

Two art teachers share their experiences in using a mentor program to become National Board Certified Teachers and give advice for others seeking Certification or mentorship.

# Two Women, One Shared Experience: A Mentorship Story

SARAH CRESS-ACKERMANN and JELENA TODOROVICH

**S**arah Cress-Ackermann: It was my fourth year of teaching high school photography in the Chicago suburb of Streamwood, Illinois. While passionate about my position and equally in love with my students, I had developed an itch for my next challenge. I began searching for professional development opportunities online, looking at graduate programs, and perusing state and national websites for direction. Finally, I had found my answer while flipping through an old journal dating back to my student teaching days. I fell upon a few notes inspired by Susan Gleason, a lifetime mentor and friend. "Sarah, as soon as you are allowed, you must pursue this honor. It is the highest certification you can earn as an educator." I recalled my conversation with Susan as clearly as if it were yesterday. Some within my peer group at that time called my itch insanity. **I know what you are thinking: No, it couldn't be... Yes, I had caught the National Board Fever.**

## What is National Board Certification?

Soon after I had contracted the Board Fever, I quickly learned that to become a National Board Certified Teacher was no easy feat. Such a pursuit involves rigorous writing that remains reflective in scope. Candidates complete a series of four portfolios, which require significant and focused written elements. One is classroom-based and features examples of student work. Two require videos, which highlight interactions between the candidate and students. The final entry documents the candidate's accomplishments and provides evidence of how continued professional growth enhances student learning. Candidates "prepare the portfolio at their own pace, usually over the course of several months" (Rotberg, Futrell, & Holmes, 2000, p. 380). The process concludes with a formal exam experience comprised of six written prompts. Candidates are assessed on their portfolio entries, in addition to their assessment center responses, "to determine whether they are qualified for National Board certification" (Rotberg et al., 2000, p. 380).

The mission of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is to cultivate strong accomplished professionals that "elevate the status" of the profession (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2013, para. 2). Expectations for the program include:

- raising public awareness with respect to the cognitive complexity, collaborative, and expertise-driven nature of teachers' work;
- setting higher standards for entry, advancement, and leadership in the profession; and
- recognizing accomplished teaching through a rigorous professional certification process comparable to those found in other professions such as medicine, engineering, and law. (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2013, para. 2)

Those who achieve National Board Certification (NBC) boast "the highest recognition of accomplished teaching" (Barone, 2002, p. vii).



## The Importance of Mentorship and Support

During my own pursuit of NBC, I regularly leaned on others for support. These individuals included cohort leaders, past candidates who achieved, and a small group of peers sharing in the same journey. During this time, I placed tremendous value on others' experiences with the National Board, particularly those who were certified in art. They were my inspiration. They were my mentors.

"Research has pointed out that teachers lack a professional tradition of sharing expertise and are often reluctant to articulate professional knowledge because of a culture of isolation" (Park, Oliver, Johnson, Graham, & Oppong, 2007, p. 381). In a qualitative study involving 14 candidates, Park et al. (2007) present "evidence that the NBC process counteracted a culture of isolation" and that "engagement with NBC aided the development of a professional discourse community in which one another's expertise and professionalism were shared and learned" (p. 382). My pursuit of National Board supports this claim. When sought, I found my mentors and peers to be extremely supportive and willing to aid in my venture. Such support did not stop after the certification process. I continue to maintain ties with former mentors and candidates and facilitate my own professional learning community. This is evidence of one of the core propositions of NBC, which supports that accomplished teachers are a part of and interact with a variety of learning communities (Hopkins, 2004). Such involvement impacts student learning significantly, as it strengthens professionals through regular collaboration and reflection.

The certification process at large can serve "as a means for teachers to express their willingness to support each other's professional development" (Park et al. 2007, p. 382). "Teachers learn more from each other than from an authorized person such as a content expert or an education specialist" and so, "systematic efforts are necessary to facilitate collegial

interaction among teachers beyond those constraints" (pp. 382-383). Park et al. and others in the field seem to agree that teacher-to-teacher mentorship is a key factor when considering candidates' success rates and overall satisfaction with the certification process.

The reality, however, is that not every candidate accesses external supports or seeks guidance. Some teachers attempt to navigate the certification process on their own. This article was written in hopes of encouraging mentorship between candidates and those who have achieved. Such support enhances the certification experience for mentees, validates the current practices of mentors, and creates lasting bonds among similarly motivated professionals, all while increasing the potential of passing boards. Mentorship and guidance can present itself in various forms during National Board pursuit. Some teachers look to cohort groups; others look to individual colleagues. Regardless of the support sought, mentors must be there to help answer questions; critique reflective writings, videos, and documentation; lend emotional support; and celebrate milestones (Barone, 2002).

After achieving certification myself in 2010 with the support of colleagues, I knew I had to give back to my professional community. My mentors provided regular guidance, feedback, and moral support, which pushed me professionally and personally. They had given so much for so little in return. Now it was my responsibility to take on such a role. In the following pages, I share my story of pursuit alongside my mentee (and now colleague), Jelena Todorovich. I knew that as both of us were art educators, and both were motivated to enhance student learning in powerful ways, we could learn much from one another. Following, we share our separate and united tales, which illustrate one particular instance of collegial interaction and mentorship.






## Sarah's Tale

Following my decision to strive for certification, I found myself caught up in a whirlwind of writing, rewriting, documenting, videotaping, and catching up on my art history. I attended monthly meetings that sometimes felt more like a self-help group than a National Board support cohort. As the only art educator of the group, I sometimes struggled to find common ground with my other feverish compadres. I found continued strength in one of my two support team leaders, Ruth, who was certified in Early and Middle Childhood Art. Hers was the constant voice in my head during those early-morning writing sessions and late nights in which I would lock myself in our school office, glued to my laptop. While I sadly watched others in our group fade away from the rat race, Ruth was my cheerleader, reminding me of the purpose of it all. This purpose was to challenge myself as an educator and to produce a better version of myself for my kids. For me, it was always about the kids.

After putting together four comprehensive portfolios, surviving the all-mighty testing center, and packaging everything up into that devilish blue box, I left the rest up to the NBC gods. For a few weeks, I could not stop thinking about the ordeal, waiting impatiently for the results. After a few months and the continuation of life, I thought about it less and less, until it eventually faded into my distant memory as something I once did. Eventually, I felt my next itch, this time leading me to the University of Missouri, St. Louis, where I enrolled in a doctoral program.

It was a typical day at the university, and I had just finished teaching a section of a course called Theory to Practice. Art education students lingered in the classroom to ask a few follow-up questions. As I provided clarification on a reflective assignment, I was interrupted midsentence. I remembered what day it was: It was Results Day [insert dramatic pause here]. As soon as I got the chance, I rushed home to my laptop, desiring the privacy to cry if needed. As if my life depended on it, I was logging into the National Board website to see what hand the gods had dealt. I had passed. Wait, what, I had passed!? In disbelief, I read the words over and over again, hoping they would set in. I even made my fiancé read them out loud. Through happy tears, I said to myself, "Wow, I did it!" For the next several months I remained on cloud nine. I had passed!

After a year of so of giddiness, I felt the need to give back to the National Board community. Thinking fondly of my relationship with Ruth and countless other art educators who took the time to read my entries over and over again, I placed my name on an official listserv of enthusiastic mentors. It was through such a listserv that I came to know Jelena Todorovich. While we still have yet to meet in person, we have connected in so many ways electronically. Following is her story of National Board pursuit.



## Jelena's Tale

I was in my twelfth year of teaching and had a fantastic tenured position in which I was privileged to watch my students grow from 1st through 8th grade. I had earned my Master's in Education as well as an English language learner certification a few years previously. I was looking for a challenge and a means to further my awareness of my teaching practice. I had been thinking about this for years, and knew this was the next step I had to take.

The timing could not have worked out better, as there were three other teachers in my building that would be attempting this feat alongside me. We joined a district cohort that met twice a month and offered additional support to one another along the way. It was during one of our cohort meetings that I realized that I needed advice from someone who knew art. Classroom teachers could all lean on one another, but when it came to content-specific questions about the portfolio entries, and especially the exam, I knew I needed to speak with someone that had completed the process within my field.

In one of my cohort meetings, our leader passed around a list of people willing to mentor candidates. Hallelujah! After searching the Internet for answers (and finding nothing in the area of art), I had before me the name of an actual person willing to answer my questions. This person, Sarah Cress-Ackermann, must be crazy! I e-mailed her right away, asking if I could speak with her on the phone to ask some specific questions about the entries. When we spoke on the phone, I realized that she knew her stuff, and she shared my passion for quality art education. I also found out that she was studying for her PhD and was very busy in her pursuit. I felt horrible asking her to edit my writing, because I realized that her time was limited as well, but I really needed the help. Thankfully, she agreed. She was my new secret weapon! I made sure to give her a second or third draft of my writing each time, ensuring I had a decent piece of writing to show her.

Eventually, that portfolio package was sent off and out of my hands forever. This is when the second phase, exam preparation, became critical. "What do I study?" I asked Sarah. I knew what would be on the exam for general education teachers, but no idea what would be on the art test. "Art history" was her answer. Oh boy, thousands of years of the history of mankind, basically. Then she sent me sample prompts that she had prepared to help candidates out. How lucky was I? So, thankful, I sat down to attempt to answer an essay question she had prepared. She certainly didn't go easy on the prompts. By preparing for the worst, I was surprised, confident, and relieved at the test center.

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for my kids. **For me, it was always about the kids.**



I was anxious and dreading that day in November when the results would be revealed. Once again, I was lucky to have others to share in my nervous energy. I had resolved not to look at the results until that afternoon, as I had a gallery opening for my paintings that day. I did not want potentially poor results to ruin the day. When I woke up, though, I had an endless list of messages on my phone from my cohort members. No one had passed. All of the hard work, videotaping, organizing, meetings, and hours of writing, and no one passed? That can't be right! Extremely disappointed, I decided I couldn't wait another minute and I logged on. A screen flashed before my eyes: "Congratulations, you are a National Board Certified Teacher!" I cried. My colleagues that had not passed are some of the strongest and talented teachers I have ever known. Their dedication, planning, and innovation in teaching are inspiring, and it breaks my heart that they have to redo the process. This just shows how challenging and difficult each part of the process is.

I really believe that it was my work with Sarah that made the difference. Asking this favor from a busy stranger forced me to produce the best work possible. I had to stay on target with my writing in order to give her time to edit. There was a balance of responsibility in which I produced the initial work and Sarah guided me deeper in my reflection. I will always be grateful for how this pushed me to success.

## The Meaning of True Mentorship

Pershey (2001) writes that: "The National Board certification process prompts teachers to inquire into their impact on individual students' learning" (p. 205). But beyond that, "It can strengthen collegial relationships, build communities of learners within the classroom, and provide professional growth experiences with other educators" (p. 205). Both of us found initial support by joining cohorts. Such cohorts offered guidance for time management, provided answers regarding general portfolio and assessment center prep, and fostered diverse and dynamic mentoring relationships. Beyond the cohort, we both sought mentorship from art educators who had previously achieved. These individuals provided content-specific support and even deeper emotional backing. Albeit small, we have started our own community of learners. The glue that maintains such bonds is a sense of mutual respect, professionalism, and a constant desire for improvement within various domains personally—artistically and within the classroom space. This community will continue to grow as we encourage others in our field to pursue certification and to lend support in various capacities.

As a point of departure, and in an effort to grow such a community, we provide a comprehensive list of Do's for future mentors and mentees tangled in the mess we call National Board Certification. The role of mentor is described by Sarah, and the role of mentee is described by Jelena. Such steps

helped both of us in our own pursuits of National Board and may potentially assist future mentors and mentees in powerful ways. We encourage mentors and mentees to reach out to us and to others passionate about NBC in order to further grow our community of support and mentorship.

## Steps to Success

### Always remember your purpose.

**Mentors:** Your purpose is to help maintain the excitement and enthusiasm inherent in your mentee. You congratulate them on their successes, and you pick them up when they are down. You maintain complete honesty and transparency throughout the experience as you push them toward personal and professional perfection. You provide clarity when general questions arise regarding the National Board process at large. You answer subject-specific concerns when they pop up. You read draft after draft and provide critical feedback throughout. You watch videos and look at documentation. You provide ongoing suggestions for growth in a timely manner.

**Mentees:** Your purpose is to produce the highest quality work and to put your best ideas into motion. Research the process and work with a cohort if possible, as well as a mentor. Subject-specific questions will arise. Having a mentor answer these questions and help prepare you for the exam is priceless; be grateful and don't overwhelm them by asking too much.

### Be mindful of the timeline.

**Mentors:** Whether your mentee is on the fast track or is taking their time with the experience, create a manageable time-frame that works for both of you. Set due dates in which you expect your mentee to accomplish specific tasks. Hold your mentee accountable. They may not always like your pestering e-mails asking for updated drafts, but in the end, they will appreciate your persistence.

**Mentees:** Timelines are difficult to stick with, especially in the beginning when it seems like you are working with a foreign language. Be prepared to revise regularly. Be respectful of the fact that you are not alone in this process. Remember that your mentor volunteered to help you. Their time is just as precious (if not more) than yours. Be grateful and respectful of their generosity. If you fall behind, you risk running out of time and losing the guidance and experience your mentor can provide you.

### Schedule time for relaxation.

**Mentors:** If you have the luxury of being in the same vicinity as your mentee, offer to take them out for coffee or to meet up for drinks. Make time for moments of celebration. Remind your mentee of their primary purpose in their pursuit, and

and to produce a better version of myself



congratulate them on their progress. Don't forget to reward yourself as well for giving back to the NBC community. Your time is equally precious and you are generous for donating it.

**Mentees:** Set aside consistent time to work. It might be an hour a day or several hours in a row every few days. If you work consistently, you don't have to feel guilty for taking a little time to unwind. I went on a trip one month before my portfolio was due. I knew I needed to work, so I did so on the plane and during downtime in the hotel. I had a wonderful trip, but also managed to get some work done.

### Be prepared for tough conversations.

**Mentors:** There may be times when your mentee wants to give up. Don't panic. They are already panicking enough for both of you. Start by simply being an ear. Listen to their concerns. Let them vent. Once they take a breath, you can chime in with your almighty words of wisdom. Remind them of their strengths. Remind them of why they invested in the first place. Remind them that you are available to them anytime.

**Mentees:** Be honest with yourself and with your mentor. If you are not putting in the work, step it up. Be open to suggestions, and really listen to their advice and expertise. They are on your team, and want to see you do well. They are investing in you and your success.

### Write, write, write, and then write some more.

**Mentors:** You know the process: Your mentee is going to get absolutely sick and tired of reworking each of their four entries. Brainstorm ways to keep the experience new and exciting. Ask your mentees to write small chunks of each entry in a non-sequential order. Be timely in your suggestions for revisions. Ask others to help read with you to offer additional insights for your mentee's growth and development. Consider other NBC leaders beyond your shared content area to weigh in on the writing. For as much work as your mentee is putting into draft after draft, you too must spend significant time providing detailed feedback and seeking additional supports.

**Mentees:** I found it helpful to have more than one reader. I was lucky enough to have a cohort in my district. The leader of the cohort was willing to do an initial reading of the entry to guide the writing. Once I got the general draft on paper, I could make revisions and then send them to Sarah, my art mentor. This made me more confident in my writing and reinforced areas of strength and weakness. Get used to revising. I found that I needed around four drafts per section to feel confident in my entry.

### Don't stop with the portfolios. The testing center can be equally terrifying.

**Mentors:** When it comes to the testing center, think about your previous experience. How did you prepare? Did you reference those vintage art-history books? Did you look to AP art-history resources? Whatever the case, help your mentee get back into the mindset of their undergraduate self. You know, the one that always risked the chance of dozing off while in a dark room exposed to slide after slide of artwork. Make review of art history interesting. Create a game. Visit a few museums together. Start talking about historical and contemporary works and how you might consider them in the classroom environment.

**Mentees:** The biggest mystery to the whole process was the dreaded test. You get the smallest amount of information about this piece, and every certification is completely different in what you are tested on. When I talked to Sarah about this, her advice was to study any and all art history—no short order, considering that is essentially all of history! What helped the most was that she offered sample prompts she had created on her own. They were based on the sections of the test and were really difficult. The website offered a few samples using the program given in the test center, as well. After doing a few of these, the days of art history essays came back to me, and I felt confident about writing once again.

### Celebrate regardless.

**Mentors:** Previously, candidates would ship off an infamous blue box with all of their portfolio materials. Now they upload everything online. Once your mentee submits their work, be sure to share your immense pride in some way. Take them out to celebrate this huge endeavor they have accomplished. Reflect on your experience working together. Share with them what you have learned during the experience. Remind them that they will be forced to wait a long time before receiving the results. Regardless of what happens, they are a stronger teacher because of NBC and because of you. Relish this!

**Mentee:** After the box was sent and the exam turned in, I didn't want to think about anything related to National Boards. I would drive myself crazy rethinking what I could have done differently or if I should have spent more time on a certain area. It was such a weight off my shoulders to complete the process. I celebrated the fact that I finished, and I began the passive act of waiting, waiting, waiting. When results time got close, I knew in my heart that this experience changed the way I thought about teaching, and that was an accomplishment in itself. I also haven't been able to wipe the smile off my face since the results came in.



With the right intentions, it is completely life changing for both mentor and mentee.



## Keep in touch.

**Mentors:** Like many others, your mentee will begin to think less and less about their inevitable results as life begins to take up where it left off. Touch base with them occasionally to talk about things other than portfolios. Begin to establish a relationship beyond NBC. You are both accomplished, persistent individuals. Dare we say: Birds of a feather flock together.

**Mentees:** This amazing person helped me with one of the most difficult challenges I have faced, saw me at my weakest, and was my cheerleader. When all is said and done, I found a kindred spirit that believes in the importance of quality art education as much as I do. Through e-mail, website exchanges, and social media, I am able to keep in touch with Sarah and keep up-to-date on the amazing things she is doing in the art and education fields. I am able to be her cheerleader as well now, as I watch her challenge herself in other pursuits, which is a great feeling!

## Concluding Remarks

For two hardworking art teachers, following such steps resulted in two certifications and an eternal friendship. So, what is life like beyond certification pursuit and mentorship? Still awaiting the opportunity to meet one another in person and share that much-needed glass of champagne, the two of us maintain ties in the only way we know how: electronically. What began as a simple e-mail correspondence eventually grew into the occasional phone conversation, supplemented by our new Facebook friend linkage. Who knew that such a deeply rooted collegial bond could be developed over keyboard conversations? We remain proof that NBC educators are not only passionate, but also resourceful in many ways. While we continue to maintain our own digital ties, we encourage others to consider our suggestions in their own pursuit of NBC. With the right intentions, it is completely life changing for both mentor and mentee.

Sarah Cress-Ackermann is a professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis where she teaches preservice educators online, as well as a Middle School Art Teacher in Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: sarahcress@gmail.com.  
Website: www.sarahcress.com

Jelena Todorovich is an Elementary Art Teacher in Des Plaines, Illinois. E-mail: yelley73@gmail.com

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