



# HIGHLIGHTS

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## MetLife Foundation

*Best Practices in Student Retention*

### MetLife Foundation Honors LaGuardia Community College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of LaGuardia Community College, a 2003-2004 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. This overview of LaGuardia's retention efforts outlines factors that prompted the college to focus on student retention, lists several initiatives implemented, highlights one key strategy – The First Year Experience, and discusses key lessons learned.

#### Defining the Issue: What Prompted the Focus on Student Retention

The retention challenges for LaGuardia are unique. Located in western Queens, the most ethnically diverse borough of New York City, LaGuardia serves almost 13,000 students. Students come from 159 different countries and speak 110 different languages. Over two-thirds of the students were not born in the U.S., and almost half of the entering freshman class has been in the U.S. five years or less. Other characteristics of the students include low-income (85% of the student body) and academic under-preparation (92% need at least one developmental skills course). To serve this very diverse student population, the college has embraced an extensive set of retention initiatives.

#### Facing the Challenge: A Model Practice for Student Success

LaGuardia began to focus on student retention as early as 1978. LaGuardia was among the first colleges in the nation to pioneer learning communities. More recently, the college has introduced e-Portfolios and outreach educational planning programs that are the basis for a strong student retention program. The components that have come together to create the college's retention program include: The First Year Experience, Learning Communities, ePortfolio, Honors Program, Career and Transfer, Peer Mentoring, Leadership and Diversity Training, and Academic and Student Support Services.

Though all of the programs have had a significant role in increasing student retention, of particular interest is LaGuardia's First Year Experience (FYE).

### The First Year Experience (FYE)

LaGuardia had a number of first-college-year activities in place for many years, including a "New Student Seminar" designed to acclimate students to college life and a successful learning communities program. However, there was still room for improvement in first-year retention and success rates, and the college faculty and staff believed more needed to be done to facilitate the transition to college. Additionally, the size and diversity of the incoming class had expanded dramatically since the first-year activities were established. Three years ago, the first-year programs were reviewed, with the idea of expanding what was successful, in addition to adding new initiatives to address the changing needs of LaGuardia students.

The First Year Experience (FYE) program was revised and expanded upon and the college added an array of new student activities including the following:

**Learning Communities.** First-year learning communities link developmental courses such as ESL with discipline-based courses such as Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers, Sociology, and Biochemistry. Over the last several years, based on the success of these learning communities, the college has made substantial increases in the number of such communities available to first-year students.

**New Student Seminar.** The college requires *all* new students to take a freshman orientation course, the New Student Seminar, which is designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college.

**Intensives.** The college offers an array of "pre-freshman" intensive courses in its "Quick Start" summer program, which is designed to accelerate first-year students through the basic skills course sequences. These skills courses include a "Strategies for Success" counseling component as well. Approximately 400 incoming students participate each summer. Other skills intensives incorporated "Second Chance," a one-week course for students who "nearly pass" a basic skills course, an experience designed to assist them in passing without having to retake the course for an entire semester.

**Common Reading.** To create a shared intellectual experience for new students, the college established a freshman theme ("Personal Narrative and Memoir") and a common reading (*Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First Hundred Years* was the first book selected). Faculty-led discussions of the text were built into Opening Sessions for new students, and a website providing lesson plans and

background materials for the text was developed for both student and faculty use.

**Mentoring.** As part of the expanded First Year Experience, the college instituted a program to create a cadre of mentors for first-year students consisting of advanced students, faculty/staff, and alumni. Mentors are asked to assist students in finding their way through the system and are trained on how to connect students with support services on campus.

**Opening Sessions for New Students.** In an effort to create a sense of community for incoming students, the college instituted an "Opening Sessions" day, with a plenary session and concurrent workshops/presentations led by faculty and more senior students on topics such as leadership, women's issues, communication, student clubs, student success stories, community activism, and diversity.

### Evidence of Effectiveness

The initiatives at LaGuardia create a climate that is generating student success. The following pieces of data demonstrate the effectiveness of the combined retention strategies that have been implemented at the college.

- Learning communities are highly successful in improving learning outcomes. A ten-year study conducted at the college showed a statistically significant increase in grade point average and pass rates in learning communities.
- "Quick Start" intensives accelerate large numbers of students through developmental courses, with over 1,500 students accelerated through one level of required developmental courses over the 2000-02 period.
- Preliminary assessments of the college's new initiatives (Opening Sessions for New Students, Common Reading, and Mentoring) show that students who participate in these activities are being retained at higher rates.
- During the 2002-2003 academic year, LaGuardia Community College was one of 13 colleges nationwide to be recognized for excellence in its First-Year Experience program by the Policy Center on the First Year of College.
- The college has a 92% within-semester retention rate and 80% semester-to-semester rate for 2002-2003. For 2001-2002, the fall-to-fall semester retention rate was 65 percent.
- According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, the first year retention rate at LaGuardia, which has averaged 65% over the past five years, exceeds the national average by about seven percent.
- As national data (NCES) reveals, LaGuardia students exceed the national average for "success" when graduation rates are measured at five years: our students graduate at 25% as opposed to an 18.9% national norm.

### Lessons Learned

Over the last 25 years, LaGuardia has learned that a multi-faceted approach is required to support a highly diverse population of students often needing developmental work. Programs must be formulated first and foremost with student needs in mind and must be based on research literature, documented successful processes, and in-house data collection and analysis. In the case of LaGuardia, it was clear that a first-year program needed to focus on improving academics for a student body overwhelmingly requiring developmental work in literacy and math, as well as lacking a strong sense of affiliation and connectedness to the institution. By keeping these goals front and center, the college has been able to create a successful program.

### For More Information

For more information about LaGuardia Community College, visit the college's web site at <http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu>. For specific information on the student retention efforts at LaGuardia, contact Joe Smith, Senior Administrator for Enrollment Management, at [jsmith@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:jsmith@lagcc.cuny.edu).

#### Look for CCSSE at:

Colleges and Careers Transition Initiative (CCTI)  
Summit  
February 28-29, 2004  
San Francisco, CA  
By invitation to CCTI colleges that are participating in CCSSE

Innovations 2004!  
February 29 – March 3, 2004  
San Francisco, CA

The North Central Association Higher Learning  
Commission 2003 Annual Meeting (NCA)  
March 27-30, 2004  
Chicago, IL

National Resource Center for the First Year Experience  
2004 Teleconference Series  
April 8, 2004

Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC)  
April 23-24, 2004  
Minneapolis, MN

AACC Annual Convention  
April 24-27, 2004  
Minneapolis, MN

NISOD Conference  
May 23-26, 2004  
Austin, TX