

Academic Mentoring as Revolution: Developing the Student's Power

SUNY Empire State College

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Mentoring in a university context is often identified as “strong advising.” Students are given an opportunity to work closely with a faculty person, a mentor, who gets to know them as individuals and helps them make informed choices about their degree choices, their course loads, and even their future plans.

But academic mentoring at the university level can also mean students and mentors closely working together in developing an individual student's sense of personal power and power within the larger system. Students can develop individual studies (learning contracts) and whole curricula (individualized degree programs), and they can be shown the ropes in such a way that they know how to make the most of their college experience and even have an impact on the systems of the college. In such ways, students are not only receiving the benefit of “good advising,” but are directly involved in building a culture as they create and carry out studies directly relevant to their personal, professional and academic needs. Through mentoring, students are given a powerful voice.

We illustrated this concept by describing “academic planning,” the one required study at SUNY Empire State College. It is in this study—guided by a mentor-- that an individual student is asked to research, reflect on, present, and defend a “curriculum” that reflects his/her individual personal, professional and academic interests. As a result, a student is empowered to not only become the “maker” of his/her learning, but an active participant within academic culture.

As Empire State College Provost Joyce Elliott relates in her “Message to Students”:

Students who have gone before you describe wonderful changes in their view of themselves as learners, their self-confidence, and their ability to pursue goals that are important to them—all stemming from the work of creating a degree program. I encourage you to take up this new challenge; immerse yourself in the work and self-reflection involved in creating a degree program. Those who fully engage in the process are likely to reap rewards beyond creating a degree program that is uniquely their own. *Student Degree Program Guide*, Empire State College, p. 1)

We illustrated these points by sharing examples of student work, including a series of sample degree plans.

(Note: at Empire State College, students divide their studies into two main categories: “advanced standing,” which includes both transcribed and experiential learning; and “contract studies,” which represent proposals for new learning.

Students also create a “concentration,” their individualized “major,” and include “general learning,” elective supports in support of their whole degree.)

In this first example, the student has developed a “concentration” called “Psychology of Change,” and has included transcripts from 3 colleges as well as a clearly defined course of study at Empire State College.

Name:XXX
 Degree: **Bachelor of Arts**
 Registered Area: **Interdisciplinary Studies**
 Concentration: **Psychology of Change**

ESC-ID:
 Center:

Source	Concentration	Credits	General Learning
Credits			
TRANSCRIPT CREDIT			
College #1			
Introduction to Social			Media History and Analysis 8
Change		3	Introduction to
Psychology of Attitudes		2	Newsriting 4
Social Theory		4	Desktop Publishing 4
Developmental Psychology		6	Mass Communications 3
Introduction to Cognitive			Religion in Western
Psychology		4	Civilization 4
			Foundations of Education 3
			Experiments in Higher
			Education 3
			American Social History 3
College #2			
			Cultures of Africa 3
			Individual Research
			Project: Writing 6
			Writing I & II 6
College #3			
General Psychology		3	Principles of Agriculture
			& Resource Economics 3
			Basic Concepts of Food 3
			Fundamentals of Nutrition 3
			Elements of Statistics 3

	Introductory Chemistry I	4	
	Introductory Chemistry II	3	
	Undergraduate Human		
	Anatomy & Physiology I	4	
	Obesity & Weight Control	3	
	TOTAL TRANSCRIPT CREDIT : 96		
	TOTAL ADVANCED STANDING : 96		
	EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE STUDIES		
	Abnormal Psychology	4	Educational Planning
	Self and Media	4	
	Social Research for		
	Professionals	4	
	Motivation	4	
	Social Change: Individual		
	and Society	4	
	Can Anyone Change?	4	
	Psychology of Change	4	
	TOTAL EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE : 32		
	DEGREE PROGRAM TOTAL: 128 credits		

What is particularly empowering about this program is that the student—unencumbered by predetermined departmental requirements--was able to build on her foundational learning in psychology to develop an entirely new interdisciplinary inquiry into personally meaningful psycho-social topics.

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In this second example, the student has created a concentration called “Studies in Addiction and Recovery.” Unlike the first student, this student has included a series of experiential learning requests (called “credit by evaluation”) in addition to his prior transcribed learning and his proposed Empire State College studies.

Name: XXX

ESC-ID:

Degree: Bachelor of Science

Center:

Registered Area: Community and Human Services

Concentration: Studies in Addiction and Recovery

Source	Concentration	Credits	General Learning
Credits			
TRANSCRIPT CREDIT			
XXX Community College			
Chemical Dependency in			Freshman Composition 3
Society		3	Introduction to Sociology 3
Dynamics of Addiction		3	Statistics I 3
Chemically Dependent			Group Dynamics 3
Family Systems		3	Introduction in Psychology 3
Criminal Justice and			Golf 1
Chemical Dependency			Western Civilization 3
Counseling		3	
Professional			
Documentation: Data			
Collection, Assessment,			
Treatment Planning		3	
Techniques for Counseling			
the Chemically Dependent			
Client		3	
Chemical Dependency			
Education and Prevention		3	
Advanced Techniques of			
Counseling		3	
Habilitation and			
Rehabilitation of the			
Chemically Dependent			
Client		3	
TOTAL TRANSCRIPT CREDIT 46			
CREDIT BY EVALUATION			
Independent Study			
			Public Speaking 3
			Self-Help Program Creation & Administration 3
			Field Practicum in Chemical Dependency 6
			Fundamentals of Management 4
			Radio Station Management 3
			Selling and Salesmanship 4
			Public Relations 4
			Advertising 3
			Starting and Operating a

Small Business		3
TOTAL CREDIT BY EVALUATION: 33		
TOTAL ADVANCED STANDING: 85 credits		
<u>EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE STUDIES</u>		
Adult Children of		Nutrition 3
Alcoholics	4	Colonial America:
Abnormal Psychology	4	Sorcerers and Witches 4
Family Violence	4	The Short Story 2
Counseling Approaches	3	Animal Intelligence 2
		Spanish I 3
Academic Planning/ Social		
Work	4	
Addiction Recovery Methods	4	
Psychology of Addictions	6	
TOTAL EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE: 43		
DEGREE PROGRAM TOTAL: 128 credits		

Like the first program, this degree program responds to the student’s unique learning goals. In addition, it empowers him by explicitly recognizing his professional background in both business and addiction services. While the process of developing a “credit by evaluation request” and having it assessed is necessarily rigorous, this validation of a student’s past learning promotes both confidence and academic agency.

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Both of these examples point to the possibility of a student developing a course of study that is academically sound, but equally important, personally and professionally meaningful. In both cases then, the students, working closely with faculty mentors, have created “curricula” that are “uniquely their own.” And, in so doing, they have indeed gone beyond the specifics of the plan itself to become fully engaged in knowledge-making. In many interesting ways, such work can be quite “revolutionary.”