SUNY WESTCHESTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE

2026 BEACON CONFERENCE

June 5, 2026

PANEL AWARD WINNERS

BIOLOGICAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES

Presenter: SYDNEY NEWSOME
Paper: “Saffman-Taylor Instability as a Biomimetic Model for Synaptic Pruning States in Pyramidal Neurons and Implications for Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder”
Mentor: Prof. Nicole Rodstrom
Orange County Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Ann Yezerski, King’s College:

“This was a very difficult decision as all three papers and presentations were excellent. My ultimate decision was based on how novel Sydney's project was; taking a technique used in other capacities and applying it to such a complex question. I was also very impressed by Sydney's depth of knowledge on the entire breadth of her topic from the neural diseases through the neural anatomy and physiology, to the application of the model itself.”

COMMUNICATIONS, MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES

Presenter: PARKER MADSEN
Paper: “John Carpenter’s *The Thing*: An Uncanny Horror Touchstone”
Mentor: Prof. Bruce Campbell
Westchester Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Michael Cramer, Sarah Lawrence College:

“Parker Madsen's paper does an excellent job of illustrating how studying the origins of fear from an evolutionary perspective can be applied to the analysis of horror film. Carpenter's The Thing serves as a perfect case study and allows the paper to show that although certain fears may be "hard-wired" into us through evolution, they take on different meanings depending on cultural context. In this sense, the paper is an exemplary case of using insights from both science and the humanities to carry out a textual analysis.”

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Presenter: AFAZUR RAHMAN
Paper: “The Existential Dangers of AI: We Need to Act Now”
Mentor: Dr. Kelly Keane
Bergen Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Jennifer Wester, Johns Hopkins University:

“Afazur Rahman offers a thorough examination of the practical, ethical, and existential perils of AI as it rapidly infiltrates every aspect of our world. In a balanced analysis that acknowledges both benefits and drawbacks. Afazur lays out how AI is already impacting the labor market, social inequalities, global politics, and the environment, and presents a chilling caution about the impending reality of AI achieving superintelligence. But Afazur does not just name the problem: he convinces us of its urgency, and he offers a compelling solution for addressing it, through the creation of an international organization that would hold tech companies and governments to a set of global ethical standards that would ensure the safety of humanity.”

LITERATURE I

Presenter: RYHAN MCHUGH
Paper: “Epic Women: Who's to Blame?”
Mentor: Dr. Daniel Salerno
Bergen Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Margaret Christian, Pennsylvania State University:

“In her paper ‘Epic Women: Who's to Blame?’ Ryhan McHugh time-travels across millennia, tracing the epic logic of ‘patriarchal theodicy’: women PRECIPITATE crises, while men in response create institutions that shape not only the COURSE of history but the way history should be UNDERSTOOD. Given a field of papers outstanding for their research and intellectual heft and three excellent presentations, the Q&A session was critical, and here McHugh's command of relevant detail stood out.”

WOMEN’S, GENDER AND LGBTQ+ STUDIES

Presenter: KATHERYN HOPKINS
Paper: “Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo: A Feminist Fight for Human Rights”
Mentor: Dr. Felipe Muñoz
Lehigh Carbon Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Terri Gordon, The New School:

“This is a rich and moving paper about the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of women who have marched weekly in Buenos Aires since 1977 to protest the disappearance of their children. The author has done a beautiful job contextualizing her paper, laying out the political situation before and after the 1976 coup and the climate of terror that marked Argentina's dirty war. Her analysis focuses on the crucial role the mothers played in the public sphere; by drawing attention to human rights abuses, developing forensic tools to find kidnapped children, and providing an emotive and collective appeal, the mothers/grandmothers serve as an inspirational model for feminist and resistance movements.”

BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

Presenter: ALFONSO MARIN
Paper: “Understanding How Financial Literacy and Economic Literacy Shape Financial Outcomes in Community College Students”
Mentor: Dr. Christine Farias
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Veronica Minaya Lazarte, Teachers College at Columbia University:

“Alfonso's paper stands out for the relevance of the topic, the clarity of the research scope, and the effort to collect original survey data to test an important hypothesis about community college students’ financial decision-making. Its contribution is not only to study financial literacy, but to ask how students’ ability to use that knowledge may be shaped by the barriers they face while enrolled, including work, stress, time scarcity, and basic needs. I would encourage Alfonso to keep expanding this work by defining the main outcome more clearly, potentially following students over time, and most importantly, continuing to follow his research passion.”

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Presenter: MALLORY ANDERSON
Paper: “Harming to Heal”
Mentor: Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Matthew Aiello-Lammens, Pace University:

“While all of the papers and presentations in this session were truly fantastic, Mallory Anderson's stood out in the ways she integrated ethics, political theory, and natural resource management and asked the reader to think differently on how we make decisions regarding invasive species management. Her work has the potential to be adapted to many areas of sustainability science and reframe how managers, researchers, and the public more broadly, acknowledges and considers the necessary trade-offs inherent in environmental decision making.”

HISTORY

Presenter: VICTORIA MAKAREVICH
Paper: “The Sacred War: Religion, Morality, and Anti-Communism”
Mentor: Dr. Sadegh Foghani
Montgomery College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. James Martin, US Military Academy at West Point:

“A well-executed analysis of early U.S. Cold War policy. By expertly integrating primary sources across multiple media with secondary scholarly works, Victoria provides a careful and insightful analysis that illuminates the foundations of American civil religion during the Cold War era.”

LITERATURE II

Presenter: MEGAN HUSSEY
Paper: “Literature and Cinema in Tandem: Politics of Portrayal in *Hiroshima mon amour*”
Mentor: Prof. Rachel Corkle
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Robert McParland, Felician University:

“Megan's paper highlighted the influence of literature and film in collaboration and their impact upon cultural memory. She capably investigated the challenge for an innovative writer and a creative director to give voice to collective memory and how the experience of trauma shapes our sense of history. Within a panel of impressive presentations and notable research, Megan's paper underscored the relevance of filmic and literary art in the modern world, their work of remembrance, and the ‘duty to not forget.’”

PSYCHOLOGY

Presenter: TIANAMARIE ALLEN
Paper: “The Psychological Burden of International Adoption”
Mentor: Prof. Seamus Gibbons
Bergen Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Jordan Daley, New York University:

“The written component of this project really stood out. The paper was very clear and crisply integrated existing research. The topic was compelling, and the author did a great job highlighting relevant tensions for both adoptees and parents. I also appreciate how the paper/presentation concluded by offering healthy pathways to improve adoption dynamics.”

SOCIOLOGY

Presenter: BIANCA RODRIGUES COUTO
Paper: “The Pain Gap: Gender Disparity in Western Healthcare”
Mentor: Dr. Zachary Sunderman
Westchester Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Marie-Claude Jipguep, Howard University:

“Ms. Rodrigues Couto's paper stands out for its strong research and thoughtful analysis, especially in how it connects historical ideas like “hysteria” to current inequities in women’s healthcare. The presentation was also well put together, with a clear structure and an early introduction of the research question that helped guide the audience. Overall, it’s an impressive piece of work that not only explains the problem but also offers practical solutions, and it shows strong potential for future research.”

EDUCATION

Presenter: CRISTIAN TENEMPAGUAY
Paper: “Understanding the Special Education Teacher Shortage: Causes, Challenges, and Policy Responses in the United States”
Mentor: Dr. Melissa Krieger
Bergen Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Thomas Brock, Teachers College at Columbia University:

“Cristian's paper addressed an important question for U.S. schools: Are we preparing enough special education teachers to meet the growing needs of students today and in the future? Cristian drew on data from the National Center for Education Statistics and academic literature to demonstrate why special education teacher preparation is a problem, and conducted an interview with a special education teacher to get a personal account of the issue. His paper weaved together these sources seamlessly and led to a powerful conclusion about the need to address chronic problems of high workloads, insufficient funding, and teacher burnout in special education. His paper was clearly written, spoken from the heart, and persuasive.”

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND GLOBALIZATION

Presenter: REGINA PORRAS CARDONA
Paper: “The Role of Caifanes and Mexican Rock in Shaping Youth Activism Across Borders”
Mentor: Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Leandro Benmergui, SUNY Purchase:

“’The Role of Caifanes and Mexican Rock in Shaping Youth Activism Across Borders’ stood out for its originality, interdisciplinary scope, and explicitly transnational framework. By connecting music, migration, cultural identity, and political activism across generations and national borders, the project exemplifies the spirit of International Studies and Globalization. The paper combines historical analysis, cultural studies, and original interviews to explore how cultural forms travel, adapt, and continue to shape political engagement in contemporary contexts. I want to emphasize that this was an exceptionally difficult decision. All three papers demonstrated intellectual curiosity, thoughtful research, and a willingness to engage with complex and important questions. Each project approached its topic from a different perspective, but all three showed originality, commitment, and a genuine engagement with scholarship. I want to congratulate all of the presenters. The quality of the work we saw today speaks not only to your talent and dedication, but also to the value of undergraduate research and the importance of creating opportunities like this one.”

LITERATURE III

Presenter: MEGHAN FARRELL
Paper: “Freedom for Some: Women in Postcolonial Society as Portrayed Through Literature”
Mentor: Dr. Elise Martucci
Westchester Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Elizabeth Holt, Bard College:

“While all papers in this panel were commendable, Ms. Farrell's work stood out for the dexterity with which she approached the literary texts themselves. Her argumentation took distance from presumptions about authorial intent for an approach that centered the words on the page, analyzing with nuance the broader, often contradictory postcolonial contexts of the pieces under analysis. This allowed Ms. Farrell's essay and presentation to each complement the other, uncovering a wrangling with facades and rhetoric surrounding gender, race, class and national belonging in Kenya and Colombia alike.”

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Presenter: PARKER MADSEN
Paper: “Sorry Tolstoy, Some People Are Inoculated”
Mentor: Dr. Dwight Goodyear
Westchester Community College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Keith McPartland, Williams College:

“The writer does an excellent job presenting Tolstoy's theory of art and introducing a number of complications for the theory. The issue about background knowledge necessary for successful communication is worth taking seriously in any attempt to provide an intentionalist or expressivist theory of art. The writer raised a number of interesting questions about the role of the subconscious in the creation of art, and showed ways in which the rise of AI ‘art?’ presents special problems for any attempt to arrive at a definition of art.”

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Presenter: ADALIA BONILLA
Paper: “Voices in Motion: How Gen-Z is Changing the Meaning of Activism”
Mentor: Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Taneisha Means Davis, Vassar College:

“’Voices in Motion: How Gen-Z is Changing the Meaning of Activism’ is the winner, standing out for its analytical ambition, engagement with contemporary political issues, rich comparative perspective, and relevance to some of the most pressing political questions of our time. Drawing on cases from the United States, Nepal, Peru, and Kenya, Adalia's paper and presentation examined how young people use digital technologies to reshape political participation, challenge traditional institutions, and

advance social change. Adalia delivered an engaging and polished presentation and responded thoughtfully to questions during the discussion, demonstrating a deep understanding of her topic, its broader political implications, and the opportunities and challenges facing democratic participation, especially among the youth, in the digital age."

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Presenter: ALY VACA
"Parties, Policies, and Permission: The Divergence of Transphobic Rhetoric in the United States and the United Kingdom"
Mentor: Prof. Lauren Strawbridge
Montgomery College

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Amiel Bize, Cornell University:

"Aly's paper was a deeply thoughtful engagement with the expansion of transphobia and how it has gained traction in the US and UK. It persuasively explains that increasingly transphobic political rhetoric isn't coming from the grassroots -- in fact, it's political rhetoric that generates transphobia among the broader public. This argument helps us see something really important - that politicians mobilize anxieties around gender to sideline discontentment with unpopular neoliberal policies. I was extremely impressed with how this paper unfolded its powerful argument!"

CONGRATULATION TO ALL BEACON'26 SCHOLARS!!!