LaGuardia Community College’s ASL-English Interpretation Program Only Interpreting Program Recipient of $1.25 Million Grant from U.S. Department of Education

Long Island City, NY—November 20, 2012--LaGuardia Community College’s American Sign Language (ASL)-English Interpretation Program (AEIP), in collaboration with SUNY Empire State College, was recently awarded $1.25 million by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs. The grant, which will be distributed over a five-year period, was awarded to only 10 programs nationally in the category of those serving children with low incidence disabilities. LaGuardia’s program, which competed against four-year institutions and graduate-level programs, ranked third in quality out of 50 proposals submitted and was the only interpreting program to receive an award.

AEIP is a rigorous academic program that prepares selected individuals who are fluent in ASL to become ASL-English interpreters, with a special focus on interpreting in educational settings. In its unique design, students earn a Bachelor’s Degree in Educational Studies: ASL-English Interpretation through a partnership with SUNY Empire State College in which they take three 4-credit education courses, in addition to the LaGuardia’s interpreting sequence. Or, if they already have a bachelor’s degree, they can take the same interpreting and educational studies sequence for a Professional Certificate. Since program candidates must have an associate’s degree to apply, LaGuardia also offers an Associate’s Degree in Deaf Studies and ASL to help prepare them for entry into AEIP.

“LaGuardia’s Program for Deaf Adults is one of the largest and most comprehensive post-secondary education and support programs for deaf and hard of hearing students in the country,” said Gail O. Mellow, President of LaGuardia Community College. “Our deep commitment to serving the Deaf community and educating those who work with them as interpreters is evident in the range and quality of our programs. In awarding our ASL-English Interpretation Program this competitive grant, the U. S. Department of Education has entrusted LaGuardia not only with the training of interpreters, but with the education of deaf students they will serve.”

“In the past, deaf, hard of hearing and deaf blind children (K-12) often got the least qualified interpreters because they couldn’t advocate for themselves,” said Rob Hills, AEIP Project Director. “Since many deaf students are now mainstreamed into regular classes, instead of learning from a teacher communicating directly in ASL, they are receiving an ‘interpreted’ education, which can have implications on their educational outcomes. In this case, the ASL-English interpreter must be highly qualified; this is of paramount importance. This grant funding is meant to address that issue, and our program has already made a very positive impact on improving interpreting services to area schools.”

Several elected officials representing New York gave their support to the proposal. “Congratulations to LaGuardia Community College’s American Sign Language-English
Interpretation Program on being awarded a $1.25 million grant from the United States Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs,” said U.S. Senator Charles E. Schumer. "LaGuardia is the only interpreting program to be awarded in its category, and for reasons well deserved. LaGuardia’s program continues to provide a great service for the Deaf community. LaGuardia’s graduates are amongst the top American Sign Language-English interpreters in the country and this critical funding will ensure that these graduates continue to excel and provide the necessary support programs for deaf and hard of hearing students from all walks of life.”

“I am proud to have supported LaGuardia Community College’s successful proposal for $1.25 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Education to train ASL-English interpreters," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan, Queens). "The program’s rigorous curriculum demonstrates LaGuardia’s consistent dedication to providing an excellent education to a diverse population. Children with special needs should never have to settle for inferior services. Hearing-impaired students of New York City, who are too often underserved and overlooked in traditional educational settings, will greatly benefit from the exceptional interpreters trained at LaGuardia.”

“I am thrilled LaGuardia Community College will receive these much-needed funds!” said Rep. Joe Crowley (D-Queens, the Bronx). “This program is dedicated to ensuring not only that we have enough qualified interpreters to meet the needs of children and youth who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf blind, but also that these interpreters are armed with the necessary skills and understanding to connect with New York City’s large, diverse population of these children. It is critical that LaGuardia Community College have the resources it needs to further grow and develop this unique program that is helping to make a difference in the lives and education of deaf, hard of hearing and deaf blind children in New York.”

Since its inception in 1997, AEIP has graduated 142 interpreters. While the average passing rate of the National Interpreting Certificate (NIC) Knowledge Exam is 500, LaGuardia students’ average score is 640. And though it is not a New York State requirement, LaGuardia students must now take the Educational Interpreting Performance Assessment (EIPA) as an additional graduation requirement. There is also a 3-year service obligation for students who are recipients of the grant in which they work as educational interpreters within K-12 settings.

With the educational coursework provided by SUNY Empire State College, and LaGuardia’s expertise in the area of ASL-English interpretation, AEIP graduates are well prepared to meet these requirements.

“This collaboration among, city, state and federal education organizations strengthens teaching and learning at the primary, secondary, and college levels," said Deborah Amory, Provost of SUNY Empire State College. “LaGuardia’s AEIP is an outstanding program, and we are proud to partner with LaGuardia by providing the opportunity for AEIP students to complete their studies with a bachelor's degree and to serve the Deaf community with distinction.”

“We are pleased to be participating AEIP to offer educational studies and bachelor's degree options,” said Cynthia Ward, Dean of the SUNY Empire State College Metropolitan New York
Region. “The inspirational mission to increase diversity among interpreters who work in K-12 urban education aligns with our shared commitment to access and openness in education.”

While retention is a challenge, students who are accepted into the program do not pay any tuition or national testing fees. “Ours is a demanding program, so making sure students meet requirements when they begin is essential for the graduation rate,” said Mr. Hills. “Students must receive a B or better in each course to move on in program. Strategies for retention will include tutors and mentors, which are provided for with this new funding,” he added.

What makes AEIP—which serves students from all over the tri-state area—distinctive is the fact that the student body is diverse in age, race and professional background, reflecting deaf students and the Deaf community at large in this area of the country.

“We’re above the national average of diversity within interpreting programs,” explained Mr. Hills. “This is important because the field of interpreting does not reflect the strong diversity of deaf students out there. One of the richest parts of our students’ education is that they themselves come from all walks of life. Their collective experience better enables them to be more ready to serve a diverse, Deaf population.”

Philip Wilson graduated from the program in June 2011 and is currently an educational interpreter in a program for deaf students in a Bronx public high school. He credits the education and training he received in AEIP with giving him the building blocks he needed to pass the NIC written exam, obtain his current position and have confidence interpreting in various settings. “It’s a great program,” he said. “Often I can tell LaGuardia interpreters when I meet them. There’s a certain niche they fit into, as they seem to know the importance of prioritizing their connections to the Deaf community that gave them the language in the first place. I feel privileged to be a graduate of the program and among that few.”

LaGuardia Community College located in Long Island City, Queens, was founded in 1971 as a bold experiment in opening the doors of higher education to all, and we proudly carry forward that legacy today. LaGuardia educates students through over 50 degree, certificate and continuing education programs, providing an inspiring place for students to achieve their dreams. Upon graduation, LaGuardia students’ lives are transformed as family income increases 17%, and students transfer to four-year colleges at three times the national average. Part of the City University of New York (CUNY), LaGuardia is a nationally recognized leader among community colleges for boundary-breaking success educating underserved students. At LaGuardia we imagine new ideas, create new curriculum and pioneer programs to make our community and our country stronger. Visit www.laguardia.edu to learn more.

###