Creating Assignments that Matter to Students
By Alicia Ellison

What would you do if you read this comment from a student on a survey—or better yet, in the closing paragraph of the student’s research paper: “Thank you for this assignment”? Would you pinch yourself to see if you were dreaming?

Judy Nolasco, English faculty at YB, is so used to it that it doesn’t even register anymore. Judy’s been getting feedback like this since Spring’05, when she instituted her Personal Development Research Paper as the term paper assignment for her ENC-1102 classes.

It was an approach born out of frustration. “My students and I were just bored with the tired old topics they had been writing about for years,” Judy says. “And I was tired of grading their intentionally or unintentionally plagiarized papers.”

So one morning, during her daily check-in with her two adult daughters (who also are educators), Judy confided her predicament. The two young women shared how, in hindsight, they wished someone had encouraged them to think about real-life issues, e.g. what’s involved in buying a home of one’s own, paying for health insurance, etc.

A seed was planted. Judy started thinking about what other areas might be useful, in a practical way, for her students to research.

“I would ask them often throughout the year if they had started to make plans for college or for a job.” The answers were no surprise. “Many had not thought beyond the weekend, let alone what they would do after graduation.”

The seed began germinating. “I started thinking about where my current college students live, what kinds of jobs they might be interested in, and for some, what college, if any, they might like to attend after community college.”

And so a research paper assignment took shape that integrated just such personal, educational and professional issues. The paper is fully documented in MLA style and follows the traditional conventions of academic writing, except in one respect. “(My students) were happy to hear that I was going to allow them to write their paper in first person—except for the research part.”

That “research part” caused another innovation in this assignment. Judy asked Alicia Ellison, Librarian at YB, to help her students find credible sources for the topics. Alicia created a hand-out that guided students to information sources that support their decisions regarding their future life plans. “But even beyond giving them the factual data about best places to live or which college to choose,” Alicia says, “I tried to find students tools that would actually help them think through these issues and guide them on the journey of discovery that is this assignment.”

What started as a paper hand-out in January, 2005 has evolved into an online “research starter kit,” viewable here: http://hccfl.edu/facultyinfo/aellison2/jnolasco.html Students have praised the kit as an invaluable aid in completing the assignment.

The overall assignment has proven worthwhile to many students who have told Judy that it helped them clarify their life plans. “I even had one young lady, who has since gone on to USF, write to me about how she is using her paper as a checklist, crossing off each goal she set for herself as she achieves it.”

Judy and Alicia have been selected to present their collaborative project in February, 2008, at the annual conference of the Two-Year College Association (TYCA)-SE. TYCA is an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. The conference will be in Louisville, KY.

There, they will share the secret to creating an assignment that engages students, teaches them to make research-based decisions, connects academics to their lives, and actually makes them “glad” (eventually) that they “had to write this paper.”