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LaGuardia Community College Wins a National Award For Excellence of Freshman Programs

Long Island City, NY--In a highly competitive competition, LaGuardia Community College has won a national award for developing one of the best college freshman programs in the country.

The Policy Center on the First Year of College, a national research center with a basic mission to improve the first year of college, has selected the college as an "Institution of Excellence in the First College Year." The Policy Center is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Atlantic Philanthropies.

LaGuardia was among the 13 institutions nationwide that were chosen from a field of 130 nominees through a competitive selection. Lehman College in the Bronx was the only other CUNY college awarded and The U.S. Military Academy at West Point was the only other honoree from New York State.

"LaGuardia's first-year activities have been designed to foster academic success as well as create a sense of community and connectedness to the college among a highly diverse group of students, many with developmental or English-as-a-Second-Language needs," said President Gail O. Mellow. "LaGuardia has been able to achieve first-year persistence rates averaging 65 percent over the past five years, exceeding the national average for first-year persistence at public two-year colleges."

A national panel of higher education experts made the final selections based on the following criteria: an intentional, comprehensive approach to first-year student education; continuous improvement driven by meaningful assessment; broad impact on significant numbers of first-year students; strong enduring institutional support and leadership for first-year initiatives; and an involvement of a broad range of faculty, student affairs professionals, administrators and others in first-year programs.

LaGuardia's comprehensive first-year program includes first-year learning communities that link developmental courses such as ESL with credit-bearing courses such as Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers, and Introduction to Sociology.

"What the success of such learning communities shows," said Dr. Paul Arcario, Dean of Academic Affairs and co-chair of the College's First-Year Experience Committee, "is that the most effective basic skills instruction occurs when such instruction is closely coordinated with regular college coursework." Learning communities have been a strong feature of LaGuardia's curriculum and

pedagogy since the mid-1970's; however, since the early 90's, there has been an enhanced focus on learning communities in the first year for developmental and ESL students. Assessment data demonstrates that students in these learning communities are outperforming those taking either developmental, ESL or college-level courses in stand-alone versions (see link on Evaluation of Learning Communities).

Also instituted are pre-freshman intensive courses in the college's "Quick Start" summer program that help to accelerate first-year students through the basic skills course sequences, as well as a new student seminar designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in college.

Another activity is an opening sessions for new students that helps create common, shared experiences, particularly intellectual experiences, that set an academic tone and expectations for students, as well as create a greater sense of community and connectedness to the institution. Integrated into opening sessions is a common reading for freshmen, also designed to create a shared intellectual experience for first-year students.

Freshmen are also supported through a mentoring program where faculty, staff, and alumni volunteers are matched up with first-year students for the purpose of helping them negotiate the system and guiding them to necessary campus support services.

Technology has also been used to enhance the first-year programs. Faculty members are being trained to incorporate technology-based pedagogies into their teaching approaches; basic skills tutorial labs are being computerized, and on-line tutoring for first-year students is being piloted. This year students in newly designed Freshman Interest Groups are beginning the process of creating their own websites and electronic portfolios to improve learning and assessment. Electronic portfolios are a selection of student's works--presentations, projects, and performances--that are posted on the Internet. Through this technological link, professors, counselors, and administrators will be able to follow the student's progress.

In addition to LaGuardia and Lehman, the other institutions selected were: Appalachian State University; Ball State University; Community College of Denver; Eckerd College (FL); Elon University (NC); Drury University (MO); Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis; Kalamazoo College (MI); Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi; University of South Carolina; and the U.S. Military Academy.