

*The 14<sup>th</sup> Cambridge International Conference on Open, Distance and E-Learning  
2011*



## What's a nice US college of open learning like ours doing for international social justice?

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September 25, 2011

### **Abstract:**

The State University of New York's Empire State College admitted its first students in September, 1971 on a wave of innovation and change in western higher education and society. It was mandated to open access to higher education as a key component of expanding social justice across the state. In December 1971, it opened its first international satellite operation, and now serves about 800 learners each year on site in 8 locations, plus dozens of individuals in as many countries through distance learning.

In the absence of any articulated goal with respect to international education, the impact of such activities on the intersection of globalization and social justice must first consider the USA's own complex social issues, and of course the significant role it continues to play in the globalization of everything. In this context, what role should or could this college play in international education, while staying true to its own mission and core values? What have we learned from our activities so far? How can we be more intentional about what we offer to ensure that we contribute to appropriate and positive social change?

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## **Introduction**

It is great honor to be asked to address this conference. I have known about the event for many years, signing off the requests by colleagues at Athabasca University who regularly attended, and who returned full of enthusiasm. I must also commend the organizers for putting me on first. I like being the “warm up act” for the real stars to follow on later days. Hopefully, on a topic of such broad scope, my offering can act as an ice breaker of sorts, and thus get the discussions underway as we explore the intersections of our work with culture, language, technology, politics, religion, and individual and collective human rights.

Let me start with some disclaimers. Like many in higher education (likewise for parents and politicians), I find myself in a leadership position of key influence without any formal training, neither in education nor in administration. My academic background is in Chemistry, and while that developed some transferable skills in communication, thinking and data analysis, any soft skills were developed more likely as a boy scout, a poor athlete, and in community theatre. I say this because, in my reading around the issues of internationalization, social justice and the role of open and distance learning, I am overwhelmed with the scope and complexity of the topic and the many lenses through which it can be viewed. The good news is that the informed and serious commentators come from so many academic and professional fields that there is perhaps the chance that my voice fits in somewhere.

Furthermore, like many who are involved in our field of open and distance learning, my own education was very traditional, having no experience as a “non-traditional” learner nor with any type of e-learning. I came to the field somewhat by accident, and only realized later why it was such a good fit with my background and values.

Given all this, I have chosen to approach the theme of the conference in the following sequence:

- the context of the US in internationalization and social justice
- Empire State College as an institution of open and distance learning
- Empire State College’s experience in international education, and its impacts on social justice
- matters that the college needs to consider as it becomes more global

## **The US, Globalization and Internationalization**

There is intense discussion throughout higher education regarding its impact and role in what is now a global, knowledge economy. Generally, and to crudely distinguish between the right and the left, globalization refers to the often destructive expansion of western corporations (along with attendant military activity), while internationalization

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refers to the usually well-intentioned activities of western-based international non-government organizations to bring health, education and social justice whenever invited to do so.

In higher education, fuzzy divisions can be made between the liberal arts where criticism of globalization (and sometimes often internationalization) is rife, and in business schools, where there are plenty of voices in favor of globalization as a way to bring wealth and opportunity to poorer countries, with democracy and human rights to trickle down along the way. Scientists are usually quiet on the matter, and economists are deeply divided.

The US of course has had a huge influence, in the last century at least, in both arenas, being the major source of most of the globalization of its corporations, of military expansion in support of those interests, and of popular culture (through films, television, fashion and music). In this respect it has taken over the imperialistic roles that European Countries undertook for centuries, along with various empires that came and went throughout history.

The US is also the headquarters of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, is a leader in the OECD, hosts many international non-governmental organizations, and it is generally understood by most people, although its influence has waned in the last two decades, to still rank (depending on your point of view) as the biggest villain or as the best chance for a better world in respect of global issues. It does all this, for better or worse, with only 6% of the world's population.

There is plenty to criticize about the US in world affairs, but (and I can say this as a Canadian who has the privilege of working there) the story is not a simple one, and one must be careful not to stereotype nor simplify. Although small compared to the likes of China and India and Indonesia etc, the US is still a very big country: 320 million people of incredibly diverse origins, living in areas of significant geographic and cultural diversity, and embracing a wide range of political and religious viewpoints. It is a country of huge contrasts and extremes: in short, a conundrum.

- While it is one of the most wonderful places in the world to live if you have the means, with freedom and peace, good health care and diverse educational opportunities, it also has some very serious social issues: poverty, especially in the recent recession, is rampant. 1 in 6 of the working population is unemployed, and the social safety net is not anywhere near as strong as in Canada or most places in Europe, and this has a direct impact on many aspects of social well-being.
- While one can mourn the undue impact of its popular culture on other cultures everywhere, it is also the home (or in many cases the haven) of some of the world's greatest thinkers, activists, artists, musicians, writers and poets of

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certainly the past century, and has established many leading cultural organizations and institutions.

- While one can become weary and disenchanted at the political nastiness that is seen at all levels of government, the existence of extreme political views (and this is not unique to the US by any means), and the appearance of corruption everywhere, the US embodies the concept of democracy and free speech as well as any society in the world, and is not shy about exposing embarrassing “dirty laundry”.
- While many bemoan the loss of its global competitive edge in education, plus the recent for-profit university scandals, the US still has one of the best higher education systems in the world, and leads the world by a long way in attracting international students.
- While it has been a major contributor (directly and indirectly) to environmental degradation through its consumption and its expectation of a very high standard of living based on materialism, its research and development capacity (both corporate and university) is enormous, and the world will continue to rely on the US to help find solutions to all the significant issues of sustainability (and thus health, human rights and other areas of social justice etc.).

### **SUNY and its Empire State College**

Following the events of World War II, the need for government-supported institutions of higher learning in the US was very clear. Returning veterans seeking to fulfill the promise of the “GI Bill” needed accessible and affordable public education. Minorities, including those of the Jewish faith, who until then had faced barriers to college, also sought such opportunities. As John Clark, William Leslie and Kenneth O’Brien (2010) remarked “the revelations of the Holocaust made discrimination, particularly anti-Semitism, a burning issue, especially in New York”. In 1948, the State University of New York was established with a mission to “provide to the people of New York educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population”. The commitment to social justice was clear from the outset.

Empire State College, one of 64 institutions within SUNY, was founded in 1971 by then Chancellor Ernest Boyer\*. It developed a model of open education that drew upon the Open University, on the “Oxbridge” model of tutoring and on the progressive educational philosophies of John Dewey, Paulo Friere and Ivan Illich especially. It is very much a child of the 60s and as such, hired faculty who sought a radical alternative to traditional, elitist and relatively closed higher education. Distance education was added

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in short order as the college endeavored to meet its state wide mandate. Its commitment to social justice is still very strong, although the largest undergraduate degree program is in Business, Management and Economics (a point to which I will return), and its second largest is in Community and Human Services.

(New York State has a population of close to 20 million people, about half in the New York City/Long Island and lower Hudson Valley region, and the rest “upstate”: an area stretching north to the Canadian border and west to the Great Lakes. It is 10% larger than England, with about 40% of England’s population. It is home to the largest African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Jamaican American and the second largest Asian American populations in the United States. Its geography includes two mountain ranges-the Adirondacks and the Catskills, the Atlantic coast, the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, along which the Erie Canal was built, and two of the Great Lakes, with large reaches of rich farmland. With its lumber, mining, commerce, abundant manufacturing energy, and its agriculture, it was nicknamed “the Empire State” because of its diverse and self-contained wealth which supported education and the arts especially.)

The college now serves over 18,000 learners in New York State through 35 regional locations, a wide range of online undergraduate offerings plus online graduate programs. It also has about 1200 learners across all the other US states who study online. The mentor learning model is adapted for both online and onsite delivery (and any mixture of the two) through independent and group studies and through residencies that are held throughout the state each year. Each undergraduate learner (and this is true also in some graduate programs) is expected to be an equal partner in the design of his or her degree program, integrating prior formal and informal learning, linking studies to his or her work, interests and the community, and defending the resulting degree plan to the college. In this way, learners use an open approach to curriculum, organizing the degree plan within one of 11 areas of study, which can include almost any area of concentration. The combination of multiple modes of delivery, extensive use of prior learning, and the individualization of degree design represents open learning at its best, and this is reflected in the latest wording of its mission statement (2009):

\*In addition to being the Chancellor of SUNY (1970-77), Boyer was United States Commissioner of Education under President Jimmy Carter (1977-1979); Princeton University Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School (1985-1990); and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1979-1995). In these various roles, he had a major role in shaping American education, and at all levels--an influence that continues to this day and reflects his deep appreciation for education as a means of creating a just society. Boyer was particularly concerned about the welfare of native Americans, and he visited the People’s Republic of China a number of times and probably recognized the ultimate potential of education to building a democratic society. As a young man he traversed the North Atlantic after World War II--a sea inhabited by mines--in a freighter that brought food and farm animals (gathered by his church) to a war-devastated Poland.

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*“SUNY Empire State College’s dedicated faculty and staff use innovative, alternative and flexible approaches to higher education that transform people and communities by providing rigorous programs that connect individuals’ unique and diverse lives to their personal learning goals.”*

The college has adapted and embraced a wide range of information and communication technologies to both support learners and to improve its effectiveness as a highly distributed organization.

Overall, the college has been incredibly successful in achieving its original mandate, with over 63,000 alumni across the state, the US and the world. Its retention rate is climbing and exceeds that of most open institutions in North America, and (like many institutions of its type in their various jurisdictions), it ranks first in student satisfaction amongst its SUNY peers. Although it is a public college within the largest comprehensive state system in the country, its state funding is less than 10% of its budget, the rest coming from tuition and fees.

During its 40 years of operation, various tensions have arisen as change has been inevitable. Right in the early year, senior administrators argued over the pedagogical principles that defined the academic program. The development of the individualized, mentored-learning model won the day initially, although the introduction of distance education, with its more structured studies offered to cohorts of learners is still not universally accepted. (In addition to providing structured learning alternatives, the Center for Distance Learning was designed to serve learners out of the reach of our regional learning centers and units: such as the physically disabled and other homebound learners, the incarcerated, the geographically remote (including out-of-state students), learners whose work schedules made it difficult or impossible to meet with mentors and tutors for one-to-one advising and tutoring, military personnel overseas, etc.)

The long term vision for the institution to become more networked (in an effort to reduce inconsistencies while preserving individualization) , to grow (since so many learners are still underserved just within the state), and to re-define and re-position the college more overtly as an open university (and thus perhaps invite more attention and criticism) is the current point of debate. The same is true of the college’s international offerings.

### **SUNY Empire State College around the world**

4 months after admitting its first adult learners at 3 locations in New York in 1971 the college opened its first international location in London, England. As for all subsequent international projects, this was a purely opportunistic response to an external enquiry, and largely the result of the initiative of one key person. SUNY already had 26 study

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abroad programs operating and London, and the alternative, individualized model of Empire State College became the 27<sup>th</sup>. It was highly successful, with US students able to use London and beyond as their campus, devising studies and projects and internships to fit within their degree plans, while students at other SUNY programs sat in traditional classrooms taking structured courses. The program closed for financial reasons in 1974, but a new opportunity arose to serve American students in Jerusalem (which closed in 2000 for safety reasons).

The first partnership to serve international learners in or near their home country was in 1986 in Nicosia, Cyprus, where a technical college needed a degree completion route for their graduates. Again, the opportunity came to the college, and the same key person ensured the success of the project, which closed because new government regulations did not allow for the recognition of SUNY degrees for the civil service. This connection did however lead to other partnerships with private colleges in Beirut and Athens and from Athens to Thessaloniki, Prague and Tirana, which still thrive, along with new projects in Central America. Roughly 800 students are served each year, with an annual graduating class of about 300. There are now nearly 4,000 alumni of these on-site, partnership programs.

2 basic delivery models are used in these programs. In Greece, Albania and the Czech Republic, a fairly traditional classroom approach is used, although at the senior level, some independent studies are available to allow individualization of the curriculum with a local faculty coordinator or director acting as the mentor. Other instruction is provided mainly by adjunct faculty hired locally. In recent years, summer residencies have again been offered by Empire State College faculty in Cyprus for students from any of the programs.

Blended learning occurs in Lebanon, Dominican Republic, Honduras and Panama, where learners write papers, give presentations (individual and/or group) at residencies, and participate in discussions online and at residencies. Generally, face-to-face residencies occur towards the beginning and end of a term.

It is worth quoting the most senior faculty involved in these partnerships on the matter of quality:

*Overall, we and our partners want learners to be active, not passive learners; we want them to develop their research and reporting skills--speaking and writing modes; we want them to learn to work independently as well as to be effective members of learner teams working on projects and giving presentations; and, above all, we want them to develop—in addition to expertise in the concentration— the critical faculties necessary to become valued professional employees as well as life-long learners. It is not unusual to encounter learners who abandoned their highly regarded national universities to study with us. Oftentimes, learners in their degree program rationale essays eloquently address the fundamental differences between the public alternative and what we*

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*provide to meet their intellectual and professional goals. There is a huge difference—they know it, and they want what we have to offer.* Richard Bonnabeau, former Director of Academic Planning

It is worth mentioning that one clear difference between the international partnerships and the US programs is the age of the learners, which is far lower (about 23-25) for the international students than in the US (36 for undergraduates). This affects our expectations of and approaches to the international learners in their ability to engage in the mentor-learner model, and more structure is provided in the design of programs for the cohorts.

Financially, these programs do not make a clear net profit, although the revenues are sufficient to pay a small overhead to the college, and to support about a dozen jobs at the coordinating centre in New York. Academically, the programs are subject to the college's normal quality assurance processes, although some concerns have been expressed about consistency, which is tied to the learners' capabilities in English at each location.

In addition to these site-based partnerships, the college has 100 or so students studying at any time online from one of about 50 countries. A good portion of these learners may be Americans working or serving abroad, although there certainly a few "genuine" fully online international learners. In one case, learners at a university in Siberia undertake online studies prior to transfer to the on-site program in Prague, which has become something of a hub for students from eastern Europe. Some efforts are also underway to explore opportunities in Asia.

It should also be added that several faculty are engaged in international activities through their scholarship, including work on AIDs education in Lesotho, exploration through art of the experiences of children with war and violence in the Middle East, the experience of identity in the teaching/learning experience, food and drink in global cultural contexts, and writing for international travel publications, along with contributions of college staff to many global networks of administrators and scholars.

Strategically it can be said that the international activity of the colleges (as is the case for most others until now) has been opportunistic, without any overall intention except to maintain viability and quality. While it has created good professional development opportunities for college employees to travel and engage with our learners around the world and has created jobs in New York, these activities have been peripheral to the college's core business, do not link to its state mandate nor to the college's mission (especially in terms of social justice). For example, the Vision 2015 and Strategic Plan, developed through 18 months of wide consultation internally and externally, does not mention international education.

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Despite this somewhat haphazard and ad hoc history, the college's work internationally, when mapped onto the theme of this conference does inspire hope, and forms the basis for future possibilities in open, international education.

Many students who otherwise would not have been able to get a US (or any other accredited "western") university degree are able to do so online or through these partnerships. Although the fees students pay are generally high in the context of the local economy, they are far less than those paid as international students in the US, and the living and travel costs are of course far less. In some cases, a family of modest means will pool its resources to send one member to study, thus creating the opportunity for a new and better career. There have been times when our partner colleges have subsidized or helped students meet tuition costs, either through scholarships or loans. So when combined with reduced travel and living expenses, we are able to bring a western college education to students who would otherwise consider any higher education an impossibility.

In Lebanon, many capable students are denied access to university because they do not score well enough in the competitive university entrance examination, and some of them find their way to the college through our partners, and most do very well. While our site-based programs are small and not scalable compared to the audiences being served by some open institutions our success is high, with a graduation rate of about 80+%.

For women in particular, our partnerships and our online offerings offer access that is otherwise hard to come by:

*The fact that at the college we educate women equally with men in our programs, without regard to religious affiliation, etc. is a powerful statement in our favor. It alters the perception of Americans as bastions of "you come to us" educators and begins to promote a shift in the gender balance of the educated outside our borders. In the residencies, seeing educators from a variety of places in the world and of both sexes, in the leadership position of being their professors, sets an excellent example for the students.* Deborah Smith, faculty mentor

More generally, it can be said that these programs offer opportunities for learners (who may well take on key roles in their communities) to experience a western, liberal education which (it is hoped) exposes them to new ways of thinking and critical analysis in a democratic context of free speech and free thinking, and to issues related to social justice, broadly defined. It also expands their understanding of western and US life beyond war, fast food, pleasures of the flesh, and Hollywood. Muslim students in Beirut, for instance, regularly interact with Jewish American faculty: this can only help bridge divisions among cultures and religions. For most, if not all of our Muslim students, this is their first (face-to-face) encounter with Jewish Americans, and perhaps the first time meeting a Jewish person. And the reverse was true for our faculty. It creates a nurturing pedagogical forum where long-held stereotypes had to be seen in a new light.

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Likewise in Panama:

*In a recent cohort in Panama we had learners from 7 countries speaking 11 languages working together harmoniously in one classroom. A comment from the Arab and Jewish learners was “we speak business”. Other international programs have a similar mix.*

Lorette Calix, Program Director

However, while these ideas and individual stories may be compelling, it is all anecdotal and incidental. The college does not have an overall strategy for international education, and more glaring than that, as an institution established specifically with a strong and explicit social mandate to use alternative, progressive and innovative methods, it has not leveraged its strength and experience in open and distance learning to create access to quality higher education in order to address issues of social justice internationally. The good news is that there is no shortage of ideas or enthusiasm among the faculty mentors and professional staff (see the Appendix).

The timing is also very good to do this: the arrival of a new Chancellor at SUNY in 2008 brought new energy and interest in global education. One of her first appointments was a Vice Chancellor for Global Affairs (to bring coherence and new opportunities to all of SUNY’s 64 institutions), the establishment of the SUNY Global facility in Manhattan, and the development of “SUNY and the World” as major theme of the SUNY’s strategic plan (SUNY, 2010)

### **Towards a global strategy: issues and options**

Higher education has always been a highly international community, often inspired through research networks, and US universities have played a major role in these. In teaching and learning, however, international education has involved almost exclusively the recruitment of students to come to the US, or the establishment of branch campuses elsewhere, with mixed success. With the globalization of almost everything, the ubiquity of the Web, the success of some open universities internationally, the emergence of for-profit universities with huge marketing budgets, and the powerful corporate interests who regard education as a commodity, a new era of what it means to be a truly “global” university is here. Almost every institution is claiming to be global in one way or another, but rarely is social justice explicitly included in the propaganda.

In no particular order, and given what has been sketched out above regarding SUNY Empire State College’s experience so far as a small but successful, publically supported open university with considerable distance and e-learning capacity, if we want to extend our social mandate internationally, what issues need to be addressed?

Defining Social Justice

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There is not the room or the expertise in this paper to explore this matter in detail, but it cannot go unmentioned, and certainly has to be understood in the context of this college's international intentions.

Zadja (2010) has summarized the issues that pertain to defining social justice, understanding that "the creation of a more equitable, respectful, and just society for everyone is a dream for all concerned citizens...". Firstly, social justice is not a mono-cultural and linear definition: it is a "multilayered construct and refers to a contested and contentious concept". Secondly, one cannot assume that social justice is attainable in any society: some believe, for instance, that it cannot exist in capitalist societies where economic inequalities entrench social stratification. Lastly, the nexus between social stratification and social justice is ambivalent: unequal distribution of wealth makes it very difficult to address social inequalities and to implement reform.

Globally there is disagreement about whether, despite all the efforts to do otherwise, things are getting better or worse. The World Bank (2008) even acknowledges that the unequal distribution between nations has widened and has consolidated inequalities globally, where "the richest 20% of the world's population spent more than 75% of the world's total, while the poorest 20% spent less than 2 %". It is hard to achieve equality of educational opportunity in such a highly stratified economic system, and some argue that finance-driven globalization simply increases educational inequalities and access.

The UN itself, in its latest update in its Millenium Goals provides the following sobering comments on the goal to *"Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling:*

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- *Hope dims for universal education by 2015, even as many poor countries make tremendous strides*
- *Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are home to the vast majority of children out of school*
- *Inequality thwarts progress towards universal education"*

On the other hand, Charles Kenny (2011) and others are starting to provide evidence and opinion that "globalization has been a powerful force for the spread of technologies and ideas that have improved the quality of life almost everywhere", and Michael Veseth (2010) leads the discussion of the optimists who believe that there is too much "globaloney" and that a third way of sorts exists where globalization, properly applied, is the only solution to global issues of social inequality and justice.

Global Education

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Following from the above, the college needs to understand and engage in the many dimensions of educational globalization, and how these relate to the college's mission and core values. This includes understanding the dominant theories that shape the discourse:

- world culturalists, who believe all cultures are seen to be integrating into a single global culture;
- post-colonialists who agree but see the integrated globe as having 2 zones: a core of North America, Europe and Japan, and a periphery of the rest of the world, with globalization of education being part of an effort to impose economic and political agendas that benefit the core zone at the expense of the world's poor; and
- culturalists, who stress the existence of different ways of seeing and knowing, and the borrowing and lending of ideas that are adapted locally. They also see different world models of education in play: human capital, progressive, religious, and indigenous.

We need to engage with our sister institutions to understand the various roles that higher education should play globally, beyond the marketing of knowledge-based products, attracting foreign students and setting up branch campuses. Many critics are concerned about the loss of the liberal and social justice traditions in higher education, and this also true at SUNY and at Empire State College: what are we trying to achieve internationally, why are we doing it, and how? What impact does it have on the migrations of talent to and from countries and, if access and opportunity is so widely available. Will there be careers available that are commensurate with higher education qualifications or are we flooding a labor market in a knowledge economy where working conditions will be degraded and many will be underemployed?

We also need to understand the roles and attributes of the key global agencies involved in international education beyond the higher education system itself. For example:

- the World Bank and its many components, working to support a global knowledge economy (and thus advocating changes to cultural values of various peoples), and where social capital is treated as one aspect of human capital;
- the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and how it aligns with the World Bank agenda and works to standardize educational achievement;
- United Nations with its related agencies, notably UNESCO, where a different vision for global education focuses on the whole person, human rights, and education for political action;

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- Diverse multi-national learning corporations and their role in the “trading” of education, such as global assessment and the standardization of curricula, thus potentially controlling what is taught and displacing local cultures, systems and languages;
- International NGOs and other voluntary organizations, especially those involved in human rights, women’s rights and sustainability, with their use of progressive education models, and existing as a parallel system of power to national governments and multinational corporations by “thinking globally but acting locally”.

### An Educated Person

In developing a strategy to export our education to other countries, we should at least be clear on what we are trying to achieve in our own jurisdiction. Surprisingly, although there has been a lot of work and many proposals put forward to describe the knowledge, skills and attributes of, say, a bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts and science (see the American Association of Universities and Colleges (2007)), neither SUNY nor the college has an explicit statement of what we should expect or strive for (although there are plenty of implicit, anecdotal and other reassuring indicators that we are doing a pretty good job).

Very recent work at the college, not yet finalized or even discussed thoroughly, shows promise:

***A graduate of SUNY Empire State College will demonstrate appropriate levels of competency in the following areas:***

***Active Learning***

*Assess and build upon previous learning and experiences to create new knowledge, either independently or in collaborative dialogue with others*

***Breadth and Depth of Knowledge for Effective Engagement***

*Engage in a complex and interconnected world by cultivating a broad understanding across a range of disciplines, as well as expertise in a particular field of endeavor.*

***Social Justice***

*Display an awareness of issues of democracy, diversity and social justice locally and globally.*

***Communication***

*Organize and communicate ideas and information in a clear and efficient way in a variety of contexts, including, the ability to access, assess, and organize information, weigh evidence, substantiate an idea, and clearly communicate his or her ideas to a variety of audiences.*

***Critical Thinking***

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*Think critically and reflectively, including, the ability to evaluate, analyze, critique and apply key concepts, assumptions, theories, and experiences.*

***Literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

*Identify, locate, evaluate and appropriately use information digitally, quantitatively, and qualitatively*

As you can see, social justice looms large, and, combined with the other areas, suggests an appropriate framework for ensuring that all our international programs, in all programs, including Business Management and Economics, reflect the core values of the institution (and of liberal, progressive education generally), and are broad enough to embrace diverse points of view: political, environmental, social etc. The college should also take a more deliberate approach to developing resources and curricula in “global citizenship” for all our students, no matter where they are based, which is now a stated goal in many universities and should be a major reason for (and a benefit of) our international activities. Many useful resources are already available in this emerging area such as Lynnette Shultz and Shelane Jorgenson (2010).

### Language

One of the clearest manifestations of global hegemony has been the transfer of English as the language of commerce and finance into “the Imperial Tongue” (Phillip Altbach (2007)). Certainly, “the domination of English-speaking institutions in the global trade in educational services contributes to the growth of English as the global language ( Joel Spring (2010)), and many see this as inevitable. Again, there is not the room or expertise to develop this issue further here (since it relates to respecting diverse cultures and local ways of knowing) except to flag its importance.

In practice, SUNY Empire State College’s language of instruction is English and our foreign language offerings are limited. However, our open curriculum, low “residency requirement” ( only 32 of 128 credits need be taken with the college) and flexible approaches to recognition of formal and informal learning all provide the college with the ability to respect each learner’s first and other languages, while ensuring that the learners’ competence in English is appropriate to their levels of study. One strategy (since the second language in much of the US is Spanish) is to partner with Spanish open institutions to allow our learners to complete a certain number of their final 32 credits in their native or family language. Another is use the considerable capacity of college faculty who are multilingual and/or who learn new languages.

### Open Educational Resources

The concept of freely sharing digital curriculum for use by others is now old news. The simple availability of this content is of course largely symbolic: it does not guarantee that anyone will learn anything, or that those trying to learn are properly supported, or

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indeed if that learning can be assessed. It is clear however that there is huge interest in using open resources to create access and opportunity, and teachers everywhere are using and adapting them locally.

One of the more interesting next steps has been the formation of the Open Education Resource university, which

*“is a sustainable international system which will provide free learning to all learners with pathways to gain academic credit from formal education institutions around the world. It is rooted in the community service and outreach mission of tertiary education providers to evolve parallel delivery systems (now possible with the open web and free content licensing of learning materials) that will augment existing educational provision. The OER University is an open network and public-private partnership (PPP) including post-secondary institutions, the private sector, non-profits, government and international agencies.”* Paul Stacey (2011)

The college has joined this consortium, and we believe that our well-developed approaches to the assessment of the learning achieved through the use of these resources will help realize their value globally, including in our home states, where access to such resources and the freedom to explore are becoming an expectation of not just “adult learners” (Anya Kamenetz (2010)).

### Open Curriculum

*Learn something first, then teach it second* Michael Fortunato, faculty mentor

Adaptation of our western, liberal education to international locations has certainly occurred over the years, but it now needs to be documented and consistently applied. The college’s mentored learning approach, whereby individuals work as equals with a mentor to design and develop a program of studies within broad curriculum guidelines that meets his or her needs, interests and which respects their prior learning and learning context, is a thing of beauty. Transpose this then to the college as whole acting as a mentor to a local partner in the development of the programs of study to be offered locally (within the context of our mission and core values), and within that, for each learner to benefit from this important dimension of open learning, and I believe we have the framework for an international education model that will have significant value to many communities throughout the world.

### Technology

Last, but not least, information and communications technology is one of the key accelerators of globalization as well as the cause of many of its new manifestations. Those in open and distance learning have been obsessed with its impact on teaching

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and learning for decades, and probably know more about its vast potential for good and evil than any others in higher education. Open and distance institutions have grappled with the pedagogical paradigm shifts needed as technologies have evolved, not waiting for “tipping points” and for colleagues and administrators to catch up with change.

SUNY Empire State College has the benefit of having faculty and professional staff who constantly explore ways to increase the richness and reach of the college’s mentored learning model using technology creatively. In this respect, we are able to (and have more potential to) explore all sorts of ways to appropriately connect our international learners with each other, with mentors everywhere, and with learners in the US. In the words of one mentor at our college, *“with internationalization in higher education becoming more about relationships and not location, the college’s own model of [technology-supported] geographical distribution throughout the state and beyond makes it uniquely equipped to pursue efforts at internationalization”*.

Some very thoughtful work is also appearing (for example in Joseph Zajda and Donna Gibbs (2009)) by academics from both traditional and open institutions, which address issues such as the digital divide, digital literacy, the expansion and potential of mobile learning, and the directions for important areas of research in educational technology. Some elegant work has also been described on the intersection of technology with issues of social justice, such as with Indigenous communities (Margaret Kovach, Dora Leigh Bjornson and Harpell Montgomery (2008)), and leaders in the so-called “emerging” technologies have started to see wonderful, low cost opportunities to solve seemingly intractable problems of access and opportunity in difficult and remote regions (George Siemens, (2010)).

## **Conclusion**

This somewhat fragmented and incomplete overview of where a president of one institution of open learning sees its future in international education, and what SUNY Empire State College needs to do to leverage its experience and talent in the cause of international social justice, is offered as something of a prologue to an intense few days of discussion and debate. Fundamentally, the college needs to step back, take stock, and become much more strategic and intentional about what we are doing, and to make sure our ongoing mission to advance social justice through access to rigorous higher education is manifest everywhere that we operate, and to do all this sustainably.

This conference is timely and important, and part of wider debate across higher education: see for example in Franciso Marmolejo (2011) from where I found this quote by Eva Egron-Polak, secretary general of International Association of Universities, and with which I close this essay:

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*...internationalization must contribute to narrowing gaps, increasing respect and appreciation among people, to expanding opportunities, and to pushing the frontiers of knowledge but in ways that are not detrimental locally or globally, now or in the future.*

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## Appendix: Samples of ideas for the future of internationalization at SUNY Empire State College, submitted by a group of mentors (2011)

### Making Connections

Our international programs bring rich cultural diversity to the college. Connecting our learners with those in the US provides a wonderful opportunity for learning and sharing that few of our US learners have the opportunity to experience. Bring our learner populations together and encourage faculty development by:

- Connecting learners and faculty from courses in our international programs with learners and faculty in similar courses in the US using blogs, Elluminate, shared lectures and discussions (teleconferences, Elluminate, skype, etc.).
- Developing some college wide courses that require international and cross cultural participation, requiring global teams working together to solve problems and develop projects.
- Opening international online courses to enrollment from any student in the college
- Encouraging exchange learner experiences with our partner colleges and/or joint educational travel with US and international learners participating in the groups
- Encouraging international learners and faculty from our partners to participate in College events;
- Exposing all of our learners and faculty to conferences and prominent guest lecturers from around the world using teleconferencing abilities. Our partners often have connections we could take advantage of to reach outstanding speakers in their countries/regions.
- Participating more fully in events organized by our partners. For example, our partner in Panama organizes an annual forum and debate drawing approximately 300 learners from around the region and the US
- Encouraging ESC faculty to organize and lead “field trips” to our partner countries as part of their courses. Panama has economic growth of over 7%/year. There is a lot that could be learned!
- Organizing educational trips for our international students to go to the United States for 1 – 2 weeks. We are currently organizing a trip for Panama students to attend sustainability conference as part of 40th anniversary. They will also visit local businesses as well as businesses in NYC.

### Making an Impact

- Identify with problems and issues in our partner countries – this could range from collections after natural disasters to forums discussing political and economic issues in our partner countries and regions.
- Identify a theme or topic of international importance and focus attention on this issue both in the US and with our international partners. These topics could change every few years.
- Contribute to improving education in the countries where we work. Offer training for partner faculty and university staff at little or low cost (look for grants). Offer low or no cost assistance like access to the college library and online training for faculty at our

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partner institutions. Work with our partners to help them develop new initiatives, such as support or training in offering online components of their courses.

- Make connections through the MA in Teaching or M Ed:
  - Offer professional development for K-12 teachers using Elluminate or video conferencing.
  - Have US learners do their field work here in Panama. Possibly agree to teach here in exchange for a scholarship (of special interest to students interested in bilingual education)
  - Offer graduate certificates and/or Master's degrees to cohorts of teachers in our partner countries at special group rates.
  
- Look to make connections/increase female enrollments:
  - Connect learners in our partner countries with the college's NY women's residency. Again another use for video equipment or elluminate
  - Have a women's residency in Panama
  - For both women's residencies have our partners promote beyond their universities and invite learners /faculty from other universities
  - Have global business leaders be speakers in our gender classes or business classes. Discuss what it is like as a woman in country x. Talk as a role model, offer advice, discuss challenges and successes.
  - Contact US women who have relocated to other countries and are high level in a global business.
  - Look to try and expand female enrollments through expanding our connections with Middle Eastern universities
  - Develop a woman's history course for international learners that looks at influence in US, globally, where the US is at vs. other global countries with respect to women in business, what accounts for differences, what might impact differences in participation
  - Promote international online learning for single mothers who can't participate in our residencies due to child care issues. Look for scholarships for these women
  
- Participate more visibly in international education conferences and events – get the college on the international education map
  
- Organize an annual (?) forum on globalization or international issues (could be a virtual forum)

#### Regionalize programs and expand program offerings

- Share resources, reduce costs, expand the market base – this is already happening to some degree. Allow learners from neighboring countries to participate and/or learners that leave for neighboring countries continue in the program: a good option for gradual new program start up. Panama is well positioned to be a hub for Latin America and the Caribbean and already draws students from the region.
  
- Collaborate with other US universities in the regions where we work.

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- Look for a grant to put teleconference and other supporting equipment in our partner institutions allowing increased sharing both in the region and with the US. (Depending on cost, our Panama partner may be willing to purchase the needed equipment).
- Be responsive to needs in the different countries/regions. This means being able to develop courses, certificates and programs tailored to fit our “client” demands in a timeframe that allows the courses to still be relevant when offered.
- Graduate degrees could be viable, at least in Latin America. The students are usually working and finance their own studies, and usually have commitments that make it even harder for them to leave their country for the US to obtain a Master’s degree. A 3 + 2 Bachelor to Master program would be very marketable.
- Our international students tend to be younger than the typical Empire State College student in the US, and can come to us with fewer prior credits and less work experience. This could be an opportunity to have a greater influence on the student’s education by starting to work with them earlier in their college career.

#### Faculty development

- Faculty report that working with international programs has forced them to learn and use more technical tools to support their students’ learning: Angel, Elluminate, Skype, digital textbooks, you tube videos and others. They recommend the experience to other faculty as a development tool — in addition to the learning from working with students from another country.
- There are faculty in our partner institutions (and other partners of our partners) interested in collaborating with US faculty on research and projects.

#### Miscellaneous ideas

- Increased marketing support and presence in our international markets. Look at key foundations and other sources for possible grants
- ESC could increase its social presence by offering scholarships/making more cost accessible for lower income students
- To make courses more accessible (and greener) internationally: use easily downloadable textbooks which are free or inexpensive. Increase use of videoconferencing, Elluminate, etc. to connect instructors with students and students with one another.
- Work with our partners to incorporate themes across all courses. Topics important to the college in partner courses and vice versa.

## Questions

1. What essential features of "western/European" higher education (content, ways of knowing, pedagogy etc.) are helpful to expanding social justice internationally?
2. Which are unhelpful ?
3. By what criteria should an open institution like Empire State College evaluate the potential for, or the impact of, international activities with respect to social justice?