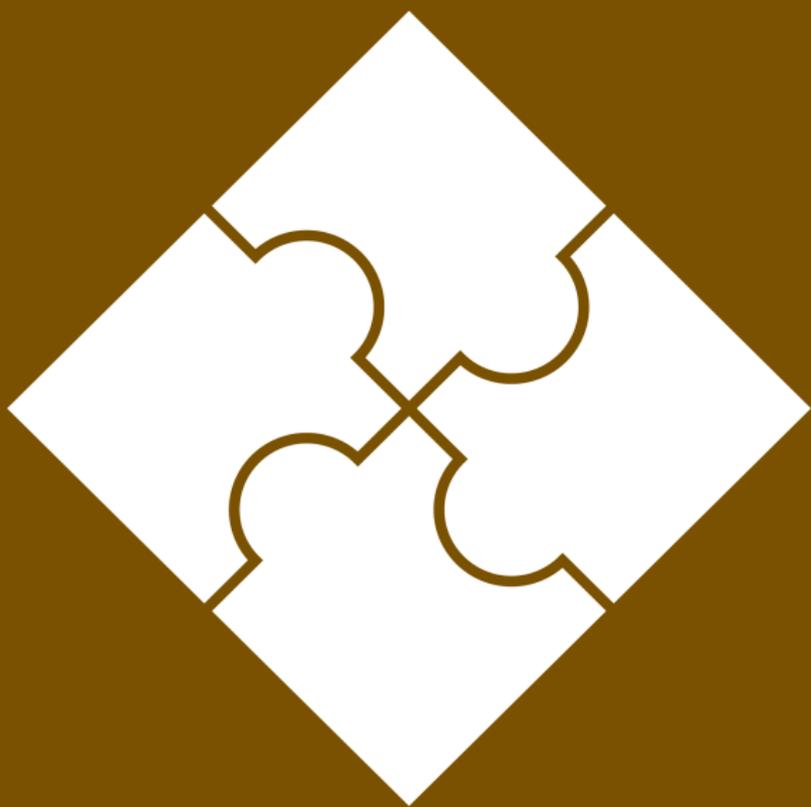




disability

making
study abroad
happen for you



Whatever your disability—physical or psychiatric, hearing or vision, cognitive or learning, systemic or something else—you can fit yourself into the study abroad puzzle. About three percent of study abroad participants today have disabilities, both apparent and non-apparent, and that number is on the rise. If you've always wanted to study abroad, think about what you'd like to experience—and what challenges you're ready to take on—and talk to disability experts and program staff to decide which programs are best for your goals and abilities.

Whatever your fears—exclusion, communication, unwanted attention—most staff and students are willing to go the extra mile so you can participate as fully as possible. The truth is, the accommodations made for your disability aren't always the type or quality you're used to at home, but there are still important things to see, amazing people to befriend, and great experiences waiting for you abroad. Like almost every student who ventures abroad, you'll end up changing for the better in ways you never expect.

<< put your mind to it and do it

By studying abroad, you'll learn what makes the culture tick in a place thousands of miles away. You'll also learn how your disability is addressed in your new host country. The first part of the lesson is practical: U.S. laws and society recognize specific physical, mental, learning, and health conditions as disabilities, but not all of these conditions are formally recognized everywhere in the world. This could affect if and how you receive accommodations for your disability abroad.

The second part of the lesson is more abstract but equally important: views on disability, independence, confidentiality, respect for authority, and individual rights differ from country to country, and these views will definitely affect your experience overseas. Here in the U.S., we tend to see independence as being able to accomplish what we want with little or no assistance, or with assistance that we control—and that is guaranteed by law. In other cultures, independence often includes relying on assistance from family, friends, or even strangers.

Don't forget to be on the lookout for other cultural differences. You may think people are staring at you because of disability-related reasons, but don't rule out the possibility that they're staring because it's a normal practice in that country or city to stare at people in general. Evaluate everything against a new cultural framework, and you'll understand—and adapt to—your host culture more easily.

These differences don't mean you can't or shouldn't study abroad. They just mean you'll need to step outside your comfort zone and consider new ways of doing things—just like every student who studies abroad must.

making the decision

There are hundreds of study abroad programs out there, each able to serve different needs—some relating to your disability, some not. These tips can help you evaluate them:

Think about your study abroad goals. What do you want to accomplish? Is there a specific country or region of the world that interests you? Do you want to improve your skills in a particular language? Or study a specific subject?

Think about the type of program you want. Do you want to study in a place where disability accommodations are well-developed and cultural attitudes are progressive, or is the destination itself more important than how your independence or use of adaptive equipment will be affected? Do you want a program that fits your learning style, like interactive classes and experiential field trips to keep your attention, structured schedules and assignments to help you manage your time, or late morning classes to accommodate fatigue?

Choose several programs to research in depth. Learn the facts about the programs you find appealing. Will they meet your academic needs? Can accommodations be made for your disability? Programs vary widely in the way they are designed and operated, so make sure you look at options in a few different countries and for a few different academic terms (program lengths range from a few weeks to a full academic year).

Talk to organizations both on campus and off to learn more. Campus disability support offices and disability groups both in the U.S. and abroad can advise you on how to identify your needs, request accommodations, and learn what services are available on the programs you like. Describe your specific needs and current adaptations, and be sure to ask about every aspect of the program: arrival, orientation, living accommodations, classes, excursions, and assistive technology. Reasonable accommodations are negotiated on a case-by-case basis with study abroad advisors and program staff, and a good program provider will work to include you in every aspect of the experience by making accommodations when possible.

self-identifying and planning

Identify yourself as a person with a disability early in the process. If you do, you'll improve your chances of securing the accommodations you need to make participation possible. Don't be afraid you'll be disqualified; once you've been accepted, a good study abroad program will encourage you to participate. With your permission, the staff of the program you choose will need to share information about your disability with overseas partners such as host institutions and families. That way, if you have a learning disability, you'll get a quiet room or extra time to take exams; if you use a wheelchair, your host family's home will be measured for fit; and if you're visually impaired, arrangements will be made for Braille and proper computer technology.

Plan logistics and pack. What do you need to take with you? Do you need special equipment like an adapter or transformer for your wheelchair, a laptop with adaptive software, or hearing aid batteries? Talk to the consulate of your host country and to your airline about entering the country with special equipment or medications.

Verify health insurance coverage. Some study abroad programs include health insurance as part of their fee but some don't. Check your regular policy to see if it provides the coverage you need for medical services abroad—and whether your plan pays providers directly, or requires you to pay and seek reimbursement. Pay close attention to benefits relating to pre-existing conditions, prescription drugs in more than a 30-day supply, and mental health coverage for seeing psychologists or counselors. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) often can be continued while studying abroad, but Medicaid benefits usually can't.

Get informed. Program providers and disability organizations can put you in touch with students willing to tell their stories. The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and administered by Mobility International USA, provides information about disability and international exchange. Tips and a list of organizations that have experience including disabled people in their international programs can be found at www.miusa.org/ncde.

while you're away

Discuss your accommodations with program staff. Once you arrive abroad, discuss specific needs with your resident director or other staff, and communicate any new concerns as they arise. Do you need extra time on tests? Orientation and mobility training? Counseling? Wheelchair ramps? Sign language interpreters? They'll do their best to help.

Seek local resources. For country- or city-specific information, contact national or local disabilities organizations. NCDE has a database of disability organizations worldwide at www.miusa.org; their staff can assist in finding others for you.

Take ownership of your disability and learn what you can do to accommodate your own needs. This may mean memorizing bus routes or which streets have curb cuts, seeking out deaf clubs to learn the local sign language, or identifying people willing to provide you with informal support like assisting you with grocery shopping, monitoring changes in your condition, or keeping you on schedule. Remember that reality can be different from the official story: in theory, every metro station may have an elevator, but how many are operational is the real question.

Allow yourself to accept more assistance than you would at home, or use assistance from home if it's not available abroad. If you're like most students with a disability, you'll build a support system abroad made up of program staff and new friends. And you may have to accept that there are some things you'll need help to tackle. Maybe that means one of the first things you'll learn in Japanese is "my battery is dead; will you push me home?" If you can't find a personal coach, AA meeting, or therapist abroad, access them remotely by Internet or telephone. If readers and scribes are unavailable, mail order audio or Braille books from the U.S. Library of Congress or bring assistive technology and software from home.

Be realistic about challenges and open to new experiences.

The more open-minded you are about the ways things can happen, the more you'll experience. Realistically, though, you may not end up participating fully in every activity. Not every museum has assistive listening options and not every field trip will be worth joining if you're fatigued, conditions are slippery, or your balance isn't great. Understand how the local culture works, adapt your behavior to accommodate it (like by bringing a book to amuse yourself while you wait for accessible transportation), and you'll write your own story abroad.

be a pioneer

All students abroad face challenges in their new environments, and you will too. Realize that difficulties that may seem disability-related could be part of the same culture shock and homesickness that everyone goes through. You may have something extra to grapple with, but you do at home too—and wouldn't you rather be doing that grappling while taking in the Australian Outback?

Once home, help other students with similar (or different) disabilities gain the courage to take their own plunges. Many don't realize they can study abroad, and you have the power to open the world to them:

- educate home campus study abroad and disability offices
- write articles for disability and study abroad publications
- participate in disability-related or international education conferences and panels
- talk to students with disabilities on your campus
- share your story in words and pictures at www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/peernetwork and www.ciee.org/ciee_initiatives/under_groups/study_abroad/disabilities.aspx

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