

# CAREER PATHS

## THE IMPACT OF MENTORING

*Sponsors are advocates in positions of authority who use their influence intentionally to help others advance, while mentors provide advice, feedback, and coaching. Both are important to advancement as employees navigate the workplace and earn opportunities for growth.*

### Catalyst: Changing Workplaces, Changing Lives

*Each month the Buncombe County Health and Human Services Department asks someone to share their experience of working with a mentor and mentoring others or acting as a sponsor and advocate. It is hoped that readers will increase their efforts to find a mentor as well as be mentors to others. This month's feature is with James Lee who is the Coordinator for Workforce Outreach at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.*

### An interview with James Lee

#### What do you like best about your job?

I enjoy building relationships with different businesses in the community and the resulting partnerships that this brings to A-B Tech.

#### Who helped you in achieving success?

Most recently Cynthia Hamilton and Shelley White have given me the time to seek out partnerships with organizations and individuals in under-represented communities. Both of them asked me where I saw myself headed and encouraged me to go back to school for my PhD. Cynthia suggested a degree to match my passions so the focus on my PhD is on the role that mentoring and sponsorships play in hiring, retention, and promotion of under-represented populations.

Cynthia helped me in another important way. When I was hired at A-B Tech, John Hayes at WRES Radio asked me to come on the show and talk about the different degrees, programs, and services that are available at A-B Tech. Cynthia suggested I put together a plan and present it to the Marketing Department, which I did.

When it was accepted, the next step was to form a cross-functional team to develop the types of programs and guests to be featured on the radio program. Before I got to A-B Tech, the degree programs that lead to jobs were unfamiliar to me. I figured it was like that for the rest of the community as well. Highlighting those degrees builds economic prosperity which is at the core of my job responsibilities.

#### Would you describe a time when a mentor helped you make an important professional decision?

When I was in high school I was not the best student, so I went into the mili-



John Hayes (left), and James Lee (right), host a weekly show on WRES, covering courses that lead to employment. Also pictured is a guest on the show, Phyllis Utley, A-B Tech Minority Student Recruiter. Photo: Urban News

tary. Afterwards, the GI Bill helped me go to college. In that first experience I was more interested in partying than in studying, so soon I was back home working in a small business. After a few months, my boss said "James, you are really smart. You need to get a degree if you are going to match your potential."

He paid for my tuition and counted it as work time. He believed in me and saw my potential. Later, my associate's degree advisor said, "An associate's degree is the new high school diploma—you need to get a bachelor's degree to stay ahead." After I got my BA he said, "A bachelor's degree is like an associate's degree—you need to get a master's." I told him "I heard this before." Now I am going for my PhD, and I appreciate his advice.

Another person who has helped me make a professional decision is Ron Layne, the Dean of Academic Success at A-B Tech. He shared that he wanted me to stay with the college and encouraged me to attend the Executive Leadership Institute and the Manager's Institute. Both of these are necessary for movement with increasing responsibilities in a position at A-B Tech. This encouragement presented a different image of A-B Tech for me and for the community. Ron is opening doors for me that I never expected.

Finally, I could not talk about mentoring and sponsorship and not mention Cathy Ball, Assistant City Manager for the City of Asheville. When I worked for the City of Asheville, I started out in the Parking Services Division as the Parking Enforcement Supervisor. Cathy was the Transportation and Engineering Department Director, which my division fell under. Cathy provided me an opportunity to advance within the city by sponsoring, supporting, and recommending me to succeed as the Minority Business Coordinator for the city. It was a great honor and showed me that sponsorships do work.

#### Mentoring is a two-way street. Who have you opened doors for to improve their professional and personal well-being?

I mentor the youth at my church and at Green Opportunities. I share with them that I did not have a successful first start with college, but I did have people who encouraged me along the way and kept me going with focus and as my mentors. I let them know that they can do it too.

**— FIND A MENTOR —  
BE A MENTOR TO OTHERS**



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\*Employment ads are posted on Thursday morning and updated at midnight on Wednesday, two weeks after the posting date.