Introduction: The Moral Imperative
As barriers continue to obstruct the progress of women and minorities long after the Civil Rights movement, it is essential that educators continue to heed the moral imperative that has fueled battles for equal opportunity. In the Robert H. Atwell Lecture given at the 89th meeting of the American Council on Education on February 11, 2007, Freeman A. Hrabowski, III, President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), emphasized the potential results of a failure to educate a diverse population:

Just this past week, the ETS recently released a new report that underscores the urgency of “the access imperative.” America’s Perfect Storm [(Kirsch)] focuses on the national impact of three converging forces: disparities in the education and skills levels of our population; a restructuring of the nation’s economy; and changing demographics. The report, which echoes themes from the National Academies’ Rising Above the Gathering Storm [(Committee)], says, essentially, that if current trends continue over the next quarter-century, increasing numbers of educated professionals will leave the workforce and millions of native-born Americans, who will be less qualified for these jobs, will find themselves vying not only with one another and recent immigrants to this country, but also with other better prepared workers earning lower pay throughout the world. Without our intervention, large numbers of Americans will continue to be left behind.

President Hrabowski continued by declaring that the challenge is to recruit and support students from all backgrounds so that the colleges and universities reflect the face of America.

Recruiting diverse talent must, therefore, be a major priority for American businesses. “[C]orporate recruiters and campus career services professionals share the belief that college and university campuses represent the most important source for diverse talent” (Roach 47). As a constituent element of the workplace, diversity is mandated
in virtually all public institutions and implicit in the central values of American democracy: equality, liberty and justice (Flume 51). America’s community colleges, “which account for nearly 40 percent of all college enrollments today, play a critical role in educating students from low-income families,” (Cook, and Córdoba, qtd. in Hrabowski), and different races, religions, and nationalities for participation in the business of work.

LaGuardia is a leading community institution focused on enhancing the prospects for educational and socioeconomic mobility of students from diverse backgrounds including low economic class. According to the 2008 Institutional Profile issued by the LaGuardia Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the college’s student body in 2007 was a blend of 38 percent Hispanic-American, 20 percent African-American, 21 percent Asian-American, and 14 percent white students (many of the latter from Eastern Europe) (5). The college serves more than 15,000 credit students and over 58,000 non-credit students (viii) hailing from over 156 different countries and speaking 119 different languages (1). The college’s students are largely poor and working-class – over 42 percent of degree students were awarded some financial aid in 2007–08 (6) and 57 percent of new students have jobs, with 40 percent of new students working more than 20 hours a week (ix). In the LaGuardia academic environment, it is morally imperative that faculty appreciate multiculturalism in its many forms – race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and nationality – and not waste the talent assets of any of our students.

Diversity and Program Development at LaGuardia
LaGuardia has established a Task Force on Pluralism, “in response to the request from the CUNY Board of Trustees that each campus ‘develop a specific local plan to combat racism and promote pluralism and develop mechanisms for anti-racist pluralistic interaction and cooperative projects with its immediate community’” (LaGuardia Community Coll. Human Resources Dept. 23). The LaGuardia Instructional Staff Handbook goes on to say that “[p]luralism encompasses such areas as culture, gender, race, ethnicity, ageism, sexual preferences, and differences in ability (23). LaGuardia prides itself on building multiculturalism into the curriculum through programs such as the following:

1. Learning communities have been “part of LaGuardia since the early 1970s, when Roberta Matthews created the first Freedom Clusters”
Clustering courses from different disciplines around specific themes, often related to culture and identity, has proven to be an excellent medium for addressing diversity. One learning community, “Constructing Gender,” recently codesigned by Professors Heidi Johnsen of the English department and Leslie Ann Aarons and Patricia Sokolski of the Humanities department, focuses on the expectations that different cultures place on men and women and the resulting roles often expressed in social, political, and professional interactions (“Liberal”).

2. LaGuardia’s ePortfolio program, under the direction of Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs Bret Eynon, has gained national recognition. ePortfolios provide students with the “tools to tell important stories about their experiences in the complex global society of the 21st century.” Students include essays, poetry, interviews, paintings, family photographs, and resumes, showcasing diversity (“History”).

3. The Cooperative Education department, led by Chair Francine White, offers both part-time and full-time internships in over twenty majors at LaGuardia. Students earn academic credit by working or volunteering in a wide variety of business, government, or community agency settings. In addition to internships, students take seminars such as Critical Reflection and Learning at Work (CPA041) which includes exploration of workplace values, culture, and ethics (“Course”).

4. The Division of Enrollment Management and Student Development invites students to participate in its Leadership and Diversity Program, a series of workshops in leadership skills and diversity awareness. Under the direction of Brian Goldstein, Director of Recreation and Student Life, the program helps students develop personal and professional skills as citizens in diverse environments, including the workplace (Leadership).

Engaged teachers and students are key to training young adults for various roles in the workplace. In an article about diversity and education at LaGuardia, President Gail O. Mellow, Professor Phyllis van Slyck, and Assistant Dean Bret Eynon state:

LaGuardia faculty has developed a wide range of strategies for working with this complexity. Probably none is unique. What makes LaGuardia stand out is the pervasive attention to the
issue of diversity, the multiplicity and interconnectedness of its approaches and the degree of institutional focus on its students. The college’s diversity has forced a systematic, layered dialogue about appropriate pedagogy and curriculum content, led to innovations that create community, and stimulated faculty introspection. (Mellow, van Slyck, and Eynon 12)

This fall, as every fall, LaGuardia will welcome a large cohort of new faculty. This new group “will become a key element of the larger teaching community at LaGuardia. To support these new members... and help them grow as skilled and effective professionals,” the Center for Teaching and Learning will offer a year-long New Faculty Colloquium. The college recognizes its responsibility to support new teachers as they enter LaGuardia’s teaching community and to share with them LaGuardia’s tradition of caring and innovative teaching. Additionally, there is a specific need to develop reflective teachers who are responsive to the vocational goals, the academic skills, and the diverse cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds of students (New).

Teaching Diversity in the Business Classroom
I agree with Professor Ximena Zúñiga of the University of Massachusetts who states that “the main objectives of the intergroup dialogue process are to encourage self-reflective conversation and inquiry that break through the surface tension created by difference; [and] clarify and address issues of potential conflict.” In Introduction to Business (AMM101), my students are representatives of LaGuardia’s diverse population and many wish to pursue careers in business. Hence, I begin discussion of diversity within the first two weeks of class, stressing that the topic has direct relevance to the students and their ambitions. The initial presentation begins to expose issues of racism and sexism, providing a foundation for future dialogue. The relatively early discussion lessens tensions, minimizes any reluctance students might feel about sharing personal experiences, including injustices they have witnessed or experienced, and encourages debate about charged topics. Later in the semester, when we spend more time on the subject of human resource management, I deliver a comprehensive lecture about diversity and engage students in a related group activity focusing on the workplace. I give each group, which I have organized to be heterogeneous, the following information and situation related to diversity in a typical business setting:
Workplaces in the United States are becoming more diverse. Employees bring varying customs, traditions, values, and languages to the workplace. It can be difficult for some employees who have worked in business for a long time to adjust to the changes that accompany diversity. The work environment may become tense and full of distrust and hostility as conflicts erupt among employees. This is the situation at Zebra Corp., a manufacturer of food containers made from recycled plastic and glass.

As the company’s Human Resource Director, you are faced with an environment with particular differences between the majority white male employees, and the newer minority and female employees. How would you go about fostering cooperation, trust, and respect among the different groups?

What are the issues and problems with diversity at the company? What benefits and opportunities exist for the company? How can you encourage employees to be more understanding of each other? What would your plan look like?

After about twenty minutes, I ask each group to select a spokesperson to report out on the group’s responses to the situation and to the related questions. In recent group reports, students have presented the following recommendations:

- “Create a workplace that is aware and respects a broad spectrum of human values through awareness training.”
- “Sponsor lunches and group activities that encourage discussion and behavior changes.”
- “Hire a Chief Diversity Officer to work with managers and employees.”
- “Encourage the development of groups so that employees with common issues can openly discuss and share experiences.”

After the group presentations, using corporate websites, I direct students’ attention to real workplace situations. For example, McDonald’s website illustrates how one of the country’s most successful business
enterprises seeks to manage its human resources. McDonald’s “Diversity” portal opens with a mission statement:

McDonald’s is the world’s community restaurant. We are proud of our long-standing commitment to a workforce that is diverse. We believe in developing and maintaining a diverse workforce that will strengthen the McDonald’s system. Diversity at McDonald’s is understanding, recognizing and valuing the differences that make each person unique.

The student group exercise is reinforced by the visual and textual materials of the McDonald’s website that includes information about awards and recognition programs, diversity facts, diversity educational seminars, and relationships with community-based organizations. Many of the programs that McDonald’s has engineered are similar to those suggested by the students.

In a subsequent session, we review the relevant chapters in Business, the course textbook, and discuss benefits that a diverse workplace offers an organization (Pride, Hughes, and Kapoor 314). Students invariably agree that such things as the marketing edge provided by the ability to communicate with minority and women consumers are an advantage of a diverse workforce; that problem solving and decision making are enhanced through a wider range of perspectives and critical analysis of issues; that creativity is better achieved through diversity of perspectives; and that cultural diversity in the workplace brings with it bilingual skills which are advantageous in a global marketplace (317).

This approach – the introduction of diversity as a topic early in the term, the lecture, group exercise, and use of a corporate website highlighting a major company’s approach to diversity – emphasizes the importance of diversity in business. It gives students a detailed perspective of an area that is increasingly complex and important in creating and maintaining a competitive workforce, particularly in a global economy. In addition, I continue to reinforce the issue throughout the semester by my constant challenges to students “to rethink many of their attitudes, assumptions, and political and social understandings through sharing of feelings and experiences, critical analysis of historical and sociological material, and consideration of alternative perspectives” (Zúñiga ).
Conclusion: The Future
The greatest impact we can make as educators at LaGuardia is by remaining true to our commitments as a valued community institution. We must remain vigilant in our mission to enrich our ever-changing and expanding student population, preparing them for work in a diverse and global environment.

WORKS CONSULTED


