Overcoming Obstacles: Students with Disabilities Can Study Abroad
An Overview of Increasing Access to International Education

Ashley Machado

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Katherine Punteney
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Imagine being a Latin American Studies major with the desire to study abroad in Buenos Aires to see first-hand some of the places you have learned about and to immerse yourself in a foreign language and culture, but you use a wheelchair and you are not sure if accommodations can be made for you in Argentina. Or picture yourself as an Art History major with dreams of becoming a museum curator and eager to study the Louvre in Paris, but you suffer from anxiety and wonder if traveling alone to France is a good idea.

Students with disabilities who are curious about the world often have reservations about studying abroad because of their limitations. However, 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-changing and sometimes transforming – are made possible through their courage and determination, as well as the encouragement and assistance of many (Katz, 2007). By utilizing available resources, such as study aboard advisors, disability services, and a whole network of information, students with disabilities can and do study abroad with confidence and assurance.

Resources for Students with Disabilities

Mobility International USA (MIUSA), now in its 33rd year, has been at the forefront of providing resources and information to students with disabilities regarding study abroad. Co-founded by Barbara Williams and Susan Sygall, who acts as CEO and is also a wheelchair user, MIUSA houses the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) which serves as a resource center for international education professionals and students with disabilities. The NCDE also fosters the collaboration of international educators and disability services providers to support students with disabilities going abroad.

In 1999 the University of Minnesota, a pioneer in encouraging and assisting students with disabilities to study internationally, was awarded a grant by the U.S. Department of Education called Access Abroad. Using government funding, the University of Minnesota worked with other U.S. and international universities, as well as with a number of other education abroad organizations to develop procedures and materials to use during the advising process when a student with disabilities is going abroad (Katz, 2007). They have also developed and recommend a collaborative effort between education abroad offices and disability services (Soneson, 2013). Like MIUSA, the University of Minnesota’s website is a plethora of information used nationally and internationally as a toolkit to aid students with disabilities on their journey to study abroad.

Teamwork

When a student with disabilities decides to study abroad, it takes a village to make that dream a reality. One of the best practices that the University of Minnesota has developed to aid students with disabilities in studying abroad is called an Accommodation Triangle. When determining and arranging reasonable accommodations for a student with a disability to study overseas, it is advised that the Accommodation Triangle include the student, a disability services advisor, and the faculty or education abroad advisor, as well as the overseas contact. Each of these individuals has a key role in the accommodation process (Soneson, 2013).
It is imperative that university staff (international educators, disability services, and/or academic advisors) maintain a positive and encouraging outlook when a student with disabilities suggests that they would like to study abroad. Because it is the attitudes of the university staff, and the student, that will influence whether the presence of a disability is seen as just one more unique characteristic of the student, or as the main, overwhelming characteristic. The focus should be on each student’s specific abilities and interests, not on disability stereotypes (Hameister, et al).

**Advising**

When international educators are advising students with disabilities, they must remember to first see the students for their abilities, interests, major of study, and academic and study abroad goals, so that together with the student, they can choose the study abroad or exchange program that best fits their needs. With that said, an affective study abroad advisor will recognize that some programs might not be appropriate for certain individuals. Further, a good advisor will not encourage nor discourage, but rather explain in concrete terms the reality of participating in a program and guide the student to consider a range of options (Katz, 2007).

Once a student with disabilities has made the decision to study abroad, there are a few extra steps that an advisor must take (besides working with disability services and the host organization) to ensure the success of the student. For example, obtaining disability service information for those study abroad or exchange programs that are most utilized by the student’s institution or by contacting other students with disabilities who have studied abroad before to ask about accommodations at their host university. Also, an advisor should consider the availability of assistive devices and services at the host institution, such as test accommodations, note takers, and wheelchair accessibility (Hameister, et al).

Lastly, advisors should instruct students on how to make the necessary arrangements for traveling with service animals, including airport regulations, shots and vaccinations, and in-country orientation training for the student and their companion. As well as they should be aware of which cultures are accepting of dogs and which are not. Students should keep in mind that they might face barriers when traveling with a service dog and ought to be prepared to advocate for themselves (Bryant, 2013).

In addition to researching host institutions and programs for their viability to students with disabilities, international educators must also consider all of the expenses associated with studying abroad and try to identify adequate financial resources. Costs for personal assistance, transporting equipment, high medical costs, adapted transportation, and personal devices compatible with international systems may increase financial need. Although students can typically use their existing financial aid package when studying abroad, supplemental funding may be available from a variety of sources (Hameister, et al), such as the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship.

**Disclosure**

Getting students to disclose their disability is the biggest challenge for study abroad offices as some individuals may be reluctant to make their disability known due to the stigma associated
with having one (Soneson, 2013). Most student disabilities are hidden. For example: processing
disabilities like learning difficulties, attention deficit disorder, or psychological disorders, as well
as chronic systemic disorders including severe allergies and diabetes are all considered
disabilities that would require special accommodations (Katz, 2007). Yet they cannot be seen
and therefore can easily go underreported. A university encourages and relies on self-disclosure
to discuss the kind of accommodation(s) that a student may need; and while it is true that not
every student does or needs to disclose, failure to do so can cause complications for the students
and host institution (Katz, 2007).

Michele Schieb, project specialist at the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange at
Mobility International USA, states that asking students directly about their disability on student
inquiry, application, or acceptance forms is one option for collecting information. If gathered at
or before the application stage, it needs to be clear that disability reporting is optional and not
used to discriminate or screen out applicants (Schieb, 2009). Schieb further explains that
students may be more apt to disclose a disability on health/accommodation forms after their
acceptance to a program (Schieb, 2009).

Disclosure is an important step to ensuring the success and safety of the student while abroad
because proper accommodations cannot be made without this essential information. It’s best
when a student discloses early on so that both them and their team of advisors have adequate
time to work with the host institution to make the necessary preparations. Confidentiality and
sensitivity are also key components that an advisor must remember. Often only select staff at the
host institution needs to be informed of the disability (Soneson, 2013).

More importantly, when speaking with a student with a disability, it is important to keep the
student’s academic and education abroad interest as the primary focus. A student will be best
served to select a study abroad program based on these criteria (Soneson, 2013). “Sometimes
students ‘perceive’ obstacles that are not actually going to cause a problem,” reports Shieb
(Dessoff, 2006). In many cases, a disability accommodation does not require significant changes
on site and it is best to discuss their needs after the student has been accepted to the program
(Soneson, 2013).

Creating a welcoming environment within the study abroad office and training staff to be
sensitive and aware of the needs particular to students with disabilities will help encourage
students to disclose. This can be achieved by having posters and books related to accessibility
openly available and by highlighting the range of disabilities that should be disclosed (Soneson,
2013). Also, advertising the success stories of other students with disabilities that have studied
abroad on the education abroad website can make future students feel comfortable and more
likely to disclose. By letting students know that options are available to them creates a sense of
inclusion and a safe space for students to talk about their special needs.

Inclusion and Creating Equal Access

It is important to note that students with disabilities want to be included in study abroad and
exchange programs with nondisabled students as opposed to programs created specifically for
students with disabilities. This sentiment was confirmed by a study Matthews et al conducted
regarding the attitude of students with disabilities toward study abroad, when the researchers asked students how important accommodations were in the decision making process. Also from this study, it is worth mentioning that questions about accommodations evoked a stronger response than questions related to barriers. Researchers suggest that this may be due to the fact that students are reaching a point where barriers are much less important than finding a way to work around them and advocate for disability-related accommodations (Matthews, et al, 1998).

Providing accommodations for persons with disabilities is necessary when designing publicity materials and events to advertise study abroad programs. For example, written materials should be offered in different formats such as large print as well as audio, and study abroad websites should be compatible with screen reading software. Informational events about study abroad ought to be held in a physically accessible facility with amplification systems or sign language interpreters, if needed. The welcome extended by staff, quality interaction, and the accessibility of information will influence students’ desire to learn more about study abroad and exchange programs (Hameister, et al). By making the study abroad office, website, and staff easily accessible to students with disabilities, it is more likely that they will pursue their interests in going abroad, as the accessibility of information exemplifies the possibility that these students can participate in an experience abroad.

Statistics

According to the Institute of International Education’s Open Doors report of 2011-12, about 5% of study abroad students had disabilities. This is an increase from 2.6% in 2006-07. Open Doors reports that in 2011-12, 43% of students with disabilities had a learning disability, 28% had a mental disability, 17% had a disability categorized as ‘other’, which could include diabetes, eating disorders, or asthma, 7% had a physical disability, and 3% had a sensory disability such as being blind or deaf (IIE, 2012).

In 2014 it was reported that 8.8% of students on college campuses in the U.S. are disabled. Further, 7.8% of these students study abroad (The Numbers Tell the Story, 2010-2014). Over the four years (2010-2014) that The National Survey on Student Engagement was conducted, the number of students with a learning disability on college campuses grew 41% and overall study abroad numbers increased 39%. While the same survey states that the number of students with a mental disability increased 5% over the four years, study abroad also increased by 12%. Importantly, 1 in 5 women with mental or learning disabilities have studies abroad (The Numbers Tell the Story, 2010-2014).

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 funding. And while, from a legal perspective, ADA laws do not apply outside of U.S. boarders, universities usually feel a moral obligation to extend the same accommodations overseas (Katz, 2007). Although the home institution’s international education office cannot guarantee these adjustments, they can look for host countries with a reputation of
being politically, socially, and academically accepting and inclusionary toward peoples with disabilities.

The United Nations made history in 2007 when it formed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Since its inception, 114 countries have signed and agreed to its terms. This convention ensures the inherent right to life on an equal basis to others and recognizes persons with disabilities as equals in the eyes of the law. It also calls for equitable access to information and prohibits discrimination against those with disabilities (UN, 2006). The convention is considered a blueprint for ending discrimination and ensuring all inalienable human rights to individuals with disabilities (Katz, 2007). It has grand implications on the world of study abroad in that as countries ratify the Convention, they are agreeing to accommodate and accept people with disabilities. These measures will undoubtedly have positive benefits for students with disabilities who wish to study abroad.

Although many countries already have disability laws, experienced advisers do not characterize a country as accessible or inaccessible based 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 (Katz, 2007). In the Students with Disabilities Studying Abroad article, author Eve Katz illustrates how culture can impact students while abroad by telling the story of a quadriplegic woman who experienced some discrimination in a European country. The woman noticed that when she had a problem, she was often ignored. However, when she was in Mexico, which is a country with fewer accommodations, many more people offered to assist her (Katz, 2007).

“It really encouraged me to kind of step outside of my comfort zone and be okay with it and be myself and not worry about what other people think. It is an educational experience...If you are a student, you should definitely take advantage, because that’s the point in doing it. It can be a really big change, I loved it.”

-Connie Rivera, University of California, Berkeley 2012 Gilman Scholar Recipient on her study abroad experience in Brazil

Studies show that students with disabilities who participated in study abroad or exchange programs experienced increased self-confidence, a broader awareness of their abilities, as well as stronger communication and problem-solving skills (Hamiester, et al). It is essential to consider each individual as a unique combination of interests and skills with varying levels of independence and assertiveness (Hamiester, et al). And with all their individual talents, knowledge, experience, and capabilities, students with disabilities are one underrepresented group that will increase the diversity of Americans studying abroad (Matthews, et al 1998). Education abroad departments along with disability services should collaborate to find ways to improve opportunities for these students (Scheib, 2009). Disabilities are those that are both seen and unseen, however, with proper disclosure, planning, collaboration, and advising students with disabilities can study abroad.
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References


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