U.S. Undergraduate Students with Disabilities and Study Abroad

Gloria Avalos

Monterey Institute of International Studies
**Introduction**

According to the Merriam Webster’s dictionary definition of the word “disability”, it is defined as being: “a condition (such as an illness or an injury) that damages or limits a person’s physical or mental abilities”. While this is the way in which most people would describe that word as mentioned before, advancements in the medical field have progressed so much that tasks that were perceived as impossible for people with disabilities are currently easier to complete with the appropriate accommodations.

Ever since the idea of studying abroad has entered the minds of the population at large, it has mainly been viewed as an experience that is only open to people who have various financial resources at their disposal; however, over the last decade, the amount of students from diverse backgrounds have been on the rise. Most would associate this with various ethnic backgrounds, but diversity also includes individuals with disabilities. For the intent of this essay, any variation of “individuals with disabilities” is to demonstrate the value of the person over the disability because the latter should not be the primary defining factor of the former. Also, to clarify any doubts, the different categories of disabilities fall into: learning, mental, physical, sensory, and other.

The Institute of International Education (IIE) releases on an annual basis their Open Doors report, which is a highly regarded and extensive informational resource within the International Education field that compiles data in relation to international scholars and students who either study or teach at higher education institutions in the United States and U.S. students who study abroad for academic credit at their home colleges and universities. The most updated edition of Open Doors has findings that go as far back as of the 2006-07 academic year and goes up to 2012-13. As evidenced in the data that will be mentioned from IIE (2014), there is an upward trend of United States undergraduate students with disabilities who are studying abroad. In 2006-07, this percentage is at its’ lowest with 2.6 percent, or 1,006 total U.S. students with disabilities that were reported to Open Doors; meanwhile, it is at its’ highest ever in the 2012-13 academic year with 5.1 percent, or 3,194 total students with disabilities.

In regards to which percentage of students with a certain type of disability, ones with learning disabilities have maintained first place in these rankings from 2006-07 (50.5) to 2012-13 (46.4). Then, those who have been diagnosed with either (in descending order) a mental, physical, other, or sensory disability have consistently followed the aforementioned group of students from 2006-07 to 2012-13.

There is another section that is titled “other disability”, but there are no descriptions listed on any page that directly hosts the Open Doors data on the Institute of International Education’s website, so it was challenging to attempt to see the criteria that make a disability to be considered as “other”.

Best Practices

First of all, Johnson (2000) phrased it best when it came to marketing study abroad specifically to students with disabilities: “To build student awareness of study-abroad opportunities, recruitment methods must be implemented that reflect the needs of students with disabilities, such as developing brochures and posters that illustrate people with disabilities studying and traveling abroad. A student advisory committee and peer mentors who are also students with disabilities and have traveled abroad are useful in helping prospective students explore options and determine what physical, programmatic, informational, and attitudinal barriers they may face when traveling abroad.” (p. 47) The suggestion where she mentions having promotional materials with photographs of individuals with disabilities traveling is ideal because it creates a connection between the “buyer” (the students who are hesitating at taking advantage of this opportunity) and the “seller” (the study abroad program and/or department) and allows for members of the target market to imagine themselves abroad and attain a sense of what they would receive through this experience.

Hameister, et al (1999) discuss a practical approach of including students with disabilities in study abroad, which the following concepts can still be applied nowadays, based on these five principles: individualization, barriers and accommodations, disability spread, inclusion, and collaboration. The principle that does not appear in most literature concerning students with disabilities and was the most interesting to read about was individualization because each student brings their interests, experiences, and skills prior to departing for their time abroad, but with individuals with disabilities, the experience of adjusting to their learning environment is something that they already have first-hand knowledge of and they can tailor it to whatever situation they may encounter themselves in while overseas and provides them with an advantage over the general student population, as shown in this excerpt: “Students acquire disabilities at different ages, learn to use different types of compensatory strategies and adaptive equipment, and develop varying levels of independence and assertiveness. For example, two students who are hard of hearing may have different proficiency in speechreading (lipreading) and unequal willingness to initiate speech with strangers. These individual characteristics will influence the study abroad experience.” (p.85)

In terms of breaking down barriers that impede students, especially those with disabilities, to study abroad, Hulstrand (2014) talks in general about challenges that minority students regularly face, which includes individuals with disabilities, which include but are not limited to: worried parents, be aware of concerns that underserved student populations will have, and providing essential funds for their time abroad. Hulstrand interviewed Taylor Wood, who is the special projects manager in the Office for Study Abroad at George Washington University, and to attain consciousness of apprehensions that hugely affect nontraditional students, he came up with this idea: “We’ve partnered with offices on campus that support these students—Disability Support Services, Multicultural Student Services, Transfer Students Services, etc.—through informal meetings, structured roundtable discussions, and formal trainings. These partnerships have led to effective
communication and policies, inclusive advising practices, updated websites and online resources, and intercampus collaborations and recruitment.” (p. 47) What Wood mentioned is exactly what Hameister, et al strived for through their principle of collaboration to maintain an inclusive environment abroad between the International Education and Disability Services offices on campus when it comes to successful experiences for students with disabilities to study abroad.

Katz (2007) and Scheib (2009) share much common ground, in terms of specific procedures that encourage prompt disclosure of students’ disabilities so that appropriate accommodations can be implemented in a timely manner: having data assessment questions that uncover accessibility to the International Education office, promote early disclosure (through inclusive language and providing a safe space to allow disclosure to happen), have an advising plan in an Education Abroad office’s arsenal so that all staff is aware of what protocol to follow when there are interested students who have a disability to study abroad, develop strong relationships with important offices to your mission on campus, and have access to information on accessibility on study abroad destinations.

Soneson (2009) created a manual for NAFSA for Education Abroad offices in higher education institutions to best advise students with disabilities who desire to study abroad. For the most part, Soneson covers information that was mentioned earlier, but these next two points are crucial to note while implementing early disclosure:

“Although it is important to foster early disclosure, this information should not be used to disqualify an applicant and should not be requested on an application form. A student should be accepted to a program based on the standard program eligibility requirements, and the question of disability accommodation is best pursued after acceptance. Students do sometimes bring up issues related to disability before acceptance, and advisers should not avoid these questions but should be knowledgeable about how to make sure this information is kept separate from the admissions decision.

When reviewing a student’s application, it can be helpful to keep in mind a student’s disability status and any accommodations that have been provided. A student may have had a reduced course load, for example, as part of a disability accommodation, or a student may have had a difficult semester academically before recognizing the need for and receiving appropriate disability accommodations on campus. Clarifying these circumstances with a student during the application review process can be helpful in interpreting the student’s application and identifying potential disability accommodation needs overseas.” (p.7)

**Conclusion**

All of the ways in how anyone involved with the Education Abroad sector as discussed above are steps in the right direction to boost growth amongst United States undergraduate students with disabilities who want to study abroad while sustaining an inclusive learning environment in both their home and host countries. Just like the rest of
the fields within International Education, the topic of United States undergraduate students with disabilities who study abroad is always growing, but there is not much comprehensive research, for example: which study abroad destinations are best suited for each disability type and the assessment and outcomes of study abroad experiences for students with disabilities. However, 78 percent of U.S. undergraduate students were satisfied with the quality of learning, living, and support services while they studied abroad via a brief summary of the 2010 i-graduate’s International Student Barometer that is posted on Mobility International USA’s website (2014).
Bibliography


