

Students with Disabilities Studying Abroad

YOU ARE AN ENTHUSIASTIC STUDENT of the writer James Joyce, eager to study at Trinity College in his beloved Dublin, a picturesque Irish city with many narrow, crowded, cobblestone streets. But you use a wheelchair. Is your dream realistic?

You have long yearned to study in England. The University of Sunderland, in the heart of England's buzzing Northeast, beckons. But you are blind. Is it realistic to think you will be able to travel there by yourself and keep up with the coursework?

You struggle with bipolar disorder, dealing with dramatic mood swings and marked changes in energy and behavior. Can you handle the challenges of this mental health problem while taking classes in Buenos Aires, Argentina?

Yes, yes, and yes.

One of the most encouraging trends in recent years is the increasing number of students with disabilities who have been able to take advantage of education abroad opportunities. Their experiences overseas—almost always life-enhancing and sometimes transforming—are made possible through their courage and realism, and the leadership, encouragement, and assistance of many.

Leadership and Teamwork

A pioneer group in the field is Mobility International USA (MIUSA), now in its 26th year. The organization was cofounded by Barbara Williams and Susan Sygall, who serves as its CEO. Sygall, who uses a wheelchair, has had a personal and professional commitment to disability rights and women's issues for more than 25 years. The organization's



Editor's Note: The information below is a summation of best practices based on the University of Minnesota's federally funded Access Abroad project, the authors' experience with education abroad and students with disabilities, and consultation with colleagues in the field.

Students with Disabilities Self-Study for Advisers

By Heidi M. Soneson and Roberta J. Cordano

TO PREPARE for the growing number of students with disabilities interested in studying abroad, education abroad advisers need to implement procedures in key areas on their home campus and overseas. The procedures outlined below are designed to encourage early disclosure so that accommodation needs can be identified and discussed well in advance of the education abroad experience, and to provide study abroad advisers with the necessary resources and tools for comprehensive guidance to interested students. The critical questions at the end of this overview are designed to help advisers consider ways to assess and expand overseas accommodations for students with disabilities.

Have an Advising Plan in Place

- Develop office procedures on steps to be taken when a student with a disability requests accommodations overseas. Train all staff on these procedures to maximize advising access for students.
- Create a handout to have available in your office and on your Web site with specific steps students with disabilities should take to identify a program and assess accommodation possibilities. This handout should include suggested timeframes for notifying the study abroad office of specific accommodation needs.
- Implement an assessment survey that allows students with disabilities to identify their accommodation needs in consultation with their disability services adviser.
- Train staff on effective advising approaches to utilize when working with students with disabilities.

Foster Early Disclosure

- Include wording in your advising and promotional materials that invites students with disabilities to disclose their interest in study abroad.
- Display photos of students with disabilities in your promotional materials.

■ Provide a place for disclosure in your acceptance materials.

■ Include language in your predeparture materials that encourages students to share their accommodation needs.

Develop Linkages with Key Offices on Campus

- Build your disability services office into your advising plan.
- Identify a contact in disability services that can help assess and identify reasonable accommodation needs.
- Arrange a meeting with disability services and study abroad staff to develop joint advising strategies.
- Determine whether additional offices (such as the dean of students) should be included.

Provide Information on Overseas Accessibility

- For your own program locations overseas, discuss accommodation possibilities in advance.
- For programs offered by other organizations/institutions, know in advance what procedures they have in place to assist students with disabilities.
- Create a binder of information on accessibility at your most popular locations.

Assessment Questions to Determine Accessibility in the Education Abroad Environment

The following questions can help programs identify some of the accommodations that might be needed for the four major functional categories listed above.

- Do you have the ability to identify a ground floor classroom if this accommodation is needed?
- Can you identify faculty that utilize PowerPoint or provide lecture notes in advance for students?
- What arrangements (classroom, housing, and transportation) can be made for accommodation, such as sign language interpreters, service dogs, etc.?
- Do you have a list of mental health providers in the community?

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Additional helpful tools and resources for U.S. and overseas advisers and students are available at the University of Minnesota's Access Abroad Web site: www.umabroad.umn.edu/access.

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Web site is a rich source of information. In underscoring that the communities of international education and disability need to work together, Michele Scheib, project specialist of MIUSA's National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, echoes a theme repeated by many who are active in helping students with disabilities to study abroad, a theme vividly elaborated in the film *Making It Happen, Study Abroad for Students with Disabilities*. The documentary was written and produced by Jeff Whitehead and Carol Larson, University of Pittsburgh, and shown this past May to the International Education for Persons with Disabilities Specific Interest Group (IEPD

SIG) during NAFSA's annual conference, in conjunction with MIUSA and the affiliates who sponsored it. The film was also shown at the July meeting of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the professional group for disability service providers. Larson, assistant director of study abroad at the University of Pittsburgh, emphasizes that only with a team approach—she works closely with Lynnett Van Syke, director of disability resources and services—can a university offer the best service to a disabled student interested in overseas study. Heidi Soneson, program director of the Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota, also makes the point: “This is a partnership involving the student, the study abroad office, the disability services office, and the overseas colleagues.”

As universities encourage their students to study abroad, they are making conscious efforts to include those with disabilities.

Access Abroad is the name given to the 1999 grant that started the University of Minnesota's formal process for supporting and assisting students with disabilities to study abroad, and its Web site, too, is used nationally and internationally. With support from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, Minnesota worked with other universities in the U.S. and in other countries, as well as with various education

the student and the host institution. Stephen Ferst, director of study abroad at Rutgers University, and one of the five founding members of NAFSA's IEPD SIG, says “It is not altogether clear if there is really more disclosure or if we are seeing more students with disabilities who are studying abroad.”

Any effective adviser needs to gain the trust of the student and encourage planning while remembering that even with good planning students could well encounter unanticipated

challenges. Students may not like to talk about the “what if,” but those who have gone abroad know how important it is to plan. The more information an adviser can share with the host school, the better.

The process can take many months. Cindy Felbeck Chalou, associate director, in the Office of Study Abroad at Michigan State University, recommends 9–12 months for planning, starting the conversation in early fall, for example, for the following summer. Pittsburgh's Van Slyke cites the example of a student who needed a guide dog. Like all visitors, students must abide by the laws of the host country for bringing in an animal, and in this case the Latin American country had a six-month quarantine requirement necessitating many preparatory steps over a long period.

Flexibility

Together with disclosure and planning, flexibility is another factor that is key to success. Uniformly, advisers and others in the field shun the notion of discouraging students with disabilities. The attitude all bring to the enterprise is a will to make it work. This includes recognizing that there may be some

Resources

Mobility International USA www.miusa.org
National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange <http://www.miusa.org/ncde>
Enable Link www.enablelink.org
Ability www.abilityinfo.com
Global Access News <http://www.globalaccessnews.com>
Emerging Horizons <http://emerginghorizons.com/>
Disabled Student Services in Higher Education (DSSHE) List Serv
listserv.buffalo.edu/archives/dsshe-1.html

abroad organizations, to develop processes and materials to use in the advising process. One of the project's imperatives was to create products that would encourage students to disclose their disability.

Disclosure and Planning

Many people may have a wrongly limited view of what constitutes a disability. All those interviewed for this article observed that most student disabilities are hidden. These might involve processing disabilities (such as learning difficulties, attention deficit disorders, psychological problems, or brain injuries) or chronic systemic disorders (such as severe allergies or diabetes). A university encourages and relies on self-disclosure to discuss the kind of accommodations that a student may need; and while it is true that not every student does or needs to disclose, failure to do so—or to disclose in a timely manner—can cause complications for both

programs that are not appropriate for some individuals. A good adviser does not encourage or discourage but explains in concrete terms the reality of participating in a particular program and guides the student to consider a range of options. "Our responsibility is to find the right match between student and program and that includes students with disabilities," says Ferst. This could mean choosing a different country or a different program or a different length of stay. "No two students, even with the same disability, are the same," Cerise Roth-Vinson, manager of MIUSA's National Clearinghouse, reminds us. "They may request different accommodations based on factors such as energy level, environmental conditions, lighting, or medication side effects that influence the barrier they are experiencing." And as Minnesota's Soneson observes: "We must be prepared that not every site can accommodate every student." She underscores the need to ex-

plore the issues of where, for how long, for what kind of experience: course work in a big city, a rural internship, special classes at a center; for three weeks or a semester or a year. "All the variables," Soneson says, "are part of the conversation to identify an appropriate experience."

Third-party providers offer universities a choice of programs that, individually, the institutions would not be able to provide. These organizations have long and deep experience in many places throughout the world and are able to educate the students about what possible challenges they may face. And with the information, the student makes the final decision. MIUSA's Web site allows a user to search the globe for exchange programs. One group, this year marking 60 years of activity, is the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). Although its work with students with disabilities goes back to the 1980s, its

concerted effort to attract students with disabilities began in the mid-1990s. Catharine Scruggs, CIEE's program director for Western Europe, credits MIUSA with playing a critical role in prodding others to encourage more people—students and others—to go abroad. Scruggs serves on MIUSA's Roundtable Consortium, joining colleagues from 25 international exchange and disability organizations, usually once a year, with the goal of encouraging more people with disabilities to go abroad. CIEE currently offers 97 programs in 35 countries, located in Africa, the Middle East, Eastern and Western Europe, the Asia-Pacific region, and Latin America. Another example of a third-party provider is International Studies Abroad (ISA), now 20 years old, which concentrates on Spanish-speaking countries but is expanding to include Italy, France, England, and other places. "We expect to send close to 4,000 students overseas in 2007," says

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Lindsay Hauser, ISA's East Coast regional director, "and many will have disabilities."

Laws and Culture

The rights of students with disabilities are protected under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The ADA extends antidiscrimination legislation to all institutions of higher education regardless of whether or not the institution receives federal funds. (The act contains five titles; Titles II through V apply specifically to students who attend postsecondary educational institutions.) The effect of the ADA has been considerable. It focused on the workplace and, in part for that reason, made a huge differ-

ence in popular awareness of disabilities and the need to accommodate them. And while from a legal perspective the ADA obligations stop at our borders, universities usually feel a moral obligation to extend the same accommodations to their offerings overseas.

An important recent development occurred in March of this year: 80 countries signed a United Nations convention enshrining the rights of the world's 650 million disabled, moving it close to coming into force. The convention is a blueprint to end discrimination and exclusion of the physically and mentally disabled in education, jobs, and everyday life. It guarantees that the disabled have the inherent right to life on an equal basis with the able-bodied and

requires countries to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantee equal legal protection.

Although many countries already have disability laws, experienced advisers do not characterize a country as accessible or inaccessible solely on the basis of legislation or technological advancement. The cultural values of a country can be a strong determinant of the experience a student with disabilities may have. One woman told a group that because of her quadriplegia, she came upon some obstacles in a European country. People there ignored her when she encountered a problem. However, when she ran into a similar instance in Mexico, a country with far fewer physical accommodations,



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15 people offered to help her. "There are countries," says Soneson, "where a student with a mobility disability may find the buildings have no elevators but where people find it natural to offer assistance in other ways, for example to lift a student over an embankment." In the U.S., students are likely to view independence as the ability to do what they want with little or no assistance, or with assistance they can control, and that the law guarantees. But in other cultures, to achieve independence they may also need to rely on help from others—friends or strangers.

Anyone who goes abroad has to be somewhat adaptable; a student with a disability must be very adaptable. Even what may at first seem like a helpful public accommodation may pose a problem. As Paul Jarmin, learning development officer for Students with Disabilities at Queen Mary College (part of the University of London), and himself blind, points out in the docu-

mentary *Making It Happen*, London has more cut curbs (called "dropped kerbs" in the U.K.) than in the past, which is good news for wheelchair users but not so good for the blind using guide dogs, since the dogs depend on curbs. "What suits some, doesn't necessarily suit others," Jarmin says. Even apparent progress may pose challenges.

Statistics on Trends

There are few firm numbers about students with disabilities. A survey of the American Council on Education found that the number of full-time freshmen with disabilities increased from 7 percent to 11 percent between 1988 and 1999. MIUSA's Scheib says currently the most widely used figure is that 9 percent of college students have some kind of disability. Informally, individual university study abroad programs have noted that the number of participating students with disabilities is growing. But more statistical

information would be welcome. Disability is the only underrepresented category not included in the *Open Doors* survey of the Institute of International Education (IIE). MIUSA is working with a number of groups and with the IIE to test pilot a question about disabled U.S. students going abroad for inclusion in the spring 2008 *Open Doors* survey.

The trend line, however, is clear: there is much more awareness; professors and administrators are becoming more educated, and students more confident. ISA's Hauser observes that as more are involved in the field, more become open to the possibility of doing something similar. She sums up her experience: "The field has become a community and a growing one." **IE**

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