

people with disabilities

Giving Back

Who do you turn to when classes and career demands seem overwhelming? Perhaps you have a favorite professor or you've befriended an older person who shares your academic interests *and* your disability. If so, you know the value of having a mentor, and it's not too early to think about being one yourself.

A telementoring project designed to aid in the recruitment and retention of students with disabilities in science, engineering, and math curricula is proving that email is

Help a student with a disability achieve success... just like you

more than a pipeline for jokes and memos. Through this program, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Applied Science and Engineering Laboratories at the University of Delaware, high school students with disabilities have the chance to link-up with professionals with similar interests and disability issues. "Students gain insight from their mentors on such topics as how

to present a disability when interviewing for a job, understanding disability accommodations, and when to disclose a disability," says University of Delaware research engineer, Anna Phalangs. The students also learn how to be self-advocates, she adds.

Since a considerable distance usually separates the students and mentors, the program is conducted over the Internet. The Internet is used to introduce students interested in science, engineering and math to the vast well of technical information that's housed on the World Wide Web as well as to the insights of mentors. The mentored students are loaned computer equipment and not only communicate with their mentors via email, but also participate in on-line activities such as puzzles and HTML tutorials.

Even though physical barriers that challenge students with disabilities are being removed as technical innovation improves means of communication and access to classrooms and laboratories, other roadblocks still exist. Namely, self-doubt on the part of the disabled student and negative attitudes of others who don't believe people with disabilities can succeed in the sciences. Mentors work with the students, through on-going communication, to build self-confidence and the ability to block out the unfounded negativity of others.

Throughout the correspondence, mentors usually advise the mentee on coursework, write letters of recommendation or discuss potential solutions to problems the mentee might be experiencing. Ideally, the mentor is a professional from business, government or academia who can relate to a mentee's academic interests and disability issues.

The program keeps a database of professionals who are willing to mentor a student. Students who are accepted into the program are paired with the most appropriate mentor. A

potential mentor is required to have Internet access and the time and interest to communicate with their mentee on a regular basis. "Mentors do not have to be disabled," says Phalangs. "There are 25 students in our program and about half of the mentors have disabilities." In addition, university students are also encouraged to get involved since their experiences are often valuable to younger students who are beginning to narrow their academic focus.

For more information about the telementoring program contact:

Applied Science & Engineering Laboratories
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What Do Mentors Do?

- Encourage the mentee to complete their education and pursue a rewarding career
- Provide examples of people who are succeeding in their field of interest
- Offer students the knowledge of their own personal experiences
- Challenge the mentee with new ideas and opportunities
- Provide academic, business or personal contacts

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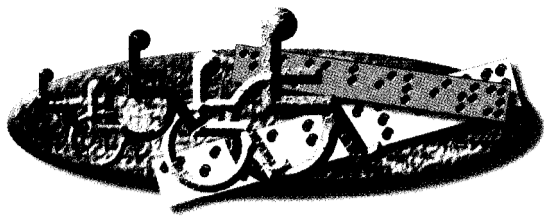
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