

Public Hearing on the Statewide Plan for Higher Education

Comments presented by Cynthia L. Ward, Dean, Metropolitan New York Center, Empire State College, State University of New York

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Introduction

I am Cynthia Ward, Dean of the Metropolitan New York Center of Empire State College of the State University of New York. Speaking for myself and with the support of Acting President Meg Benke and Acting Provost Deborah Amory, I applaud the draft of the 2010-2020 Statewide Plan for Higher Education, in particular its emphasis on access and degree completion, the efforts each sector is making in this regard, and the continuing need to strengthen and integrate these efforts. The themes of diversity and the need to better serve underrepresented populations are particularly critical to New York City, but have impact throughout New York State.

The discussion of the TAP gap is clear and pointed—it cannot be emphasized enough how crucial this program has been to New York State students; how much its diminution is felt; and how even what little we have cannot currently stretch to serve the adult student most of whom would be included in the TAP categories of independent or married. Part-time TAP is important to the students Empire State serves. In New York City slightly over half (53%) of students attend part-time.

For those of you who do not know the college, we offer the opportunity to earn an associate, bachelor's or master's degree at 35 locations in New York State and online anywhere through the Center for Distance Learning. Empire State's core values are that each student's educational journey is unique; therefore degree curricula should not be fixed but flexible to fit the goals of each student and that while using a framework of generally accepted criteria of each field of study, each student might choose different selection of topics to study and ways to study. Secondly, the values that the students may well have gained college-level learning through previous life experience that can be documented through prior learning assessment. The field is booming and being reinvigorated by the open educational resources (OER) movement. Finally, that faculty mentoring is an important concept. Every faculty member serves as a mentor, who advises students on their degree planning throughout their time at the college, as well as teaching and conducting research in their field and in the field of teaching and learning.

Empire State College is referenced in the statewide plan in several contexts within the larger context of SUNY's strategic plan. Empire State is discussed in terms of its long-time mission to serve the adult, nontraditional student in ways that amplify the points of access to the system; its early commitment to best practice in online learning; its current participation with the SUNY Learning Network in OPEN SUNY.

What I can provide today is the human face of the students who are served and provide some concrete models for success and completion including peer mentoring programs and prior learning assessment. The college serves a wide range of students who are in need of nontraditional educational setting from disconnected youth (18-25 with GED or high school only); an increasing large cohort of under 30 (30% in

New York City). The adult student continues to be a large audience; for New York City students the mean age is 37 years.

A tradition of innovation

Empire State’s mission is to “transform people and communities by providing rigorous programs that connect individuals’ unique and diverse lives to their personal learning goals.” The Empire State College model of higher education has its roots in the progressive and innovative educational movements of the 1970s, but is now finding its place in a second round of innovation with the same aims of openness, but incorporation of new ways of thinking about learning and use of various modes of study such as online or hybrid. What remains steady is the focus on the student, the individualized curriculum for each student, the possibility of prior learning assessment, and the assignment of a faculty mentor. Finally, the concept that students have as much to bring to the institution as we do to them; they belong to families, communities, and are active citizens.

The college, since its founding, has embraced innovative ways of thinking about higher education that anticipated contemporary thinking about how increase completion rates and shorten time to degree. Founded by then SUNY Chancellor Ernest L. Boyer in 1971 the college was designed to serve adults, often returning women, who could not access traditional residential institutions, because they were being asked to repeat their entire previous college experience. The idea of flexible educational attainment and open educational resources popularized by authors such as are not new to the college, but the concept of mentored learning provides a key context. For Empire State the way to provide grounding for innovation in online and open education resources is to hold to principles of mentored learning including the concept that learning how to learn is a key component of the successful college experience. (See for example, Kamenetz, Anya, [DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education](#))

Empire State’s roots in New York State communities

There are over 9000 Empire State College students enrolled in downstate New York. They are enrolled in undergraduate associate and bachelor’s degree programs face-to-face through the regional centers (nine locations in Hudson Valley, Metropolitan New York, and Long Island), in online undergraduate degrees through the Center for Distance Learning, in labor studies programs that are part of union apprenticeships or have other union sponsorship through the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, in undergraduate nursing and in graduate programs. The college serves 20,000 learners each year and has 67,000 graduates—the vast majority of whom live, work and study in New York State communities. Empire State is a comprehensive liberal arts institution with SUNY.

In New York City students from the five boroughs are served at three locations—Manhattan in the lower west side neighborhood of Hudson Square, in downtown Brooklyn, and on Staten Island.

The Metropolitan New York Center serves a diverse population of 2200 enrolled students, of whom 65% are female and 35% are male; 41% are white, 28% are Black and 11% are Hispanic. In Brooklyn 17% are white, 55% are Black and 6% are Hispanic.

Hurricane Sandy challenged Empire State in NYC where we had many students impacted in Staten Island, Brooklyn and Queens. The Staten Island location was flooded and suffered severe damage. The resilience of the students was amazing—instead of dealing with requests for withdrawals, they have made every effort to remain in school as an anchor for normalcy. We are currently offering our face-to-face meetings at a high school and increasing our technology mediated teaching. Faculty mentors meet with students at mutually agreed upon locations from coffee shops to the local library. A Hurricane Sandy Emergency Educational Grant was established by the College's Foundation Board and matched for replacement book purchases. Faculty mentors, students and staff are involved in storm follow-up, from first responders to those active in local foundations and volunteer groups.

In Brooklyn Empire State established deep roots early in its history. The location was originally in Bedford-Stuyvesant and served community members who sought to be leaders in community and human services. By 2008 more space was needed and the site moved to downtown Brooklyn. The impact was immediate—our neighborhood community identity continued, but the college became part of a much larger renaissance in downtown Brooklyn. For example, Empire State is part of the Brooklyn Downtown Partnership's initiative "Brooklyn is a College Town." We are among the eight institutions of higher education comprising 57,000 students.

The Metropolitan New York Center hosts major college events each year to celebrate Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage. Last year's the Black History Month alumni honoree was jazz pianist Kenny Barron, this year the honorees will be photographer, Benedict J. Fernandez, who worked with Martin Luther King, and Laurel Masse, singer and founder of Manhattan Transfer. Hispanic Heritage also has a home in Brooklyn with an annual art show at the Brooklyn site's Livingston Gallery space at led by a mentor curator and including community, alumni and student artists. In this effort we are a participating institution in PAMAR, Pan American Musical Art Research, Inc., a Latin American culture festival held annually throughout New York City.

In Manhattan, Empire State opened a third 18,000 square foot floor in fall 2011. Designed as a regional hub it serves the Metropolitan Center, the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, the School of Graduate Studies and the Center for Distance Learning. A center for academic support, student services center, state-of-the art computer teaching laboratories, flexible seminar space, a robust online learning environment, student lounges, and a top quality large conference room are features of the environment the college designed to provide students with congenial, flexible, interactive learning spaces.

Success for diverse learners

The Black Men's Initiative (BMI) at the Metropolitan Center is a retention project designed to address the most at-risk group in higher education--black men. Begun in 2008 it offers to all black men enrolled at the Metropolitan Center peer mentoring and the opportunity to participate in a support group. Now in its fourth year, two peer mentors are hired each year, who work in the Metropolitan Center Student Services office. They contact each enrolled student who voluntary identifies as a black male in admissions data. Some need help with student service issues ranging from change of address to referrals for help with financial aid—even a small barrier such as an out-of-date address that hampers registration can discourage continued enrollment. Others ask for help with writing, research skills and

mathematics. The peer mentors refer them to Center academic support resources and share their own experiences and advice. Finally, a group of 10 to 15 each year join the support group and work together to share and surmount challenges. This year for the first time, support groups are being held in Manhattan and in Brooklyn. The support group is dedicated to enabling black men to help each other and engage the resources of the center and the college to counteract societal and cultural challenges to educational attainment based on race.

BMI leaders also formed a student club that sponsors forums on topics of public policy. The most recent was called “Black Men and the Business of Incarceration.” The distinguished panel of policy makers and advocates included Eric Adams, State Senator, 20th District, Brooklyn, and Ronald Day, one of the first BMI peer mentors and now a Ph.D. student at the CUNY Graduate Center. I believe the ESC and BMI can make an impact not only in providing a model for retention but also in community engagement in public policy.

BMI is being replicated elsewhere at the college and other retention and curricular projects relate to the mission of supporting diverse learners.

Empire State engages in an ongoing partnership with Year Up New York. Year Up is a national organization dedicated to closing the opportunity divide. It serves “disconnected youth,” now estimated at 5.2 million young adults ages eighteen to twenty-four nationwide who are not employed and do not have more than a high school diploma. Founded by Gerald Chertavian, it provides mentoring, academic and career preparation, and places each young person in an internship setting, often with a major financial institution or non-profit agency, with the goal to provide a successful transition in high-quality employment or college engagement or both. Empire State College enrolls the largest number from their New York cohorts and we are engaged in a process to support the college credit equivalence of their program. (Chertavian, Gerald, *A Year Up: How a Pioneering Program Teaches Young Adults Real Skills for Real Jobs with Real Success*, Viking, 2012)

Scalable educational opportunity: online education and prior learning assessment

On one hand we seek to provide for each student an education that is intensely individual and personal—a one-to-one, individualized model of education. On the other hand the commitment to overcoming barriers to higher education has led to constant search for mechanisms to provide scalable access. Online study is one example. Here the goal is not to create or re-create the most impoverished version of education, but the richest. In the early 1990s I attended an early Sloan consortium meeting that sought to combat “the guy with the bald spot” syndrome-- videotaped lectures taken from above and the behind the speaker, which did little to compliment the presenter or engage the listener. On the other hand, innovations such as simulations, chat, applications based on gaming are extremely engaging. More recent examples from the New York City faculty include students in a curatorial studies course who present art works as shows on a website and another is a history of American music that provides the audio application for a smart phone. “High touch” is an old but enduring concept in online learning—that a high degree interaction is crucial among instructors and students.

Empire State College was very early in developing online courses—it was a way to reach students who couldn’t even make a 35 mile journey, but the same model of instruction was used in online study.

Students have faculty mentors, they just talk online or by e-mail or phone. The courses are interactive—both faculty and students must live up to commitments to engage in discussions weekly. Students state that they find the online discussions useful because they are more enduring than conversation; they exist in printed and can be reviewed over the life of the course.

Online courses are "asynchronous"--anytime, anywhere learning. This provides our students a great deal of flexibility in determining when they study because they do not have to logon for real time class sessions. Instead they can login at multiple times throughout the week to read the course materials and to post comments in the asynchronous online discussions. Our courses are organized into modules that contain course content, assignments, and discussions. All of the course information is available in the learning management system (LMS) that provides students with easy access to the course materials and interaction with other students and the instructor. Many courses are enhanced with digital images, video, audio files, and multimedia content to make the courses dynamic and interesting to students.

Online course instructors receive extensive professional development including an online *Teaching Online at ESC* orientation to establish early support for everyone engaged in teaching online. The *Teaching Online at ESC* orientation modules provides an overview of the college, including the college culture and philosophy. We also examine the dynamics of online pedagogy with our adult learner population. In addition, we present details on how to be successful with a variety of tools and scenarios.

Hybrid courses show up in Sloan consortium studies as the most successful in encouraging completion, higher than online alone and somewhat higher than classroom alone. At Empire State there is a focus on seamless educational opportunities--the ability to enroll face-to-face, in blended or online study only. These choices suit various learning styles, accommodate varied schedules, and make wider course choices available. Center for Distance Learning and Metropolitan Center faculty mentors are working on a new blended initiative that combines face-to-face instruction with online learning. In January 2013 several blended courses will be offered in the areas of Business Management and Economics and Social Science, including a blended version of Introduction to Human Services, Disabled in America, Survey of Social Science Research Methods, and Corporate Finance. Faculty have presented on their approach to blended learning at the national conference Sloan-C *Blended Learning Conference and Workshop: Perfecting the Blend* in April 2012.

Prior Learning Assessment and its Potential to Support Completion

The Statewide Plan for Higher Education does not address prior learning assessment (PLA), but it can be correlated with degree completion and can dramatically shorten time to completion. In 2010-11 Empire State College associate level students received an average of 26.6 credits through transcripts and evaluation of prior learning. Baccalaureate level students received an average of 70 credits through transcript and experiential learning. There are now exciting ways in which PLA and Open Education are converging.

Empire State College was recently awarded a \$500,000 Lumina Foundation grant to develop SUNY REAL – Recognition of Experiential and Academic Learning – a new pathway to degree completion for students whose learning acquired outside the formal higher-education system through open

educational resources is eligible for college credit. The project should expand capacity and access to higher education, increase graduation rates, decrease time to completion, reduce costs and assure quality.

SUNY REAL leverages the college's expertise in assessing and awarding credit for college-level learning for life experiences, certifications, work and study completed prior to enrolling at Empire State College that we have offered our students since our founding in 1971. Time to degree and cost is affected, because Prior Learning Assessment greatly diminishes the need for a student to repeat courses and spend money on learning content and skills they already know.

Because prior learning assessment has decades of practice, professional associations, a history and a research literature, its application to the newer concepts of open education resources provides a grounding in quality.

Conclusion

This is a transformative moment in the history of United States higher education. There is a wave of innovation designed to serve more students more effectively. The New York State Education Department Office of Higher Education's Statewide Plan for Higher Education statewide plan provides an excellent framework to move forward.

Empire State College is proud to be part of this effort. The college is uniquely positioned to be an important and central player in regard to the goals of increasing education access and degree completion particularly for populations underrepresented in higher education. Our statewide reach and significant presence in the New York City region, the flexibility we offer students and the agility with which we can respond to market and work place demands make us unique among the state's higher education institutions.