

# The World's Community College

## Diversity in action at LaGuardia

By Ron Feemster

QUEENS, NEW YORK

**G**AIL MELLOW, president of LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York, understands why institutions like hers are important. She began her higher education at Jamestown Community College in the southwest corner of New York State. She juggled classes, a full-time job and a two-year-old daughter. She knew then—and remembers today—that school was not her most urgent priority. At the same time, it was a life-transforming process that opened up opportunities beyond any that she might have imagined for herself. “If there hadn’t been a community college in my town,” she said, “I might be working for Wal-Mart today.”

A look of consternation passed briefly over Mellow’s face, as if she were considering the possibility that remarks about working at a retail chain are somehow insensitive, when hundreds of her full-time students are hoping to keep similar jobs in a tight New York job market. What she meant, she pointed out quickly, is that she couldn’t have gotten here without her beginnings at a local community college.

“Here” is a spacious corner office in one of the refurbished factory buildings that LaGuardia calls home. A photo on the bookshelf over her head shows Mellow and four other community college presidents shooting rapids in a rubber raft. The American Association of Community

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Colleges sponsors the annual Outward Bound-style initiation in Colorado for newly appointed presidents. She took the trip in 1998, the summer after her first year as president of Gloucester Community College in southern New Jersey.

Two years later she was being considered for three vacant community college presidencies in the City University of New York system. LaGuardia, she told the search committees, was the only job she would take in New York. If they had asked, she would have told them that running LaGuardia was the only job in the country that could have lured her from the comfortable position in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

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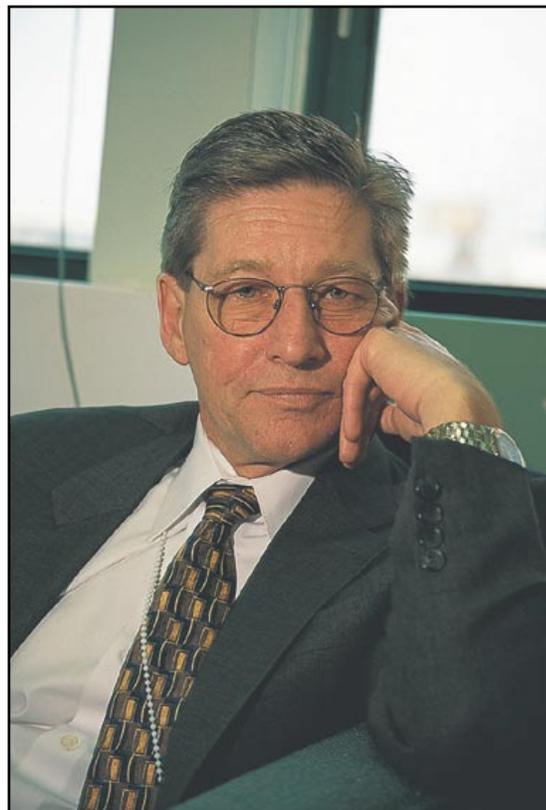
What was special about LaGuardia? Dozens of challenges and opportunities that start and end with a single fact: LaGuardia’s diversity. With students from 140 nations, speaking 104 languages—some second-generation immigrants and some right off the plane—the school is a microcosm of Queens, perhaps the most ethnically diverse county in the United States. If Queens is a microcosm of the world, LaGuardia is the world’s community college.

Students at LaGuardia have lived through war in Bosnia, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, guerrilla kidnappings in Colombia, even slavery in the Sudan. When political violence struck New York last September, the campus was shocked but not cowed, according to Mellow. At a spontaneous school assembly convened last September 12 (which would have been the third day of classes) students reflected on their strength as well as their vulnerability, on the richness of a campus community whose members hail from five continents. “This place is so diverse, you can’t drop a bomb anywhere in the world without hurting someone on this campus,” said a student the college president likes to quote.

### A walk around campus

The community college—which was named for Fiorello LaGuardia, New York City’s flamboyant mayor from 1933 to 1945—was founded 31 years ago in spaces where an earlier generation of immigrants worked. The Ford Instrument Company was the original LaGuardia facility. The Equitable Bag Company, which once stood across the street from Ford in the Queens industrial neighborhood known as Long Island City, was opened in 1992. They are the two main campus buildings today.

Photos by Lisa Quiñones, Black Star, for CrossTalk



**Richard Elliott, LaGuardia’s vice president for finance and administration, says the college was seriously underfunded during Rudolph Giuliani’s years as mayor of New York.**

## LaGuardia by the Numbers

### Enrollment (fall 2001)

|            |        |
|------------|--------|
| Total:     | 11,427 |
| Full-time: | 6,908  |
| Part-time: | 4,579  |

Median student age: 23

### Racial/ethnic composition

|                          |            |
|--------------------------|------------|
| Hispanic:                | 34 percent |
| Black non-Hispanic:      | 16 percent |
| Asian, Pacific Islander: | 16 percent |
| White:                   | 14 percent |
| Other:                   | 5 percent  |
| Unknown (no response):   | 15 percent |

### National Origin

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| Foreign-born students:                              | 67 percent |
| Students from 140 countries, speaking 104 languages |            |

Full-time faculty: 243

Part-time faculty: 315

Operating budget (2001-02): \$84.4 million

Tuition and Fees: New York State full-time students seeking degrees pay \$1,250 tuition per semester, plus \$60.85 in fees. Out-of-state students pay \$1,538 tuition.

A few hundred yards to the west, at the foot of the 59th Street Bridge to Manhattan, LaGuardia is slowly renovating a third factory building, which still has a few manufacturing tenants. Classes are held on three of the nine floors of the former Loose Wiles Sunshine Biscuit Complex. The school envisions a business incubator on the top floors.

Back on the main campus, LaGuardia had the street between buildings “demapped” by the city of New York and transformed it into a courtyard, the only bit of outdoor space on campus.

LaGuardia houses four high schools in addition to the community college. Middle College High School, one of the nation’s first schools for at-risk students, encourages its 500 students to do college work during high school and seek an associate’s degree. International High School gives 500 fresh immigrants with limited English skills their first taste of American secondary education. The Robert Wagner High School, named for another former New York City mayor, focuses on the arts and

technology. LaGuardia is also the temporary home for Frank Sinatra High School for the Performing Arts, which was founded by fellow singer Tony Bennett.

Visitors never quite know who will be waiting around the next corner on LaGuardia’s campus. Two Chinese students hammering a table tennis ball back and forth, or a tight

circle of young women, heads covered by shawls, conversing quietly outside a classroom. Many ethnic groups have their formal or informal meeting places, but everyone comes together in a three-story atrium off the courtyard. At this campus (and world) crossroads, it seems that everyone hails from somewhere else. Simply stopping passersby for fifteen minutes highlights the disparate goals, academic histories, cultural values and language backgrounds LaGuardia’s students bring to the school.

Some, like Wumi Daramola, 21, are living the almost universal story of second-generation immigrants in New York. Her father practiced as a medical doctor in Nigeria, and traveled alone to England and later Canada on sabbaticals before settling in New York. He is working as a school nurse to support his family. Daramola, who came to LaGuardia after graduating from Evander Childs high school in the Bronx, is at home on the streets of two big cities, New York and Lagos. And she is torn between the future her family sees for her and the one she is discovering for herself. “I told my father that I would study nursing,” she said. “But I think I want a career in business.”

Daramola’s tale is as old as the CUNY system. But Dhruba Saha’s story is more typical of LaGuardia’s recent students. A 26-year-old native of Bangladesh, he was studying botany and zoology there two years ago when Saha received word that the United States had granted him a student visa. Without finishing the semester, he dropped out of school, took the next flight to New York, and enrolled in the computer science program at LaGuardia.

Asked if he always wanted to study computers, Saha



**President Gail Mellow believes LaGuardia Community College offers valuable opportunities for its many foreign-born students.**

**“We want them to have enough experience on the job to begin to think about the world of work. We offer hope, encouragement, and a little bit of reality.”**

**—Jack Rainey, director of cooperative education at LaGuardia**

offered an answer that new immigrants have given for generations. “I just want to improve myself,” he said. “I am interested in having a better life.” Computers are fine, but he is considering a change to the nursing program, because it offers immediate steady employment upon graduation, even in an otherwise tough job market.

LaGuardia has grown from 500 students in 1971 to nearly 12,000 degree candidates today (9,500 full-time equivalents). But now as then, the school is a predominantly female institution. Almost two thirds of the students are women. Many are working mothers with tight schedules who depend on a complex web of family relationships for childcare and financial support. Mellow says the school lost 700 registrants in the wake of September 11, largely because the family members who had provided or paid for childcare were no longer able to do so.

### Writing—everybody’s problem

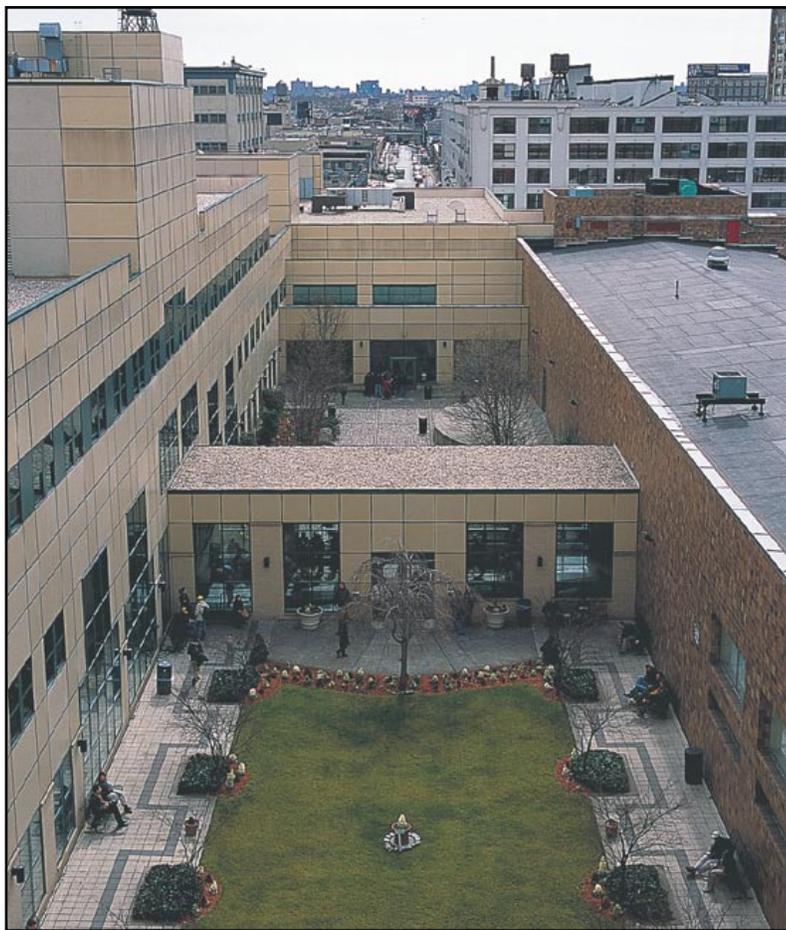
Saha was relaxing at midday with Bill Mazza, his former tutor at LaGuardia’s writing center, which is at the heart of the school’s remediation program. For most non-native speakers of English—and for many others who simply are not ready to do college work upon leaving the New York City public schools, the center is the key to survival at LaGuardia. Students who can follow a lecture, read a textbook and participate in a class discussion cannot necessarily write a paper or pass a written exam.

About half of the student body takes at least one of the remedial English courses. All of them convene for a one-hour writing lab in addition to regular class meetings every week. Some 3,500 other students show up for tutorials every year. Any teacher in any course on campus can suggest that a student attend the writing center. Writing and remediation are not among the sexiest programs at the community college, but everyone from Gail Mellow on down brings up the writing center within the first few minutes of conversation. And why not? Two thirds of LaGuardia’s students are foreign born. If the school wants to maintain or increase enrollment, it must teach students to write in English.

“I get excited when people learn to write a simple, fairly well argued essay,” said Bert Eisenstadt, a senior staffer at the center, whose credits include writing at *Soap Opera Digest* and teaching autistic people. “The first step is the biggest. I get an enormous kick out of being responsible for that step.”

Tutors like Mazza, who typically make significant progress toward a graduate degree before they are offered a job, start at \$10 per hour. The hourly rate doesn’t climb beyond \$12, according to Eisenstadt, who says he loses tutors constantly because they become classroom teachers for higher pay. “You don’t do it for the money,” said Mazza, who, true to form, is angling for an adjunct faculty position in English.

Most students meet their tutors in a warren of tiny cubicles with four or five chairs around the table. The furniture points up the biggest problem LaGuardia’s writing teachers face. “Teaching writing is all about relationships,” Eisenstadt said. “One-to-one teaching works the best. You can still accomplish many of the same goals in a two-to-one



**The LaGuardia campus is located in three former factory buildings in the New York City borough of Queens.**

setting. But three-to-one is too much like a small group.”

“Fluency does not proceed in a straight line,” said Sandra Hanson, chair of the English department, and inhabitant of the most arresting office on campus. (Posters of Elvis Presley share wall space with advertisements for John Deere tractors and an aerial photo of her family’s farm in Iowa. Framed Norwegian American embroidery complements a collection of African dolls.) “You can’t assume that a student who finished ESL 099 last fall with a good 300-word essay will succeed in remedial English. They could stay on the same level for a while without the writing center and other supports.”

Even at the depressed tutor wages, there simply isn’t enough money at LaGuardia to teach writing one-on-one. There is no formula for creating productive groups. In general, group teaching slows progress, Eisenstadt says, which in turn feeds the political objections to community college education. New York City has decreased its share of community college funding, even during the boom years of Rudolph Giuliani’s mayoralty, with the argument that too few students graduate on time. “One percent of our students graduate on time,”

**LaGuardia has grown by expanding adult and continuing education from 19,000 enrollments in 1996 to more than 28,000 in 2000.**

Eisenstadt said. “I find it surprising that *any* graduate on time. They work in factories. They have spouses and parents who don’t speak English. They write term papers in a second language. Why would they graduate on time?”

### **Community, cooperation, direction**

If the writing center is what gets new arrivals and underachievers on track in the classroom, the Cooperative Education program helps students chart a future course in the outside world. Every LaGuardia student must complete two semester-long internships to graduate. In addition to getting their feet wet in a field that interests them, students attend seminars to help decide if they want to pursue a four-year degree or go right to work after graduation. Employers include large manufacturers and banks, small shops specializing in photography or design, magazines, television networks and newspapers, nonprofits and government agencies.

“We sometimes offer occupational training, as in travel or hotel reservations,” said Jack Rainey, the director of cooperative education at the college. “But sometimes the career exploration is much less specific. It also depends on what the company needs. At Verizon (the local telephone provider), students have been repairing derelict equipment and building new networks.”

At Community Board 3 in Queens, a local government advisory body funded by the city, one LaGuardia student per semester works on a prototype for a Community Board

website. Tom Lowenhaupt, one of 50 volunteer board members whose own company donated server space for the site, explains the scope of the project, gives students direction and sends them home to write the code. “This is not just about programming in HTML or Java,” Lowenhaupt said. “I try to teach them to solve a communications problem. They need to learn to think about the site from the user’s point of view.”

Every intern is likely to have a slightly different work experience, since each company

tends to develop its own co-op model, Rainey said. One technology firm that uses LaGuardia interns on a help desk hired LaGuardia graduates (former interns) to supervise the rotating crop of workers. “We want them to have enough experience on the job to begin to think about the world



**Wumi Daramola, whose father was a medical doctor in Nigeria, intended to study nursing at LaGuardia Community College, but might switch to business.**

of work. We offer hope, encouragement, and a little bit of reality.”

### **The best and worst of times**

In 1991, two years before Giuliani was elected mayor of New York, the city contributed \$121 million dollars to CUNY’s community colleges, or 42.4 percent of the budget. Tuition payments of \$61.5 million represented 21.6 percent of the budget. By 2002, when he left office, the city contribution in current dollars had dropped to \$101 million, or 28 percent, while tuition payments had more than doubled to \$135.5 million, or 37.5 percent. State aid remained nearly constant in percentage terms during the same period, falling to 34.5 percent from 36 percent. Tuition has doubled, in current dollars, to \$1,250 per semester for full-time students.

“We suffered during those years,” said Richard Elliott, LaGuardia’s vice president for finance and administration. “The mayor was not an ardent supporter of community colleges, probably because he did not have as much control over CUNY as he would have liked.”

Elliott described the 1990s as a period of trying to get by from year to year. Even today, he sees paying day-to-day expenses as one of the greatest challenges facing the community college during the next five years. LaGuardia is about to settle a faculty contract dispute and has agreed to a labor settlement with its civil servant employees that will cost the school about \$1 million.

There is no money in the budget to fund the settlements as of yet, according to Elliott. The school has made cuts where it could—everywhere from cleaning and building maintenance to leaving vacant staff positions unfilled. With a new mayor in City Hall, the school hoped for additional

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funding from the city. But faced with a budget deficit of \$4.8 million, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has called for cuts across nearly all city agencies.

### Reaching out

In an attempt to make up the shortfall in city funding, LaGuardia has aggressively pursued grants. In the 1991-92 academic year, the school brought in \$6.4 million in grants. In 2000-01, LaGuardia received \$13.4 million in grants from government sources and private foundations. "We doubled the dollar volume of grants in the last ten years, but it isn't nearly enough," Elliott said. The school also has a private foundation that will eventually produce an income stream. Community college alumni rarely make significant financial contributions to their alma mater.

Among the larger grants the school has received are two federal Title V grants for \$3.5 million, awarded to institutions that serve large Hispanic populations. One dedicates \$400,000 per year for the next five years to

upgrade computer networks and fiber-optic data lines. But introducing technology into a greater number of classrooms is only the beginning of the tasks set by LaGuardia. In the long run, the school wants to require almost every student to create an online portfolio that would become part of the school's graduation requirements. In addition to posting term papers and similar projects, LaGuardia would ask students to put up videos of final speeches or dramatic performances, original music, or photos of sculptures and paintings.

"We will have the portfolio project going as a pilot project in a few classes first," Elliott said. "If it works out, we see it as a campus-wide requirement." To ease the introduction of this requirement among the school's senior faculty members, many of whom were hired in the 1970s and have not hurried into the computer age, LaGuardia has designed a program in which students become technology mentors for faculty.

The school was among several singled out for recognition this year by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Based in

## UPDATE

### Steady Growth at LaGuardia

#### July 2008

**L**AGUARDIA Community College, which was described as "the world's community college" in a spring 2002 *National CrossTalk* article, has been living up to its reputation in the years since.

In fall 2007 the college, located in the New York City borough of Queens, enrolled students from 156 countries, speaking 118 different native languages. Fifty-nine percent were foreign born; 53 percent were first-generation college students. A majority were low income.

There has been steady growth. Fall 2007 enrollment included 15,169 credit students and 58,281 non-credit.

Although the number of white students has increased in recent years, they remain a minority. In fall 2006 the student population was 38 percent Hispanic, 21 percent Asian, 20 percent black, 15 percent white and six percent "other races and ethnicities."

Since most LaGuardia students must combine their studies with jobs and family responsibilities, they often take longer to earn degrees

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or certificates.

"We continue to look for ways to enable our students to earn degrees or certificates in two years," said Gail O. Mellow, LaGuardia's president since 2000, in a 2008 interview.

In recent years the college has been "trying to create career paths, so students can

move from lower-paying jobs like cleaning rooms in Manhattan hotels to something that pays better and is more interesting," Mellow said.

For example, after taking ESL and other remedial classes, a student "might move to classes for home health aides, then to a certified nurse program, after that training to be a phlebotomist or a similar job, and perhaps eventually to a nursing program, either LVN

(Licensed Vocational Nurse) or RN (Registered Nurse)," Mellow said.

There has been an increasing focus on electronic portfolios, in which students keep a record not only of their educational progress but also of their personal life experiences.

These portfolios make it easier for "students whose lives are quite complex—they have families, or hold part-time jobs or perhaps are in drug recovery—to get a community college education," Mellow said. "We think this is a very important development—it has become the singular pedagogy of the college."

"These 'e-portfolios' are both a record of students' work and a reflection on their learning experiences," said Bret Eynon, executive director of the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning. "They are a mix of the academic and the personal. They allow students to capture what's happening to them, to reflect on how they're changing."

Since the program began in 2001, between 13,000 and 15,000 students have compiled e-portfolios, Eynon said. Enrollments have risen from 5,000 in the 2005-06 academic year to more than 7,500 in 2007-08.

"This e-portfolio is basically a showcase of my best works and pieces that I've done to date," Abigail Philip, an aspiring teacher who was raised on the Caribbean islands of Antigua and Barbuda, wrote in her electronic journal. "This tool is basically one of my tickets into the workplace or a four-year institution. This is a perfect way of displaying my abilities, not only academically but socially and personally as well."

—William Trombley

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large part on work done at Middle College High School, a total of \$40 million was awarded to a number of foundations, which will distribute the money to community schools doing similar work throughout the United States. The grant aims to replicate a secondary education model pioneered at LaGuardia. At Middle College, students at risk of dropping out of high school are placed in smaller classes within smaller schools and challenged to do college work. Instead of merely finishing high school, students are expected to earn an associate's degree within a five-year span.

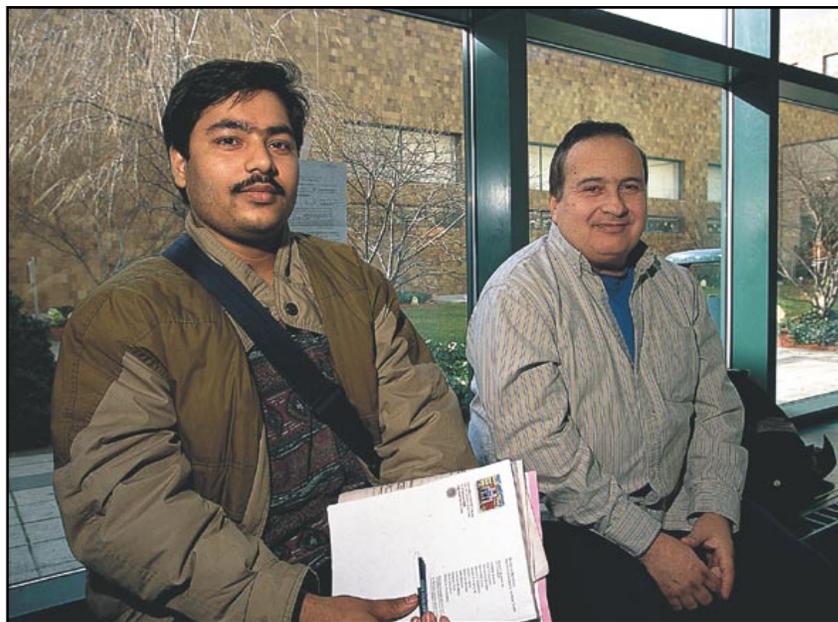
LaGuardia has grown by expanding adult and continuing education from 19,000 enrollments in 1996 to more than 28,000 in 2000. The heart of the growth strategy is figuring out what services the public needs. The school was among the first to train taxi drivers; it has developed a program to help deaf adults transition from high school to college; and it has become a leader in training paramedics and emergency medical technicians. Enrollment in the ESL program grew by 25 percent between 1996 and 2000, topping 2,000 registrants that year. Participants ranged in age from 16 to more than 60. Spurred mostly by immigration to Queens, the English language program has also become an inexpensive option for free spirits like Kazu Miyoshi, 33, an architect from Japan who quit his corporate job to become a sculptor. He wants to learn English before traveling the world to look at art. "Friends in Japan told me

to come here," he said.

And when the student cannot come to LaGuardia, the community college comes to the student. LaGuardia receives \$1.3 million from the New York City Department of Corrections each year to teach high school equivalency courses in jail. The program serves a highly transient population, given that most city inmates are awaiting trial, and no convicted criminal serves a sentence longer than one year in a city facility. "We have to set short-term goals,"

said Linda Gilberto, the head of Continuing and Adult Education at LaGuardia. "But we sometimes have a lasting effect."

LaGuardia is the kind of community that challenges assumptions, whether about the way to teach a diverse group, or the goals appropriate for at-risk high school students. As an institution, it has enjoyed great successes, but it does not have all of the answers, as Gail Mellow readily



**Dhruba Saha (left), a native of Bangladesh, was a student of Bill Mazza at LaGuardia's writing center, key to the college's remedial programs.**

admits. It does view its greatest challenge as its greatest opportunity: The same mind-boggling diversity that makes simple communication an adventure guarantees a fresh point of view every day. "We don't really know what's next," Mellow said. "Sometimes we have to say, Let's just learn our way through this." ♦

Ron Feemster has been a freelance writer based in Germany and New York. He currently teaches at the Indian Institute of Journalism & New Media in Bangalore, India.

**The school hoped for additional funding from the city. But faced with a budget deficit of \$4.8 million Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been forced to call for cuts across nearly all city agencies.**