

## **Part 1: Supporting peers with intellectual disabilities: what we do, and why we do it**

If you are watching this video, then chances are you are actively involved in, or interested in being involved with, supporting students with intellectual disabilities in a college program.

My name is Megan Goldfarb and I am an undergraduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University, graduating in spring 2018. Since fall of 2016, I have served as an academic support with ACE-IT at VCU, which is a certificate track for college students who have intellectual disabilities.

At my university, my title is an education coach. Your title might be different: it could be a peer mentor, peer support, academic support, or something else. While titles and responsibilities vary from school to school, the core of what we do remains the same; we work in the academic setting to support our peers who have intellectual or developmental disability.

I have a question that I would like you to reflect on. Why have you chosen to work with students who have intellectual disability at your university?

As education coaches, we work to support our fellow students who have intellectual disabilities because we value making a college education accessible for everyone, and because we understand that with the right support, college can be invaluable for students with intellectual disability just as it is invaluable for everyone else on campus. We work to support our peers because we know and believe in their potential, and we want to do what we can to support them so that they can meet their goals. In college we build our vision for our own futures, as well as a network of community members who are the doctors, educators, social workers, CEOs, political leaders, engineers, and artists of our future. Out of the university emerge the leaders of our society; and our goal is to make that group of leaders diverse, inclusive, and mutually supportive. This is why we work to foster an environment in which people who have different learning needs can thrive among the rest of the members of our community.

We work as education coaches because we want to see our peers reach their goals, and we have tips and strategies to offer to help them get there. As education coaches or peer mentors, we are not the bosses of the fellow students that we work with and we are not their teachers. We are their peers; we want to be resources and supports for fellow students who could use that support. We value the independence and autonomy that our peers with intellectual disability have over themselves. We value their ability to grow and to learn and to be valuable contributors to the class environment.

As I mentioned previously, the specific responsibilities of a peer support or education coach will probably vary from school to school. But what is it that we do, generally?

You may attend classes with students and you may hold study sessions outside of class; the specifics of this depend on your role with your university. In the college track that I work with, which is ACE-IT in College at Virginia Commonwealth University, I support my fellow students in and out of class sessions in various ways based on their specific needs. I help students manage their course materials and work

on organizational strategies, study techniques, reading strategies, in-class participation plans- and I help them figure out ways to work through the material presented in lectures, readings, class discussions, and assignments. But the strategies that I use and the things that I focus on with each of the students that I work with varies greatly depending on each person's strengths, and what they personally can work on. For a first-time mentor, or even someone with more experience, the range of things that we may cover with our student peers can be a lot. In the ACE-IT track, Education Coach roles are broken down into the following categories:

- Organizational Skills
- Study Skills
- Test Taking
- Time Management
- Campus Access
- Classroom Conduct

I would like to further break each of these categories down as a more in-depth introduction to some of the things that you might find yourself involved in as an education coach or mentor.

#### Classroom Conduct:

- Paying attention during class to the professor and to other students
- Working on communication skills with peers and professors
- Following classroom policies such as not using cell phones during class unless it is being used for the class.
- Maintaining proper conduct for the professional environment

#### Study Skills:

- Making study guides for exams
- Making the best use out of flashcards
- Managing time when studying for exams and knowing when to take breaks.
- Encouraging and helping to coordinate study time with peers and family members

#### Test Taking:

- Reviewing codes of conduct for taking exams
- Introducing test-taking strategies for test formats like multiple choice, matching, fill in the blank, true or false, and essay questions
- Depending on your university, student needs, and arrangements with the professor, you may be arranging alternative testing locations with the student. You may be reading a test aloud to them or acting as a scribe depending on that student's accommodations.

#### Time Management:

- Planning study and homework schedules for students' free time
- Introducing the use of a planner, to-do lists, calendar, and alarm reminders to complete assignments

- Breaking tasks down into numbered lists of steps, and helping students prioritize what they want to tackle first.

#### Organizational skills:

- Keeping documents and papers in one place: be it printed and in a binder for each class, in a folder on a desktop, in a folder shared with the student on Google Drive, or on a class or school web platform.
- Keeping checklists to check off when tasks are completed

#### Campus Access:

- Making students aware of the resources that are on campus and where those resources are located. These resources include things such as:
  - The Disability Support Services office, which is called the Student Accessibility and Education Office at VCU
  - The library. Some libraries rent out things like equipment to students, including laptops, iPads, phone chargers, and more.
  - Tutoring resource centers and writing support centers
  - It also might include making students aware of options that they have for recreation and social life on campus, such as the gym, places to eat, free events on campus, and clubs and organizations. At some schools, the role of education coach focuses more on academics, though at many universities as a peer mentor, these are things that you may be communicating to your fellow students.

As an additional note, if you are working with a student in the classroom like I do with the ACE-IT track at my school, you may also be working with your student peers on the following:

- Note-taking: students may or may not feel comfortable taking notes. They might take notes on their computer, or on paper. They may use a LiveScribe pen, or a voice recorder, with the permission of their professor. You may also be taking notes that you share with them.
- Group discussions or group work: Discussions with peers or the professor as a class or in small groups. You may work with your student peers on how they prepare their thoughts and share them with their classmates.

I would like to stress that the position of an education coach or peer mentor is not just going to help your student peers get through a particular class to learn the course material and achieve a passing grade. It's a lot more than that; as a support, the strategies that you introduce with your peers can be habits that they build and apply to other areas of their lives. For example, improving problem-solving skills when tackling challenges in a class can help a person develop problem-solving skills that they will then use in their experiences outside of class. As an education coach, I want to help my peers build organizational strategies, time management strategies, reading strategies, and many more habits that they can take with them as they move out into the world as independent adults working in their field of interest.

College is also a time for students to gain a lot of experience interacting with others in the academic community; those social connections are a huge component of the college experience for everyone. As a peer mentor, you may find yourself supporting your peers by helping to facilitate interactions with others and build positive social, communicative, and collaborative skills with other students in class and around campus. One of the biggest takeaways that I've noticed with my peers that I've worked with is a huge boost in confidence that comes from the chance that students have to build friendships and positive working relationships with classmates.

**What to expect:**

As someone who works with peers who have ID, prepare to stay flexible, open-minded, and to think creatively! No two people are alike; we all learn and communicate in different ways. We have different preferences for things like how to study and how to stay organized. As you work with student peers at your school, keep in mind how important it will be for you to always be perceptive to everyone's individual needs. One strategy might work wonderfully for one student, but might not be so helpful for another. It is always good to be observant and responsive so that you can tailor your strategies to each individual that you are supporting.

It's not always going to be easy...

College is hard, for everyone. Getting into a routine with each student will take a little while. New challenges will come up all the time- prepare yourself to embrace them as opportunities to grow.

If this is your first time working with people with intellectual or developmental disability, it might be helpful to consult a few resources before starting, to better understand different ways that individuals learn and communicate. Check out the following links for a little background information.

<https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/specific-disabilities/intellectual-disability/>

This first site, from the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, describes how having an intellectual disability can affect the ways in which students learn. It provides a helpful list of teaching strategies for working with individuals who have different learning needs. While this list is intended for teachers, it might be helpful for you when going over class material with your peers as an academic mentor.

[https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/Insight4\\_web\\_F.pdf](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/Insight4_web_F.pdf)

This article is an overview provided through ThinkCollege's website on how academic supports are used in different college programs. It is intended more for college administrators to familiarize themselves with education coach models but I've found that reading it provides good insight into some of the expectations for college students who have intellectual disabilities, different forms of supports for students, and different challenges that may be faced by students, peer supports, and teachers. It helps to provide a well-rounded understanding of what the education coach role might entail and includes tips that are helpful for not just administrators, but education coaches themselves.

<https://www.mentalhelp.net/articles/effective-teaching-methods-for-people-with-intellectual-disabilities/>

This next article is also catered to teachers, but it details four main strategies that can be helpful to know when supporting a peer in a learning environment.

[http://do2learn.com/disabilities/CharacteristicsAndStrategies/IntellectualDisability\\_Strategies.html](http://do2learn.com/disabilities/CharacteristicsAndStrategies/IntellectualDisability_Strategies.html)

And then the last link I'm sharing is another list of strategies for teachers to keep in mind when supporting students with a learning disability. This resource appears to be catered to teachers working with younger students, so some things are irrelevant since you'll be working with your peers. However, the list of tips for learning and academics contains some important points that would be helpful to note going forward.

### The classroom environment will grow

Students in the classes that I've taken collaborate with one another on a daily basis, and through working with students with different learning needs, other students on campus also learn ways that they can make their conversations and academics as a whole accessible for all. They improve their communication skills and their collaborative skills, and their ability and desire to engage in mutual support with people in their community. Students from my program are often so engaged with their classes and ask awesome questions.

I myself have learned how to communicate very clearly and pushed my own creativity and problem-solving abilities. I think that people who do get involved as education coaches improve our own sense of organization, our ability to take leadership, to take responsibility and initiative, and our ability to self-reflect. And more importantly, we build in ourselves an understanding of how much people are capable of and how important it is for us to be supportive of our community members.

### You will build great relationships!

With every one of my student peers whom I've worked with, I've built a bond of friendship. I want to support their success not just as an education coach, but as a friend.

In this video series, we will introduce and discuss strategies for working with students who have intellectual or developmental disability in college. Note that not every strategy will work for every student; by becoming familiar with different strategies, you will build a tool bank of ways to support your student peers as they work to achieve their fullest potential.