

Co-op for a New Generation of Students

By Dr. Peter Katopes

Vice President for Academic Affairs, LaGuardia Community College

Situated in Queens, NY, arguably the most diverse political borough on the face of the earth, LaGuardia Community College truly is “The World’s Community College.” Attracting students who represent more than 150 ethnicities and nationalities and who collectively speak more than 110 distinct languages, the College is the gateway to the American Dream for foreign-born and native-born students alike. Although a majority of LaGuardia’s students express a desire to pursue their education beyond the associates degree, more than half have been in the United States for fewer than five years, do not speak English as a first (and often not even as a second!) language, and have a family income of about \$25,000. Eager to assimilate into American culture, they understand very well the undeniable power of education to improve their lives materially by enhancing their marketability in the workplace. And it is at LaGuardia where they not only often begin their formal American education, but, through our Cooperative Education program, learn about the American way of life through the American way of work.

LaGuardia currently enrolls more than 13,500 credit students. The majority of these students, in addition to being the first in their families to attend college,

have need of remedial or ESL instruction or both. Not surprisingly, many of these students have had limited exposure to the reality of the workplace in the United States and often lack the necessary tools, knowledge, and experience to make sound career decisions. Yet, they are very upwardly mobile and ambitious; they want to be successful and are willing to work hard to achieve success.

Founded in 1970 as the “Co-Op College” of the City University of New York, LaGuardia is the only college in CUNY at which Co-Op is a graduation requirement. Through its Co-Op program, LaGuardia has provided students internship opportunities with multinational and local

businesses, non-profit organizations, and community-based organizations, among others, and helped several generations of students improve their academic skills, increase their vocational options, and enhance their career opportunities. However, co-op at LaGuardia is much more than just participation in internships. Rather, it is a central feature of the education we provide our students. It is based on a philosophy of experiential learning that recognizes individual student needs and draws upon student strengths and experiences. It provides a context for self-assessment and self-directed learning in which the

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CO-OP Close-ups

LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Juanita Rosado

Juanita Rosado, an Honors student at LaGuardia Community College, came to New York from



Colombia only five years ago.

While completing her co-op internship at Pfizer's corporate headquarters in New York City, she realized that the experience would open many doors for her and used the experience to learn as much as

possible. After completing her co-op internship, Juanita was hired full-time as an Administrative Assistant.

“LaGuardia gave me the opportunity to build my confidence and academic potential, as well as the opportunity to challenge myself.”

THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

Daniel J. Rahrig



My co-op experience with Lafarge North America was superb. I was able to work in a hands-on environment alongside an excellent group of engineers. I was given many opportunities to apply my problem-solving skills to real-world situations in an industrial atmosphere. I was assigned various projects that exposed me to new technologies and computer programs. As a result, I consider the co-op program to be an invaluable tool for training the engineers of tomorrow. I look forward to my next co-op with Lafarge.

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student connects, constructs, and reinforces knowledge through direct experience, reflection, analysis, and synthesis.

One of the exciting ways that we are helping students to be successful is through our innovative and exciting new co-op course, “Fundamentals of Professional Development,” which is designed to prepare students to benefit from the co-op experience by assisting them in making sounder career choices by means of more thorough and sophisticated self-assessment and career research projects; helping them understand the realities of the global workplace and the influence of those realities on their career options; creating experiential activities that teach them how best to benefit from an internship experience; and, finally, as part of LaGuardia's signature ePortfolio initiative, helping them to create a professional ePortfolio that will allow them to present themselves to future employers in a new and exciting way.

Linking innovative pedagogy with exciting digital technology, ePortfolio provides students with an opportunity to collect their academic work and their reflections about what they have learned both in the classroom and on their internships. LaGuardia students begin to deposit work in their ePortfolios during their first semester or two and are encouraged to continually refine their presentations as they have more experiences, each time applying more critical analyses about what they have learned about work and how they themselves have grown and changed as a result of their internships. Designed to help students connect what they learn in the classroom to their anticipated career and personal goals and experiences, the ePortfolio supports integrated learning and the development of integrated lives. One student from Central America, commenting on the use of ePortfolio in assessing her internship experience, said, “My ePortfolio helped me realize important things about what I am capable of, how I can accomplish my goals. By using my ePortfolio as a tool for reflecting about my internship rather than merely as a description of my activities I became much more aware of myself as a responsible adult who can make it in the world.” And another student from Eastern Europe said, “ePortfolio is not only a great learning tool, but also a great way to present myself and my experience to future employers.”

Another vital part of LaGuardia's Co-Op program is connecting the internship more closely and dramatically with curricular objectives and by so doing create better opportunities for faculty and students to interact around the co-op experience. Because of our belief that experiential learning can be an important part of a student's educational experience, the College sponsors a program of professional development aimed at helping faculty to increase the role of experiential learning in classroom instruction and provide opportunities for faculty to incorporate experiential education into the classroom while at the same time improving opportunities for students to develop the College's core competencies of critical thinking, reading, and writing. Whether students are studying business administration, travel & tourism, paralegal studies, or computer science, they are learning what it takes to be successful in their careers.

Employers like working with LaGuardia students. "We have a pretty extensive internship program," a manager at a large multi-national bank said, "and we take on students from many colleges and universities in the New York area. The students from LaGuardia are among the most motivated, the most willing to learn. We love having them and in fact have hired a number of them once they have graduated!" In our Employer Survey, employers typically report significant increases in knowledge and understanding on the part of their interns in basic work-related competencies. And our students appreciate the internships, typically reporting that they believe that their overall knowledge

and understanding of the business world had increased significantly and that they were very well-prepared to go on. Katherine Cuevas, a travel & tourism major said of her internship with the Sheraton LaGuardia East Hotel, that it was "a great experience." And Emilio Cortez, also a travel & tourism major, parlayed his internship at the Sheraton into a full-time job in their purchasing department.

Dawid Zamirski, a Polish émigré, went on his first internship as a programmer at the Queens Public Library and was hired just a few months later as a full-time programmer at a salary of \$45,000.

Integrating competencies from content-based programs and curricula, ePortfolio, and a faculty committed to student success have made LaGuardia's Co-op experience more valuable for students than ever before. The development and implementation of "Fundamentals of Professional Advancement" extends the reach of co-op to a broader range

of students. The identification of competency areas clearly frames the knowledge and skills that the internship promotes. The new Employer Evaluation provides valuable data for faculty. Student learning objectives are clear and organized by competency area. And, perhaps most important, data indicates that the internship contributes dramatically to program specific competencies and, ultimately, to employer satisfaction and student success in the workplace. As Joseph Abajian, founder and president of his own music company, says, "My LaGuardia. . . internships gave me the solid foundation I needed to start my own company."

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