

PRACTICE BRIEF

Lessons Learned from a Disabilities Accessible Study Abroad Trip

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Abstract

In the summer of 2009, a two-week study abroad program was specifically designed and executed to include students with disabilities. Recruitment efforts resulted in 11 student participants, six of who were identified as having a disability by the University's Office of Disability Services. Students participated in a two-course academic program; one course took place on campus prior to the actual study abroad experience and included academic content to prepare students for the follow-up course. The second course entailed a study abroad experience in Switzerland. This article describes the lessons learned.

Keywords: Study abroad, accessibility

In an increasingly global world, study abroad programs and international education are seen as important offerings on university campuses. Each year, approximately 240,000 students study abroad (Blumenthal & Gutierrez, 2009). However, based on a review of the literature and reports from experts in study abroad programs and disability services (T. L. Kinsley, personal communication, August 12, 2009) opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in international educational experiences are limited.

Students with disabilities make up 11% of students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities (U. S. Department of Education, 2006). A paucity of peer-reviewed literature exists related to students with disabilities participating in study abroad programs. This suggests that the practice of serving students with disabilities in study abroad programs is still in its infancy. Matthews, Hameister, and Hosley (1998) interviewed students with disabilities about their attitudes toward study abroad programming. Students indicated that "being part of a program for non-disabled and disabled students as opposed to one for students with disabilities" was the most important accommodation. McLean, Heagney, and Gardner (2002) reviewed the implications for international students with disabilities who studied in Australia and concluded that students with

disabilities who wished to study abroad may receive some accommodation services, but they may be less than they are accustomed to receiving in the U.S. or Great Britain.

Limited programming for students with disabilities may occur for several reasons. First, it is unclear whether relevant disability laws require universities to provide accommodations abroad (Hebel, 2002). Another reason college students and other adults with disabilities may not travel is because of the additional challenges that must be negotiated (Jo, Koscuilek, Huh, & Holecek, 2004; Turco, Stumbo, & Garnarcz, 1998). Daniels, Rodgers, and Wiggins (2005) studied leisure travel by people with physical disabilities and found that travel constraints and their negotiations were inter-related and ongoing, rather than hierarchical.

Course Description and Administration

In the summer of 2009, a study abroad program specifically designed to be accessible to students with disabilities was offered. The courses took place over seven weeks and included a 15-day travel-abroad component. The international education office was concerned that students with physical disabilities had been turned away by other campus study abroad programs because of a combined lack of accessibility

in host countries and lack of willingness by faculty to explore and make accommodations for all students. The university's international education office provided funding for a pre-course planning trip for the faculty, helped create brochures to recruit students, handled all financial issues associated with the study abroad program, and provided a general orientation for students enrolled in all study abroad programs occurring during the summer of 2009.

Special recruitment efforts targeted students with disabilities through the Disability Services (DS) office. They publicized the travel-abroad opportunity with posters and brochures for students who visited their office and sent an email to all students registered with DS promoting this campus' first study abroad program designed for all students. As a result of the combined recruiting efforts of DS, the international education office, and the faculty, 11 students, six of whom were identified as having a disability by DS, enrolled. Students participated in two academic credit courses. The first was a five-week on-campus course that included academic content and preparation for foreign travel. The second follow-up course was the two-week study abroad experience in Switzerland.

Students Enrolled

Eleven students enrolled in the course. Six of the students were registered with and received services through DS. One of these students was blind; one was paraplegic and used a wheelchair; one was diagnosed with spinal bifida and used leg braces and a wheelchair; one had a psychiatric disorder and cerebral palsy, which caused hearing and balance impairment; one student, who was diagnosed with Neurofibromatosis, was deaf and blind and used a wheelchair; and one student had a visual impairment. The remaining five students did not have identified disabilities.

Ten of the eleven students were female. The students' ages ranged from 17 to 61. All students were Caucasian. Nine students were enrolled at the authors' campus and were traditional college-aged students. One student was a high school senior and enrolled in the class for credit and to be the personal assistant (PA) for a sibling who was also a member of the course. Another participant was a 19 year-old first-time college student planning to attend another regional university.

Course Description

The course was facilitated over two summer terms. The first five weeks of the summer course occurred on the home campus. Class was scheduled to meet four days a week for 105 minutes per day. The academic content of the course was delivered on Mondays and Tuesdays in a traditional classroom setting. Course content focused on self and society (social psychology), Swiss culture, basic lessons in German (to facilitate travel in Switzerland) and American Sign Language (to facilitate communication with a student participant), and preparations for travel. Additionally, an DS staff member led the class in an awareness and accommodation discussion about traveling with a disability or with a companion with a disability. As needed, students used classroom accommodations in order to assist them (e.g., adaptive technology, an assigned note-taker, and a sign language interpreter). Wednesdays and Thursdays were designed for students to become acquainted with each other and identify through experience the accommodations needed to travel in a group with people with disabilities. As such, students and faculty ventured into the community to participate in tourist activities which would provide a comparison for cultural and other travel-related experiences when in Switzerland.

In the second summer term, students traveled to Switzerland for 15 nights. Two faculty (one from sociology and one from social work) who taught the course content while stateside also traveled with the students to Switzerland. While in Switzerland, the group was based in Zurich and Lenk. This provided experiences in urban and rural settings. The course content focused on cultural comparisons of Switzerland and the U.S. Day trips to cities and destinations like Geneva, Luzern, Interlaken, the Jungfrauoch, Kandersteg, and Rapperswil provided the backdrop for cultural immersion experiences. The group variously lodged in a hotel, a sports/vacation center, and an urban scout lodge. Swiss Rail Passes provided nearly all forms of public transportation including trains, buses, trams, boats, and gondolas, all of which proved quite accessible.

Methodology

Leading a study abroad program that is accessible for students with disabilities is an emerging practice in international education and was a new study abroad opportunity at our university. As such, the faculty and

students charted new territory and learned many valuable lessons in the process of planning and execution. While the study abroad program was successful in many ways, this article will also report on some miscalculations and mistakes made in the piloting of this new type of programming

Data were collected through several sources and are used to make recommendations. The first source was the authors' notes from the trip. These included personal reflections as well as recorded comments from conversations with students. Further information came from a meeting that occurred 11 days after the students and faculty returned to the U.S. Questions about personal and professional growth were explored and students were asked for suggestions for improving the course and the study abroad experience. The notes taken by one of the authors during this session were reviewed for the writing of this paper. Third, information from the students' final reflection papers was used to develop recommendations. Finally, this paper was reviewed by three students who participated in the study abroad experience. Their feedback was incorporated in order to assure that attitudes and opinions were correctly captured and accurately related.

Lessons Learned

The sentiment, "I had no idea what I was getting myself into" was expressed by nearly every participant. However, what students were "getting themselves into" varied widely based on their abilities and preparation for the study abroad experience. Some of the expressed concerns are universal to any student studying abroad, such as "being away from my friends and family," "managing my money," and "worrying about what to eat." However, participants also expressed issues related to physical and psychiatric disabilities. Students with disabilities expressed a wider range of concerns, from being "accepted by others" to "medical issues" that occurred during the study abroad experience, compared to students without disabilities. Students without disabilities reported feeling unprepared to travel with people with disabilities and "being forced by guilt" to attend to or accommodate their needs.

Pre-planning Improvements

The most important lesson learned was that increased assessment of needs during the application process would have improved the ability to provide appropriate accommodations. A more thorough assess-

ment would have created a better study abroad experience for all students. The only screening conducted by the faculty advisors was a 60-minute interview as a prerequisite for accepting students' study abroad applications. It is typical for study abroad applicants at our university to meet faculty who are teaching the course and facilitating the travel. In this brief interview, students may have been overly optimistic about their ability to be an independent traveler. Likewise, the faculty operated from a strengths perspective and accepted students' own personal assessment of needs. As this was the first trip of this type for this university, the protocol and application procedures were those designed for only able-bodied students. Mobility International (2011), however, provides guidance for students with disabilities who wish to study abroad. Accommodation forms and checklists are provided to assist in planning and preparation. The University of Minnesota's (2011) Access Abroad organization shares information linking international education staff, DS staff, and faculty in order to facilitate successful international experiences for students with disabilities.

Ultimately, this underestimation of needs resulted in students' under-preparation for the demands of travel on a study abroad experience. Students reported their independence in their home comfort zone. We did not take into account independence in the absence of parental assistance, familiar routines, or other stressors associated with travel. For example, because of familiarity, one student did not need physical description of the scenery or way-finding while on campus; however, in the unfamiliar surroundings of a foreign country and a new environment, that same student required verbal descriptions from fellow students of the setting and continual assistance in navigating pathways, buildings, and transportation. Further, a more comprehensive interview process could have identified potential resources in the university's DS or other disability support agencies that could have enhanced a student's study abroad experience. An example of a resource that DS could have provided was a hand-held, portable reader that could allow a student with a visual impairment to scan and magnify a brochure, sign, or menu. It may have been helpful to have a DS staff representative participate in the initial interviews. Short of that, DS professionals could provide a list of questions or an inventory tool regarding common daily-living skills likely in a travel or foreign environment that could be used to identify and accommodate individual student needs.

Two additional assessments are recommended. First, students who are served by DS should meet with DS personnel and the faculty advisors to assess how accommodations can be made to facilitate a safe and successful study abroad experience. One student with disabilities voluntarily coordinated a meeting with DS staff and her personal assistant (PA) in advance of the trip to discuss possible accommodations. This meeting led to appropriate accommodations that allowed the student to fully participate in the course. Reflections included, "I loved having my sister along. She made it possible for me to do everything." The student's PA added, "Since her [sister's] diagnosis, we've been so focused on her medical care. It was fun to be together with [my sister] and the other girls to laugh and travel. It felt like we were normal again."

Next, all students interested in the study abroad program should engage in a 24-hour, overnight weekend travel experience if possible to more accurately assess the realities of travel than we were able to do during the Wednesday and Thursday pre-travel course activities. This would allow participants to experience the demands of being away from home and traveling. Faculty often lack expertise in the areas of disabilities and accommodations and, as such, it is recommended that a member of the DS staff attend the weekend experience and contribute their professional insights to individual strengths and weaknesses. We suggest this take place six months before the travel-abroad experience and simulate an approximate level of stress of a typical study abroad experience (e.g., moving luggage, eating group meals, sharing close living quarters, having long active days, using public transportation, carrying a day pack, not having parents or their usual assistance/support network nearby). For example, a particular student struggled with personal care issues during the study abroad-experience. She said, "How was I supposed to know I had to be responsible for all this stuff [e.g., cutting my own food, washing clothes, hygienic disposal of catheter supplies]. My mom always does that for me." Participating in the weekend experience would have brought such issues to light and allowed ample time for the student to learn a new skill or, if necessary, arrange to use a PA. Following such an experiential weekend, DS staff, the student, and the faculty could meet to discuss what accommodations or service could facilitate a successful study abroad experience.

Such a weekend is equally as important for the students without disabilities who will be participating in the study abroad program. For example, one student without a disability said, "I had no idea of all the things we had to think about when we travel with people with disabilities. I learned about the things I take for granted that might make it impossible for [students with disabilities] to participate." Another reported, "I wish I would have known more about [student's] disability. The things she did frustrated me, but then I learned more about why she did them. It did not bother me then... it made me more compassionate." These quotes suggest that further pre-course content related to disabilities could enhance student learning, facilitate travel accommodations, and increase the awareness of others' abilities and differences, all of which are goals of study abroad programming.

This weekend experience is not intended to screen or disqualify students but, rather, increase the awareness of appropriate accommodations needed to study and travel abroad. Requiring all students to participate in this practice travel experience would have the benefit of facilitating interpersonal connections, bonding, and team-building prior to the actual travel abroad-event. Disability Services staff who participate would bring an expertise to helping students evaluate their needs. Likewise, DS staff would be in a position to advocate for the student with the disability as some faculty may have little knowledge or experience of how to make appropriate accommodations. Efforts to keep the time and cost burden of such a weekend to a minimum should be made. This could be done by traveling to a city nearby, spending only one night in a hotel, and some creative financial support from a sponsor.

Based on the information gained from the facilitated meeting and the travel weekend, we recommend that faculty err on the side of caution and recommend that a student bring a PA if needed. In assessing the need for a PA, consider the travel destination and the anxiety that a foreign environment may cause. Students who may be independent on their home campus because of established routines and a support system should evaluate their independence based on the absence of those resources. Unlike the campus setting where students can test their abilities and independence by foregoing an accommodation, the study abroad experience may be logistically beyond the reach of timely intervention by DS staff and other support services. It would be better for a student to have an accompanying

PA and be able to test out the need for the amount and types of assistance needed rather than be without one and be unable to have a full learning experience, or, more significantly, experience medical consequences because of lack of appropriate assistance. Proactive work on the part of DS, the international education office, faculty, and students helps clarify needs and accommodations.

PAs are considered a “personal service” by universities and funding for them is typically a responsibility of the individual student. Case law has yet to clarify the extent of universities’ responsibility for providing accommodations while studying abroad. As such, students who need a PA to successfully participate in a study abroad program will be responsible for this cost. This essentially doubles the cost of a study abroad program. In the case of this program, it would have a combined cost exceeding \$5,000 for the student and PA to participate. Universities are encouraged to consider the additional cost burden and seek funding sources to offset economic barriers. For example, our university sought and received foundation funding that was used for study abroad scholarships for students in this program. Additionally, students were encouraged to apply for other department and college study abroad scholarships and highlight the additional travel costs encumbered by a person with a disability in their applications. Two students received \$1,000 each from such scholarships that were used to offset costs.

Pre-planning that Worked

The Office of International Education does several things for all students who participate in study abroad programs. It promotes study abroad programs and engages in recruitment efforts, processes payments for the program, and provides travel insurance. Additionally, it hosts a two-hour orientation related to studying abroad topics like personal safety, overseas laws, and the code of student conduct. None of the orientation content focused on traveling as or with a student with disabilities.

Some of the pre-planning done by the faculty was successful and aided students in having a safe and educational study abroad experience. This course was taught over two terms in the summer. Teaching the course over two terms was necessary to achieve course objectives and to prepare students for study abroad travel demands. The unique characteristics and accommodations needed by several of the participants required additional time and effort to build trust, in-

teraction skills, and group cohesion. Students had to disclose personal information to the faculty members and their classmates in order to ensure a safe and successful study abroad program. Often, while abroad, the additional length of time it may take people with disabilities to complete daily living tasks, the slower pace of visiting tourist sites with a large group, and the logistical issues of wheelchair mobility reduces the time available to deliver course content while in the country. Course content was limited to experiential learning and connecting the experience to the information already learned in the first term course.

One of the best pre-planning activities was to invite parents to a class session to meet the faculty and other participants. All but one student brought parents to that orientation class. This gathering provided parents with assurance and reduced the level of anxiety about their son’s/daughter’s travel, as it opened lines of communication and allowed parents to learn about the course and faculty expectations. At such a meeting, it is recommended that faculty discuss policies and procedures related to phone calls and cell phone usage, medical emergencies and health insurance coverage, packing requirements, and the level of assistance that students can expect to receive from or render to classmates. Parents also shared planning tips with each other. One parent suggested that they work with their student’s doctor to provide medical records saved on a CD-ROM disk or pen drive data storage device, which the students could carry and provide to medical personnel in the event of an injury or health issue. Two other parents and students agreed and prepared a complete set of medical records and physician contact information. This measure eased student and faculty concerns about the “what if’s” of a medical emergency in another country. Mobility International (2011) and the University of Minnesota (2011) offer additional resources that may aid faculty and students and their families in developing contingency plans for medical emergencies abroad.

Conclusions

If universities believe that competing in a global world is important for students, then that commitment and opportunity must extend to and include students with disabilities. The authors believe that offices of international education, offices of disability services, and faculty members can successfully plan and execute

meaningful and accessible study abroad programs. Comprehensive assessment of needs and time-intensive work with students before the study abroad experience will enhance successful programs. We must consider realistic accommodations within the context of the ADA, specifically the fact that the funding of personal assistants is not covered by DS and the added financial burden this may create for students with disabilities can make travel and study abroad prohibitive. Efforts should be made to share lessons learned with others who promote travel for students with disabilities. Doing so can help create more accessible study abroad programs for students with disabilities that have the potential to be unique, life-changing, and transformative educational experiences.

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