Cast from Eden, Adam and Eve went to work, probably on the South Side of Pittsburgh, just down the street from my cousins, aunts, and uncles. Arriving in the early 1900s with the first great wave of Ukrainian immigrants, my father’s people grew up along the rivers and railroads that carried iron, steel, and coal from Monongahela Valley mills and mines to the rest of the country. Above the rivers, in St. Clair Village, the housing projects where I was born and raised, work was breath, part of nature – you worked even if you didn’t have a job, even if you were a kid. Like our parents and everyone around us, we were raised to work – we did not wait until we graduated high school or college to begin our working lives. At young ages, we minded our brothers and sisters and cleaned house; if the neighbor’s children also needed minding, well, that was part of life, too. The trick, of course, was to balance housework with homework. From the projects we could see the spires of the University of Pittsburgh’s Cathedral of Learning. Some of us just didn’t know how we would get there.

The inseparability of work from an identity rooted in family responsibility and community, and pressured by daily necessity is a reality familiar to the students welcomed into LaGuardia. Conflicting work and family obligations keep many of our students from class; falling behind or feeling out of place, some give up, as did three of my five brothers and sisters and too many of my St. Clair neighbors. Bright as anybody, they left high school or turned away from college.

Lest the reader think our life was only about la miseria, please: We were raised together, in each other’s sight; we had language, music, style, and our own complex forms of information gathering and exchange, and we practiced civil rights before it became a movement. However imperfectly, in those days our public housing unified, held its children close. Yet as intensely as we desired to learn, public education alienated, kept us apart. In large groups, we took buses out of our noisy projects straight into the quiet mornings and leafy afternoons of a middle-class school district ill-prepared to receive us. There were no mentors to guide and advise us, and we needed more time in school to study, more occasions to internalize disciplined and systematic approaches to academic work, and less crowded space at home to do it in. Another,
related, part of our problem was cultural: few teachers expressed interest in what we already knew. But as great as the challenges may have been when I was being raised in the 1960s, the economic, social, cultural, and educational challenges and pressures facing our students now seem greater. Younger parents work longer hours for less money; more money is needed for more things – cell phones, cars, computers, and branded clothing – and rent is higher in communities that are less cohesive and more traumatized by violence and hunger.

The awareness of LaGuardia faculty and administration of the material conditions of our students’ lives is evidenced by multiple college and student leadership initiatives. In a variety of classroom practices that extend across the disciplines, our faculty pursue and confront social reality in their selection of texts and assignments. The current issue of *In Transit* highlights some of these practices, providing a diverse set of examples that view work from a broad range of personal, professional, and pedagogical perspectives, represented here by over a dozen faculty.

Arranged in three sections, the essays explore the unspoken relations of class and identity; the vital links between the classroom and the workplace; and the creative tensions among work, aesthetics, and education. As a group, the writers ask a series of questions: When we talk about work as a concept or as an action, how do we engage students in the conversation? In what ways are we presenting to our students the life of the mind as work, as making thought? What is academic work? Clinical work? How are our identities as thinkers or poets shaped by a working-class past? And what of categories of class – how are these currently experienced and constructed? Several articles can be read as pairs, reinforcing and complementing each other; others stand apart, or in opposition, bringing into question a position encountered earlier. Not surprisingly, common to nearly all of the essays are accounts of fatigue and hard labor, sacrifice and aspiration. Themes of class, community, and social agency cut across several essays, become less dominant in others, and resurface elsewhere. Obstacles apparent in one group of learners do not exist for another: such is the reality of diversity and difference at LaGuardia.

In the opening article of Part One, “Identity, Class, and the Nature of Academic Work,” Sue Young frames many of the challenges posed by LaGuardia’s “unique student demographic” of immigrant working students. To better understand the stresses of her students’ lives, she designs a semester of instruction that changes her own identity as a
teacher. Change is also at the heart of Renée Somers’ deeply personal examination of the distancing effects of an “elite” education upon her working-class background. Uncertainty about class identity is presented by Nancy Berke and Evelyn Burg as the result, in part, of the erasure of class discourse from classroom practice, an exclusion that limits a student’s capacity to imagine the historical experiences of others. Discussing the uses of the “About Me” section of ePortfolio in English 098, Heidi Johnsen considers the contradictions between the invisibility of working-class identity and the inevitability of work in the lives of our students. Like Berke and Burg, she attributes students’ difficulty in talking about work to the absence of a critical discourse – “they had no apparatus, no terms to use to describe [class].” Not coincidentally, these accounts take us into classrooms where the work of the student is to write and read at levels that meet specific academic standards. In the closing essay, Carolyn Henner Stanchina offers a definition of the nature of academic work, and expresses concern that college-bound high school graduates may be losing the race to acquire skills and strategies beyond those assessed by standardized tests.

The essays in Part Two, “Experiential Learning,” bring together recurring themes: the historic prominence of hands-on learning at LaGuardia; our commitment to providing our immigrant communities with educational and workforce opportunities; the importance of cross disciplinary faculty partnerships in mentoring student internships; and the urgency of recruiting and educating a diverse population to compete in a global economy. Several essays examine how experiential learning motivates intellectual and personal growth. As Doreen Kolomechuk writes in “Academic Study and Vocation,” when the disciplines are directly connected to experience, we “enable students to find meaning and purpose in life.” The promise of life transformed by education underlies Tania Ramírez and Melinda Thomsen’s “Immigrants in the Workforce,” an account of significant change in lives destabilized by immigration. In “Clinical Affiliation,” Clarence Chan points to the transition between clinical training and professional work as “a crucial time for student learning when students must face unfamiliar, real-world work experiences outside the protective walls of their academic institution.” From Suzanne Rosenberg, we learn of the personal sacrifices and special skills required of those called to nursing. Chan and Rosenberg describe the hands-on, face-to-face training of physical therapy and nursing students, giving the uninitiated reader a crash course in the realities of healthcare education. Andrea Morgan-Eason
offers the preceptorship as a model of nursing training, arguing that its student-centered emphasis on independent learning could easily be incorporated into LaGuardia’s nursing curriculum. Exploring the rationale for internships at LaGuardia, Marie Sacino and Angela Wu present their faculty partnership as effective in linking our classrooms to New York City workplaces. In this section, Milton Hollar-Gregory has the final word: To prepare our students – whether financiers or hotel workers – to be truly competitive, educators must heed the imperative to recruit, educate, and retain a population of students whose commitment to diversity reflects the moral underpinnings of American democracy.

Part Three, “Work, Art, and the Aesthetics of Work,” returns us to the reading and writing classrooms. When reading Seán Galvin, Carlos Hiraldo, and Chris Alexander and Kristen Gallagher, one imagines their classrooms as restorative spaces where students might, after long hours at work, reclaim their fullness as human beings. In “Work Ethic? Or Work Aesthetic?” Galvin considers the labyrinth of obstacles confronting evening students – years of developmental classes, conflicting family obligations, low income, and language barriers – in their quest for the prized college degree. He relates one reason for their endurance to the benefits of learning in community; another reason is the promise of improved economic circumstances upon graduation. But Galvin points to the pleasures of learning for its own sake as equally important. In “The Class of Bukowski,” Hiraldo’s students experience pleasure, and perhaps a bit of dizziness too, as the world of literature spins open to include the shock of Bukowski’s working class characters and language. With Bukowski in the classroom, Hiraldo and his students can share common ground: everyone works; let’s all talk about it, write about it, analyze its images.

As represented by the essays in this volume of In Transit, our labor is neither punishment nor shame. Brought out into the open and made visible in our classrooms, work is a source of knowledge, identity, and an inspiration for our creativity. This is Bukowski’s lesson, one stressed in Alexander and Gallagher’s “Writing the Workplace,” the journal’s final essay. Drawing together themes set out in previous articles, Alexander and Gallagher explore the idea of “affective labor,” and the ways that some work can steal our energy. Nevertheless, writing about our work brings us into “intensified contact with reality,” by reflecting upon our actions, we regain our energies and self-image. As in Galvin’s essay, the classroom revitalizes, restores, and replenishes; it, too, can be a kind of garden.
In our classrooms, the combination of work and creativity, discipline and innovation, method and freedom signifies the presence of student commitment to the demands and possibilities of an unsentimental but liberating education. Some students will fall away, of course. Yet, like the young man who works all night in the 7-11 across the street and sleeps there, too, others will find ways to stay with us. His response when I asked how he managed? “I just run across the street for morning class, and I am there! It’s easy, miss!”

Perhaps deep within, you carry, as I do, an idealized image of your birthplace. My Pittsburgh is like a Breughel painting: everyone is making something, or everything has been made – a fire, bread, tiny skates, the windows of narrow houses, the delicate spires of churches. We hope that the articles collected here capture images of LaGuardia as a community of makers, demonstrations of what we do and make as learners and teachers, whether as writers of poems or essays, nurses on clinical rounds, housekeepers at the Sheraton Hotel, or composition teachers assigned five courses a semester. Your labor is represented here, too. We hope you find the issue worthwhile, and welcome your comments.