

## Tracking Students With Disabilities Who Study Abroad

**C**RIPPING HER GERMAN SHEPHERD'S HARNESS, Christie Gilson easily navigates the Moravian College campus in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where she is assistant professor of education. In 2006, as a graduate student at the University of Illinois, she left her guide dog behind and with her long white cane, headed on a Fulbright to Hong Kong. Gilson doesn't seem like someone who would fall under the radar either at home or abroad. Yet, she notes, "Disability continues to be a minority group that is largely invisible."

Gilson is referring to the lack of demographic data collected on the number of students with disabilities who have studied abroad. Students with disabilities typically represent 9 percent of the student population on U.S. campuses, according to U.S. Department of Education National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies. The question remains, however: How many and what types of students with disabilities are going abroad each year? In 2008 the Institute of International Education (IIE)'s annual *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* survey asked this for the first time, and 12 percent of institutions answered. Not enough to make the reported 2.6 percent of education abroad students

who have disabilities a national-level finding (see "How Many Students with Disabilities Study Abroad?").

In 2009 the *Open Doors* survey will again ask institutions to find out. This time around, there's more opportunity to plan. Linfield College, Purdue University, and San Diego State University (SDSU), which reported the largest numbers of students with disabilities on the survey in 2008, are examples of how to collect data on the number of students with disabilities going abroad.

At first glance, calculating how many students with disabilities have participated in education abroad in any given year may seem difficult, but what many institutions don't realize is that they may already be collecting it.

Linfield College, located in Oregon, collected data from student health information forms. "Students are asked to disclose their disabilities after they are admitted to our programs so that we can provide adequate support both here and abroad," says Sandy Soohoo-Refaei, associate director of the International Programs Office.

Purdue's disability resource center used an education abroad list to tally numbers from their database of 1,300 registered students with disabilities.

SDSU sent their education abroad students' school identification numbers to the registrar's office and received a tally back of the number of listed students who also received disability support services. "It was one of the easiest questions to answer on the entire survey," says Rebekah Fuganti, international programs coordinator.



## How Many Students With Disabilities Study Abroad?

**O**VER 1,000 STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES from 116 U.S. post-secondary institutions studied abroad for credit in 2006–07, according to baseline figures from the Institute of International Education (IIE)'s annual *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. This represents 2.6 percent of the total number of education abroad students.

Half of the students with disclosed disabilities reported a learning disability, while one quarter reported mental disabilities. Students with physical, sensory, or other disabilities comprised the remaining 25 percent.

IIE collected the disability data for the first time this year. Due to the low response rate for this question in its introductory year, *Open Doors* data on students with disabilities studying abroad cannot be interpreted as a national-level finding.

five disability categories. "I assume that there was much under-reporting, partly because it is new and partly because some institutions may not feel comfortable in knowing who is in and who is out of the 'disability' umbrella," says Brian Harley, associate dean of international programs and director of programs for study abroad at Purdue University.

Many students' disabilities are easy to categorize. Others may require clarification. All types are best tallied while keeping the individual's name private. If using health/accommodation forms, the information provided by a medical doctor or a student may not name the disability, only related conditions, medications or services requested. The *Open Doors* survey asks staff to specify only if a student's disability was psychiatric in nature, for example, without regard to the specific diagnosis. Temporary conditions, such as a broken leg, are not among those counted. Also, students with multiple types

### Using Education Abroad Forms

Asking students directly about their disability on student inquiry, application, or acceptance forms is one option for identifying the data. If gathered at or before the application stage, it needs to be clear that disability reporting is optional and information is not used to discriminate or screen out applicants. Students may be more apt to disclose a disability on health/accommodation forms *after* acceptance. (To further understand the issues around disability disclosure among education abroad students, see the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange's tip sheet: <http://www.miusa.org/ncde/tipsheets/disclosure>)

Institutions also need to collect information about students enrolling in third-party provider programs to avoid marking "unknown" for those students on the disability question. In theory, "a student could just go directly to [a third-party provider] to disclose, work with disability services, and never talk to us—that would be quite possible but not typical. Students usually disclose to us," says Heidi Soneson, program director at the Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota. The university's solution is to have all students fill out standardized health/accommodation forms regardless of the program, which is easier than asking each third-party provider to report back this type of data.

### Disability Categories

The *Open Doors* survey (see "Checklist on Disability Data Collection") asks institutions to identify both the total number of students with disabilities going abroad for academic credit and to assign these students to one of



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of disabilities are listed once under each applicable category. For example, a student with a brain injury is coded in the “other disability” category, but may also report a secondary disability, such as walking with a cane. Both “other” and “physical disability” would be marked for the student.

Disability service offices, health and/or counseling centers on campus can provide guidance in answering questions about how best to categorize a type of disability or medical information on a form. Developing a relationship with the disability services office on campus is one of the best ways to collaborate on data gathering and to plan proactively for the recruitment and support of students with disabilities.

Linfield College asks their student health center to assist in reviewing forms they receive, and as a result, categorizing the disabilities was not difficult, says Marie Schmidt, international programs assistant. “What surprises us is the number of severe emotional and learning issues college students have and sometimes how unprepared overseas institutions are to handle these types of issues,” says Schmidt. As a result, Linfield locates disability information to assist overseas partners in better understanding various students’ needs.

### Disability Office Databases

In some cases, the disability services office may know about an education abroad student with a disability while the education abroad office does not. “There are certainly times when there are students who are availing themselves of services but are not disclosing to study abroad, and sometimes I’m coordinating with the student to provide campus-based services that they [normally receive] even while abroad,” says Laura Patey, coordinator of disability services at Lesley University. “I have a database, and I keep their file active even though they aren’t showing as registered for courses that semester.”

The disability office can report the total number of students and the number for each disability category while maintaining the Federal Family Educational Rights



## Checklist on Disability Data Collection

### Do you gather health/ accommodation forms?

- Ask your disability services office to help you learn how to classify the information on the forms into type of disability.
- Develop a process through which you can enter the information into a confidential database or locked spreadsheet.
- Require students studying in third-party provider programs to fill out standardized forms or ask department-led programs to use these forms and report back.

### Do you gather student intake forms?

- If the form is filled in during or before the application stage, make reporting a disability optional.
- Consider asking all demographic questions, including disability, post-acceptance—assuring students that the information is not being used to determine eligibility.

### Do you work with your disability, health, or counseling office?

- Direct students in several places on your education abroad forms to meet with the disability, health, or counseling office if they would like accommodations abroad.
- Provide the disability, health, or counseling office with a list of all education abroad students so they may cross-check it with their database.
- Find out if the disability office is connected to the institutional database.

### Do you work with your Office of Institutional Research?

- Find out if the centralized database can keep disability and education abroad data.
- Ask a person with clearance to view both disability and education abroad data in the centralized database to assist with the number count.

### Other ideas?

- Share them with colleagues on disability or education abroad listservs.

and Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines and other required confidentiality of individual students. Patey says she can easily give numbers of students to the education abroad office for the *Open Doors* survey. The education abroad office shares a list of accepted students with her office, and on education abroad forms and checklists, includes reminders to students to inform the disability office that they are going overseas. She notes that in the past, this process has helped her identify and advise

more students, and maintain comprehensive, accurate records.

“There would be students that I would be seeing on a fairly regular basis and I’d get the student education abroad list and say, ‘Oh, I didn’t know you were studying abroad’ because it wouldn’t necessarily be part of our conversation,” says Patey. “The student would say, ‘Oh, I didn’t even think about it or that you could help me with that.’”

Disability services colleagues often want to know where their students are, and how



they can ensure their students have the support they need. "It's useful to know that there are a relatively large number of students with disabilities participating [in education abroad]. This is an area of emerging concern to us, especially because twelve majors at SDSU require study abroad," says Mary Shojai, director of student disability services. While 5 percent of SDSU students with disabilities are studying abroad compared to 3.4 percent of all SDSU students, she did note that students who are deaf, blind, or have mobility disabilities "rarely" study abroad compared to those with less apparent disabilities.

Disability offices can work with education abroad advisers to see who is underrepresented and find ways to improve opportunities for these student. Heather Stout, associate dean of students at Purdue's Disability Resource Center, has a close working relationship with their education abroad office and found the *Open Doors* data they collected on disability this year useful for their own campus' gauge of students with disabilities participation. She is working with the education abroad office to look for ways to further facilitate participation of students with physical and sensory disabilities.

### Using All the Data Available

Similarly, data kept by institution-wide offices on the number of students with disabilities studying abroad helps "to assess what kind of support services are needed and to train staff and faculty abroad before students go," says Inés DeRomaña, principal policy analyst for the Education Abroad Program (EAP) at the University of California's (UC) University-wide Office, who fields many disability-related questions for the EAP that services all UC campuses.

Additionally, it helps combat misconceptions when she hears statements such as, "Students with eating disorders shouldn't be going abroad." By using data, she can respond, "In the last three years, we have had X number of students with a history of eating disorders successfully study abroad."

More offices are moving toward connecting with institutional databases to reduce the time spent entering student contact information in office-specific databases. A student identification number provides access to existing data. Purdue found that their education abroad and disability offices used the same database software, and while Stout had to enter the education abroad student's identification numbers manually into their disability database, "the process went fairly quickly." However, if resources are limited, using only a centralized database may limit what fields the education abroad office could track, as was the case with SDSU. "I only asked for a total [number] so I don't know where they went or what type of disability they have," says Fuganti.

Partial answers to the disability category questions are better than nothing, says Kathleen Sidel, associate vice president for overseas study at Indiana University: "Anything that requires our attention makes us more aware."

Shojai agrees, "The statistics are motivating us to work through some of these challenges so that students with severe physical disabilities have opportunities similar to those of other students."

And, that is a step in the right direction for students with disabilities, who follow in Gilson's footsteps and who will benefit from higher education institutions' growing awareness of disability inclusion in education abroad. Whether the number of institutions reporting on the amount of students with disabilities going abroad will grow as a result remains to be counted in 2009. **IE**

**MICHELE SCHEIB** works with the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), which is administered by Mobility International USA and sponsored by Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State. The NCDE provides free information and referral services related to the participation of people with disabilities in international exchange programs ([www.miusa.org/ncde](http://www.miusa.org/ncde)).

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