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## INTRODUCTION

*Creative Tensions in Progressive Higher Education:  
Theories and Practices in a Changing Context*

### HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY: OUR CURRENT CONTEXT

There is a crisis today in postsecondary education. Institutions of higher education are grappling with significant challenges as they strive both to fulfill their historical mission of offering liberal and professional education, and to adapt to dramatic changes in their contexts. These challenges and changes are both multifaceted and related. First, the explosion of new technologies serves not only to allow for remote access to education but also to alter profoundly the teaching and learning that occur, whether at a distance or “on campus.” Second, the demand for vocational and professional education and for the credentials attesting to that preparation for the workplace has increased markedly, and has resulted in a commensurate decrease in demand for liberal studies. Third, the demographics of students attending college also have changed significantly, with increasing numbers of adults and part-time students attending. Another powerful change has occurred with the globalization of education, which has spawned both dispersed organizational structures in postsecondary institutions and more and more cross-cultural interaction and exchange. Fifth, with heightened demand for the accountability of colleges and universities – accountability to the public and to the workplace – have come increased emphases on assessment of student learning and on standardization of program and curricular offerings. In addition, a decrease in public funding and changing funding models have forced institutions to reassess not only their organizational processes and systems but even their pedagogical approaches. And finally, in a context of exponential growth in knowledge and of widely disparate cultures and perspectives, the contesting of curriculum is ongoing, with questions about what constitutes knowledge, as well as whose knowledge has any legitimacy at all, raised at every turn.

Any of these challenges to the place, role and purposes of postsecondary education would be sufficient to command careful attention on the part of colleges and universities. Taken together, they signify a time of rapid, unprecedented and genuinely disruptive change, change that requires of each institution focused analysis of the issues at hand, rigorous examination of the institution’s purposes and practices, and strenuous assessment of its particular capacities and strengths. And, in light of this examination and assessment, institutions of higher education must

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not only undertake thoughtful and deliberate innovation to accommodate a shifting context; they must also use this context to strengthen and enhance what they do. For some – the elite, the financially secure, the minority of institutions – these kinds of shifts in the landscape can present opportunity for creative response and revitalizing change. But for many – the more precariously positioned, the less financially secure, the majority of institutions of higher education – it is not so much their ability to thrive and improve but their very survival that is at stake.

Among those colleges and universities that are especially challenged in these turbulent times are what we are calling nontraditional institutions, schools such as, among many, Goddard College, Union Institute & University, and Walden University, that embrace a progressive approach (about which more below) emphasizing individualized, student-centered pedagogy; interdisciplinary and/or problem-focused study; and attention to community, diversity and social justice. These progressive colleges and universities are facing particular challenges to their academic and organizational models. When funding is drastically cut, there is pressure to grow, which is challenging for educational models employing mentored, highly individualized study – models that prize the faculty-student relationship. When accountability and assessment are the order of the day, standardization follows – another external pressure directly undercutting individualization. When various technologies fuel a parlance of “instructional design” and of “delivering content” in a sequence of modules, the potential for student-initiated, student-designed study is lessened. And when these same technologies enable access from a distance, community as well – a key dimension in most progressive pedagogy – can be undermined. Thus the very tenets of these organizations’ distinctive academic programs are among the most threatened in the landscape of higher education today.

One such institution, Empire State College (ESC), a nontraditional college within the State University of New York (SUNY), is the focus of this book. ESC was founded in 1971 to offer greater access to students in all contexts, including working adults; to give students opportunities to work closely with a faculty mentor to design studies in relation to their particular interests; and to allow students to integrate their academic, professional and personal goals throughout their course of study at the College. Thus ESC’s history and current challenges provide an illuminating example of some of the pressures that nontraditional institutions of higher education are confronting and the ways in which they may be struggling to sustain their progressive vision and approaches.

Throughout this edited volume, contributing authors write about what we are terming *creative tensions*, that is, the ongoing and generative interplay between what are in some ways competing emphases and values. These tensions reflect complex issues in education. Identifying them and the issues they raise can, in our view, allow us to address them more thoughtfully and purposefully, to develop more creative, effective approaches to our mentoring and teaching, and to create and/or sustain more supportive, capacious organizational structures and processes. But, as

noted above, and as is evident throughout these chapters, we are mindful as well of the possibly compromising pressures at work – both external and internal – on our institutions. So, just as we need to identify and examine *creative* tensions that are inherent in the work that we do, we need also to analyze possibly undermining pressures and demands and their impact if we are to address these both innovatively and intentionally and to sustain and strengthen our progressive pedagogies and identity.

#### WHY THIS BOOK?

We see this book as part of that effort. A close look at Empire State College, which has been devoted for almost a half-century to progressive adult higher education, will help us to see more clearly and to examine critically the changes, challenges and multiple creative tensions that are currently at play in contemporary American higher education and, we would argue, across the world. At its core, then, the purpose of this book is to use an examination of a single progressive, alternative public institution of higher education to help educators and students of education grapple with the complexities of issues in higher education and the challenges of trying to sustain a progressive vision in the face of internal and external pressures undermining that vision.

Using a case study approach such as this examination of Empire State College will allow us to delve into the forces at work, the problems and questions arising, the interplay of educational theory and practice and, too, the fact of and need for constant change in order to meet the challenges of the day. Can we make sense of the tensions and the changing context? Can we pinpoint the challenges we face? Can we understand what is at stake? And can we chart a course that both accommodates change and sustains a vision and the values and principles on which that vision rests? While this volume focuses on one institution, in our view it is this careful and multifaceted look at one organization that will shed light on these questions and have resonance and significance well beyond one college.

#### THE HOW OF IT: A CASE STUDY IN CHANGE

To undertake this investigation, we have looked at myriad aspects of the institution, including: its principles and values, the various mentoring and teaching practices occurring across the College, its diverse students and multiple programs, and the institutional frameworks, i.e., the organization and infrastructure, within which teaching and learning at ESC take place. And we have included many voices, people in different roles and contexts across the College, and thus a range of perspectives and interpretive stances – all, in our view, essential to surfacing and gaining insight into the many issues and conundra at hand.

We are both delighted and honored that in this edited volume, 25 Empire State College colleagues have offered their ideas, their points of view, their

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angles of entry – their distinctive ways of thinking about this college and the challenges it is facing. We hope that, as a result of their contributions, the crisis in higher education that we experience today can be more helpfully and hopefully understood as a series of tensions, of creative tensions, that can, with our efforts, maintain their vitality and keep an alternative, progressive vision of adult higher education alive.

PROGRESSIVE AND ADULT HIGHER EDUCATION:  
THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

*Progressive Education*

To begin, then, with key theoretical underpinnings of Empire State College's academic programs and pedagogical models, we should note here some basic tenets, first of progressive education, grounded in the thinking of John Dewey (1938) and William Heard Kilpatrick (1951), and then of adult education more broadly, which draws on the work of Eduard Lindeman (1926), Malcolm Knowles (1973), Paulo Freire (1970), Jack Mezirow (1991), Stephen Brookfield (1986), and others. Progressive education, reflecting not just the generally understood connotation of forward thinking, but rather referring more specifically to the particular ideas and perspective of the progressive school of thought in philosophy, has drawn heavily on Dewey's ideas of working from and toward the student's purposes; of integrating a learner's experience – prior, current, and future – into education; of engaging in ongoing experimentation – both in education and in society; and, importantly, of working toward social change and reconstruction.

Fundamentally, progressive education is student-centered, by which we mean not simply – as it is often used in today's parlance – doing what is best *for* the student, but working *from* the student's very particular experience and *toward* the student's own unique goals. Honoring and drawing on the student's context and working toward the student's purposes, progressive education is typically highly individualized. In consultation with faculty, students at schools such as those mentioned above and, for example, Antioch College, Fielding Graduate University, the School for New Learning at DePaul University, and Empire State College literally create their own degree programs and design their own studies, both identifying the content needed and framing the learning activities – all toward their own articulated questions and learning goals. And thus studies such as these are often focused, for example, on a particular problem or issue that the student wishes to explore rather than on a given academic discipline. In this model, a student may bring any number of disciplines to bear on the question at hand, integrating these as they inform the issue. And intrinsic to this Deweyan, genuinely student-centered model is an emphasis on working with the student as a “whole” person, which includes acknowledging his/her life context and the relationship among and between a student's academic, professional

and personal goals, and supporting the student in integrating these facets of his/her studies.

In addition, the student may draw not only on prior experience and study but also on his/her current context, integrating ideas and experience and using each to inform and examine the other. Related to this process of the integration of theory and practice is a fundamental tenet of Dewey's thought, an emphasis on experimentation, on innovation, not for innovation's sake but for improvement, for gaining insight and efficacy as new approaches to teaching and learning (and in ESC's model, mentoring) and to addressing social problems are tried. As will be discussed below, ESC has been and continues to be an experimenting institution as it strives to serve students and to support their learning in ever more effective, meaningful, and generative ways.

In Dewey's progressive thought, democracy – what contributes to and shapes it, what it yields, how it can be supported by education – is central. As such, in some progressive institutions, participatory decision-making and nonhierarchical models of both management and governance prevail. In others, a more collaborative relationship between faculty and student is essential to the pedagogical model. When working toward the student's goals and sharing the learning enterprise, the relationship between teacher and student becomes dialogical. Similarly, in a context of shared authority, evaluation of a student's work may be undertaken jointly, with the student's self-evaluation contributing as much as the faculty's judgment to a shared evaluation of learning in any given study. And in many progressive models, an emphasis on community – again, on what contributes to and supports its development and on what it yields – is key. Thus attention is paid to respectful and productive group processes and to shared decision-making in group contexts. Famously saying that education should not be merely preparation for life, that education *is* life, Dewey (1893) believed that students – of all ages – must experience some degree of democracy in their learning. Whether meeting individually with a mentor or participating in a group study or class, in Dewey's view students must learn by doing, must, therefore, gain a sense of what it means to live in or contribute to a democratic society. In progressive education, an underlying commitment to constructive participation is accented at every turn.

Closely related, in progressive thought, to ideas about and educational practice toward supporting democracy are strong emphases on broadening access to education, honoring diversity, and working toward social justice. In Dewey's thought, social reconstruction, related to his ideas regarding both experimentation and democracy, is necessary to and should be an outcome of effective education. Thus the aims of education for Dewey were both individual and social; education must contribute to the development of both. And as progressive education has developed along with its changing context, this multipronged idea of social reconstruction has placed more and more emphasis on drawing on, learning from, and celebrating our increasingly diverse society.

*Adult Higher Education*

Turning to adult education, we can see not only strong echoes of each of these tenets of progressive education – the centrality of the student and of the student’s knowledge, experience and context; the integration of theory and practice; the importance of ongoing experimentation; the emphasis on a dialogical, collaborative relationship between teacher and learner; and social reconstruction and change. We also find further development of these ideas, as adult educators have continued to examine, for example, the role of experience in learning, have theorized about the processes involved in making new meaning and constructing knowledge, and have probed the intimate connections between transformation and learning. They have as well placed considerable emphasis on critical reflection, have analyzed the place of such reflection in effecting change, and have considered what it would mean for education to be emancipatory.

Like progressive educators, in keeping the student at the center of the process, theorists and practitioners of adult education have placed major emphasis on the rich knowledge that their adult students bring to their studies and on mining that knowledge for how it can inform next questions. Similarly, just as progressive theory treats a multilayered conceptualization of experience as central, so does adult learning theory. Acknowledging students’ prior experience, supporting reflection on – in order to learn more from – that experience, and integrating current experience into the learning enterprise, adult educators are echoing the progressive view. And like critical theorists, about whom more below, adult educators are encouraging delving into one’s experience in order to surface the questions and possible contradictions arising and to consider new ways of seeing.

In Mezirow’s (1991) conceptualization, we all have “meaning perspectives” that filter how we perceive the world; that is, we organize and represent the events and ideas that we encounter, the experiences we have, into certain schema, schema of which, often, we are unaware. And it is through examination of these meaning perspectives that we may become more aware of the structures of meaning that shape our consciousness and our lives and may develop more advanced perspectives. Thus, in Mezirow’s thought, through a process of critical reflection, through questioning and discovering contradictions, adult students can – and do – make new meaning. Key here, and consistent with progressive education theory, is the notion of the student as the author of meaning, as a constructor of knowledge. Rather than the teacher being understood to be the sole keeper of sacred, given understandings, “delivering” that knowledge to the student, the student too brings rich, significant experience, knowledge, and insight to any given study. In this way, the learning enterprise is necessarily dialogical and collaborative, as the mentor seeks to support the student in his/her quest and as both are learning through this process. Yet while both student and teacher are learning through shared inquiry, the emphasis is on the student, who, in consultation with the teacher or mentor, not only gains understanding, but also makes new meaning, constructs new ideas,

imagines new possibilities, and develops his/her capacities for action in and on the world. Thus, just as is the case in progressive theories of education, in much adult education theory, it is the student, and not the “teacher” (or advisor or mentor), who is central.

Closely related to the idea of each individual student making meaning of the world, many adult education theorists (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Freire, 1970) argue that learning can be genuinely transformative, as a student may alter profoundly his/her perspective on and sense of that world. And through such learning experiences, in transformative learning theory it may be not only the individual student who is transformed; the world too, through the student’s ability to act on that world, may be changed – not just ideationally, but in particular and concrete ways.

And related to each of these ideas – of the student as an author of meaning, of the importance of integrating theory and practice, and of learning as potentially transformative – the notion of critical reflection is key. Having been extensively explored and variously defined, critical reflection has been widely embraced by educators of all stripes. Examining one’s experience (and/or one’s action), one may “theorize” that experience; one may develop innovative ideas or frame new meanings; and one may conceive new possibilities, may try different approaches. Harkening back to Dewey’s emphases on the importance of integrating theory and practice, of experimentation, and of social reconstruction, this kind of critical reflection asks of us – whether as learners or teachers or citizens – that we probe our experience, inquire into the results of our and others’ actions, and that we constantly experiment and evaluate; it suggests an ongoing cycle of action, observation, analysis, evaluation, and innovation – whether in our studies, our work world, or, indeed, our personal lives. In Paulo Freire’s (1970) conceptualization, this critical reflection constitutes *praxis*. In Donald Schön’s schema (1984), reflection in and on and for action is essential to constructive change; in his view such reflection necessarily makes a “revolutionary demand” (p. 338).

So, whether viewed in the strictly educational context of teaching and learning or in an organizational context or in the adult “life-world,” the concept of critical reflection speaks not just to thoughtful examination but also to constructive change. And in this respect, several aspects of critical theory have significantly informed progressive models of adult education as, in keeping with Freire’s advocacy for conscientization and Schön’s “revolutionary demand,” many adult education theorists (Brookfield, 2005; Welton, 1995; Ohliger, 1974; Cunningham, 1998) have emphasized looking closely both at students’ particular contexts, and more broadly as well, at the oppressive structures and systems that reign over that context. Thus, while some transformative learning theorists have tended to emphasize individual development and change, other adult educators, while seeking to honor the widely varying identities and individual perspectives of their students, have also argued that careful examination and questioning of the systemic political, social, and

economic structures of domination, within which both “teacher” and “learner” function, is essential – both to the individual learning process and to any education purporting to contribute to a just society. Through examining one’s context critically, developing a more critical consciousness of the world, and, as Freire (1970) puts it, “naming the world” newly, one can “re-create that world” (p. 78). Clearly akin to transformative learning theory, and harkening back as well to Dewey’s framing of social reconstruction, this is a distinctly more political view. But the point shared by all – progressive and adult educators and critical theorists – is the centrality of the student’s critical questioning, which not only can foster individual development and change but also can lead to envisioning and working toward social change, toward a more just and life-supporting society.

Clearly, adult education theory and practice draw heavily on progressive education. Both attempt genuinely student-centered education; both emphasize that a broad and deep conceptualization of experience is central to teaching and learning; both honor and support meanings the *student* makes, capacities the *student* brings to learning and to acting on the world; both strive to recognize, to work within, and to examine the student’s context; both reexamine authority – whether that of the “teacher” or that of the social, political, and economic systems within which we live – acknowledging and supporting *students’* authority; and both argue that education must contribute to ongoing social reconstruction and change. Similarly, adult educators are informed by critical theory, as, in addition to these tenets shared with progressive thought, many adult educators have brought in a more emphatically political perspective, as they work to support their students’ analyses and questioning of dominant, and often oppressive, structures and systems at work, not just in their own lives but across the globe. Thus, while Dewey and other progressive theorists emphasized social reconstruction and ongoing societal change through experimentation, adult educators who have drawn on critical theory have added a distinctly leftist thrust to this reconstruction.

There are, of course, many alternatives to so-called traditional education. But we wanted to offer a brief introduction to some of the ideas, the theoretical context, informing many so-called nontraditional or alternative institutions of higher education for adults. Some institutions may emphasize, for example, the integration of theory and practice, through giving attention to incorporating the professional and academic realms through action research; others may focus more on participatory decision-making toward developing a “just community” within a school; in other settings, the emphasis is on reflective practice, through which students examine critically their work and the context within which they carry out that work. Yet each of these institutions stands on a body of ideas emphasizing the need to honor and work in relation to the student’s experience, context, needs, and goals, and thus to open new avenues to both the individual student’s and our society’s development. Like other nontraditional programs and institutions for adults, Empire State College was founded on these ideas and has continued to develop academic programs and pedagogical models in keeping with them.

PROGRESSIVE ADULT EDUCATION AT EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE:  
BRINGING IDEAS TO ACTION

From the call for its creation as set out by then SUNY Chancellor Ernest L. Boyer in 1970, to the earliest years of its deliberate construction as an innovative public institution within the State University of New York system, Empire State College embraced the tenets of progressive education as summarized above. That is, in the very structure of the institution, in its core values and its institutional mission, and in the pedagogical ways that established it as a significant alternative to conventional higher education, Empire State College proclaimed itself to be a college that championed, at least in spirit, Dewey's vision of teaching and learning.

It is important to note that, just as the social, political, economic and ideological realities of our current context have a direct impact on ESC and higher education, the historical context within which Empire State College was established played a central role in shaping the College. The early 1970s was a time of deep questioning of the institutional arrangements of American society and of what was understood by some as a military-industrial-educational complex in which the American university played a key role in reproducing a society of inequity, war and alienation. That is, far from the image of an "ivory tower" set apart from the ruckus of oppression, institutions of higher education were seen by many as complicit in a system of division, hierarchy, conformity and anonymity. ESC's creation was, in this sense, part of a broader social movement – one that included the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the anti-war movement – that set out both to question and to reimagine the basic foundations of society. As noted above, while surely borrowing from a rich tradition of educational experimentation (for example, Alverno College, The Evergreen State College, Warren Wilson College and Black Mountain College, along with others previously mentioned), Empire State College (in some ways like its United Kingdom counterpart, the British Open University, which also welcomed its first students in 1971) was to be a new kind of college.

At the heart of ESC, echoing the progressive mindset, were what might be thought of as four calls: the call to individualization, the call to innovation and experimentation, the call to access, and the call to democratic social change.

Championing a student-centered approach to teaching and learning at every turn, the College deliberately created policies, stipulated processes and invited practices that focused attention on the student and on neither some sacred body of knowledge nor the assumed authority of faculty experts. While sometimes stormy debates about the possibilities and limitations of a truly student-centered approach have shadowed the College throughout its history, a focus on the individual and his/her academic, professional and personal goals was understood as an antidote to the systematic inattention of the contemporary university to the student's unique purposes and experiences, indeed to the self. In the spirit of progressivism, Empire State College seemed to be asking: How can the individual student take charge of his/her own learning?

Four elements of such student-centeredness became the hallmark of ESC: the shared development of the learning contract, which situates faculty and student in a dialogical relationship; prior learning assessment, which acknowledges a student's past experiential learning; the individualized degree program, which reflects directly a student's purposes; and the role of the faculty member as mentor who facilitates and supports students' study as opposed to asserting professorial authority.

The learning contract was established in the earliest years of the College as a template, a distinctive educational architecture, that called on students and their faculty mentors (their educational guides, the facilitators of their learning) to create ever-new learning opportunities, and that could serve as a guide for and record of this individualized study. As opposed to the fixity of the course and the omnipresence of the course catalog that defined most institutions' claims about what-is-to-be-learned, both constructed well outside of any student's realm of control (early in ESC's history, the word "course" was, to many, anathema; the word "catalog" was avoided at all costs), the learning contract – focused on the individual student's questions, interests, goals, and statements of individual purpose – was developed to support the student as a self-directed learner. And the learning contract could serve as the space for experimenting with learning activities as well as with learning purposes.

This same emphasis on the student-as-active-knower, not as receiver of all that should be known, was reflected in the College's early embrace of "prior learning" and of providing opportunities for students to identify, describe, document, and earn credit for college-level learning gained outside of any university. In so doing, Empire State College policy not only acknowledged what might be thought of as progressivism's faith in the underlying curiosity and ongoing learning of individuals (which Dewey saw in learners of all ages), but its belief in the richness of experience itself, of the importance of learning from experience, and of the responsibility of any institution devoted to learning to take such so-called "informal" learning seriously. Here again, the centrality of the individual and the hearty embrace of the distinct possibility that significant knowledge could be gained in areas not previously framed as a university's predefined course of study drove the inclusion of prior learning assessment (PLA) as a significant feature of this new institution.

The student-drivenness of individual studies as reflected in the learning contract and the possibility of truly individualized learning captured through prior learning assessment gained even greater centrality in ESC's progressive ways through the expectation that each student create his/her own "curriculum" – an individualized program of study or, in ESC parlance, degree program plan. Two ideas vital to the progressive tradition stand out here: the notion that knowledge itself is provisional and that established bodies of knowledge as framed in college curricula are constructed; and the idea that students, the learners themselves, should participate in developing a plan of study relevant to them. The ideal of each student being actively engaged in the research regarding and the articulation of a rationale for his/her college program directly situates students at the center of their educational journey. And the academic legitimacy of the completed program results from a multilayered

approval process and reflects ESC's best efforts to support the student's creation of an individualized college-level curriculum that is responsive to his/her personal, academic, and professional goals.

Perhaps at the heart of these experimenting pedagogical practices at ESC was the fashioning of a new faculty role – the role of the mentor. Although mentoring practices have a long tradition in and outside of the academy, Empire State College embraced a particular faculty-as-mentor role in order to accent three progressive tenets: the student's role as an active learner who needed regular support and careful guidance, but whose individual questions and directions would animate the learning; the critique of the role of the faculty member as an all-knowing expert (the image of the professorial sage); and the ideal of learning-as-dialogue – as the ongoing grappling with and development of ideas formed in a process of inquiry shared by student and mentor. What better way for a student to gain practice as a participant in an activity relevant to his/her life? What better way for the faculty to gain practice working in a more nonhierarchical structure unlike those of more conventional institutions? What more effective way than in dialogue for students and mentors to learn about what might be understood as democratic practice: the common engagement in serious work about topics introduced by those who want to learn and understand and be guided by those who can help to facilitate that learning?

Intimately interconnected with the College's focus on individualization was a second call – the call to innovation and experimentation. To focus on the personal, academic and professional interests and needs of the individual; to craft individual studies and whole curricula that were responsive to a particular student; to pull and shape college-level learning from a person's repository of life experiences, and to reimagine the faculty role as one of facilitator and guide – all of these elements of ESC pedagogy embraced innovation and championed pedagogical experimentation.

This kind of purposeful instability meant that discussions about how to teach and what to learn and how to judge the adequacy of any particular version of a "college education" became significant to a college culture of ongoing debate. Thus, educational traditions that might adroitly steer more established institutions, at ESC became contested terrain, as faculty and administrators sought to craft policies, define processes, and model practices that reflected the mission and core values of this new institution. The very vocabulary of traditional academe was regularly challenged. Indeed, as earlier noted, terms such as "learning contract," "degree program (or educational) plan," and even "mentor" were politically charged and used as both symbolic and substantive reminders of the experimenting nature of this institution and of its turn away from more accepted practices.

Three examples could be instructive: Significant time was (and has been) spent thinking about the limitations of a word like "class" and the distinctions between a class and a "study group" or "group study." If, for example, individualization, an experiment in itself, was at the heart of the College, was there any room for experimenting with what could be gained in a group – a locus of learning so central to the adult education tradition? Not only did ESC's Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for

Labor Studies offer “classes” (which they conceived of as different from traditional classes) from the start but, over time, faculty around the College have tried out different approaches to group learning, that now include group residencies and other forms of blended learning (blending face-to-face and online learning modes), innovative unto themselves, and that take advantage of students learning from one another.

Second, efforts to question the vocabulary and thus the very structures of the educationally conventional were also reflected in the decision to organize the curriculum and the faculty according to rather loose and voluntaristic “areas of study,” as distinct from more disciplinary-based academic departments. Wouldn’t more innovation be encouraged, more ideas about what and how to teach unleashed, if faculty were freed from departmental hierarchies and strictures and if students were freed from the boundaries of traditional disciplines? The melding of ideas, cutting across more conventional fields of study, and, of course, responding to what students wanted to learn could, it was argued, benefit from broader “areas of study” such as “Cultural Studies,” “Community and Human Services,” and “Business, Management and Economics.” Disciplinary silos were thrown open to question, even while, over these more than 40 years, some faculty wondered about, even yearned for, a way to support and advance their own academic (and often disciplinary) agendas.

Thirdly, for some, innovation and experimentation have taken the form of distance learning. From the start, the face-to-face student/mentor dialogue was at the very core of the institution. Such encounters were, for many, its heart and soul. And yet, now for decades, along with the image of the student and mentor sitting side-by-side at a table were the radical possibilities of students breaking barriers of distance by communicating with faculty initially through traditional means of “correspondence,” and more recently through online study. Typically enrolled in courses (a structure, as noted, which was contested in itself) and taking advantage of the new technologies, these students were offered access to vast and rich resources that ranged well beyond the imaginative grasp of most of ESC’s founders. We have seen where innovation – possible not only as a result of dramatic technological changes over the last half-century, but as a result of the call to change in the very ways we teach and learn – could take us.

It thus makes sense that the call to access, another key principle of both adult education and the progressive tradition, has spurred reflection and innovation throughout ESC’s history. Why should higher education, that is, serious learning attentive to the individual, be available only to a tiny number of 18- to 22-year-olds? Why can’t what is considered the best of education be available to anyone regardless of background, degree of preparation, age or gender, and, too, why not in a public institution? Here was the bold claim: Student-centeredness and individualized learning should not be solely the prerogative of an elite who attend small, selective, private colleges. Such a mission should be part of a large public university system as well.

This call to access has manifested itself in several ways, the core of which was the establishment of a highly decentralized institution with 35 locations across the

state of New York. A public university, then SUNY Chancellor Ernest Boyer argued, had to be available to all the citizens of the state, whether one lived in a major urban center (e.g., New York City or Buffalo), or in a less populous and more remote area (e.g., Auburn or Plattsburgh). In keeping with the strong adult education tradition of bringing educational opportunities to the people rather than expecting them to take up residence in some semi-cloistered environment far from their communities, and, too, in the spirit of other experimenting efforts of the time to create vibrant universities “without walls,” Empire State College sought a statewide footprint – with some offices as small as a single mentor and one support person, whether in an office building or on the campus of a community college – thus offering students a chance to earn a four-year degree at a public institution not far from home.

Interestingly in regard to ESC’s goal of broadening access, Empire State College was not designed as a college for adults; indeed, during a time of significant campus protests and of students leaving colleges because of what were perceived as their multiple rigidities, ESC was seen by some as a true alternative, as a place in which traditional-age college students could create their own program for learning and have access to those who would devote themselves to guiding them. But older students, working adults with families and often deep community ties, were also at the door, and ESC (with most of its students still, today, in their mid-30s) became an institution that was welcoming, reasonably inexpensive, encouraging to those who had been educationally bypassed, and willing to accommodate both the student who had not found a comfortable match in traditional higher education and the professional, whether in business or human services, who needed some new expertise and a credential. Although never, at least on paper, a fully “open admissions” institution, ESC embraced as much openness and inclusivity as possible. And doing so it has been regularly pushed to find ways to respond to the personal, academic and work needs of a widely varied student body, including academically underprepared students, adults for whom college seemed alien territory, women and men with significant accomplishments in the community but little experience of college study, and students returning to higher education after having had previous academic success and now seeking degree completion.

Perhaps this call to access, along with the previously described calls to innovation/experimentation and to individualization should be understood within the context of the fourth call: the call to democratic social change. Public institutions across the United States – such as Empire State College, the Vermont State Colleges, Metropolitan State University (Minnesota); “external degree programs” that were created at existing universities, such as The University of Alabama; and the “university without walls” movement, such as the one at the University of Massachusetts – developed alongside experimenting private institutions, such as the School of New Resources at The College of New Rochelle (New York) and the School for New Learning at DePaul University (Illinois). All of these institutions were part of a movement for educational change that recognized the potentially powerful transformative role that a more progressive higher education system could have on the broader society. As

noted earlier, these kinds of experimenting institutions saw change at the core of their mission: traditional institutional ways could give way to modes of teaching and learning that were more responsive to the individual student; curricula could be reimaged to cross disciplines, and create alternative ways to identify and shape the knowledge that could be gained; the faculty role itself could be rethought; and the entire university system could become a more inclusive one, breaking down barriers and welcoming those who had previously been excluded.

Three dimensions of change are relevant here: In the first, institutions like Empire State College sought to change the internal fixtures of the university – questioning structures (for example, at ESC, the taken-for-grantedness of the entire departmental edifice) and roles (for example, the hierarchies, activities and expectations of the faculty). Second, this movement of educational change claimed that higher education had, to date, failed to respond meaningfully to the social, cultural, technological and economic changes – and to the conflicts – taking place across the globe. It was incumbent upon the university not to defend and try to bolster its old ways but to name and try out new ways in which higher education could play a constructive role in what was perceived to be a society-in-transformation. And finally, change meant the responsibility to educate women and men who, as more engaged and responsible participants in their own education, were gaining new critical awareness and important experience as future citizens who could play a vital, constructive role in their society. As the progressive movement continued to remind us, society needed its educational institutions to contribute to the creation and sustenance of a more just and equitable world.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: MANY MODELS

These guiding principles and calls to develop a certain kind of college have resulted in the development of a wide variety of programs and models for mentoring, teaching, and learning at ESC. As noted above, in order to meet students' need for access, widely dispersed regional centers and satellite units across the state were developed. As Empire State College grew and technologies evolved and were tried to accommodate students outside the state, ESC later developed the Center for Distance Learning (CDL), which involved experiments in technologically-mediated study. While some regional centers' preponderant modes of study have been individualized, with students meeting one-on-one and face-to-face with their study mentor, other centers offer more group studies; and some offer studies that include both a residency and online study. The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies offers a classroom model but with curriculum developed in direct response to the particular context of its students. The Center for Distance Learning offers all study online, some of which is highly individualized and shaped by the student and some of which is faculty-designed; indeed, even within CDL, there is a wide range of practice on a spectrum from student-driven study allowing for emergent curriculum on one end to structured, program driven, preset curriculum on the other. And the

College's graduate programs vary significantly, as some, in professional studies such as the Master of Arts in Teaching program offer pre-structured sequences of study that enable students to meet requirements for licensure, while others such as the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies provide for individual students' design of their unique program of study. Many locations across the College are now supporting blended study, i.e., study which integrates face-to-face and online work, whether with a group or individual student. And the College has continued to experiment through the development not just of new academic programs and pedagogies but also of administrative structures and procedures, which just recently have entailed altering what has been, from the start, a center-based system.

Experimentation with such a multiplicity of modes has both supported adult learners in working within the mode best suited to their needs and context, and provided greater access to more students whose schedule and location may not allow for traditional schedules for attendance. And what has been a history of ongoing experimentation has resulted in the proliferation both of widely varying modes of study and of new areas of inquiry. ESC's School for Graduate Studies, for example, responding to changing times, has added programs in health care administration, emergency management, and emerging technologies. Mindful not only of responding to students' changing context but also of having impact on that context, these graduate programs strive to engender students' critical and creative capacities so that they can make significant contributions to their chosen field. Whether working with undergraduate students in the liberal arts or graduate students in professional fields, ESC faculty continue to emphasize attention to students' developing critical understanding of their world, their place in it, and what constructive – indeed “reconstructive” – impact they might have. Yet, though undergirded by shared values and commitments, this dispersed and varied development of the College has resulted in no single practice, in no one way of doing things, in not even one culture.

#### ISSUES AND QUESTIONS ARISING: THE CREATIVE TENSIONS

About these many different embodiments of ESC's core values and of its roots in the progressive and adult education traditions, it should be no surprise that all along the way there has been vigorous debate, as new ideas have been contested and innovative approaches tried. With each rethinking, each suggestion, questions have been raised. Beginning with the very founding of the institution, when faculty debated what became known as the (Arthur) Chickering model for individualized study and the (Loren) Baritz model for faculty-designed courses open to all, faculty raised concerns about the development of a wholly online program and its implications for individualized learning and community; later questioned the development of graduate studies, most of which have been more professional in their emphases; and, currently, are discussing questions related to moving to more centralized administrative structures and processes. All of these developments have raised hotly contested issues and deep, long and difficult discussions, which touch

not just on the direction of the College but on its very mission, its core, on what many in the College hold sacred. And discussions of this kind, often contentious, have gone on throughout the history of the College.

Within these varied and evolving practices and the questions raised about them, what we are calling creative tensions have emerged. We say “creative” because the tensions we see – sometimes within a given practice, sometimes across quite different approaches – actually *are* creative. That is, these tensions reflect longstanding, rich questions in education; they inform our thinking; whether implicitly or explicitly, they animate our institutional and pedagogical ways; and they help us to examine, experiment with, and improve our practice. We say “tensions” because the questions they raise reflect an interplay of values, principles, and approaches along a spectrum, and because, though often a particular balance is struck, this relationship, typically between seemingly opposing elements, is rarely static. Yet it is precisely in the opposition, in the ongoing dance between divergent ideas, that the creative potential resides. Rather like Rainer Maria Rilke’s counsel to “live the questions,” in our view it is our awareness of and willingness to live these tensions that deepens our insight and our practice. Far from some single-minded schema, which serves to narrow our scope and stunt our ideas, such tensions allow our thinking, our practice, to grow. So, whether arising within a collegial conversation regarding the pedagogical merits of a given practice or emerging from deep differences across, for example, different programs of study, these discussions, as they reflect the genuinely creative tensions involved, will continue not just to shape our dialog but also to inform our work.

We have chosen to place these creative tensions and the issues they raise into five categories, related to:

1. philosophy (philosophical principles and core values);
2. students (who they are; what they bring; what they need);
3. pedagogy (pedagogical models; mentoring and teaching practice);
4. the institution (internal structures and policy; external demands and constraints);
5. broader context (the social and global context within which our institution functions).

The essays included in this volume explore these areas of tension in the context of specific policies, procedures, and pedagogical models, as well as through the lived experience of ESC over time of faculty, students, administrators, and staff. Here, we will provide just a brief preview of what these tensions entail and the kinds of questions they raise, not just at Empire State College but in higher education generally.

#### *Creative Tensions: Underlying Philosophical Principles*

In regard to questions of education philosophy, for example, when one talks of genuinely student-centered pedagogy, i.e., of approaches to mentoring and teaching in which the student sets the agenda and the faculty member works to support the

student's study, questions immediately arise: How does a mentor respond to the student's stated goals while also sharing his/her own knowledge and expertise that could be helpful to pursuing those goals? How does a mentor offer guidance without "taking over" the direction of the study? Just what is the appropriate balance in the locus of authority shared between student and mentor? While these kinds of dilemmas arise even within a given study, they also play out *across* various practices in the institution. In ESC's varied programs – some grounded in student-designed study, others based on faculty-designed curriculum – the balance can look very different.

Another question in the realm of education philosophy, which plays out both across and within institutions of higher education, concerns the longstanding tension between the goals of equity of access and quality. Can the College continue both to broaden access and to provide to students highly individualized study and significant time with faculty? Can we continue to increase faculty student load while admitting students needing extra support? In some ways, the very mission of the College is at stake in how we respond to these questions.

Other issues arising – again, both in higher education generally and at ESC in particular – relate to education as a reproductive system and education as a force for reconstruction, an age-old question about the proper role of education in society. At ESC, as emphasized above, faculty support students' critical questioning of the systems, structures, and ideas undergirding our society while also helping students to gain the knowledge and skill to work *within* that society (a goal that often propels students' coming to ESC in the first place). And, again, the balance we strike plays out both within a given study and across programs having very different priorities and emphases. Similarly, longstanding questions related to the relative emphases on individual and community, supporting the development of each while attending to the interplay as well, are completely embedded in any teaching – whether in negotiating the goals of a given study, setting the content, or designing the learning activities.

So, too, must we walk a tightrope between treating knowledge as given and treating knowledge as constructed. It would be easy to reduce this juxtaposition to an historical claim that, for example, traditionally knowledge, accepted as given, was there to be "passed down" or that content, identified by faculty, was there to be "delivered," while from a more progressive and/or constructivist perspective, knowledge, sought through faculty/student collaboration, is constructed, as new meanings are made together. Yet such a characterization would be utterly simplistic. As with other genuinely creative tensions, there is a complex interplay here; dilemmas arise; the balance struck will vary; the context within which inquiry occurs matters.

#### *Creative Tensions: Students*

In addition, an array of tensions animate ESC's understanding of and response to students: who they are, what they bring with them to their college studies, and what they need from the institution. Five issues are especially salient.

Perhaps the most central creative tension in regard to students concerns assumptions about an adult student's so-called "independence." In keeping with a significant body of work by adult and progressive educators about the autonomy of the adult learner, ESC principles and practices have emphasized that the adult student's independence must be honored. That is, the role of the institution and the responsibility of the mentor are not to constrict, not to prejudge nor even to give direction, but to provide the terrain for and facilitate the carrying out of studies and entire degrees inspired by an independent learner who knows his/her own interests and goals. Can the autonomy of the adult learner be honored even as the institution or the individual faculty mentor recognizes the student's need for guidance, oversight, and for supervision in carrying out his/her plan? Is it ever possible to draw a clear line between supporting independence and giving direction?

A second creative tension concerns the College's (and the mentor's) awareness of the complex lives of adults, who are often juggling personal, professional and community responsibilities and obligations, and the dictates of the institution's academic structure. What creative tensions exist between, on the one hand, specific college policies regarding a student's "satisfactory academic progress" and, on the other hand, our acknowledgment of a student's need for flexibility and the faculty's need for the ability to improvise (e.g., to change the details of a study to respond to a student's changing interests or a personal or job crisis)? Can a faculty mentor acknowledge the context of an individual adult student's life and, at the same time, represent and carry out an institution's rules and requirements that could be at odds with such a student-centered spirit?

Within a relatively open-access institution such as ESC, a third creative tension which occurs frequently concerns the widely varied levels of readiness that adult students bring to their college studies. How is it possible for a progressive institution to carefully, fairly and systematically respond to such lack of college-study preparedness and still function within a student-directed model? What is the responsibility of the College? Or, put in yet another way, what does responsiveness to the individual who is deemed un- or underprepared mean in an institution that embraces student-designed study?

Fourth, students often bring to ESC years of rich professional activity, or community work, or knowledge gained as a result of personal inquiry. One could argue that at the heart of any progressive college, and particularly one like ESC that prides itself on offering students credit for what has been learned outside of a formal institutional framework, is the honoring of student experience. But how does that body of learning mesh (or not) with the deep traditions of the academy? How does a faculty member walk the tightrope of helping a student identify and describe what she knows without taking over that process? How can, for example, new and imaginative academic questions and areas of study be explored that begin with honoring the distinctive experiences of the students whom the institution is seeking to serve?

Fifth and finally, there are creative tensions arising in relation to the acknowledgement of and respect for a great range of diversities among ESC students

(whether those diversities are defined by gender, age, race, class, culture, learning styles, tastes and values, and/or personal histories) and the more generic – and perhaps narrow – expectations of performance to which the institution adheres. How can a progressive institution claim to be fair, to be transparent, to provide equal treatment, if, at the same time, it takes pride in shaping its evaluative criteria (whether these are judgments made of an individual study or of an entire degree) to the particulars of an individual or of any group of students?

*Creative Tensions: Pedagogy*

And these tensions related to underlying philosophy and to the students we serve are mirrored directly in the various models of pedagogy occurring at ESC. Put simply, theory and practice inform one another; and creative tensions arising in underlying theory and in relation to the students we serve are evident in practice as well. Thus, for example, when mentor and student begin to identify and clarify that student's interests and goals, as mentioned above, careful attention must be paid not only to the student's own purposes and passions but also to any relevant external expectations or requirements – whether of the institution, the workplace, graduate programs, or accrediting bodies. While a given study might be individualized to respond to a student's driving interests, if the student's study or preparation is to have credibility, so too must it accommodate shared expectations of knowledge in the field. Not unrelated, as noted in relation to philosophical underpinnings, there is always the delicate interplay between a dialogical, collaborative approach in which student and faculty work together, and a more didactic model in which the teacher provides expertise. At what point, in what ways, and to what extent should the mentor share particular knowledge so as not to foreclose or eclipse the student's exploration or discovery? How does the mentor both support the potential for new questions, new ways of seeing, and impart currently accepted understandings?

In study at ESC, often curriculum is emergent: As understanding is deepened, new questions arise; next steps may shift from what had been planned. How does one walk this tightrope between carrying out a well-conceived plan and staying open to new, possibly fruitful, directions? What is the optimal balance between emphasis on mastery of particular content and emphasis on attention to the learning process itself? And in regard to assessment of student work, while criteria may need to be carefully attuned to the content and learning activities of a highly individualized study, how can we also find the shared criteria for evaluating learning outcomes and for what constitutes quality?

Another creative tension in our pedagogy – which occurs both in higher education generally and at ESC, and which, at ESC, is addressed differently across programs – is the relative emphasis given to the liberal arts and sciences and to professional education. Even from one concentration to another, from one study to another, from one level to another, this balance may be differently struck. How do we incorporate into studies both critical questioning and skill development? Where, when and how

should the emphasis between liberal and professional study shift – whether within a given study, within a concentration, or over the course of preparing for a career?

Lastly in regard to our pedagogical choices, we must pay attention to students' need for connection – with the institution, their mentor, and their fellow students. At the same time that we want to honor and support our adult students' relative autonomy in their studies, we must not allow that independence to drift into isolation. Our uses of electronic media, for example, while seeking to provide for access and connection across distance, without careful attention, can also present barriers to “contact,” can result in increased feelings of both isolation and anonymity. Even working face-to-face with a mentor in an independent study can have isolating effects as the student may not have interaction with other students or the vibrant exchange of a group. Reflecting directly the theoretical tension between individual and community, how, more concretely, do we establish an appropriate balance between relatively independent, autonomous study and the stimulation and support of a group?

#### *Creative Tensions: The Institution*

It is impossible to understand the myriad ways in which creative tensions display themselves and ripple through the College without paying attention to Empire State College as an organization – to ESC as a macro-environment in which teaching and learning take place in very particular ways. A number of creative tensions stand out.

As a distributed institution with offices across the state of New York, the founders of Empire State College purposefully chose a nonresidential form in order to offer greater access to those for whom higher education was otherwise unavailable. As noted earlier, in effect, the College was constructed as an assemblage of “learning centers,” some in urban and others in more rural areas. While such an institutional architecture has provided significant flexibility and ease of access, it has also meant, over time, that faculty and staff at particular locations have developed cultures of practice responding to their often distinctive student bodies. But the beauty of such diversity – the opportunity, for example, for faculty to find their own styles, mores and procedures, and, physically distant from the College's main administrative office in Saratoga Springs, their own interpretations of College policy – has also meant that there is no single ESC “student experience.” And this inconsistency of policy implementation and of favoring certain teaching/mentoring forms over others has, at times, created a rather bumpy institutional terrain. In effect, decentralization has opened the way to significant degrees of academic freedom and experimentation and, at the same time, to challenges and complications in identifying and sustaining the institution's core, its shared identity.

And how can such a decentralized multi-centric institution ever be governed and managed? Here again, one can see creative tensions at work surrounding the pull of more conventional hierarchical academic ways and the benefits (given both the College's philosophy and the realities of its dispersed presence) of a more participatory model of decision-making. How can faculty, who on a day-to-day

basis feel their authority as decision-makers in their location, share governance with collegewide administrators, some of whom do not know particular local cultures and who are making decisions for “the College”? Who decides, and how can even a complexly layered local and collegewide committee structure (taking up everything from the faculty review process to proposing and vetting academic policies across the state), relying on those at the local level to participate actively in multiple facets of institutional life, ensure that policy mandates move forward and effectively reflect institutional expectations? On the one hand, if the College is founded on the principle of student participation in their most important educational decisions, shouldn’t such an academic ethic be mirrored in the faculty’s role in major college decisions? On the other hand, when does local decision-making, innovation, and implementation give way to a lack of clarity and/or to organizational instability?

But there also has been an even larger context. ESC, itself a decentralized institution, is part of a much larger, also decentralized institution. Critical to the very existence of Empire State College has been the fact that it is a public institution which is a part of the country’s largest state university system: The State University of New York. To what extent could (or should) ESC exist in relative autonomy, able to develop its own distinctive and alternative institutional and pedagogical ways without having its policies and procedures scrutinized by SUNY at every turn? To what extent does that scrutiny help the College as it may support both the College’s quality and legitimacy? In what specific ways has the College’s embeddedness in a huge SUNY bureaucracy and its complex budgetary systems (which themselves are tied to the erratic politics of the New York legislature) been detrimental to this nontraditional institution? With no residence halls, library buildings and sports facilities, how can ESC’s distinctive budgetary needs be understood by the SUNY system? It has been beneficial to students to be able to earn a SUNY degree and to pay state university tuition while at an unconventional institution in which they can create their own unique studies and academic programs, programs of study that would not have been possible at other SUNY institutions. But how far can ESC bend to accommodate SUNY policies and procedures without losing its distinctiveness? Is it possible for an experimenting institution to sustain its nontraditional character and still answer not only to traditional educational bureaucracies such as SUNY but also to powerful external accrediting bodies such as the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools?

#### *Creative Tensions: The Broader Context*

While our outline of creative tensions that have been evident at Empire State College from its earliest days has focused thus far mainly on its own internal dynamics, ESC has also been influenced by the broader social, economic, political and cultural milieu in which it is embedded. That is, while the College can be seen as a complex micro-world, it must also be understood as part of a macro-world that has influenced not just ESC but higher education generally at every turn.

One way in which the power of the larger social context has touched the College has been the weight of market realities. When public funding has been dramatically diminished and yet the demand for more affordable higher education is increasing, how can an institution with a mission of access and (what today might be called) educational personalization maintain itself? And further, what are the ramifications for ESC of a highly competitive market for so-called adult students not only among public institutions and within the SUNY system itself, but among private institutions and the for-profit sector? How can ESC both respond to these market realities and sustain its distinctive mission and identity?

With significant reductions in the state's direct financial contribution to SUNY and with tuition dollars thus becoming that much more critical to the basic workings of the College, ESC has been under increasing pressure to grow. How, with more students (some, younger in age without years of experiential learning; some, needing additional levels of academic support), can we sustain our highly individualized model? While for some such growth is in keeping with a larger social access mission, still the question remains, from what other source can operating expenses come besides tuition dollars? In the terms of the day, is Empire State College "scalable"?

A third tension opened up by a changing macro-world concerns new technologies that are continuously developing and omnipresent. Many of these technologies have created real and potential connections between faculty and students – across New York state, nationally and internationally. While in the College's early days individualization took the form of face-to-face student-mentor contact, now, most ESC students are formally engaged, whether using an array of electronic media to work with faculty or enrolled in a formal distance learning course, in some kind of internet-based academic work. Yet rather than being a leader in electronically mediated teaching and learning, ESC is actually struggling to stay abreast of change. With ESC and more and more of higher education turning to online learning, how can the College both take advantage of new technologies and sustain the values informing its unique pedagogies? How can we ensure choosing and making the best use of new technological innovations while maintaining attention to the individual learner and to the kinds of academic flexibilities that have been the trademark of Empire State College?

Finally, and linked to all of the creative tensions around ESC as only one institution in a much larger context, there remains a basic question: Can ESC sustain the essential elements of its pedagogical model, can it provide high quality public education for a widely diverse group of adult learners, in a world in which its progressive core runs counter to current trends, including standardization, accountability, and vocationalization, in higher education? If survival means something other than falling back on romantic educational visions of a bygone era, how can Empire State College remain a progressive institution and, at the same time, meet the demands of this society and the realities of students' lives and their personal, academic and professional needs today?

For any of these tensions related to theoretical underpinnings, students, approaches to teaching and learning, organization, and the current context within which higher education operates, the issues that arise allow us to probe our intentions, to examine our methods, to be more conscious of the choices we make and of our rationale for those choices. And while these tensions occur in any educational enterprise, in institutions of all stripes, it is the ways we choose to answer them, the balance we determine, that sets one organization apart from another and that gives an institution its identity. That is why we want to surface these tensions: to understand more deeply what we at ESC intend and achieve as a progressive institution, who we are as educators, and what will have the most significant, positive impact on our students, our society, and, indeed, our globe.

#### OVERVIEW: THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Contributing authors to this volume will be exploring these creative tensions more fully and concretely as they examine the many facets of this complex institution. Looking at such creative tensions from various angles and perspectives, these current and former Empire State College colleagues examine the College as it has evolved over time, as it currently functions, and as it grapples with ongoing questions, the answers to which will profoundly affect its future. We hope that our organizing of authors' essays directly in relation to the specific creative tensions we have identified will serve to illuminate the questions and issues at hand.

In the first section of the book, "Underlying Principles, Ideas, and Values: Perennial Questions," W. Willis' chapter "Empire State College and the Conflicted Legacy of Progressive Higher Education" first lays out three central tenets of progressive education and then examines ways in which growth, increasing emphasis on vocationalism, and standards and accountability have undermined both individualization of study and the goal of social reconstruction. In Chapter 2, "Conflict, Change, and Continuity: ESC's Goddard College and British Open University Connections," R. Bonnabeau presents the original and continuing debate between those supporting the value of broad access to well-designed courses and those advocating for highly individualized study design. And in Chapter 3, "John Dewey, Constructed Knowing, and Faculty Practice at Empire State College," X. Coulter looks more closely at Dewey's philosophy of progressive education in order to examine the degree to which ESC has developed pedagogical models and an organization that reflect these principles, and the extent to which we have been or could be such an institution.

The second section of the book takes up "Student-Centered Pedagogy: The Mentoring Model and What It Has Meant" for the learners who come to Empire State College. L. Herman's contribution (Chapter 4) focuses on the role of dialogue in ESC teaching practices and on the abiding tensions between the goals of transmitting knowledge and sustaining dialogue. In Chapter 5, "Educational Planning at Empire State College," S. Oaks examines the ways in which the calls for students to develop

their own academic plans open up ongoing tensions between “fluidity and structure” and between “process and product.” In her discussion of interdisciplinary education at ESC, in Chapter 6, L. Lander discusses the ways in which the term *interdisciplinary* has been used at ESC – the opportunities it has offered and the challenges it continues to present. And in Chapter 7, “The Cipher and Empire: Teaching and Mentoring Through Hip-Hop,” H. Gupta-Carlson explores the fascinating parallels between an experimenting academic institution and pedagogy grounded in an inventive artistic practice, both of which were created in the early 1970s.

In the third section of the book, “Let 1,000 Flowers Bloom,” which contributes further to the emerging profile of our students and the programs that serve them, authors take up questions arising in widely varying programs serving a diverse student body. Beginning with a portrait of their students at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, in Chapter 8, “‘I Don’t Write, I Work’: Writing and Reading with Trade Union Apprentices,” R. Fraser and S. Mavrogiannis discuss the rich tensions involved when faculty and students whose contexts are so different from one another are learning together. Chapter 9, by S. Logsdon and L. Guyette, explores some of the creative tensions inherent in academic support of underprepared students in a progressive individualized program model. In Chapter 10, focused on ESC’s International Program, D. Starr-Glass discusses the challenges, contradictions, and benefits involved in employing a fundamentally student-centered model when working with students of a different culture and with profoundly different experiences and expectations of schooling and higher education. And, talking about ESC’s prior learning assessment program, in Chapter 11, N. Travers digs into some of the creative tensions involved in recognizing a student’s learning gained outside of academe and locating that knowledge within a university curriculum.

The fourth section of the book focuses on the tensions related to the organization of the College – to its basic architecture and infrastructure. In Chapter 12, L. Wiley examines the complexities of this “new kind of college” (Ernest Boyer’s phrase) that has struggled to build systems around student learning and that is so widely dispersed, both geographically and administratively. Then C. Rounds (Chapter 13) reflects on “autonomy and connection” in such a physically dispersed, statewide institution. In Chapter 14, “Family Feuds, Shotgun Weddings, and a Dash of Couples Therapy,” S. Hertz, C. Leaker, R. Bonanno, and T. MacMillan uncover some of the struggles involved in developing studies that bridge disparate cultures and pedagogies and that may either complement or live in critical tension with one another. C. Conaway and C. Whann take up another facet of these tensions in Chapter 15 by pointing to the organizational challenges that come with the institution’s uneven growth. And in Chapter 16, B. Eisenberg uses the example of changes in the health care industry to point to tensions surrounding standardization and individualization in the creation of ESC’s graduate programs.

The fifth section, in which authors focus on impacts of the broader context on institutions of higher education today, begins in Chapter 17 with E. Warzala’s examination of the myriad tensions that have existed between an alternative

college, ESC, and its institutional home, the State University of New York, a large, public bureaucracy. In Chapter 18, B. Hurley discusses ESC's responses to and development and uses of changing technologies and their implications for the institution and for mentoring, teaching, and learning at the College. And in Chapter 19, concerning assessment at ESC, J. Elliott looks at the questions, challenges and creative tensions arising when a progressive institution, which offers nontraditional and interdisciplinary areas of study and means of evaluation, must address external demands for accountability and assessment.

It is our sincere hope that the 19 essays that follow, organized in relation to the creative tensions that we have identified, will shed light on the complex challenges and demands that higher education is facing today and that nontraditional institutions in particular are experiencing so acutely. We hope that what we intend as both a close and broad look at one nontraditional, public institution will be of direct relevance to institutions of higher education, whether public or private, traditional or alternative. Through such a case study, we want to identify the issues, surface the tensions, and frame the questions we must address if we are to make thoughtful, intentional choices about the organizational structures and pedagogical practices that, in the midst of extraordinary pressures and rapid change, will allow us to sustain our progressive vision and best serve our students and society.

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