

Advising Students with Disabilities in Education Abroad: Promoting Equal Opportunities and Best Outcomes

Case Study #1 Navigating a Colonial City in Mexico

The following situations have all actually occurred. Read each situation and, with your group, brainstorm answers to the given questions. Consider what each situation can teach you about working with students who have a disability.

A blind student at your university is accepted into a study abroad program in Oaxaca, Mexico*. Students in this program live with a host family and face a daily commute to the university where they will be studying. Additionally, as a part of this program, students will take weekly field trips and one 10-14 day extended field trip in another part of the country. The student has some vision to see shapes at close range, so can read large print and navigates on her own around familiar places without use of a white cane or guide dog. Knowing the background of the program, how would you support this student in his/her time studying abroad, both before departure and during study? Who would you contact and what are the first steps you might take? What additional obstacles might this student face and how might you accommodate for them?

*Oaxaca is a colonial city with mostly cobblestone streets and varied traffic patterns.

Moderator Note to Add Depth to the Discussion: While the student can be oriented to the areas that she will frequent so she can navigate independently, in the first weeks, she would like someone to be available to walk with her everywhere, and during the whole experience when she is new places, such on the field trips.

Case Study #2 Changing Perspectives in Germany

The following situations have all actually occurred. Read each situation and, with your group, brainstorm answers to the given questions. Consider what each situation can teach you about working with students who have a disability.

A student with low vision has applied to study abroad in Berlin, Germany. She has a guide dog and wants to bring her guide dog with her to study abroad. The program is run through a U.S. program provider and is housed at a language institute. It is a host family based program. The language institute denied her because her disability “couldn’t be accommodated.” What would you do in this situation? What are some questions to ask this student? What are some things to consider when working with a student with a guide dog? Who would you contact regarding this situation?

Moderator Note to Add Depth to the Discussion: Some of the reasons the language institute gave as to why they could not accommodate her was:

- Spiral staircase in the institute
- People might have allergies to dogs
- Space for the dog in the classroom

Case Study #3 Studying Abroad with a Health Condition

The following situations have all actually occurred. Read each situation and, with your group, brainstorm answers to the given questions. Consider what each situation can teach you about working with students who have a disability.

A student comes to meet with you regarding her desire to study abroad. During your meeting, the student reveals she has Crohn's disease. Over several sessions, you assist the student in coming up with locations that would be the most suitable fit for her, given the information about her disease*. However, she later comes into your office having picked Costa Rica, a location *unlike* those you had discussed. You are not certain if she could medically handle this location. How would you know she could handle this time abroad? What documentation would you want to see? How would you try to accommodate the student's decision? The student has to cancel before going abroad, due to a flare-up of her disease. She comes back to you, wanting to try again. How do you help? To what extent would you try to accommodate her? What if she has to cancel again?

*Crohn's disease is a form of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), usually affecting the digestive tract. Symptoms depend on what part of the gastrointestinal tract is affected, but they range from mild to severe and can come and go with periods of flare-ups. The main symptoms include: abdominal cramps, fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, persistent diarrhea, digestive pain and unintentional weight loss. Symptoms may also include joint pain, ulcers and skin rashes, among other things. Certain types of foods may worsen the symptoms during times of active disease.

Moderator Note to Add Depth to the Discussion: The student is requesting a wheat and gluten free diet in the host family, flexibility in classes in case of flare ups, and medical care nearby that has knowledge of the disease and who speaks English.

Case Study #4 Providing Accommodations from Afar

The following situations have all actually occurred. Read each situation and, with your group, brainstorm answers to the given questions. Consider what each situation can teach you about working with students who have a disability.

A student at your university has been accepted into the study abroad program in Ireland. This student has grown up with one weak leg and has difficulty walking. In this study abroad location, the student apartments are a 15-20 minute walk from the university. For most people, this length is doable, but you are concerned it will take her much longer. You also know that the weather in Ireland during the time the student will be abroad is usually wet, cold and windy. Trying to help, you talk with the partner university about alternative housing. You find something much closer to the university and present the idea to the student. You thought the student would be happy about it, but later that afternoon, the student's parents show up in your office to reveal that their child wants the same study abroad experience as everyone else and does not want special accommodation. Discuss why jumping to conclusions about the student's needs wasn't the best idea. How can you shift your mode of thinking to accommodate the student in other ways? Once the student is abroad before a professor at the partner university notifies you because the student had been having difficulty participating in lengthy field trips. What would be your next steps? What could you do from your location to assist?

Moderator Note to Add Depth to the Discussion: You call the student to check-in about field trips and she says everything is fine and she doesn't need any assistance.

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Prepared by Sandy Soohoo-Refaei and Jenaveve Linabary, Linfield College, for the NAFSA Region I Conference session, "Advising Students with Disabilities in Education Abroad: Promoting Equal Opportunities and Best Outcomes," October 27, 2010, Corvallis, Oregon.

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