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A Practice of *yes!*

volunteer

Working with overseas partners
to include students with disabilities

research



A Practice of Yes:

Working with Overseas Partners to Include Students With Disabilities

This publication has been produced by the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange and funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State.

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About This Booklet

In 2003, the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) facilitated a half-day disability workshop at the Council on International Educational Exchange annual conference in Budapest, Hungary. Exchange program resident directors from different countries and U.S. study abroad professionals discussed issues involved in working with overseas institutions, faculty and staff on including study abroad participants with disabilities. This booklet is intended to respond to some of the questions that arose during that workshop.

In 2004, NCDE conducted interviews with more than 25 U.S. international exchange professionals across the United States, seeking information about their approaches to and thoughts about sending students with disabilities on international exchange programs. Interviewees represented a diverse cross section of educational institutions including public and private colleges and universities, large and small institutions, art schools and technical schools, community colleges, and institutions whose experience with sending students with disabilities on overseas exchange programs ranged from very little to extensive.

NCDE staff also asked students with disabilities to reflect on their experiences abroad. In interviews, focus groups or in writing, former exchange students described the personal impact of international experiences, one year to several years later.

The insights provided by these diverse professionals and students, coupled with the experience and research of the NCDE staff, are the basis of this booklet. Readers will find suggestions for effectively working with overseas partners and institutions to include students with disabilities in international exchange programs. More detailed recommendations and resources for including students with disabilities in international exchange are available through the NCDE, which is sponsored by Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State and managed by Mobility International USA (MIUSA).

Through the NCDE, MIUSA offers other publications that overlap and complement this booklet, including:

Building Bridges: A Manual on Including People with Disabilities in International Exchange Programs, a comprehensive how-to guide for professionals that can be used effectively in combination with this booklet.

Rights and Responsibilities: A Guide to National and International Disability-Related Laws for International Exchange Organizations and Participants, a booklet, useful in understanding and implementing the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws.

Survival Strategies for Going Abroad: A Guide for People with Disabilities, a valuable resource for people with disabilities planning a trip abroad, and for those who advise them.

Instructions for ordering these publications can be found in the "Using Other Resources" section at the end of this booklet.

NCDE also provides free services, including:

- Personalized information and referral services for exchange programs and individuals.
- Practical tips for a successful international exchange.
- Contact information for disability-related, exchange and volunteer organizations worldwide.
- Trainings for exchange organizations wishing to better serve students with disabilities.
- Conference presentations at national conferences sponsored by international exchange and disability-related organizations.
- Projects such as Disability Networking Across Borders, which facilitates international exchange for disability organizations and disability professionals around the world.

Specific examples used in this booklet may be composites. All student names are fictitious, and locations and other details may have been changed.

Assessing Personal and Institutional Practices

People and cultures change through ongoing contact. Australian researchers developed the Interaction with Disabled Persons scale to measure change in attitudes, and found that the benefits of weekly or daily contact with people with disabilities led to more positive attitudes [about people with disabilities].[1] As a Scandinavian anthropologist describes, "Cultural constructions of [disability] are not in fact simple structures with clean lines and clear functions built by an anonymous contractor called culture. Rather, they are homemade jerry-built affairs made of available materials and subject to remodeling... In fact they are not finished structures at all, but ongoing processes. Our analyses must be built on the assumption that people are actors with social contexts, not prisoners of a fixed cultural construction.[2]

Because individuals with disabilities have traditionally been underrepresented in international exchange, you and your overseas colleagues may not have had experience with advising students with disabilities on study abroad opportunities. Without experience, each partner may be operating under misconceptions that may impact their ability to include effectively students with disabilities. The following sections draw on NCDE interviews with study abroad professionals and students with disabilities, to examine common preconceptions, provide accurate information based on actual experiences, and offer suggestions for shaping institutional practices that encourage and support participation of students with disabilities.

Staff Receptiveness

Preconception: Including a student with a disability on an exchange requires more effort from the entire group.

Learned Experience: Many students with disabilities often require no accommodations at all, or will be able to rely primarily on personal aids. Finding creative accommodations will empower the fellow exchange participants, exchange leaders and overseas partners in unexpected ways.

Many interviewees in the NCDE survey mentioned resistance by exchange program staff, both U.S. and overseas, as an obstacle to inclusion of students with disabilities. One advisor related an example in which a faculty member became angry upon learning that a student with cerebral palsy had been accepted into a program he was leading, believing that the extra time and attention required to include that one student would unfairly impact him and the other students. The advisor also noted that faculty members often do not attend trainings on working with students with disabilities when they are offered.

Other interviewees, however, recounted positive outcomes from including students with disabilities, such as:

- Our hosts gained new insights from the experience of hosting a student with a disability and they were grateful for the opportunity to learn more and explore future possibilities for people with disabilities in their own communities.

- Everyone on the program learned about disability issues.

- We felt more like a team, like we'd really accomplished something because we all worked together to figure out how to make things work.

International exchange teaches that there is no substitute for traveling to and being immersed in a foreign culture. Exchange professionals find that experience is also the best teacher for breaking down misconceptions about people with disabilities.

- For one resident director, a long-time relationship with faculty at the host institution and her own personal learning experience with another student with a disability, motivated her to go ahead and place a student who used a wheelchair in a class against objections of the professor. The professor's concerns ended up being unfounded and faded away once the semester began.

- A U.S. program coordinator also did not accept "No" for an answer when a resident director raised concerns about hosting a student with a physical disability in their Latin American program. In turn, the resident director became an outspoken advocate for inclusion based on her positive experience with the student. The student herself returned home to promote study abroad as an amazing opportunity, and eventually taught English overseas and enrolled in an international graduate degree program.

Reviewing resources such as publications and videos by NCDE or Access Abroad's multi-media website (see "Using Other Resources") can assist exchange staff and study abroad faculty to identify preconceptions and develop more realistic expectations.

To Empower or Protect?

Preconception: It is my job as a U.S. exchange professional to protect students with disabilities from taking on more than they can handle in terms of both physical and emotional barriers in the exchange program they chose.

Learned Experience: Students – all students – have the right to follow their dreams and ambitions and to decide what challenges they are willing to face and what international experience will best further those aims. Teamwork between a student, the study abroad advisor and the disabilities services office, in concert with the overseas staff, can make even the most challenging international exchange program a life-changing, successful experience.

All of the interviewees in the NCDE survey expressed enthusiasm about sending students with disabilities on overseas exchange programs, and many reported successful experiences working with exchange students with disabilities. Notably, however, the majority of exchange destinations for students with disabilities were in urban centers of Western Europe and Australia, with very few students having been placed in developing countries or in less urbanized areas. While non-Western countries are undoubtedly the choice for many students, with and without disabilities, staff and student interviewees reported that advisors tend to steer students with disabilities, and sometimes in fact limit them, to exchange program sites that offer environments and services that the advisors perceive to be more accessible or supportive. Some examples include:

- We try to send students with disabilities only with faculty who are willing and helpful and to host institutions that are receptive and helpful. We don't want to send students with disabilities anywhere we know they'll have a harder time than necessary.

- If a student with a disability makes a choice of exchange location that is just not feasible for disability-related reasons, I suggest an alternative and try to explain why their choice is unfeasible and how the second choice would substitute well.

- Even if we find a way to enable a student to manage in a third world environment, are they willing to give up their hard-earned independence in order to do so?

Such well-intended protectiveness actually puts roadblocks in the path of students with disabilities, limiting their options and restricting opportunities to make informed choices, weighing the challenges and benefits of different exchange experiences. Sometimes students with disabilities come with their own internal roadblocks and what they need most is encouragement, and staff willing to apply creativity or a "can do" attitude.

Disability Spread
This "refers to the tendency for non-disabled persons to exaggerate the impact of a disability based on stereotypes and myths about the type of disability... When someone's disability is seen as the largest component of their personality, we only see the person's limitations, not their unique and human characteristics." A student's disability is a relatively minor part of the study abroad experience.[3]

Paternalism
This is an offshoot of Disability Spread. It is a tendency for advisors, faculty or others to resort to "care taking." For example, a professor might give a student more accommodations than are authorized in order to be helpful, but in the process creates an unfair advantage. Or, an advisor might believe or assume she or he knows what is needed and pressure a student to accept accommodations the student neither wants nor has requested. Or, staff or faculty may put unreasonable limitations on a student's participation in a program or course in the name of "safety."[4]

As an exchange professional, you know the importance of providing all students with the most complete information possible about their exchange program destination. Students, with and without disabilities, need to know what situations and resources they will encounter in order to prepare and plan how they will manage.

Mary who uses a wheelchair remembered that her study abroad advisor warned her that Spain would not be very accessible, with its historic buildings and cobblestone streets, and tried to steer her away from a program in that country. Mary weighed the options and decided to go to Spain anyway, where she discovered that, for her, access was challenging in some ways and less so in others. In fact, upon her return to her hometown on the east coast of the United States, Mary struggled with re-adjusting to the lack of accessible taxis, which she had found readily available in Spain. She also found people on the streets in the United States to be less willing to assist her when she encountered a high curb, unlike people in Spain, who had often volunteered their assistance.

Overwhelmingly, students with disabilities report that the beneficial experiences of living in another culture greatly outweigh the challenges. They also note that the challenges that took them by surprise, both physical and emotional, had made them grow in ways they still value today.

- I've matured a lot [from being abroad.] For me, it was hard to adjust overseas, but I'd do it again in a second. Whatever the hardships are they balance themselves with rewards.

- Before I went, I thought it was just so out of reach in terms of how I could do things abroad - what everyday life would be like, how I would get to my classes. I worry a lot about the little things because that's what [I do] to get through. When I came back and I had gotten through it - I was successful and I had a good time - it was a big boost to think, 'Wow, I

can do this and I can do it again.' It's very enriching. Since I've been back I haven't done any international travel but I'm just itching to get back. The experience allowed me to think that I could be more independent and self-assured.

- It's a feeling of pride, because you have succeeded in this. My self-esteem really increased. I had different expectations [when I returned home]. I wasn't going to accept that there wasn't an elevator in the building anymore because I knew I deserved these things. I think that's why I got into studying law. There are certain things that I deserve to have, that everyone deserves. It was being abroad, and seeing the opposite, that made me realize this.

- My friends were really amazed at how much more I wanted to venture out. I didn't want to stay at home anymore, [I wanted to go out], even though I had never been to a certain place. They said, 'Wow what made you do this?' And I said, 'Well, I went halfway around the world and now I know I can go any place new [at home].'

Economic Incentives

Preconception: Accommodations for students with disabilities are too expensive, especially for institutions that are on tight budgets.

Learned Experience: Surveys from the Job Accommodations Network of the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor, show that 50% of measures taken to facilitate disability-related accommodations incur no financial cost, 30% cost under $500 and only 10% cost over $1,000. The median cost is $240, based on these employment surveys. Many exchange program staff who have hosted students with disabilities reported that costs were not a defining factor in the success of the experience.

Following are some points and suggestions that may reassure your overseas partners that disability-related accommodations need not incur high financial costs.

- Many accommodations can be made easily and inexpensively. For example, extra testing time, a quiet place to work or lowering/raising a desk or table cost almost nothing at all.

- Disability organizations both in the United States and abroad may be able to assist with or point to resources for equipment, personnel or costs.

- Costs of disability-related accommodation can be routinely built into study abroad budgets, or shared between exchange providers, vocational rehabilitation offices, service organizations and institutions. For more information and ideas, see *Building Bridges*, listed in the "Using Other Resources" section.

- The United States and a number of other countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, offer tax incentives for capital (building and equipment) improvements to increase access for people with disabilities.

- Multiple, long-term uses of accommodations reduce the per capita cost. The few improvements that are relatively expensive, like elevators and some software, may benefit many students, with and without disabilities.

Laura and Cindy, who both have learning disabilities, came up with different, but equally effective, solutions to finding notetakers while on an exchange. Laura made a deal to borrow notes from a friend, in exchange for traveling to the university an hour earlier every day, so that her friend didn't have to ride the bus alone. Cindy asked for and received copies of the professor's notes, complete with overhead presentations.

Questions like the following can assist your overseas associates to begin thinking in terms of simple, inexpensive accommodations, and ease their fears about expense:

- Can a class scheduled in a second-story classroom be moved to the ground floor to accommodate a student in a wheelchair?
- Is there another entrance into a building that could more easily be ramped?
- Can a student with a learning disability have access to a computer or tutor?
- Will students have access to the titles of their textbooks ahead of time in order to get audiocassette or Braille versions before traveling abroad?

Reaching Partner Agreements

Preconception: We would need a special grant to develop a program for students with disabilities.

Learned Experience: In interviews with 64 undergraduates with disabilities on barriers to study abroad, five universities found that involvement in a program for all students, as opposed to a program specifically designed for students with disabilities as being the most important to the students with disabilities.[5] Resource organizations, such as NCDE and Access Abroad (see "Using Other Resources"), can provide useful examples and tools that can be adapted for ensuring students with disabilities the right to participate in all programs.

When establishing partnerships, plan for a diversity of participants in the program. Address the inclusion of people with disabilities routinely and explicitly in new exchange program contracts from the start, and add agreements about inclusion to existing contracts as they

In conversation at a professional reception, the director of a study abroad and internship program in Mexico told colleagues about a couple of students with disabilities who had excelled in the program the previous year. "We just did what was needed," she said. "While it took some figuring out, it was worth it; the students were excellent workers." This program accepts students from many U.S. colleges and universities, but unless discussion of inclusion of students with disabilities is incorporated into the partnering process, its U.S. partners may not know how receptive the program is to making accommodations for students with disabilities.

are renewed. Clear expectations from the beginning will make the discussion easier and more informed when a student with a disability seeks information. The agreement must make it clear from the outset that the question is not *whether* to include students with disabilities in the program, but *how*.

Suggestions:

- State expressly that your organization actively recruits and includes students with disabilities into exchange programs.

- Relate disability inclusion to other standards that you expect to be met through the partnership relationship, either contractually or historically, such as preventing sexual harassment and race-based discrimination (include relevant federal and state laws).

- Make it clear that you expect your partners to be informed about host country disability-related resources. Use a disability site assessment survey to help guide these expectations.

Regional and national laws or instruments with the goal of inclusion for people with disabilities have been passed in over 45 countries. *NCDE's Rights and Responsibilities: A Guide to National and International Disability-related Laws for International Exchange Organizations and Participants* provides general information and resources on disability rights laws worldwide, as well as more detailed information about the Americans with Disabilities Act. While specific approaches and wording varies among countries, all laws are centered on a respect for human rights that assures people with disabilities the same basic rights of citizenship as non-disabled people in education, employment, recreation and other life activities.

Following are examples of exchange contract wording that institutions have used to address non-discrimination toward students with disabilities:

Example One: The purposes of affiliation between [University] and [Program Provider] are as follows:

- To provide quality overseas programs to the students who attend [University]
- To promote student interest in the educational programs and services of [Program Provider]
- To facilitate enrollment of students in these programs
- To provide to students services that are in compliance with relevant federal and state laws [such as protection from discrimination based on race, color, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, etc.]

Example Two: Both institutions subscribe to a policy of equal opportunity and will not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or disability.

Approaching Situations Creatively

Upon his arrival in a Scandinavian country, Jason was discouraged to find that, though he thought his needs had been well described to the host family, the shower was inaccessible to him. It didn't take his homestay father long to discover that a few minutes' work with a screwdriver made the shower completely accessible, and the removed panel could be easily replaced when Jason went home.

Housing and Homestays

In industrialized countries, most universities accept foreign exchange students with disabilities, and they have made efforts at being accessible.

- Before going abroad one student who is blind e-mailed a staff member in the International Programs Office at the host university, and with the help of an instructor from the local guide dog association, they selected a room that met the student's needs, on the first floor of a dormitory, close to a spot to take her guide dog outside.

In fact, participation of students with disabilities is becoming common enough that some are encountering a new dilemma.

- Marcos, a U.S. student who uses a wheelchair waiting to be accepted into a program in Ireland found the Irish university kept "running around the question" of accepting him. The Irish exchange coordinator finally let him know that they wanted to accept him, but that the university had such a long waiting list for accessible apartments, they weren't sure they would be able to provide the requested accommodation.

Whether lack of accessible accommodations is due to unavailability or overuse, creative research and an optimistic view that "anything is possible if given enough options" are essential tools for finding housing.

If accessible housing on campus is not available and adaptations are not feasible (see "No and Low-Cost Accommodations for University Staff and Homestay Providers" section following) some students will be able to find alternate accommodations in the community, at other nearby colleges, or with homestay families. While students who live on campus are surrounded by peers and have easy access to classes, homestay hosts can sometimes provide extra exposure to the culture as well as support and tips in the adjustment process. One student recounted, "My favorite thing about Brazil was the woman I lived with. She also uses a wheelchair, so it

was very easy to get around her house. More important, my host mother and I became very good friends. She was instrumental in helping me adapt to life in Brazil. I admire and respect her so much. She's a beautiful person with a strong and powerful spirit that motivated me many times."

Recruitment of homestay or host families that include people with disabilities increases the overall pool of homestay families and housing options, and ensures that families with accessible homes or knowledge of disability-related accommodations will be available when students with disabilities participate. In addition to the practical advantages, inclusion of host families that include people with disabilities reflects the true diversity of the community and offers other enhancements to the exchange experience. Families who have members with disabilities may appreciate the opportunity to host a student, with or without a disability. Non-disabled students may enjoy and learn from a host family member with a disability. When recruiting families for homestays, ask local disability organizations for referrals, even if no student with disabilities is expected immediately.

As recounted by one student who uses a manual wheelchair: "As my scheduled departure date drew near, our main concern was where I was going to live! Though the site director in Spain ran up against many closed doors, none of us were ready to give up. Our plan was that I would arrive with my fellow students and stay in a hotel temporarily. I called the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) to see if it had any contacts in Spain. With the helpful disability contacts NCDE staff provided and the fine detective work of the Spanish site director, we discovered an organization for people with disabilities. The site director explained my situation to staff members. One thing led to another until a family with an accessible home offered to host me. They were excited by the opportunity to host a student with a disability from the United States."

No- And Low-Cost Accommodations For University Staff And Homestay Providers

The first and most important step in arranging accommodations for a student with a disability is to consult with the student to determine, from her or his perspective, what she or he needs (see more in the later "Know Your Student" section). He or she may have long ago figured out simple solutions and accommodations that will work just as well in the host country. If the student hasn't traveled before, NCDE can provide you and the student with contacts for former students with disabilities who have studied abroad. NCDE staff can also brainstorm with you to find ways around seemingly impossible barriers, and provide you with resource materials full of field-tested tips and more specifics on different disability accommodations (see "Using Other Resources" section). With information from the student, NCDE and other people with disabilities, you will be more prepared to effectively explore options with your overseas partners.

Consider:

- What is possible, or manageable, now?
- What will take some planning and a little more work?
- What will take significant planning, work and some funds, but is doable?
- What is impossible at this time?

When seeking information about access conditions in the host country, request that your partner institution provide specific descriptions, rather than general assessments about accessibility. For example, "Sidewalks are scarce and have very few curb cuts. The streets are shared by people, animals and vehicles. Local people are willing to assist but taxi drivers often do not stop for wheelchair users" provides more useful information than "It is not feasible for someone using a wheelchair."

Practical No- and Low-Cost Accommodations

- Allow headphones or earplugs during quiet study times for a student whose disability necessitates minimal auditory distractions.
- Consider writing instructions or providing checklists for students who ask for such aids to offset memory or distraction disorders.
- Produce large print easily on a copier or by using 18-24 point font with word processing software.
- Allow a low-vision student to sit where the light is best for him or her; near a window for better light or away from windows to reduce glare, depending on the needs of the student.
- Allow hard-of-hearing students who use lip reading to choose the most appropriate seating for their needs, and provide peer notetakers if needed.
- Allow a student with diabetes to make arrangements to check blood sugar and have food readily available.
- Empower a student with environmental sensitivity to use personal judgment about self-care; leaving a particularly smoky area, using an inhaler or wearing a surgical-type mask at times, for example. Arrange for classes or housing in areas with good ventilation, air filters and reduced scents (e.g. carpet cleaners or perfumes).
- Use a handsaw to shorten the legs of a desk or table for a student who needs a lower surface.
- For a student who needs a higher surface, raise a table or desk by placing blocks of wood under the legs.
- Place a mattress and box spring on the floor instead of a frame for an individual who needs a lower bed, or place the bed on blocks of wood for someone who needs a higher bed.
- Remove a door and hang a curtain to add width to a doorway.
- Access a house or building through the back or side door if there are fewer steps than at the front entrance.

Accommodations continued...

- Build a simple, inexpensive ramp when only two or three steps are involved.
- Move furniture to allow comfortable maneuvering for a scooter or wheelchair.
- Speak descriptively to more fully include people with low vision who cannot see hand gestures and facial expressions, and deaf students who may miss visual cues while watching a sign language interpreter. For example, use a verbal description instead of pointing and saying "this".
- Use drawings, symbols and actions to supplement words for the benefit of students with learning or hearing disabilities. Pause to allow time for the student to review the visual cues before moving on. This is especially helpful if a deaf student is watching a sign language interpreter.
- Allow extra time or a quiet, distraction-free place for studying or test taking for students with learning disabilities.
- Consider the requests of students with disability-related fatigue to incorporate occasional breaks or to reduce extracurricular activities.
- Replace doorknobs with handles that pull down rather than turn.
- Inexpensive, battery-operated tape recorders can have multiple uses for people who have vision or learning disabilities, such as recording lectures and listening to taped textbooks. Many students may bring their own personal equipment from home.
- Portable toilet seats or chairs can be placed over floor or squat toilets in places where western-style toilets are less common. A portable commode can double as a shower chair.

Unusual Environments

Like other students, students with disabilities will establish day-to-day routines and strategies for managing in the new environment of the host country. Non-routine activities such as field trips and volunteer work often require creative solutions, teamwork and flexibility on the part of the student with the disability, other participants and exchange program staff. Faculty and staff can find guidance from the student's own experience dealing with similar situations, and the experience of others who have worked out accommodations for similar situations. Seeking out local people with disabilities is one of the best ways to learn how to navigate a community or activity.

Following are a few examples of creative solutions used by exchange students with mobility issues to successfully get around in the host community.

- While studying in Brazil, Arla, who uses a wheelchair, sometimes found transportation challenging. Then she discovered an entrepreneur who had turned an old ambulance into a taxi, complete with a ramp up the back that made it wheelchair accessible.

- Camille, a student who is blind, was unsure whether she could manage on an exchange without orientation assistance. Her friend, Talia, who had also been accepted for the exchange, was on the verge of withdrawing over financial concerns. Both issues were resolved when their university offered a scholarship to Talia to participate in the exchange and provide orientation assistance to Camille.

- On a field trip to a South American site with particularly rough terrain, Kelli, a resident director, hired a driver with a horse and cart to transport a student and her wheelchair.

"One day, while I was working in the garden, I fell. I looked down and my right foot [of my prosthetic leg] had fallen off. So, the next week I walked on one leg and crutches while my broken foot was sent to Florida for repairs. The staff's attitude was wonderfully supportive. I continued to attend class and participated in field trips. The field director herself drove me to one of the field sites so I could be fully involved throughout the program." Linda, student on a Latin American program

Flexibility and curiosity about how to make it work on the part of the student and the program staff are key in arranging accommodations for students with disabilities during field trips. A student with a disability may need to accept more assistance than he or she is used to, and program staff may need to diverge somewhat from their usual routine. One of the early activities in Trevor's exchange to Australia was a trip to the zoo. Because Trevor's guide dog was still in quarantine, Trevor accepted guide assistance from a fellow student. However a second program trip, a farm visit to observe current agricultural practices, was postponed so that Trevor could use his dog to go around the farm independently.

- Jennifer, a student who uses a manual wheelchair, found that a golf cart was a great way to get around a hilly Scottish campus. She also learned that service or security staff could often direct her to delivery entrances or freight elevators in buildings with no ramped entrance or public elevator.

- Japanese public transportation is very busy at rush hour. Joanie, who has trouble standing for long periods, scheduled her internship work so she could ride during non rush hours. She found that she could schedule most activities around the bus schedule.

- Hiring an assistant in the host country for a particular activity may be a useful strategy.



Words and Concepts in Cultural Context

Cultural differences in perceptions of concepts like disability, independence, confidentiality, respect for authority and personal rights may affect your overseas colleague's approach to working with students with disabilities.

Students and their advisors in the United States are likely to view independence as the ability to accomplish daily tasks with little or no outside assistance, or with outside assistance that is under the direction of the person with the disability. To that end, adults with disabilities may be provided with technological supports or with personal assistants who are directed by the person with the disability. In other cultures, independence may include relying on family, friends or the aid of strangers – utilizing informal human support, which students from the United States may experience as a less self-directed approach.

Likewise, U.S. students take for granted confidentiality as defined by U.S. procedures and laws. In some cultures, the customary way of providing accommodations may mean involving many people, more than would ordinarily be privy to a student's personal information at home, including disability information.

U.S. and U.K. university staff participating in a professional exchange learned that translation may be necessary, even when the host and the visitor ostensibly speak the same language. Although the U.K. Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) is comparable to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), with similar definitions and policies protecting individuals with disabilities, terminology is very different. For instance, "adjustments" translates to accommodations, "accommodations" means housing, "public" means private, "state" means public, "voluntary" means paid, "minicom" means TTY, "welfare" means organization/government or advocacy, etc.

Likewise, it may be difficult to explain a disability, especially a non-apparent disability, in the language or

Many overseas universities do not have an office of disability services or a formal procedure for requesting disability-related accommodations.

• Assistance may possibly be arranged on a case-by-case basis by accessing community services, family support and the cooperation of individual instructors. Although some international staff may be knowledgeable about local disability services, most will have only a limited understanding of the broader resources and situation among the disability population in their own country.

• Encourage your counterpart to seek out disability organizations in their own community. Disability organizations often can provide a more in-depth view of what is available or has been achieved regarding people with disabilities.

• *Worldwide disability organizations have chapters and members in almost every country of the world. The NCDE website lists worldwide disability organizations and their members in its online database and links pages (www.miusa.org).*

cultural context of the host country, and the explanation may not elicit the kind of response you expect. There may be no precise word in the host country's language for a student's disability, or the disability may not be one that is easily accepted as legitimate in the host country. Examples:

- A person with a learning disability may be considered unintelligent.
- A student who needs a lot of sleep for disability-related reasons may be considered lazy.
- A psychiatric disability may be equated with being "crazy."
- In some cultures, a person who has a physical disability or epilepsy is believed to be "cursed" or "possessed."
- If a student's disability is assumed to be contagious, he/she may be treated quite differently than if the student had chosen not to disclose the disability.

Cross-cultural learning is an integral aspect of international exchange. The approach that staff and students use to address disability-related issues and concepts can set the tone for positive dialogue and increased understanding. Immersion of people with disabilities into a new culture as college students can change the perception of the host community toward people with disabilities. In return, the exchange students with disabilities and study abroad staff can gain insight into their own culturally based perceptions of disability, through the lens provided by interactions and experiences in a different culture.

Cultural Differences in Decisions about Accommodations

Frequently, it is underlying cultural differences, as well as individual and contextual responses, that impact the ways in which a student with a disability is accommodated or generally treated. For example in some countries, "The emphasis is on the person and the circumstances of the person's situation. Fairness is

ensured by treating people uniquely. Strict adherence to rules, [it is believed], prevents empathy.[6]" On the other hand, many countries, including the United States tend to hold to more procedural approaches, "The emphasis is on policies, rules and procedures. Fairness is ensured by treating people similarly.[7]" For example, while the Americans with Disabilities Act evaluates situations relative to each individual to determine what is reasonable, this law ultimately seeks to ensure that all individuals are given equal opportunities to succeed through establishing procedures, documentation and regulations that ensure no one is provided an advantage or disadvantage.

Insight into cultural differences that shape expectations and approaches regarding disability issues can be useful when working with overseas partners and preparing students for host cultures. In in-depth qualitative interviews with six students with non-apparent disabilities preceding and following their study abroad experiences in Spanish-speaking countries, research[8] found that **Procedural vs. Personal** and **Individualistic vs. Collectivist** cultural differences helped to explain how the students expected decisions to be made regarding disability-related accommodations, and how they were actually made in the host community.

Findings from the interviews reflect that Procedural vs. Personal cultural differences arise when determining how decisions were made about:

- Whether accommodations should be provided
- How many accommodations should be provided
- Why certain accommodations should be provided
- How to provide accommodations.

For the students interviewed, the degree of success at arranging disability-related accommodations seemed largely to have depended on personal relationships between individual students and the host staff. Students who were reported as having a positive relationship with host country professors or staff were found to have successfully received disability-related

accommodations (sometimes more than they would have at home). Students identified as having a less than positive relationship with host faculty were not successful at getting desired accommodations, which was sometimes reflected in their academic success.

Disability-related accommodations seemed far less affected by formal efforts, following established procedures, by U.S. partners. None of the overseas sites had a disability office or processes in place to notify faculty of accommodations that the students used at home. Forms with information about or requests for disability-related accommodations sent from the U.S. institution were either not shared with faculty, or were reviewed only by upper level staff with whom the students had little contact.



Findings from the research indicate that requests for disability-related accommodations may have been more effectively addressed if U.S. staff had discussed issues directly and personally with program staff or faculty, with specific attention to increasing mutual understanding of conditions and needs of the student, deciding (with the student) whether, what and why accommodations would be needed, and how best to provide them. This approach may have helped to ensure supports that were a best fit in the host cultures. As one resident director in a Latin American country

explained, "Host nationals, whether dealing with a person with or without a disability, solve their problems through social networks with a personal base - by appealing personally to other human beings related to themselves by ties of family, friendship or simple solidarity. These ties are exceptionally easy to establish...so long as [the people] meet face to face. One simply doesn't expect things to work because they have been established by cold, mechanical things like laws or policies. Rather, a host national will assume that the only way to be well served by an institution, official, bureaucrat or person of importance is by applying leverage through some kind of personal connection."

Interview responses also indicated that students perceived that the host community, outside of the classroom as well as in the academic sphere, responded to disability-related needs differently than responses to which they were accustomed at home. The differences between collectivist cultures like those in Latin American countries, and individualistic societies like the United States[9] influence students' perceptions and expectations of where support is to be found. For example, Latin American cultures look more to family, community and friends to offer informal support services, and less to professionals and the government to add additional support. As intercultural studies explain, "The specialized approach to interpersonal relationships can be extended to the prevailing reliance of people in the United States and other western cultures on specialists and experts, who are available for almost all functions that need to be performed....In contrast, help for many of the social and emotional problems in [collectivist] cultures is sought from members of one's family and from close friends.[10]" The U.S. students who lacked insight into this difference, described the exchange experience as extra challenging.

Students who appeared to have had a harder time adapting during the exchange largely maintained the viewpoint that the host country government should be doing more for people with disabilities, and that the university should have a disability services specialist for them to go to. These same students also did not

appear to take notice, draw upon or have access to the types of support offered by the host community. These students often felt they were on their own when academic or health-related issues arose, and a couple experienced their homestay families as treating the host role more like a business relationship than one of a close, intimate family. Students who viewed the supports offered in the host country more positively were more likely to have drawn on those supports, for example, by practicing their foreign language skills with the community instead of seeking out paid tutors, or by noting how their family's normal assistance with tasks such as laundry and cooking helped the student to conserve precious energy for other activities.
These culturally-rooted differences in expectations among the students were examined by asking the following questions:

- Who should provide support services?
- To whom should support services be provided?

These questions, and those listed previously, may prove useful in exploring underlying cultural differences that, if understood, can help you and your overseas partners work together effectively, as well as to assist students with disabilities to adjust their expectations to the culture they are entering.

Disability Rights and International Exchange

Disability rights movements are at different stages in different countries and parts of the world. In many countries, students with disabilities are most often educated in segregated schools among other students with similar disabilities – schools for students who are deaf, blind, with cerebral palsy, etc. In some communities, people with visible disabilities are overtly and implicitly deterred from participating in the life of the community by social, institutional and infrastructural restrictions. In those countries, your partners may react with surprise or resistance to the idea of placing a student with a disability in a non-disability-specific program.



Although it is important and necessary to show respect for the ideas and beliefs of the host country, U.S.-based international exchange programs have legal as well as ethical commitments to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to participate. Your overseas partner must comprehend fully your organization's clear commitment to the human and civil rights of all students with disabilities – those from the United States and those in the host country. Students and international exchange program staff may find themselves, intentionally or not, changing inaccurate perceptions about people with disabilities that they encounter in the host country (and, sometimes, in the United States). Participation of U.S. students with disabilities in international exchange has the potential to have a positive impact on the rights and opportunities of host country students with disabilities as well.

To find more information about disability rights laws in countries around the world, see *Rights and Responsibilities* or contact the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, listed in the "Using Other Resources" section.

Most U.S. college-age students today have grown up in a society that is rights-based, centered on policies and practices that are designed to protect the equal rights to which citizens with disabilities are entitled. Students often carry their assumption of entitlement to equal access overseas, where the expectation of equality as a right may be newer. For example, a disability service provider from England found that U.S. study abroad students ask her, "What am I entitled to?" whereas a typical approach from her British students would begin, "Do you have what I need?" Even among countries with rights-based laws, there may be differences in the specifics as to what the laws require and how they are implemented. For example, a U.S. student may expect more accommodations than are required by the Australian Federal Disability Discrimination Act, and may find delays in receiving accommodations to be unacceptable, while the Australian institution may offer fewer or different accommodations, based in part on availability of resources, and may find the student's request to be excessive.[11] *While many U.S. students with disabilities find the lack of rights-based legislation in host countries to be surprising and frustrating, some have found ways to turn looser legal requirements to their advantage. In countries in which disability laws are less defined, and with institutions that have less experience in hosting students with disabilities, more flexibility is sometimes possible for making arrangements with collaborative partners.*

Implementing Best Practices

Know Your Student

In the United States, disability accommodations are arranged on an individualized basis. Because each individual's needs are unique, there is no "one size fits all" accommodations package. International exchange professionals who have worked with students with disabilities who have gone on international exchange have identified some key practices for ensuring a successful experience. These include:

- Know your student. Do not conclude, or let your overseas partner conclude, that you know what accommodations the student will need based on assumptions about his/her disability. Each individual's goals, needs, preferences and solutions are different.

- Work closely with the student and with the U.S. institution's disability services program, to establish exactly what accommodations the student is receiving in the United States, and what similar or alternative accommodations would be useful and necessary in the host country and campus settings.

- Encourage the student to make detailed lists of activities of daily living, and how any tasks that are affected by the disability are accomplished. For example, if the student employs a personal assistant at home, exactly what duties does that person perform, and how, if necessary, will those tasks transfer to a new, unfamiliar assistant for the trip or in the host country?

- With the student, develop detailed lists of accommodations that are absolutely necessary, and accommodations that would be helpful or desirable. Use the lists as basis for discussion and agreements with your overseas colleague as to what accommodations will be provided, and by whom.

- Be sure that the student has appropriate documentation of the disability if accommodations are being requested.

- Every student, disabled or non-disabled, needs a contingency plan. For a student with a disability, the plan should include advocacy approaches should services not be effective, and plans and resources for resolving disability-related issues.

- When discussing the student with an overseas counterpart, avoid overemphasizing the student's disability. Focus both on the student's disability-related and non-disability related goals, needs and abilities, to give a balanced picture. Present the student as a whole person, providing information such as outstanding achievements, academic record and travel history. This can also assist the overseas staff in arranging an appropriate homestay placement if that is part of the program.

- Encourage the student to contact NCDE for ideas from other students with disabilities who have traveled abroad.

Know Your Partner

- Explore concepts such as independence, disability spread, paternalism and human rights (see "Assessing Personal and Institutional Practices," and "Working Across Cultures") with your overseas partners, to strengthen mutual understanding of cultural values, preconceptions and terminology that impact your ability to successfully include students with disabilities.

- Continue to keep conversations focused on the "practice of yes"– how, not whether, to include students with disabilities.

A U.S. exchange professional spoke of her success in placing Gina, an art major and experienced traveler who is Deaf, to study art in Europe:

I approached the Director first, and he said, "Bring her on." The Administrator, however, was reluctant and kept finding reasons that it would be a bad idea. He said he was afraid there would be problems incorporating an American Sign Language interpreter into the classroom, though the course is taught in English. Because the Director assured me that this was not a problem, I pushed further. The Administrator expressed concern about Gina's being able to function in the community; would she be able to go the market on her own? Would a homestay family be willing to take her? Eventually, I discovered that his real concerns were about the "Deaf subculture" and were based on stereotypes of Deaf people in Europe. We did, in fact, find a homestay for her, and Gina went to study in the host country, where her international experience is serving her wonderfully. I believe that study abroad may be a lot harder on a non-disabled 18- year-old who has never been away from home than on a student with a disability who has been faced with challenges and learned to take them in stride.

On the other hand, sometimes an objection is presented as disability-related when it really is not. This was evident when another university sent a student who is blind to a different university in the same European country. As it turned out the problems she encountered had everything to do with the student being 20 years old and little to do with her lack of vision. By not starting out as "strict" with her because her adjustment needs were perceived to be greater than the other students, the local directorship undermined its authority to be her guardian as it is to the other students. This type of "exception" is equally as damaging to the progress of efforts for the inclusion of students with disabilities because to some it implies that disability suggests a lack of seriousness for schoolwork.

Know the Resources

Being aware of the resources available to a student with disabilities participating in international exchange, both from the U.S. university and in the host community make for a smoother, more successful overseas experience. Suggestions include to:

- Collaborate with your overseas partner and with the student to become familiar with disability organizations in the host community or country, and the kind of assistance that they might be able to offer.

- Know, and be able to explain, exactly what your institution and the student will provide in the way of disability-related accommodations and expenses.

- Contact the NCDE, education abroad listservs and other networking resources if, before or during the program, the student or your overseas partner encounters problems related to inclusion and disability accommodations. For example, members of the U.S. study abroad listservs were able to assist when a student with a psychiatric disability needed to find an English-speaking counselor in Japan and when a student with Attention Deficit Disorder needed to know how to get more medication in England. NCDE can tell you about disability organizations in the host country or contacts among your U.S. colleagues who may know of resources.

Know the Incentives

- Share with your overseas associate some of the best reasons for welcoming students with disabilities on exchange programs, such as their commitment to equal opportunity and diversity or widening their market.

- Be prepared, if necessary, to mention any existing nondiscrimination laws that apply in the host country or U.S. laws that affect the way you work with the host institution.

Know the Program

Discuss with your overseas colleague the academic and programmatic obligations that the student will be expected to meet. What adjustments or adaptations are possible within the framework of the program, the environment of the host site and cultural expectations? For example:

- Can requirements be negotiated, such as reduced course load or alternative testing times for someone with disability-related fatigue?
- What resources are available to students if they need tutoring, library assistance or counseling?
- What is the usual relationship of faculty to students on campus? Do faculty members act as mentors to students, or are students expected to be more self-directed?
- Are students expected to do certain amounts of reading, note taking, conversation, essay writing, etc. that could affect the need for assistants or alternative format materials?
- How are classes taught (didactic, experiential, etc.)? How much flexibility can the student expect?
- Will sign language interpretation, personal assistance, guides, medical facilities, etc. be available on field trips?

Assist your student in understanding what will be expected of him or her and how best to prepare. Plan to check in, as needed during the program, with your overseas contact as well as with the student, and direct the student to the appropriate contacts overseas when necessary. Continue problem solving, if needed, in collaboration with your associate and the student while the exchange program is in progress.

Tips to Tell Your Students

- Remember the benefits: this experience is an incredible opportunity to gain invaluable knowledge and for personal growth.
- Many of your fears will fade away as the unknown becomes known and you are surrounded by new exciting places, tastes, and friends.
- Many people with disabilities have successfully traveled to all parts of the world to study or volunteer, and you can do it too. Visit www.miusa.org and www.umabroad.umn.edu/access/ to learn more from people who have done it.
- Learn as much as you can ahead of time about the host country and resources you need, but know there's always more to learn.
- Be realistic about the challenges you may face, as well as open to the possibilities.
- Make a list of your past successes, and the skills and attributes you called upon to accomplish them. Look back at that list to encourage yourself when you feel overwhelmed.
- Be aware that, in order to be "independent," you may have to accept more assistance in your host community than you are used to or are comfortable with at home.
- Don't be surprised if cultural and language differences may prove as much of a challenge as disability-related issues.
- It may be difficult to explain your disability in the language of the host country, and you may not get the kind of response that you are accustomed to or expect. You may find that there may be no precise word in the host country's

language to describe your disability. You may also find, especially if you have a non-apparent disability, that your disability may not be immediately accepted as legitimate in the host country. Think through different responses that you might use to counter misinformation and assumptions.

- Be prepared that some words and concepts, such as "confidentiality"and "independence" may be interpreted and addressed very differently in different cultures.

- Luckily, some of the differences in other countries make things easier for some students with disabilities. For example, in some cultures, host families, especially "mothers," may want to do tasks for the visiting student that the student is used to doing for him/herself at home, such as laundry and cooking meals. In some cultures, slower-paced lifestyles, late morning class schedules and untimed tests make the overseas experience easier for some students.

- While you are abroad, it may appear to you, based on your experience as a U.S. student with a disability abroad, that the assistance you need is not available, when in fact you may simply not know where to look. Ask people with disabilities in the host country how they do things. Research disability organizations in the area and what assistance they might offer or point you to.

- In many cultures around the world, disability support services are seen as the province of the family, friends and perhaps religious organizations, not the government or educational institutions, so many overseas universities do not have an office of disability services.

Tips (continued)

- If you will be requesting disability-related accommodations, find out what documentation will be required in the host country and institution in order to receive services and support.

- If you are not fluent in the language of the host country, you might want to learn key words and phrases that would be useful in asking for the kind of assistance that you are likely to need.

- Learn about cultural issues or prejudices that you may face.

- Prepare yourself for being stared at if your disability is visible. Think through possible responses. For example, you might choose to look away, or to speak to the person staring. One student who uses a wheelchair makes it a policy to wink at anyone she sees staring at her. Others view staring as a way for people in the other culture to learn about them, and welcome the chance to interact.

- Think through responses you might use for questions that are uncomfortable for you or that seem inappropriate.

- Learn about any anti-discrimination disability laws in the potential host country.

- Making friends may be challenging at first. This is true for people with and without disabilities. If you want to connect with other people with disabilities in your host community, how will you do that? Are you interested in sports, the arts, social activities? If possible, find out ahead of time what is available locally, to make it easier to connect with people and resources once you have arrived.

- Don't get discouraged by setbacks – persistence usually proves useful, and it is a skill worth developing for the rest of your life.

- Recognize that your feelings may be similar to what other students, with and without disabilities, are experiencing. You may be experiencing the typical ups and downs of cultural adjustment.

- Be ready for anything. On an international exchange, there are no "ordinary" days.

- Appreciate this amazing opportunity while you are there. Listen to advice of exchange program alumni, with and without disabilities: "Have the time of your life! It is so worth it!"

- Remember, you are paving the way for others who come after, just as other students with disabilities have smoothed the way for you.



Using Other Resources

Mobility International USA (MIUSA)
National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) Publications

PO Box 10767
Eugene, Oregon 97440 USA
Tel/TTY: (541) 343-1284
Fax: (541) 343-6812
E-mail: info@miusa.org
Web: www.miusa.org

Books and videos may be ordered online at www.miusa.org from the publications page or by contacting MIUSA. All publications are available on diskette or audiocassette for alternative formats; the video includes captions, and audio description (upon request).

A World Awaits You
This award-winning journal of success in international exchange includes personal experience stories, disability-related accommodation tips and ideas along with international opportunities for people with disabilities. *Free.*

Building Bridges: A Manual on Including People with Disabilities in International Exchange Programs
A practical reference guide on including people with disabilities in international exchange programs, it features more than 200 pages of suggestions and creative ideas for including, recruiting and accommodating people with disabilities. It includes an extensive resource section. *Building Bridges* also addresses how to budget for disability-related accommodation costs, provide information in alternative formats, locate appropriate homestays and much more. 2005 edition, ISBN #: 1-880034-37-9, $20.00.

Building Bridges Training Video
A 15-minute video that provides practical, how-to information on topics such as recruiting participants with disabilities, arranging homestays, setting up accommodations abroad and where to obtain disability-related information. This video, a companion to the *Building Bridges* Manual, can be used as a tool to train both new and experienced staff at international exchange organizations. $49.00 VHS, PAL and SECAM versions; also available on CD-Rom.

Rights and Responsibilities: A Guide to National and International Disability-Related Laws for International Exchange Organizations and Participants
This booklet includes helpful information on disability rights law for international exchange advisors and participants. 2005 edition, ISBN# I-880034-47-6, *Free.*

Survival Strategies for Going Abroad: A Guide For People With Disabilities
This publication takes a personal approach to answering disability-related questions about international exchange. With extensive resources and travel tips, this book is designed to be as useful for study abroad offices and libraries as it is for the personal collection of any disabled person who wants to travel abroad. 2005, ISBN #: 1-880034-70-0, $16.95.

National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) Roundtable Consortium Members
This consortium functions as an advisory committee to the NCDE. Individuals and organizations may contact any of the Roundtable Consortium members to obtain information about international exchange programs or to establish relationships with the international exchange or disability communities. All of these organizations are committed to fostering the inclusion of people with disabilities in the full range of educational and cultural exchange programs. A full list of these members can be found on the MIUSA website at www.miusa.org.

Access Abroad
Learning Abroad Center
University of Minnesota
230 Heller Hall
271 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Tel: (612) 625-2571
Fax: (612) 626-8009
Web: www.umabroad.umn.edu/access/contact.htm

Access Abroad was a federally-funded project (1997-2000) to enhance education abroad opportunities for students with disabilities. The University of Minnesota, Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), and the Pennsylvania State University were partners in this 3-year U.S. Department of Education project. The project ended in 2000, but the website can still be accessed. It includes a wealth of information for advisors to replicate at their own institutions: checklists, template letters, outlined processes on their roles and responsibilities, etc.

United States Department of State
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
301 4th Street SW, Room 234
Washington, DC 20547 USA
Tel: (202) 619-4360
Fax: (202) 401-5914
Web: http://exchanges.state.gov

The Bureau's Office of Academic Programs manages a wide spectrum of educational programs. Principal among them is the world renowned Fulbright Program, which awards more than 5,000 grants annually to U.S. citizens to study, teach, lecture or conduct research abroad, and to foreign citizens to conduct like activities in the United States. The Benjamin Gilman scholarship program provides grants for U.S. undergraduates to study abroad, specifically targeting students with financial need. The Hubert Humphrey Fellowship Program provides academic study and internship opportunities in the United States for mid-career professionals from developing countries in a variety of fields.

Information on these and many other programs may be found on the website listed above. Non-U.S. citizens should contact the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in their country or the EducationUSA office affiliated with it. To locate the U.S. Embassy near them, they may visit the United States embassy website (http://usembassy.state.gov) and link to the embassy in their country. A list of EducationUSA offices is available online at http://educationusa.state.gov.

No Barriers to Study
Lock Haven University
Robinson Hall 205
Lockhaven, PA 17745
Tel: (570) 893-2926 or (800) 233-8978
Fax: (570) 893-2517
Web: www.lhup.edu/international/no_barriers.html

No Barriers to Study (NBTS) is a consortium of private and public universities in central Pennsylvania. Representatives from Bucknell University, Lock Haven University, Pennsylvania State University and other higher education institutions meet regularly to share information about ways to increase participation in study abroad by students with disabilities at their campuses. They are interested in students with disabilities studying abroad as well as international students coming to the United States. Founded in 1988, the focus of NBTS is on including college students with disabilities in existing study abroad programs. International education staff, disability service providers, and other faculty and staff collaborate and share ideas, resources, and enthusiasm. Research they conducted can be found at www.frontiersjournal.com/back/five/groff.htm.

End Notes

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