

## Public Hearing on the Statewide Plan for Higher Education

Comments presented by Sonja Brown Givens, Associate Dean, Niagara Frontier Center, Empire State College, State University of New York

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### Introduction

I am Sonja Brown Givens, Associate Dean for the Niagara Frontier Region of SUNY Empire State College. I'm speaking today on behalf of Acting President Meg Benke, Acting Provost Deborah Amory and Dean of the Niagara Frontier Region Nan DiBello. The draft 2012-2020 Statewide Plan for Higher Education emphasizes key challenges and opportunities that are jointly critical to NYSED's mission "to raise the knowledge, skill, and opportunity of all the people in New York" and to Empire State College's mission to "transform people and communities by providing rigorous programs that connect individuals' unique and diverse lives to their personal learning goals."

With roots in the progressive and innovative open education movements of the 1970s, and a specific focus on providing accessible, flexible and collaborative learning opportunities to nontraditional adult students, Empire State College is being sought out in a post-secondary education environment with increasing competition from out-of-state institutions and decreasing state resources. We are responding by continuing to diversify our approaches to learning design and delivery.

My goal today is to provide representatives of the state Board of Regents with a sense of the lived experiences of students we serve, whose day-to-day lives require us to respond to their educational needs with innovation and openness as part of our commitment to remaining a game changer in higher education well into the future.

I. Empire State College is a national leader in prior learning assessment and has extensive experience in the areas of online and blended learning, which is a combination of online and face-to-face engagement. We serve adult learners and we often partner with community colleges and regional and national businesses and trade unions to offer their students, employees and members flexible ways to earn higher education credentials.

We are one of the 64 SUNY institutions across the state, but the only one with a statewide footprint. ESC provides learning-focused service at 35 physical locations across 7 regions throughout New York, along with online programs offered across the nation and around the globe. We have students in each of the 50 states and dozens of foreign countries. ESC was founded by SUNY Chancellor Emeritus Dr. Ernest Boyer in 1971 to provide access to students who encountered barriers enrolling at traditionally modeled, residential institutions. ESC was designed as an alternative approach to serving adult students, many who had some college education, some who did not, And all had not met their degree goals for a variety of reasons.

Boyer's model for the college is described in the book *Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies* edited by Diana Oblinger, the CEO of Educause and a leader in technology-enhanced educational delivery. Here the college is described as "fiercely radical and anti-establishment, ... determined to break all the shackles of tradition in order to better serve those traditionally underrepresented in higher education." Its predominate student population at that time was women who had withdrawn from college to raise families. Since those early years, Empire State College has awarded more than 62,000 degrees and currently serves almost 20,000 enrolled students in its multi-modal academic offerings.

In the upstate area stretching from the Capital District into the North Country and to Central and Western New York, more than 11,000 students are enrolled at Empire State College in undergraduate programs where they work face-to-face with faculty mentors at regional academic learning centers, in online undergraduate degree programs through the Center for Distance Learning and in undergraduate nursing and graduate programs delivered primarily online with in-person components as part of the blended-learning model.

More than 40 years after its founding, the college remains dedicated to its core values that include the idea that each student's educational journey is unique, therefore curricula should not be prescribed, but flexible (guided by trends in the field of interest) to fit learner goals, that college-level learning should be recognized and assessed no matter where or how it occurs, and that relational mentoring is key to learner success. Every faculty member serves as a mentor and is engaged in all aspects of a student's learning design. Thus, each faculty member is a guiding resource throughout a student's career with the college. Our commitment to these values and continuing support from the state have allowed us to establish Boyer's original experiment as a successful and valuable educational option for citizens of New York.

Empire State College's nontraditional and sometimes unorthodox approaches to meeting the educational needs of residents of the state are grounded in a history of openness and innovation. Our students and alumni come from highly diverse backgrounds and have in turn enriched our communities statewide.

II. Empire State College serves a unique and underrepresented population of students within the SUNY system. Undergraduate students comprise approximately 95 percent of the total student body at ESC; most are working adults with some college education, but no degree, and in their mid-thirties. Among our most popular fields of study are business and human services. Our RN to BSN program is popular enough to be overenrolled, and the new certificate programs in our School for Graduate Studies are showing steady enrollment gains. Our investment in Blended Learning Models allows us to work with these and other students when it is convenient for them, to meet their educational and career goals.

Thus, a student can study with us working one-on-one with a faculty mentor, blending that method with online learning, or working strictly online.

Online courses at the college's Center for Distance Learning (CDL) are what we call "asynchronous," or what is usually referred to as 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 logon at multiple times throughout the week to read the course materials and to post comments in the asynchronous online discussions.

Our online courses are organized into modules that contain course content, assignments, and discussions. The courses also include email, a course roster with names, pictures, and descriptions of each student, a course calendar, course outline, course schedule, and grade book.

All of the course information is available in a 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 engaging for students.

We also provide extensive professional development for our online course instructors. All new CDL faculty members, including part-time and adjunct instructors, participate in an online "Teaching Online at ESC" orientation to establish early support for everyone engaged in teaching online. The orientation modules provide 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.

At CDL, both faculty development and student support have been recognized and honored by independent national organizations. For example, CDL was selected by the Sloan Consortium, an association of institutions and organizations of higher education engaged in online learning, to receive its 2011 Excellence in Faculty Development for Online Teaching award.

At the Niagara Frontier Regional Learning Center, students work directly with faculty mentors to plan individualized degree programs. In addition, they can enroll in weekend residency studies, which are a unique combination of face-to-face meetings with online resources - our blended learning model - making it possible for busy students to manage the demands of college study, work and other responsibilities. Our residencies provide a rich academic experience along with career development programs and networking opportunities. Each term, approximately 120 residency students are able to study with faculty mentors who share their academic expertise and industry experience to provide the comprehensive knowledge in theory and practice that today's professionals need to be successful in the workforce. Our Niagara Frontier Center offers weekend residency sessions in the fall and spring terms, and two in the summer.

Transition: While the college has made great strides providing higher education opportunities to underrepresented students over our 40 year history, we recognize the need to strengthen and

extend its connections statewide in order to meet the demands of the challenging social and economic times we face today and in the future. Looking forward, we believe our current initiatives related to OPEN SUNY and SUNY REAL will position us to help the state face these challenges by expanding the scale of flexible educational resources we provide.

### III: OPEN SUNY and SUNY REAL

Empire State College is referenced in the statewide plan as contributor to the Open SUNY movement:

“Now SUNY is committed to coordinating and scaling up these resources into a system-wide, state-of-the art online portal, tapping into the combined strengths of SUNY Learning Network and Empire State College, our leading institution in online learning, to develop Open SUNY.” (p. 69)

Empire State College was an early pioneer in developing online courses as a way to reach students who couldn't commute to a physical campus in order to meet with faculty and other students. Our work as early adopters of distance learning pedagogies has enabled us to offer seamless educational experiences.

And now, as the first anchor partner of the Open Educational Resources University in the United States, SUNY Empire State College is moving into a new and exciting realm of higher education that is accessible, affordable and scalable. We are now working to meet the needs of Open Educational Resources learners in collaboration with like-minded institutions around the world through the OER university project, which promotes and supports free access to OER learning materials for students around the world and coordinates assessment and credentialing through recognized educational institutions. Participants from several continents are designing open courses, which will have methodologies in place for learning assessment and transfer, affording students the opportunity to choose the educational pathway that best suits their learning styles and availability.

Although the statewide plan does not discuss prior learning assessment, I recommend the concept for further consideration to address the areas of concern identified in the plan. There are exciting ways in which PLA and Open Educational Resources are converging in conversations about best practices in Open Learning. For instance, prior learning assessment can shorten learner's time to degree. Studies undertaken by The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CEAL) show a strong correlation between prior learning assessment and student degree completion. ESC is involved in merging the Prior Learning Assessment and Open Educational Resources movements in a way that will benefit learners studying in any modality.

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 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.

OPEN SUNY and SUNY REAL are two college-wide initiatives we believe will expand access opportunities and strengthen connections across the state.

The college also has undertaken various regional initiatives to address the topics of concern described in the plan. For instance, The Niagara Frontier Regional Learning Center has created strong partnerships with businesses and community colleges in the Buffalo area.

In addition to previously established transfer agreements with Erie Community College and Jamestown Community College, our regional center is also working on a new partnership with the Niagara County Community College Culinary Arts program to offer studies in Business Management for graduates in culinary arts who are interested in becoming restaurateurs.

We began offering on-site instruction in management at GEICO for upwardly mobile entry-level managers this academic year. GEICO students are now able to enroll exclusively in advanced level management courses, offered by faculty mentors with both academic and practical expertise, or they may enroll as fully matriculating degree seeking Business Management students. This initiative started with two weekly course offerings and a group of 20 interested prospective students, and we anticipate demand for a third weekly course and a total student body of 45 GEICO students for the next academic year. The potential of this initiative is vast and we are excited about the opportunity to serve members of the GEICO management community for many years to come.

As you can see ESC is working diligently to respond to the unique needs of adult learners in the state of New York. We are deeply committed to making positive contributions to the economic and workforce development sectors of the state now, and into the future.

Empire State College is uniquely positioned to be an important and central player in the State Education Department's 2012-2020 plan to increase access to higher education and degree completion, particularly for populations underrepresented in higher education. Our statewide reach and significant presence in the Western New York region, the flexibility we offer students and the agility with which we can respond to market and workplace demands make us unique among the state's higher education institutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Board this morning.

Note #1: Prior Learning Assessment refers to the assessment of college-level learning that takes place outside of a college classroom. Most Empire State College students receive some prior learning assessment credit. Students may earn credit from standardized tests, such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP); DANTES Subject Standardized Tests; ACE evaluations of business, industry and military training; or from documenting their prior learning through a portfolio that usually includes a reflective essay.