

Making an Impact: The Benefits of Studying Abroad
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Abstract: Qualitative interviews with ten individuals with disabilities who participated in a study abroad program within the past eight years, compared equally to long-term outcomes cited in studies with the general study abroad alumni population. Students reported increased self-confidence, independence and career or educational gains related to their study abroad experiences.

Key Words: international study, career, disability

When a University of Washington student who uses a wheelchair decided to study abroad in Spain, it transformed her outlook on life, her relationship with her family, her college major and her career choices. This is an example of what five months on an international exchange can do.

The term international exchange includes cultural and educational programs that focus on work, study, internship, volunteer, research and teaching experiences overseas. High school students to academicians to professionals to retired community members can participate in these programs, or arrange an exchange experience independently. International exchange programs allow entry into host cultures in ways that are broader and deeper than for general tourists. Students study alongside people from the host country or live with local families. Interns, teachers or volunteers achieve access to the country's employment, educational and social service sectors. Some international exchanges allow a longer stay than permitted under a typical travel visa, making more time available for cultural adjustment and to develop insight into cultural and language differences. However, exchanges can also be as short as 2-4 weeks, and focused on a specific topic, for example architecture or archeology.

This article focuses on students with disabilities that choose to study abroad while in college. For most students, the study abroad experience will be their first international opportunity. Most will find themselves to be the only, and often the first, student with a disability on the group program or hosted by the counterpart higher education institution.

Is the exchange experience worth it for students with disabilities, given the challenges that may arise in an unfamiliar environment? After students return from study abroad, how are their lives affected, both in the short-term and long-term? How are alumni's perceptions and lives changed as a result of an overseas experience? What are the benefits of international exchange for a student with a disability?

The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), managed by Mobility International USA and funded by the U.S. Department of State, conducted qualitative research that looked at the experiences of ten study abroad alumni with disabilities. All ten alumni had studied during a summer, semester or academic year

abroad, sometime over the past eight years, with Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) study abroad programs. The students had physical, vision, hearing or health-related disabilities and had studied in Australia, Brazil, Spain and Thailand. Four were young men, and four of the six women were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Unstructured individual or group interviews were recorded by telephone, transcribed and analyzed in the summer of 2004.

Career and Educational Impact

The alumni provided insights on how they felt their international exchange experience had impacted, or were integrated into, their lives today. All participants focused the majority of their comments on the effect of their overseas coursework and experiences on their educational and career goals. Study abroad experiences were specifically viewed by some alumni as being well-integrated into their academic preparation toward employment objectives. Some participants also reported personal changes, some of which also impacted career goals. Some comments included:

“Even though my primary reason to go abroad was to perfect my Spanish, then to learn and perfect Portuguese, [the result] was so much more than that. It was also being independent, and getting to know the healthcare systems of those countries. Being in public health now, I speak three languages, I’ve been certified as a medical interpreter and that helps with the job I have now. And the study abroad experience helped me to develop the interest in public health. Not just abroad but here, with all the immigrants that we have in Los Angeles.”

“I think it’s because I went to Spain that I decided to go to law school. [My study abroad experience] is also the reason why I decided to major in Spanish, so it set the path for what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It’s not exactly about Spain in particular, but when I was over there, there were so many obstacles and it was very difficult. I remember talking to my roommate over there, complaining about this and that and she said, ‘Why don’t you just do something about it?’ so that’s when I started thinking about going to law school and that’s how I went down that path.”

“I’m working at the [center for blind people] as a rehabilitation teacher. I work with seniors mainly. I encourage people to travel with a support group there. I encourage them that no matter what life brings you, you can overcome it. If you want to travel, if you want to venture out, not to be afraid, but to go for it. I tell them that life is so short, they should enjoy it.”

“There’s a very strong relationship [between my study abroad experience and my career goal] because, for example, at the bank where I interviewed this morning, I was talking to them about international banking...I feel it’s an area of business that I can pursue in the future. I did know a little bit of Spanish, so we discussed international banking.”

“The semester program to Thailand wasn’t what I was doing or studying [international business]. [My later studies at Khon Kaen University in Thailand for eight months] would be more related...it was most useful because it gave me a better view of what Thai business is really like. It was all business courses, and I was the only white guy there, and it was kind of fun.”

“I’m working for a very large import/export firm. I’m working on coordinating international shipments. I was hoping to get into something more related to Brazil, but here in Los Angeles we deal with a lot of Asian shipping. To a certain extent, it does help me appreciate other cultures and dealing with other people overseas.”

Interestingly, respondents that stated the study abroad experience had less significant impact on career goals, were all working in international careers or majoring in an internationally-related course of study—finance, banking, and business. Their responses addressed more directly the question of whether their current international position involved the specific country in which they had studied, or whether the courses they had taken overseas were directly related to their current field. Quantitative interviews with 100 human resources professionals and CEOs conducted by the Institute of International Education along with three European partners (2003) showed similarities to many employers. The employers recognized the positive qualities that people acquire from an international experience – flexibility, maturity, independence, cross cultural communication skills, ambition – and these same interpersonal skills were desirable qualities in employees. However, they tended not to explicitly link these together to give weight to an overseas experience unless the job specifically involved a cross-cultural, language or international component. This is likely to change, however, as those in the international education field take on greater awareness campaigns of these benefits, and “globalization” and “emotional intelligence” become stronger trends in the employment field.

Research in the international education field has documented these outcomes for study abroad alumni in general. Carlson, Burn, Useem and Yachimowicz (1990) published one of the first significant studies, which included a sample of 150 students from several universities who had recently completed a study abroad program and a long-term follow-up of 76 alumni of study abroad programs from the preceding 20 years. The long-term follow-up revealed, “the educational attainments of the study abroad alumni far exceeded the norms ...on aspiration for and attainment of educational experiences and degrees” (p. 92). Approximately 60% of the alumni reported they had incorporated their international experience into their career choices and employment practices.

Similarly, a decade later the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) (2000), in a report based on a survey of 3,000 respondents who participated in IES programs from 1950 to 1999, found that 69% felt their international experience had influenced their career choices and 96% “experienced increases in self confidence after

studying abroad.” When asked about the highest level of education achieved, 59% of the respondents reported earning a bachelor’s degree, while 41% had earned a master’s degree or higher.

These studies, while not specific to disability, include what can be seen with study abroad alumni who have disabilities. Related to this focus on employment and graduate school achievement, eight alumni with disabilities interviewed mentioned the overseas experience as helpful on their resumes, in job interviews or on graduate school admissions applications:

“When I was in Illinois and I was calling around because I knew I wanted to do my internship elsewhere, I called California. I called the Center for the Blind and said that ‘I would like to do my internship there.’ The director said, ‘Oh, I don’t know...you are going to move out here?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I’m willing to do it. I’ve been to Australia for nine months with just my guide dog.’ The director said, ‘If you did that then you can come to California!’”

“I had told [my internship supervisors at the World Affairs Center] that I was going to Spain to fulfill my curriculum requirement and that when I returned, I would need to do an internship. I think it did somewhat have an impact on their decision to hire me for the semester.”

“I would think [my international experience helped]. If nothing else, just for the resume value, because it looks good on paper and it is such a good conversation topic.”

“I definitely think it did impact getting my first job. The fact that I had been over to Europe really did help me get an international accounting position, working with an international firm. Just from what they said, I think it gave me an edge over people who perhaps did not have this experience. It also helped too because my boss was from England, and I spent a lot of time in England. So, I got along with him pretty well and I really understood where he was coming from...They felt more comfortable that I had traveled, but it wasn’t necessarily a deciding factor.”

“I believe [my international experience helped]. When we went over my resume, we went over my educational history. I’m pretty sure it made a difference when they offered me the position.”

“I actually wrote my admissions letter [to Yale University law school] about being in Spain, so I would say [my exchange experience impacted me getting accepted].”

“I go to UCLA. I’m at the school of public health and I really feel one of things that helped me to get in and get a full scholarship was just the broad base that I have....All the times I went abroad, in Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela, the times I volunteered at hospitals and it helped me to write about that.”

“I think it definitely helped me get into graduate school because I think that to study abroad, it says something about you. You have certain types of characteristics, that you can adjust to different types of environments, you’re a people person.”

Personal Outcomes: Increased Confidence, Independence

Other research findings of the general study abroad population also indicate study abroad not only impacts careers, but personal outcomes. Respondents to a survey by the British Columbia Centre for International Education (2001) described their international exchange experience as having had positive or very positive impact on their employment (51%), career choice (77%), acquisition or fluency in additional languages (77%), self-confidence (92%) and independence and autonomy (93%). Similarly, seven alumni with disabilities interviewed reported that by having been abroad, they had developed confidence and a “can do” approach to other aspects of their lives (educational, social, professional). While some may have had this aspect to their personality prior to studying abroad, they noted a positive increase upon return:

“In my graduate studies, I was taking some classes and people asked, ‘How can you take that class? It’s really hard. You have to have sight in order to take it.’ I said, ‘Look, if I’m able to go to Australia and deal with things there, then I can accomplish this. I can do it.’ And so they were really amazed. In the end, I still maintained my 4.0.”

“Going to Brazil the first time helped me develop better self-esteem and become even more independent. In Los Angeles I live alone, I have my own apartment. I think living abroad, helped a lot with that. And being more comfortable in my [wheel]chair.”

“My reality was challenged, and I’m definitely a better person, more independent, more confident. I’ve matured a lot more. I achieved a lot more confidence about graduate school.”

“[I knew] I could do anything if I put my mind into it [after the challenges in Thailand]. Subsequently, I signed up for five courses [upon returning home], which was rather insane. I managed to get a fairly respectful GPA.”

“If I get this job coming up, it will be a completely different environment. I’ve been there, done that, in a way.”

“To go abroad, be away for so long without having my back-up system with me, it allowed me to realize that I can certainly do more things than I had thought...For career purposes, it gave me a tremendous boost. If I’m more confident to employers or whatever endeavor I may be doing, then it’s always a plus.”

“A lot of times I wouldn’t take a class at my school because it was in a building that was inaccessible. I just wouldn’t take it. I’d say, I can’t take that class, it’s fine, I’ll take another one. But I think that after being in Spain and seeing that I could accomplish things, when I came home, if I really wanted to take that class, I was going to do anything I could to be able to do that.”

This confidence also translated into interactions with family and friends. Five alumni reported family member and friends viewed them as more independent upon return. Others reported no change in relationships with their families, saying they had always encouraged independence, or their families were not involved in their lives:

“I surprised everyone, and it kind of gave me my independence back...For my family, they actually gained confidence back in me – that I can be self-sufficient. I think it made a reality of the future possible in my perspective and also their perspective for me. They became less pessimistic.”

“I had a hard time re-assimilating with the people who were used to helping me, my friends and family. I came back and I was very cold to them, I was so used to doing it myself.”

“They knew I was scared. They were scared. I had never been away from home that long. I had never been farther north than Tennessee...They were proud of me; they were more confident when it rose in me that I can go out in the real world and survive on my own.”

“My friends are really amazed at how much I’ve wanted to venture out. I don’t want to stay at home anymore. I just want to go out even though I’ve never been to a certain place. I went half way around the world, now I know I can go anywhere...After I came back, people were more respectful towards me and they didn’t try to bring me down. It encouraged me more to reach my goals.”

“From the family, none of them speak Spanish. They thought it was a novel experience, but it’s totally out of their experience. None of my people attended college, so that’s not their world. They all marvel because I have partial vision and I went away. They don’t travel in America, let alone abroad.”

Four alumni with disabilities also mentioned becoming confident in their ability to travel abroad, and described how their fears were dispelled about participating in an international exchange:

“I was always scared before I had left. Even my study abroad counselor advised me not to do Spain because there are a lot of steps around...Before I had gone, I thought it was so out of reach. When I came back, and I got through it, I was successful and had a good time, it’s just a big boost. It makes me think ‘I can do this, I can do it again!’”

“For me the most important thing, I was really happy and proud that I managed to do this. I had actually been diagnosed in 1997 before I went over, and I didn’t even understand my illness then. Everyone told me that I wouldn’t be able to make it, I couldn’t survive, I’d get sick. And I did it. And I had a wonderful time doing it, I might add. Just because you’re disabled doesn’t mean you can’t see the world. It may be hard and it may be a little more complicated, depending on your type of disability, but it doesn’t mean you have to give up your dream.”

“I had never been away from home aside from going to college two hours away...It was hard that first night. I woke up the next morning and said, ‘I’m going to get through this.’ And I absolutely loved it. After the first night, I was fine....I was really scared and concerned about how to maneuver around the airport...But once I got back from this trip and went through the motions a couple of times, I realized that I can do it and there really is nothing to be scared of anymore.”

“I knew it was going to be hard physically, but I was surprised about the emotional challenges of it. It was a total growing process. It was from the initial ‘What am I doing here, this is so hard’ to ‘If I may, I do not want to go home. I love it, this is my home.’...[When I returned home] I worked for a program for people who were going to study abroad. I was an orientation leader and I think that was a nice catharsis for me...that was a good thing for me to reflect on my accomplishments and knowing that I had mastered it.”

Changed Perceptions on Advocacy and Identity

Since many students with disabilities of current college-age attended school in the era of the Americans with Disabilities Act and other disability legislation, they may take access for granted and may not have developed the self-advocacy skills required of the generation previous to them. This often changes when students go abroad. Four alumni with disabilities used the challenges that they encountered in other countries, and in some cases, the better services and access that they found abroad, to recognize their rights as people with disabilities:

“It really changed my attitude. It’s a feeling of pride...I developed certain expectations because I wasn’t going to accept the fact that there was no elevator in this building. That [lack of access] is not OK anymore. I knew that I deserved [access] and so that’s why I got into law, because I know that there are certain things that I deserve to have and everyone does, and it really took being abroad and seeing the opposite [to realize this].”

“I was angry about [transportation access] when I came home [to Philadelphia]. Because when you’re abroad people say, ‘You’re American, America has everything....’ We’re a powerful country, which we supposedly are, but we’re not using those resources for people with disabilities, because I would like to be able to catch a taxi in my wheelchair. I can’t catch most trains and buses. In Australia, I can use most things like that. Not here.”

“I realized that I may run into some professors [in the U.S.] who will penalize me because I am too sick to go to a class that day, but I will always run into that and I can’t let it bother me. I realize that there is nothing wrong with me asking for help or accommodations, I deserve it. A key difference was that in Spain, the professors trusted you. There was no second-guessing. There was just acceptance. Here, the professors are more concerned about having equality among students, and they see you asking for accommodations as asking for a special favor that they choose to grant...Being in Spain I felt validated.”

“When I was in Australia, I changed in the way that I wouldn’t let people tell me I couldn’t go with them because I had a guide dog...When I was in Australia, I remember I had difficulty with the Disabilities Office there and how they wouldn’t help me and get me a reader. I was very persistent because I was a straight-A student, I didn’t want to fail and I didn’t want to get a B. When I got back [to the United States], the disability office here knew what we needed as people with disabilities, so I have put that devotion and my persistence into other things.”

For some, the change to a different environment abroad highlighted the impact of environmental and cultural conditions on their experience with a disability:

“The taxis were more accessible in Spain. You can literally call them up at your whim and get a taxi with a foldout ramp. It wasn’t mechanical, it’s very simple...It made me feel like any other student. Late night, early in the morning, I could get where I wanted to go.”

“The lifestyle was much more calm, the focus was on enjoying life, it wasn’t on being a workaholic. I have a workaholic tendency, and Spain really slowed down my pace in a really good way. I was much healthier and happier there. I was much less sick, I fit in very well over there...The professors were

so accommodating in giving me tests, I really clicked over in Spain. The education itself and studying was harder, but because my accommodations made it easier for me to take tests, it was actually easier.”

“They have pedestrian signals [in Australia] and we don’t have that in Chicago, so that was another thing I had to get used to... The people are much more helpful and very nice, and so I had to get used to the culture in Chicago again, people are not as open and not as helpful.”

Four students also noted the experience created broader worldviews and gave them a different perspective on their identities as Americans. Four others mentioned how it changed their life perspectives, becoming a “defining point” in their lives or confirming their desire to lead lives that incorporated the international realm.

Increasing Participation

Unfortunately, not enough students with disabilities are taking advantage of these life-changing international opportunities. As study abroad participants in general increase each year and have more than doubled in the last decade (Institute of International Education, 2004), the percentage of students with disabilities (3%), while growing, is still unrepresentative of the percentage of students with disabilities on most campuses (Mobility International USA, Fall 2005). More people in the disability community, who are convinced of the benefits of this type of experience, can help to change the tide by encouraging students with disabilities to seek out these opportunities.

Mobility International USA has promoted international exchange programs since 1981. Co-founder and CEO, Susan Sygall, a wheelchair user who studied for a year in Australia under a Rotary scholarship, decided more people with disabilities should have the opportunity to experience international exchange. Since then, MIUSA has coordinated its own international short-term programs, and in 1995, with funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State, established the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE). NCDE provides assistance and support to people with disabilities about exchange programs offered by other organizations, such as Rotary International and Council on International Educational Exchange. At the same time, NCDE staff began to educate international exchange organizations and study abroad offices, most of which had little or no experience with people with disabilities, about how to arrange accommodations and services overseas to include individuals with disabilities on their programs. Today, NCDE continues to offer free technical assistance and information and referral services. For insight from other exchange participants with disabilities on a variety of professional, volunteer or study programs, see MIUSA’s *Survival Strategies for Going Abroad: A Guide for People with Disabilities* book, which provides reflections and advice, visit www.miusa.org/publications, or contact MIUSA at 541-343-1284 (voice/tty), clearinghouse@miusa.org to learn more.

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