



### Peer and Mentor Support

Friends, parents, teachers, and counselors help shape who we are. Although most interactions develop informally, supportive relationships can also be developed intentionally. Peer and mentor support are essential components of the *DO-IT Scholars* program. This chapter describes how to create and sustain an e-mentoring community to promote the success of teens with disabilities in school, careers, and other life experiences. The content is adapted from earlier publications (e.g., Burgstahler, 1997, 2003b, 2003c, 2006a, 2006c; Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001).

Activities within the DO-IT e-mentoring community are supported by a large body of research and practice in the areas of

- success, self-determination, and transition;
- peer and mentor support; and
- computer-mediated communication (CMC), e-mentoring, and electronic communities.

### Peer and Mentor Support

Mentors can help protégés explore career options, set academic and career goals, develop professional contacts, identify resources, strengthen interpersonal skills, and develop a sense of identity. They can guide young people through the transition from structured high school environments to less structured postsecondary environments.

Peers can offer some of the same benefits as mentors, including coaching, counseling, advice, information, encouragement, and role modeling. Peers are sometimes easier for young people to approach than adults and typically offer a higher degree of mutual assistance. Relationships with individuals who are a year or two older, *near-peers*, can also help high schoolers learn about academic accommodations, work with professors, live independently, and make friends. Near-peers make short-term goals seem within reach. In addition, mentor, peer, and near-peer supporters can become empowered as they come to see themselves as contributors in their supportive roles with young people.



### **DO-IT Mentors offer Protégés . . .**

**Information.** *Mentors* share their knowledge and experiences with protégés.

**Contacts.** *Mentors* introduce their protégés to valuable academic, career, and personal contacts.

**Challenges.** *Mentors* stimulate curiosity and build confidence by offering new ideas and opportunities.

**Support.** *Mentors* encourage growth and achievement by providing an open and supportive environment.

**Direction.** *Mentors* help protégés discover their talents and interests and devise strategies to attain their goals.

**Advice.** *Mentors* make suggestions to help protégés reach their academic, career, and personal goals.

**Role Modeling.** *Mentors* accomplish many of these goals by letting their protégés know who they are.

### **DO-IT Protégés offer Mentors . . .**

**Challenges!** *Mentors* develop their own personal styles for sharing their skills and knowledge via electronic communication.

**Opportunities to Help Set Goals.** One *Mentor* explains, “I try to tell the DO-IT kids to listen to their hearts and think about what they really want to do. Don’t listen to people who say no, you can’t do this or that, or you should be thinking only about this kind of work; just think about what you really want to do, what turns you on, and go for it.”

**A Chance to Share Strategies.** *Mentors* pass on hard-earned experiences. One *Mentor* reports, “I’ve been through this thing. I had a stroke and so on. And I find it incredibly gratifying to be able to share that with someone, and to be able to help someone else who’s going through some of the same things.”

**New Ideas.** *Mentors* join an active community of talented students and professionals with a wide range of disabilities who are eager to share their own strategies for problem-solving and success.

**Fun.** *Mentors* share in the lives of motivated young people. Listening to them, hearing about their dreams, helping them along the road to success—it’s fun!



## DO-IT's E-Mentoring Community

*DO-IT Mentors* are valuable resources to their protégés. Most *Mentors* are college students or faculty or practicing engineers, scientists, or other professionals who have disabilities. Protégés are *DO-IT Scholars* and *DO-IT Pals*. Frequent electronic communications and personal contacts bring DO-IT protégés and mentors together to facilitate academic, career, and personal achievements.

Introducing protégés to *Mentors* with similar disabilities is a strength of the DO-IT program. As reported by one protégé, she had never met an adult with a hearing impairment like hers before getting involved in DO-IT: "But when I met him, I was so surprised how he had such a normal life, and he had a family, and he worked with people who had normal hearing. So he made me feel a lot better about my future."

Participants learn strategies for success in academic studies and employment. *Mentors* provide direction and motivation, instill values, promote professionalism, and help protégés develop leadership skills. As one *Scholar* noted, "It feels so nice to know that there are adults with disabilities or who know a lot about disabilities, because I think that people who are about to go to college or start their adult life can learn a lot from mentors." As participants move from high school to college and careers they too become mentors, sharing their experiences with younger participants.

Most mentoring in DO-IT takes place via the Internet. Through electronic communications and projects using the Internet, mentors promote personal, academic, and career success. For example, the following "The Thread" article from the May 2003 issue of *DO-IT NEWS* provides an example of conversations that take place.



## The Thread—Transportation in College

**DO-IT Scholar:** *Hi, I have Cerebral Palsy and I have a question for all you brilliant wheelchair-using Mentors: Did you have transportation challenges when you attended college? How did you deal with them? This is an important issue to me, as a wheelchair will be my mode of mobility in college. Thanks for any responses.*

**DO-IT Mentor:** *I was really lucky because the small town where I went to college had a completely wheelchair-accessible taxi service. My wheelchair is an electric one, so if I needed it wherever I planned to go, I usually would just meet my friends there. I also obtained and learned how to use a manual wheelchair in college. That worked well because my friends could fold it and fit it into their car if we were going somewhere.*

**DO-IT Mentor:** *I also have Cerebral Palsy and used both a manual and a power wheelchair while on campus. Transportation is definitely an issue. I suggest getting familiar with places you need to visit regularly on and off campus, and plan ahead to be able to get there. For example: Will you live in a dorm, have to visit the dining hall or library regularly, or be working on or off campus? What is the terrain of the campus like? Will you drive or be using a form of public or specialized transit? If you plan to use specialized transit services, be sure you have applied and*



*qualify beforehand. Can you ride with friends too when going places?*

*I know this might seem like a lot of questions, but the more you know about your needs and the options available to you, the more prepared you will be. A campus visit or two might be very helpful.*

**DO-IT Mentor:** *I used a manual wheelchair in college. I lived on campus in a dorm that was accessible to me and I rolled everywhere on campus. I was not used to rolling distances outside and I found it tiring to roll from class to class. I eventually built up my muscles in my arms and found I could do the whole campus successfully over time. My wheelchair was a folding model and once my friends had cars, they were more than willing to toss it into the trunk and off we'd go. I don't recall feeling limited at all about my wheelchair and getting around on and off campus.*

*Now, in hindsight, the best option for me would have been to have a choice in my transportation: to have both a manual folding chair (or a lightweight rigid model that could be easily tossed in a car, had they been available then) and a powered chair or scooter for long distances. Of course, I don't know your strength level or what sort of wheelchair you typically use. If the campus has some sort of shuttle system for students and it is accessible to wheelchair users, you could use that to get longer distances on big campuses in a manual chair. If you want to go off campus, depending on the local terrain, a scooter or power chair might allow you to get to the local store or music club on your own power.*

*Learning how to transfer into a car if you are not familiar with that would be a great task right now. Practice going out with your high school friends in their different vehicles (Gee, Mom, I NEED to go to the movies! wink, wink) so you can feel confident doing so with new friends. If*

*you feel confident with transferring independently or with light assistance, taking a taxi is an option for you. In my experience, taxi drivers are willing to put wheelchairs in trunks.*

*If you are a power chair user and transferring is not an option, don't worry, you and your buddies will find other ways to get around. Many college students can't afford cars so walking and biking are their primary means of transportation. As a power chair user, you'd be able to go along with them!*

*Perhaps having some backup parts/batteries for your chair in case of breakdown is one way of ensuring that you will always have transportation. Great question!*

**DO-IT Mentor:** *I am a senior at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. Most of the events that I go to are fairly close to my on-campus apartment, and since I don't drive, I have had to rely largely on my parents who are nearby. Eventually I hope to solve this in a city with great mass transit (plus getting a van friends can drive), but this is a tough problem for me too.*

**DO-IT Scholar:** *Thank you for your advice. I agree with your idea that campus visits are important, and I have already visited my primary and secondary schools of choice (UW and EWU). I have experienced both their advantages and weak points and will take them in to account when I apply.*

*Thanks for all the good advice, Mentors!*

DO-IT encourages one-to-one communication between protégés and Mentors via electronic mail. It also facilitates communication in small groups through the use of electronic discussion lists. For example, one group includes both Mentors and protégés who are blind. They discuss common interests and concerns such as independent living, speech





and Braille output systems for computers, and options for displaying images and mathematical expressions. Benefits of email over other types of communication noted by DO-IT participants include the ability to communicate over great distances quickly, easily, conveniently, and inexpensively; the elimination of the barriers of distance and schedule; the ability to communicate with more than one person at one time; and the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. Many report the added value that people treat them equally because they are not immediately aware of their disabilities. Negative aspects include difficulties in clearly expressing ideas and feelings, high volumes of messages, and occasional technical difficulties.

Consult the book *Creating an E-Mentoring Community: How DO-IT does it, and how you can do it, too* (Burgstahler, 2006) for the text of dozens of messages that can be used to support an online community. Each can be sent by a program administrator to mentors alone or to mentors and protégés together. Included in this book are seven recommendations for success that were synthesized from hundreds of responses from young people and adults in the DO-IT community. They are:

1. Define success for yourself.
2. Set personal, academic, and career goals. Keep your expectations high.
3. Understand your abilities and disabilities. Play to your strengths.
4. Develop strategies to reach your goal.
5. Use technology as an empowering tool.
6. Work hard. Persevere. Be flexible.
7. Develop a support network. Look to family, friends, and teachers.

## DO-IT's E-Mentoring Community, Step by Step

Creating an online mentoring community requires vision, a technological and administrative infrastructure, and ongoing facilitation. Following are steps for setting up such a community. Challenges and experiences of the DO-IT e-mentoring community are shared as examples. The following content, along with additional details, can be found in *Creating an E-Mentoring Community: How DO-IT does it, and how you can do it, too* (Burgstahler, 2006a).

1. **Establish goals for the e-mentoring community.** The purpose of DO-IT's e-mentoring community is to promote the academic, career, technology, leadership, self-determination, and social skills of young people with disabilities. The ultimate goal is a successful transition to adult life for each participant.
2. **Decide what technology to use.** DO-IT uses electronic mail and distribution lists as primary communication tools because this text-based, asynchronous approach is fully accessible to everyone and results in messages appearing in participant email inboxes, making it difficult for students and mentors to ignore the conversations that occur. In contrast, chat systems require that participants be on the same schedule and are not accessible to all students, in particular those who are very slow typists. Web-based bulletin boards and chat both require that all participants have the motivation and discipline to regularly enter the bulletin board system to participate.

*DO-IT Scholars* are encouraged to use a wide range of technologies (e.g., blogs, online chat, web-based bulletin boards, text messaging, cell phones, teleconfer-



encing) in individual and small group discussions with specific participants.

3. **Establish the mentoring group structure.** In DO-IT, the *doitkids@u.washington.edu* discussion list is for the *DO-IT Scholars*. *DO-IT Mentors* can communicate on their list, *mentors@u.washington.edu*. For group e-mentoring discussions, the list *doitchat@u.washington.edu* is used; it comprises all of the members of the e-community, including *Scholars*, *Mentors*, and *Pals*. As DO-IT grew in size, individuals expressed an interest in conversations in smaller groups of people with accommodation issues similar to their own. To address this need, DO-IT set up specialized discussion lists. For example, *doithi@u.washington.edu* was set up for *Scholars* and *Mentors* who have hearing impairments. Members of this list discuss topics that include sign language interpreters, FM systems, and cochlear implants.
4. **Select an e-mentoring administrator and make other staff and volunteer assignments.** A DO-IT e-mentoring administrator obtains the informed consent of parents, distributes training and rules for participation in the community (including Internet safety guidelines), promotes communication in group discussions, and disseminates web resources of interest to community members. To assure that individual needs are met, each *DO-IT Scholar* and *Ambassador* is assigned to a staff member. Other staff assignments include technical support and mentoring leads for subgroups.
5. **Establish roles and develop guidelines, orientation, and training for mentors.** DO-IT disseminates simple, straightforward guidelines to help potential applicants understand mentor responsibilities and provides Internet-based training.
6. **Standardize procedures for recruiting and screening mentor applicants.** In DO-IT, mentoring opportunities are communicated by word of mouth through organizations with which DO-IT has connections. This approach helps assure the quality of mentors and the safety of student participants. Prospective mentors complete applications, provide references, and undergo criminal background checks.
7. **Develop procedures to recruit protégés.** Information about the *DO-IT Scholars* program is regularly distributed to schools, parent groups, and organizations. The DO-IT Advisory Board selects *DO-IT Scholars* by reviewing their applications, teacher recommendations, parent recommendations, and school records.
8. **Provide guidance to parents.** DO-IT encourages parents to put their Internet-connected computers in high-traffic areas of their homes and to talk to their children about Internet safety.
9. **Establish a system whereby new mentors and protégés are introduced to community members.** The electronic community administrator sends messages to introduce new *DO-IT Mentors* and protégés to the group and invites these individuals to sent their own introductions.
10. **Provide ongoing supervision and support for mentors.** In DO-IT, the mentors discussion list is used by mentors to support one another and by the electronic community administrator to distribute resources and guidance.
11. **Monitor and manage online discussions.** In DO-IT the e-mentoring admin-



istrator monitors discussions within the e-mentoring community. This person sends questions to focus discussions and encourages protégés and mentors to contribute questions or thoughts to the group. The administrator distributes weekly messages called “DO-IT Lessons” that point to interesting online resources. Samples of these messages can be found at <http://www.washington.edu/doi/Lessons/>.

**12. Employ strategies that promote personal development.** The types of online activities for teens employed by DO-IT include recognized strategies for self-development. Among these are role modeling, affirmations, self-assessment, self-reflection, and visualization.

**13. Monitor the workings of the community as it evolves.** Adjust procedures and forms accordingly. DO-IT regularly surveys participants in the e-mentoring community to assess their level of satisfaction and collect their suggestions for improvement.

**14. Have fun!** Communication between participants in DO-IT’s e-mentoring community is enjoyable for everyone. Sharing humor and personal stories is encouraged.



## Existing Online Mentoring Programs

Programs without the resources to develop and support their own e-mentoring community should search for an appropriate existing community for participants to join. For example, any teen with a disability who plans to attend college can join DO-IT’s e-mentoring community by simply sending a message to [doi@u.washington.edu](mailto:doi@u.washington.edu) and asking to join *DO-IT Pals*. More information about this program can be found at <http://www.washington.edu/doi/Programs/pals.html>. Information about online mentoring options can be found in the DO-IT article *Are there electronic mentoring programs for students with disabilities?* at <http://www.washington.edu/doi/articles?218>.

## Sample Documents

Consult the following Appendices for samples of e-mentoring community program guidelines, mentor application form, and evaluation instruments.

- Appendix G: Netiquette Guidelines
- Appendix H: Mentor Guidelines and Application
- Appendix I: Online Mentor Survey
- Appendix J: Participant Computer and Internet Use Survey

The next chapter shares information regarding how to run a summer program, such as DO-IT’s Summer Study.



### DO-IT's E-Mentoring Participants

#### *DO-IT Scholars*

High school students with disabilities who are accepted into the *DO-IT Scholars* program communicate electronically with mentors and other DO-IT participants using computers and, if necessary, assistive technology. *DO-IT Scholars* who do not have the necessary technology are loaned equipment and software. *DO-IT Scholars* attend summer programs at the University of Washington in Seattle where they participate in academic lectures and labs, live in residence halls, and practice skills that will help them succeed in college and career settings.

#### *DO-IT Ambassadors*

When *DO-IT Scholars* graduate from high school and move on to postsecondary studies, they can become *DO-IT Ambassadors*, sharing their experiences and advice with *DO-IT Scholars* and *DO-IT Pals* and otherwise promote DO-IT goals.

#### *DO-IT Pals*

Teens with disabilities who want to go to college and who have access to the Internet can apply to become *DO-IT Pals*. *DO-IT Pals* come from all over the world and use the Internet to explore academic and career interests and communicate with *DO-IT Scholars*, *Ambassadors*, and *Mentors*. To become a *DO-IT Pal*, a teenager with a disability who already has access to the Internet, must send email to [doit@u.washington.edu](mailto:doit@u.washington.edu).

#### *DO-IT Mentors*

Adult mentors are an important part of the DO-IT team. *DO-IT Mentors* are college students, faculty, and professionals in a wide variety of career fields. Many *DO-IT Mentors* have disabilities themselves. *Mentors* support *DO-IT Scholars*, *Ambassadors*, and *Pals* as they transition to college, careers, and self-determined lives.

#### *DO-IT Staff*

The e-mentoring community administrator monitors discussions, introduces new members to the group, and sends messages with mentoring tips to the mentors and lessons and activities to all members of the community. Other staff join in discussions, particularly during times of low participation by others, and send useful information and resources (Burgstahler, 2006a).