

### **Part 3: Adapting to Individual Student Needs: A Case Study**

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.

Some of the most important qualities that you can have as an education coach or peer mentor or academic mentor are being perceptive and being flexible. Because every student has very individualized needs, you will need to adapt your own strategies to figure out the best ways to support your peers based on how they learn and work, and what their specific needs are. Thus, while a strategy like task analysis is going to probably be beneficial for most of your peers that you work with, the ways that you apply task analysis, and the other strategies that you use, may be very different. Sometimes it takes a little while to figure out exactly what each person's needs are and what their learning style is, and that's okay. It's just important to be willing to try several different strategies, be observant to how your strategies are working for your peer, and be willing to adjust what you do as a coach or mentor to better support each student. I am going to present my own experiences with three students who had very different needs, and discuss how my strategies shifted to best support each of them.

One of my peers that I worked with last year was great at participating in class as long as the class material related to subjects that he was interested in. When he was interested, he would raise his hand during lecture, ask questions, and actively engage with class activities. But he struggled with staying organized and completing his assignments, particularly when he was stressed and things became overwhelming. With this student, some of the primary things we focused on were organizational strategies, time management, and stress management. The student and I worked on planning out his evening and weekend schedule to build into it times that he would specifically set aside for studying and assignments. We implemented iPhone apps to remind him of this schedule outside of class, with alarms set in the evening that would give him reminders about tasks he needed to complete at the times that he planned to complete them. We would set multiple reminders so that if he missed the first one, there would be another.

One of the biggest takeaways for both myself and this student was learning how necessary it was to make not only a Plan A for how he was going to approach time management and get his assignments done, but also a Plan B, a Plan C, a Plan D, and so on. This student had the tendency to avoid or abandon a task when something came up in his schedule that interrupted his plans. So I tried to encourage his problem-solving abilities by helping him develop these alternative plans of action in case something went wrong when he was trying to complete assignments at home- be it a technology issue, a conflict arising in his schedule, and hiccups of that nature.

Now working with this student, like working with any student, I found that I often had to adapt strategies that we used in order to better suit that student's needs and lifestyle. For example, this student liked to use flashcards for test preparation. However, I learned during the first semester that we worked together that, because flashcards take quite a long time to make, they often were very overwhelming for the student and he avoided doing them. So I adapted my strategies. The next semester, the student used an iPad to study. One of the things that education coaches do to support

students is to take our own notes during class and upload them online so that the student can use them to study. Now normally we use a web platform called Blackboard, but I also started uploading this student's notes to Google Drive, which we were able to better organize into folders and documents for each lecture subject. The student then used the iPad in a way that was similar to flashcards- he would pull up my notes in Google Drive, and to study a vocab term, for example, he would glance at the term in my PDF notes, then turn the iPad screen off to test himself to see if he could remember what it meant. He would then repeat the definition to himself in his head and use that step-by-step flashcard strategy. Because this method didn't include the laborious effort of making flashcards, the student was more likely to spend his time studying like we planned. And though I'm a big proponent of writing out flashcards as a way of trying to commit information to memory, I realized that this student wouldn't benefit as much from physically writing out his flashcards- this is because when he writes he really focuses on spelling and remembering what to copy down, and doesn't focus as much on the information that he is writing down. So, I realized he could make better use of all of that time that would have been spent making the cards by using it to read my notes and quiz himself instead.

The other student that I worked with, last semester, had different needs than this first student. She is one of the most organized people in the world and almost always manages to complete her assignments and gets a lot of support from her family doing that. Where this student had room to grow was in class engagement and participation, and in her willingness to contribute her own thoughts. I learned many things while working with this student- that, for example, she often didn't feel comfortable contributing in class because she would have to speak or respond on the spot- however, given time to think about her responses and write them down in advance, she was more than happy to contribute her ideas- she just needed to go about it in a different way. Thus, one of the things that I did as an education coach was to try to really communicate with her professor to find out what the activities and discussion prompts would be for each class, prior to that class actually happening. Then, in our coaching session, which we held the hour before class, this student could prepare her contributions for the class that lie ahead and write down what she wanted to say. By being able to read off her thoughts then in class, she could participate fully. She also benefited from checklists to use in class- so if she had a checklist that could ask her to check off what she was observing, that was a great way for her to follow along and maintain her engagement with what was going on in the classroom.

For this student, setting goals on a daily basis for class participation was important- we would often set a goal for her to share her thoughts at least one time for each class session. Once she had these goals, her participation skyrocketed and she knew that sharing her thoughts was an accomplishment.

So, while one student and I focused on strategies for time management and organization, and strategies for class participation were more of a focus for another student, with another peer that I worked with I developed yet a different set of individualized strategies. While this third student and I also employed organizational strategies and class participation strategies, where we really focused our attention was on developing strategies for reading and writing. This student was not as fluent a reader, and was taking a class that involved a lot of reading and writing assignments. For him, the amount of reading and writing that he had to do on a weekly basis was daunting, but we came up with several strategies that allowed him to tackle these assignments with quite a lot of independence.

To handle readings, this student used a text to speech app on his computer to read texts aloud. Many computers will have a “text to speech” setting that allows texts like PDFs and websites to be read aloud by an electronic voice through the computer. There are several different text to speech apps that can be downloaded to computers, tablets, and smartphones, as well as online options that students can use. This student was able to get his required books for the class as Kindle books, where he could use text to speech to listen to each assigned chapter.

This student was also required to write a reflection every week to post to the class’s online discussion forum. It was important for this student to be able to find a way to capture his own, original thoughts, and to do so independently. So, we built strategies to enable him to do so. The first component of being able to reflect on an assigned reading for class often involves taking notes to look back at. We created an alternative strategy for this student to take notes on his readings. Instead of writing notes down, or highlighting certain parts of the text, this student used his voice memo app on his phone to record verbal notes. After each paragraph that was read aloud to him by his computer, this student paused and made a voice recording in which he summarized his understanding of that part of the text.

To complete his reflection assignment, this student would listen over his notes about the reading and then create a new recording in which he summarized his thoughts. If the student used the “notes” app on his phone, the phone would record his speech as text. Sometimes, he used the voice memos app instead of the notes app, and instead of having his phone transcribe his speech as he spoke, he brought in a recording to our homework sessions and I transcribed his words with him. This strategy allowed the student to get his ideas down outside of class and post his thoughts to the weekly discussion board.

There are many, many more ways that I worked with each of these students and figured out small strategies with them that would help them to overcome challenges. Something that I want to stress about the role of an academic mentor is how important it is to be a strong observer and to respond to those observations - to be very, very perceptive and figure out how you need to shift and adapt the ways that you work with students in response to their individual needs. Perceptiveness, flexibility, and creativity is needed to be the best support that you can be.