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Remarks at Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellowship Convening

Good evening, everyone. I'm Kenneth Adams, President of LaGuardia Community College.

Congratulations to all of you who received Mellon/ACLS Fellowships.

I believe that, in total, there are 110 fellowship recipients from four cohorts. Forty of you are faculty from CUNY community colleges. More than a third. That's fantastic!

Eleven fellowship recipients, I am proud to inform you, are LaGuardia faculty. I don't want to press this point too hard, but that's ten percent of all the recipients. There are about 1,200 community colleges in the US — my LaGuardia colleagues walked away with ten percent of Liberal Arts Power-Ball. That's pretty good!

Before I share a few observations with you I have to take a moment to salute the eleven LaGuardia faculty members who were awarded Mellon/ACLS Fellowships. I will name them by department. Please hold your raucous applause till the end.

Education and Language Acquisition

Prof. Habiba Boumlik

Prof. Kenneth Yin

English

Prof. Paul Fess

Prof. Joy Sanchez Taylor

Prof. Jayashree Kamblé

Prof. Sonia Rodriquez

Humanities

Prof. Ari Richter

Social Science

Prof. Dusana Pudlucka

Prof. Emily Brooks

Prof. Karen Miller

Prof. Nicole Shippen

I could describe each of their projects and we would be here all night. We really would. Better for you to attend the presentations, workshops, and meetings tomorrow. I don't want to spoil any surprises.

The success of our faculty in earning these coveted Mellon/ACLS Fellowships is a measure of LaGuardia's support for the Liberal Arts. And while their achievements are important for their own scholarship and professional advancement, the real winners are our LaGuardia students, since they benefit from these inspiring, engaging, hard-working scholars who draw them to the Humanities and Social Sciences and support their learning — in the classroom, in the community, and as they transfer to four-year colleges for their baccalaureate degrees.

LaGuardia is one the seven community colleges of the City University of New York System, or CUNY. We were founded in 1971 in Long Island City, Queens. We serve approximately 23,000 students in associate degree, adult education, and workforce training programs.

LaGuardia degree-seeking students come from 130 countries and speak 54 heritage languages. More than half are first gen. About one half identify as Hispanic. Of course, we are an open access institution — open access to a first-rate Liberal Arts education.

LaGuardia is known as a community college with a rich array of Liberal Arts majors, including...

Creative Writing

English

Film and Television

Fine Arts

Music Performance

Theatre

Photography

Philosophy

And... Liberal Arts associate degrees with 11 different options

LaGuardia is also well regarded for Health Sciences (we have the #1 Associate Degree in Nursing program in NYS) and STEM. In fact, we are the third largest producer of STEM graduates in the CUNY system, following City College uptown and CityTech, in Brooklyn.

We continue to attract students to our Liberal Arts programs because of their unique appeal in the CUNY system, the quality of their faculty, and — this part is critical and we must get it right — their transfer pathways to four-year colleges in CUNY, where our students can complete their Liberal Arts baccalaureate degrees.

Some students come to LaGuardia specifically for Liberal Arts programs like Political Science, Journalism, or Fine Arts. And then there are the students who come to LaGuardia for something else and end up as Liberal Arts majors.

Like a student I spoke with yesterday, whom I will call John. John started out in Criminal Justice, didn't like it, switched to Environmental Science, found Chemistry to be a serious challenge, so he changed his major again, this time to Creative Writing. There he found his passion. It turns out that John, a self-described introvert, discovered he loves writing and especially creative writing. This semester he's tutoring and mentoring other students. He's finally found his academic home in English and, especially, in Creative Writing.

Community college students are all wired differently – some are drawn to math and science, for others it's language, literature, the arts, or the social sciences. Still others, who already know what they want to do for a career, seek specific technical training. It's all valuable. All good. And that great mix is what makes community colleges unique institutions.

In the end, we want students to connect with fields of study that excite and motivate them – connections that enable them to have academic success. Success that increases their confidence and self-esteem as college students. Success that ignites their curiosity and sets in motion a flywheel of continuous learning and growth.

Humanities and Social Sciences offer journeys of learning, discovery, and self-awareness. They provide opportunities for agency and self-actualization that can produce outsize impacts for certain students, like John.

To promote Humanities and Social Sciences in a community college is not inconsistent with promoting career programs, or being a leader in STEM. The challenge is to promote all our programs in a balanced way that is clear and helpful to students.

Now, let me put down my Liberal Arts Cheerleading Pom Poms for a minute and offer two important notes of caution:

First, community colleges with rich Liberal Arts offerings need lots of experienced, well-trained advisors and state-of-the-art advising software. And often we are not funded sufficiently to provide all that.

When we combine those eleven Liberal Arts options with our other Humanities and Social Science programs, LaGuardia offers prospective students more than 60 majors. A community college like LaGuardia that offers so many different majors to students who are first gen and/or foreign-born has a heightened obligation to give students the information and support they need to make thoughtful choices regarding their majors.

Think of it this way: LaGuardia freshmen have more choices than first-year students at Harvard. This puts an extra burden on our advisors, who already have untenably high caseloads. It also raises organizational issues: How do you organize your advising team? What role do faculty play in advising? What sort of IT support will make a difference?

We need to make sure students fully understand what it means to be, for example, a History major, and what it will take to transfer to, say, Queens College and get a bachelor's degree in History there. Because let's remember: an associate degree in History is an educational credential with limited value in the New York City labor market.

When advising students about Liberal Arts programs, we must be honest about the job prospects of particular fields, and, at the same time, clear about the many rewarding careers for which a liberal arts education provides a strong foundation. (My father, a Classics major, became a lawyer; my Fine Arts major mother, a school librarian, this Spanish major, a college president.)

Second, we need to work extra hard to make sure our associate degrees in the Liberal Arts transfer easily and efficiently to four-year colleges.

Unlike with most AAS programs, like Nursing or Cyber Security, when a student in a community college decides to pursue an associate degree in a Humanities discipline that is actually a decision get a bachelor's degree. Success for a community college liberal arts student arrives on graduation day at her four-year college, bachelor's degree in hand.

The reality in our CUNY system is that some associate degrees transfer better than others. For example, it's not that hard to align associate and baccalaureate programs in accounting, computer science, or business administration.

But not all liberal arts programs transfer smoothly, and don't assume that articulation agreements are a perfect fix. Please — I urge all of you to confirm each and every semester that the humanities program in which you teach is part of a transfer pathway to a four-year college that will accept all sixty credits on your students' transcripts. If you haven't checked on this in a while, do so next week.

Advising and transfer concerns aside, I want to suggest a couple of arguments for the folks who do the marketing and enrollment at your colleges. We don't sell the Liberal Arts very well; we need to do better.

For example, I will tell anyone who will listen that community college is a great way to get started in the Liberal Arts because we're cheaper. In the CUNY system, community college tuition is about 30% less than the tuition at our senior colleges. That means one can complete the first half of one's Liberal Arts degree at a deep discount by going to a community college. Happens all the time.

What's more, if you're on your way to college and, like John, you're not really sure what you want to major in the financial penalty for test-driving different disciplines until you discover creative writing is a lot less at LaGuardia than at NYU.

Here's something else we should promote – you! I'm sorry, but my sense is that prospective students have no idea that community college faculty win awards like your Mellon/ACLS Fellowships, or that you do cutting-edge research, that your projects involve students, that your scholarship is as original and sophisticated as anything done by four-year college faculty. Why do we keep this a secret?

Since we're in agreement about the value the Liberal Arts in community colleges it's time we take on a larger challenge...

Did you see Paul Tough's article in the New York Times Magazine of Sept. 5 called, "Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College. Whose Fault Is That?" A sobering assessment of the state of higher education in the US, Tough's piece lays bare the financial risks for many students thinking about going to college.

His view is hardly radical. According to the Hechinger Report, when Gallup start asking Americans about their confidence in higher education in 2015, 57% of respondents gave college a solid thumbs-up. When they asked again this June, confidence in college had dropped to 36%, the lowest level ever. Meanwhile, the percentage of Gallup's respondents that had "very little confidence" in college more than doubled. We may not feel this way, but many Americans have soured on college.

Well, maybe not *community* college. Consider this: Enrollment is up this fall at many community colleges across the country, including, I am happy to say, LaGuardia. And while one semester's data is no basis for bold projections, it makes me optimistic. I am optimistic because I believe community colleges are the answer to the "Is college worth it?" question.

Why? Our tuition is lower than private or public four-year schools so the “bet” that Tough describes in his article is less risky. We align many of our programs with employers’ needs which increases career success for our graduates. Community colleges offer advising, mentoring, and other support not found on many four-year campuses. Aspiring, hard-working students, many foreign-born and first-gen, attract faculty for whom teaching comes first. And, as I mentioned, Liberal Arts students can get the first half of that BA in English at a deep discount and then transfer to a four-year school.

You all know the advantages of attending a community college. When we look at this fall’s enrollment data it appears that families and students across the country are starting to catch on.

In the end, I believe community colleges will help restore America’s confidence in higher education.

If after all this you’re still looking for some powerful arguments about the value of the Liberal Arts, let me direct you to Professor Roosevelt Montás. How many of you have read, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*, published by Princeton University Press? It’s terrific. I highly recommend it.

As some of you know, Professor Montás is a Senior Lecturer in American Studies and English at Columbia University. Notably, he was Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum at Columbia College for 10 years, from 2008 to 2018.

Professor Montás came to NYC as a teenager from the Dominican Republic. He attended public schools in Queens and was admitted to Columbia College in 1991 through its Opportunity Program. For a while he worked in our LaGuardia college library.

Steven Mintz, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, and a forceful advocate for the Humanities, said this about, *Rescuing Socrates*, “as Montás makes clear ... a liberal education ... entails making sense of one’s identity, delineating a set of values, and plotting a direction in life.”

At this point, my direction is to leave you alone so you can enjoy your evening.

Thank you.

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