

Why Harvard, Yale And Stanford May Not Be The 'Best' Colleges

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If you're naming top colleges, you might not think of the City University of New York right away. It's not selective — it serves what one former official called "the top 100 percent." It also has a pretty low graduation rate.

But if you look deeper, at metrics like diversity and sheer number of lives changed, then CUNY can make a strong case.

With more than a quarter of a million students across its 25 colleges and graduate schools, it's among the largest university systems in the country. With students hailing from more than 200 countries, it's surely among the most diverse colleges in the world. And according to [research from Harvard](#), CUNY ranks among the top 10 colleges that most promote social mobility.

LaGuardia Community College President Gail O. Mellow says she is troubled by the disproportionately small amount of money that community colleges receive, considering how many undergraduates they serve.

Scott Sternbach/Courtesy of CUNY

In other words, a large number of its students come from the bottom fifth of the income distribution and rise to the top.

Since 2000, Gail O. Mellow has presided over LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, Queens, one of seven community colleges in the CUNY system. She has just announced plans to step down in August, so I called her to get her thoughts on how we define "the top" in higher education right now. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What are the biggest changes you've seen over your tenure?

The biggest change is probably scale. The college has grown by close to 45 percent. We're much larger, and we're much more diverse.

That's been a delightful change, a hopeful change.

Honestly, the hard-fought change has been part of changing the narrative around what was the value of a community college:

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From being totally dismal, where students would hide the fact that they went to a community college because of the stigma, to students being incredibly proud and coming back from Georgetown or Brown and saying, "I wouldn't be there if it weren't for LaGuardia."

On a national level, suddenly the value of community colleges, especially in growing and keeping a middle class, is being recognized.

What metrics would you point to at LaGuardia that illustrate successful results?

One is change in family income [after] graduation [[\\$400,000 in additional lifetime earnings for those who get an associate's degree](#)].

Another is our pass rates on national exams, for physical therapy assistants or nurses for example, which often beat the national average.

[In 2018, 96 percent of LaGuardia nursing students passed the [national exam](#). That compares with 88 percent overall, including nurses at four-year colleges.]

Another is our transfer students. To watch students make their way successfully into the very most elite colleges in the world — colleges we now know others have paid millions to get into, and our students do it by hard work.

Those are the metrics that really show the formidable investment we have made.

Since you brought up elite colleges — as you watched the recent national admissions scandal unfold, what was going through your mind?

For me, as I age in this job, I'm troubled by the disproportionately small amount of money that community colleges, who educate more than half of all undergraduates, receive.

The amount we have to serve those students, compared to the millions of dollars that basically get squandered on things that have nothing to do with education [at other institutions], just makes me fear for the soul of America.

It's also intriguing to me that the pull, draw, focus of the elites is still so strong on the American psyche when they educate such a small number of people.

Their impact — in terms of changing people's lives — is so small!

The public fascination continues to astound me and does such a disservice to how people get educated.

And what about a little closer to home: What are your thoughts over the upheaval over New York City's specialized high schools admitting so few black students once again?

The obsession!

If those eight schools were 100 percent diverse the difference would be a couple of hundred students out of 1.1 million.

Again, I think it's the wrong focus. Why are we focusing on the top 0.01 percent when there's real work to be done on the other 99.9 percent of education: Who teaches? What do we teach? Are those students getting the education they need?

How would you define excellent teaching at a college like LaGuardia?

You must deal with a diverse group in a way that will never happen at one of these elites almost by definition.

One of our students, his father was shot twice in their house in Colombia because he refused to pay extortion. He had to then navigate a different culture and language with his family, the traumatic stress and the fear of it happening again.

How do you then teach *Moby Dick* to a roomful of people when that is their experience? They're from tiny rural communities in Nepal. Some are Nigerian. Some grew up African-American in Bedford-Stuyvesant or Dominican in Bushwick. And yet

you have to find a way to open up a college curriculum so those students grow and learn.

What became of that young man from Colombia? Did he graduate?

He's at Stanford now.

So what is the secret of managing a classroom that diverse?

The quality of our faculty and the quality of conversation.

We have a gazillion good teachers. Imagine their expertise in creating a conversation where all those different human experiences come together analyzing a complex piece of literature.

Dealing with the hardest cases is the hardest kind of teaching but also the most rewarding.

How do you promote good teaching in college? College instructors famously tend to be trained in their discipline, not so much in pedagogy.

From the time I began as president, I required that every single full-time faculty interview with me personally. I interviewed two people last week.

We have spent at this point millions of dollars on faculty development. Teaching is not something you were born to do. You have to learn it.

And you've actually led your own research on improving college teaching, right?

We say teaching is an art, but improving is a science. The faculty at LaGuardia, they so want their students to succeed. That connection is precious and we find it can be so transformative.

As a teacher, you have to teach yourself. You have to use pedagogy and the process of teaching as a form of your intellectual work, just like research.

Are you leaving with any regrets?

I'm always disappointed that I can't blast through the challenge of the graduation rates.

Students who are poor and working, the likelihood that they're going to graduate is about half if you look over 10 years.

If they complete, their life is going to change. It's that other half I'm sad about and it will continue to be a sadness.

How do you change it?

I think improving teaching is a big part of that.

Also, the actual desperation of poor people who need to make a living while they study.

The elite model of, you're 19, come in for four years and come out cooked, is no longer appropriate if it ever was. The linearity of higher ed needs to be broken.