

A Civic Learning Initiative to Address the Dropout Rate: One Institution's Approach

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Abstract

This paper reports on a campus-wide initiative designed to address South Carolina's high-school graduation rate. Interested faculty at Coastal Carolina University redesigned existing courses to include a mentoring component. The mentoring provided a way for college students to learn their content while helping at risk youth in the public schools make progress in meeting their S.C. curriculum goals. Over time, the initiative seeks to capitalize on the close, personal bond that develops between a mentor and his or her protégé. Research suggests that this relationship may help discourage youth from engaging in behaviors commonly associated with delinquency and dropping out of school. Excerpts from interviews suggest that senior-level, pre-service teaching candidates gain valuable insight on at-risk students, themselves, and teaching writing.

When the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education designated Coastal Carolina University as the site of a three-year pilot study on student-focused civic learning, the original goal was to improve the state's high school graduation rate - through mentoring. By pairing interested college students with elementary and middle school students at risk of school failure, the initiative hopes to capitalize on the personal relationship that often develops between a mentor and the younger student with whom he or she works. The initiative could not have come at a more critical time. According to Greene and Winters (2005), South Carolina ranks *dead last* among the 50 states in the percentage of students who earn a high school diploma in the four consecutive years that represent grades 9-12. In fact, only 53% of S.C. students who entered 9th grade (in the 1998-1999 school year) graduated with a high school diploma in 2002. The rate in other southern states is not much better. In Georgia and Tennessee only 56% and 57% of the students (respectively) from the class of 2002 earned a high school diploma. In Alabama 58% of students achieved the same benchmark. Clearly, something must be done.

This paper will address three points with respect to the Coastal program. First, it will describe how the university implemented the initiative and how it relates to the University's overall mission. The paper will then discuss the most salient research on mentoring and its impact on young students. Finally, it will discuss my own involvement in the program and the reflections of five pre-service teaching candidates.

Implementing the Initiative

Officials at Coastal Carolina took several steps to implement the initiative. First, they hired a full-time liaison who would work directly with the school district to coordinate the pairing of Coastal students with elementary and middle school students deemed at risk of school failure. The liaison would also be responsible for planning and

conducting the necessary training for mentors and for coordinating extracurricular activities for all mentor/mentee pairs. Second, the Provost invited interested faculty to redesign existing course syllabi to include a mentoring component. The University sweetened the deal by offering cash stipends from \$5,000 to \$10,000 for faculty whose redesigned course best embodied the goal and spirit of the Commission's charge: to reduce the dropout rate. Faculty used their own discretion in choosing the course, deciding how many points (if any) students could earn for the experience or even if the mentoring would be a required or optional way to earn credit. Regardless of its exact nature in a particular course, the mentoring component would remain a vehicle for teaching and learning: "knowledge from the discipline would instruct the mentoring and vice versa," according to the proposal. Though any student could potentially serve as an "unaffiliated" mentor (one who is simply volunteering, without connection to a course) the initiative made clear that a redesigned course, and thus, the mentoring, should provide a way for Coastal students to learn their content while helping Horry County elementary and middle school students make progress in meeting *their* S.C. Curriculum goals. Fourteen Coastal faculty members from the humanities, science, and education redesigned a Fall 2005 course to include a mentoring component.

For the university, the mentoring served other purposes. For one, it strengthened the institution's level of commitment to the public school system and to the community at large. Coastal Carolina already provides release time, stipends, and grants for faculty "civic engagement" projects. In these, individual faculty work with stakeholders to marshal the university's resources and their own expertise to address an issue facing the community. More recently, the College of Education began a formal partnership with Horry County schools in which eligible, practicing teachers can waive most tuition expenses while pursuing a Masters degree in either Early Childhood or Elementary Education. Finally, the University as a whole continues to offer top-rate cultural programs including plays, jazz and symphonic concerts, and artistic exhibitions. The Celebration of Inquiry, for example, is a three-day symposium of faculty and student-led dialogue sessions that address a central theme. February will mark the fifth consecutive running of this popular event. The mentoring initiative is just the latest in a series of efforts to deepen this involvement with the community and the region.

Second, and perhaps most important, the mentoring provided a way for Coastal Carolina students to develop close, personal relationships with elementary and middle-school youth who might be at risk of school failure. It is this bond that we hope will prove a significant factor in compelling the at-risk students in this program to stay in school and graduate.

Research on Mentoring

Several studies suggest that mentoring may reduce the likelihood that young students will engage in a variety of behaviors commonly associated with being at-risk. For example, adolescents who reported having an adult mentor were less likely to have participated in 4 (of 5) identified risk behaviors - ever having carried a weapon, having used illicit drugs in the past 30 days, having more than 1 sexual partner in the last 6 months, or smoking more than 5 cigarettes daily (Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, & Bontempo, 2000). In another study, one group of at risk youth paired with adult mentors posted fewer absences and earned higher grades in English than students not enrolled in

the program (McPartland & Nettles, 1991). Moreover, research from Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, (2000) indicates that 10-15 year olds enrolled in a mentoring program are significantly less likely to skip class or a day of school. In a similar vein, 64% of 962 at-risk youth who participated in a Big Brother-Big Sister program reported "a lot" of benefit in the program's affect on their "attending all classes" (Bilchik, 1998). Even higher percentages of students from this study reported the same benefit of mentoring on a number of other behaviors associated with delinquency and dropping out of school. These include: staying away from gangs, 67.6%; not using knives or guns, 68%; staying away from alcohol, 69.9%; and staying away from drugs, 71% (Bilchik).

Still other research confirms that fairly high percentages of young students perceive that mentoring helps them avoid potentially risky behaviors that could lead to serious trouble or even crime. For example, in a 1998 survey of young students who were mentored by an adult volunteer, 62, 55, and 52 percent of the students (respectively) reported that their mentor helped "a lot" with the following problems: running away from home and negative feelings about himself or herself (tie); physical or sexual abuse; and skipping school (McLearn, Colassanto, & Schoen, 1998). Apparently, South Carolina is not the only state in need of mentors. The same study suggests that as many as eight in ten young people across the country have problems that could adversely affect their health or success in school and that presumably, could benefit from a mentoring relationship (McLearn, Colassanto, & Schoen, 1998). Finally, and of particular relevance for the Coastal initiative, most mentoring programs also include a tutoring component; research suggests that students who are tutored make more gains in academic areas than students who are not tutored. For example, Schwartz (1977; in Reisner, Perry, & Armitage, 1989) found that 7th grade students who were tutored made average increases in reading of 2.1 grade levels compared to 1.0 grade level for the control groups.

My Involvement

In addition to reading, communication, and research, writing is one component of the South Carolina Curriculum Standards for English Language Arts and includes a number of competencies that run throughout the upper elementary grades. These include: the ability to plan and organize ideas for writing, edit writing for errors in grammar, punctuation, etc.; write for different audiences and purposes, use appropriate vocabulary, write for extended periods of time, and write and publish in a variety of forms. I teach a senior-level, Language Arts methods course in the College of Education; my own syllabus charged each candidate with improving his or her young student's writing ability relative to these strands.

To earn full credit, candidates completed several tasks. First, each candidate would informally assess his or her student's writing ability, and then develop a plan for how they would help them improve. I also required candidates to keep a regular journal of their mentoring sessions; at the end, each candidate submitted a number of his or her student's writing samples along with a brief analysis of his or progress.

Candidate Reflections

The following paragraphs share the most pertinent reflections from an interview I conducted with five candidates at the end of their mentoring experience. I was particularly interested to hear what they learned about at-risk students, themselves, and

teaching writing. I conducted two interviews; each session lasted approximately 30 minutes.

When I asked the candidates what they learned about at-risk students, two themes emerged. First, some can be very difficult to teach. Laura made the point that her mentee was below grade level, and therefore posed a significant challenge. "My mentee is severely behind academically so she faces more challenges than the average student...so you have to have more patience with her...and you watch her get really easily frustrated over things that normally most people would take for granted."

At least two candidates made reference to the effort required just to get their student to *begin* writing. Beverly used the word "grueling" to describe her struggles; Steve said it takes more than just "simple persistence." Granted, the candidates were not the students' primary teachers, but their comments suggest that they neither expected, nor were fully prepared to deal with students who lacked basic skills in writing.

Second, the young students appeared to easily develop a close relationship with their college-age mentor. All the candidates spoke of how quickly the attachment occurred and how much the young students missed them on days when they did not visit. According to the candidates, the students without mentors were even jealous of the attention some of their peers were getting; they constantly wanted to know how they could get their own mentor. As the research presented earlier alludes to, it is this close, personal bond that we hope will promote in these youth the skills they need to do well in school and eventually graduate. The candidates seemed to satisfy a very important need of these young students: to be cared for and known well by someone other than a parent or teacher. In this semester-long experience, the candidates became part of "the network of caring adults," to which the young student now belonged (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, 1990). Laura spoke of the attachment:

They become really easily attached very quickly. It's not even that you realize it. It's like you go one day and you don't think you're making a connection with them and you go back and there's the connection. It's like it forms quickly and it happens overnight.

Heather spoke of how the students just needed someone to talk to: "The students say they have nobody...they go home and nobody's there for them they don't have that option when they go home of having someone to talk to." Heather also pointed out that what these students seemed to need the most was attention: they loved getting the one-on-one attention that a typical mentoring experience can provide.

When reflecting on what they learned about themselves, the overwhelming response was "patience."

*One thing I learned about myself is that I've got to be more patient, as far as, with that kind of thing...because I was like...I'd find myself when she was rewriting getting really stressed out...I realized I need to be more patient.
(Beverly).*

Meghan also mentioned the need to be patient, but in a different way. The candidates' comments suggest they were deeply committed to the project and wanted their students to

improve. Yet they were almost too eager to jump in and provide an "answer" rather than appropriate scaffolds for learning. In the following response, Meghan explains how she had to force herself to be quiet, sit still, and not give away too much too soon:

With her writing, I did notice a lot like...I wanted to give her the answers. I wanted to help...like, I was telling her, 'If you write it sort of like this it makes it better'...and like trying to help her that way...and like, writing it for her almost...which I shouldn't be doing.

Finally, the candidates learned much about *how* to teach writing relative to the S.C. curriculum standards. For example, Beverly described how her cooperating teacher used a graphic organizer to help students gather their thoughts prior to writing: "She took a card...and folded it in four pieces...and each piece represented a paragraph...or an introduction, two events, and then the conclusion...and they had to draw what they were going to do."

Laura talked about the importance of modeling and making the writing process visible to young students.

I had to model things to her, because she couldn't understand it just explaining it to her...she needed to see it done, so if she saw that I could do it then, it was like...the light bulb came on and she thought, 'okay, I can do this'.

Steve talked about the importance of making sure the writing task itself is flexible and open-ended enough so that students will feel like they are not pigeon-holed into one "correct" way to approach a topic. This seems especially true for at-risk students who may lack even the most basic skills. Mandating that they respond just to a prompt or some other teacher-determined task could very well discourage them from writing anything.

He seemed to do best when he was able to write about what he wanted to write about; I think I'd probably permit that a little more in my class, just to kind of motivate him. I'd try to keep things open-ended...a little more flexible...according to the student.

The initiative at Coastal Carolina University pairs college-age mentors with at-risk youth in the Horry County School system. By design, the program remains a way for college students to learn their content while helping young students make progress in reaching their South Carolina Curriculum goals. But the mentoring serves a much larger purpose. Research from Big Brother programs and other studies suggest that young students who participate in mentoring programs are less likely to engage in a number of behaviors associated with delinquency. These include carrying guns, knives, using drugs, skipping school and other similar behaviors. Conversations with senior-level teaching candidates indicate that a bond *does* form - quickly. Over time, we hope this relationship will promote in these youth the skills they need to do well in school and earn a diploma. Mentoring alone may not save all at-risk students in South Carolina, but it is a step in the right direction.

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