Philosophy Valued At One Community College
by Margot Adler

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John Chaffee, philosophy department chair at LaGuardia Community College (center), considers philosophy a necessity, not a luxury. Philosophy students from left: E.J. Lee, Liz Montesclaros, Kate Yacino and Gabriel Lockwood.

As state universities cut back on humanities programs in order to deal with budget shortfalls, LaGuardia Community College in Queens, N.Y., is going in the opposite direction. At LaGuardia, philosophy is king: Of the 17,000 matriculated students, 4,500 are taking philosophy. There are seven full-time professors, most of whom have been added in the past two years.
The school, which has a well-regarded nursing school and programs in engineering and veterinary technology, is overturning the stereotype that four-year colleges are for intellectuals and community colleges are for career training.

"People tell me the role of community colleges is narrow — to train students for tomorrow's jobs, says Peter Katopes, the interim president of LaGuardia. "But I ask them, 'What are these jobs?'" The real task, he says, is training students for what he calls "the entrepreneurship of the imagination."

"It is giving students the opportunity to really understand the context of their lives, and you do that through the humanities," Katopes says. "If you do even a cursory survey of successful CEOs, you will know that an unbelievable number of them did their undergraduate degrees in English or philosophy or history."

**Asking Questions**

All kinds of students are taking philosophy at LaGuardia. Liz Montesclaros, 29, had been in the military before enrolling.

The military "is not the best place for questioning," Montesclaros says. "It's very rigid, very structured. When I finally got out, that's when I decided I really wanted to explore the questions that matter to me: What are we doing here, why am I here in the first place, for what purpose?"

E.J. Lee, 22, started out as a business major.

"Growing up, my parents were 'make money, make money, make money,' so I figured business was what you do. But as a business major, I was required to take an ethics course, and as soon as I sat in that class, I knew that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," Lee says.

These are the kinds of attitudes you might find normal at a four-year liberal arts college. But the students here speak 120 different languages. And most of them were not born in the United States.

"We are all so different on the outside, and on the inside we are all searching, we are all seeking," says Gabriel Lockwood, who came to LaGuardia at 36. He wandered through Europe, knows a half-dozen languages, worked as a translator and took courses at various European universities, but he couldn't get credit for them in the United States. So at 36, he is starting again. He is full of questions, and philosophy, he says, has helped to answer some of them.

'The Heart Of Life'
The classes in philosophy are the usual: introduction to philosophy; ethics; religion and philosophy; political philosophy; logic; aesthetics; Eastern philosophy. But there are also new courses being developed in African philosophy and Latin philosophy.

John Chaffee, the chair of the department, says philosophy is a necessity, not a luxury. "It's something that is at the heart of life. It addresses the foundational questions that we all wrestle with, and these are questions that [Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist and author] Viktor Frankl said 'burn under our fingernails,'" Chaffee says. "Philosophy is a discipline that gives us the tools to really understand ourselves, and the skills to answer the mysteries that are really at the heart of ourselves and at the heart of life."

Take a recent philosophy club meeting, where more than a dozen students and two professors sit in a circle and debate happiness. The question: Suppose you lived a totally pleasurable life, but found out that you had been living in a virtual reality the whole time. You had really not done any of the things you thought you had, but you had all the experiences, all the pleasure, all the satisfaction, all the contentment. Would you say you were happy in those previous experiences?

"Even if this life is a dream, you can't take away the experience of that dream or what you thought you accomplished," student Arthur Rodriguez says.

Javier Velasco says it all depends on suffering. "If you had no suffering, you can't really recognize happiness or appreciation for something if it is always there," he says.

Minerva Ahumada, who teaches introduction to philosophy and Eastern philosophy at LaGuardia, says these students bring very different things to the mix.

"It is more personal here. It is more challenging here, but also, the results you get are way more surprising than what I got at other kinds of institutions," Ahumada says.

Professor Richard Brown says many of the students here have serious real-life issues, but "to suddenly see them become curious about the nature of forms or universals or what is the morally right thing to do — it is really a privilege. These people never envisioned that they would be studying these kinds of things, and also understanding it and having it influence their life."

Five years ago, there wasn't even a philosophy major at LaGuardia. Now 60 students are majoring, and several say they want to teach it in the future.

The president of LaGuardia Community College made philosophy a priority, the department chair built a department and hired faculty. Now this community college in New York City that's under many people's radar has more philosophy majors than many four-year colleges and universities. It's like that line in the film Field of Dreams: If you build it, they will come.