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9. A PROGRESSIVE INSTITUTION TAKES ON ACADEMIC SUPPORT, 21ST CENTURY STYLE

INTRODUCTION

Each semester, faculty and academic professionals in colleges and universities across the country encounter students who require academic support to be successful in their studies. These students oftentimes come reluctantly to that support. Typically, the student is singled out through various placement exams, or through diagnostic testing, or, after the semester is underway and the course instructor recognizes a problem with the student's performance. The student is then either diverted into remedial courses or encouraged – and in some cases required – to engage in academic support provided by the college or university's tutoring center. However, they arrive, or in whatever manner they engage, college students are increasingly finding themselves consigned to some type of academic support.

This trend has not gone without notice, and in May of 2012, the State University of New York formed a SUNY Remediation Task Force "to determine how a collaborative effort between SUNY and K-12 school districts across New York can best alleviate the need for remedial education at the college level" (SUNY, 2012). The SUNY system is not alone in its attention to this issue. Recent data collected across Connecticut's 12 community colleges, for example, show that approximately 70 percent of students enroll in at least one remedial course during their first year of college (Fain, 2012a, para. 3). And more than 50 percent of students entering Maine's community college system place into at least one remedial course (Lawrence, 2012). Nationally, 40 percent of all students entering college now require some kind of remedial course work, and 60 percent of students enrolling in community colleges require remediation (Complete College America, n.d.). Further, very recent data suggest that almost four out of 10 students who enroll in remedial course work fail to complete those remedial courses (Mangan, 2014, para. 1). These numbers are staggering, and voices in support of, and in opposition to, remedial, or developmental, education have begun to weigh in. The State University at San Marcos, Texas, for example, in response to this trend, has recently launched Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs to prepare the Developmental Education scholar and practitioner. On the other side of the issue are such groups as Complete College America, who argue that remediation in its current form is not effective and should be abolished. Indeed, there is data to support both sides of this provocative issue, depending on who's presenting it. Progressive institutions like Empire State College (ESC), that serve, in large part,

the nontraditional student, face the same academic support challenges as traditional institutions and community colleges across the country. And those challenges are only growing, as adult learners increasingly decide to return to college to earn a degree.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), adult learners make up 39 percent of the undergraduate population in the U.S. (Plageman, 2011, para 1). The challenge of how best to serve our nontraditional students who need academic support is the focus of this chapter. While specific data on this special, but growing, group is hard to find, we know that our adult learners return to college after having been away from an academic setting, in most cases, for a number of years. Many of our adult learners arrive eager to earn the degree, but are ill equipped with the skills or the time that it takes to be successful in their course work. For a progressive institution like Empire State College with a nearly open admissions policy, the challenge has been to find ways to meet the diverse, and growing, needs of the nontraditional student, and to remain true to the college's mission of valuing and privileging individualized, self-directed learning that occurs in collaboration with a faculty mentor. Moreover, when the various modes of study for which the college is known are juxtaposed against the characteristics of its student population, a tension results that must be acknowledged.

Unlike a traditional setting where students meet with a faculty member two to three times a week with prescribed topics and classroom activities, nontraditional students in an independent learning model meet with faculty on a far less frequent basis. In many cases, there is a two to three-week period between meetings. While online courses at ESC may be more structured, often the same space exists between deadlines. Learning activities such as research, reading, paper development, interviews, applied learning, etc. are developed collaboratively with a faculty member and are designed to meet the student's learning goals. While there is guidance in the identification of these activities, the student is expected to work independently to develop a schedule and process for completing the activities. Formative evaluation, which might be rendered via e-mail or a phone conversation, often occurs every few weeks versus every few days. This model, praised for its attention to individualization and independence is refreshing for many nontraditional learners. It allows these students much more control over their own learning and the ability to move at a pace that best suits them.

However, the underlying assumption in this model is that all learners are equipped with the skills to operate independently. For example, a student who is asked to research a topic and write an eight to ten page paper needs to be able to develop a research question, adopt a research strategy that includes identifying and navigating appropriate research databases, draw upon higher order critical thinking skills to evaluate the research for its appropriateness to the topic, develop an organizational framework based on the research findings, integrate sources into the paper, and ultimately present a successful research project. Throughout the process, the student is assumed to have skills in academic research, critical thinking, college-level

reading, college-level writing, and time management. Yet, as the statistics indicate, many students arrive with academic skills that suggest a need for remediation. And while much of the available data on remediation is largely focused on the community college learner, who may or may not be required to engage in a research project, these statistics nonetheless apply here at ESC. Indeed, nontraditional learners who make their way to community colleges are, in many cases, the same learners that progressive, four-year institutions like SUNY Empire State College serve. In other words, though most of the available data on college readiness focus on the community college learner, that learner is, in many cases, the very learner that nontraditional four-year institutions like ESC are engaged in serving. And those students who seek the bachelor's degree will be required to demonstrate competency in these higher order skills. Thus we increasingly find that one of the College's central goals – of supporting independent learning – is at odds with the very learner we serve: the learner who often arrives underprepared in reading, writing or math skills; the learner who comes with the challenge of learning disabilities; the learner burdened by the competing demands of career and child or elder care.

How then does an institution address these challenges while continuing to value self-directed learning that relies on the student's independence in his or her study? How does an institution like ESC take on academic support initiatives that support that student's learning and do not detract from the specialized mentoring relationship that happens here? How and where, when we have such a diverse group of learners in a distributed college environment, do we situate the learning, demonstrate the learning, and provide support for multiple modes of learning in relation to specified academic standards?

This chapter seeks to explore the inherent tensions and challenges of serving underprepared, nontraditional students and to answer these questions by examining the evolution and practice of an academic support initiative that removes many of the traditional barriers that students in other colleges and universities face. By bringing academic support to the student, to the syllabus and to the student's learning experience, this initiative, which we call Embedded Academic Support, takes on a unique form here at Empire State College, as it promotes collaboration between faculty and the academic support professional, can be applied across academic disciplines, and can be used to support various learners and various learning styles.

A NEW FORMAL ACADEMIC SUPPORT ROLE

According to the most recent data, Empire State College serves just over 19,000 learners at 35 locations across New York state, online, and at eight international locations around the world. The average age of students is reported as 36, although academic support professionals have worked with students ranging from age 18 to 75. A little less than two-thirds of the students of the students are female. Nearly 35 percent of students identify as being minority or multi-racial status (SUNY Empire State College, 2014–2015).

While age, race and gender may provide a snapshot of the student population, these factors alone do not describe an adult or nontraditional learner. Choy (2002) defines a nontraditional learner as one who has any of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education; part-time attendance; financial independence from parents; full-time work; having dependents other than a spouse; being a single parent having no high school diploma or GED. In most cases, the Empire State College student meets one or more of those criteria. According to recent data, part-time enrollment at Empire State College was approximately 60 percent of total enrollment. Financial aid grants were awarded to 20,725 students and 11,054 received loans suggesting both need and financial independence (SUNY Empire State College, 2014–2015). Marital and dependent status is more difficult to capture, and the only data collection is through financial aid applications, which record only those who choose to apply for aid. Empire State College's current admissions requirement mandates that students provide evidence of a completed high school diploma or GED. However, what is perhaps more interesting is the low number of students who arrive at Empire as first- time freshmen, defined as having no prior higher education experience. In 2014–15, first-time freshmen were only 1 percent of the ESC population, suggesting that most students may have previously attempted, and in some cases completed, some form of higher education (Student Achievement Measure, n.d.).

Yet, still, these characteristics do not fully describe the Empire State College learner. For a more apt description, one must turn to the faculty and staff who work with the students each day. Asked to describe the "typical learner" at Empire, the most likely response is "it depends." Each learner at the college is viewed as an individual with his or her own unique needs, circumstances and goals. A single parent with a modest income and two children, for example, may have limited academic skills, but may also have a substantive support network that will allow her to persist in her studies and eventually earn her degree. Another student may have strong academic skills, but no support network to step in when a child or elderly parent becomes ill, forcing the priorities of that adult learner to shift away from academic study, resulting in abandoned coursework. Yet another example might include a successful CEO who returns to college to complete a lifelong goal of earning a degree, but who is unfamiliar with academic writing. A refresher writing study is recommended but due to her perceived status – she is after all the head of her company – she chooses not to enroll in the writing study and becomes frustrated when her paper is returned with feedback on how to improve her writing skills. Meanwhile, in the next office, a student is working closely with his mentor. He simply wants to learn, and knows his writing skills need development. He participates in every academic support opportunity, meets regularly with his mentor and actively seeks out anything he can do to improve his ability to succeed in college. And, finally, there is the student who arrives at Empire, goal-driven, academically strong and with a solid support network. This student seeks an independent path, and the mentor acts as a guide, fostering opportunities for the student to independently demonstrate his learning.

All of these scenarios and more are possible at Empire State College. Although it is tempting to dismiss these scenarios as anecdotal, they are reflective of the core value of the College – that each learner deserves to be viewed as an individual, in terms of both needs and goals.

This core value of prioritizing the focus on the individual, central to Empire's mission, is admirable. Yet, support of this model has required significant resources. The student's mentor, described in previous chapters in this volume, is central to a student's experience and success. But despite the significance of the student-mentor relationship, it is tremendously challenging, and perhaps not even possible, for one person to meet all of the academic needs of each student. Therefore, in 2007, the College made a significant change to its staffing model and added seven Directors of Academic Support (DAS) to its ranks of professional employees. Located at each of the major centers in New York state, including the Center for Distance Learning (CDL), each Director was tasked with developing both local and statewide academic programming services to support the growing student needs at the college.

In a traditional college or university, this undertaking would be substantial, but there would be models to emulate. National organizations such as the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), the National Association of Developmental Education (NADE), and the National Tutoring Association (NTA) among others have large networks and large data banks of "best practices" when establishing a learning center and related programming. While the requisite challenges of establishing any new department would exist, there would also be a strong data set to which one could refer in arguing for support, in terms of both funding and programming format. At Empire State College, however, several unique conditions challenged this approach.

At many campus-based universities, there is a central learning center which provides traditional tutoring in core academic subjects. Tutoring may take on many forms such as individual, peer or group, but the learning center itself has a visible presence on campus. Increasingly, some tutoring has been integrated into specific academic departments, particularly those areas defined as high-risk. Again the services are campus-based with an identifiable presence, whether it be through signage, web-presence or printed materials. As simple as it sounds, the absence of a central location has created significant challenges to developing academic support initiatives at Empire State College. While separate regional locations shared the College's mission, policies and commitment to independent learning, each center had developed its own culture and interpretation of those policies. So, while the core practice might be the same – students designing their academic programs, pursuing studies and completing a degree – the process of how they did so was at times quite different among the various locations. Given the College's model of individual and independent learning, the diversity of approaches is not all that surprising. But for developing academic support initiatives, it created some challenges.

The first challenge was establishing the DAS role in each region. The answer seemed simple enough: support students with their academic development to provide

them with the best opportunity for success. But how? While it was a collegewide initiative to hire a cohort of seven Directors of Academic Support, each regional center was responsible for hiring its own DAS, and that DAS reported to the dean at each individual center. The first cohort of DAS was comprised of six women and one man, with academic qualifications that ranged from Ph.D.s and an Ed.D. to an M.S., an M.A. and an MFA. Some members of the cohort had extensive experience in teaching, particularly in the areas of reading and writing, and some had more administrative experience, even at the dean's level. Hired as professional employees with concurrent academic rank, the position was defined as nonteaching faculty, yet the academic rank and responsibilities suggested some expectation of mentoring (and teaching) students. While administrative and instructional roles are frequently integrated in the academic support field, such an integration was not a typical practice at ESC, and was met with varying response.

As the first cohort of DAS began their positions, some were met with the suspicion that this new role would undermine, or usurp, the important student-mentor relationship. Others were met with sighs of relief that finally there was someone to deal with all of the "problem students." Still other DAS were welcomed as equal voices and immediately integrated into committee structures and academic decision-making roles. It was a delicate balancing act first to learn the culture of each center and then to gauge how quickly, or in some cases how slowly, to proceed. Quite simply, time was required to establish relationships and build trust with faculty and staff colleagues before a voice and role for academic support could be developed.

The first DAS cohort also faced the internal difficulty of creating good will and trust among members of the cohort, all the while working at a distance. Yet this group found a way to work closely and collaboratively, through bi-weekly conference calls and taking advantage of every opportunity to meet together, face-to-face. It might also be argued that the diversity of professional backgrounds and interests of each DAS actually contributed to the climate of good will and the sharing of resources. For example, expertise that one DAS might be lacking to respond to a particular need at her center could easily be requested of a fellow DAS at another center, sometimes hundreds of miles away.

However, the road to building collegewide academic support services was not entirely a smooth one. Initial efforts were less successful not just because of some of the challenges listed above, but also because each DAS had both a local direct reporting relationship with a regional dean and a dotted line reporting relationship with the collegewide Office of Academic Support. This model frequently resulted in competing priorities, with collegewide directives often conflicting with regional centers' priorities. It was clear that a change in the leadership model was necessary to realize the full-potential the college's investment in academic support. Therefore, in 2009, the Collegewide Office of Academic Support was replaced with a self-governing model whereby co-conveners were elected from the cohort. With this model, DAS collaborated to leverage the resources within the

group, set collegewide priorities and identify implementation plans that accounted for regional differences. This shift in the leadership model created a sense of shared ownership and the group was able to successfully develop and implement a number of academic support initiatives, not least of which is the Embedded Academic Support initiative.

Assessing student need was yet another challenge. The individualized nature of study, combined with the vastly different environments of the regional centers, created varied learning environments across the state. For example, some regional centers were in largely metropolitan centers, others were in wealthy suburban areas and yet others were in extremely rural communities. And CDL presented an additional challenge as its environment was entirely online. Why does this variation matter? Depending on a given location, the majority of students may have graduated from underserved urban districts, while in another area the majority may have come from highly funded, high performing school districts. In one location, a single community college may be the only other higher education institution, while in another location, 12 colleges, including multiple community colleges, may be within an hour's drive. While one could argue that every college has a diversity of learners, the range of educational preparedness across the geographic regions was significant and at times meant that the emphasis for meeting the needs of a majority of learners varied greatly from one site to another. In fact, in some cases, these differences created competing demands for resources and focus between locations.

Because Empire State College students are all commuters, the frequency and availability of transportation cannot be ignored. Transportation has an impact on access, and opportunities for on-site academic support programming may be limited, at best. For urban students, it can mean hours on public transportation. For more rural students, it can require a significant investment in gas and a reliable vehicle. For those students who need additional support, added transportation requirements can often be an impediment to their success. These challenges are especially relevant for those students who continue to work while attending college. In addition, the high number of students who qualify for grant-funded aid suggests limited financial resources for many students. Lastly, in addition to the regional centers, CDL also had a unique set of challenges. While transportation issues may not affect these students, access to and familiarity with technology is a significant variable when assessing student need.

Therefore, unlike traditional academic support models where needs assessment may be broken down by cohort or by departmental boundaries, needs assessment at Empire State College had to be considered by geographic area. Student profiles, educational opportunity and access, and faculty and staff resources all needed to be evaluated locally before any college wide discussions could begin. The results – not surprisingly – suggested that to be successful, academic support needed to be nimble to adjust for major variations in educational preparedness, geographic locations, and students' resource and financial limitations. The development of programs and

services has needed to have variations both in levels and points of access in order to be replicable across the state.

The next significant challenge – limited budget support – is perhaps not unique to Empire State College. While the College made an important financial investment in hiring its Directors of Academic Support, funding for additional programming was virtually nonexistent. Despite hopes for grant funding to expand the initiative, Empire State College's unique distributed learning model did not fit the requirements for many traditional funding streams, such as a Title III Student Support Services Grant. While some initial funds were allotted for professional development, program funding was restricted to an online tutorial service that served a small segment of the college's population. In the beginning, most Directors were asked to provide direct service while also developing local and statewide resources. In more recent years, minimal funding has been released for Learning Coaches, who provide direct tutoring service. However, these resources are very small in comparison to student need and demand. Peer tutoring programs are on the rise with established programs at two of the centers, but even those programs do not address the more complex needs of students who may be woefully underprepared, restricted in their ability to attend additional sessions, and insecure about their capabilities within their studies.

Each of these challenges – uncertainty about the role of academic support in a mentor-student learning model; differing educational preparedness of students; the geographic variable; and limited resources in terms of both finances and time – presented an environment which challenged the traditional role of academic support. And, one more important dynamic, although perhaps not unique to Empire, also emerged. There is often a variation among faculty regarding how to measure progression of student learning – especially in introductory level courses. For some faculty, a student's demonstration of learning is measured primarily by "content knowledge" regardless of how that information is presented. For example, if a student can describe his or her learning through oral discourse, then the ability to show this same content knowledge with a written document may be less important, especially early in a student's time with the college. Indeed, how far the student has progressed in her learning, or how facile she is in discussing the content of the course, has often mattered more to faculty than if that student has, for example, properly cited her sources and demonstrated the use of correct grammar and punctuation. For other faculty, demonstration of learning must include not only content knowledge, but also college-level academic skills, particularly in the area of writing. In this case, the ability to follow traditional conventions of college-level papers and the content of the paper may be given equal weight in assessment; in some cases, a poorly written paper may negate the value of any demonstrated content knowledge. The reasons for these varying perspectives are numerous and not the focus of this chapter, but the tensions related to this difference have existed and created yet another dimension that has had to be accounted for within academic support initiatives.

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RETHINKING THE ROLE OF REMEDIATION

Given the unique learners and the unique conditions outlined in this chapter, the Directors of Academic Support have explored some of the traditional approaches to serving the underprepared or nontraditional learner, including, for example, mandating that students sit for placement testing in writing and, in some cases, mathematics, and advising poor performing students to take remedial writing courses. This practice is typical in most postsecondary institutions. In fact, in 2011, the National Assessment Governing Board reported that in a survey of 1560 postsecondary institutions, 71 percent reported using some mathematics test and 53 percent reported using some reading test in evaluating student need for remediation in those two subject domains. The majority of postsecondary education institutions use student performance on tests in determining entering students' need for remedial courses in mathematics and reading (Fields & Parsad, 2011). However, the DAS were concerned about this practice, and placement tests continue to be challenged in terms of their accuracy and efficacy in predicting student success. In a recent study by the Community College Research Center, high school grades were found to be much better predictors of student success than placement tests. "Placement tests are associated with severe error rates; three out of every ten test takers is either assigned to developmental education, despite being predicted to get at least a B in college-level English, or assigned to college-level English, despite being predicted to fail the course. Again, these results are in stark contrast with those of high school GPA, which yields error rates half as big" (Belfield & Crosta, 2012, p. 39). Yet not only placement tests may be problematic; using high school records as a predictor of success has been problematic at Empire State College as well. Given that the average age of the Empire State College student is 36 and that the student is likely to have had some previous college experience, high school records were both distant and often less relevant as they were eclipsed by experience at other postsecondary institutions. Thus, an alternative to traditional placement testing needed to be explored.

In addition to the questions surrounding placement testing, the DAS uncovered data suggesting that the effectiveness of developmental education is unclear. Increasingly, remediation is being questioned by practitioners and theorists in the field. It's unclear if developmental courses improve student outcomes, and some longitudinal studies suggest that students who take traditional pre-college level courses are unlikely to complete college. In reviewing "Achieving the Dream" (a nongovernmental reform movement focused on community college student success), Bailey (2009) noted less than one-quarter of community college students who enroll in developmental education complete a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment in college (p. 5).

Much of the literature around development education has argued that these outcomes can be explained as a result of poor preparation. But another way to analyze what's contributing to the failure of under-prepared students in developmental courses is to consider the typical conditions in the approach. Oftentimes the under-

prepared student is segregated from the mainstream student population and shuffled into noncredit-bearing studies that teach skills development in isolation from content-rich, credit-bearing courses. This approach sets up a number of barriers to success, starting first with the isolation of these students from other "good" and/ or "smart" students, suggesting to them from the outset that they are not "college material." This approach is additionally problematic because we then leave it up to the under-prepared student to determine how to transfer the knowledge and skills learned in isolation to content rich, credit-bearing courses in subsequent semesters. And lastly, the skills addressed in many of these developmental courses are often focused on the most basic level and not necessarily on the understanding and skill needed for college and for readiness to undertake independent application. According to research by Grubb et al. (2011) developmental courses typically involve "drill and practice … on small sub-skills … that most students have been taught many times before, in decontextualized ways that fail to clarify to students the reasons for or the importance of these sub-skills" (pp. 20–21).

In a review of the literature, the DAS began to question if traditional remediation really contributes to successful degree completion or if, in fact, it might impede it. The one-size-fits-all approach to learning has never worked at an institution like Empire State College, and that fact has certainly been applicable to academic support. The models that the directors developed had to be flexible and individualized, both in terms of their delivery mode – online, face-to-face, peer tutors, professional learning coaches – and in terms of the studies they enhanced. Academic support had to be integrated into introductory and advanced level studies, across all academic disciplines, and in courses that students engaged in through independent study, and traditional classroom settings, as well as through the Center for Distance Learning. In addition, academic support models had to recognize that not all faculty prioritized academic skills development as part of the progression of student learning. Finally, academic support models also needed to support underprepared students in a largely unstructured environment.

Thus, a new model of academic support emerged and was supported by three important tenets. First, academic support would be provided in *partnership* with the student and faculty member. Second, the support would be *embedded* in, not added on to, existing learning experiences in a variety of courses and modes of study. Lastly, the embedded support would make use of existing resources because there was no expectation that those resources would increase. From these tenets, the concept of "Embedded Academic Support," which included collaboration with faculty to integrate academic support and skill building directly into their credit-bearing courses, was developed.

EMBEDDED ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Academic Support can and should take many forms. It can include requiring students to make appointments at a tutoring center or, at Empire State College, with a learning

coach. It can include having the student work with a peer tutor, which the literature might represent as Supplemental Instruction. It can also take the form of required attendance in academic support workshops or labs, which in some cases is referred to as the "split credit model," most often seen in science courses that require a linked, credit-bearing lab. And sometimes it can include requiring students to enroll in a noncredit course concurrent with the credit-bearing one, an approach sometimes referred to in the literature as the "Co-requisite Course Model" (Goudas & Boylan, 2012).

While some may argue that these elements exist at many institutions, the Empire State College approach is an *embedded* academic support model that includes all of the above, an initiative that has striven to be as diverse in its approach as the students and courses it supports. Instead of choosing one or two approaches and applying them broadly to multiple programs or departments, this model has allowed the faculty mentor, the academic support professional, and in some cases the student to select a model which best fits the individual learner.

Certainly there were challenges at first, most of which we detailed earlier in this chapter. Indeed, much of the early work of the DAS was centered around community building within the DAS group, and trust building with faculty mentors at the regional centers. The trust that the directors worked to build with faculty then needed to be deepened and expanded. True embedded academic support requires full integration of academic support into the content of the credit-bearing study. This meant that the directors had to work collaboratively with individual faculty as they designed their studies and drafted their learning contracts. Collaboration of this kind requires trust, and the investment of time at the beginning of the project. The first step was in identifying willing faculty partners, instead of studies, as good opportunities for embedded support. As the directors later discovered, employing the embedded support model in upper- and lower division courses worked for all learners at all levels across varied academic disciplines. But the earliest goal was in finding willing faculty with whom to collaborate.

For some directors, those partners were easily identified and persuaded to participate in the pilot. Other directors had to work more diligently to find faculty collaborators. Still other directors faced a skeptical faculty who wanted to wait and see how this effort worked at other centers around the college before they decided to make a commitment to the project. Yet it soon became clear that embedded academic support was working. Faculty who participated in the embedded academic support pilot reported both anecdotally and through local center surveys that the experience was beneficial to the student, beneficial to the course, and beneficial to faculty. Students also reported that having academic support as part of the study itself contributed to less anxiety about completing assignments and less need for revision of those assignments. In addition, they said that it was helpful to have an additional person to turn to. As these data was shared at the local level during monthly regional center meetings and collegewide during meetings at our coordinating center in Saratoga Springs, additional faculty agreed to come on board.

Still, the Embedded Academic Support initiative did not expand as rapidly as expected. While some of the skepticism around collaboration with the DAS to embed academic support has to do with trust, it also has to do with territory. Course and curriculum development is sacred faculty domain, and the faculty mentors at Empire State College extend that authority and autonomy to include the wide range of their mentees' needs. The relationship each mentor has with his or her students is an important part of mentoring and teaching at Empire. As Zachary (2005) defines it, mentoring the adult learner "is a reciprocal and collaborative learning responsibility between two or more individuals who share mutual responsibility and accountability for helping a mentee work toward achieving clear and mutually defined learning goals" (p. 3). Indeed, the mentor essentially functions as a facilitator of knowledge acquisition, guiding the student to discover and pursue his or her own learning. Early faculty collaborators in this embedded academic support project had to struggle to make space in this close working relationship for another voice, particularly the voice of the academic support professional who had come in on a wave of change at this institution.

There were changes occurring at the highest level of the SUNY system, changes in leadership at ESC, and changes driven by technology and a push to measure student learning. Suddenly there were discussions happening center- and collegewide about academic quality, standards and assessment, and these resulted in a creative tension between valuing mentors' ability to individualize a student's study design and focusing on the progress their students were making in this new landscape of measurement of academic skills development.

In addition, faculty were seeing their students struggle with many of the challenges outlined earlier. Their students had always had the competing demands of home and career, and the challenges of financing their education, but increasingly it became clear that students were also struggling with the academic demands of pursuing a college degree. Faculty wondered how they could function as a facilitator of learning in their field when many of the student's basic skills were lacking or missing altogether. Faculty lamented the time lost to addressing those skills, time that some felt could be more productively spent on teaching content and developing new studies.

On the other side of the equation was the student who had decided to return to college during a period of profound change in higher education in general, and specifically at ESC. Students had to make choices about the different ways to engage in learning – guided independent study; face-to-face study groups; and online learning, for example – and they had to engage an institutional context that was significantly driven by new academic technologies. Degree programs were planned online; supplemental materials, if not entire courses, were found online; there was no brick and mortar library, instead one located on the web; and the Bursar and Registrar were all online. Attitudes towards teaching and learning were changing, and technology was changing how and when our students engaged in their studies and with their mentor. Both student and mentor, even in the regional centers, were

feeling a fundamental shift in how they interacted. If ever there was an opportunity to try something new, it was now.

Yet before the directors could try an embedded academic support approach, there was another valued practice at Empire State College to address, and that was the reluctance to make things mandatory or required of students. So much of the learning that happens at ESC is based on the primary tenet of adult learning theory – that adult learners are internally motivated and self-directed (Knowles, 1970, p. 10). However, what the early effort of this embedded support initiative showed was that most students did not engage in the embedded learning opportunities unless those activities were written into their learning contracts as *required* learning activities. While the reasons for student reluctance could well be explained by some of the competing demands for their time, and the fact that the student often had to make a choice between something pressing at home or at the office and something that was presented as optional in their courses, still early efforts showed that across the regional centers most students chose not to participate. This reluctance extended to courses across the disciplines at both the introductory and advanced levels. And that did not change until the directors and faculty changed their approach to how those learning opportunities were presented to students. Once again, a fundamental shift was occurring. Learning contracts in which academic support had been embedded now outlined not only the required texts, and the required reading and writing assignments, but also the required participation in specified learning activities that included academic support programming.

Part of the process of implementing the embedded academic support pilot was to think about how to assess it. A critical part of that assessment was for the academic support professional and the faculty partner to meet at the end of the term. This meeting included a discussion about what worked and what needed to be changed, and it provided an opportunity for the academic support professional to review examples of student work. In fact, during one pilot, a study in which academic support had been embedded required the student to submit her completed assignment – in this case an annotated bibliography – to the academic support professional for grading. The score was calculated based on a rubric provided by the faculty member. That score was then forwarded to the faculty member to be included in the calculation of the student's final grade. Each of the directors who participated in the early pilot relied on feedback from faculty on student performance, and feedback from students who had engaged in the support activities. As the pilot moved into the implementation phase, students and faculty collaborators completed an evaluation form developed by the DAS.

And thus the embedded academic support initiative took hold at several regional centers. In the western part of the state, for example, in locations that served a mix between urban and rural areas, embedded academic support was piloted in a number of different ways. First it took on the form of a split course model which is most closely connected with the academic support concept of "supplemental instruction." Traditionally, supplemental instruction employs students who have previously

completed a course to lead study sessions where students who are currently taking the course "compare notes, discuss readings, develop organizational tools, and predict test items. Students learn how to integrate course content and study skills while working together" (UMKC International Center for Supplemental Instruction, n.d., What is Supplemental Instruction section, para. 1). The goal of supplemental instruction is most often better test preparation in high challenge courses. While tests are rarely used at Empire State College, the concept of developing or reinforcing other academic skills through supplemental sessions seemed promising.

This was attempted in two ways. At the Genesee Valley Center, a traditional four-credit statistics study was replaced with a faculty member mentoring three credits and a learning coach mentoring a one credit connected lab. Together, the faculty member and the learning coach identified the academic skills necessary to be successful in the statistics study. They each provided content, but within the lab, necessary academic skills development was either introduced or reinforced. Students who arrived with skill deficits and who may have struggled with the study were given more intensive support and, as a result, experienced success in the course. Those students who did not need remedial assistance were given opportunities to work with the mentor on more advanced concepts within the study during the lab time.

At the nearby Central New York Center, the DAS and a faculty member also partnered to work together on a statistics study. In their model, the students completed the traditional study, but the DAS also attended the study meetings and then held weekly recitation sessions where the learning was reinforced through additional explanations and practice models. In this model, the recitation sessions were not mandatory for all, but there was an expectation that if assistance was needed, the student would utilize this element of the study. While it is still early, initial indicators suggest a sharp increase in the completion rate for statistics studies in both these models.

The Hudson Valley Center, which is located just north of New York City and serves a diverse population, both racially and economically, took a different approach. Using the web-based Elluminate platform, the faculty and DAS embedded an online workshop that addressed information literacy and instruction on how to prepare the annotated bibliography. The results proved immediately positive. Students were required to participate in one of two scheduled online workshops that lasted 90 minutes. One workshop was scheduled for the noon hour on one day, and the next workshop was scheduled in the evening on a different day. Students chose the time that best met their work and family needs. During the online workshop, students were "taken" to the college's online library and shown how to find appropriate scholarly material to inform their research and to be included in the annotated bibliography. After that, students looked at sample annotated bibliographies on the OWL at Purdue and the Diana Hacker websites. The faculty partner reported a dramatic improvement in the quality of the completed assignments from those students who participated in the workshop. This immediately translated into less time that the faculty member had to spend evaluating, and correcting, the annotated bibliography assignment. Equally

important was that students reported satisfaction with the workshop experience and an appreciation for being led through the process and given examples of the annotated bibliography to model. Students also reported satisfaction with having an extra person to go to for questions and additional support. One might argue as well that the positive experience that students reported with embedded academic support also has an impact on retention, but it is too early in the implementation phase to make that claim.

Because early efforts were so successful at the Hudson Valley Center, additional faculty partners were easily recruited and academic support efforts were expanded to include embedded workshops in a range of introductory and advanced level studies, including workshops on academic writing, APA and MLA citation styles, time management, developing the dual entry journal, writing the research paper and writing article abstracts. In this model, the faculty member worked in partnership with the Director of Academic Support to assess the appropriate workshop level for students in the study. In addition, the Center set up a center-wide Turnitin.com account for student use as a way for students to educate themselves about plagiarism and how to avoid it. Roughly half of the faculty at the Center now require students to use the Turnitin account, and currently most of the full-time faculty include some form of embedded academic support in their credit bearing studies.

Other Empire State College locations have also successfully integrated academic support into their studies. And they have taken slightly different approaches. In some study groups, a writing coach was involved from the start, which meant that students had ready access to support with their writing. The coach was also there to help scaffold skills as the students progressed through the term and took on more challenging assignments. Individual help was also provided as the need arose, while mini-workshops were created if more than one student had similar needs. This model was also used in online content studies where peer tutors were accessible through a link in the online study space. Other studies required mandatory participation in workshops held outside of regularly scheduled classroom time. Those workshops were offered as in-person activities, or via the new web-based platform, Collaborate. Still other studies required the use of Smarthinking, an online tutoring service to which the college subscribes; or the use of Turnitin.com.

What all of these studies had in common is that the support activities were embedded into the content of the study and were represented in the learning contract as required learning activities. Also important to remember is that embedded academic support allowed for assistance to the student at the time that it was needed and the student was ready to work on the new (or forgotten) skill. The literature supports this approach, commonly referred to as "just in time tutoring," as an effective way to enhance student learning (Fain, 2012b). This approach directly addressed student concerns about that assistance being an "extra" requirement, as it had immediate relevance to their success in the study.

When serving a diverse adult learner population, as Empire State College does, it is important to consider not only the obstacles referred to earlier in this chapter,

but also the physical barriers that often impede access to academic support. At many colleges and universities, the tutoring center is located in a building separate from the one in which the students take their courses. This means that students must seek out and locate the space, navigate a directory of personnel different from those with whom they have previously engaged, and, perhaps most importantly, present himself as students "in need." This could be particularly problematic, for example, for the affronted CEO used as an example earlier in this chapter. In fact, while Empire State College serves a number of high level professionals who have been successful in their careers and whose pursuit of a degree is driven entirely through internal motivation, the College also serves people in middle management as well as blue collar workers and parents whose circumstance has kept them out of the work force and who may be enrolled in college out of necessity. What's important is that so many of these students have been successful in their careers and in their efforts to raise children and manage households. It is not hard to imagine what it must feel like to one of these students who has been singled out for academic support, who has been taken aside by a faculty member and told that she has a "problem." It is true that learners need to be made aware of their limitations and to address their deficiencies. But many students at ESC are successfully writing their professional reports and managing their business's bottom line, only to be told that they need help with writing or help with math once they get here. That is why supporting these learners through an embedded academic support model is so important. It removes the stigma and the barriers to getting that support. The successful CEO participates in the required workshop in academic writing, for example, or information literacy, along with everyone else with whom she is participating in the study. And as the successful CEO progresses through her degree program and into more advanced level studies, she will engage in higher level skill building with the other students, as the embedded support grows and adapts to the needs of the particular study and the learners involved.

CONCLUSION: RE-ENVISIONING ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Academic support programming must be nimble in order to meet the demands of its incoming learners. A menu of options must be available so that support is customized to the student need. Scholarly articles, op-ed pieces and blogs are choked with voices bemoaning the failure of public schools to graduate students with the basic skills that prepare them for college. Other voices debate who in higher education – the community college or the four-year institution – is best equipped to provide remediation and support to these underprepared students, a debate that sometimes also includes English Language Learners (ELL) and students with learning disabilities. Then, of course, as this chapter has detailed, there is debate among academic support professionals about which approach best serves the record number of underprepared students arriving in our classrooms, eager to earn a degree.

And that national debate is intensified at Empire State College because its adult learner population has the added burden of the competing demands of child rearing and elder care, and, thanks in large part to the technological revolution, careers that increasingly require round the clock attention. Accompanying all these demands is the increased emphasis in higher education on measurement and assessment that has affected how a progressive institution like Empire State College serves its students.

To be truly nimble, to meet student need, and to maintain the core commitment to individualized learning, traditional academic support needs constantly to be re-envisioned. The seamless integration of academic support within a student's learning experience creates opportunities as opposed to barriers for success. Intentional partnering between students, faculty and academic support professionals is progressive simply because it removes the traditional boundaries created by separate learning centers and promotes student success as a shared goal. And, true to Empire State College's approach, these partnerships around embedded academic support are progressive because they signal a respect for all members in the learning community, regardless of academic preparedness. Each member arrives with individual expertise and experiences which are a respected and important part of the learning process, and all members of the learning community participate equally in the support services that are integrated into the curriculum.

For students, the integration of academic support within studies places the learning within the context of the course. The development of academic skills is not seen as an additional burden, but rather a central expectation for the study. Support for skills development is not an extra activity, nor does accessing resources require another call or appointment. In this integrated model, students naturally create relationships with academic support professionals, thereby eliminating the stigma typically associated with "extra help" or tutoring centers.

It could appear that this model is resource-heavy, but in fact, it is likely simply to shift where the resources are allotted. By shifting academic support into students' studies and out of stand-alone centers, assistance is provided early in a student's time at the college and across multiple learning experiences. This model also allows faculty and academic support professionals to pilot a variety of approaches. In addition, this model clarifies the role of academic support and encourages students to continually build their academic skills.

As Empire State College continues to move forward as an innovator in higher education, it is now joined by the new voice of academic support. Intellectual exchange regarding academic skills development takes place not by announcement, but rather through conversation about the design of learning experiences. As we engage in that conversation and work to broaden our embedded academic support initiative, we have begun to wonder about the impact of technology on skills building and on new opportunities for academic support. Does the technological revolution, for example, change the expected skill set of today's students? Does embedded academic support work as effectively when delivered solely in an online environment? How much more effective – if at all – is the synchronous delivery of online support over

archived sessions that are individually, and perhaps even passively, engaged? How does academic support – embedded or otherwise – change to meet the needs of a busy global community that increasingly values and demands services that are "in and out"? These are just some of the questions that are emerging as students engage in studies not bound by a specific time, place or space in a physical building. In this rapidly changing environment, embedded academic support is responsive and innovative and therefore, a natural fit for Empire State College.

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