

Studying Overseas Not a Foreign Concept for Students With Disabilities, Thanks to Pitt's Study Abroad Office

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By Leigh Ann Wojciechowski

Can a student in a wheelchair traverse the centuries-old streets and buildings of Europe? Can a student with a chronic illness obtain the prescription medication she needs in Asia? Will a student with a psychological disorder have access to a reliable counselor in South America?

Those are important questions for students with disabilities who are considering studying overseas. They are also important considerations for Carol Larson, assistant director of Pitt's Study Abroad Office, and her staff, whose goal is to make the study-abroad experiences of students with disabilities as rewarding as those of their nondisabled peers.

Since joining the Study Abroad Office six years ago, Larson has promoted foreign study among groups of students who typically have been less likely to do academic work outside the United States: men (of the 174,629 U.S. college students who studied in foreign countries during the 2002-03 academic year, the most recent year for which such statistics are available, only 35.3 percent were male, according to the Institute of International Education); African Americans (just 3.4 percent of the U.S. college students studying abroad in 2002-03 were Black, the institute reported); students majoring in engineering and the sciences; and students with disabilities—physical ones as well as so-called “hidden” disabilities such as learning and eating disorders.

Larson and Study Abroad Office Adviser Jeff Whitehead will travel to London in October and Barcelona in early spring to videotape U.S. students with disabilities who are studying in those cities. The footage will be edited to produce a 30-minute DVD for use by study-abroad professionals at colleges and universities across the country in promoting foreign study among students with disabilities. The project is supported by a



Pitt senior Tara Beech—pictured here in Colonia, Uruguay, overlooking Rio de la Plata, which separates Argentina from Uruguay to the south—chose a foreign study program in South America that best met her needs as a student with bipolar disorder.

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Larson and Lynnett Van Slyke, director of Disability Resources and Services (DRS) at Pitt, say that it's best to tell students with disabilities upfront about challenges they can expect to face when traveling and studying in foreign countries, including the fact that handicapped-accessible facilities may be less common abroad than in the United States.

“Is a student with a disability going to be able to go on every program or travel every street in London?” Larson asked rhetorically. “No. But is that a deterrent to the program? No. If we're honest and upfront about the positives—‘Here's what you will be able to do’—to some students, that's enough. Students with disabilities can still have rewarding international experiences. It just requires a bit of extra planning.”

Study Abroad staff, with help from DRS, leave nothing to chance: They make sure that accommodations and classrooms will be accessible to students with physical disabilities, that students taking prescription drugs will be able to get refills or adjustments to their medication regimens, and that students with learning disabilities will receive the necessary accommodations. Students with physical disabilities are trained to identify accessible transportation and cautioned that they may need to ask strangers for help in boarding vehicles—and that they can't count on those strangers understanding English.

But all of the preparation time is well spent, said Tara Beech, a 25-year-old Pitt student with bipolar disorder from Jeannette, Pa. Beech is currently studying in Buenos Aires. “I worked very hard with Leslie Smedley, my study-abroad advisor; Noreen Mazzocca, my disability counselor; and on my own in order to create a [study-abroad] experience free from problems and challenges,” Beech said.

A political science major who also is working toward a certificate in Latin American Studies, Beech began by carefully selecting, through the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS), a program that best accommodated her needs. “I chose a structured program, which included an onsite resident director, a student advisory center that provided assistance in English, and accommodations with Argentine families,” Beech explained. Before leaving for Argentina, she compiled a list of questions and doubts regarding medications, therapy, funding, academic procedures, and cultural differences, and then discussed those concerns with the staff of Pitt's Study Abroad Office, the AIFS admissions department, and her doctors.

Despite her careful planning, Beech ran into unexpected problems in Buenos Aires, largely having to do with the language barrier. “The key is to reduce these occurrences to solely uncontrollable factors,” she remarked, adding that she has no regrets about her experiences in Argentina. “I have increased my Spanish language skills by a tremendous amount,” she said. “I have met many people from Buenos Aires, other parts of Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil. It is an enlightening experience to speak with each one of them, and I have enriched my own life by learning so much about their cultures, customs, and traditions.”

Trent Balius, a 22-year-old senior at Pitt-Greensburg majoring in applied mathematics, shares Beech's regard for study abroad. Balius, who is originally from Thurmont, Md., and suffers from severe dyslexia, spent the 2004-05 academic year in Grenada, Spain, attending classes at the city's Centro de Lenguas Modernas.

His Pitt study-abroad adviser, Kathleen Murray, coordinator of international studies and an academic adviser at Pitt's Greensburg campus, arranged for Balius to get extra time in taking exams. "I felt that the faculty and staff [of Centro de Lenguas Modernas] were very willing to help me during my study-abroad experience," Balius said. "My experience has strengthened my independence and allowed me to evaluate my strengths and weaknesses. I have become competent in communicating in Spanish and feel deeply attached to Granada, Andalusia, and, for that matter, all of España."

Testimonials from students like Beech and Balius are highly gratifying for Larson. "When I leave Pitt," she said, "I want my legacy to be that we have an incredibly diverse population going abroad."