moment in time for community colleges. The relevance and value of honors education at community colleges has never been more salient than it is now, given President Obama’s call for grassroots action to make two years of community college free through the College Promise Campaign. The national conversation now taking place recognizes that community colleges are the gateway to the middle class in America. I can attest to this important mission of community colleges, and as we’ve seen at LaGuardia, honors programs advance the mission by breaking down barriers to higher education and upward mobility. Our program has changed students’ and their families’ lives beyond what they ever imagined possible.

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