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1. EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE AND THE CONFLICTED LEGACY OF PROGRESSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

At its founding in 1971, Empire State College (ESC) entered an American scene bustling with new schools and programs in revolt against the *status quo* at all levels of education. Identifying their institutions variously as experimenting, alternative, innovative, free, open, or nontraditional, dissenting educators infrequently chose to call their ventures "progressive." This term, dating from the political and social reform movements of the early 20th century, was no longer in vogue and, indeed, had fallen into disrepute during the Cold War era. This was particularly true in the world of education, where critics frequently attributed the mediocrity of so many schools to the influence of John Dewey and other progressive theorists. However, as Lawrence Cremin wrote presciently in 1961, "the authentic progressive vision remained strangely pertinent to the problems of mid-century America. Perhaps it only awaited the reformulation and resuscitation that would ultimately derive from a larger resurgence of reform in American life and thought" (p. 353). This is precisely what would happen in the 1960s and '70s. Although advocates for sweeping educational change preferred to emphasize the originality of their ideas, the rising scholastic counterculture embraced some of the old progressives' fundamental goals, concepts, and methods. It also inherited certain tensions and oppositions that had surfaced within the earlier movement. We can gain a clearer understanding of the difficulties that Empire State College has faced in forming and implementing a coherent educational vision if we place its struggle within the larger history of progressive education's internal conflicts.

I.

As Cremin (1961) showed in his classic *The Transformation of the School*, there can be no "capsule definition of progressive education" because those who called themselves progressive (and eventually organized in 1919 as the Progressive Education Association) were a loose collection of thinkers and practitioners whose specific initiatives were too diverse to constitute an integrated, consistent program of reforms. Progressivism also went through several historical phases that reflected changes in the political and economic climate of the nation and in the views of intellectuals. Thus, "the movement was marked from the very beginning by a pluralistic, frequently contradictory character" wherein "progressive education

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meant different things to different people" (p. x). Still, there are some persistent themes within the progressive critique of American education from the elementary to the collegiate level that provided rationales for many of the reforms advanced during progressivism's early 20th century heyday and in the later revival period that brought forth ESC.

First, progressives argued that America's educational institutions excluded or poorly served too many people who could potentially benefit from them. Access needed to be greatly expanded to better serve children, youth, and adults across the full spectrum of the population, whether the student was urban or rural, native or immigrant, male or female, and regardless of religion, ethnicity, race, or economic standing. From the late 1800s onward, progressives campaigned for improved rural schools, vocational training, health education, student counseling, the creation of adult education programs offered by a vast array of voluntary associations, and the evolution of the high school into an institution of mass public education. Within higher education, progressives championed the growth of state university systems and two-year public colleges, university extension programs for adults, and new educational opportunities for women either in sex-segregated or coeducational colleges. After World War II, the GI Bill extended this egalitarian thrust to veterans, community colleges grew dramatically in the 1960s, and by the 1970s optimists were forecasting the arrival of a "learning society" based upon universal higher education and continuous learning throughout the life cycle (Cremin, 1961; Kett, 1994, pp. 257–292, 403–448). In 1928 the progressive president of the University of Minnesota, Lotus D. Coffman, had written, "The state universities and the public schools from the beginning have been maintained to provide freedom of opportunity," recognizing that "genius and talent do not belong to any class because of wealth or social position." For Coffman, however, this commitment to educational opportunity meant that the student of "less talent" should also "be permitted to progress as rapidly as his abilities will permit to the approximate limits of his attainment. The student of few talents will not be denied his opportunity while the student of many talents is given his" (as cited in Cremin, 1961, pp. 314–315). A similar vision of open access became one of the foundation stones for ESC. Empire State College's (1971–1972) first bulletin declared, "For the last hundred years the United States has made a little education universally available and a lot of education available for the few. Now a lot of education must be available for many" (p. 10).

Second, progressives contended that most existing schools failed to connect with the genuine learning interests, needs, and goals of many students due to curricular and pedagogical rigidities rooted in outworn academic traditions or the self-interest of inflexible faculty and school administrators. This lack of "child-centeredness" (or "student-centeredness" as it was named at the college level) stifled the learner's natural curiosity and made it unlikely that a conventionally educated student would develop the independent intellectual spirit and skills of inquiry needed for what Dewey (1900) called "effective self-direction" of one's own journey through life. Dewey was certainly not the only progressive theorist to argue that education should

begin with "the immediate instincts and activities of the child" (pp. 44, 51). But Dewey became by far the movement's most widely known and respected thinker. His Laboratory School at the University of Chicago was commonly cited as a model of best progressive practice. (Likewise, Dewey was the most visible target for the ridicule of critics who claimed that other learner-centric schools typically descended into anarchy.)

The concept of child- or student-centered education has often been stretched to cover practices that are far from what Dewey and his allies had in mind. However, research has generally shown that only a few public school systems converted to individualized learning rooted in students' self-generated interests and questions, while this form of progressivism exerted a powerful influence on the founding and development of many small, private, elementary and secondary schools (Ravitch, 2000; Cuban, 1993; Zilversmit, 1993). These places shaped, for better and worse, the ambivalent reputation of the progressive school as a refuge for "free spirits." From the 1920s to the '40s, a handful of new, private colleges, such as Bennington and Sarah Lawrence, carried this philosophy into higher education. Here "functional curriculums" were tailored "to each individual student" on the premise that educational coherence "is something to be sought in the individual student, not in the curriculum" (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, pp. 276–277).

During the big wave of reform that swept through American education from the mid-1960s through the early '70s, the surviving progressive colleges of the earlier period were joined by hundreds of others, either brand new institutions or experimental divisions within existing colleges and universities. Many of these newcomers tried to give their students a personalized and "liberating" educational experience by reducing or rejecting core curriculum and distribution requirements, empowering students to take a large measure of responsibility for designing their own academic programs and individualized learning projects, facilitating off-campus experiential learning activity in the community or workplace, replacing letter grades with narrative evaluations, encouraging teaching and learning across disciplinary boundaries, and fostering more egalitarian relations among all members of the academic community (Kliewer, 1999). For the most part, these "innovations" were actually adoptions on a wider scale of long established practices in progressive schools and colleges. This is what made it possible for so much seemingly new thinking to be put in play so rapidly during the '60s and '70s. When ESC declared that it would place its focus on the individual student and embraced all of the student-friendly features described above, it was being bold but not especially original. (As I will discuss, ESC was more distinctive in its combining of various elements from progressive thought and practice to serve a student body composed mostly of part-time adult learners.)

Along with the need for more access and student-centeredness, a third theme in the progressives' critique of America's schools was that they did not sufficiently prepare students to address contemporary social problems. Many progressives believed that a primary goal of education was to equip students to become intelligent, informed, and caring citizens of a democratic, forward-looking society – people who could

work together effectively to improve life in the United States and around the world. In his book *Dynamic Sociology,* Lester Frank Ward (1883) claimed that education was the "great panacea" for society's ills (p. 698). Dewey echoed this opinion. "Education," he wrote, "is the fundamental method of social progress and freedom." Teachers "engaged not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life." For modern Americans this must mean education for democracy, which was "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living." Moreover, Dewey was convinced that "the growth of mind" in the individual depends upon "participation in conjoint activities having a common purpose." Therefore, his Laboratory School had been set up "to discover ... how a school could become a cooperative community while developing in individuals their own capacities and satisfying their own needs." Dewey hoped that in progressive schools students would develop a "spirit of service" to be carried forward to adult life (as cited in Cremin, 1961, pp. 100, 118, 120, 122, 136).

Progressive educators often tried to live up to their ideal of enlightened civic activism, taking positions that were usually toward the left on many public issues. During the late 1920s and '30s, Dewey became the most prestigious American intellectual to make the case for a "new liberalism" that approximated democratic socialism (Dewey, 1935). George Counts and other radicalized progressives of the Depression era called upon the schools to help "build a new social order" based upon "the administration for the common good of the means of production and the wide adoption of the principles of social and economic planning." In order to be genuinely progressive, Counts maintained, educators needed to teach from a politically progressive perspective that reflected their authentic social insight and not be stifled by "the bogeys of *imposition* and *indoctrination*" (as cited in Cremin, 1961, pp. 259, 263).

The relationship of educational reform to the nurturance of social consciousness and social action again became a pressing concern during the tumultuous '60s and '70s. Within higher education was it enough to widen access and design institutions that were highly responsive to the perceived interests and needs of individual students? Or did dissenting academics have a responsibility to guide their students toward a heightened awareness of social issues, or even a particular vision of society, its problems and their possible solutions, that derived from the faculty's own study of these matters? At ESC, faculty were invested with little authority to require students to address great social questions or to teach any "correct" analysis of them. But the 1971–1972 *Empire State College Bulletin* proclaimed that the future survival of humanity would require "sound judgments and wise priorities," lest a "new human nature" develop "combining the animal irrationality of primitive man with the materialistic greed and lust of industrial man, and powered by the destructive forces available from modern technology." The bulletin's rhetoric virtually threatens students with the urgent need to think together with their faculty mentors about how their education might help the world avoid calamity and achieve "expansion of human satisfactions and potentials" (p. 11).

Viewed from certain angles the progressive goals of general access, student-centered learning, and education for democratic social reform appear quite compatible with each other. In the progressive vision, educational opportunities of many kinds would become much more broadly available. All learners would be treated as individuals with their own interests, objectives, needs, and circumstances taken into account to achieve appropriately personalized educational outcomes. Since individuals must cooperate with one another to sustain and improve any functioning society, schools at all levels would also enable students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed to confront and resolve social problems in a democratic manner.

Yet this progressive vision was far more harmonious in the abstract than it was when put to the test of practice. Serving large and ever growing numbers of students did not easily go hand in hand with meticulous attention to the learning interests of individuals, let alone the coordination of those interests to explore some Deweyan "common purpose" through "conjoint activities." This is one reason why student-centered learning never took hold as well in most public schools and colleges as it did in small, private, alternative institutions. Nor did commitment to free individual self-expression and development blend smoothly with the desire to raise students' social and political consciousness and activism, particularly when faculty and administrators had strong views of their own about what positions on public issues a well-educated person should hold. In practice, student-centeredness, expanded access, and education for social change often became competing goods that struggled for institutional supremacy. A paramount drive to construct an ideologically "correct" academic community placed inherent limits on the number of students who would feel comfortable within that community and upon the individual student's sense of intellectual freedom. An overriding commitment to self-directed, individualized learning could limit a school to serving a select group of highly introspective (and perhaps overly self-absorbed) students. A predominant concern for continuous expansion might cause an institution to find ways to serve more and more people, but in a mass production mode, that did little to stimulate the unique potential of individuals or thoughtful engagement with social issues.

In short, there was, as Cremin (1961) said, an "authentic progressive vision" for the future of education, but it was one that conveyed a conflicted legacy to new generations of educational reformers who were, in effect, challenged either to choose among competing goals and values, or to try to find ways to bring them into acceptable balance. This became the challenge for Empire State as a college in the progressive tradition.

II.

ESC's founders committed the College to the paired goals of greatly expanded access and highly student-centered education, viewing these objectives as fundamentally consistent with each other. The State University of New York's

(SUNY) Chancellor Ernest Boyer stated that this new college was created "in response to an urgent need ... to serve more students of all ages" while "keeping the individual student constantly in mind and tailoring education to his requirements" (Empire State College, 1971–1972, p. 5). In his investiture address, the first president, James W. Hall, said that ESC would seek to "demonstrate that individual learning and mass education need not be contradictory." Hall thought that a "focus on the individual student" could improve the overall quality of American higher education (Hall, 1991, pp. 128–129). ESC would enable each student not just to obtain a college degree, but to achieve an education that was better for him or her than it might have been had the student gone elsewhere. If, as Hall later said, traditional institutions felt "threatened" by ESC (Empire State College, 2006, p. 10) it was perhaps less due to the College's pledge to serve largely ignored groups, such as adult and part-time and place bound students, than to Empire's assertion that personalized degree planning, individual learning contracts developed in collaboration with faculty mentors, and many other of the College's features "should help people learn better, not merely differently … to improve *what* is learned as well as how it is learned" (Empire State College, 1972–1973, p. 5). If this was true, then maybe *all students* who attended more traditional institutions were among the "underserved." In 2013 ESC's new president, Merodie Hancock, welcomed students by stating that the College was founded "to allow students to earn a college degree without taking classes at a set time and place" in order to "fit the lives" of "adult learners" (Empire State College, 2013–2014, p. 1). But in its early years ESC did not present itself mainly as a second chance school or a college of last resort for adults who found it difficult to attend at a fixed time and place. Indeed, the idea that ESC and other institutions with similar progressive characteristics could produce *superior* educational outcomes led some within the College to argue that a new model was being generated that should be adopted throughout higher education.

Open admission to a system of guided independent study did mesh well with an individualized approach to student-centered education when it made it possible for students who wanted to study unusual subject matter, or combine subjects in an unusual way, or approach them using unusual methods, to do so by designing customized degree programs and learning contracts. Even when ESC students chose to organize their programs around entirely traditional academic fields and topics, individualized learning contracts could take into account the particular interests, goals, questions, experiences, life situation, and learning style that the student brought to the study. (Let a thousand variations on Introduction to Psychology bloom!) Under the influence of Arthur Chickering, its first vice president for academic affairs, a belief became deeply embedded within Empire's early culture that it was best for all students to pursue their intellectual and affective development by placing a unique personal stamp on their education, both through the design of the degree plan and the execution of the studies within it. To ensure academic integrity, this was to be done under the guidance and ultimate authority of the faculty, and in accord with several

broad cognitive and developmental objectives defined by the College (Bonnabeau, 1996, pp. 22–26, 41–42; Empire State College, 1972–73, pp. 45–55).

This "Chickeringesque" concept of self-initiated, collaboratively constructed learning was often claimed to be Empire State College's educational ideal, and it continues to appeal to a number of veteran faculty hired during the 1970s and '80s, as well as some newer colleagues. However, it was never an uncontested vision within the College, nor ever the entire reality of daily practice. In order to provide effective access for students who "desire a more structured and predictable educational experience," as the 1972 annual report put it, President Hall supported the creation of pre-structured independent study course materials (Empire State College, 1972, p. 7). This initiative took several forms, but by the end of the 1970s brought the Center for Distance Learning (CDL) into being, offering a substantial number of tightly constructed courses that could be delivered by a changing core of adjunct instructors in addition to CDL's full-time coordinating faculty. At first these courses were commonly regarded outside CDL as a substitute for the true Empire experience, but useful for students whose geographic location or personal circumstances made it too difficult to come to the College's regional learning centers and units for one-to-one study with mentors. However, when CDL grew in the online era to become ESC's largest single program, it appeared a bit ludicrous to say any longer that it was not the "real thing."

Additionally, a very large majority of students attracted to ESC turned out unexpectedly to be adults with jobs and families who chiefly appreciated the opportunity to attend college without the obstacle of a fixed classroom schedule. Many of them were more than content to let their faculty mentors assume the lion's share of responsibility for setting their learning objectives, selecting their text materials, choosing their writing topics, and planning other details of their studies. One might say that these students were escaping from the freedom extended to them by Empire's educational principles and policies, but the connotations of student-centeredness were elastic enough to allow this shift to be defended as an appropriate response to students' needs or desires. Looking back from 2006 on his long tenure as president, Hall distinguished between "individualization and responding to the individual." "For me," he said, "responding to each student as an individual always seemed less limiting, less coercive, less of a new orthodoxy than individualization" (Empire State College, 2006, p. 12).

If many students made no demands to be treated as individuals with regard to the academic content of their studies or how their performance in them would be assessed, this freed faculty with large numbers of students studying the same subject to create generic learning contracts for continuous reuse. (Let one version of Introduction to Psychology bloom!) A growing student body composed mainly of part-time students imposed heavy workloads on faculty, moving them increasingly to look for ways to reduce individualization, as a special committee on faculty roles frankly phrased it in 1994. The committee asked the College to consider some major changes: creating "pre-established curricula" for students "wishing a specific disciplinary education,"

which would "eliminate the need for degree program planning"; directing students "into less 'individualized' learning arrangements for a part of their program," such as CDL courses and group studies; making the registration system similar to a traditional college by replacing individualized enrollment cycles with several "fixed terms"; and "the use of grades rather than narrative evaluations" to record and assess a student's performance at the end of a study (Altes, Coughlan, Gerardi, & Muzio, 1994, pp. 13–14).

As a number of these changes, and other standardizing measures, were eventually put in place, gaining momentum since the early 2000s during the presidencies of Joseph Moore and Alan Davis, there was much conversation about whether the College was losing its sense of itself as an alternative and progressive institution (Willis, 2007). ESC might be serving ever more students, and perhaps doing it more efficiently, but was it also becoming primarily an alternative "delivery system" for a conventional and impersonal education? President Hall had surely been right to worry that individualization could become a constricting "new orthodoxy," limiting the College's ability to work with a large and diverse population of potential students who were not attuned to this way of thinking about education. However, Empire's original claim to provide its students with better, more authentic learning than they had (or would have) experienced at more traditional institutions was based principally on individualization, as is quite evident in the language of the College's early publications, often written by Chickering. The sense of professional purpose and pride of many faculty stemmed from the belief that as mentors they were helping their students achieve something of special value in their lives that went beyond a degree or a career boost or a typical package of collegiate knowledge and skills, but reached deeper levels of self-discovery and personal growth. Recognizing that most students probably did not arrive at ESC with this expectation, it was still disheartening to think that as an institution ESC was losing interest in moving students toward what some faculty called a "transformative" educational experience.

In order to preserve this vision of educational possibility, it seemed necessary to nurture "the quality of the mentor and student relationship," which "largely determines the quality of the student's education," according to the College's first formulation of its Core Values in 1993 (as cited in Altes et al., 1994, p. 3). Since then, efforts to sustain, revitalize, and better comprehend the activity of mentoring have been made by the ESC Mentoring Institute and its successor, the Center for Mentoring and Learning. Many articles in the College's journal *All About Mentoring* have been devoted to the challenge and promise of academic mentoring, as is the book *From Teaching to Mentoring* by Lee Herman and Alan Mandell (2004) based on their work with students at ESC. The Center for Distance Learning's pre-structured group course model was long seen as the College's greatest deviation from the path of individualized education. But in recent years some faculty have developed online distance offerings that provide individual students with quite rich opportunities to define and pursue their personal interests within the very broad framework of the course (Ball, 2009; Ball, 2010; Vander Valk, 2010).

Nevertheless, more than a few might agree with the mentor who argued that ESC is no longer "a school built around individualized study," if it ever really was, and that few of its students or faculty now "are prepared to teach or learn through individualized methods." To face up to these alleged realities, this mentor proposed that a special program be established to "invite inventive degrees" and devise individualized studies for those who want them. The much larger portion of ESC could then happily drop any pretense to individualization (Wunsch, 2011, p. 46). The complete elimination of narrative evaluations of students' learning in 2012 and their replacement by transcripts consisting entirely of letter grades was one of the College's most striking departures from the individualized practices long advocated by progressive educators. Composing written evaluations of each student's learning in each of their studies had always been a time consuming, burdensome part of the faculty's work life. But the College had consistently maintained that narrative evaluation was "central to its educational program" and "an integral part of the learning process," enhancing the students' "learning and understanding" of their own personal "strengths, weakness, abilities and accomplishments" (Empire State College, 2011–2012, p. 20). The divisive debates within governance bodies that preceded the abandonment of narratives showed that, while many current faculty supported grades as a work reduction measure, they also no longer believed that narratives were an especially valuable or necessary method for expressing the content and outcomes of a student's learning endeavor. If grades, written comments on papers, and feedback in student conferences were sufficient at most other institutions, why not at ESC? Instead of priding itself on its differences from the academic mainstream, as it had in earlier years, the College appeared increasingly willing to let that mainstream set the standards by which it judged itself. Faculty now frequently describe themselves as "teachers" or "instructors," rather than as "mentors," to their students, and they carefully list their own degrees, faculty rank, and subject area specializations in their internal communications with students and colleagues.

Highly individualized learning is unlikely to disappear completely at ESC. Still, in a recent interview, former president Moore urged ESC to recognize that "the core of any higher education enterprise now is enrollment ... The key is enrollment growth" to meet the need for increased revenue (Warzala, 2013, p. 53). ESC's continuing drive to serve greater numbers, adding structured degree programs and certificates targeted at specific "cohorts" of prospective undergraduate and graduate students does not place individualization at the forefront of the College's approach to learning. Nor does the Academic Assessment Plan drafted in 2013 stipulating every individual learning contract study be designed with "clearly articulated," predetermined learning outcomes that will also be in "alignment" with a new set of collegewide learning goals approved in 2012, *and* with outcomes statements *and* rubrics developed by the faculty for concentrations in each of ESC's "areas of study" *and* for each of the subject categories required by SUNY's undergraduate general education policy. As the plan states, "a critical component of alignment will be the

linkage of course/contract outcomes to goals at the program/concentration, general education, and college learning goal levels." The formulation of this multilayered plan is ESC's response to pressures upon America's colleges and universities today to demonstrate their "ongoing, continued assessment of student learning and institutional effectiveness" to skeptical external accrediting and funding organizations (Empire State College, 2013). But it is easy to imagine the spirit of free, individual inquiry being crushed under the weight of all these prescribed outcomes. As one mentor put it at the point of his retirement, the College "has moved in ever tightening circles toward greater structure and accountability" that conflict with the "pristine model of open-ended collaboration" between learner and mentor upon which his own 30-year career at ESC had been based (Lewis, 2013, p. 67). The current ESC bulletin (which now, inauspiciously, calls itself the "undergraduate catalog") no longer assumes that students will do *any* individualized studies in their programs. It does say that the College "strongly encourages students to create individualized studies that move you closer to your goals" (Empire State College, 2013–2014, p. 38). Might that sentence eventually be revised to read, "Students may attempt to create individualized studies that are appropriate to their programs," and be relegated to a footnote in small print?

And what of progressive education's third theme, democratic social reform? Although its first bulletin had rather stridently called students' attention to the grave dangers facing the late 20th century world, ESC has always prioritized access and student-centeredness over education with a progressive political agenda. The College's early publications conveyed an impression that many students were looking to forge lives and careers outside the corporate world, as teachers, social workers, labor union officials, public administrators, writers and artists. Within some corners of the College, this atmosphere survived beyond ESC's formative period. But from the profiles of students and their interdisciplinary liberal arts degree programs featured in the 1972–1973 bulletin, one would not guess that Business, Management, and Economics quickly became the most popular area of study and has stayed on top decade after decade (Empire State College, 1972–1973, pp. 9–28). Be that as it may, ESC's adult students have thick connections to society. They often are heavily engaged in a variety of community activities when they enter the College, sometimes to the point where they need to cut back on these involvements in order to find time for study. Those who concentrate in Community and Human Services or Public Affairs often connect their prior experiential learning to new theoretical and applied studies in social and behavioral science. A far smaller number of students have chosen to develop concentrations in the area of Social Theory, Social Structure, and Change where fundamental questions about the organization and direction of society are perhaps most likely to be raised and explored in depth. (The renaming of this area of study as simply "Social Science" in 2014 might signify to some a declining interest in the use of social research to spark major social change.)

Over the years, faculty have repeatedly expressed concern about the narrowly careerist content of many students' self-designed programs and occasionally

argued that perhaps all should be required to address a few topics of critical social importance, such as cultural diversity or the world environmental crisis. Proposals of this sort never really took hold. The honoring of the individual student's self-declared learning interests and objectives had sunk deeper roots in ESC's institutional culture. "We are not social reformers," said Herman and Mandell in *From Teaching to Mentoring* (2004, p. 10). But in its increasingly prescriptive mode, ESC now defines "Social Responsibility" as one of the new "learning goals" in which *all* graduates are to "demonstrate competence," including ability to "engage in ethical reasoning, and reflect on issues such as democratic citizenship, diversity, social justice and environmental sustainability, both locally and globally" (Empire State College, 2013–2014, p. 17). Whether this ostensible requirement will stimulate a vibrant climate of social concern and activism among students and their mentors remains to be seen. Like other core curricular requirements throughout higher education, it might be predicted that this one (if it is actually enforced) will be embraced by some, resented by others, and passively endured by many more.

At the institutional level ESC's sense of its own social responsibility has always been connected to its commitment to educational access. Might a dramatic expansion of access itself be a vehicle of social transformation? The 1971 SUNY *Prospectus* for ESC went so far as to claim that "An intelligent person from the ghetto or urban area or isolated community who is currently at a disadvantage in learning the predominant cultural symbols system in our society will not be excluded because he cannot communicate within that symbol system or reflect its cultural expectations. He will learn for his own purposes and at his own pace within a community of his own choosing" (as cited in State University of New York, 2003, p. 9). ESC has never actually attempted to construct such a radically "Open Community of Learning," although it has accepted most applicants with a high school diploma or its equivalent, and struggled with the resulting problems of students who are underprepared for college-level learning as it is usually conceived. Exactly because it appears to set aside conventional academic standards in order to serve the very most nontraditional of learners, the *Prospectus* remains, over 40 years later, the College's most provocative, if forgotten, gesture toward the *societally* transformative possibilities of education.

III.

There are many reasons why alternative colleges of one sort or another gradually revert to more conventional thought and practice, if they even survive long enough to do so. Jencks and Riesman observed in 1968 that at "offbeat" colleges, "True believers feel obliged to testify to their faith both in and out of season, and such an atmosphere makes daily life more strenuous than most people can stand for ten or twenty years. This is one reason why almost every experimental college has eventually redefined its goals, or at least the distinctive manner by which it initially pursued them, in such a way as to bring it closer to the academic mainstream"

(p. 502). Moreover, with the passage of time, successful alternative colleges start "to attract prospective faculty and students only partially committed to the original revolutionary vision." Applying this analysis to ESC, it is true that by the 1990s, if not well before, senior faculty were caught between their lingering "faith" in the ideal of individualized education and their weariness at trying to live out that ideal in their work with large numbers of students who were themselves not committed to it. These senior mentors were steadily joined by new colleagues who often admired the College's ideals and values, but wanted a more traditionally balanced professional life that left them with time and energy to devote to scholarly or artistic projects not directly tied to their work with students (Rounds, 2009).

Perhaps ESC could have accommodated mounting external demands for accountability and the desire of its faculty for a more manageable and balanced work life without shedding so many of its old ways, if it had been able to operate like a small, private, liberal arts institution in the progressive tradition with full-time students selected (and self-selected) to fit its educational philosophy. But ESC was not created to be a public equivalent of Hampshire or Sarah Lawrence or Goddard, challenging though that would have been. Rather, ESC was intended to serve a large, growing, heterogeneous, unselective body of students only a small fraction of whom were consciously seeking a Goddard- or Hampshire-like learning environment. Throughout the 20th century, progressive schools devoted to expanding access had usually provided a far more standardized type of education than progressive schools that were born to assist the self-educational quests of individual students (Ravitch, 2000, p. 59). Few institutions that serve over 20,000 students per year, as ESC now does, are known for their ability to provide a highly personalized educational experience. By seeking to become both a large, open access institution and a place for intensively individualized learning, Empire State from the outset internalized tensions that made it very difficult to form an intellectually cohesive community of faculty, administrators, and students who were genuinely dedicated to common principles and practices.

This incoherence continues to buffet and beleaguer those who work and study at ESC today. Students shuttle confusedly between highly pre-structured courses or one-size-fits-all learning contracts supervised by faculty who may grant them little personal agency, and individualized tutorials, small study groups, weekend residencies, and online learning opportunities with mentors who expect them to take a very active role in shaping, and even evaluating, their learning. Is the student to regard herself mainly as the fortunate beneficiary of the faculty's instructional moves, or as a learner increasingly adept in the art of intellectual self-direction? How far should a mentor go in acceding to the preference of a student who appreciates being told "exactly what to do" and says that other ESC "courses" have provided him with this explicit and expert guidance? ESC may be as far away as it has ever been from being able to respond to such questions in a consistent and credible manner that unites principle with practice.

It must be noted that none of this has prevented the College from establishing itself as a very successful institution by measures such as growth, student

satisfaction surveys, and excellent accreditation reviews. Collegewide meetings and any issue of *All About Mentoring* reveal a lively atmosphere of academic debate and experimentation, although some "fresh ideas" within the ESC context (such as rubrics and grading standards) reinvent the College as a more traditional and formal institution. For better or worse, the ESC professional community now appears to be tolerating the College's inconsistencies in a rising spirit of live and let live that defers to the reality of our condition, however unsatisfying this may be to anyone who hungers for a coherent college culture and a consistently applied philosophy of education. This may be Empire State College's organizational destiny – an educational eclecticism that is conceptually rather cloudy but pragmatically sufficient to the day as the College seeks to survive and thrive while managing the inherently conflicting tendencies within the legacy of progressive education.

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