

# Making Connections: Integrated Learning, Integrated Lives

**By Paul Arcario**, dean of academic affairs; **Bret Eynon**, assistant dean of academic affairs and director, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning; and **J. Elizabeth Clark**, associate professor—all at LaGuardia Community College

On any given day on the campus of LaGuardia Community College, most students come to us from jobs, from other schools, and from caring for families and children. The college educates New Yorkers of all backgrounds, ages, and means and helps students become full participants in the city's economic and civic life. Approximately 65 percent of LaGuardia students are female, more than 65 percent are immigrants, and more than 75 percent are students of color. The campus bristles with energy as people hurry to classes, the library, and computer labs, and then rush off campus to their next commitment. The college serves twelve thousand matriculated students and another twenty-eight thousand in continuing education. Many students struggle under the load of full-time jobs and full-time class schedules, barely managing to meet the demands of each. In their hurried approach to education, students often miss the opportunities to find critical intersections between their personal, professional, and educational lives. As passengers on life's express train, they usually don't have time to get off and make those connections.

Working with the Integrated Learning Project (ILP), a three-year initiative of the Carnegie Foundation and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), LaGuardia seeks to transform the hurried, fragmented nature of our students' education by creating substantial, integrated connections between their courses and helping them link coursework to the rest of their lives. Restructuring the

first year at the college and using electronic student portfolios, or e-portfolios, LaGuardia aims to help students overcome fragmentation and make the connections that are vital for personal growth and academic success. Moreover, as LaGuardia works to explore and implement integrated learning on its own campus, it is also encouraging other City University of New York (CUNY) campuses to connect previously disparate classes into an intellectual whole.

LaGuardia's students make this task particularly fascinating and important. As the swell of new immigration has reshaped New York City, and Queens has become the Lower East Side of the twenty-first century, LaGuardia has been transformed. At last count, LaGuardia students originate from 158 different countries—including Columbia, Brazil, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Rumania, and Thailand—and speak 108 different first languages. The institutional mission revolves around meeting the needs of this incredible student body. LaGuardia treasures its diversity, and recognizes that it translates into a campus of students who have been traditionally underserved by the educational system. In many cases, this leads to significant underpreparation in key academic areas. In 2002, for example, 90 percent of entering students required at least one developmental skills course in reading, writing, or mathematics. And many of our students are undergoing a challenging acculturation process, navigating the landscapes of college life, an intense city, and a fast-changing new society—all at the same time.



### **The E-portfolio Initiative**

LaGuardia's work with the Integrated Learning Project seeks to serve the needs of these students from two complementary directions. The first part of the project, the e-portfolio initiative, provides students with a tool for collecting their academic work and their reflections on their learning, and for sharing their portfolios on the Internet. Students begin depositing work in the e-portfolio in their first semesters at the college and continually refine their presentations as they move forward, each time looking to reflect on and understand the process of growth and improvement. Reflective personal essays encourage students to explore their changing sense of themselves. Designed to help students connect classroom, career, and personal goals and experiences, the e-portfolio moves students toward not only integrated learning, but also more integrated lives.

Funded by the Title V program of the U.S. Department of Education, the LaGuardia e-portfolio is a multifaceted structure. It prompts students to take more responsibility for their learning while also providing faculty with snapshots of student growth that can help them better understand individual students as well as the broader process of learning and teaching. Meanwhile, at the institutional level, the e-portfolio also lays important groundwork for a more holistic outcomes assessment process that examines student work as a way of identifying and pursuing possibilities for improved instruction.

Although LaGuardia only has a three-year history with the e-portfolio project, two thousand students are already actively building their e-portfolios. Feedback shows that students are enthusiastic about this opportunity to learn new technology skills, and are particularly interested in using it to connect classroom and lived experience. Meanwhile, institutional examination of student work at the college has begun to show interesting changes. Rather than viewing our students through test scores and retention rates, we have begun to see students creating virtual representations of their lives and work. Students have inte-

Rather than viewing  
our students through  
test scores and  
retention rates, we  
have begun to see  
students creating  
virtual representations  
of their lives and work.

grated original paintings, drawings, oral interviews, family photographs, poetry, annotated resumes, and a range of classes and projects that represent who they are as students and emerging scholars. The e-portfolio has proven to be a versatile tool that allows a student like Kyoung Kang to

use her previous medical training at the University of In-Je in Pusan, Korea, in the context of her present work as a visual artist and as a student in art therapy at LaGuardia. Kang's e-portfolio—now in its fourth iteration—demonstrates her progress toward integrated learning as she pulls her past, present, and future into a seamless whole, building on her two passions: art and medicine. Kang's work, and the work of others like her, helps us understand the role of reflection as a key element of integrated learning. Each day, LaGuardia students find new ways to connect identity and learning.

### **The First Year Academies**

The second part of LaGuardia's ILP complements and supports the first. The First Year Academies, a combination of linked courses and cocurricular activities, offer all LaGuardia students the opportunity to take advantage of interdisciplinary faculty collaboration in their first and their second semesters at the college. Creating innovative learning community structures designed to help new students successfully adjust to college life, the academies also provide training and support as students launch their initial e-portfolios.

The First Year Academies bring together the best of LaGuardia's history—drawing on the college's expertise with learning communities, basic skills instructions, and the first-year experience. Developed by a faculty committee, the academy structure provides students with a more cohesive academic experience and allows basic-skills students to move more



# Practice

quickly toward substantial engagement with content courses. When the program is fully operational, new students will select one of three academies (Business/Technology, Liberal Arts, or Allied Health and Sciences) and take four linked courses designed by faculty to reflect the themes of that academy.

For example, students in the Business/Technology Academy will take Introduction to Business or Introduction to Computers, a themed developmental English course, and a themed New Student Seminar in their first semester. In their second semester, they'll take a Fundamentals of Professional Advancement Seminar for Business/Technology students. Their Introduction to Computers or Introduction to Business course will serve as an anchor, setting key themes and engaging students with major concepts and disciplinary thinking in their major. Basic Skills faculty recon-textualize writing as a practice associated with the major. The New Student Seminar provides support for students in critical areas such as study skills, course planning, and career planning.

The academies are growing steadily in size. In spring 2004, the college piloted four Business/Technology Academy learning communities; in 2004–5, the college has run nine Business/Technology Academy learning communities, two Allied Health learning communities, and four Liberal Arts learning communities. Over the next three years, LaGuardia seeks to move toward including all of the college's incoming matriculated students into learning communities housed in one of its three academies.

The e-portfolio will be an integral element of the academy structure, supporting students and faculty as they make connections between classes. In both semesters of the academy, students will take a “Studio Hour,” in which they learn about e-portfolio technology and build initial e-portfolios to showcase their work in all of their academy classes. After the first year, students will continue their e-portfolios by collecting work created in their urban studies class, which is a required course of study for all LaGuardia students. In the future, they will create a final portfolio in capstone courses in their major, providing them with an opportunity to pause and review their growth over the entire course of their time at the college.

The national Integrated Learning Project has offered LaGuardia a chance to think, work, and connect with other colleges. In November 2004, we brought members of the Portland State University (PSU) ILP team to LaGuardia for three days to meet with our entire faculty and discuss PSU's first-year studies program, their use of e-portfolios, and their innovative assessment program. In January 2005, we visited the College of San Mateo, along with other members of the ILP group, to learn about their math learning communities. While there, one of the authors copresented with Portland State, comparing our approaches to e-portfolios. When faculty see our project in a national perspective—understanding that integrated learning is an important conceptual approach to education—they are more

willing to meet the challenges involved in transforming learning and teaching at LaGuardia.

Moreover, we have found ways to spread the benefits of the Integrated Learning Project beyond the boundaries of LaGuardia, reaching out to the entire seventeen-campus system of CUNY. In January 2005, Bret Eynon launched a six-month CUNY Research Seminar on Integrated Learning, drawing together faculty development leaders from fourteen campuses for a series of discussions exploring issues raised in the national project and considering possible applications at CUNY. In May, the CUNY Task Force on General Education and CUNY's new executive vice chancellor for academic affairs, Selma Botman, sponsored a highly successful day-long conference on integrated learning and its implications. Held at LaGuardia and featuring twenty-four workshops from sixteen campuses, the conference was keyed by AAC&U Senior Scholar Lee Knefelkamp, who spoke to a standing-room-only audience on integrated learning and integrated lives. Our participation in the Integrative Learning Project benefits not only our twelve thousand students, but all of the CUNY campuses—the nation's largest urban education system—and offers an exciting opportunity to extend our work and transform undergraduate education in New York City and beyond. ■

© Copyright retained by authors, 2005