

Beyond Stereotypes

IN EDUCATION ABROAD

BY SUSAN LADIKA

Today nontraditional students of all kinds—ethnic minorities, adults, those with disabilities, and gay and lesbian students—are finding their way to new learning and life-changing experiences through education abroad.



WHEN STUDENT Ashley Caveda began discussing the idea of studying abroad during her senior year at Butler University, C. Montgomery Broaded, director of the Center for Global Education, admits to being rather overwhelmed by the prospect.

Caveda, who is confined to a wheelchair, wanted to break out of her comfort zone at the Indianapolis university, and spend time studying Spanish overseas.

Broaded, who was going to Spain to check out various universities anyway, used the trip to scout out potential places for Caveda to study in the fall of 2006. That included finding classrooms, transportation, and accommodations that were handicapped accessible.

The housing coordinator at the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares in Alcalá de Henares found a household for Caveda to stay in that was already modified because the father was

also in a wheelchair. And because of his own disability, the host father knew of services available in the area.

Caveda's father, who was born in Cuba and is fluent in Spanish, came along during the first few weeks to help his daughter find her way around, and a roommate from the Butler University program also stayed in the house to help her navigate her new environment.

"It was a really good learning experience for me and my staff to do this," Broaded says. "A lot of time it's not nearly as daunting as you imagine. Things can be done. Solutions can be found."

And it wasn't only a learning experience for Broaded and his staff. Studying abroad also helped Caveda learn and grow. "I'm the kind of person who dislikes change. It can be very jarring and difficult," the 24-year-old says. "But it's really worth it. It teaches you a lot about yourself."



Changing the Face of Education Abroad

The ability to learn and grow is a key reason why universities and colleges around the country are trying to get increasing numbers of nontraditional students to take part in education abroad experiences. It could be older students, minority students, parents who are students, or homosexual or transgender students who are being encouraged to spend time overseas.

At San Francisco State University, which has a preponderance of nontraditional students, My Yarabinec, associate director of the Office of International Programs, believes “the diversity of San Francisco State should be reflected in study abroad. A lot of students deselect themselves. They think ‘that’s not for me. That’s just for rich, white kids.’” But Yarabinec and others are working to dispel that notion.

That might come through role models who have already studied abroad, faculty members of color who emphasize the importance of such programs, market-

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ing materials that cater specifically to older students, or booklets aimed at addressing the questions homosexual students might have.

Those involved with education abroad “can’t sit in their web waiting for them,” Yarabinec says. “You have to get out there into the campus.”

Adult Students

At the University of Pittsburgh, Kathleen Gallant, graduate student assistant in the Study Abroad Office, serves as a poster child for older students who want to study abroad.

Gallant, who is now 40, began her undergraduate career when she was in her mid-30s, studying part-time. When she first heard about education abroad, she thought, “There has to be a way I can do that,” and she did, taking two courses at the London School of Economics.

Now Gallant oversees a satellite office of the study abroad program, located at the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success at the university. She’s developed a brochure designed to appeal to older students, run blurbs in their newsletter, and spoken at lunches to discuss her experience with education abroad. She even organized a photo exhibit featuring the work of a student who studied in Senegal and Gambia. Gallant wants to promote the program any way she can so older students will begin to think it’s a viable possibility for them.

Imani Williams, a senior at San Francisco State University, is preparing to depart on her second education abroad program, this time bringing her children along. The 26-year-old previously spent nine months at the University of Ghana, and had to leave her daughters with family members. The Africana studies major was drawn to Ghana to “see firsthand the culture and people that I have heard and read about and studied in school. I also felt an ancestral connection to the land and the people.”

During her time abroad, Williams says she “discovered the leader and determination in me,” and wanted to bridge the gap between American and Ghanaian women so she created a “sisters group” to discuss commonalities and form the basis for close friendships.

Now she will take her three- and seven-year-old daughters with her to Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. “I want them to know that there is nothing that they can’t do. This will further change their lives and broaden their horizons.”

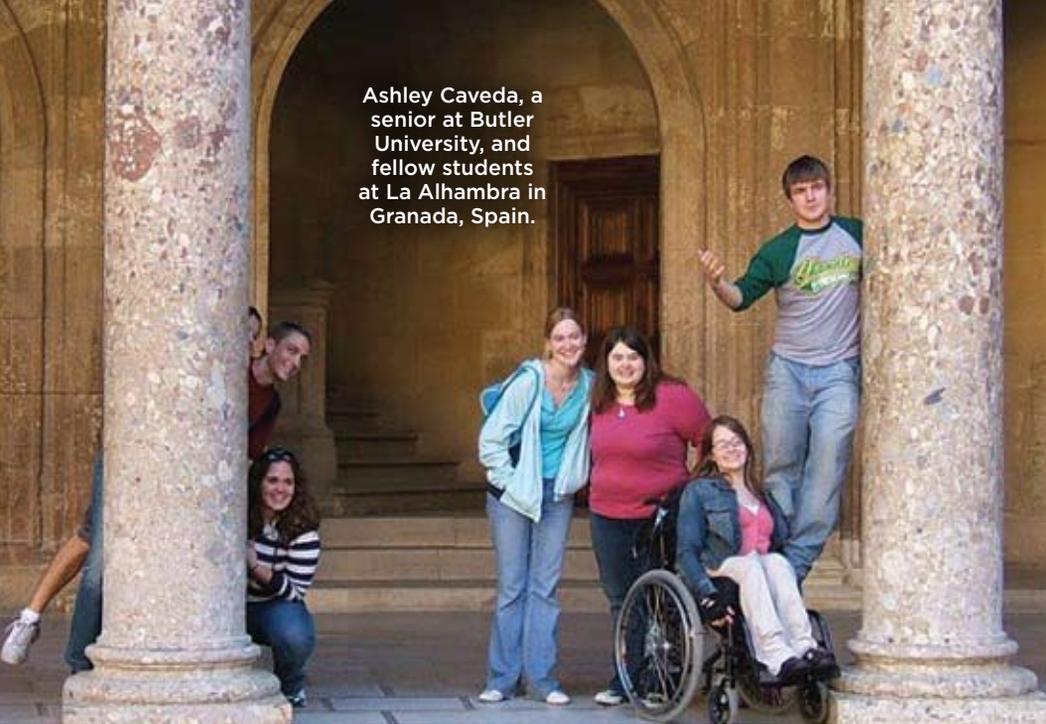
Because of the particular challenges facing older students, who might have families or full-time jobs, many universities are emphasizing short-term education abroad opportunities.

Annagene Yucas, director of study abroad at the University of Pittsburgh, says the school has put more of a focus on older students during the past couple of years. Surveys by the university found that they prefer short-term, cost-effective programs. As a result, “we are very mindful of the cost as well as the duration.”

Minority Students

At Michigan State University in East Lansing, international studies programs have been a focus for more than a half-century. But now the university is making more of an effort to get minority students involved, says Cindy Felbeck Chalou, acting director of the school’s study abroad office

Ashley Caveda, a senior at Butler University, and fellow students at La Alhambra in Granada, Spain.



College in Ithaca, New York, says that when it comes to studying abroad, “there are many gay students who summarily dismiss it (and think) ‘there is no way I could do that in a way that is safe.’”

To address those reactions, Maurer’s office and the Office of International Programs put out a booklet, “LGBT Students and Study Abroad.” The booklet is designed to help students think through questions related to education abroad, although there “aren’t a lot of hard and fast answers,” Maurer says.

Questions range from “How open will I be about my sexual orientation and gender

identity with my teachers, peers, friends, host family, and others?” to “What are the cultural attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity in my host country?”

Kevin Morrison, associate director of study abroad at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, says “there’s an appropriate way to be gay or lesbian in any culture.” When he meets with a student who wants to go abroad, they discuss the student’s personal and academic goals to find the place that is most suitable.

If those goals can best be met by studying in Morocco, “I want to send them to Morocco,” Morrison says, but he always wants to be sure they understand all the potential risks involved.

While some students have no problem telling their education abroad advisers about their sexual preferences, others are much more circumspect. But Morrison believes it’s important for them to speak up, so the education abroad offices both at home and overseas can be there to help them. “If students don’t disclose, we can’t help.”

His first priority is putting them in the right housing environment. “They need a place to live where they feel safe.”

It’s also important to get students involved in the local culture in whatever way best suits their needs. For some it’s crucial to be part of the local gay community—for others, it’s less of an issue.

Short-term Programs Popular Among Nontraditional Students

When Joseph Kinsella, associate vice president of international programs, took over as director of study abroad at DePaul University in 2000, the school already had quite a few short-term programs in place to serve its many nontraditional students. So his goal was to shore up the quality of the programs, tying them into coursework before and after the trips. “The time abroad isn’t the only piece of the educational experience. That has caused short-term programs to boom.”

So for a course on the growth of urban space in Northern Europe, students study the topic before the trip, travel to Europe, where they take photos and write down their reflections, and then “the next quarter they unpack it all,” Kinsella says.

The university is trying to have minority faculty members “intentional in reaching out to students of color,” and hopes to hire a full-time staffer to help with that effort, Chalou says. “If students see models out there, it will fall into place.”

Part of the effort involves discussing minority students’ fears and concerns. “Some students of color are concerned about how they will be treated, and possible racism abroad,” Chalou says. And it’s also crucial to involve their parents in the process. “Parents are key players for the support of students of color,” Chalou says.

Sometimes it involves going against the grain to take part in study abroad. Tanya DePass, office manager in the international programs office at DePaul University in Chicago, says she “always had an itch to travel,” so she planned to go to Japan for a semester and stayed for a year during college. Her family’s response: “Black folk don’t go to Japan,” and “we don’t do things like that,” DePass recalls. “It was odd enough I was in college.”

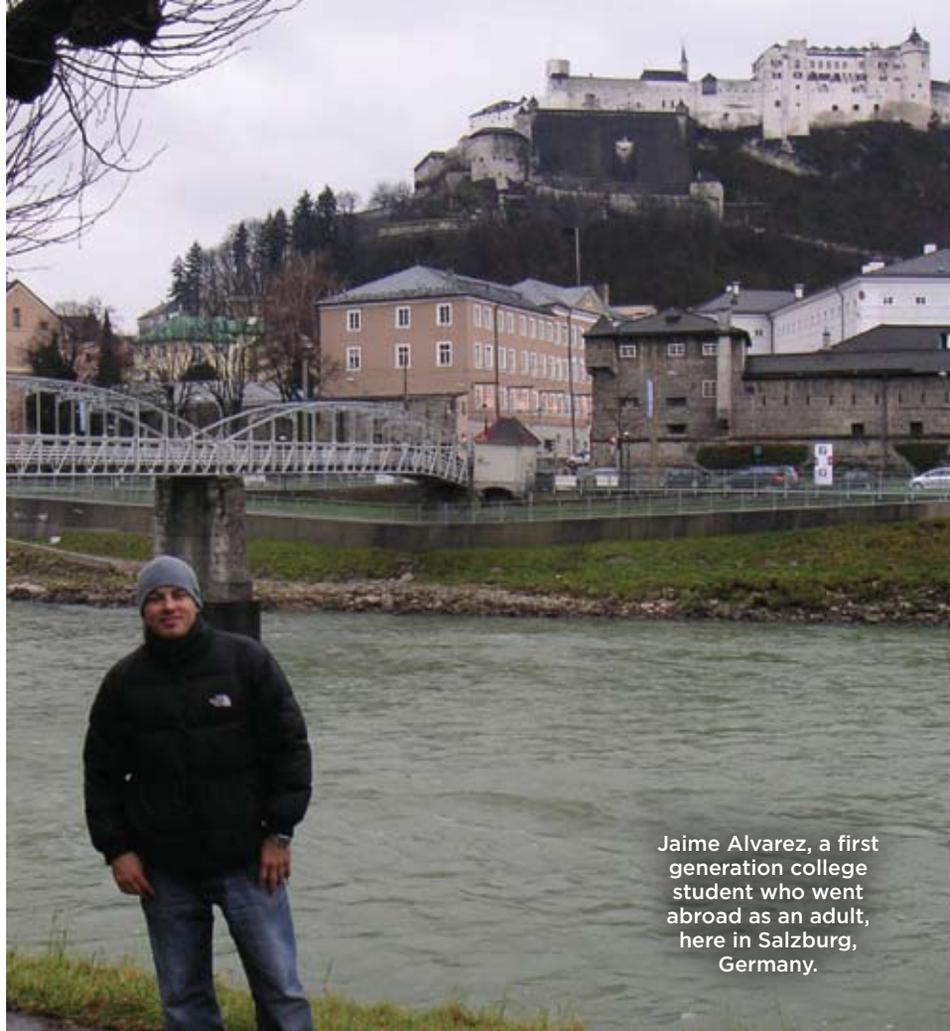
James Alvarez, now a graduate student at California State University, Long Beach, ran into a similar situation when he decided to study abroad at Uppsala University in Sweden during his senior year in 2005–2006. Alvarez was born in Mexico, and his family immigrated to the United States when he was a baby. His was a humble upbringing, where the siblings were expected to graduate from high school and then go to work to help support the family.

Going to Europe was a “daydream. It’s the stuff you read about in history books,” Alvarez says. When he first got the idea to study abroad, his oldest sister was supportive, while the rest of his close-knit family wondered why he wanted to travel so far.

But Alvarez, now 31, believed “there’s got to be more [to] life,” and wanted to be a role model for his nephews to show them that they have choices.

Gay and Lesbian Students

That’s the goal of many study abroad advisers nationwide—to show students that any doors can be open to them. Lis Maurer, coordinator of the Center for LGBT Education, Outreach & Service at Ithaca



Jaime Alvarez, a first generation college student who went abroad as an adult, here in Salzburg, Germany.

At the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in Baltimore, both graduate and undergraduate students, as well as their family members or members of the community, can take part in short-term programs that are designed and led by faculty members and are generally about two weeks long, says Lamy.

Of the Catholic college's 3,000 female students, only about 500 are traditional students. Because most work or have families, they can't squeeze in a typical semester abroad. With the short-term programs, they generally have to take only a little more than week off work, and a family member can babysit while they are away.

Susan Chance, a senior accountant who is studying for a graduate degree in management, has repeatedly taken advantage of the short-term study abroad opportunities. "I want to get a little more out of my education, instead of just sitting in a classroom."

She went to Mexico and El Salvador as an undergraduate in 2003 and 2005, then visited Morocco last year. In 2009 she plans to take part in a trip to Egypt and Jordan. The trips ranged from studying Spanish in Mexico to studying Islamic religion and culture in Morocco.

The 40-year-old single mother with a 13-year-old son has found her son's father and other family members to be willing care-takers while she was away. She's used vacation time to get off work, and the financing has fallen into place. "I just kind of went with the flow," Chance says. "If you try to line every little detail up, you never do anything."

The trips "surpassed my expectations. They changed my perspective on people and the world." Since her travels abroad she's kept in touch with some of those she met, and met new Muslim friends since her return to the United States.

She already attends a Spanish church and sponsors a child in Mexico, and she hopes to do volunteer work abroad when she finishes up school.

Time abroad also has had a major impact on Karen Ford, a 51-year-old married mother with a 14-year-old son, who is studying for her undergraduate degree in political science at DePaul, with a focus on labor issues. Ford works full-time as an administrative assistant to two directors in the program unit for church in society at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and is involved with the National Writers Union, which represents freelance writers.

Her interest in international issues was piqued when she attended a conference of nongovernmental organizations on the politics of class, held at the United Nations in New York. In 2007 she traveled

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to Ghana, Benin, and Togo for three and a half weeks with DePaul, studying the area's history, religion, and culture. "It gave me the opportunity to see what is happening on the continent as far as nongovernmental organizations are concerned."

Particularly intriguing was a home stay with a family in Ghana where the wife was involved in administering a microloan program for women in the highly patriarchal society.

What struck Ford was that "We're not just talking about the United States when we're talking about poverty and economic downturn. Poverty is poverty. It's all interrelated."

Ford is fortunate to have a supportive employer, which has a continuing education program, allowing her to take days from the program, along with vacation, to go on the trip, and also helped pay for part of the trip. After her return she spoke at a brown-bag lunch at work about her experiences.

Cost Not Always an Obstacle

While it's often thought that unsympathetic employers and lack of money are what keep older students from traveling abroad, that isn't

necessarily the case. About a decade ago, the California Colleges for International Education did a survey of community college presidents, vice presidents, faculty senate presidents, and other leaders about the barriers to community college students studying abroad, says director Rosalind Raby. The results found “all presumed barriers are not really barriers that exist for these students.” College leaders thought key issues would be money, racism concerns, and hesitation to leave their environment.

In surveying the students, they found money wasn’t an issue, and most could work extra hours to bring in the cash they needed. Also, about 70 percent of respondents had traveled abroad several times. “Think about the changing face of immigration. They go home a lot,” Raby says.

Because they are used to having their independence, many older students prefer home stays rather than staying in dorms. And certain programs allow the students to bring their spouses or children along.

Instead, the key issue was that community college students weren’t even aware that study abroad programs existed. The California Colleges for International Education has funding to repeat the survey this spring. While the economic downturn might make funding more of a factor, Raby believes the key issue will continue to be lack of awareness.

Each year, about 5,000 community college students nationwide participate in education abroad programs, and about 3,500 come from California. And that’s without full-time education abroad personnel at most colleges. “Can you imagine what we could do with a little support?” Raby asks. “People still don’t understand that international education is germane to the community college mission and is something that will benefit students.”

And that holds true regardless of what kind of higher education program a student is enrolled in. In California, seven out of 10 jobs have an international focus, Raby says. “This is not just going abroad to sightsee.”

Expanding Offerings for Nontraditional Students

Other schools still are working on enhancing their study abroad programs. The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) hired its first full-time education abroad adviser last year. It’s like many schools

that are taking greater pains to reach students who might not think studying abroad is right for them.

But there can be particular challenges at certain institutions, such as the UTEP, where the vast majority of students are Hispanic. While part live in Texas, the others are residents of Mexico.

With Hispanics in general, “family ties are so tight, it can be hard for students to want to step out and do this,” says Carol Wenzel, assistant director of the Office of International Programs. In fact, many of the students have never left the El Paso area.

In today’s global economy, “citizens are no longer going to be able to function without having some kind of global perspective,” Wenzel says. “We want them to participate as global citizens, not just have a narrow focus.”

For those who have studied abroad, Wenzel has seen that the students have gained self-esteem and are better able to handle change and deal with a stressful environment. It also gives them an edge when hunting for jobs.

There can be particular challenges for Mexican students who want to study abroad, as they have to maintain both their U.S. F1 and their visa to study in another country. One student was going to France, and his U.S. visa would have expired while he was gone. So the office helped him renew his U.S. visa and obtain his French visa.

One way the university has helped students finance their travels is through a \$4 international fee paid by every incoming student. That money is used to fund scholarships for study abroad. UTEP grants scholarships of \$1,000 to \$3,000 per term, though as the number of students who enroll in study abroad increases, the size of the individual awards decreases, Wenzel says.

At Cleveland State University in Ohio, where the bulk of the students are minorities who receive financial aid, that money can be used to pay for study abroad costs, says adviser Hannah Fischer.

Reeling More Adult Students In

Now there is more of an emphasis of drawing older students into education abroad. “They have re-entered the higher education arena very aggressively in the past couple years,” Fischer says. More than 60 percent of the students—both graduate and undergraduate—are age 25 or older. If they decide to study abroad, grants are also available, reaching up to \$5,000 for longer trips.

Because they are used to having their independence, many older students prefer home stays rather than staying in dorms. And certain programs allow the students to bring their spouses or children along. One example is a Spanish-language education program in Mexico, which also allows children to enroll.

Though Fischer says bringing the family along can complicate things. “It does provide a distraction. They’re parents first, then students.”

Regardless of their age, older students are “students just like the others. What’s available to others should also be for them, Fischer says.”

One of those making the most of his time abroad is Cleveland State student Foday Conteh, a junior studying for his degree in biology-medical technology.

The first challenge for the 29-year-old was simply enrolling in the university. Born in Sierra Leone, Conteh was a refugee in Gambia when he migrated to the United States with his family at the age of 21. While working in Philadelphia, he lost his job and decided he needed to go to college, something his mother couldn't understand. He recalls thinking, "I don't need another job. I need a career."

In September he headed to the University of Sunderland in the United Kingdom for a semester, where he is now captain of the soccer team and interacts with other students from around the globe. "If the world is going to be peaceful, we have to understand each other first."

Students With Disabilities

Time abroad also is a way not only for nontraditional students to educate themselves, but also for them to educate others.

Nicholas Goldsberry, a senior at Butler University, has been blind since birth, and headed to Guadalajara, Mexico in 2007 to study Spanish, completing the last three hours of his minor. "I would much rather have the immersion and cultural experience of going abroad."

His host family's home was easily navigable using his cane, and the bus station was only a couple of blocks away. He was paired with a different teacher each day, who explained the city in depth. One day he might go to the zoo, and the teacher would describe what she saw. Another day he might go to a museum, and the teacher would explain the exhibits and allow Goldsberry to touch them "just to make sure I had the full experience."

He views education abroad as a "two-way street. I can educate others about my disability and learn about customs and food that you wouldn't otherwise know."

Ashley Caveda had a similar experience in Spain, where a drama professor fought to prevent her from enrolling in his class, and then didn't want her to have an onstage role in a class play.

She said on the last day of class he announced everyone's grades and gave her an "A." He also confided that he had been afraid he could not work with a wheelchair-bound student and hadn't been sure he could handle the situation, but after seeing Caveda in action, said having her in class was one of the best experiences of his life.

Dealing With Racism Abroad

For minority students, there can be concerns about racism, discrimination and even ageism. Alvarez says of racism, "there are issues everywhere. I really make it a point not to take offense."

And DePass says of her trip to Japan, "you are an outlier once you get there anyway," though she was pleased to find other black students and older students at Kansai Gaidi University in Osaka.

She believes that she benefited more from her time abroad than younger students might because she viewed it as a major learning experience. "Who knew when I'd get the chance to do it again."

Before Gallant went to the London School of Economics, "I had a lot of age anxiety. It didn't pan out at all." Even if a student is the oldest in his class, "It makes you stand out. You've got a different set of experiences. You can add to what's going on in class."

Both classes she took abroad had a number of older students, including a contingent from the Sudanese government, as well as professionals from the European Union and the World Bank, giving her the perfect chance to network.

His time abroad convinced Alvarez that he wants to teach at the university level. He currently is substitute teaching in a very diverse classroom. He's seen that the students "have so much to offer each other, and they don't know how. I'm trying to help them learn."

For Conteh, not only does the semester spent abroad bolster his resume, but he is also cultivating the friendships and connections he makes along the way. "This way I can interact with European students. ... Students are the future leaders of the world." **IE**

SUSAN LADIKA has been a journalist for more than 20 years, working in both the United States and Europe. She is now based in Tampa, Florida. Her last article for *IE* was "Nursing Goes Global" in the November/December 2008 issue, which is part of the ongoing "internationalizing graduate programs" feature series.

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