



# Transforming Students' Lives

How "Exploring Transfer"  
Works, and Why

by  
Janet Lieberman  
and  
Julie Yearsley Hungar



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The story of the "Exploring  
Transfer" program, initiated from a  
collaboration between Vassar College  
and LaGuardia Community College.



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*To our husbands  
and families*

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**Transforming Students' Lives: How "Exploring Transfer" Works, and Why**  
*by Janet Lieberman and Julie Yearsley Hungar*

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# Preface

Despite efforts of the last twenty-five years, the ideal of equal access to higher education for all students remains unrealized. Certainly, progress has been made, but there is still far to go — especially for students of color and low socioeconomic status. A significant measure of access to baccalaureate education is the rate at which students transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. While the nation's community colleges serve high numbers of minority and low-income students, disappointingly few of their students manage to make the leap to four-year institutions.

The Exploring Transfer program has been successfully addressing this issue since 1985. What began as a partnership between Vassar College and LaGuardia Community College (a City University of New York campus located in the borough of Queens in New York City) has expanded to include seven community colleges. The program has transformed not only the lives of its students and faculty but also its cooperating institutions. And its graduates have transferred to and graduated from four-year institutions at a rate nearly triple the national average.

Two successful replications of the Exploring Transfer program, at Bucknell University and Smith College, have produced similar results, attesting to its power. The purpose of this book, then, is to encourage other institutions to consider adapting the Exploring Transfer model to create their own partnerships in their own settings. The chapters that follow describe key elements of the model, its genesis and development, and changes in the program over time. Especially important are the lessons learned from more than twelve years of Exploring Transfer experience and analysis.

## **In Appreciation**

Valuable contributions to this account have come from many people, especially Colton Johnson, Tom McGlinchey, Frances Fergusson, Virginia Smith, Norman Fainstein, Alison Bernstein, Steven Zwerling, Harold Wechsler, Jane Spalding, Janet Andrews, John Chaffee, Joel Diamond, Judy Kohl,

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# c o n t e n t s



VASSAR COLLEGE

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# Genesis: The Call for Access

Exploring Transfer is the story of an educational innovation that has worked and of the lessons it offers. The story is about educators crossing the great divide that separates the urban, open-admissions, public community college from the selective, residential, independent liberal arts college. It is about visionary funding agencies stimulating and supporting the change process. And it is about students leaping into the unknown and being rewarded with totally new expectations of themselves and their ability to succeed.

It is also about the power of collaboration between institutions with significant differences but a common goal. The original partners were Vassar College and LaGuardia Community College; other community colleges soon joined them. The mission they shared was to break down barriers keeping community college students, especially students of color, from achieving the baccalaureate degree. At the same time, they were determined to expand the pool and increase the diversity of students in four-year institutions, particularly liberal arts colleges. In doing so, the partners intended to release the untapped abilities of community college students, while exposing them to the value of liberal study. Furthermore, the program would demonstrate how a concerted, holistic effort to remove obstacles on both sides of the transfer gap would make the seemingly inaccessible not only accessible but possible.

Because Exploring Transfer has so powerfully changed the lives of students, the way faculties teach, and the relationships between two- and four-year colleges, the program's lessons bear repeating. They offer information that other institutions and funding groups interested in improving access to higher education should find both encouraging and helpful.

## **Success Story**

The program, originally called the "Vassar Summer Program for Community College Students," is essentially a mini-college experience. A group of selected community college students participates in an intensive residential summer session on the Vassar campus. They earn Vassar credit

## impact



**Arlene Alvarado (ET '86, Vassar '89), who describes herself as "a low-income daughter of Cuban immigrants," transferred from LaGuardia to Vassar after Exploring Transfer. At Vassar, she designed her own major, "Animal Behavior and Environmental Modification." After graduating in 1989, she was awarded a four-year fellowship to the doctoral program at the University of California at Davis.**

**While at Davis, Alvarado was invited to spend six months in Zimbabwe running an experimental project on the impala. She calls the experience a "life-long dream come true." She adds, "While I was frightened at the idea of going to a strange and unfamiliar land, I remembered one of the many invaluable lessons from ... ET — follow your dreams and never let fear be the reason for missing out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."**

for two rigorous courses, each team-taught by one faculty member from Vassar and another from a community college. After the summer experience, most of the program's students return to their original colleges to complete their two-year degrees and then transfer to baccalaureate institutions.

Exploring Transfer, or ET, as it is familiarly known, grew out of conversations and planning begun in 1983 by innovative educators from Vassar College and LaGuardia Community College who were looking for solutions to a problem that remains unsolved today: the low numbers of community college students, particularly students of color, achieving the baccalaureate degree. Initial conversations led to a partnership between the two institutions. The partners then added students from four more community colleges — Dutchess, Rockland, Sullivan County, and Ulster County, all from

upstate New York — to launch the first summer session in 1985. Converging from different perspectives, the collaborators developed a common purpose: to challenge students who had academic potential by exposing them to liberal study in a program that enabled them to meet the challenge and expand their horizons.

Today, Exploring Transfer is an established program involving seven community colleges and Vassar. Its results have been spectacular. ET graduates have gone on in record numbers to earn bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Many are launched on promising careers. Regardless of the path they have taken, most report that the experience changed their lives by giving them an entirely new sense of their own abilities and the options open to them.

Most ET students come from low-income families, and usually they are the first in their families to go to college. Nearly two-thirds are from ethnic minorities. Thousands of their counterparts can be found in community colleges across the country — a national talent pool that remains relatively unrecognized and untapped.



ET faculty and their institutions, too, have been indelibly marked. Working with colleagues from another sector and teaching a group of highly motivated students give faculty renewed enthusiasm for and fresh insight into the teaching-learning process. The collaborating institutions gain better-prepared students and rejuvenated faculty. Everyone involved acquires new understanding and respect for community college students and for the partner institutions.

The success of the first few years of Exploring Transfer led to a replication project funded by a grant to Vassar from the Ford Foundation, with additional funding from the AT&T Foundation, Transamerica, and Chase Manhattan Bank. Vassar invited the Association of American Colleges and Universities to be a partner in the replication project. Outcomes of the replications underscore the power of the model, as well as reinforcing the principles critical for its success. Of five replications initially funded, two are still going strong: at Bucknell University and Smith College. They demonstrate both the virtues of the model and its portability.

Understanding the model's key components, the likely obstacles and pitfalls, and the sources of its strength provides a guide for adapting it to other educational settings. Although some characteristics are particular to the ET partnership, many of its basic principles are applicable to a wide range of higher education institutions. This adaptability and the model's transforming power argue for its broad adoption.

## The Context

In the years since ET's launch in 1985, the need for such a program has not diminished. If anything, it has increased, as federal support for students in higher education declines along with commitment to access for the underserved.

In the early 1980s, the *zeitgeist* in higher education reflected ambivalence toward community colleges. On the one hand, the relatively new sector was the fastest-growing segment of American higher education, enrolling almost 40 percent of all college students. Of the 1,219 community colleges, 1,064 were under public control.

The advent in the 1970s of open admissions policies had flooded urban



**Vassar science classroom: ET student and faculty member.**

community colleges with a new kind of student. Uniquely American, the sector specialized in lower-division academic courses and career-oriented programs, providing access to economic advancement for students historically underserved by baccalaureate institutions, including minorities and women. The average community college student was female, older, poorer financially, and less prepared academically than the "traditional" college student. Many needed flexible pathways and strong academic support to compensate for shortcomings in their preparation for college-level work.

At the same time, though, critics charged that the community colleges were failing in their mission to provide opportunity for the underserved. Authors such as F.L. Pincus (1974) and Steven Zwerling (1976) accused these so-called "people's colleges" of serving the "cooling-out" function Burton Clark (1960) had identified years earlier. They saw the community colleges as actually reinforcing the status quo, tracking minority and poor students into training for low-end jobs rather than into transfer to four-year institutions.

Perceptions aside, the data were also equivocal. Two-year schools founded in the 1970s with a mandate to serve the underprepared had responded with innovative remediation, flexible scheduling, and student-centered curricula. Yet by the early 1980s, fewer than 14 percent of community college students were transferring to four-year institutions (Cohen and Brawer 1987). Of these students, about 5 percent graduated in two years with associate's degrees and transferred immediately; another 8 to 9 percent transferred before completing their associate's degrees.

The low transfer rate had many root causes. One was the decreasing emphasis on transfer in community colleges, as legislators, trustees, and institutions jumped on the vocational training bandwagon. While college transfer enrollments and academic course offerings had dominated most community college catalogs well into the 1960s, by the 1980s occupational programs had approached parity. Preparing people for jobs in the local economy had strong political and community appeal; community colleges, looking for state and local funding, responded with new and expanded vocational offerings.

An explicit part of the vocational faculty's role was to help graduates find work in their fields. Teachers nurtured ties with area industries, creating a pipeline to jobs and a follow-up system that kept tabs on changes in the job market. By contrast, students intending to pursue an academic degree might be offered information about transfer requirements, but it was often inaccurate or out-of-date. Mostly they were left on their own.

Another deterrent to transfer was the mismatch between the demands of

the transfer process and the character of the typical community college student. College transfer procedures assumed that students could mobilize their own resources to fill out applications, secure transcripts, arrange interviews, write essays, apply for financial aid. But first-generation college students had trouble negotiating the system. They were immobilized by inexperience and discouraged by the bureaucracy they encountered in their home college and in the receiving institution.

A fundamental internal obstacle for these students was low self-esteem. Many had never been considered — nor considered themselves — “college material.” They lacked academic role models in their families and communities. As a result, they did not have the confidence to envision themselves succeeding in senior institutions.

Those who did plan for four-year degrees customarily headed for publicly funded universities, usually close to home. They saw residential liberal arts colleges as places that exclusively served members of a leisured class. The perception was that such colleges enrolled only students who had prepared for college in the hothouse of the private prep school and could afford to study subjects like the humanities, arts, and sciences. The idea was foreign territory to the typical community college student — who attended college after some years in the work world, whose plan was to study for no more than two years, whose goal usually was to get a better job. For such students, neither their capacity for study of the liberal arts nor the value of such study figured in their aspirations.

Another obvious obstacle was money. Most community college students also worked to support themselves while attending school. They were in no financial position to pay the higher tuitions charged by public

impact

**Laurel Herdman (ET '91, Vassar '95) is a single parent who found after working for twenty years that without a college degree her job was a dead end. Seventeen years after starting at Ulster County Community College, she went back into the college's human services program to become a social worker. The professor of her honors literature course suggested she apply to ET.**

This was a big step. She says, “The liberal arts are considered leisurely, wasteful in my community. I'm grateful to liberal arts learning — I can look beyond black/white, on/off, and I can see the gray areas.” Her two-year-old son stayed with his father during the summer session, so ET was like “a vacation from diapers and bottles. It was exciting to have time to devote to study, to see what I could do.”

After completing her Ulster degree, Herdman went on to graduate from Vassar in anthropology. Discovering that her first job, as a social worker for adolescents, did not pay enough to support her and her son, she started her own business, called “Career Launcher,” assisting clients in preparing for satisfying jobs. In 1995, she became director of the Ulster County Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program, part of the district attorney's office.

Herdman's goal is to help those who are disadvantaged, and her education is enabling her to reach that goal. She says, “ET and Vassar gave me not only the degree I needed but also an environment to tie my talents, visions, and desires together to accomplish what I really want to do.”

four-year institutions, much less those at independent colleges; nor could they quit work to attend full-time and during the day, as most of those colleges required. The concept of winning a scholarship was equally alien.

Finally, there was the matter of family obligations and the trauma of leaving their neighborhoods, especially to transfer to a distant, suburban or even rural campus. Many urban community college students had lived all their lives within the city limits; marriage, children, and older relatives tied them to their homes. It was hard to envision giving up the support of friends and the comfort of the familiar.

The attitudes of baccalaureate institutions toward community colleges and their students presented another set of obstacles to transfer. In the eighty-some years since the original community colleges were established to provide lower-division undergraduate education, the connection between the sectors had steadily diminished. Although the two often drew from the same tax base, public two- and four-year institutions pursued increasingly different missions and found little common ground. The independent colleges pursued yet a third mission and served a different clientele.

Senior college and university faculty generally viewed community college faculty as offering a second-class product and saw little need to understand or communicate with their lower-division counterparts. For their part, community college faculty perceived universities as distant and impersonal, not student-oriented. As a result, the two groups had minimal contact, except around transferability of courses, and even that tended to be ad hoc. Practices at baccalaureate institutions in giving credit for community college courses and degrees varied widely, even between campuses within the same state system. Formal articulation agreements, where they existed, did not solve the problem. University departments changed requirements and equivalencies without regard to the effect on community college students preparing to transfer. In many liberal arts colleges, the prescribed course of lower-division study virtually precluded transfer at the junior level.

Implicit in this disjuncture was disdain at the senior colleges for the quality of the students who attended two-year schools. The idea of open admissions, which gave many poorly prepared students entry through the "open door," adversely stereotyped the community college student. So, too, did the emphasis in community colleges on so-called "terminal" degrees leading to entry-level jobs. The truth was that many capable students began their educations in two-year colleges, sometimes in occupational programs. But such students did not fit the stereotype.

Consequently, when community college students did transfer, many of their credits were rejected or they received only elective credit not applicable toward graduation requirements. Once enrolled at large public universities — the most common transfer route — many transfer students felt like second-class citizens. Such treatment, plus the leap from a student-centered environment of small classes and a faculty focused on teaching, often resulted in the phenomenon known as “transfer shock,” characterized by low grades in the first term after transfer. After the first quarter, however, transfer students usually performed about as well as their peers. But not all were strong enough to survive the initial shock.

Independent four-year colleges presented their own set of difficulties. Although they often were even more student-centered than community colleges, barriers of higher academic standards, social class, and high cost were great enough to appear insurmountable to most community college students.

By the time of *Exploring Transfer's* origin, however, the environment was beginning to change. Demographics in the 1980s aroused new concerns and renewed interest in transfer students. For the first time in many years, four-year enrollments were declining. Educators feared an increasingly separatist higher education system. Birth rates among minority groups were substantially higher than that of whites, but minority students were underrepresented in the college population. African Americans made up 12 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds but only 9.2 percent of college students; for Hispanics, it was 7.1 percent compared with 4.4 percent. Of those 18-to-24-year-olds attending college, most were enrolled in urban community colleges. Some educators began to see in these demographics an untapped pool of applicants for four-year colleges and universities.

Another trend, subtle but influential, surfaced in the 1980s. Along with concern about low numbers of community college transfers, reformers

impact

**Deirdre Anderson (ET '92, Vassar '96) worked full-time while studying communications at CUNY's Borough of Manhattan Community College at night. Going to ET seemed to her like an impossible sacrifice, taking five weeks off without pay, juggling all the changes in her life. Once she took the step, she found how valuable it was to have nothing to do but apply herself to her studies.**

**Returning to the BMCC for her associate of arts degree, in her first semester she felt like “a rubber band stretched; [ET] gave me the capacity to do more.” Anderson transferred to Vassar and earned a degree in Renaissance history. Back in her old apartment in Manhattan, a move she found challenging after two years at Vassar, she went to work at the Museum of Television and Radio.**

**She calls ET “a dynamic, intellectually stimulating experience which was different from other class environments, including Vassar.” She now returns to the BMCC to tell students that “for working-class people, education is not only for getting a job but also for understanding the world: racism, classism, culturalism, and other fundamental issues that affect our daily lives.”**

decried the lack of connection between high schools and colleges. Ernest Boyer and the Carnegie Commission emphasized the need for a “seamless web of continuity in education” (1983). According to Wilbur (1988), the school reform movement generated collaboration between high schools and community colleges. Other authorities attributed the new emphasis on high school/college connections to the need for solving anticipated college enrollment shortfalls.

High school/college collaborations often limited themselves to creating innovative curricula, but some were more ambitious. Middle College, a public high school housed at LaGuardia Community College (and designed by Janet Lieberman), proved that such a partnership could reduce the high school drop-out rate and prepare students for college, thus benefitting both sectors. Numerous replications of the Middle College model across the country bore out the soundness of its basic tenets: among them, challenging students academically, holding them to high expectations, and providing strong support. Why wouldn't these principles prove equally applicable to community college students?

These confluent conditions — projected declines in college enrollments, underrepresentation of minorities in higher education, low rates of transfer from community college, and the impetus for partnerships from school reform — all pointed in one direction for some thoughtful educators. They saw increasing the transfer rate of community college students, especially minorities, as a promising solution. The question was how to make it happen.

## The Odd Couple

It would be hard to find a more unlikely pair of collaborators than Vassar College and LaGuardia Community College. At polar extremes in the higher education continuum, the two institutions differ in size, mission, pedagogy, standards, cost. Their students differ markedly in their academic preparation and social position and in their educational goals.

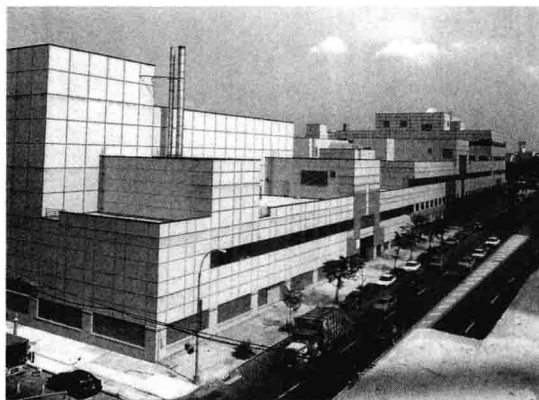
In fact, it was precisely this diversity that initially attracted the partners. Their coming together demonstrates one of the prime lessons learned from the Exploring Transfer program: When institutions bring imagination, integrity, and the will to achieve a common goal to a partnership, they can reach their goal. Other keys to the success of the Vassar/LaGuardia relationship are a shared focus on student needs, combined with flexibility and empathy for the partner institution. Both institutions emphasize the teaching function while encouraging faculty scholarship. Their climates support innovation. Each is a respected exemplar of the best of its institutional type.

What brought these two institutions together from opposite ends of the higher education spectrum was recognition by visionaries in both colleges that a mine of student academic talent was not reaching its highest potential. Further, by helping those students fulfill their potential, the institutions would meet their own interests as well.

### **The Commuter College: LaGuardia**

LaGuardia Community College opened in 1971, the last in a series of community colleges created by the City University of New York in response to the call for open admissions. Located in western Queens, LaGuardia views serving minority students as a cornerstone of its mission. Graduates earn associate of arts, associate of science, or associate of applied science degrees, requiring the equivalent of two years of postsecondary coursework. Sixty percent of its students require public assistance and financial aid to attend school. Low-income students are eligible for tuition refunds from the New York State Tuition Assistance Program. In 1983, the year the





**LaGuardia  
Community College,  
Queens, New York  
City**

Exploring Transfer idea was born, tuition and fees totaled \$1,156 for the academic year.

Since its early years, LaGuardia Community College has been noted as a leader in the cooperative education movement. All degree programs require students to earn nine college credits through work related to their career choices. Most students go to LaGuardia to gain credentials for employment, and many hold jobs while attending school. Many have serious remedial needs in reading, writing, and/or mathematics. In 1983, only about 5 percent of students were enrolled in a liberal arts major.

By 1983, the college was riding high. Twelve years of experience with an open admissions population had led to the creation of successful programs in remediation and English-as-a-second-language. The full spectrum of ethnic diversity was represented in the college's administration and faculty; all were committed to the principles of access and equity. Within this multiethnic environment resided a high degree of respect among students and faculty, and the college culture fostered a sense of cohesion and dedication.

Hired largely at the opening of the college in 1971, the faculty included many teachers active in the civil rights movements of the 1960s. They reflected formative experiences in antipoverty programs and found satisfaction in disseminating their values through teaching and community activity. They were intent on implementing social reform and interested in improving the conditions of the minority and the underserved. The climate of experimentation and outreach fed new ideas and programs. Throughout the institution, the dedication to affirmative action was strong. As a consequence, LaGuardia had attracted first-class minority scholars and had developed a vibrant faculty community that was both intellectual and multicultural.

During those first twelve years, the college had seen its student population not only grow but change. In 1971, LaGuardia had enrolled 450 students, drawing chiefly from the white, Catholic, girls' school in the neighborhood. By 1983, enrollment was more than 7,000, of whom 80 percent were students of color. As more Hispanic and African-American women moved into the area, they enrolled in the college, eager to become upwardly mobile. Mostly working mothers, these women wanted to finish in two years and find decent "white-collar" jobs.

Before Exploring Transfer, LaGuardia's faculty and administrators



were aware of the importance of the bachelor's degree for success, but transfer was not their highest priority. They dedicated few resources to promoting it. One counselor had primary responsibility for transfer, and a few faculty recruited students for their own alma maters. Otherwise, students interested in a bachelor's degree were largely on their own.

At the system level, the City University of New York had an ostensible commitment to transferring students from its two-year colleges to its four-year colleges. There were intrainstitutional articulation agreements, but the provisions were perfunctory and the process frustrating. Advisors at the receiving colleges had to match descriptions of LaGuardia courses and content with their own institutional catalogues in a course-by-course articulation to guarantee credit. Often, in spite of written guarantees, the situation would deteriorate and a LaGuardia counselor would have to advocate on behalf of the student.

Everyone knew that the transition could be smoother. Within LaGuardia itself there existed an example of cross-sector collaboration in the creation of the Middle College, a successful high school/college partnership in which students at risk of dropping out of high school could apply to complete their educations on the LaGuardia campus. Middle College and LaGuardia treated the students as adults and challenged them intellectually, but also provided strong academic support. As a result, an extraordinary 80 percent completed high school, and 75 percent of the senior class went on to college. With the Middle College, LaGuardia faculty and administrators had firsthand experience that cross-level partnerships could work. They recognized that such model programs were both generative and inspirational.

Because many LaGuardia faculty were members of minority groups or had been active in the civil rights movement, they also knew that LaGuardia's predominantly minority and low-income students deserved more opportunity. Most faculty also had experience in the work world.

impact

When Dolores Colon (ET '88, Yale '91) came to LaGuardia at age 34, she attended part-time while receiving public assistance and raising two children as a single mother. Her aspirations were to transfer to a unit of City University and acquire first a degree and next a good job.

Then came her experience at Vassar. Colon says, "They taught me I can go to school anywhere. I thought I would be limited to CUNY, but I learned there are schools out there that are eager to have me." After LaGuardia, she transferred to Yale University, taking her two children with her to New Haven.

Graduating with a bachelor's degree in English, she went to work in Yale's library system and was eventually promoted to a post with the Beinecke Library. Her son is now a Yale undergraduate. Colon is also vice president of the Yale clerical and technical staff union and an active delegate to the New Haven Central Labor Council.