

This article, written by a co-director of Beacon 2008, outlines some of the procedures and the rewards that come with mentoring Beacon entrants.



Preparing for Beacon: Mentoring High-Achieving Students at the Two-Year College

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Too often, as Kassie Freeman points out in "No Services Needed?: The Case for Mentoring High-Achieving African American Students," busy community college teachers focus on the underachieving student, believing that those at the top of their classes need no services (16). However, my experience working with high-achieving students to prepare submissions for the Beacon Conference for Student Scholars has proven the importance and value of mentoring academically gifted students.

In *New Directions For Teaching and Learning* (Spring 2001), Diane M. Enerson suggests that the modern mentor, like Odysseus's friend who served "to counsel and guide Telemachus," facilitates others' success by "revealing the secrets of a profession or discipline . . . a way of showing them not just that it is possible to get a rabbit out of a hat, but also how" (7-8). Enerson goes on to point out that as a verb, "mentoring" shifts the focus from what the teacher can do to helping the students "perceive what they can do" (8).

At Bergen Community College, many of our promising students are the first of their families to attend college. They are often dealing with financial problems, cultural and language differences, and the distractions of job and family obligations; thus, mentoring is especially important in help high-achieving students acquire the skills, understanding and confidence necessary to succeed in academia and achieve their career goals. Because I teach English composition, I often encounter these students during their first year at the college. The relatively small (22 students), learner-focused nature of the class, which utilizes discussion, group work and extensive writing, enables identification of those who not only show academic promise, but also have the desire and ambition to achieve.

One mentoring opportunity that presents itself to community college faculty in the Northeast is Beacon, an annual conference for student scholars, hosted by a different two-year college each year. Beacon invites submissions of mentored research papers in eighteen different subject areas ranging alphabetically from Allied Health and Nursing to Technology and Technical Studies. The maximum length for each paper is 5000 words (about 20 pages); the panel allows twenty minutes for each student to give an oral presentation with the last thirty minutes of the session reserved for questions from the judge and audience. The deadline is March 1. Three scholars in each subject area read the papers and decide which will be accepted for each subject panel. The student who presents the outstanding paper in each category is awarded \$100, as is the student's mentor.

Most of my Beacon students have written their papers in my English composition classes although some students bring me papers they have written for other courses. When I consider a possible candidate for Beacon, the quality and depth of the student's research is important, but perhaps more critical is evidence of the student's thinking critically and creatively.

When I offer to mentor a student for Beacon, I explain that they will be doing additional research, amplifying their papers with additional proofs/details and/or adding topics and revising the papers for improved organization, style and mechanics. I will assist them by offering suggestions and feedback that will help their paper receive a positive evaluation from the Beacon readers, but the responsibility for the papers is theirs. I am available for office

conferences, phone calls, fax transmissions, or e-mail consultations.

Once the contract is agreed upon, my first step is re-reading the chosen papers carefully, usually over semester break, and suggesting where I feel work is needed in content. For example, an introductory paragraph may require sharper focus and a clearer articulation of thesis; in another section, I may suggest that the student supply additional proof or a better quote. A topic may need expansion; for example, a 2002 paper about bullying seemed to require exploration of the psychology of the bully as well as that of the victim. To improve "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye: A Study of Child Abuse*," I recommended the student write a clearer delineation of the main characters and key events of the story for an audience who might lack familiarity with the novel.

Sometimes the paper needs balance in the critical perspective - for example, in "The Male Gender and Its Effect on Teen Violence," where the writer relied heavily on feminist sources to make points, I suggested adding material from more mainstream psychologists to balance the perspective and make the paper more appealing to a scholarly audience. For "The Koran and the Rights of Women," I suggested the student meet with a faculty member whose specialties included world religions and women's studies; the professor's advice and research recommendations greatly enhanced the paper. For a paper on nursing home abuses, I was able to facilitate an interview between the student and a patient companion that added an effective primary source. My suggestions also address issues of style (awkward phrasing, the need for transition, sentence errors) and mechanics (subject-verb agreement, tense, citation and works cited format).

The mentoring relationship is a flexible one with some students needing more advice and support than others. A few students take my initial suggestions, disappear for a few weeks and return with a second draft that is virtually ready to mail. More often, students need suggestions about sources, content, and organization. They may submit multiple drafts and collaborate with me in person or by phone or e-mail. I recall a flurry of faxed exchanges with a student, ending with the struggle to nail down the concluding sentence and how satisfied we both felt when he came up with just the right one.

In the course of the relationship, a mentor often becomes a friend and colleague as well as an academic advisor. Brian Coppola uses a term coined by colleague Ralph Williams - "full human presence" - to express this more complex ideal of mentoring: "It charges us to be honest and fully realized people in our interactions with those whom we mentor and educate" (61). Often, mentoring for Beacon leads to students' taking other courses with me and keeping in touch after graduation. Ideally, the mentoring relationship encompasses the elements of respect, trust, and friendship.

Beacon acceptance letters are sent the beginning of May, giving students about a month to prepare the oral presentation. While the oral portion is stressful for students, it is excellent preparation for the get-up-and-speak-in-front-of-a-group required in many college and career situations. Students may simply read their paper or they can do more - using PowerPoint, video, slides, or handouts - even costumes. I discuss various options with the students and help decide what approach is most comfortable and effective for them. In the past, BCC speech professors have been available to help students prepare an effective reading.

Overall, a mentoring relationship with a high-achieving student is a mutually rewarding interaction. The student gains not only valuable skills, but guidance in navigating academia. As Freeman writes, "All students need encouragement during their academic life Even one comment passed on from a mentor can be pivotal for a student's continued growth and encouragement" (22). One student, now attending The New School, e-mailed me this comment about the Beacon experience:

I always knew that I could write, but when you came to me and offered to be my mentor, I realized that maybe my talents were greater than I had known. Writing those papers involved everything that I loved. I got to do research and write passionately on subjects that matter and have meaning in the real world. In short, the whole experience helped me to find what I wanted to do with my life.

Mentoring can provide a deeply satisfying teaching experience. This fact was literally "driven home" to me on June 1, 2001 as I was returning to Paramus from Schnecksville, Pennsylvania after attending Beacon. With me were the two women students I had mentored, a forty-year old Black student I'll call Ruth and a young white woman in her twenties I'll call Jane. Ruth had been in my Composition II class the previous fall. She had transferred from another community college where she had already taken a composition course and she was not happy about having to repeat the requirement. To her credit, she quickly accepted the situation and made the most of the class, leading the discussion, helping other students and working hard on the essays she submitted. She would rewrite even her A essays, using my suggestions to make them better. Her research paper was well researched, powerfully written and original, an obvious Beacon candidate. As I got to know Ruth, I was impressed by her strong Christian faith, her job with emotionally disturbed children (which included the single-parent adoption of a little boy with multiple problems) and her dedication to pursuing a career in social work. Jane was the intelligent, creative student who had gone to the Beacon Conference the year before and had a panic attack when she started to give her presentation. She was able to complete it after taking a few minutes to collect herself, but this year she was determined to do better.

The women were talking quietly as I drove east along route 78. Hypnotized by the road, I lapsed into my own thoughts briefly before tuning back into their conversation. They were talking about the Beacon Conference and how much participating meant to them as proof of their intellectual abilities.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Both of you are A students. Didn't you already know you were smart?"

"No," Ruth said, "I really didn't think I was anything special. But when you thought my paper could be good enough for Beacon, that made me think maybe I was."

"Yes," Jane agreed, "your recognizing us gave us confidence in ourselves."

I switched on my headlights and drove on in the Friday-night traffic. Neither Ruth nor Jane had won the "Outstanding Presenter Award" in their panels that day, but they had validated their own intellectual abilities. I felt like a successful mentor.

Works Cited