SUNY Empire State College at 50:
Reflections on a Half Century of Our Work
Notes from the Editor

This volume was produced on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of SUNY Empire State College as a way to memorialize the contributions of an incredibly innovative public institution of higher education and the people who have worked here. While this is not a formal history, as Richard Bonnabeau created for us in his “The Promise Continues” that charts the college’s first 25 years, this is a gathering of reflections by those who wanted to contribute to the story of the college and its development in the very important and shaping years between 1996 and 2021. Great credit goes to those who put pen to paper to tell us about their lived experiences during their time with us. These were the people who helped build upon the promise of the college and deliver what that promise offered. In telling their story, they tell the story of SUNY Empire State College.

Among those who have helped bring this publication to fruition is Mentor Alan Mandell. Alan’s efforts, insights and extraordinary institutional memory have served the project well and saved my sanity. Susan McFadden, a member of the special events team, has again proven to have exceptional skills bringing a project to completion. She has been aided, as I have been for years, by the patience and skill of a very valuable employee of the college for nearly 50 years — Janet Jones of the college's print shop team.

Another generous contributor has been Richard Bonnabeau, who not only undertook the composition of two essays, but who also helped us comb through countless file folders of photographs and other archival documents used to complement the messages herein. And thanks also go to Anastasia Pratt for the expert advice she offered along the way.

Readers will find that each of the essays printed here is unique. Taken together they are wide-ranging in both subject matter and emotion. Some are touching, quite moving in fact, and others are analytical and even pragmatic. A few explain how some of our academic programs were developed, from motivation to execution. Some are funny. Others are wistful. All are exciting to read because they are reflections of what this remarkable college is in its many, many facets.

Themes emerged, none of which should surprise: the centrality of the student in the work we do; the very significant importance of the practice of mentoring; the critical role of strong leadership committed to the mission of the college.

One editor’s note: We were charmed by the different ways writers referred to the college, and rather than bring them all into some artificial but conforming usage, we decided to let the voices of the various authors prevail, for that was the “lingo” they used while at the college — ranging from ESC and SUNY Empire, to any number of other ways we’ve referred to our college. Similarly, we allowed the style each writer used for citations to stand as is.

We do not know where the college will be one, 10 or another 25 years from now. What we do know is 50 years of history has been experienced through our work alone, and together, and we felt it needed to be recorded, if for no other reason than as an archival document. I hope those who read these reflections years from now, or perhaps as soon as tomorrow, enjoy the thoughts shared by our friends and colleagues who care deeply about a place that has meant so much to us and has changed the lives of so many.

With kind regards,
Mary Caroline Powers
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We lost Ernest Boyer more than a quarter of a century ago. Now, in the 2020s, we are not, in most respects, the America he knew, nor the world he knew.

In many ways, the challenges we confront, the dangers we face, are much greater now. Nevertheless, the messages of concern he broadcast as a young dean of a small Christian college in Upland, California, as chancellor of the State University of New York, as President Jimmy Carter’s Commissioner of Education, and as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education, are more relevant than ever, more necessary, and certainly more urgent. Boyer became the ascending voice for American educators, connecting the centrality of education to the cultural health of society by guiding students in becoming enlightened citizens as lifelong learners committed to the spirit of civic service. His message, as recounted by his spouse, Kathryn Boyer, in “Many Mansions: Lessons of Faith, Family, and Public Service” (2014) provides remarkable insights and examples from his own life of service, about the urgency of his vision linking education to the survival of humankind.

In addition to his fundamental belief in the essential human capacity for goodness, Ernest Boyer was remarkably talented and charismatic, as well as driven by his mission to have humankind view each other as family, not as foe. Ralph Tyler, one of the preeminent American educators of the 20th century, who guided Boyer in the accreditation process of Upland College, asked Kathryn Boyer if she knew that
her husband was “one in a million.” She mentioned this to Ernie. His reply: “God made everybody one in a million” (K. Boyer, 2014, p. 65).

Robert M. Hutchins, then former president of the University of Chicago, and Royce “Tim” Pitkin, president of Goddard College, had participated as speakers for Upland’s January term (1958), a highly innovative proposal funded by the Ford Foundation. Both were advocates of innovative approaches to higher education and the service connections in sustaining a democratic society and reducing global tensions, ideas that would later surface in public remarks made by Boyer (K. Boyer, 2014, pp. 63–64).

Years later, according to Kathryn Boyer, her husband was interviewed about the significance of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Boyer asked, “What is the moral equivalent to the atomic bomb? I mean, if that’s an example of intelligence used for destruction, where are the centers of inquiry in which we would pursue human safety and peace with equal urgency? Where is the Manhattan Project for Peace?” (K. Boyer, 2014, pp. 87–88). In fact, in the midst of the Cold War, the theme for Upland’s January term was the Soviet Union. To Boyer, creating thicker and higher walls between the Soviet Union and the so-called Free World was just the opposite of what needed to be done. His goal always was to reach out, building bridges to create common grounds of communication anchored in the higher qualities that make us truly human.

In 1974, as chancellor of SUNY, Boyer supported a proposal from Patricia Snyder, the founding director of the State University of New York Children's Theater, to bring to Moscow the musical version of “The Wizard of Oz” performed by SUNY students. The production was held at the Bolshoi Theater and was an astounding success: “The climax came when the SUNY cast sang in Russian, ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow,’ and at the curtain call the crowd applauded and stomped their feet for about 20 minutes. There was hardly a dry eye in the Bolshoi Theatre as people reached out to strangers and hugged them tightly and smiled through their tears (K. Boyer, 2014, pp. 151–152). The following year, the Boyers received and accepted an official invitation for a two-week visit to the People’s Republic of China (K. Boyer, 2014, pp. 154–155). The following year Boyer returned to Moscow and signed an agreement with the Soviet Minister of Education, making it possible for SUNY and Moscow State University to conduct regular exchanges of faculty and students — the first for the United States. Boyer spoke the next day in a large university auditorium and received a standing ovation from students and faculty (K. Boyer, 2014, p. 170). About the significance of the occasion and the extraordinary outcome of the “Wizard of Oz” performance a few years earlier, Kathryn Boyer noted: “Ernie liked to believe that education had a great responsibility toward working for peace and a better world, and this visit was a poignant reminder of the success that can come when one firmly believes in that aspiration” (K. Boyer, 2014, p. 171).

Boyer was SUNY’s chancellor from 1971 to 1977. During his tenure, one of SUNY’s great achievements was the creation of Empire State College — an alternative college for working adults, under-represented individuals, divorced and empty-nester women seeking degrees to enter the workforce, others denied college opportunities for a whole host of reasons, as well as a response to disaffected youth clamoring for much more say in their education. Boyer had an excellent relationship with the SUNY Board.
of Trustees and had been instrumental in encouraging SUNY campuses with Chancellor Samuel Gould’s support to connect with local communities through storefront-outreach (SUNY Development Document, 1968, pp. 19–29). This was reminiscent of the storefront urban mission his grandfather, the Rev. William Boyer, established in the poorest section of Dayton, Ohio. As a teenager, Boyer assisted in the work of the mission. At times, it was just the two of them walking miles in search of the needy and spiritually impoverished or helping Grandma Boyer back at the mission handing out food to the hungry. His experience influenced his views of how education could address the broader needs of society, which resulted in his oft-quoted statement, “To be truly human, one must serve” (Carnegie Foundation, 1997, p. 12).

Shortly after becoming acting chancellor, Boyer moved quickly to build on the momentum started by Chancellor Gould which had included making a multimillion-dollar investment in educational television and correspondence courses with audio-visual supports to reach out to bypassed students and others, but without the capacity to earn a degree at a distance. Boyer asked Deputy Chancellor Merton Ertell to form a task force to brainstorm how SUNY, which had just nearly completed a massive statewide brick-and-mortar network of SUNY campuses with dormitories, could create a viable alternative to the traditional campus. Jim Hall, barely in his 30s and subsequently ESC’s founding president, was assigned to the task force in his capacity as assistant vice chancellor for policy and planning. Just before the group met, Hall prepared a one-page interdisciplinary three-year baccalaureate study plan with faculty guidance and evaluation. It illustrated how innovative approaches might work using a variety of learning resources and a wide range of learning opportunities. His proposal, which was the first to use the term “mentor,” was followed by a task force report that laid the foundation for a detailed prospectus (Ertell to Boyer, 1970, November 4). The prospectus called for a freestanding, nonresidential college consisting of as many as 20 regional learning centers and satellites. This bold initiative planned to serve as many as 10,000 students in three years and 40,000 by the 1975–1976 fiscal year (A Prospectus, 1971, February 8, p. 12). While the proposed institution did not meet these enrollment targets because of tough fiscal times, the birth of the State University of New York Empire State College with mentor-based innovative programs throughout New York state, including a highly innovative unit in
the United Kingdom, electrified American higher education. We owe much to Ernie Boyer, but ESC had the good fortune of having a first president with a steady administrative hand who remained with the college for 27 years, as well as extraordinary faculty and staff willing to develop iconic mentoring approaches, using many inventive ways to engage students.

From the vantage point of the 50th anniversary, it does seem miraculous that all the right connections were made to create SUNY Empire State College and then sustain it through tumultuous times. It is an extraordinary saga that has special meaning for ESC’s nearly 100,000 graduates who are, have, or will contribute to the betterment of society and the world.

In this regard, Kathryn Boyer’s statement about Boyer’s firm belief that “education had a great responsibility toward working for peace and a better world” is a timely testament for these troubled times.

In celebrating the 50th anniversary, may we all in our individualized ways help build bridges of understanding between and among the divided people and nations of the world.

References


Richard Bonnabeau joined the newly established Buffalo Center in 1974 as a postdoctoral Eli Lilly Foundation mentor intern. This followed the completion of his doctoral studies in history and cultural anthropology at Indiana University. Bonnabeau then joined faculty colleague George Bragle in developing various structured approaches to distance learning as an experimental unit of the Center for Statewide Programs, which eventually merged with Bob Hassenger’s independent study program as the Center for Distance Learning. Following an ESC Foundation Award for Excellence in Mentoring in 1993, Bonnabeau joined ESC’s Center for International Programs. There he assisted Ken Abrams in developing programs in Greece, Albania, the Czech Republic, Russia and Turkey. He retired in 2017 as mentor emeritus, and since then has served as a volunteer archivist for ESC’s archival collection in Saratoga Springs. Bonnabeau is the author of “The Promise Continues,” which charts the first 25 years since the creation of Empire State College in 1971.
“For the creation of a democratic society we need an educational system where the process of moral-intellectual development is in practice as well as in theory a cooperative transaction of inquiry engaged in by free, independent human beings who treat ideas and the heritage of the past as means and methods for the further enrichment of life, quantitatively and qualitatively, who use the good attained for the discovery and establishment of something better (Dewey, 1959/1952, pp. 133–134).”

My very first student at Empire State College in 1984, a highly successful local businessman, eventually became a member of the ESC Foundation Board; my second student ran her own preschool and worked with her husband on their organic farm; my third student, with wide-ranging literary interests if she wasn’t taking amphetamines, fell asleep during our student/mentor conferences because she had narcolepsy; and my fourth student wanted to build a degree program around the works of Edgar Cayce. Such diversity was truly flabbergasting. Perhaps these variations were the result of living
in Ithaca or due to the adult status of my students. Over time, I came to believe that students everywhere are equally diverse, but that traditional colleges tend to focus faculty attention more on their own expert knowledge than on the interests of their students. Whatever the reason, after years of teaching at a research institution, I found exhilarating the wildly different interests and objectives students brought with them to college and the unusually wide range of educational opportunities Empire State College allowed them to explore.

Another exceptional practice at the college that intrigued me was its acceptance of the academic value of knowledge gained from student prior experience. I happened upon John Dewey’s 1938 book, “Experience and Education,” and read it, thinking it might be relevant. As it turned out, it was, but not directly. Dewey had no interest in giving students extra-curricular credit; however, his underlying argument that all knowledge, whether in or out of school, emerges from experience, certainly offered a strong philosophical justification for recognizing college-level knowledge acquired from experience outside of school. However, the stated objective of the book, directed as it was largely at teachers, was to explain and describe the attributes of what he referred to as the “educative” experiences that students should be exposed to in school. And what excited me was that the book seemed to totally capture the spirit and outcome of what was taking place while my Empire State students and I planned and carried out their studies. As I asked questions about what students wanted to learn and why, their vision of where such inquiries might lead expanded exponentially right before my eyes, which is precisely what Dewey argued educative learning experiences should do.

But references to Dewey were nowhere to be found in the college. I did learn from the college’s historian, Richard Bonnabeau, that Ernest Boyer, who was hugely instrumental in ESC’s creation, was strongly influenced by William Fitzgerald, a major Deweyan advocate in the 1930s. I also was aware of an undercurrent of opposition to Dewey’s ideas that made me wonder whether it had been simply politic after the college opened its doors to avoid mention of Dewey’s name and progressive education. Maybe too, Dewey’s mixed reputation also explained what I saw as a lack of ideology in our practices in those early years (Coulter, 2018). On the other hand, colleagues with solid philosophical backgrounds who responded to my curiosity were quick to point out that Empire State College’s hallmark individualized mentoring, that is, the marked absence of interactions among classmates — was antithetical to Dewey’s stress upon the school — and learning itself — as inherently and necessarily social (see, e.g., Dewey, 1902, also, Mayhew & Edwards (2007/1938).

It took at least 10 years before I sought to seriously address these contradictions by tackling Dewey’s major opus, “Democracy and Education” (1916). In my first years of studying the text, I continued to marvel at the congruence between ESC’s and Dewey’s educational vision — namely, the importance of attending to individual student needs and interests, of student agency in learning, and of appreciating the infinitely varied

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nature of each learning experience. It was somewhat unsettling just how much our college seemed to actualize with adult-aged college students the very objectives Dewey sought for K–12 children. Yet, along with my colleagues, Alan Mandell and Lee Herman, I wondered what our students were missing without the communal learning experiences Dewey considered so important. Was more social practice needed at Empire State, or was it possible that adulthood itself—particularly with the “established” adults who were our typical students rather than the “emerging” adults who populate traditional classroom-based colleges2—made social learning opportunities in school unnecessary?

This question encouraged us to examine more closely the role of “democracy” in Dewey’s thinking, a move that was further stimulated by the current political situation in our country and across the world that suddenly raised doubts about the viability of our democratic society. More and more, governments thought to be democratic models appeared to be moving in an autocratic direction, and even more alarmingly, a direction that a large segment of the population seemed to welcome. Also, in 2016, the 100th year anniversary of the publication of “Democracy and Education,” led us, along with many others,3 to examine more closely Dewey’s conception of a democratic society in relation to his pedagogy. Had we indeed failed to fully appreciate why Dewey thought progressive education was critical not just for deeper learning (see, e.g., Darling-Hammond & Oaks, 2018), but also for acquiring the skills and attitudes that sustain democratic life?

Using the family as an ideal example, Dewey (1916) defines society in terms of two essential ingredients: A group of individuals with (a) “some interest held in common” (p. 83), and (b) “… interaction [among each other] and cooperative intercourse with other groups” (p. 83). With these elements, he argued, a democratic society can be determined by “how numerous and varied are the interests that are shared” (p. 83) and “how full and free is the interplay with other associations” (p. 83). If in 1990 at Empire State College, we had been able to bring all prior graduates together, the gathering would have been a remarkable exemplar of what Dewey would consider a democratic society: An assembly of individuals representing a vast array of interests, skills, occupations, goals and beliefs who had in common gratitude for their own personal and professional development the college had promoted and an appreciation for what each one had gone through in earning their degree. They would discover among themselves a variety of external commonalities and differences that excited their admiration or respect, which they also would undoubtedly have called upon if the college needed assistance.

Dewey (1916) constructed a form of teaching that he believed would promote just such a society. He emphasized two objectives: enriching, broadening, and strengthening the individuality of each student; and giving them all “an equitable opportunity to receive and take from others” (p. 85). Whether intentional or not, I would argue that the original design of Empire State College, although without any social requirements, nonetheless promoted exactly the same outcomes.

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2 According to Arnett (2010) and Mehta et al. (2020), emerging adulthood begins around age 18 and ends in the mid to late 20s whereas established adulthood begins around age 30.

3 See in particular articles by Wraga and also Wang in the edited volume by Cunningham & Heilbronn (2016) and also by Biesta in Higgins & Coffield (2016).
that Dewey envisioned. So, for example, that students were not graded eliminated entirely a form of class division that Dewey argued weakens the social contract of a democracy. That students were encouraged to tackle the college curriculum in ways that addressed their unique strengths and weaknesses broadened their own range of capacities which in turn broadened the number of interests they might have in common with others. Thus, through personal development, they acquired an improved capacity for a democratic life that Dewey called “a mode of associated living” (p. 87).

Admittedly, the college has changed considerably over these past 50 years, and I am in no way suggesting that we should return to the past — neither ours nor Dewey’s. Our world is continually changing (a reality that Dewey argued education should be designed to address) making possible a whole universe of new pedagogical possibilities. If it is true, as Dewey claims, that a democratic society is marked by ever-increasing interests we hold in common and a concomitant decrease in attitudes and behaviors that set us apart, then as educators, in the next 50 years we are limited only by our imagination and available resources as to how we might intentionally enhance those attributes that promote those outcomes. Democratic dispositions and, for example, remote learning are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, our own experiences do suggest certain directions we ought not take: for example, teachers should be guides rather than authorities if students are to become self-confident or self-directed; also, we must promote individualization rather than standardization if students are to appreciate diversity in themselves and in others. All that is needed is the desire, and permission, to experiment with various approaches to education, which produce outcomes that support rather than undercut democracy. Our tradition of taking seriously the individual needs and interests of our adult students, in my opinion, provides a perfect point of departure for such educational experimentation that will allow us to continue an approach to education that, in Dewey’s words (2011/1929) “… is by its nature an endless circle or spiral … [demanding] more thought, more science, and so on, in everlasting sequence” (p. 77).

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**Xenia Coulter**, professor emerita, was the mentor/COORDINATOR of the Ithaca Unit, a mentor in International Programs, and an instructor in the graduate program and Center for Distance Learning. Xenia earned a B.M. in music theory from the University of Michigan and a Ph.D. in psychology from Princeton. Over the past 30 years she has developed a deep interest in adult learning and development, prior learning assessments and John Dewey’s writings.
A Very Early All College Conference

An All College Conference — Lunch Break, 2 Union Ave., Saratoga Springs, N.Y., early ’70s.
Deciding Together: Shared Governance at SUNY Empire

by Anastasia L. Pratt,
Mentor and Interim Dean,
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While SUNY Empire State College’s shared governance structure has evolved significantly since our founding, it has long been a hallmark of a college dedicated to serving adult learners in innovative and flexible ways. Beginning with the Inaugural Workshop in 1971, the college community has organized itself around the shared work of developing a college that could carry out its mission and provide quality academic programs. Over time, that commitment has led to a dynamic shared governance system predicated on the core belief that all voices at SUNY Empire are valuable — that all constituents should be involved in making the decisions necessary to provide a quality education for our students.

Currently, our shared governance system is composed of the College Assembly, which consists of the entire voting membership of the college; the College Senate, which acts on behalf of the voting membership of the Assembly, and its 10 standing committees; and the Program, Planning and Budget Committee, which advises and consults with the college president and which is formed through joint consultation between the Senate and the president. That structure, fairly common across the State University of New York, becomes considerably more unique when the membership is considered. Rather than a series of faculty-only committees or a system that allows only faculty and professional employees voting rights, SUNY Empire’s governance structure is designed to be as inclusive as possible. Thus, the voting membership of the College Assembly includes the SUNY
chancellor and SUNY Empire State College president, as well as all academic personnel, professional employees, support staff employees, and management confidential personnel of the college holding a line of .25 or higher (Article I.A, SUNY Empire State College Bylaws, 2021–2022).

Bylaws were first adopted in 1973, with a two-thirds majority of faculty, professional, administrative staff and officers voting to approve at a collegewide meeting held in the Catskills. Wrangling over the legitimacy of bylaws developed by administrators without faculty input led to the delay in adoption, which was further threatened by a significant divide among the faculty and administrators over the way the college should be run. One faction advocated for the elimination of all titles and ranks and the institution of equal pay for all faculty and administrators, while the other argued for a more traditionally governed institution. Both factions knew that the State University of New York requires each institution to have a set of bylaws agreed upon by the faculty and president. The adoption of the bylaws was a significant moment in the college’s history, and the specific bylaws laid the foundation for the commitment to equality and fairness still in evidence today by including students, professional employees, and representatives of the administration, in addition to faculty, as members of the College Assembly. In 2012, the College Assembly voted to add support staff employees to the voting membership of the college and to create a Support Staff Conference parallel to the Professional Employee and Faculty conferences. With that change, the Assembly became far more representative, with a membership that includes “all academic personnel, professional employees, support staff employees and management confidential personnel of the college holding half time or greater appointments of at least six months at the time of the meeting/election” (Minutes of the Plenary Session of the College Assembly, All College Conference, March 30, 2012). Another significant change designed to increase the representative nature of our institution occurred during the 2020 bylaws revisions process, when the membership was further refined to include all personnel of the college “holding a line of .25 or higher” (2021 Proposed Bylaws Revisions and Plenary Session Minutes April 2021). This and other proposed bylaw revisions were approved at the 2021 Plenary Session.

Regular review of the bylaws has always been part of our governance system. For at least the last 20 years, reviews have occurred every two years, with amendments presented to and voted on by the College Assembly. By 2009, the Governance Operations and Review Committee (GORC) had been created to assist with the work of reviewing and revising the bylaws. Now, GORC serves as “a conduit for proposed revisions,” helping with the analysis of the proposals and with the facilitation of consultation across the college (Bylaws 2021–2022, p. 17). That committee’s work has helped to create a clear process for the review and revision of bylaws, as well as methods for evaluating the work we need to accomplish within our shared governance system in order to continue providing innovative and quality academic programs for our students.

The Standing Committees of the Senate are essential to achieving those goals. In 2021, the work of college governance is carried out by the Academic Personnel Committee (APC), the Committee for Undergraduate Programs (CUP), GORC, the Graduate Studies and Policies Committee (GSPC), the Integrated Technology Committee (ITC), the Professional Personnel Committee...
(PPC), the Support Staff Committee (SSC), the Teaching and Mentoring Faculty Committee (TMFC), and the Undergraduate Committee for Academic Policy (UCAP). Not surprisingly, these committees have shifted and changed as the college’s needs have evolved. Some of those changes have been relatively minor, with the change of a name from the “Educational Technology Committee” to ITC, for example, or with a slight change in charge to account for a move away from a specific system to review management confidential employees. Others have changed the entire face of our system of governance, as was the case with the 2017 proposed bylaws amendments. Senate Chair Mary Mawn and Vice Chair Thalia MacMillan led an effort to rework both the bylaws and the standing committees included therein according to the college community’s feedback and a structure based on academic schools and functional offices instead of regional centers. This represented an extensive change to the governance structure. Among other changes, that revision divided the Committee on Undergraduate Studies and Policies (CUSP), the standing committee charged with acting “for the faculty on academic issues that require their study, recommendations and approval in all matters impacting undergraduate academic programs, services and policies of the college as well as any college procedures that impact undergraduate academic policy,” into two standing committees, the Committee for Undergraduate Programs and the Undergraduate Committee for Academic Policy (2017 Proposed Bylaw Revisions). Advocated by the members of CUSP, who had found their work to be growing exponentially, this bylaws change is a prime example of how the regular bylaws revision process allows for the assessment of a committee’s charge and work to lead to meaningful adjustment. The change also demonstrates the ways in which bylaws revisions can respond to structural changes in the college, as the membership of the two new standing committees differed vastly from previous iterations. While CUSP’s members included a member from the personnel of each center and school, a member of the assessment professionals, and a member of the directors of academic support, the new committees were composed of “One member elected from and by the personnel of each academic governance unit, one member elected by the assessment professionals from the directors of academic review, and the registrar, or his/her designee” (CUP) and “One member elected from and by the personnel of each academic governance unit; one member elected by the assessment professionals from the directors of academic review; one member elected from and by the directors of academic support; one member elected from the group comprising: retention coordinators, retention services, and student academic services; and the registrar, or his/her designee” (2017 Proposed Bylaw Revisions). Regardless of the specific charge, each standing committee is expected to elect a chair and either a co-chair or vice-chair to lead the group’s discussions, set agendas, and serve on the College Senate alongside elected senators from the academic governance units. Beyond representing their committee members, these standing committee chairs help to draft and revise policies that affect every part of the college. Even as a committee like APC makes recommendations regarding the reappointment, continuing appointment, and promotion of academic personnel, and PPC and SAC make recommendations regarding the training of professional personnel and support staff employees, committees like CUP and GSAC review and bring forward for college approval academic programs.
that become part of our academic offerings. To assist with this work, an administrative liaison is assigned to each standing committee “to provide a link between the committee and the administration, provide continuity to the committee, and assist with collaboration across committees and administrative offices” (Governance Handbook 2020–2021, p. 6).

From our beginnings, students have been included in these governance processes, though to varying extents. One of the most significant changes to SUNY Empire State College’s bylaws has been the transition from a Student Affairs Committee, jointly populated by Empire State College employees and students from each region of the college, to a Student Governance Association (SGA) to “stand alongside the college assembly and governance” and to “assume the primary role of SAC, which is to represent the views of the students and provide regular access to college leadership” (Bylaws 2021–2022, p. 9). Beginning in May 2022, the SGA will begin its work of providing “a stronger and unfiltered voice for students” (ibid) and with that change, our shared governance system has met our mission to “build on the diversity of our students, their work and life experiences” (College Mission and Vision) and strengthened the representative nature of our structures.

With this move, SUNY Empire State College’s shared governance structure has evolved to meet our current needs, again demonstrating our commitment to carrying out our mission and serving our constituents well. At the heart of this change and, indeed, our governance structure as a whole, is the pervasive belief that all of our voices are essential.

**Anastasia L. Pratt** is the interim dean of the School for Graduate Studies and the college archivist. She works with undergraduate students in the School of Arts and Humanities and with graduate students in the M.A. in public history and M.A. in liberal studies programs, primarily teaching public history courses. She is particularly interested in the ways we choose to remember, commemorate and memorialize historical figures and events.
An ESC Digest and Evaluation: When and Where I Entered

by Robert Carey, Mentor Emeritus

My career at SUNY Empire State College started in the summer of 1973. I took a Greyhound bus to Saratoga Springs from New York City to meet with Jim Hall, the president (I thought he was the chaplain — he had a charming smile and a lot of curly hair), Loren Baritz (whom I knew from Wesleyan University), and then, in turn, Bill Dodge, who would be my first dean, and Virginia Lester, who would be my associate dean. I entered the college, to put it more programmatically, on page 60 of the 1972 Master Plan (Empire State College, 1973). On that page and the pages following was a description of the SUNY Urban Study Center. Located in New York City, it was to have no permanent faculty of its own, but was to draw on SUNY resources in providing visiting students from “State University campuses” the opportunity “to plan Programs of Study built upon the rich learning opportunities of the Metropolitan area” (p. 63) — a kind of study abroad opportunity for SUNY students. One of the sources students would be able to use was the Religion in the City Program, supported by a grant from the Edward W. Hazen Foundation. It was to admit its first students in the fall of 1973. I would be there to greet them.

That is how my career at ESC began. Over the course of 45 years, I would be a mentor in the Center for Statewide Programs, a mentor in the Metropolitan Regional Learning Center, an associate dean at the Metropolitan Regional Learning Center, a graduate dean, a mentor at the Metropolitan Center (again), an acting associate dean,
a unit coordinator at the Staten Island Unit of the Metropolitan Center and, finally, a unit coordinator at the Brooklyn Unit of the Metropolitan Center.

When I became a member of the faculty, the college (and SUNY) was fully supported by the state of New York. These were the Gov. Nelson Rockefeller years. That would change dramatically during the Hugh Carey years: We went from being fully supported to beginning the long march toward being “kind of associated” with the state of New York. SUNY and its member campuses would have to learn a new kind of nimbleness in the coming years, as state support for higher education began to wane, speeded along at times by governors and SUNY board members who were not supporters of public higher education.

The college was made up of regional centers, the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. School of Labor Studies and the Collegewide Division, which became the Center for Statewide Programs and the Center for New Models for Careers, which became the Lower Hudson Unit and then the Hudson Valley Center. The Master Plan anticipated the development of a graduate school: that got underway in the ’80s. The college’s organizational chart would change time and again over the years, for budgetary or programmatic reasons. For a stretch, it would be two colleges. The Center for Distance Learning was a child of the internet and became the public-regarding face of ESC — College No. 1; the regional centers (the earlier, analog version of the college) were now College No. 2. They met like tectonic plates in the reorganization work that marked the end of the regional centers. All of that lay ahead of us. In the meantime, the day-to-day work of being a mentor and working with students (and each other) was more than enough to pass the time.

Some early initiatives didn’t quite work out. The college had a “development faculty” early on; the idea was that they would develop “modules” — self-contained studies that mentors and students could use as a student planned a degree — our version of the British Open University materials. (Theirs were extraordinarily detailed; ours — not so much.) I remember that Kenneth Burke did one or two that I thought were very cool at the time. My favorite was “The Myth of St. Petersburg.” I am still waiting for a student to show up wanting to do that module. Each office had a bunch of these things, but over time, they got tossed or shredded.

Who Showed Up?

One of the things that happened very shortly after the college opened its door was that the people who were supposed to show up and do interesting things in the city did not show up and, in all likelihood, would never show up. SUNY faculty who were supposed to participate were busy with their campuses and programs. So, who did show up? People, adults mostly, who wanted to finish degrees and who had heard that the college offered credit for life learning. My conversations with prospective students were not about religious studies but usually about what else they might be able to study — psychology, any pre-social work studies, maybe some literature, and how long it would take to get their degree. I did work with some students who wanted to finish a degree so they could go on to seminary. Most of them did not need “religion in the city” (many of them were pastors in storefront churches or congregations housed in former movie theaters) as much as a lot of liberal arts and skill development. So, the Urban Study Center grew, just not in the way anticipated by the Master Plan.
One thing that attracted students to the college was the idea of credit for experiential learning. One of the constants of being a mentor was explaining that process—what the college understood prior learning to mean, how college-level learning was determined, what means and measures were involved, and not least of all, how to caution against inflated notions of how many credits would be forthcoming in the process. One of the images I used again and again in talking with students and in doing information sessions for prospective students was the image of a pretzel twister.

It went along the lines of—“OK, you want to get credits for what you have learned. You have been a pretzel twister for a long time—so there should be a lot of credit for all that learning—right? Well, no, actually. You learned to twist pretzels in one day—that is when the learning occurred. You have been doing the same thing again and again and again—not learning anything new, but repeating what you know. So, you would get a bit of credit for what you learned—not for repetition.” ESC’s vocabulary—mentor, degree program, general learning, contract concentration, evaluation, individualization—recalled the known and familiar—teacher/advisor, degree requirements, a major, liberal arts requirements, grades, introductory/advanced, syllabus, course, teaching and learning. But our “lingo” had a gauzy quality to it, so working as a mentor meant detailed and seemingly endless explanations about what a student could or couldn’t do, what the college meant by “experiential learning” or “concentration,” what “individualization” meant and where and when it could happen.

In addition to translating the college’s language for students, working as a faculty member meant being party to what would become a permanent conversation about workload and count and student readiness—usually occasioned by assessment committee work and the review of student degree program rationales, a species of writing peculiar to Empire State and the source of various types of educational angst. The idea of the degree program, early on, was that the mentor and student would put it together—charting what the student would do to finish the degree. It would be approved and then serve as a guide. It sort of did that in many cases, but increasingly, over the years, it would not be uncommon to see a degree program needing review and approval so someone could graduate. Rather than serving as a guide, it increasingly was an exit activity for many students.

GEAR, Tears and Zombies

When I started at the college, the “month” was the unit of credit. If a student was doing 16 credits of work—a full-time student’s term load—the contract (the document describing the work) would have “4 months” listed in the space where credit was indicated. The “month,” as I recall was actually three weeks and change, but we counted a month as four weeks. When you count a calendar year’s months as four weeks each, you end up with a year of 13 months. That extra month was the reading period from late-July to mid-August—not a vacation, mind you. A faculty member had to be “professionally available,” but had a no-appointment period for evaluating student work, doing research, getting new material developed for studies. That was the idea. One of the things that it meant in practice was that I could create a single learning contract that would cover two terms of work because of the way enrollment worked.

Enrollment could happen on any working day—except for reading period. It was a continuous enrollment process; a student...
was enrolled unless he/she “dis-enrolled.” We were orienting students on a monthly basis — starting up, always starting up. At some point, the college had to change this system, but in the meantime, a quickly developed mentoring skill involved engineering enrollment amendments that would prevent the student from being overcharged, or on the other hand, creating a document that covered two terms — the bespoke learning contract.

Any business day enrollment gave way to Monday only — not any weekday, just Monday. Then, another change as we slowly began to return to the mean. Enrollment terms changed from being a student’s enrollment term to being college terms — the familiar summer, fall, spring — with a fall 2 and a spring 2 tucked in. We had an enrollment form that allowed a student to enroll for 16 weeks as a full-time student. Then, a further turning of the dial; we had a standard calendar — there were enrollment periods. If a student missed one, he/she would wait for the next or ask to be shoehorned in as a late enrollee.

Another big change in the way we did things was the coming of SUNY General Education requirements. If you were to find a college “bulletin” (the precursor to the catalog) published before 1996, you would find language that described a student’s degree program as having “depth” and “breadth.” In addition to having a robust concentration, the expectation was that students would do studies outside of their “major” and thus have “breadth” in the degree program. That was the idea. It was not framed as a requirement, but as something to be considered as the degree program was being formed. Degree programs tended to favor the concentration, the bigger the better, so “breadth” as a reliable design feature was a sometime thing. Very often the “breadth” that we could see was in the concentration, a polite way of saying that the concentration was large. A constant reason for that design discussion — and often a tug of war between a mentor and a student, or an assessment committee that wanted a degree that had two columns (concentration and general learning) — was the student’s voiced opinion that he/she did not want to take anything that was extraneous or, from their point of view, beside the point. The assumption that shaped that conversation went something like this: “If I have a lot of studies in my major (concentration) — I will get the job, the promotion, get into graduate school.” A kind of course/content magic.

The breadth issue was “solved” in 1996 when the board of trustees of SUNY mandated 10 areas of General Studies requirements for the SUNY system. A group of us went to Asheville, North Carolina, for a workshop on developing General Education programs and approaches; we acquired another acronym — GEAR (General Education Assessment Review). The historical studies faculty of the college was a big winner. Historical studies was not a major degree area at ESC — nothing like community and human services, or business, management and economics, the big enrollment drivers, with human development as a close third. GEAR had an American history requirement along with a western civilization and other world civilization as three of the 10 required areas. Some adjustment was made to the GEAR requirements after a while, going to seven. Degree plan design began to become more routinized.

Degree program planning embraced two things. The first was a student’s history — What were they bringing to the college? What was usable? Where did it fit in the scheme of things? This was the top part of
the degree plan where transcript credits were listed along with other transcripted learning. Some of them would be in general learning, some would be listed as part of the concentration. Just below that would be a place for “credit by evaluation” for the concentration or for general learning. The bottom third of the degree program form was for the titles of the contract studies that would complete the degree — satisfying concentration guidelines and/or general learning requirements. The typed degree program and related/relevant documentation and the rationale went to a faculty assessment committee for review — and that is where the discussion of the rationale and student writing would take root and climb like ivy up the walls and over the transom of a center’s assessment committee meeting room.

Very early on, assessment committee meetings involved meeting the student whose degree was being reviewed and discussing (and evaluating) their presentation of their experiential learning. One such meeting lingers — the student burst into tears and ran from the room. Documentation and evaluators’ reports became the norm as the college gained more experience in sorting out experience and learning. Degree program planning had a way of becoming the land of the undead. Several things contributed to the creation of this twilight zone. A committee would approve a degree program conditionally, requesting the student to revisit his/her rationale and correct some sentences that didn’t really work or to clarify what the student hoped to accomplish with the particular proposed concentration and — in more recent actions — how the concentration satisfied the area of study guidelines. These, it should be noted, had become more specific and department-like over the years. If the student didn’t respond to the committee with the necessary revisions, the degree program would sit in limbo until the student realized that they had not gotten a degree and called to ask why.

Or, there were the other “undead.” A student got credit for degree program planning; the evaluation was in the file, the credits had been awarded — but nothing had happened. The student had done some exercises and gotten credit but had not submitted a degree program or rationale for review. Another chapter in “forensic” mentoring — meeting with the student, putting the degree program together, getting it evaluated, closing the file, waving goodbye at the door.

The call I dreaded getting as an associate dean or unit coordinator usually began something like this: “Hi, my mentor said I was all finished, but I haven’t received my degree and I don’t know why.” That is when I would put on my “forensic mentoring” scrubs and get started in sorting things out.

**Analog and Digital**

Central to my experience of the college as an institution was that it was always in motion. A center shifted its locations, a program that was started here ended up over there. A good deal of this had to do with growth. The college added centers, centers added faculty, leases ran out and new offices had to be found. Some of it had to do with budget. And, as noted above, after the Rockefeller fat years, there were the Hugh Carey sparer years as budgets got leaner — and meaner from SUNY perspectives. It also didn’t help that some governors and SUNY trustees weren’t big fans of SUNY. So, Empire adjusted and moved administrative furniture — associate deans disappeared. Regional center deans became super deans charged with handling two regional centers rather than one. Faculty chairs didn’t take the place
of associate deans, really, but they served governance purposes. I was Metro’s first faculty chair. At the time, the position was considered radioactive. Associate deans would return as would center deans only to disappear again as reorganization took another turn, and College No. 1 and No. 2 morphed into the currently slow to be born, College No. 3.

The biggest change in many ways was the coming of the internet. Empire started when the “technology” that we had was typewriters — I thought that the IBM Selectric II was as good as things could get — and the Xerox machine. Both of these were considered good technology. We were swimming in paper; everything needed to be typed, vetted, signed, processed and sent to Saratoga Springs. Student files bulged with copies or unprocessed originals. We spent a lot of money on Wite-Out and some documents were lumpy with it.

Our transcript consisted of evaluations. Contracts were followed by “digest and evaluations” — a transcript document with a vaguely medical-sounding name. D&Es, as they were called, could run for several pages. The original idea was that the evaluations would provide the student with information about how well they were doing and what they might improve. But given the amount of typing and processing of paper involved, the D&E arrived too late to be current news. And, early on, students began to ask for grades. Yikes — we were the non-grading, student-centered, consultative college that worked to shape intellectual growth. Grades? Yes, grades — employers wanted them, other registrars wanted them (What is this transcript anyway? Why all this clotted prose?), and students, most of all, wanted them. Grades were what you got from a college. When we moved from paper to an online records system, grades followed as the night followed the day. While I was an associate dean and had to assign grades, I discovered that we (the faculty) had routinized a grading vocabulary. Excellent was, of course, an A; Very good or solid and engaging, was A- and B+ respectively. It took the college a while to use F. The idea of failing didn’t figure in the early design. No Credit (the NC) filled that spot — not exactly an F, more like a redacting of a past event, like it sort of hadn’t happened. When the college adopted grades, it marked the end of Empire State College for some. For me, at least the first chapter was over.

The computer/internet age arrived. We had computers on our desks and MS-DOS disks in the top right drawer of our desks. Floppy disks would very quickly give way to hard disks, and dot matrix printers and that buzzing noise they made would be replaced by Hewlett-Packard desktop printers. Suddenly, a lot of behaviors were out of date. In the analog college, information was something in print. You might need “Books in Print” when you were developing a contract and each regional center had a huge reference binder with information about sources that might be used in developing learning activities. I am not sure that that resource guide was ever used a lot. I know “Books in Print” was essential as was getting on the phone and talking to colleagues.

Student files were fat with drafts, amendments, memos to the file and somewhere along the way, a copy of approved degree plans or copies of degree plans that had been reviewed but didn’t pass muster for some reason — usually the rationale was a mess — and nothing had happened after that. The student hadn’t revised, the mentor possibly forgot it, but there it sat. Then we went digital and had to move from a lot of paper to less paper. The behavior didn’t change. I still got calls — as a unit coordinator, or as a faculty
chair, about the same stuff. Only now I could sit at my computer and use Notes DP, the Contract Library and DP Planner to see where things had stopped.

**Face-to-Face Good; Distance Learning Bad**

A major change that followed on the heels of computerizing things was the coming of distance learning. I was on a committee that looked at how the college was going to address the use of computer technology and distance learning (it was not yet “online” learning). If the IBM Selectric and the Xerox had been “good technology,” the computer was, as I recall discussions about online/distance/computer-assisted learning, a bad thing. But there was no turning of the tide that was coming our way. Some things changed; others, not so much. The first direct experience of change that I found myself coping with was course design. Not contract, but course work. There would be a contract for the student, but it now arrived as a term-length course, with a number of modules, assignments, requirements for online discussions. The earlier contract style had been a kind of “come on down, we’ll have a talk and see what you want to do.” Online changed that — this is the course you signed up for — 4 credits, liberal arts, advanced level, etc. No waiting for the contract to be typed and Xeroxed and sent to the student.

The computer helped us do away with a lot of paper, do slightly better on record keeping, even though all of our different academic records systems didn’t talk to each other. Still, information retrieval and problem-solving were a good deal crisper. What the computer did most strikingly, I think, was to sharpen the core questions of our work and give them a new urgency.

How should the work of teaching and learning and interacting with students now proceed as they, like us, grappled with mastering the computer and its possibilities? How best to design, to engage, to coach and to coax? Was there an app for that? Not really. All those things were and are at the heart of the enterprise of mastering something, of demonstrating comprehension.

At the dead center of things was a question that I used in the Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Study course in the M.A.L.S. (Master of Arts in Liberal Studies) program: How many questions do you have to answer in order to answer the question you want to answer? Next to that, a companion idea really, was my Critical Reading contract — a study I offered every term after first putting it together when I was an associate dean and was working with a student who was struggling with a reading assignment. She was very bright, but reading was a struggle. She was, as I would later learn, aliterate. She knew the words but couldn’t “see” the meaning, couldn’t hear what the author was up to. We were covering “content” but to what end? By the end of the term and a lot of deconstructing articles and some introductory texts, she began, finally, to “see” what a text was about. What I am left with, after all the changes and moving about, is that moment — and all that is involved in the exchange between reader and text. The final irony is that reading and writing were the crucial “technologies” along with math that our ancestors invented to cope with the world. Every generation has to learn those technologies — the greater the level of comprehension and performance, the better.

Working for that — “I get it,” “I see it,” “Oh, that’s what it means” — is what we are all about. That, for me, was the unchanging task, the dead center of what working with students involved. It had its moments, as in:
“Do I have to read the whole book?” “Both articles?” “Do I really have to rewrite this paper or see a writing coach?”

The college got underway, I think, with an idea of the student as being pretty much at the graduate level — at home with research and writing, able to move easily in the back and forth of analyzing someone’s claims. It took a while to realize that those students do enroll from time to time and did some great work: every center had its wall of the best and brightest. But the day in and day out work of mentoring was in fostering insight, coaching, working on comprehension. I loved that.

Reference

Robert Carey, mentor emeritus, was a professor of history and religious studies and served as a faculty member and administrator over the course of his 45 years of service. He was a faculty member of the Center for Statewide Programs and, following that, the Metropolitan Regional Learning Center. He served as “Metro’s” associate dean and a five-year term as the dean of the graduate school and developed and taught religious studies courses for the Center for Distance Learning. From time to time he made remarks on the state of the college at its annual All College Conference in Saratoga Springs. He had (and has) an abiding interest in how adults can become critical readers and users of texts. He did his undergraduate work at Wesleyan University, graduate work at Union Theological Seminary, and his doctoral studies at Columbia University.
An Early College Meeting in an Unconventional Room

John Jacobson, vice president for academic affairs and later provost and acting president, meeting with colleagues.
Evolution of Practice
Empire State College: Living an Evolving Mission and Vision

by Justin A. Giordano, Mentor

Empire State came into being as the applied vision of a truly innovative scholar and dedicated educator named Ernest L. Boyer. Inspired by the vision of Boyer, who at the time served as the chancellor of the State University of New York, Empire State College was established in 1971 by the SUNY Board of Trustees. Boyer later went on to serve as the United States Commissioner of Education in President Jimmy Carter’s administration in 1977. He had previously also served on commissions to advise President Richard M. Nixon and President Gerald R. Ford. Toward the end of the Carter Administration, Boyer moved on to assume the presidency of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Boyer’s vision was to create an institution that would be easily accessible for nontraditional and adult students by delivering instruction through a broad array of methodologies. Thus, an Empire State College student could be instructed one-to-one, which was and is still known as an independent study, and this could be done in person or via distance learning. But the characteristic that differentiated Empire State College from all the rest was the introduction of the “mentor.” The mentors were the focal element around which all instruction revolved in that they served as academic advisor, professor and instructor in their own area of expertise, but, on occasion, also ventured into related academic areas. Every student
was assigned an individual mentor and that made all the difference, particularly since each student, under the guidance of that mentor, could not only transfer credits obtained from other academic institutions but also translate their individual college-level acquired knowledge gained outside of the academy into college credits. All of the aforementioned constituted an approach quite ahead of its time and enshrined the Boyer vision that everyone should be afforded the opportunity of a second or third chance or more, at completing, or even starting, a higher education degree.

Over the nearly three decades since I've joined the institution, one which I’d heard about but, I readily admit at only the peripheral level, there have been many changes, some more around the edges but other quite substantial. Yet, in the estimate of this “mentor” and faculty member, the core and the essence of what makes this academic institution what it is and what it represents as it celebrates its 50th anniversary, has not changed. The approach to instructional delivery may have been modified, for instance with the majority of individualized course studies as well as group studies that are now delivered via the internet and not in person. Given the reach of the college with locations across the state and internationally, this has proven quite an effective instructional delivery system. Of course, because the college was located in larger centers and smaller units across New York state (and beyond) it was not surprising that regional differences in the delivery of instruction emerged — differences that reflected that region’s academic culture. Consequently, one of the downstate regions, which was until recently known as the Metropolitan Center and encompassed the Manhattan, Brooklyn and Staten Island units, prominently featured group studies. These in-person groups were scheduled to meet on a regular basis, typically weekly, and constituted an amalgamation of seminars and small classes, many capturing the essence of what interactive lectures and discussions between faculty and students should be. I always thought this must reflect in good measure Boyer’s vision of what educating is all about.

Other Empire State College locations did not incorporate the “group studies” delivery mode at all or, depending on the location, did include group studies but to a much lesser degree. In essence, each location responded to the needs of their students in that region in order to serve them best. And this also reflected the vision of Boyer and the founders of the institution. No single model fit every circumstance.

Since I first joined the college in the 1990s, the effectiveness and sophistication with which online teaching has been delivered has not only kept pace with other institutions that utilize online learning as their primary mode of instruction, but has actually surpassed competitors. Thus, when the horrendous COVID-19 pandemic hit full force and resulted in all in-person instruction and contact being prohibited or curtailed because of safety concerns in March 2020, Empire State College’s expertise and extensive experience with delivering online instruction proved a most valuable asset.

Indeed, when all instruction and related academic aspects including mentoring, which make the college what it is, were converted to remote delivery, Empire State College was able to accomplish this, if not effortlessly, at least rather seamlessly in comparison to other institutions of higher learning.
I always viewed Empire State College as working on two parallel tracks at the same time: delivering quality education to its students while at the same time continuing on its path to innovation, and, yes, even experimentation. It is no wonder that to the rest of the academic world, this institution has often been seen as a quasi-enigma.

I distinctly remember many a conversation I had with colleagues and representatives from our sister institutions, through my years of involvement with the SUNY Senate, where recurring questions revolved around the key issue: What was Empire State College all about? I would painstakingly go over what made us different, but also what we had in common, as well. These types of questions have and still come up fairly regularly when I attend conferences and related academic events. I have always found it gratifying to be affiliated with an institution that generates such interest or, at the very least, intense curiosity. At times, I’ve found it a bit challenging answering those questions knowing that the college is, as I previously alluded to, an ongoing project in educational innovation.

The changes that the college has undergone since its inception in 1971 through 2021 have been numerous, including the very structure of the institution, which is crucial to consider. As I mentioned earlier, the college was organized into seven major regional centers along with their affiliated smaller units. This model featured a center dean and essentially a good deal of center-based governance, which was headed by a “faculty chair,” a position to which I was honored to be elected for two, two-year terms, which was the maximum term of service allowed. The faculty chair represented the full contingent of faculty at the center, regardless of that person’s academic discipline and what was referred to as “area of study.” This structure had the benefit of solidifying, or even creating, in the early stages of the college, a strong sense of community and collegiality at the local level. However, in my estimate, there was what I considered an academically based drawback and that pertained to the lack of emphasis on academic disciplines. The center-based approach was not the most conducive to enhancing and strengthening the professional interactions among faculty in that same academic discipline. An ancillary and just as important drawback pertained to decisions that dealt with reappointments, continuing appointments and promotions, which were significantly impacted by the center-based faculty vote. And while there is absolutely no doubt that every faculty member exercised their best judgement on each vote they cast for their fellow faculty, it’s nevertheless obvious that each of us in the faculty operated at a clear disadvantage in evaluating the credentials and accomplishments of a colleague whose professional expertise was in another and often quite different academic discipline.

Therefore, the relatively recent change that re-structured the college into five “schools” based on academic disciplines has substantially addressed that deficiency. Other major changes such as the duration of the semesters and their starting and ending dates, letter grading and, most recently, the inclusion of honors and other equivalent recognitions for students bring the college in line with other institutions of higher learning, thus demystifying some of the real or perceived hurdles in understanding and navigating the Empire State College landscape.

In the quest to make the Empire State College experience as full as possible, I’ve also seen the increasing commitment to
student clubs and their ensuing activities as very beneficial. One of my few concerns revolves around the possible diminishment of opportunities for in-person meetings among the faculty via conferences and related events due to financial constrictions. This trend had started before the COVID-19 pandemic, but I’m hopeful that it will be reversed when some kind of normalcy returns and the pandemic is finally behind us.

I firmly believe that the college’s mission, which states in part, “SUNY Empire State College provides motivated adult learners with access to innovative, flexible and quality academic programs ...” continues to guide us. With dedicated commitment to it by the faculty, staff and the administration, and the continued embrace of innovative and creative ideas, the college will surely thrive for the next half century. Ernest Boyer’s vision is alive and well and embodied in the comprehensive college known as Empire State College.

Mentor Justin Giordano addressing attendees at the annual music and entertainment industry residency he organizes in Manhattan, which features entertainment lawyers, music and film producers, touring musicians, social media experts specializing in the entertainment field, and other music and entertainment practitioners as guest speakers.

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Ernest L. Boyer’s Genius Vision in 1971, 1981 and 50 Years Later

by Gohar Marikyan, Mentor

My journey in mentoring at ESC started July 1, 2005. During the new mentor orientation, I was trying to understand what ESC was all about. Although the orientation organized by the planning group was very productive, there was more to learn about ESC. The most fascinating phrase I heard then was, “College without walls.” (Haven’t heard it for quite some time, now.) Soon, I recognized Empire State College as being one of a kind — providing opportunities for creativity. I also appreciated that, most importantly, we mentors make huge, positive changes in our students’ lives. Needless to say, in a month or two, I fell in love with my college.

ESC has changed since Ernest Boyer’s time. Many changes took place during the last decade. Some of these were inevitable, necessary and even predicted by Boyer.

**Flexibility**

Fifty years ago, in 1971, at Ernest L. Boyer’s urging initiative, the State University of New York proposed to create Empire State College to “… experiment with new, flexible and individualized modes of learning which transcend constraints of space, place and time, to open new paths of learning and fulfillment to every individual within the State of New York, to pursue his education according to his individual needs and interests” (Boyer, 1971).
On July 10, 1981, in his speech at Empire State College’s 10th anniversary convocation, Boyer said, “This unique institution has become known as the Cadillac of nontraditional institutions. Empire State has a reputation for excellence all around the world and, most importantly, thousands of students have been served” (Boyer, 1981).

Calling ESC a “funny institution” Boyer said, “This college will go forward because it is flexible, but it is committed to excellence as well.” He continued, “The flexibilities of the past give me enormous confidence that it will remain flexible and committed in the days ahead” (Boyer, 1981).

What would Boyer say if visiting ESC now? Would he lovingly call us a “funny institution?” Are we as flexible as he had dreamed us to be and as we were in 1981? Are we still an “excellent” college? Does ESC still follow the path Boyer had in mind when establishing Empire State? Which changes helped ESC stay flexible and excellent? Do we endeavor enough to stay unique and be “the Cadillac of nontraditional institutions”? Does Empire State have the reputation for excellence all around the world?

I fully agree with Boyer that ESC’s flexibility and our unique approach to education are the most valuable assets of our college and we must strive to protect and develop them.

**Mentoring**

In Boyer’s vision, the student’s own needs will shape the process of education (Boyer, 1971). Watching one student, his wife, “engaged in an intense, persistent and enduring relationship with a mentor of great skill” Boyer wrote. “I wish to thank a superb faculty on which all of this has rested. Working in Empire State College is a very tough, demanding task.” He then concluded, “I am convinced that one of the most outstanding faculties in the world works in this distinguished institution” (Boyer, 1981). It is really uplifting and encouraging to read Boyer’s comments, as he saw a mentor’s work through a student’s eyes.

Students come to our college from very different walks of life and with a variety of interests and experiences. Some students are well focused and know exactly what the goals are and what the college expects of them. Other students are not so sure about what they need for accomplishing their goals. This latter group needs appropriate guidance in their search for their educational objectives. After putting together their individually tailored degree program, students become proud owners of their educational plan. The feeling of ownership empowers and motivates them to continue their education.
There are numerous facets to mentoring, and there is no magic formula that will work for all mentees. There is always more to learn in mentoring. Mentoring is not something that one can read in “how-to” books in order to memorize the proper steps. It is not something one can explain in a few words, either. Mentoring is something more than an accumulation of knowledge. Mentoring is about making beneficial and productive changes in the lives of our mentees; it is about seeing things the way they see; it is thinking with them; and yes, it is sharing their happiness when they complete their studies at Empire State College (Marikyan, 2009).

Back in 1981, Boyer predicted, “We face, I am convinced, an information revolution which will explode in the decade of the ’80s, and this revolution will have an enormous impact on our colleges and schools” (Boyer, 1981). He interestingly concluded, “Television can teach, calculators can solve problems, and computers can retrieve, instantly, millions of information bits, but perhaps, old fashioned, I declare television, calculators, and computers cannot and will not make discriminating judgments; they cannot or will not teach the students wisdom” (Boyer, 1981). Considering, in Boyer’s words, “He (the student) will learn the value of a close relationship with a competent adult in some profession” (Boyer, 1971), and “Quality education is the vision of a mentor and the dedication of a student” (Boyer, 1981), we conclude that a mentor, who has a wealth of knowledge and expertise, can guide students in choosing, and then achieving their academic goal.

Students

Boyer “assumed that the student will be motivated to learn independently” and should have “problem-solving ability on personal, social and technical levels” (Boyer, 1971). The ESC student body has changed since 1981, and, in Boyer’s words, “the ability to apply qualitative as well as quantitative understanding” (Boyer, 1971) became essential for our students. That is, we need to develop our students’ analytical skills, which can be achieved by teaching introductory mathematics through understanding, an idea I have worked to realize during my career at ESC.

When I joined ESC in 2005, despite the demand, just a couple of mathematics and technology studies were being offered in New York City at the college’s largest regional center. During my first year, I ended up creating more than 30 studies. (Currently, I offer more than 20 studies in a single term.) An observation I made early on regarding the existence of math anxiety among my students led me to conduct research on math education. My survey showed that 55 percent of our students suffer from math anxiety, and only 36 percent like math (Marikyan, 2009). In my opinion, the number of students who have math anxiety has only increased since 2009. Math anxiety prevents students from learning mathematics and, more importantly, prevents the development of their analytical skills and success in college. To address this issue, I devised a few strategies that have had a positive impact on the math anxiety of our adult students and helped them learn mathematics more easily and effectively (Marikyan, 2008). In 2005, I initiated, organized and supervised the following:

- Peer tutoring services at the Metropolitan Center. The training sessions provided to peer tutors offered excellent experiences for both students seeking help and the tutors (Marikyan, 2009).
• Tutoring is not sufficient for students with limited knowledge of foundational concepts. These students need more assistance over a longer period of time. That led me to the creation of the Mathematics Refresher Workout in 2007, an internet-based, tuition-free, self-paced, no-credit, no-teacher course to teach the fundamental concepts of mathematics.

• The Refresher Workshop taking place a few days prior to the start of each term was conducted by a trained advanced-level volunteer student. The net effect was to refresh pre-algebra fundamental concepts, releasing tension caused by math anxiety, and preparing students psychologically for the math class. It was also a good experience for the volunteer students.

In addition, I consistently address math anxiety during my teaching (Marikyan, 2019).

I have seen how my students express their happiness when they understand the topic and become confident in performing mathematical operations and solving problems. The confidence built by successful completion of introductory mathematics classes boosts students’ self-assuredness, helping them to continue their education. In this way, succeeding in math is an effective retention tool.

It is also obvious to me that teaching mathematics through understanding and using these strategies develops students’ analytical thinking skills (Marikyan, 2013). These strategies work, but the teacher remains the main solver of the anxiety problem by constantly addressing it.

Looking to the future, there is a need to explore new ways to help our adult students understand foundational concepts of mathematics and develop their analytical skills, which is crucial for any career, and for everyday life. As mentioned earlier, this gets at the essence of mentoring, which is “... about making beneficial and productive changes in the lives of our mentees” (Marikyan, 2009).

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My journey at ESC began in June 2009. Coming from a traditional academic institution, I was supremely excited to be able to join an institution that was innovative, dynamic and experimental in all aspects. Mentoring was something that specifically appealed to me and ESC was a place where I wanted to grow and excel. As I entered the office on my first day, many colleagues welcomed me in the hallway. The informal atmosphere of the institution and the warmth of my colleagues struck me and continues to do so to this very day. That “informality” continues to remain at the top of my core mentoring processes and work with my students. Over the course of that year and many more years after that, I have had numerous conversations around mentoring and educational practices with my colleagues and, every time, I am amazed at the wealth of knowledge that our institution has at its disposal to serve the students.

The greatest strength of our institution is in its approach of considering each member of the community as a learner and allowing varied opportunities for growth. The institution has allowed me to grow and innovate as a mentor, something that may not have been possible at a traditional institution, and something that truly needs to be acknowledged. Being an academic comes with its own set of pressures and challenges, but the college has always been supportive of my professional growth and allowed “me” to be “me.” I feel that much of mentoring comes from the “heart,” yet it is important to let
students take ownership of the educational process. I feel that the students are the “drivers” of this process and my role is that of a “guide.” Every interaction with my mentees brings out something new and gives me an opportunity to be a part of their dreams and aspirations. What is important is to be a good listener, attempt to find answers for the student, and be able to properly guide them. More than a mentee, I see them as fellow colleagues and try to establish a connection. I have always believed that if there is a sense of bonding between individuals, they tend to relate better. It is imperative to understand that these adult learners have their own anxieties and are apprehensive about a lot of things. All of this has aligned closely with the core values of our institution.

As I reflect on the rich history of the college, I strongly believe that the early founders created a synergistic, groundbreaking, and innovative institution that has a strong relevance in today’s academic environment. This is an institution that has always offered a conducive environment for collaboration. The college has been a learning-mentoring organization, in the truest sense. For the past 11 years, collaborating with ESC colleagues and our undergraduate students has given me tremendous personal joy, broadened my scholarship, and subsequently impacted my mentoring practices. I would like to specifically discuss a few of my collaborative endeavors with our students.

Our students come from variety of backgrounds and are hungry to succeed despite the challenges they may face. They have tremendous research potential and there is a need to harness that. I have always felt that if you ask more from students, they will give you more. In my conversations with one of my mentees, who is now an alumna, I started by discussing what she wanted to do after she finished the degree. I found that she was interested in research in the area of marketing and had entrepreneurial ideas. After working with her to develop a degree plan as a first step, I decided to explore a variety of ways in which I could encourage and promote the “hunger for research” that she displayed. We started out by having a discussion on potential research topics. Social media marketing was her area of interest. Even though marketing is not my primary area of expertise, I investigated many peer-reviewed journals, and identified and read articles that would best suit her research interests. I then shared the articles with her and asked her to review them. We decided to communicate every week to further explore how she could approach the idea. I also encouraged her to review many business databases to identify studies related to social media marketing. This was truly a rewarding experience, as this further encouraged the student to actively engage in research and question her own views about social media marketing. It was a rewarding process for me as well in that my mastery of the subject matter in business, and specifically in marketing, increased. Working on the paper also helped us identify some further and potentially key topics for future research in social media marketing. This paper that we cowrote resulted in its publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

In another project, I collaborated with a student in my Supply Chain Management in the Global Context class, on a project that was the recipient of a 2016–2017 ESC Keep-Mills research award. Here again is an example of the institution supporting me in broadening my scholarship and also giving
the student an opportunity to satisfy their research potential. Specifically, this project sought to investigate how spirituality plays a role in inner development, and how spirituality impacts the way we do things in our professional and academic lives. It also sought to investigate how business, management and economics learners foresee the role of spiritual topics in business curriculum, and how the ESC faculty view the inclusion of spirituality in management and/or business curriculum. As a consultant with industry, and in the management world, I have seen that inner development prepares individuals to assume leadership roles and meet many professional challenges. The student’s motivation for the research was to understand what prompts individuals’ desire to succeed, and what stimulates the quest for improvement of the individual during various life stages that would typically be periods of stagnation or diminished desire to seek out new opportunities. This project came to fruition after many enjoyable discussions. The research resulted in a conference paper and presentation at a peer-reviewed international conference and was very well received. I also published an article related to this research in the “All About Mentoring” Spring 2019 issue.

As a business educator, the word “change” is not new to me. Having served in industry, I have seen that change is often necessary to match up with a fast-moving environment. The academic landscape is no different, and there is a need to embrace change that helps us keep pace with today’s changing student needs. As I reflect on the changes at the college during the past decade and ask myself how this has impacted my mentoring work with students, my answer may surprise some colleagues: not significantly. Sure, there has been a need to adapt to the system changes, but the core of my mentoring practice has not changed significantly. Over the years, I have seen more and more of my mentees interested in seeking degrees in focused areas of business such as management and human resource management, to name a few. This is where the new registered programs in these areas have added to the marketability of the college offerings, and serves as an example of how our institution has continually responded to workforce development and promoted the development of innovative programs. I have had the pleasure of playing key roles in the launch and delivery of two such programs: the Undergraduate Certificate in Manufacturing Management and the Undergraduate Certificate in Entrepreneurship. These certificate programs are completely stackable into the bachelor and the associate degree programs, thereby promoting enrollments at the college. Such program offerings also provide a diverse group of learners across the state of New York opportunities and high-quality learning. From the mentoring standpoint, these and other new program developments provide more options for a mentor to discuss with students.

In my opinion, college programs and practices have continued to align with the college’s core values: to experiment to meet the diverse needs of our adult learners. What will the next 50 years bring? I remain optimistic that innovation will not and must not stop for us to strive to meet the individual academic and professional needs of each of our learners. Along the way, there will and should be sculpting around the edges, but we must not deviate from what has made us truly unique in every sense of word: a caring and nurturing institution.
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Mentor Bob Rodgers of the Niagara Frontier Regional Center works with a student in a mentoring session, Spring 1987.
Richard Bonnabeau: You joined the Niagara Frontier Regional Center in the late 1980s, shortly after earning a second master’s degree. In addition, you had been employed as an engineer for a major steel manufacturer in India. Did you first serve as a tutor for the college — still a common practice today — before applying for a faculty post?

Bidhan Chandra: I was hired on an open search as a .75 part-time lecturer on a sabbatical vacancy. The main hiring criteria were fluency in computer applications and the academic qualifications to teach business-related subjects. Dean Thomas Rocco encouraged me to go for a Ph.D. if I wanted to continue in academia. I earned my Ph.D. from the University at Buffalo in 1992 and was hired full time on a tenure-track line as an assistant professor.

RB: This was just about the time that the second Information Revolution was gaining momentum, or as Alan Tait of the British Open University referred to it, the “Digital Revolution.” What was the state of computer technology in terms of its educational applications at that time?

BC: This is what I have learned about the initial history from you and others. The Center for Distance Learning (CDL), established in 1979, offered a telecourse called Making it Count via WMHT-TV, a computer literacy course. But it was
limited to the specific broadcast viewing area. It was one of many telecourses that it offered, especially in liberal arts. Then in 1984, CDL offered its own course, Introduction to Computers and Basic, which had a programming component. Students had to have access to a computer. But telephone and mail remained the primary means of communicating between student and instructor. In the late 1980s, CDL experimented with asynchronous group studies using a text messaging system called CAUCUS. Of course, CDL used this foray to reach its own students and students enrolled from other centers, part of its mandate to serve students from other centers, even at other SUNY campuses.

When I joined the college in June 1988, the technology landscape for the faculty was pretty primitive by today’s standards — a fundamental infrastructure, and nothing besides simple desktop computers, Word Perfect, Lotus 1-2-3, email, and limited internet based on the VAX/VMS operating system. The World Wide Web was years away. Also, a large percentage of students had no access to a computer either at home or at ESC, and they did not know how to use email. Only full-time faculty mentors had desktop computers. There were no computer labs for students. The college was not offering computer applications learning contracts. Only a few computer literacy courses were being taught by a couple of faculty members.

RB: You said earlier that one of the primary reasons you were hired in Buffalo was to teach computer applications. Given what you said about the absence of resources, and most notably computer labs, how were you able to manage what seemed — at least on the surface — an impossible task?

BC: Despite their lack of access to computers — even at their workplaces — the demand of students for computer application courses was increasing at such a rapid pace that I had no option but to move from one-to-one instruction to a group study format. But, as I said, there was no lab, and by this time the Niagara Frontier Regional Learning Center had moved from the Buffalo State campus to Franklin Avenue. The solution was that I requested my fellow mentors on the same floor to allow me to use their computers on weekends but only for study groups. Lester Levine, Phyllis Herdendorf, Regina Grol and Imani Fryar happily agreed. And so, I most likely became the first instructor in the college to offer the first-ever study group in computer applications. This was around 1988 into 1990. The demand for this particular course was so high that I was compelled to offer two consecutive study groups on the same Saturday.

RB: So, because the college had provided full-time mentors with desktop personal computers, you had the means to create a moveable lab, so to speak. This is yet another example of how the success of the centers and units depended on the ingenuity of mentors and teamwork to find solutions at the local level, not to mention making sacrifices.

BC: In retrospect, I am happy that I did this “jugaad.” It is an Indian management technique that means “do more with less” by adopting frugal improvisations and innovations. I recall my coaching each of the students to learn email and use this new technology to communicate with their primary mentors, other faculty and students. While most of my faculty colleagues were fine with this, a few of them were unhappy that I was causing an increase in their workload by forcing them to read and reply to students’ emails. It may sound quite bizarre now, but it was happening at that time.

RB: This is not so strange. I recall the Annenberg CPB project rejecting ESC for a hefty grant to create a statewide
computer network. One of the reasons was that the proposal to enhance mentoring effectiveness was too powerful. Why? Because “this system would eliminate some of the natural barriers protecting teachers from student questions, requests, etc. …” Of course, Empire State College was brought into existence to eliminate barriers. From your viewpoint, how did things change during the early ’90s?

BC: I might be missing something, but this is what I recollect. It was a period of curiosity, exploration and innovation. It was driven by external advances in technology. More and more students were buying computers, there was greater availability of computers at work and in public libraries. So, the use of technology for communication began to speed up. Students also began using email to a larger scale, but file attachments were not possible until the late 1990s.

The pace of innovation at ESC reached a key milestone in 1990 with the creation of the Center for Learning and Technology (CLT), thanks to the efforts of President Jim Hall and Chancellor Bruce Johnstone. The center had a dual mission, to provide leadership for SUNY as a seedbed for experimentation and to serve ESC. But both were connected. The first major experiment was SUNY by Satellite (SBS) in 1992, a cooperative but complex effort by ESC and the New York Network in conjunction with SUNY two-year colleges. The program offered bachelor’s degrees to students who had earned associate degrees at local community colleges or elsewhere. It was highly innovative for its time but was soon overrun by the World Wide Web. Unlike SBS, web-based courses did not require students to travel to local campuses for video broadcasts. The SBS program consisted of a live telecourse supplemented by recorded lectures, VCR tapes, onsite academic advisors, and tutorial support to students via telephone and email. By its close in Fall 1994, SBS had expanded to 20 learning sites, including the colleges of technology and a for-profit utility in Peekskill. Subsequently, CLT became a conduit as a primary technology provider of CDL courses for what became a rapidly growing SUNY consortium, the SUNY Learning Network, today’s Open SUNY.

Also, ESC’s stature was augmented when President Hall became SUNY’s assistant vice chancellor for educational technology during 1993–1995. While he worked on Chancellor Johnstone’s mandate to increase the use of educational technology for teaching and learning, he remained also responsible for ESC.

RB: How did the creation of the Center for Learning and Technology impact you in terms of your own professional development?

BC: The CLT Venture Fund initiative was a great benefit. It was established for faculty who were willing and ready to experiment with emerging technologies. Over the years, I received three consecutive CLT Venture Fund grants in 1991, 1992, 1993, and three conference scholarships in 1993, 1997 and 1998. The latter made it possible for me to participate in the first-ever SUNY Faculty Access to Computing Technology Conferences on instructional usage of information technology. This conference later became the SUNY Conference on Instruction and Technology (CIT), which is hosted every year.

I also owe my success in no small measure to the huge support I received from CLT in the 1990s. Some important colleagues who supported me wholeheartedly during that time were Evelyn Ting, Larry Greenberg, Bob Perilli, Kathleen Farrell, Ruffin Pauszek and Kathy McCullagh. I apologize if I am missing out on anybody else — it was so far back in time that my memory is fading with age.
RB: As you noted earlier, you were active in all three FORUM programs during the 1990s and not only as a mentor. You contributed also to the technological underpinnings that were germane to their success. Can you elaborate on this point and, also, what is FORUM?

BC: Yes. FORUM was a program that provided residencies for managers seeking bachelor’s degrees. Even in 1991, the Central New York FORUM program was perhaps the first location among the three residencies to offer its students access to a Forum Central server. It downloaded FORUM program materials essential to the residencies. Moreover, students were becoming eager to learn how to use the internet. Upon my invitation, many Canadian students, for example, in Forum West, would travel on a Saturday from St. Catharines, Ontario, just over the Peace Bridge, to attend my special internet training workshops.

Also, I was the first-ever ESC faculty to offer an online synchronous collaboration of ESC students with students at another university, Pennsylvania’s Lehigh University. I did this with a colleague who taught there. It was a time when we wanted to make connections and break barriers, and we did. We planned a successful international online collaboration event in 1995, creating a live online interaction between my international marketing class in Forum Central and Lehigh’s MBA class. We used the MUD-MOO technology interface to synchronize our classes on a Saturday morning. Both groups of students engaged in interesting synchronous exchanges, using simultaneous texting only and discussing ethical issues pertinent to conducting business with China. One of the MBA students had logged on from Hong Kong.

RB: I believe that the graphic interface of the internet began to evolve in 1995–1996. Can you say a little more about how it impacted the development of the SUNY Learning Network (SLN)?

BC: The SLN was born in 1995, primarily the first homegrown LMS for online courses and based on the Lotus Notes Domino platform. Although this had many limitations, it was considered quite innovative at that time and continued to serve our students for many years. For that first SLN term in January 1995, we offered five business courses. But there were no takers! Students were quite skeptical at first. Then SLN at ESC transitioned to ANGEL, a web-based learning management system, in 2007. One of the significant limitations was that every user needed Lotus Notes (supplied by ESC on a disk) on her/his computer to utilize SLN. But the number of courses grew by leaps and bounds every semester. Starting from a paltry five, we have now more than 500 fully online courses, and, of course, a large army of instructional and educational technology specialists to guide us.

RB: I remember “the no takers” episode. My first thought was that this foray into asynchronous learning was doomed. With SLN, dynamic teaching was replaced by asynchronous instructors and print—not a fetching combination. Do you agree?

BC: I see your point, but to prime the pump, we made it tuition-free to entice students to do online learning for the first time. Many prospective students were using the popular America Online internet platform by this time, so it was not as though they were jumping into an abyss.

RB: Yes, the growth was remarkable, and ESC’s engagement with technology was catching on, especially in the international arena.

BC: I was the program director for the International Business for Online (IBOL) database in 1997, a website funded by
a $30,000 grant from General Electric. I developed a web-based database for international business information serving both teaching and research. This ran successfully for almost 10 years and then was closed for lack of funds to update and revamp it.

I became a founding mentor of the Cyprus Residency Program (CRP) for Lebanese students in March 1997. Once the face-to-face international residencies were over, one of our major challenges was to keep the students learning at a distance. We could not utilize the SLN Lotus Notes-based format, because we could not provide the Lotus Notes software to every student. Moreover, the internet was prohibitively expensive in Lebanon. Therefore, I first decided to take the students to the computer lab at the Frederic Institute of Technology where the first residency was held and had them create an individual Yahoo email account with a prefix of ESC. This first step enabled the students to communicate asynchronously and regularly with the instructors and other students. It looks primitive now but was a big gamechanger at that time. Since the SLN format for the Cyprus Residency Program was not feasible, I also experimented with TopClass, a free learning management system for the residency.

While working in the CRP from 1997 onward, I conducted a project that I believe was like a precursor to SUNY’s COIL, launching a few years later. I became very interested in developing a collaborative international online learning experience for my students in Lebanon and the United States. Using interactive internet techniques, I believed that we could bring together our domestic and international students to help them learn together and from each other. I was teaching the International cross-cultural management course in FORUM East in Albany and the Cyprus Residency Program at the same time. I decided to create five teams of students consisting of three students each from Lebanon and the United States. Team activities were mainly achieved by email and free VoIP phone calls. Since no online video conferencing services were available, I recorded and played class videos in both locations and shared them with both sides. It was considered very cool at that time. Students on both sides were excited and participated vigorously in this international venture. I presented this exciting project’s outcomes at the Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN) Conference in 2000. The SUNY COIL Center (Collaborative Online International Learning) was established in 2004. Empire State College was not involved in its first two to three years. Later, Francesca Cichello joined the college in 2006 as the international student and instructor service coordinator. She became the first ESC representative to coordinate ESC’s involvement in COIL initiatives.

**RB:** It is always a pleasure to hear about what excites students but also what excites mentors. Do you recall anything from the 1990s to make this point?

Along these lines, another one of my efforts that might be worth mentioning is my contribution to the success of the first-ever global online class that ESC carried out. This unique pilot project was designed and conducted by CDL for Digital Corporation’s (later COMPAQ/HP) middle-level managers during early 1998. I was responsible for advising all 15 students and for designing and delivering an asynchronous web-based managerial finance course in SLN format. This course was successfully delivered to the middle-level managers simultaneously in Canada, United States, Mexico, Japan, Australia, Switzerland and the Netherlands.
I should also mention that the Writer’s Complex, a valuable college-level writing resource developed by Susan Oaks, Elaine Handley, and Cathy Copley-Woods of the Corporate College Program became a go-to resource for all ESC students, including those in our programs overseas. This resource was a state-of-the-art innovation at that time and was very popular.

RB: Those creative initiatives by you and ESC colleagues accelerated — took off — as the technology became more sophisticated. In fact, ESC celebrated its 30th anniversary as it entered the new millennium. Does this have special meaning for you?

BC: This period signified a paradigm shift in the uses of technology at ESC. I cannot remember everything that either I did or that of other colleagues. But let me share some recollections. The main point is that the technology was becoming more sophisticated, as were both faculty and students in its use. In my limited capacity, I continued sharing some of the latest developments as they came along, mostly raising immediate interest, such as a lot of free tools: Unified messaging system, email, internet voice mail, e-FAX, voice discussion boards, synchronous audio chat rooms such as Paltalk, and limited video conferencing. In 2005, I co-chaired with Phil Ortiz the first CDL-Skidmore College Conference on Technology. This first conference held at the Macie Center was perhaps the precursor for regular CDL conferences that became a standard feature beginning in 2007. Susan Oaks immediately adopted my Paltalk demo for live language practice in small groups in a couple of foreign language courses at CDL. During that decade, the ESC Educational Technology Committee (ETC) became a subcommittee reporting directly to the College Senate. I was an ETC member of the committee for three terms. During this decade, one of the most helpful developments was the selection of Elluminate, a web-conferencing tool that continued to be used by us for a long time.

Also, the college community began participating more actively in Sloan-C conferences. This level of involvement was very critical for continued innovation within ESC. You probably remember that the Sloan Foundation had invested heavily in very many colleges, including elite universities, to accelerate the development and acceptability of asynchronous learning throughout higher education in the United States. Meg Benke and ESC made significant contributions to those conferences and still do. Sloan even supported online initiatives for graduate degrees. Another significant development was the hiring of more instructional designers and more faculty willing to go online. Many people at ESC may not know that CDL’s Dan Eastmond happened to be the first instructional designer during the 1990s. Deb Smith and Hillary McLellan followed him in that order. We started adding more and more instructional designers in the early 2000s as the demand for online courses grew by leaps and bounds.

In 2002, the college had entered a consulting phase with the establishment of the Center for Workforce Advancement (CWA). I developed and delivered an online training program for the NYC Metropolitan Transit Authority for their learning and development team. It featured their Horizon Live LMS. A couple of months later, I designed and delivered a new training program on intranet-based video conferencing. After the success of those two projects, the CWA asked me in early 2002 to lead the efforts to develop/deliver the course “Developing Online Course Design and Development using Blackboard” for non-ESC organizations.
RB: Given the pace of online learning, especially since March of 2020, when the pandemic began in the United States, what do you see for the future?

BC: You have asked me a very challenging and interesting question. Let me use the “yesterday, today, and tomorrow” style to address your question. Yesterday, the brick-and-mortar colleges, after decades of robust growth, considered themselves “normal” and used online education only as a side dish. Most academics in those “normal” colleges even poked fun at us. However, as we experienced the rapid pace and increasing success of technology-based online education during the past 20 years, we began to believe that, someday, in the near future, virtual online education would displace brick-and-mortar campuses and become the preferred and “normal” mode. But little did anyone realize until 2020 that we would soon face the pandemic and a monumental transformation from what was a benign prophecy to a stark reality regarding technology and online education. I believe that the field of education is never going to be the same. What was not considered “normal” yesterday has suddenly become the “new normal” today. What happens “tomorrow” is difficult to answer because the relationship between humans and technology will be transforming at a pace that we cannot even presume. The pandemic has taught us that only the most agile people and institutions will survive and thrive tomorrow. We should not take our past successes in technology-based online education for granted, not become complacent, and never think that we can continue to be a leader without additional investment and serious commitments. Many other institutions worldwide are beginning to invest very heavily in the “new normal” modes of learning. They are most likely to give us unimaginable challenges as a reputable provider of high-quality online education.

RB: The points you raise are truly profound. How the world has evolved since World War II is astounding, especially the pace of artificial intelligence, robotics and genetic engineering. What you predict about education and technology gives me pause. Perhaps we realize now, thanks to the pandemic, that learning is a shared community undertaking. So, I don’t necessarily see the ruins of colleges and universities littering the academic landscape. For Empire State College and for many other colleges, it may mean that an approach that blends technology-based and face-to-face learning could become an exciting outcome. Various modes of mentoring and teaching could continue unabated alongside one another and converge depending on the needs and circumstances of the individual student.

Professor Bidhan Chandra, School of Business, joined SUNY Empire in 1988 and is an international educator, intercultural consultant and corporate trainer. He has also taught in SUNY Buffalo’s Executive MBA programs in China and Singapore. He received the prestigious Faculty Award a part of the Capital District Leadership Council’s Diversity and Inclusion Award (2013) and Empire State College’s Altes Prize for Exemplary Community Service (2016) for promoting global diversity initiatives in the college and the business community.
The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at SUNY Empire was present for the creation, and I nearly was, too. The “labor center,” as it was known in the college, or the “labor college,” as it was known to me and my trade union colleagues, was the brain child of Harry Van Arsdale Jr., business manager of IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) Local 3 and president of the New York City Central Labor Council. Van Arsdale wanted a place where labor movement leaders and members could learn whatever they needed to know to be better at what they did or wanted to do. The first class of these leaders from a range of unions joined the college on the day the college opened in New York City (Sept. 8, 1971) and became enthusiastic advocates of the program. (I had the privilege of co-teaching a class with a group of them in the spring of 1977.) It soon became clear, however, that there were not enough local leaders to ensure the program’s long-term viability. Van Arsdale therefore convinced the Joint Board of the Electrical Industry of New York to require that every apprentice in the union’s electrical division, of which there were always hundreds, complete an associate degree at the college as part their mandated education and training. As a result, thousands of New York City, and later Westchester County, union electricians have now graduated from Empire State College and are among its most numerous alumni.
The point of the labor college, as Van Arsdale conceived it, was not “workforce development.” Unions and their associated contractors have been developing the workforce for years and didn't need traditional colleges like many of those within SUNY, or even nontraditional colleges like ESC, to do it for them. What the unions needed, Van Arsdale believed, was self-confident, broad-minded, well-informed democratic citizens able to lead the unions and the city in positive directions. There was nothing occupational or narrow about the education Van Arsdale wanted the college to make available to working people. On the contrary, he wanted it to provide a mind-opening, life-changing experience, a liberal education in the best traditional academic meaning of the phrase.

When President Joe Moore invited me to become the dean of the labor center in 2004 and oversee its revitalization, I agreed, but only after I had been assured that the college was still committed to Van Arsdale’s original vision. This commitment had recently been put in question. President Moore had caused a minor stir some months before by dismissing the previous dean and proposing to transfer the labor center’s programs, faculty and students to other centers within the college. Perhaps the new mandate of the SUNY Board of Trustees that all SUNY graduates had to meet specific requirements in 10 general education areas played a role in this decision. I’m not sure. But whatever the case, the Joint Board, which paid the tuition of the hundreds of apprentices enrolled at the college, understandably feared that the particular needs of the labor students would be lost once they were absorbed into the larger student body. To his credit, President Moore, after consulting widely on the matter, reversed course and decided to retain the labor center as an independent entity, though reconstituted with a different dean and faculty.

I took up my duties part time in April 2004, and full time on July 1, working in tandem with Acting Dean Bob Trullinger, on reassignment from his position as the full-time regular dean of ESC’s Hudson Valley Center. On Sept. 1, a talented group of new faculty joined me and we began the task of restoring the labor center to its former self. Actually, I had begun planning the revitalization in April and had to move quickly. In September, the center would welcome not only three new full-time faculty, but also several hundred new and returning students. The best chance to make a difference, I knew, was right away, when everyone was wondering what would be different, and how much would be changed, under the center’s new leadership. Such an opportunity would present itself only once and I was determined not to waste it.

The labor center then offered associate and bachelor’s degrees in labor studies, and one 20-credit course of study. Every IBEW Local 3 electrical apprentice was required to complete at least the course of study, if they already had an associate degree or higher, or, if they did not, they had to complete an associate degree. Anyone who already had an associate degree also had the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree, if they wished. The associate degree program was my first priority. It enrolled the bulk of the center’s students. I had no problem with the mandated curriculum. As a beneficiary of Columbia’s classic General Education Core Curriculum of the 1960s, I appreciated the opportunity to infuse a liberal education curriculum with labor’s values. I therefore set out to redesign the eight Van Arsdale required associate degree courses and have them faculty- and student-ready by Labor Day.
Fortunately, I had had a lot of experience designing active curricula for other faculty and their students, especially worker educators in the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers union, now part of the United Steelworkers. The Van Arsdale classes were already small, since they met in the evening in New York City high school classrooms, which could accommodate only 20 or so adult students comfortably. My goal was to make them hands-on, active and engaging learning experiences, and then to staff the classes with practiced instructors — or, as I preferred to think of them, learning facilitators. There isn’t space to review each of these efforts. But generally speaking, I started by getting rid of all the textbooks. Students were to read books that people actually wanted to read. I then worked to retain adjunct faculty who were comfortable being reading and writing coaches for nontraditional students in a college-level seminar setting. To help the mandated curriculum go down more easily with the continuing adjuncts, and to enable me to recruit others who were equally capable, I also asked, and the college agreed, for the adjuncts to receive a 50 percent rate increase. The increase made the position more competitive in the New York City market. It also, as you might imagine, helped skeptics manage any rush-to-judgement impulses.

It was not all smooth sailing. There was a bit of an uproar when I informed all the adjuncts that they would need to teach a prescribed curriculum, if they were to return in the fall. They would also need to re-apply for the position and I would be meeting with each of them before making a decision about re-hiring them. Some decided not to continue, and I decided not to re-hire a few others. In the end, slightly more than half returned. Come the fall, there was another uproar when I told the students that they were going to be required to read four books in every course (almost) and write a lot more than they used to, all the time, not only about every book they read, but also about every class they attended. Once the term started, I asked each class to choose a leader and I met with all the leaders every month to hear their complaints and discuss their issues.

The main thing everyone wanted to know was why did they have to go to college? What did going to college have to do with being an electrician? At first, this challenge often took the form of, “This isn’t even a ‘real college’! It’s a joke. Why do we have to do this?” But soon the refrain was, “This is a ‘real college’. It’s hard! Why do we have to do this?” My answer was always the same: “The union pays for you to go to college because it wants you to learn to think from and along with some of the best minds and thinkers who have ever lived. It isn’t about learning this or that. It is about learning to think, learning to be as fully present during your moments here on Earth as it is possible to be. Life is not a textbook or a multiple-choice exam. It is a mystery, an enigma, a riddle. To flourish you need to know that wherever you happen to be or whatever you happen to encounter, you can get your bearings and find your way. There is much more to it than that, of course. But in a nutshell, that’s what a ‘higher education’ is for: to take you higher. Wherever that might be.”

Getting there required a significant culture shift and it took us a while. But get there we did. I will always remember my years at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at SUNY Empire, in association with many of the best educators and students I have ever known, as the finest learning experience of my life.
Michael Merrill Ph.D., (Columbia, 1985) served as dean of the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies from 2004 to 2016. He has published influential articles on U.S. economic and political history, international workers’ education, and contemporary environmental and labor issues. He is currently teaching part time and working on two books: a history of the transition to capitalism in the U.S., and a history of the American Revolution as a freedom struggle.
Past in the Future: The MBA, Our Founders and ESC Core Values

by Alan Belasen,
Mentor

What a wonderful symmetry in time. Exactly 25 years after the college was founded — first-generation learning curve — a think tank of faculty and administrators1 inspired by President Jim Hall and led by CWP2 Dean Douglas “Chip” Johnstone, conceived the MBA (1996–1997) with Boyer’s philosophy at the heart of its architecture. And exactly 25 years later (2020–2021) — second-generation learning curve — MBA programs in North America and abroad are now running on similar platforms like the one we pioneered more than two decades ago.

A brief overview.

The call for greater relevance and accountability in management education (Fortunato, et al., 1995; Belasen, 2000) has spanned over 30 years with criticisms evolving in three major categories with common themes and focused propositions: Misaligned pedagogy (1985–1995); incongruent expectations (1995–2005); and missing

1 This group included Carolyn Jarmon who chaired the initial MBA, Meg Benke, Doug Long (former dean, Center for Graduate Programs), and the three primary developers: Alan Belasen, Michael Fortunato and James Savitt.
2 Collegewide Programs (CWP) was an incubator of innovative programs that included the Center for Graduate Programs, Center for Distance Learning, FORUM Management Education, Corporate College and International Programs.
These criticisms emerged as a result of the mounting pressures over the suitability of MBA curriculum for business students and practicing managers and the calls to enhance responsible management education (Belasen, 2020). Despite these calls, many MBA programs have continued to offer specialized education in the disciplines of business, not in the practice of management, producing graduates with strong preferences toward specialized areas. Depth and not breadth of knowledge was highlighted as a critical success factor in these MBA programs negating students’ needs for CORE skills: Competence in Organizational, Relational, and Ethical skills essential for dealing with the complexity of global, cultural and social issues (Parlamis, & Monnot, 2018).

As globalization continues to transform business operations around the world, staffing agencies and recruiters have been searching for potential hires with a diverse mix of skills and experiences. MBA graduates, they found, were ill prepared to deal with complex, multi-layered issues faced by companies in global markets (Belasen, et al., 2012; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). In a retrospective analysis, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International, 2011) called for business schools to make more significant and sustained efforts across the curriculum to help students understand the challenges of conducting business in different countries and enhancing cross-cultural appreciation.

Much of the critique of business education claimed that learning in business schools and MBA programs has reached a “tipping point” (Thomas & Cornuel, 2012) in which greater emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, ethical and social responsibility, employee engagement, and accountability is needed to deal more effectively with the post-2008 financial crisis, as well as confront unethical behaviors in business (Belasen, 2016; Podolny, 2009). The emerging concern was that learning theories and analyzing case studies are insufficient for replicating the complex interactions in global markets, and that a greater focus should be placed on responsible leadership, business ethics, and reflexive examination of the impact of managerial assumptions, values and actions on others (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015).

This concern was echoed by the United Nations-supported initiative, Principles for Responsible Management Education, a platform aimed at re-orienting business education curricula to the international values of human rights, environmental sustainability, labor rights, accountability, and transparency (PRME, 2007). The shift towards the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), an accounting framework that incorporates social, environmental and financial dimensions, far beyond the traditional measures of net profits (Savitz & Weber, 2006), and the growing interest of organizations in integrating environmental, social and governance (ESG) into their core business strategies, was defused by the focus of business curriculum on standardized foundational courses, leaving the theory-practice gap largely unchallenged and the question of how managers most effectively develop responsible practices unfulfilled (Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2010; Osland, et al., 2006). As organizations shift toward integrating sustainability and corporate social responsibility, business schools and MBA programs need to embed sustainability into their core curricula instead of relegating the subject to elective courses (AACSB, 2021; Financial Times, 2021).
With a curriculum that balances theory and practice and that is infused with the values of responsible leadership, globalization and ethics, ESC’s MBA is well positioned to support students’ aspirations for relevant business education. Multiple tracks, certificates and pathways offer students a variety of specializations with a capstone that integrates competencies and functional knowledge with learning goals that span strategy, leadership, teamwork, communication, globalization, ethics and critical thinking. While strong female enrollment in traditional MBA programs was relatively low, the flexible format of ESC’s MBA was very appealing to women who were trying to balance career and personal goals with educational needs. Hence, ESC’s MBA has always had a high percentage of women enrolled, more so than more traditional programs with fewer hybrid or online delivery methods (Belasen & Rufer, 2010).

The original conception of ESC’s MBA curriculum mapping was based on the Competing Values Framework (CVF). This framework highlights the common theme that effective managers display cognitive complexity to handle the contradictory expectations in their environment and, at the same time, maintain some measure of personal integrity and credibility when they respond to competing tensions (Belasen, 2020; Cameron, et al., 2006).

Enrolled students assess their strengths and weaknesses using CVF methodologies at the start of their program, which is one of the core activities in MGMT 6020, leadership and organizational behavior, that students take during their first term. The purpose of the assessment is to build self-discipline and self-confidence in students’ ability to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, evaluate their behavioral skills against expectations or changes in the environment, and articulate areas for self-improvement. Self-directed learning becomes an impetus for improvement when learners are self-disciplined and when the drive to learn is generated from within (Boyatzis, et al., 1995).

Nearly 25 years ago, we tested the effectiveness of online education by joining the SUNY Learning Network (SLN) initiative to increase outreach efforts and improve access to higher education. This initiative also facilitated the design of the MBA program and the adoption of Lotus Notes (and later CourseSpace) as the learning management system (LMS) for course delivery, despite the objections from many schools of business within SUNY claiming that traditional pedagogies should take precedence over online learning. Gradually, however, to remain competitive, these schools began to migrate courses to online platforms as part of localized programmatic initiatives.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition of many MBA programs to online instruction. The MBA Roundtable (2021), which surveyed deans, directors and faculty from 118 business schools around the world, reported a shift to hybrid delivery (blending virtual and in-person) by 59 percent of programs, while only 39 percent went entirely online.

Blended, or hybrid, delivery of content with the flipped classroom approach — where students learn course content independently before applying their knowledge in class — is increasingly the path schools are taking and where ESC’s MBA positioned itself more than two decades ago. Did we anticipate the accelerated shift to online learning due to the pandemic? Not really. Did we envision online business education as a viable option for adult learners who value convenience, flexibility and independence? Yes, indeed.
In line with the value of advancing ESC as an “institution accessible and dedicated to the needs of a richly diverse adult student body,” (ESC Core Values) not only was our online MBA, first launched in fall 1999, more accessible, but it also attracted students from historically underrepresented groups and put ESC on the radar of prospects and employers in New York state and outside. By 2018–2019, the student population in the ESC MBA programs was quite unique: 54 percent women, 21 percent Black or African American, 9 percent Hispanic and 4 percent Asian.

These numbers are promising, especially because the small number of African American students in MBA programs nationally is a factor contributing to low representation of African Americans in U.S. corporate leadership (WSJ, 2020). In 2018–2019, the percentage of GMAT exams (required for most graduate business and management programs) taken by African American candidates was slightly less than 8 percent. At the same time, in 2019, about 4.3 percent of U.S. chief executives and 8 percent of people in management occupations identified as African American candidates was slightly less than 8 percent. At the same time, in 2019, about 4.3 percent of U.S. chief executives and 8 percent of people in management occupations identified as African American. Hispanic and Asian professionals accounted for 7.4 percent and 5.4 percent of U.S. chief executives respectively (BLS, 2020). The gender gap persisted, too. In 2019 women held 20.4 percent of corporate board seats (GDI, 2020), and only 7.4 percent of the Fortune 500 and just 6 percent of the S&P 500 companies have had a woman CEO (Catalyst, 2020).

We are proud of the diversity of our MBA student population and strive to continue to attract underrepresented students, helping to bridge the diversity and inclusion gap in senior management positions.

Over the last 20 years, we have revised the MBA curriculum several times, reduced the distribution requirements to 36 credits, created multiple tracks, added advanced certificates, accredited the program through the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE), and continued to grow organically and through partnerships and articulation agreements. At the same time, we have continued to align the MBA mission and broad-based learning goals with Boyer’s philosophy and ESC core values. In fact, these values and guiding principles have been demonstrably embedded across the MBA curriculum, content areas, andragogy, advising and the assessment of learning outcomes. Consider the alignment of the MBA best practices and ESC Core Values (in italics below)3:

- Mentoring and academic advising in the MBA is holistic and considers the student’s contextual and professional needs and growth goals [“advocates for the interests of adult learners in a variety of academic and civic forums”].

Prior learning assessment (PLA) in the MBA in healthcare leadership is provided through in-house proficiency exams. In the MBA in management, PLA is embedded in the sequence of studies by waiving the foundation requirements through either undergraduate or graduate coursework with similar content completed prior to entering the program. Building on core courses, students extend their existing knowledge and competencies through focused electives and specialized certificates (depth of knowledge), or by selecting courses from different tracks and areas of study that contribute to their breadth of knowledge [“identify and build upon students’ existing knowledge and skills”].

Individualized learning is sustained through (a) electives that students can take or, if

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3 SUNY Empire State College Core Values, https://www.esc.edu/academic-affairs/provost-office/esc-core-values/
applicable, bring with them from previous studies/experiences; (b) certificates and pathways based on a core set of competencies and knowledge areas valued by students and their employers; and, (c) numerous MBA tracks that offer a range of choices based on students’ educational needs, career aspirations and intellectual interests [“recognizes that learning occurs in multiple communities, environments and relationships as well as in formal academic settings”].

Most of our MBA courses provide opportunities for sharing real-life experiences and best practices, thus making the learning experience engaging and personally rewarding [“critical exploration of knowledge and experience”].

The MBA capstone offers students the opportunity to participate in project-based inquiry learning [“sustain lifelong curiosity and critical inquiry”; “foster self-direction”].

The curriculum balances theory and practice using a modular structure with embedded principles, applications and reflections [“provide opportunities for active, reflective and creative academic engagement; reflect innovation and research”].

The MBA blends functional knowledge with soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, leadership) as part of its andragogy with learning enriched through facilitated interactions, special projects and shared experiences [“emphasize dialogue and collaborative approaches to study”]. The soft skills are also included in the MBA learning goals and are measured as part of the required outcomes assessment in compliance with the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE) guidelines and principles (Belasen, 2019).

The values of corporate social responsibility, sustainability, ethics, diversity and inclusion are infused in content areas taught by faculty with diverse backgrounds who inspire students to engage in their learning [“attracts, respects and is enriched by a wide range of people, ideas, perspectives and experiences”].

Did the founders of Empire State College get it right?
You bet they did.

They took the uncertainty of the future as a starting point and let systems and structures coalesce around people and ideas. They used their charisma and conviction to drive change. And the future proved them right. They had the foresight and imagination to help us know how to think about the future. And we heard them loud and clear. We look backward but move forward by using the founders’ wisdom to guide and inspire the second-generation learning curve.

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ESC Students Training to be Teachers

Students in the Master of Arts in Teaching program engage with students at their onsite teaching assignments.

An MAT teacher candidate with his students during his three-year course of study, which includes two years of mentored teaching.
In the summer of 2003, I traveled to Albany for an interview that would result in the most important career decision of my professional life to date. I had flown into the Albany airport (yes, this was back when there were reasonable, direct flights from Buffalo to Albany), and was picked up in a van that would take me to a hotel. We stopped and picked up another woman who was going to the same place I was going. We started talking and quickly realized we were both going to interview to be founding faculty members of the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at SUNY Empire State College. She asked me about my area of expertise, and I responded, “foundations of education,” having recently completed my doctorate in the field. I then asked her the same question. She said “foundations,” as well. I immediately thought, “Oh great — we’re competing for the same position!” As it turns out, both of us were hired, as we had different content strengths — she in social studies, I in Spanish.

Actually, a total of four of us were hired over those few days to join long-time faculty member, Fernand Brunschwig, in developing and launching our MAT program. Interestingly, three of us from that initial faculty group came from a foundations background. Educational foundations is a framework that encompasses themes of critical awareness and employs lenses including race, ethnicity, gender, oppression, socio-economics, history and philosophy. I have always thought that this spirit of foundations is what helped the MAT program develop into a teacher education program rooted in a social justice framework, so central to “foundations.”
The five initial MAT faculty members, however, held very different ideas as to how the program should look. For example, we had many heated discussions about content versus pedagogy, which education standards to reference, how much and which technologies to incorporate, and how to assess students’ progress in the program. A few of us were more heavily focused on subject-specific content and how our attention should be spent acquiring the latest tools for science education, for example. Others of us were more focused on issues of diversity and inclusion. In fact, I vividly remember a colleague presenting a mini-lesson to the rest of us by drawing a tree and asking us what we would call it. After we had all given our responses, she asked us, “why not uncle?” This person truly understood the importance of perspective and respect for all cultures. And although we recognized that subject area content and issues of diversity needed to be included in the MAT curriculum, we had strong debates about the ways in which content, methods of teaching, and foundational material would work best in each course. In the end, all these conversations led to the shared development of a strong, well-rounded, alternative teacher certification program for the state of New York.

While the MAT faculty found its programmatic way, we were also finding our way in the greater context of the college. At that time, the MAT program was one of the most, if not the most, structured programs at the college. Not all mentors embraced this high-profile addition. I believe we in the MAT program felt welcomed by most, unwelcomed by some, and misunderstood by many. I am still uncertain that long-standing members of the ESC community believed the institution was a good fit for a heavily-regulated licensure program at the graduate level. I have always recognized, however, that despite being a structured program due to state regulations, Empire State College’s long-standing mentoring model was written into the program seamlessly. First and foremost, this program was initiated to serve adult learners. Most traditional teacher-preparation programs attract younger students who may still be living with parents or completing their undergraduate degrees and have the space to student teach, an essential component of initial certification. The architects of our MAT program (Tai Arnold, Joyce Elliott and Efrat Levy1) recognized that adult learners cannot afford to lose their income for at least 16 weeks, hence the proposal for a pathway that would allow “career changers” to maintain employment until they found a paid teaching position.2 Additionally, the program has never been fully online; faculty have always met students across the state, which actually resembles SUNY Empire’s long-standing “study-group” model. Finally, faculty have always traveled to observe each teacher candidate, giving them

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1 Tai Arnold, Joyce Elliott and Efrat Levy, long-time members of the ESC community in various roles, with Levy always holding a faculty role and Arnold and Elliott as administrators, were the main authors of the MAT program proposal before the new faculty were hired. When the founding faculty arrived, we turned that proposal into a live program.

2 This pathway incorporates what is called a “Transitional B certification,” which is a fully recognized New York state certification that allows pre-service teachers to become head classroom teachers after a year of course work, field experience and the required state assessments. Traditional student teaching is not embedded in the program. Rather, Transitional B teachers are mentored by SUNY Empire faculty, as well as a “building mentor” at the school in which they have been placed for a longer period of time.
individualized feedback, crucial to their development as new teachers. Indeed, one-to-one mentoring has been central to the program. Thus, while some might have thought the MAT was more a square peg in a round hole, I believe the program has always embodied the spirit of mentoring and the college’s commitment to access and experimentation.

Legend has it that the idea of the MAT program at Empire State College grew out of a NYS Thruway rest stop conversation between then President Joe Moore and Rick Mills, who then was serving as the state’s commissioner of education. The two had known each other from their work in Vermont, where Mills had also been commissioner of education. SUNY Empire has always been a unique, experimenting institution. Thus, it was not completely surprising that Mills turned to Moore, as he knew of ESC’s ability to innovate, suggesting we needed a different kind of teacher preparation program in the state of New York. The creation of the MAT program is an example of so doing: offering a pathway that supports learners with specific needs, in this case, adults, who had no prior access to becoming 5th–12th grade classroom teachers.

Though I stand firm in my sense of the MAT belonging here at SUNY Empire, the program and its staff have had their ups and downs over the years. The initial start-up was to include 14 faculty, two in each (then) regional location, and, on a regular basis, to enroll 25 student cohorts in every location. One of my fondest and funniest memories was when the program faculty and staff met with then President Joe Moore in year two of the MAT, 2004, in the President’s office. We all sat around the boardroom table, looking serious and concerned, and he simply asked, “What the hell were we thinking?” We all laughed and realized that for both ourselves and our students, we needed to better adapt our approach to this little-known, nontraditional program. Mathematically, 75 students in a location with one faculty member would not be tenable. Additionally, at that time, students needed to find a teaching position in order to move to year two of the program. This model would have meant impossible negotiations with high-powered teachers’ unions and school district human resource departments. During those first years, all faculty did go out and beat this path, meeting with school and district officials, informing them about the MAT, educating them about a certification most had never heard of, essentially selling the program door-to-door. But our outreach and resources were limited. Because of these hurdles, we realized we would not be able to enroll enough students to support two faculty in every location. This is part of the reason our MAT has never been fully staffed as originally anticipated, and why we have had to consider additional tweaks to our original model to help sustain the program.

And that is just what we have done over the years. The program has evolved to include various pathways including an intensified track, which speeds up degree completion rates, and a year-long, clinically rich residency pathway for those teacher candidates who do not feel quite ready to be the head classroom teacher of record. I cannot give credit enough to the program staff and faculty for their creativity, leadership and diligence in making these changes possible — changes that have allowed us to continue our work. Faculty have come and gone, but the spirit of the program has never waned. I have seen first-hand the unwavering dedication of the faculty and support from the college administration, for which I am grateful.
In the spirit of Empire State College’s 50th anniversary, it is important to look back at our history and consider what we may have done differently. Regarding the MAT program, I could have been a more vocal advocate for the program both inside and outside the institution. I cannot count the number of times people questioned what type of “certification program” we were offering, likely because they did not understand it, or wanted to disparage it because it was nontraditional or different from what they knew. I could have been a stronger voice against the naysayers and a louder proponent of the program because the MAT program is innovative, supportive of our students, and pedagogically sound. Frequently, colleagues and I would attend professional meetings where a “new and inventive” component of teacher preparation would be presented, and lament to ourselves, “we already do this in our program!” Thus, I wish our program had been more widely recognized in the larger education community, and perhaps I could have played a stronger role in that advocacy because I believe the program was (and is) ahead of its time. While I recall these moments with some frustration, it is also rewarding to have the strength of our MAT confirmed by two rounds of formal accreditation by outside agencies. During both processes (2012, 2019), the program was lauded for its uniqueness and effectiveness in teacher preparation.

I often look back on that first year of difficult conversation debating the basic tenets of the program. Although I am the only faculty member remaining at SUNY Empire from that initial group, I am very proud of having worked through those heated conversations and collaborated with colleagues to establish our program. The MAT program would not be what it is today without incredibly devoted colleagues and mentors who believe strongly in educating all children. That commitment has been the central, shared mission of every individual who has been associated with the MAT program and, more broadly, with the evolution of the graduate education programs at the college. Despite feelings of uncertainty and periodic disagreements about programmatic vision, the belief in its mission of providing an innovative, high-quality pathway to teaching for adult learners, including career changers, has carried the program through hard political, academic and economic times. I believe if any of the program staff or faculty were asked what makes them the proudest, their answer would include the good work our students — now teachers — have done and continue to do. Their passion for teaching is what sustains our enthusiasm for playing a small role in their success. Long overdue attention and accolades have been paid to teachers during the pandemic, which has shone a light on the incredible work teachers do every day. Our MAT program has known this all along; it’s part of a mission that has given us the fortitude to continue through challenging times. We believe in the work we do in educator preparation. It has been a privilege for me to have witnessed and been a part of our evolution since day one.

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My journey at SUNY Empire State College began in August of 2010 when I interviewed for the position of dean of the School of Nursing. It was a beautiful day, which made the 35-mile drive from home, north up Interstate 87, a pleasure. Trust me, not all the subsequent rides were quite so pleasant. During my final interview, I was struck by several lasting impressions: the warmth and collegiality of the people who I met, the generous spirit of the faculty and staff, and some unforgettable blueberry scones Cathy Hoff, administrative assistant for the School of Nursing, made to mark the occasion.

And thus, the themes for my journey emerged as collegiality, community, celebrations and food. The next several years brought many events that were shared and enjoyed by not only the faculty and staff of the School of Nursing, but also by our friends from the Center for Distance Learning (CDL). Who can forget the marvelous commencements, the holiday parties, the soup days for charity, the cookie exchange, the adopt-a-family effort, and many other community outreach events?

I would be remiss if I did not go back to the founding of the nursing program, which occurred in 2008, at which time the director, faculty and staff did a tremendous job recruiting the initial cohorts of students to the new RN-BSN degree program, one of the earlier professional degree programs offered at Empire State College. This was not an easy task since the program did not undergo and
receive its initial specialized accreditation until 2010. The students in the first cohort represented registered nurses who recognized the value of advancing their nursing careers with the baccalaureate degree. They practiced in hospitals, clinics, schools, long-term care and a variety of other settings. They cared for individuals, families and communities across New York state and we recognize their accomplishments with pride.

By the time I joined the program in January 2011, the program had approximately 160 RN-BSN students, four of whom attended the joint CDL-School of Nursing commencement in June of that year. I was so proud of those four nursing graduates and very pleased to celebrate with them and their families.

One of the charges that I received when I joined the college was to grow the nursing program, which offered an attractive online format, clinical experiences in the students’ home communities, and — crucially — SUNY tuition. Grow we did as the enrollments expanded to just shy of the 700 RN-BSN students the program boasts today. We also wrote the curriculum for the graduate nursing program and launched the M.S. in nursing education in 2014, and the M.S. in nursing administration in 2016. Those programs have 2021 enrollments of about 120 and 150, respectively.

While the RN-BSN and MSN programs were coming together, so was the team that made everything work. We worked hard, but also played hard as evidenced by attending the collegewide picnic one year wearing jeans and cowboy hats and carrying toy horses. We also visited the local pub for St. Patrick’s Day for some old-fashioned corned beef and cabbage, and who can forget the ugly sweater and gift exchange at our holiday lunch at Mama Mia’s?

The team was comprised of the dean and associate dean, the faculty, the professional staff and the support staff. Each individual contributed to the goal of student success using a student-centered mentoring and support model. Graduates of the program rate the effectiveness and caring of the whole team as very positive. Examples of that caring culture came through in times of emergency, such as Hurricane Sandy, and more recently with the pandemic. All of the team rallied to provide the best possible service to the students to assure their seamless progression and degree completion. In the spirit of the team and the program, this was not something that any one person could have done alone.

In 2014, through a collaborative effort with Excelsior College, SUNY Empire joined the Tau Kappa Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society for Nursing in chartering an At-Large Chapter. This resulted after several years of the faculty and staff from both colleges working together to build chapter membership and reputation. The chartering ceremony was hosted at SUNY Empire’s Saratoga Springs location and was a lovely event staged by Events Coordinator Susan McFadden. In the subsequent years, the two colleges shared hosting the induction ceremony each year until 2020 when we conducted our first truly virtual induction due to the pandemic. The chapter continues to be vibrant, with a focus on community service and making the contributions of nurses visible and appreciated, guided by strong membership and leadership. At this initial induction, 25 new members participated in the ceremony, and the membership in the chapter continues to grow, with current membership of approximately 400, 50 percent of whom are Empire State College students or our graduates.
Another milestone was achieved in 2015 when the nursing program hosted accreditation visits for the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and the New York State Education Department (NYSED) for initial accreditation of the MSN program and the continued accreditation of the RN-BSN program. The entire School of Nursing team participated in the two years of intense preparation, including the writing of the self-study and the collection of numerous documents to demonstrate achievement of program and student learning outcomes. The visit was a tremendous success and resulted in the maximum reaccreditation for the undergraduate program of 10 years and the initial accreditation of the graduate nursing program for five years.

The year 2018 marked the 10th anniversary of the nursing program at SUNY Empire. The school hosted a party at 2 Union Ave. in Saratoga Springs, a lovely event, well attended by students, alumni, faculty and staff, and the college’s leadership team. It was a time for celebrating the School of Nursing and everything that had been accomplished since its inception in 2008.

In 2017, the college received notice that it was being awarded a SUNY Performance Improvement Funding grant to develop an Allied Health degree program. The program is designed to provide a way to earn a Bachelor of Science in Allied Health degree for those individuals already holding licensure or certification in allied health fields such as radiation technology, dental hygiene, surgical technology and physical therapy, to name a few. This new degree program was launched in 2018 and has seen consistent growth in enrollments, with current enrollment approximately 200 students.

Also of note is the development of a jointly registered nursing degree program with Nassau Community College (NCC). This program was in response to the state of New York’s “BSN in 10” legislation designed to create a seamless pathway to the BSN degree for graduates from NCC’s pre-licensure nursing program. The students are enrolled in the joint program from the beginning of the program and complete five terms of study at NCC to meet eligibility requirements to take the National Council of Licensure Examination (NCLEX) and be awarded the Associate of Science in Nursing degree. During these initial five terms, the students also begin to take courses with SUNY Empire to fulfill advanced-level general education and nursing requirements. After graduating from the program at NCC, the students complete three additional terms of study with SUNY Empire and are awarded the Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. The first cohort of students began the joint program in fall 2019.

In 2019, the college also received approval to offer a post-graduate certificate program in nursing education to address a critical shortage of master’s degree-prepared nursing faculty.

Fast forward to the year 2020, which was designated the “Year of the Nurse and Midwife” by the World Health Organization. What a year it was! The nursing program was scheduled for a CCNE reaccreditation visit for the graduate nursing program for April 1–3, 2020. I guess the April Fool’s joke was on me (I chose the dates), since on March 13, 2020, the college was notified that the visit needed to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was expected to be rescheduled for the fall term 2020, but this was not possible due to lingering
concerns regarding ongoing pandemic-related safety concerns. The faculty and staff did phenomenal work to keep students on track and moving forward to degree completion even in the face of this public health crisis. The registered nurses in the RN-BSN and MSN programs represented first responders in a variety of health settings.

We are proud of and humbled by their dedication and devotion to the profession. Not all the students and their families went unscathed, some even losing members to the ravages of COVID-19. But taken together, the responses to the pandemic of our students, their families, the faculty and staff were remarkable.

As of this writing, near the end of 2021, the nursing program counts among its many attributes new leadership in a new dean and nursing program director, a seasoned and productive team of faculty and staff, a pending decision on CCNE re-accreditation for the graduate nursing program, 1,417 alumni, and a very bright future.

M. Bridget Nettleton, Ph.D., RN, CNE, was College related to the implementation and growth of the undergraduate and graduate nursing programs and undergraduate allied health program.

Dean Nettleton greeting a graduate at a School of Nursing and Allied Health graduation ceremony.
Center for International Education: Extending the Mission of Empire State College to the World

by Francesca Cichello, Executive Director, Center for International Education

“Here was a college that had no ‘place’; it would be everywhere.” — Ernest Boyer

The spirit of 1971 — meeting students where they are, wherever they may be — runs strong within the spirit and structure of international education at Empire State College. No other institution within the 64-campus SUNY system offers foreign nationals the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree without physically travelling to a campus located within New York state. As the landscape of traditional study abroad shifts to the exigencies of a post-pandemic, post-social justice revolution world, international education at SUNY Empire occupies a position of strength. The untried concept for working outside the U.S. with global partners built on the assumption that change is constant and with the ability to shift learning modalities and curricular offerings to suit the needs of learners, has proven to be what students needed in 1971 and what they still seek in 2021.

The first 50 years of international engagement at ESC were characterized by geographic expansion: in December 1971 the London satellite was established, in 1976 the Israel program began, 1986 saw the rise of a program in Cyprus that would later grow and shift to the Lebanon Residency Program. The ‘90s saw the dawning of a new era in Europe with programs in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece, in Prague, Czech Republic, and in Tirana, Albania. The early aughts brought a new emphasis on Latin America with expansion
to Honduras, Panama, and the Dominican Republic. In 2014, the first undergraduate student in the Turkey dual-diploma program began taking classes, bridging the East-West divide with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia. In 2018, an inaugural cohort of students from Sri Lanka enrolled in purely online classes with an innovative hybrid model of onsite, in-person mentoring to augment asynchronous coursework.

The expansion model for program development and enrollment of students in new geographic locations was built on the plan that each site or unit would be run by a resident program director in-country, with a fully functional office on the premises of an international partner campus. Faculty teams of mentors would travel to these sites to teach and advise, and, in many cases, they would hold intensive residencies for up to two weeks per term. The benefits were tangible: ESC faculty had transformative cross-cultural interactions with students and colleagues abroad and international students gained the ability to earn an American degree that led to increased mobility and greater employability. The program was inexpensive and accessible to international students who, following the ESC model, would never need to get a student visa or travel to the U.S.

As enrollments grew, revenues supported burgeoning teams of traveling faculty and what had begun as founding Dean Kenneth Abrams’ brainchild — a grand international experiment — gained legitimacy and prestige for a 25-year golden age. Beginning in 2005, Dean Kingston Nyamapfene’s tenure lasted five years, and heralded the expansion of the Saratoga Springs-based administrative office as well as the hiring of four, full-time faculty members. 2010, a year of intense re-examination and reorganization, resulted in a correction to alleviate the strains of rapid expansion with a much-abbreviated administrative staff and the appointment of former Director of Assessment Gavin Lowder as interim director. Lowder’s legacy is one of responsible stewardship with an emphasis on fiscal health and the standardization of systems to align with the college’s established practices. In 2017, as the college itself reset expectations for regional operations, the Center for International Programs was renamed “International Education” with a new emphasis on collaborative online international learning, internationalizing the curriculum, and creating stronger academic and operational intersections between the programs abroad and stateside.

The confluence of the global COVID-19 pandemic and sophisticated-yet-flexible models for online teaching such as collaborative online international learning (COIL), virtual residencies, virtual exchange, and immersive cloud learning has created new receptivity to change in the world of international education. As an ad-hoc research and development hub of the college, the first 50 years of international teaching were seemingly in preparation for this moment. From using Zoom software as a reliable means for communicating across the miles, to piloting open education resources, to being at ease with synchronous class meetings within larger online classes, Center for International Education faculty have constantly pushed the boundaries of pedagogy and technology as a means of reaching students. Lived experience in international crisis management has also yielded opportunity. Lessons learned from the 2006 war in Lebanon and the fallout from the 2008 world economic crisis necessarily changed the way we delivered instruction to students.
In 2020, ESC emerged as the obvious lead institution to spearhead the creation of an online credit-bearing alternative for New York state-based students who were forced to cancel their study abroad plans due to the broadening public health crisis. Leveraging the established infrastructure of a professional instructional design team and our proclivity for collaboration, we worked alongside the COIL Center and our sister SUNY schools to build the framework for the Global Commons project. The first of its kind in the nation, this audacious experiment had a curricular focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, took cues from crowdsourcing to create academic content, and brought students together with global partners from Israel to Africa in virtual, experiential learning environments.

The work of the Center for International Education has shifted the paradigm for students collegewide. From a crushing economic collapse in Beirut to catastrophic weather events across the Caribbean, if students can see their way through local obstacles to connect to online courses, they can also earn an ESC degree. Online collaborations between students abroad and in the U.S. are now so common, they can be characterized as embedded in the regular offerings of the college. The exclusivity of study abroad — once the domain of the mobile, young and economically secure — is no more, with virtual exchange now widely available to students everywhere. Courses that were first developed for the international student audience are informing curricular development across disciplines with a more global and inclusive look at how social justice, sustainable development, cross-cultural skills, and gender equality form the student experience. And yet, much work remains.

In 2021, the imperative for accessible education has only become more emphatic: students in developing nations are newly connected to the rest of the world. Wi-Fi access and mobile technology have levelled the technological divide, yet serious economic impediments still drive the conversation about degree attainment and the goal of global learning for all. As we develop programs in Southeast Asia and Africa, new ethical questions arise: How do we responsibly offer the SUNY degree in politically hostile environments? What is the environmental impact of faculty travel? How do we balance the need to sustainably contribute to the income of the greater organization while maintaining academic excellence in the field? Paradoxically, the ever-present push for expansion spurs us to look back upon our unique history and to draw upon our legacy of experimentation and creativity as we prepare new students for the rigors of the 21st century, in New York state and around the world.

Francesca Cichello has worked to serve the unique needs of international students at SUNY Empire since 2006. She leads a global network of students, faculty and staff in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. Cichello has championed Collaborative Online International Learning efforts within SUNY Empire and has expertise in hybrid teaching and learning models that blend international distance learning and classroom-based instruction. Her research interests include the internationalization of higher education and American education within the global context. Cichello serves on various international task forces devoted to linking the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to educational programming around the world. Fluent in Spanish and Italian, she earned a B.A. in English literature from Skidmore College and a MAT from Union Graduate College (now Clarkson University).
International Students Celebrate

An elaborate ceremony held in 2009 for the SUNY Empire State College commencement in Lebanon.

Jubilant students in the Dominican Republic celebrate their graduation from SUNY Empire State College.
A joy-filled celebration at the commencement ceremony in Prague, 2008.

A group of European alumni and students enrolled in SUNY Empire State College gather for a photo in Prague on the occasion of our first alumni-student event, May 19, 2006.
Our Students
The Black Male Initiative at SUNY Empire State College

by David A. Fullard, Mentor

“The Black Male Initiative was created based solely on the fact that the Black male student community had — and continues to have — the lowest graduation rate and highest dropout rate of any identified student group or community by far. This was thought to be the most egregious of all student outcomes and, as such, it would require a distinct, isolated and undiluted effort if any positive change was to be achieved.”

— Keith Amparado ’88

The Black Male Initiative (BMI) at Empire State College was developed to be a safe and supportive haven in which students who identify as African American or Latino (both male and female) can pursue college degrees. Students of all ages possessing high school or equivalency diplomas who may have dropped out of, or never attended, college find a non-judgmental environment where they can freely talk about issues they would hesitate to approach in other quarters of our institution. Students are continually encouraged to network with their peers and SUNY Empire graduates in order to learn more about the college and our faculty. This is critical because
it reduces anxiety known to be common among students in college but, more specifically, it helps allay fears and relieve feelings of isolation commonly felt by this student population.

Further, through BMI, students are able to meet Black academics they would not normally “see” in the same manner that they see sports figures, entertainers and others commonly featured in the media. Black academics serve as examples for students of color, and others, because they model achievement in multiple areas of study. Students feel supported and their lives change as they realize that they, too, have choices, can earn advanced degrees and can move forward in academic, research and clinical environments.

This is a key issue with African American male students because they don’t often have opportunities to see or interact with us (professors, researchers and clinicians). The BMI strongly encourages networking with alums and the at-large community and sponsors events and other forums to encourage support, mentoring and partnerships. Most of the students don’t know there is a broad population of academics and professionals at their doorsteps ready and willing to offer support and guidance. The BMI actively encourages partnerships with faculty, alumni and community members that give both new and existing students a rich community from which to draw as they pursue degrees, make career decisions, look for employment and, hopefully, move forward toward advanced degrees.

“The Fortified Classroom” structure is the primary academic platform on which the Black Male Initiative is built. It is a two-term program that delivers individually tailored support where needed to students in their first two terms at the college. Support levels are determined based on students’ proficiency in the areas of critical reading, writing, math, note-taking and study habits. Support is delivered by specially trained coaches right in the classroom along with the students and the professors. Coaches guide students through to the completion of their assignments, making sure they stay on track, develop independence and direction, and learn to plan for their continuing education. In addition, coaches support students in developing a framework for career decisions and advancement. Coaches are available via phone, email or personal appointments, and special Saturday sessions are held as needed.

The BMI also develops and sponsors events year-round that have content relevant to the African American community. This helps expose our students and other interested parties to issues, ideas and subject matter they may not normally be exposed to at the college. It is a critical component of BMI offerings, not only for the learning experiences, but it also helps highlight the value of the African American experience. For the college as a whole, it also introduces and informs others (including students, staff, faculty and administrators) to aspects of our culture that have remained hidden from their view. This helps bridge the divide between the Black community and the overall college community, increasing understanding and helping to ensure the success of the BMI and its students.

Students have also embraced the practice of giving back to the community by sharing their experiences with young people who are in their final stretch of high school trying to navigate next steps. Many BMI members enthusiastically share some of the problems and issues they encountered that led them away from continuing their education in the hope that others don’t make the same mistakes. A meeting is
held every month on a Saturday to ensure that students can attend. Students are free to ask questions and air concerns. These meetings generally last from two to three hours. Any student can meet with me or another BMI faculty at any time simply upon request. Through BMI, students develop a very strong sense of connectedness and purpose both inside and outside of the college environment.

BMI also fosters an environment that helps students understand they are valued and supported. Comments from Black Male Initiative members attest to its importance in their lives.

Chevar Francis is a current student whose area of study is community and human services. When he graduates from ESC, he plans to attend The School of Visual Arts to study art therapy at the master’s level.

“The Black Male Initiative is important to me. It gave me an opportunity to go back to school and continue my education, something I thought had passed me. My mentor gave me hope and belief in myself. I actually consider him family and I call him Uncle! He constantly checks in on me which means a lot, especially for Black men. The Black Male Initiative allowed students to create an extended family. We were given space to share our thoughts, a place to gather and support one another and learn together. It’s an empowering experience.”

Keithie Pierre Lawrence graduated from Empire State College with an A.A. degree in spring 2018 and a B.A. degree in community and human services with a concentration in addiction studies in spring of 2020. He is a senior addiction counselor at The Center for Recovery and Wellness Educational Alliance. He was promoted to director of recovery services upon his graduation from ESC. Part of his additional duties involve teaching various aspects of addiction studies to new counselors.

“The Black Male Initiative has changed my life by allowing me the unique opportunity to further my education and career. I have been elevated as a professional in my role to a directorship of a program. The Black Male Initiative staff were so supportive and patient in this important transition in my life that allowed me to get to the finish line and obtain my bachelor’s degree in community and human services.”

Mandell Pratt graduated from Empire State College with an A.A. degree in spring 2019 and a B.A. degree in public affairs with a concentration in criminal justice in the summer of 2021. He is a court liaison for the New York City Department of Education and assistant director of aftercare at Martin DePorres Youth and Family Services.

“The Black Male Initiative has made a difference in my life by helping me to balance my education, work and family obligations successfully. As an older African American male with two jobs and a family, continuing my education was not an easy task, but I knew it was necessary for working with at-risk youth in the Department of Education. The Black Male Initiative gave me the support and inspiration I needed to reach my educational goals. I am now 50 years young and scheduled to receive my bachelor’s degree in public affairs with a concentration in criminal justice. This would not have been attainable without the Black Male Initiative program. I am forever grateful!”

Michael Rock is a current student whose area of study is psychology. When he
graduates, he plans to attend graduate school for a master’s and doctoral degrees in psychology.

“I’m a first-generation immigrant. Every generation after me on this land will obtain their degree because I created the standard. Thank you, Empire State College.”

Gene Jeter graduated from Empire State College with an A.A. degree in Summer 2018 and a B.A. degree in community and human services with a concentration in addiction studies in Spring 2019. He is a level 2 addiction counselor at Lincoln Hospital in the emergency department.

“I attended three different colleges full time prior to attending the Black Male Initiative program, and Professor Fullard was the first professor I ever encountered who gave me and all of the Black Male Initiative students his contact information in case we needed support (educational or emotional). Doing that made a major difference.”

Amen Adio is a current student who will graduate with his A.A. degree in September 2021. When he graduates from ESC, he intends to attend City College to study civil engineering.

“When I first started studying at SUNY Empire State College I was working full time. The professors and faculty I initially met with were immensely helpful in guiding me through the process and have made my experience as a student very comfortable.”

Larry Johnson is a current student studying history who works at Columbia University.

“Without the support of the Black Male Initiative I would probably not have been successful. The Black Male Initiative has shown me that in spite of myself, along with the insecurities I had, I could still succeed and show others the same success formula. Even though I may not know what my tomorrow will be (especially in the current reality of COVID-19), I am confident that whatever I do, it will be seasoned with success. I can only credit the Black Male Initiative for that.”

The success of BMI in the Metropolitan New York location has led to discussions about expanding the program across the college and exporting its key elements to other major urban centers such as Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo, which have sizable Black male populations.

The Black Male Initiative has been successful despite its small funding base. This is largely due to the dedication of the staff and volunteers from faulty, administration and graduates. Going forward, the BMI and Fortified Classroom alums have maintained their connections with the program and mentored students to help ensure their success. BMI leaders are actively seeking relationships with Fortune 500 companies interested in providing scholarships and paid internships which, upon graduation, lead to careers within those companies.

The college has already started to recognize the importance of the BMI, especially in the Office of Academic Affairs. With that in mind, we would like to expand certain aspects of the Fortified Classroom by inviting selected faculty to teach additional general education studies and more specific studies that address the African American diaspora.

Each term, the BMI produces both quantitative and qualitative research for internal use, analysis and direction. Qualitative sessions are held with students to learn more about their experiences. We meet with students both individually
and in groups on a regular basis to ensure that we are always travelling in the right direction. Changes for the next term and to the overall program are regularly considered and made. Failure is not a BMI option and, so far, we’ve been successful despite a very tight budget. Special recognition must be given to our volunteer graduates and to Alumni Federation and Foundation Board members who have committed themselves to supporting our efforts, including through the endowment of student scholarships.

David A. Fullard is a visiting associate professor in the School of Public Affairs and Community and Human Services and the program coordinator for the Black Male Initiative. He holds a Ph.D. degree in forensic psychology and applied forensic behavioral science. Fullard is licensed by the state of New York as a mental health counselor. He mentors students interested in studying criminal justice, mental illness and addiction. Currently, he is developing policy to aid in the decarceration of the New York City jail system as well as other alternatives to incarceration.

Participants in the Black Male Initiative program gather for a group photo with Lear Matthews, mentor emeritus (far right).
SUNY Empire Students Walking the Walk

Members of the SUNY Empire State College community participated in America’s Parade 2015, an annual event held on Veterans Day in New York City, donning bright orange knit caps and scarves specially designed for the event. The college’s delegation gathered in midtown Manhattan and marched up Fifth Avenue from 26th to 52nd Street.
Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk: The Office of Veteran and Military Education

by Mindy Boenning, Army Program Coordinator, and Members of the Administration and Staff of the Office of Veteran and Military Education

If we could get into a time machine and transport ourselves 50 years back, we would find that the revolutionary ideas that blossomed into SUNY Empire State College were as helpful to military-affiliated students then as they are now: a validation of learning done outside of the walls of a college campus appropriate to include in a college degree; an acknowledgement of distance learning formats enriching for independent learners; an opportunity to pursue a degree while also balancing work and family obligations. These are values that are deep in the bones of SUNY Empire, and they continue to support our military-affiliated students.

The college has been an eager participant in innovative academic programming for active-duty service members. For Army soldiers, military spouses and their children, the college established a presence at Fort Drum in 1990, adding to the already-prominent Watertown location. Empire quickly entered into collaboration with other colleges, especially SUNY Jefferson Community College, to serve Fort Drum military families through the SUNY North Country Consortium. As soon as we introduced ourselves to the Fort Drum community, it was clear that the relationship between our educational philosophy and the needs of military-affiliated students would be an important one.

Just a few years later, in the Center for Distance Learning, an Office of Special Programs was created to support active-duty distance-
learning programming such as eArmyU, the Navy College Distance Learning Partnership, Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), and other Department of Defense (DOD) programs. It wasn’t until the inception of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in 2009 that resources were expanded to create the Office of Veteran and Military Education (OVME) to support veterans, active-duty, guard and reserve students across the college. This consolidated office was a culmination of almost 40 years of service to our military service members. Originally established under the Office of Academic Affairs, it wasn’t until 2018 that Fort Drum was aligned under OVME and moved to enrollment management, where the office currently still resides.

In addition to our presence at the Fort Drum Army installation, the college also supports active-duty programs through U.S. Air Force Air University Associate to Baccalaureate Cooperative Program (AU-ABC), General Education Mobile (GEM) program, and Army IgnitED (formerly GoArmyEd). These programs provide DOD tuition assistance funding to service members who are pursuing their studies while on active duty. Most recently, SUNY Empire was chosen as one of five colleges across the United States to support Phase 1 Programming for the United States Naval Community College (USNCC). Historically, SUNY Empire was a founding partner in the Navy rating program, and continued in the Navy College Distance Learning Partnership until that partnership was recently disbanded.

As a long-standing committed military partner, SUNY Empire tracks national developments in best practices for military students, including signing the DOD Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and participating in the Principles of Excellence Program. OVME is staffed with a team of employees from across the college with specialized knowledge about the regulations connected to military funding, as well as the academic and student support expertise necessary to assist military-affiliated students.

A surge of student veterans appeared on college campuses shortly after the establishment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill funding in 2009. They were eager to learn and brought many assets to their college communities. But transitioning from active-duty life to civilian circumstances can be challenging, even without the additional issues of wartime experiences. National studies had clearly shown that centralization of various academic services would be key to the retention and success of military students (O’Harrin, 2011, paras. 16–21).

This kind of streamlining of services undertaken by Empire State College with the creation of OVME is especially important for veterans who have recently transitioned out of a very disciplined environment into the more self-directed and exploratory environment of college. One could argue that it is even more important at SUNY Empire, since our students and employees are not all gathered together on a traditional college campus. Having one office to contact for all military-affiliated questions, staff who understand the military language, and military mentors who are sensitive to the unique issues of these students, have, together, proven very helpful for this student population.

Military-affiliated students consistently take advantage of the individualized degree plans to bring transfer credits into their Empire degrees. Service members and military spouses move frequently, and often have multiple college transcripts, as well as credits evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE) from their military transcripts. The ACE-recommended credits
are the most consistent way that military members tap into Empire State’s prior learning opportunities. Our college staff contributed many practical suggestions to the national conversation about how ACE-recommended credits work with college processes, since we were recently a college selected for the Modernized ACE Guide pilot project. With service members’ or military-affiliated students’ unpredictable schedules, training, deployments, and demanding work expectations, Empire’s flexible degree and course options keep service members on track with their studies, and they graduate faster by integrating the learning they’ve already done.

Creative thinking about how to serve military-affiliated students has also introduced some ideas into the SUNY Empire mainstream or enhanced initiatives already started. For instance, the 8-week sessions are easier for some active-duty service members trying to integrate academic studies into their schedules, and they have proven to be a popular option across the college, as we have begun to consistently offer them in the fall, spring and summer terms.

The pre-enrollment evaluation of transfer credits and the creation of draft degree plans (required by regulations prior to the approval of some kinds of military tuition funding) is another example of a good idea spreading from one corner of the college into wider use. The three OVME military outreach coordinators who create evaluated education plans for prospective and brand-new students live close to communities of military and veteran students in California, Colorado and Pennsylvania. These staff stay current with the college’s new degree programs and academic requirements so the students with whom they work, initially in the inquiry and application stage, can move smoothly into the educational planning process with their mentors. These staff members also go on the road (except during recent COVID-19 pandemic times) to bring SUNY Empire’s opportunities to military education events around the country.

As a student’s journey at the college concludes when they are walking across the commencement stage, some of them have an additional recognition of their achievements through the national SALUTE military honor society. SUNY Empire established a chapter of this honor society in 2016. This type of celebration of academic excellence is perhaps one factor that accelerated the long-delayed decision to include Latin honors for the whole student body as part of the graduation experience.

Additionally, college leadership is supporting the launch of the Campus of Excellence for military learners and their families. Liaisons in each of the college’s centralized offices in Saratoga Springs, and in each of the main professional staff groups across the college, will enhance the two-way communication flow regarding policies and procedures to best serve military-affiliated students. Additional themes of the Campus of Excellence that will be introduced include faculty development, implementation of research-based best practices, and added financial support for students whose military funding doesn’t cover all of their educational expenses.

Our employees with specialized expertise have shared their knowledge of support strategies and organizational principles externally at statewide meetings for college financial aid and student affairs offices, as well as on the SUNY Veteran and Military Advisory Board. We attend meetings and trainings sponsored by the National Association of Veterans’ Program Administrators (NAVPA). We have also held key roles in the only national organization...
that brings together colleges, education counselors and decision makers from the military, the Veterans Administration and service organizations — the Council of College and Military Educators (CCME). In addition, a current member of the OVME staff has a leadership role in the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce’s Veterans Business Council. SUNY Empire’s history of sharing best practices and our educational philosophy with other groups is an essential part of how we serve both our own students and the wider community.

Internally, the consideration of military-affiliated students has been woven into the framework of the college in large and small ways. The on-hold message for callers to the Student Information Center reminds these students to identify themselves as military-affiliated at the beginning of their call in order for college representatives to better answer their questions. Our website features an easy-to-see “Military & Veterans” link on the main page. Unseen by most of the SUNY Empire community, every November, the college president sends a message of appreciation to all military-affiliated students and alumni, honoring their service as a part of Veterans Day commemorations. The annual alumni awards now include a category for veteran service. During commencement ceremonies, graduates who are service members or veterans not only receive a red, white and blue cord to honor their service, their service branches are also read aloud from the stage along with their names, which never fails to elicit additional cheers from the audience.

SUNY Empire talks the talk and walks the walk supporting military-affiliated students. We provide more than just procedures and processes that streamline student services and periodic appreciation for these students’ sacrifices. For about 15 years, the college has waived fees for service members (active-duty, guard and reserve) and veterans, in recognition of the fact that federal and state military Tuition Assistance (TA) programs exclude payment for fees. And not long after that, when the SUNY tuition rate set by New York state legislation rose above the maximum of $250/credit funded by federal TA, the college created a grant process to lower the cost to $250/credit for those military students. Within the last year, the waiver of most fees was extended to the spouses of service members and veterans, a real-world elimination of some barriers for this group of students, even in the midst of difficult financial times for the college and the state.

Over the years, we have had service members completing classes in war zones, studying while afloat, and while training at home; military spouses juggling their courses in addition to providing stability for their families; and veterans transitioning into new lives and new jobs as civilians. These students forge a bond with their faculty mentors and with the variety of employees who pick up the phone or answer their emails with questions about funding and paperwork. In some ways, they are just like every other SUNY Empire student, but in other ways they bring something extra to their college experience. While they are enriched by their studies, they have in turn enriched the college throughout the decades. The numerous examples of support by the college for these students, as well as the college employees who work closely with them, demonstrate the fundamental values of access, equity and excellence that run throughout the history of SUNY Empire State College. And we are on track to continue this special relationship for the next 50 years.
Reference


Mindy Boenning has been the Army and Military Education (OVME), Fort Drum program coordinator at SUNY Empire’s Fort Drum location since 2006. Through changing titles, her responsibilities have included managing the college’s interaction with the Army’s website for soldiers’ tuition assistance, explaining the college to prospective students through information sessions, providing student support for retention efforts and coordinating communication with the Office of Veteran and Military Education (OVME), Fort Drum military staff and other North Country college locations. She gained additional college experience through employment at Goddard College and the Community College of Vermont prior to coming to SUNY Empire. Mindy earned an M.A. in interdisciplinary studies from Goddard College in 1998 and a B.A. in peace and global studies from Earlham College in 1989.

Office of Veteran and Military Education volunteers and students participated in the wreath laying ceremony at the Saratoga National Cemetery for Wreaths Across America, 2021.
Celebrating the Impact of the Buffalo Project

The Buffalo Project gathered data from the greater Buffalo region and beyond for more than a decade to study the impact of a student’s culture on the learning process.

by Rhianna C. Rogers, Former Mentor

For the past several decades, scholars and university administrators have contemplated how to make higher education more open, accessible and inclusive to a wider population of potential students (i.e., across underrepresented populations — race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, visible and invisible disabilities, among others). In recent years, the push to graduate an even more diverse population has taken on new urgency, as the United States is experiencing a dramatic shift in cultural demographics and faces internal and external pressures to remain competitive in the global economy (Rogers, 2021). This, combined with the current racialized pandemic, as well as the rise of polarizing perspectives in political and racialized populations, has increased the need for more cross-cultural competencies across diverse U.S. peoples. Thus, developing intercultural competencies is no longer an option, but a fundamental part of engaging others in respectful dialogue in the 21st century. Yet despite these needs, many barriers still exist for developing such competencies among college students, faculty and the broader higher-education community. Arguably, one of the most significant barriers is the lack of cross-cultural understanding and inclusivity within various learning environments. With this in mind, this essay discusses longitudinal impacts of the Buffalo Project (2010–2021), a SUNY Empire State College-supported participatory action research project run by Rhianna C. Rogers and focused on the use of cultural data as the baseline for programmatic development and implementation.
Project Premise:
Studying Student Perceptions

For more than 11 years (2010–2021), Buffalo Project data has been analyzed to discuss perceptions of students’ cultures and their impacts on the learning process. The project’s mission “is to develop action-based diversity initiatives and culture-based programming that focus on utilizing participant observations of culture to inform solution-making efforts in college and community environments.”

Diversity-based education and research recognize the pluralism that students embody (racial/ethnic, social class, gender and other factors) as resources to be used in the service of their education. Studies suggested that learner engagement with diverse populations is positively correlated with academic achievement, critical thinking, and social agency, and has a positive effect on retention (Cuba, Jennings, Lovett, Swingle, Lindkvist & Howard, 2011; Halulani, Haiker & Lancaster, 2010; Jayakumar, Howard, Allen & Han, 2009; Littleford, 2013; Monroe, Smith, Clayton-Pedersen, Parker & Teraguchi, 2006). Generally speaking, the data that we gathered indicated a lack of cultural understanding among diverse student populations (i.e., across genders, race, ethnicity, settlement/location, class, economic and technological divides), illustrating that students were not being adequately taught the importance of intercultural competencies and cross-cultural communication. As a way to address these issues, beginning in 2010, Rogers, along with co-PIs, colleagues, and research associates (RAs), worked with community stakeholders and Western New York data to engage in a participatory action research study of perceptions of culture in the region that we coined the “Buffalo Project.” With the support of a 2015 James William and Mary Elizabeth Hall Endowed Award for Innovation, the Buffalo Project pilot was further expanded across SUNY Empire's Western New York campuses. Then, with the support of a 2018–2019 SUNY Explorations in Diversity and Academic Excellence Award (EDAE), Rogers and colleagues expanded this study into the Buffalo Project 2.0 (2018–2021), a joint ethnographic study of three SUNY campuses in Western New York (SUNY Empire State College, SUNY Buffalo State College and the University at Buffalo). The main goal of the Buffalo Project 2.0 was to leverage survey data to create regional opportunities for community stakeholders to learn from each other in both academic and community settings. Based on the success of the Buffalo Project 1.0 and 2.0, Rogers was offered both a 2019–2020 Provost Innovation Award and a 2019–2020 Rockefeller Institute of Government appointment as the Ernest Boyer Presidential Fellowship and director of the Center for Law and Policy Solutions (CLPS) Spring 2020 internship program. During this appointment, the project expanded beyond Western New York and across New York state, using statewide/international partnerships, formal and informal data collection, and the use of technological innovations (e.g., Zoom and micro-credentialing). Implemented just before the pandemic began, Rogers was able to use innovative ways of engaging interns with technology to generate conversation among students across SUNY campuses during a time of confusion and unrest. The continued success of this model led to a 2020–2021 Provost/Dean Innovation Award and a new partnership with the Sustainable Progress and Equality Collective, where Rogers expanded the Buffalo Project beyond higher education and across the U.S. As the notoriety of this program grew in national and international spaces, Rogers, with two
Buffalo Project subprojects (SUNY Empire Connects and Virtual Residencies), were featured as part of the United Nations-Geneva Forum (Dec. 7–17, 2020).

Culturally Inclusive Academic Programming and Community Events

The exciting part of the Buffalo Project is its equity-minded programming. Not only is the Buffalo Project a product-producing space, but it is also built upon the principles of a Participatory Action Research process, meaning that data is collected regularly from stakeholders to inform and shape the development of programming (formal and informal feedback loops). Here are just a few of the programs that grew out of this space and continue to impact the broader SUNY Empire community:

1. SUNY Empire Connects — in partnership with Student Life
2. Deliberative Conversations — in partnership with Student Life
3. Virtual Exchange/Virtual Residencies — in partnership with the Center for International Education
4. DEI Forum Series — in partnership with the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The legacy of the Buffalo Project at SUNY Empire State College reflects the innovative structure on which the college was founded. The numerous iterations of the project since it began in 2010 have encouraged the development of cross-cultural competencies across a larger population of students, faculty and administrators in SUNY Empire and beyond. Over the years, the vast majority of RAs from this program have gone on to become active members of their communities (e.g., politicians, policymakers, activists, advocates and educators). The goal was to teach cross-cultural understanding, respect, personal reflection and compassion for each other as members of a globalized community, but the Buffalo Project also has empowered and inspired a new generation of leaders. As this project has shown, the more we understand each other, the more we can make the world a better place for all.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the Buffalo Project, offering safe spaces to hear constituents’ voices, and using them to inform the creation of community events and academic programming can improve intercultural competencies within a learning environment. Though pilot and formal survey data (2010–2021) indicated a general lack of cultural understanding among diverse student populations, the programs that the Buffalo Project developed illustrated that progress in these spaces can be made if time is invested. It is when we take time to understand our own worldviews, ask questions, and listen to our students and community stakeholders that we can fully address the issues affecting them. As institutions of higher education, it is our responsibility to prepare our students to be successful graduates and culturally competent members of the 21st century globalized workforce. We believe the Buffalo Project is a replicable framework for creating such an inclusive environment. Indeed, as we celebrate the first 50 years of SUNY Empire and the legacy of the Buffalo Project, highlighting the enduring power of the people’s voices gives us hope for a more inclusive future. We are excited to see what the future holds for us in this space.
Rhianna C. Rogers is the director of the Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy at the RAND Corporation. Rogers is an expert on cultural and ethnic studies, intercultural competencies and diversity education, cultural mediation and virtual exchange programmatic development and implementation. She was most recently an associate professor of interdisciplinary studies (2010–2021) and the coordinator of the Global Indigenous Knowledge program at SUNY Empire State College.
Creating Resilient and Adaptive Networks in Academic Support at SUNY Empire

by Seana Logsdon, Acting Vice Provost for Student Success, and Daniel McCrea, Director of Academic Support

The SUNY Empire academic support team designs programs, services and resources to help students reach their full academic potential. Established in 2007, the academic support team delivers academic support to mostly post-traditional college students in a distributed environment using multiple course-delivery modalities. Students arrive leading complex lives with competing demands. Frequently, these demands or perceived barriers limit access to a necessary academic support system. In response, academic support offerings at SUNY Empire leverage the power of a networked approach and the concept of embedded academic support with “just-in-time” resources to meet the complexities of our students’ lives. As SUNY Empire nears the close of its 50th year and looks to the future, reflecting on key academic support developments and emerging needs will help write the next chapter for supporting SUNY Empire students.
A Brief History and Overview of Academic Support at SUNY Empire

In January 2007, SUNY Empire State College hired seven directors of academic support, one for each major region of the college, including the Center for Distance Learning, where fully online students were primarily served. This group was tasked with building an academic support system that could serve all students, regardless of their mode of study. With a growing percentage of the SUNY Empire student population enrolled in online learning, it became imperative to develop asynchronous and synchronous resources to support students, including 24/7 engagement options and more traditional face-to-face sessions.

In the early stages of the academic support strategic plan, creating an accessible tutor base was considered to be an essential and immediate need. Within regional locations, professional tutors, known as “learning coaches,” were hired to provide onsite support for high-demand areas such as writing, math, and study skills. As demand for tutoring grew, it became apparent that additional tutoring models were needed to support myriad needs of the online student population. In many ways, the potential power of a network was first realized as the tutoring model grew. Learning coaches not only provided individual student sessions, but also connected students to other academic support resources such as synchronous workshops or asynchronous interactive tools. In addition, learning coaches referred students to other team members based on content expertise or availability. This networked approach began slowly and, over time, has become a critical element in ensuring quick responsiveness and nimbleness when there are changes in academic programing or new student needs are recognized.

In 2009, the network further expanded with the addition of a peer-tutoring program. Peer tutors provided content-specific support in course areas such as business and the sciences, as well as tutoring in study and organizational skills. Such support was also embedded within specific courses. While learning coaches and peer-tutoring models provided excellent service to students, these resources were unable to meet the growing demand for 24/7 tutoring services. Therefore, the network was expanded again in 2011 with an external vendor who provided supplemental 24/7 tutoring service to meet late-night and weekend service needs.

By 2012, onsite workshops in core academic skills development, self-directed learning strategies, digital literacy, educational planning and, eventually, topics such as self-care, relaxation, creativity and motivation were regularly occurring in the regional locations and online. Today, in response to student demand, many of the onsite workshops have been eliminated in favor of online workshops. Over 80 online undergraduate and graduate-level academic support workshops are offered in each major term. With each new offering, the network of services expanded and provided new access points for student support.

In 2013–2014, further increasing student access became a priority. Given the emphasis placed on the mentor-student relationship across SUNY Empire, intentional collaborative projects with faculty, particularly in terms of curriculum design that included academic support resources, were identified as a key strategy in streamlining access to course-related student support. Not only did this approach improve student referrals to academic support by faculty, but it created opportunities to link an academic support resource alongside a specific learning
activity allowing students to see and access the resource when they were most likely to need it. In this model, students no longer needed to search for a helpful resource, as it was embedded in the course design. With this, the concept of embedded academic support using just-in-time resources began at SUNY Empire.

Embedded academic support takes many forms. A learning coach may be linked to a course to provide tutoring sessions related to specific assignments or necessary foundational knowledge. Synchronous workshops may be designed to reflect key course concepts while offering a low-risk place to clarify concepts. Asynchronous interactive tools are often linked to specific assignments within courses. For example, in 2015 the Assignment Calculator was developed as a planning and time-management tool to help students with written assignments such as research papers, annotated bibliographies and literature reviews. In 2016, an academic support team was awarded a SUNY Innovative Instructional Technology Grant (IITG) to create interactive open educational resources for key academic skills in heavily enrolled disciplines. In collaboration with educational technologists, three interactive video series related to math and writing concepts were developed, as well as the Thesis Generator. This tool, a learning activity by design, allows students to enter in details of their research by responding to key questions that represent typical thesis statement elements. The tool then generates draft thesis statements in a variety of formats, noting the structure of each for the student. This approach guides the student in learning typical thesis statement structure and provides a draft thesis statement for revision. This tool has been picked up by several institutions across the nation.

As students and faculty interest in just-in-time resources grew, the JumpStart program was added to the academic support network in 2018. This program, held at the beginning of the term, includes workshop topics such as balancing family, work and school, reading strategies, and the student experience while also providing drop-in hours for areas such as navigating SUNY Empire’s online systems, and more. This program is designed to ease the transition during the first few weeks of the term and to remove often simple, yet seemingly insurmountable barriers to student success.

The evolution of academic support programming, resources and service reflect the strong commitment to a networked and supportive environment for students. This design is a key reason why academic support transitioned to fully virtual within days, not weeks, when onsite services paused during the COVID-19 pandemic. Use of academic support programs and services is at an all-time high, with some program elements showing a 30 percent or more increase in use from the previous year and institution data reflecting students who utilize academic support are more likely to successfully complete their courses. JumpStart attendance continues to increase with over 550 new students attending this optional program in the past year. Through a partnership with undergraduate academic schools (with our nursing and graduate schools very interested), instructional design and academic support, courses are now being selected to undergo a team-based course-revision process, which includes an academic support review and inclusion of course and academic skills resources as part of the improvement process. This approach further builds the network of student success. While formal academic support in its current form is relatively recent in the college’s 50-year
history, its success continues to drive innovation in student support.

**The Future of Academic Support at SUNY Empire**

Looking forward, the SUNY Empire academic support team’s commitment to nimbleness in resource development and service offerings must continue in the coming years. Part of a responsive framework is to consider existing trends while acknowledging emerging needs. As mentioned in the introduction, one challenge that remains is the complex and competing demands on our students’ lives. The result, far too often, is high levels of student stress or anxiety that suggest another need within the academic support portfolio of services.

Howard Gardner, research professor of cognition and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, offers some insight into the breadth and depth of this problem. Based on a research initiative with 10 higher education institutions with 2,000 semi-structured interviews with new and graduating college students, Gardner noted, “As our study progressed, we were struck most powerfully by the incidence and the significance of mental-health challenges across the range of campuses. On every campus that we studied, mental health was identified as the biggest problem” (Gardner & Fischman, 2019, p. 13). While students often schedule a tutoring session for an academic question, in many cases the initial discussion relates to stress or anxiety the student is experiencing. We know stress is inevitable and present among college students (Beiter, et al., 2105, Blanco et al. 2008) and this prevalence seems to be rising (Gallagher, 2008, Mackenzie et al., 2011). This should come as no surprise, and we suspect this is even more true among post-traditional students who are frequently attending to work and family obligations alongside the academic deadlines of college. For these students, the amount of information processing and decision making on a daily basis can become overwhelming and can be a significant barrier to their education. Learning skills to become aware of stress and dealing with powerful emotional states becomes even more vital for these students.

The implications for academic support are important. While learning coaches are not equipped to be therapists nor should they act as such, the importance of clear communication, building rapport and authentic listening must continue to be emphasized throughout the academic support experience. The complexities of our own network must not create unintentional barriers in the student experience.

In fact, work within academic support must include further expansion of self-care, self-management and stress-management skills support in order to help students examine their invisible beliefs that may contribute to stress and anxiety. Gollwitzer & Wieber (2010) note that within the general population, 15–20 percent report problems with procrastination, but for college students, the percentage jumps to 80–85 percent. This points to the use of procrastination as a non-adaptive coping skill among college students, where the response to the stress of dealing with highly charged and stressful college demands is to put things off. In this example, if academic support helps students with executive functioning and some simple, but powerful planning and time-management skills, the result may be a more adaptive and effective way of coping with these demands. Identifying a more accurate assessment of their situation leads to improved decisions, actions and outcomes. As part of this process and
building on the success and experiences of creating the interactive resources for writing and math skills, we are now creating short interactive resources on self-care for college students, time management and overcoming procrastination.

In addition to those areas previously mentioned, test taking is another experience often associated with stress and anxiety. While SUNY Empire has traditionally been more writing-intensive, new partnerships and structured programs have resulted in testing within some SUNY Empire courses or for external certification. Using self-care and self-management principles, future academic support must create new opportunities to blend test-taking, memory and reading skills with information on stress and anxiety and how they affect learning. For example, instruction in “one-minute meditations” or simple yet powerful slow-breathing techniques may expand some students’ capacity to reach their academic potential by lowering their anxiety.

These new workshops, asynchronous resources, and expanded professional development for academic support staff tutor training will help the urgent need to intensively integrate self-care strategies and support for a healthy adaptive mindset. In some ways, this focus on each individual’s mindset reflects the origins of SUNY Empire State College and its desire to recognize the complexity of the individual student. Arthur Chickering, first academic vice president of SUNY Empire State College and author of the foundational college student development work, “Identity and Education,” notes that in the “seven vectors” of college development, while developing competence in academic development is important, there are other crucial areas such the ability to manage emotions and gaining self awareness that are equally important (Chickering and Reisser 1993). As academic support moves to the future, a steadily evolving network of responsive programming and services will be essential to student success. The recognition of the needs of the complex post-traditional student and the need for innovation are now more important than ever.

References


Seana Logsdon is the acting vice provost for student success and has worked in higher-education roles related to student academic success for nearly 30 years. Her work has focused on first-term success strategies and innovative academic support strategies and resource development for adult learners. A strong commitment to creative partnerships between faculty and student support offices, as well as cross-disciplinary projects, have resulted in many proactive initiatives with documented positive impacts on student retention.

Daniel McCrea is a director of academic support. He has been at SUNY Empire State College for just over seven years and has worked in the area of student success in higher education for over 20 years. He is a licensed mental-health counselor and is interested in academic skills development as well as non-cognitive factors that influence student success. He has developed many interactive Open Educational Resources (OERs) and workshops, and teaches, writes and speaks regularly on these subjects.

The 2018 directors of academic support team assembled during a break at the Fall Academic Conference in Saratoga Springs. From left to right, Brett Sherman, Dan McCrea, Mildred Van Bergen, Seana Logsdon and Sue Orrell.
It’s Never Too Late: How SUNY Empire Opportunity Programs Break Down Barriers and Redefine Success

by Dana Brown, Senior Director of Enrichment and Opportunity Programs

At SUNY Empire, we break down barriers. Through a nontraditional approach and a mentor-centered philosophy, we combine a student’s academic foundation with their motivation, providing opportunity to those who might have thought it was too late. It’s never too late.

With this in mind, SUNY Empire is well positioned to empower students to take the first step and begin to pursue their goals. More than 91,000 alumni prove the value of our institutional approach. With a vision that breaks barriers and reaches beyond traditional student audiences, SUNY Empire has made a commitment to seek out populations that are underserved or ignored. We’ve now taken our first steps to ensure the promise of academic opportunity for all students, despite background or barrier. That first step is the result of a long conversation that’s been ongoing throughout the history of our institution: Should opportunity programs be created by the college? Don’t we already enroll underrepresented populations? We provide mentoring and individualized attention. Is there a real need for opportunity programs? The answer is yes, and an exploration of the history of opportunity programs helps contextualize that answer.

Background on Opportunity Programs in the State of New York

The history of opportunity programs started during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when equality, equity and inclusion were finally a part of a national conversation. Individuals
with a dearth of resources, both economic and academic, fought for equal access to higher education. In 1964, the State University of New York set forth a long-term commitment to ensure that “every student capable of completing a program of higher education should have the opportunity to do so.” (SUNY Office of Opportunity Programs, 2021). By 1967, New York State Assemblyman Arthur O. Eve, a champion of educational, economic and social equality, put these words into action, creating legislation that would give birth to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). The program would provide financial and academic resources and supports for students. Admission guidelines for academic programs were adjusted, giving opportunity to students who were underprepared and might have otherwise been denied admission access to higher education. The students selected showed academic promise and, with the right supports, were able to achieve academic success and degree completion.

By 1970–1971, 30 SUNY campuses had EOP programs, leveling the playing field for thousands of students who might not otherwise have had access to educational opportunity. This growth and movement led to a more mainstream recognition that equity and access to education are both important and necessary in a democratic society. It also it fed into the State University of New York’s stated mission to make higher education accessible for all New Yorkers.

Partially modeled on the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) program instituted by Percy Sutton at the City University of New York in 1966, (SUNY Office of Opportunity Programs, 2021), EOP continued to grow, instituting academic support services and programming to keep students engaged. Additional Educational Opportunity Programs at public and private colleges sprouted up to mirror the model. Opportunity programs showcased stronger retention and graduation rates for underserved populations. This was the beginning of a trajectory for SUNY programs, and, as of 2020, there were active EOP programs in 49 SUNY-affiliated colleges and universities.

**SUNY Empire Creating Opportunity**

SUNY Empire State College explored the possibility of launching an educational opportunity program at several points throughout its history. In 2016, after the college established the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council convened by former Chief Diversity Officer Elliott Dawes, an advisory board began writing a white paper that encouraged establishment of EOP at SUNY Empire. In 2019, President Jim Malatras decided to stop the talk and start the action. A group was convened to respond to the request for proposals for the establishment of a SUNY EOP program at SUNY Empire. I was chosen to spearhead the grant proposal and program-development process. I had already served as a mentor at the college for more than a decade; now I set to work with Vice Provost for Student Success Tai Arnold to author the proposal.

In early 2020, SUNY Empire submitted the program proposal to SUNY System Administration, but due to budget constraints, the program was not funded. Nevertheless, committed to creating more opportunities for students to access education and complete degrees, Malatras established the Empire Opportunity Program. The program was institutionally funded and intended to be uniquely suited to the post-traditional population the college serves. It was the first of its kind
in the SUNY system — an opportunity program designed for nontraditional students, primarily adult learners, who may have started their educational journey elsewhere but who could complete it at SUNY Empire. In addition, the Empire Opportunity Program would be virtual, offered without geographic restriction, and tailored to meet the diverse needs and busy schedules of our student population. Students would have the option to attend full time or part time, and they would receive intensive academic supports, direct aid through an EOP grant, supplemental programming and enrichment, academic coaching and copious advisement. The students would have available to them an array of services that would provide the resources necessary to help them focus on being a student. The Empire Opportunity Program launched in February 2020 and initially focused on recruiting 60 students from Western New York, targeting Buffalo, both to pay homage to the legacy of Assemblyman Eve, and to address the depth of need in that region.

Less than one month after the program launched, the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic hit the state. The pandemic underscored the value of distance education, so I advocated for statewide expansion of the program. Job losses increased across New York and many adults turned to education as a means to create new opportunity, amid much uncertainty for in-person learning. By reaching a statewide audience, the program leveraged the institution’s 50 years of experience with distance education by delivering a completely virtual opportunity program.

The first recruitment cycle, begun in August 2020, exceeded the target of 60 students, welcoming 78 students from across New York state. The program welcomed a second cohort of 25 students, who started in January 2021. The 2020–2021 academic year was a success in demonstrating that when additional supports are provided, retention, completion and student persistence are positively influenced. Data showed that students in the opportunity program were retained at a rate of 14 percent higher than students who had been recruited into the general student population. Furthermore, Black and Latinx students were retained at a rate almost 40 percent higher than the general student population. Specifically, 100 percent of Blacks in the program were retained, as were 86 percent of the Latinx student. Course completion by both groups was higher than in the general student population, with 92 percent of Black students completing vs. 71 percent in the general student population, and 100 percent of Latinx student boasting course completion vs. 77 percent among the general student population. (ESC Office of Decision Support, 2021.)

The Establishment of the 50th Educational Opportunity Program

Knowing the need for programs that support access and equity would only grow, especially in the midst of the pandemic, we submitted another proposal for the establishment of an Educational Opportunity Program. The program would be a sibling of the newly rebranded Empire State Opportunity Program/ESOP (formerly referred to as Empire Opportunity Program). The proposal asked for funding to support 40 full-time, first-time freshmen students statewide. By contrast, ESOP supports transfer and part-time students. Both programs would operate in tandem, complementing one another, filling gaps in access based on student type.

As SUNY Empire celebrated its 50th anniversary, the 50th SUNY Educational Opportunity Program was approved. In March of 2021, SUNY Empire was
informed by the SUNY Office of Opportunity Programs that funding for 40 freshmen and 10 transfer students had been approved. Empire would begin its journey to focus on the recruitment of first-time freshmen, with the structure and supports that SUNY EOP requires, such as a college preparatory component focusing on college-level writing. Furthermore, students graduating from SUNY EOP have the option to continue on to graduate study in the Graduate Tuition Opportunity Program (GTOP), which will fund the tuition for graduate study at a participating institution, including, of course, SUNY Empire.

**The SUNY Empire Office of Opportunity Programs**

In 2021, we launched a third opportunity program: the Empire Promise Program (EPP). Students will begin work in this new program in the spring of 2022. The program will reach students who are not eligible for SUNY EOP or ESOP. Eligibility is not based on economic need; rather it focuses on factors that have been barriers to success such as age, need for aid, and prior college experience not resulting in the completion of a degree.

With three access, enrichment and opportunity programs in place, the college’s first Office of Opportunity Programs was established in 2021. The goal of the office is to continue to expand, to reach more students across the state, and to provide innovative ways to reach the post-traditional student population. Through the creation and growth of opportunity and access programs, the office will tenaciously engage in developing practices that work to close the achievement challenges, such as degree completion, at SUNY Empire, thus contributing to the overall success of the SUNY system.

**Creating a Legacy at SUNY Empire**

Opportunity programs at SUNY Empire speak to the mission of the college as it was first established and, also, to its evolution. The only way to truly break barriers is to dismantle the system that created those barriers in the first place. Opportunity programs change the way we work with students by recognizing they are the pilots in their journey. It is our responsibility as an institution to realize the institutional impediments and work tirelessly to eliminate them. We will improve student retention by affecting student persistence. We do this by listening, seeing and serving our students.

The evolution of ESOP at SUNY Empire State College showcases our intention to continuously serve all students despite background or barrier. Our 50th anniversary year is a milestone that’s been celebrated with a firm commitment to help our students learn, progress and complete their educational goals … because it’s never too late.

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**Dana Brown** is the senior director of enrichment and opportunity programs within the Office of Student Success. She oversees three statewide opportunity programs that provide students greater access to and support through their academic programs. With intentions of continuing to increase retention through influencing student persistence, Brown hopes to expand opportunity programs and the breadth of students it serves. She holds a bachelor’s and master’s of education in English and education, with teacher’s licensure in middle and secondary education.
Dana Brown announced the launch of the Empire Promise Program, an academic support system for promising students who have experienced barriers to education, Sept. 17, 2021. The Empire Promise Program, which includes dedicated mentoring, monthly academic programming, increased academic support, basic needs assistance and participation in the laptop loaner program, becomes the third opportunity program offered by the college, joining the Empire State Opportunity Program and the SUNY Educational Opportunity Program.

Interested attendees participate in an information session about the college’s three academic opportunity programs to learn more about the features of each and the paths available for obtaining a college degree at SUNY Empire State College.
Our Future
A Story of Destiny:  
A College and a City

by Mary Veitch Austin,  
Director,  
Student Information Center

As we mark the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the creation of Empire State College, let us look to our history — to a story of synergy between key people, places and ideals. It’s a story about vision, innovation and evolution.

In the beginning, there was Saratoga Springs. Born from an ancient geologic fault line, the earth itself possesses an energy brought to the surface through mineral-rich springs. Indeed the “Queen of Spas,” as Saratoga so often is called, has long attracted significant attention. The Mohawk enjoyed the waters for hundreds of years before European settlers arrived. Sir William Johnson in 1771 and George Washington in 1783 both acclaimed the healing powers of High Rock Spring. In 1777, the Battles of Saratoga, fought approximately 11 miles east, were the turning point of the American Revolutionary War. Saratoga has long compelled the attention of those who meet her. She holds within her the spirit of the revolution and the balm of the healing waters. When combined with the lure of thoroughbred racing, the combination drew affluent people to visit and invest in her success dating back to the early 19th century. In June 1882, James H. Rodgers, the proprietor of the Coleman House in New York City, opened the Kensington Hotel, located on the corner of Union Avenue at Regent Street, where 3 Union Ave. is now located. In a prime location, the hotel was a short walk to Congress Park and just blocks from the Saratoga Race Course. Season after season, the hotel welcomed 300 to 400 guests and featured elegant
furnishings, period plumbing, an elevator and meticulously landscaped grounds. The acclaimed hotel prospered for the next two decades.

Enter a notable visitor to Saratoga Springs in 1896 named Lucy Skidmore Scribner. According to accounts of the history of Skidmore College, Scribner was the daughter of a wealthy coal merchant and widow of a publishing scion who visited Saratoga Springs to take in the healing waters. Scribner loved Saratoga so much that she moved here in 1900 and decided to invest her inheritance in a school to empower and educate young women. On the corner of Circular Street and Spring Street, and not far from the esteemed Kensington Hotel, Lucy founded the Young Women's Industrial Club of Saratoga Springs in 1903. The club promoted “the cultivation of such knowledge and arts as may promote [members’] well-being, physical, mental, spiritual, and ability to become self-supporting,” even offering courses to students under the age of 11. Enrollments in the club grew, and by 1911, the club’s success earned a provisional charter from what is now called the New York State Board of Regents for the renamed Skidmore School of Arts. The school continued to prosper and needed room to grow. After the demolition of the famed Kensington Hotel in 1909, brought on by financial pressures on the owner, and to avoid any “potential problems that could pose a threat to the posh neighborhood,” the vacant land was leased to Mrs. Scribner for use as athletic fields. By this time, the Skidmore School of Arts occupied nearly the entire block formed by Union Avenue, Circular Street, Spring Street and Regent Street, and in 1916, The Saratogian newspaper reported that the property was gifted to Skidmore through anonymous donors. The land was indeed fertile soil in which to grow an innovative institution for post-secondary education. Skidmore College became a four-year degree granting institution in 1922 and continued to transform and expand for the next 40 years.

Enter Greenwich Village businessman, Gilbert DeLucia, who in the early 1960s conceived of a “no-frills” college education based on Italian culture and values, requiring a heavy course load, aimed at deepening its students’ understanding of the civilizations and history of the Mediterranean basin. Named after the Florentine navigator credited with discovering the mouth of the Hudson River, Verrazano College aimed to not just educate students about their roots, but to encourage an understanding of the basic Renaissance concept of “vertu” or vision, meaning the power to create and enjoy fully the processes of creating. Investors and sponsors were optimistic about this new college grounded firmly in Italian heritage. At a high profile $100-a-plate fundraising dinner, one of the trustees described the college as “a 200th birthday present to the United States from the Italian-American community.” Skidmore College was moving to its new campus located just two miles from Union Avenue at the end of North Broadway and made an agreement with Verrazano College in 1973 for it to purchase the 34-acre property. Unfortunately, Verrazano’s ideals were short-lived. Due to its financial collapse, the college closed its doors in 1975, just one year after its maiden year of academic course offerings.

Around the same time, the city of Saratoga Springs was also facing adversity. The Saratoga Preservation Foundation states that from the 1950s to the early 1970s, Saratoga Springs was struggling with economic losses, urban renewal and devastating fires. After World War II, the city had to attend to the issue of poor housing conditions and a downtown...
threatened by development happening just outside the city lines. Although not unique to Saratoga Springs, urban renewal leveraged Title I of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, to complete three projects with the goal of removing urban blight and expanding and strengthening the central business district. In Saratoga, many west side neighborhoods vibrant with Italian, Irish, Jewish and Black culture vanished. The city purchased homes and businesses through federally approved funds, and those residents and small business owners relocated. Over time, citizens became concerned that the city was losing its historic character and efforts began toward reversing the trend whenever possible.

Through the leadership of the Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation and local real estate agent John Roohan, more than 80 vacant historic buildings, possibly facing demolition located on Union Avenue and the surrounding streets, were preserved.

Enter Dr. Ernest L. Boyer, born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1928. The son of a minister, Boyer served as pastor of Brethren in Christ congregation in Florida after earning his undergraduate degree from Greenville College in Illinois in 1950. He then served as faculty and later academic dean at Upland College in California in 1956. In his 1990 interview with Richard Bonnabel, Boyer states that it was during his time as dean that the idea of a nontraditional college education took hold. When he joined the State University of New York as executive dean in 1965, he found a kindred-spirit in Chancellor Sam Gould and the sparks from the idea were kindled. Indeed, when Boyer became chancellor in 1970, creating this new college was one of his top priorities. He reflected on this decision with Bonnabel: “SUNY needed at least one campus that would be more flexible and open, and as chancellor, I wanted to make a statement that related to my own philosophy of education.” He wrote “A Prospectus for a New University College” in 1971, proclaiming a vision where the substance of education and educational processes should be more relevant for the individual and more responsive to the needs of society. This new non-campus college would transcend conventional structure and call for increased responsibility of the student in exchange for freedom. This revolutionary idea of an open community of learning to engage students to be part of the learning process and provide degree programs that were as structured or unstructured as needed, and determined by the student, needed a home. It needed a location to provide enough space for its own president, its own council, its own faculty and its own administration buildings. It needed a location known well enough, but not located in Albany or in a town that already had its own SUNY campus. Boyer stated, “Then one day it hit me. Saratoga, a wonderful community was just up the road (from Albany). It had a wonderful historic name, easy access to the airport, and there was no SUNY campus there. So, it seemed divinely ordained. (And with the facilities there) It was perfect.”

In the purchase agreement from 1973, for its first five years, Verrazano agreed to share the old Skidmore campus with Empire State College, the “new external degree unit” of the State University of New York. By 1979, the grounds on which our administration buildings sat and where the college launched the successful Center for Distance Learning clearly provided a rich environment where the seeds of accessibility and opportunity could grow and prosper for the next 50 years.

The events leading up to the founding of this college were not happenstance. Boyer was right. Saratoga was the perfect spot. It was the perfect spot to give birth to a college that could achieve Boyer’s
belief that the fulfillment of a just society is inextricably linked with an excellent education that promotes intellectual clarity, creativity, global awareness, social responsibility and a deep sense of purpose. It was the perfect spot to channel the Renaissance concept of “vertu” where student and mentor together could exercise the power to create a new way of learning and enjoy fully the processes of creating. It was the perfect spot for a non-conventional college, a place to promote individualized learning to a diverse student body, cultivating the goals stated in the Young Women’s Industrial Club constitution.

As we stand looking forward to the next 50 years, we should recognize that SUNY Empire State College and Saratoga Springs continue to operate in tandem. The effects of ESC 2.0 have uncovered significant gaps within our institution, shaking our foundation and our identity. Just as the impact of urban renewal on the city continues to be felt 50 years later: the diversity of the city’s population has not increased significantly, the city continues to struggle with equality and social justice, affordable housing for low-to-middle income residents, and the viability of our small businesses. Neither college nor city is immune to how the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed cracks in what appeared to be indestructible structures.

We need to continue to tighten the interconnection of accessibility, ingenuity and education into the needs of our community. A strong partnership between the city and the college is imperative to our continued success. Our presence in this community must model the virtues our history has instilled deep within us. We must stand as a beacon for graduating innovative thinkers, skilled workers, entrepreneurs and artists, as well as corporate, public and social policy leaders. We must open our doors and actively collaborate with public, private and nonprofit organizations to cultivate a community that is just as invested in the value of a SUNY education as we are. We are uniquely prepared to meet this challenge. Through the lens of history, SUNY Empire celebrates that the revolution of education should never end. We are destined to answer the call of the needs of our students, partners and leaders of this community in Saratoga Springs and those throughout New York state.

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About Ernest L. Boyer | Messiah, a private Christian University in PA

Mary Veitch Austin is the director of the Student Information Center and 1Stop Student Services at SUNY Empire State College. She holds an M.S. in community and agency counseling and a bachelor’s degree in theatre. For the past 21 years, Mary has enjoyed empowering students to achieve academic and personal success working in various roles within post-secondary education. A fifth generation Saratogian, Mary is the proud spouse of a military retiree and the mother of five children.

A rendering of the Skidmore College Library, now the site of 2 Union Ave., Saratoga Springs, N.Y.
1 Union Ave., Saratoga Springs, N.Y., 1920.

3 Union Ave., Saratoga Springs, N.Y., the location of the former Kensington Hotel from 1882 to 1909.
The Values and Practices of Mentoring 50 Years In and Counting

by Alan Mandell,
College Professor of Adult Learning and Mentoring

The language that was invented when Empire State College got off the ground 50 years ago was very deliberately chosen. There were reasons that the phrase “degree program” was chosen and not “curriculum;” there were reasons that “concentration” was decided upon and not “major;” there were important debates about even why the word “course” should not be used, and that “study” was more in keeping with the core values of the college and with its foundationally experimental spirit. And, wow, forget the word “class”!

In effect, those early creators of this very special institution that emerged from a time of tremendous social disruption and change, understood that a new language, a whole new vocabulary, was necessary for a new kind of institution. (And even today, we have to be aware that it’s an easy slide back into the words that shaped those conventional institutions that our college hoped to reinvent.)

But probably the key move, as I have thought about it, was the very deliberate use of the word “mentor.” Yes, Empire State College was a part of the SUNY system, and there was the need to conform, in some ways, to the demands of the larger system (for example, in making the distinctions between assistant, associate and full professor — hierarchical divisions that one could argue ran smack dab up against the college’s more egalitarian ways). But in calling each and every faculty member a “mentor,” the college was making a major point: the college was committed to a model of teaching and learning that announced: whether you are here for a day, or a year, or
for 40 years, your job, your responsibilities are pretty much the same. We were, all, every mentor, and (if this were possible) the institution as a whole — every facet of it — focused on deep attention and imaginative responsiveness to the personal, professional and academic lives of individual students: an incredible (pretty audacious, I’d say) mentoring mission. (Check out our “Core Values” statement, pages 107–108.)

And this meant a few things: first, it did mean the creation of a new role, a mentor role, that was not grounded in authority but in humility and in a critique of the alienation and anonymity that so many people (our students; and yes, ourselves as well) associated with schooling. We either knew before or quickly learned (and this came really quickly to me as a young guy whose students were always older than I was) that our students came to us with rich and complex and sometimes incredible lives, and in recognizing that, we also knew that they had experiences, understandings, insights and knowledge that we lacked. In this way, at its core, mentoring is about communicating not only what we know, but recognizing and understanding the value of what we do not know. The notion of “life-long learning” (one of those hot phrases of the time) was not only a goal for our students; it had to be a goal for every one of us. Not such an easy goal to embrace.

How great to have a model of teaching and learning based on mutual recognition and reciprocity. How great to have a model of teaching and learning based on figuring out what questions we could ask our students, not on what information we could impart to them. In keeping with the social movements of the 1960s and ’70s, this was bottom-up and not top-down education. How incredible to think about ourselves as guides, as helpers in learning, as those trying to prompt a new set of considerations or open up yet another question, not as authorities who claimed to know, from the start, what our students needed to know. How incredible to grapple with not knowing what to do, or what to suggest, or what should be read. The improvisatory moments never fade away. They are part of the mentoring deal. And this is part of that reciprocity: If we are asking our students to reflect on their assumptions, we have to do the same about our own often deeply held beliefs about just about anything. It is sometimes uncomfortable and difficult and, no doubt, hugely time consuming — and, for sure, in so many moments, it is also immensely satisfying. It’s a beautiful model with an incredible history. It’s why we are still here and need to be here.

I’d like to make one final point: Since SUNY Empire State College tried to institutionalize mentoring now 50 years ago, the term has spread like wildfire. What school, whatever the grade level, does not have a mentoring program? What corporation or law firm or organization of every stripe doesn’t announce that it has mentoring as part of its culture? It’s a given. The word, part of our originating ESC vocabulary, was meant to have a truly critical edge — it tried to push against the educational/organizational grain — to question authority and knowledge and hierarchy and the very structure of the university. It was a big deal to try (and I emphasize “try”) to question, let alone shake, a long and deep professorial tradition.

But what if the word and its practices have lost that critical edge? What if calling ourselves “mentors” is now more symbolic than substantive? What if (to be honest), we say to ourselves, “Really, truly, can’t we just be faculty?” (Are many of us saying that to ourselves?) Can mentoring be rescued? Should it be rescued? What is mentoring right now in our college that
has become an amalgam of departments and schools and structured programs and curricula and catalogues, and huge student loads, none of which existed 50 years ago?

I hope we can come to recognize that these are pressing questions of both theory and practice that do make a difference. As we were in 1971, we’re at such an important historical moment — another time of social upheaval and confusion and, one can only hope, deep questioning of our social-cultural and educational ways, not just at our college, but in our experiences as family and community members, friends and citizens, in a much, much wider world.

We are all part of an incredible mentoring legacy. How lucky we are. But what do we do now? There is so much left to do.

Alan Mandell works with students in the social sciences and, over many decades at SUNY Empire, has served as mentor, administrator and contributor to various “faculty development” projects. Interested in adult learning, the assessment of prior learning, and the ways we create and construct knowledge, Alan has been lucky to write, present, edit and collaborate with many wonderful colleagues, including Lee Herman, Xenia Coulter, Elana Michelson, Nan Travers, Kathy Jelly and Shantih Clemans.

### Core Values of SUNY Empire State College

SUNY Empire State College has had two statements of “core values.” During this season of our 50th anniversary celebration, we present both of these documents as one way to honor the college’s ongoing commitment to a set of “core values.”

**Core Values of the College, 1993**

1. The student is at the center of all educational decisions.
2. Mentoring is the best way to implement these decisions.
3. The quality of the mentor/student relationship largely determines the quality of the student’s education.
4. We believe in making ourselves and the College accessible to students in terms of place, time and programming.
5. The College works collaboratively with students in a variety of programs and studies and on a number of levels: we believe in serving individual students in a manner appropriate to their needs.
6. Our goal is to foster the development of self-directed learners who are intellectually curious, open to new ideas, own their own learning, and have the academic skills to continue learning beyond college.
7. The College should be a diverse academic community which serves a diversity of students.
8. We believe in the mentor as an adult learner, in collaborative learning, in collegiality and mutual support. We need to be reflective practitioners.
9. We believe in recognizing learning wherever it occurs and however it is acquired, and in the community as a learning resource.
10. The College should serve the community and the broader society both directly and, through its graduates, indirectly.
11. We should be open to new ways of learning and teaching, and innovative in pursuit of achieving these core values.
Core Values of SUNY Empire State College

Core Values of Empire State College, 2005

The core values of SUNY Empire State College reflect the commitments of a dynamic, participatory and experimenting institution accessible and dedicated to the needs of a richly diverse adult student body. These values are woven into the decisions we make about what we choose to do, how we carry out our work in all parts of the institution, and how we judge the outcome of our individual and collective efforts. More than a claim about what we have already attained, the core values support our continuing inquiry about what learning means and how it occurs.

We value learning-mentoring goals that:
• respond to the academic, professional and personal needs of each student;
• identify and build upon students’ existing knowledge and skills;
• sustain life-long curiosity and critical inquiry;
• provide students with skills, insights and competencies that support successful college study.

We value learning-mentoring processes that:
• emphasize dialogue and collaborative approaches to study;
• support critical exploration of knowledge and experience;
• provide opportunities for active, reflective and creative academic engagement.

We value learning-mentoring modes that:
• respond to a wide array of student styles, levels, interests and circumstances;
• foster self-direction, independence and reflective inquiry;
• provide opportunities for ongoing questioning and revising;
• reflect innovation and research.

We value a learning-mentoring community that:
• defines each member as a learner, encouraging and appreciating his/her distinctive contributions;
• recognizes that learning occurs in multiple communities, environments and relationships as well as in formal academic settings;
• attracts, respects and is enriched by a wide range of people, ideas, perspectives and experiences.

We value a learning-mentoring organization and culture that:
• invites collaboration in the multiple contexts of our work;
• fosters innovation and experimentation;
• develops structures and policies that encourage active participation of all constituents in decision-making processes;
• advocates for the interests of adult learners in a variety of academic and civic forums.
I joined SUNY Empire State College in 2009, just as Alan Davis was being inaugurated as president of the college. The inauguration was the first collegewide event I attended. I had never participated in a college president’s inauguration, and I was struck by the pageantry and pomp of it all — processions, robes, and much ceremony throughout the day. I can’t say I remember much about President Davis’ speech, but I do recall hearing words like “tradition” and “values” and “history” sprinkled throughout. It was a day to celebrate the ushering in of new leadership. But just as much as it was a moment marking transition, it was also a day for paying homage to something enduring, something lasting about the college. Permanence and change seemed joined in a delicate balance, the past a firm foundation for the future.

Colleagues who had been with SUNY Empire for some time generally spoke quite fondly of the two long-term presidents who had preceded Alan Davis. The founding president, James Hall, was afforded a certain reverence, and Joe Moore, who had succeeded him, was regarded quite warmly. When colleagues spoke of these two former presidents, I could hear the abiding respect in their voices. It didn’t seem to be quaint expressions of nostalgia. Rather, it was the notion that something important about the college was embodied in leaders who had an extended presence at it, that in addition to whatever skill and wisdom they brought to the role, they were symbols of continuity and stability.
Alan Davis left Empire State College in 2012. Since then, six individuals have served in the leadership role in various capacities: permanent full-time president, interim president, acting president, and officer-in-charge. As our 50th anniversary year got under way, so did a search for the next permanent full-time president of the college.

Frequent changes in leadership are not without impact on any organization in any industry, notwithstanding how capable the interim leaders may be. One consequence, for example, is that organizations may shift into a mode of maintenance. The more competitive the world around them, the more a lack of stability at the helm can create disadvantages with respect to keeping up. Those in acting or interim positions may lack a mandate to chart a strategic direction. As such, they may be afforded less leeway to take bold action in the commitment of resources and in rallying the organization toward the actualization of a mission. Even if they seek to undertake such action, governing boards tend to restrain them. This is especially true in industries like higher education, which tend to institute change conservatively and incrementally rather than in sweeping fashion.

During extended periods of temporary leadership, middle managers can come to feel stuck. They may experience, on one hand, pressure to build programs that contribute to the advancement of the organization, as well as to develop track records to fortify their marketability. On the other hand, they may be pulled in the opposite direction, constrained by a senior management team fixed in a holding pattern. Initiatives in various stages of progress may suffer delays.

And then, of course, when a new permanent full-time president is brought on board a new era begins. New presidents are naturally inclined to put their stamp on the direction of their organizations. Strategic plans, whether so labeled or not, are common practice in this regard. Some plans may be directed at reorienting the organization’s structure to suit the incoming president’s preferences for managing and his or her beliefs about what is necessary to strengthen efficiencies and the organization’s financial condition. Some plans focus more fully on solidifying and expanding market share, for example, through program and partnership development and outreach initiatives. Elements of both internal and external areas of emphasis are often pursued.

We have seen shades of all this at Empire State College in the past decade. It would be impossible not to have experienced some of the challenges associated with temporary leadership, even though, fortunately, we have had such leaders with histories of devotion to the college. For the most part, each had held positions in the college in which they cultivated an appreciation for the college’s purpose and an understanding of the particular needs of our student audience. This has proven most important — while such provisional leaders may lack unconditional authority to chart long-term planning, a baseline of trust in their motive to do what is right for the college can prove sustaining during their temporary terms.

But is this enough to explain how faculty and staff have maintained a strong connection to the college as it transitioned from a long period of leadership continuity to over a decade of considerable change?

In thinking about this question, I am reminded of my experience at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSK), where I worked for several years following graduate school. I joined the hospital at a time when the healthcare industry
was adapting to substantial changes in reimbursement policy, ultimately leading to the industrywide trend of mergers, acquisitions, and the formation of healthcare systems. Many hospitals struggled financially, trying to figure out how quality of care could be maintained while streamlining and cost cutting were being undertaken to adapt to weakened income streams. Leadership change across hospitals was accelerating, with boards seeking individuals armed with belt-tightening proficiencies. MSK was experiencing an additional challenge: a drop in the number of patients with highly treatable cancers who had come to believe they could obtain similar care at their local hospitals. This decrease in “census” (the term hospitals use for the percentage of beds occupied) is the equivalent of a falloff in enrollments for a college. Such a phenomenon does not occur without creating stress for people who work there. One common consequence is a decline in staff retention.

Yet, retention at MSK remained high. Many staff would have easily been able to get jobs elsewhere. I asked a variety of employees what motivated them to stay. While the feedback was anecdotal, two things stood out. First and foremost was devotion to the patients. There was and continues to be, a deep commitment to patients from staff, no matter their titles, professions, or lengths of service. Whatever the disconcerting issues around them that could have prompted some to leave — for example, census problems and concerns regarding the transparency of senior management — their dedication to the patients prevailed. And it wasn’t just those who provided direct care at the bedside; it was felt by those who prepared food, filed patient records and cleaned rooms.

The second reaction had to do with a belief that the organization itself had a purpose larger than the people who worked there, including, and perhaps most especially, those who ran it. That is to say, no employee, no executive, was of such singular significance that he or she could tarnish what made the institution important. The most effective leaders saw themselves principally as “servant leaders,” custodians of the hospital’s mission.

When Alan Davis left Empire State College in 2012, the presidential search firm arranged for a data-mining company to survey students, alumni, staff, faculty, administration and donors for the characteristics they would like to see in a new president. Almost 1,200 individuals completed the survey. The No. 1 characteristic sought by all those surveyed including students was “having an understanding of the Empire State College mission.”

A decade later, as we crave stability following what has been a protracted period of leadership flux, the question remains as to whether the center has held and if it will continue to do so. Would the predominant desired characteristic for our next full-time president still be having an understanding of the Empire State College mission? Or has the fulcrum of the permanence-change continuum shifted? After all, on top of financial pressures brought about by enrollment challenges, the pandemic, and intensified competition across the higher education universe, along with the attending unsettled discourse about how performance and productivity will be measured, a decade of change at the top can lead to cynicism and disengagement. Even the best of organizations can tolerate just so much leadership change when the larger environment is filled with such flux.
There will always be tensions between the exigencies of the moment and the deeper historical significance of an organization. The challenges of the day are very real; they absorb energy and, if unresolved, can stifle motivation. No organization is immune to the potential for stress to penetrate even the most seemingly durable institutional culture.

But, at least to me, the reservoir of commitment to Empire State College runs deep. Given its relatively unconventional founding purpose, to offer a college experience to those who might otherwise not even conceive of such a possibility, and with the corresponding establishment of mentoring as a core element of the educational experience, there has always been something distinctive about the college. Mentoring, especially, constitutes a framework in which those who work at the college are encouraged to get closer to each student, to seek insight into how the educational experience soaks in and influences each student's academic growth, creativity and willingness and ability to make a contribution. I marvel at those who pioneered this model and those who nurtured it. We may practice it differently from one another; nonetheless, the concept of mentoring casts a guiding light on the importance of each student's individuality in the learning environment.

Perhaps that is the secret to the “permanence” part of the equation at Empire State College. Mentoring, at the very least, and perhaps at the very most, is a distance-removing device. In whatever way we practice mentoring, at its core it involves caring about students. Caring about them intellectually, professionally and developmentally. Caring about them as individuals. When we think of students as people first, and being a student is just one part, we can appreciate that the roots of customizing the student experience are deeply embedded in the soil of the college.

I felt that way at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, that those who came for care were seen as people first, patients second. Does this happen all the time, with every student, with every patient? Of course not. But an organization truly committed to those it serves will consider its lapses as opportunities to learn and to try harder next time.

As SUNY Empire State College celebrates its 50th anniversary, as we await our sixth full-time president, we enter the next 50 years in a state of transition. A keen vision for navigating a shifting landscape in higher education will be required of the next president. There are a host of big challenges, but also a wealth of great opportunities. The future of higher education is descending upon us more rapidly than we might have expected just a year ago. A new president will need to summon an effort across the organization to map the course.

Success depends on many things, of course, but perhaps most especially is the commitment to dignify the work of all employed by the college and to ensure that the experience of being affiliated with the college, as an employee or a student, is meaningful. This will not be easy, certainly not in these times. If we allow ourselves to become distracted from our raison d’être — to ensure that each student values the experience at SUNY Empire — an indifference toward the very concept of leadership can settle in. But it bears restating: no college can be genuinely — genuinely — “student-centered” if it is not “employee-centered” as well. And it cannot be either if it is not “mission-centered” as well as ever mindful of the values underlying the mission. This ethos is foundational to
the college’s future as a thriving and enriching center of higher education.

A new full-time president who views the role as a balance between custodian and visionary, who employs the college’s founding values to bridge its past with its future, will have earned an honored place in the college. It’s a place reserved not just for Jim Hall and Joe Moore, but, indeed, for all who served the college with distinction and devotion. If so, those celebrating the college’s 100th anniversary will say, with admiration, that this was a president who clearly had a sound “understanding of the Empire State College mission.”

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The Presidents of SUNY Empire State College

Jim Hall, 1971–1997

Joe Moore, 2000–2007

Alan Davis, 2008–2012

Merodie Hancock, 2013–2018

Jim Malatras, 2019–2020