

Inclusion of Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in International Educational Exchange Programs at the Postsecondary Level

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Inclusion of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing in international exchange furthers access to important educational opportunities; promotes diversity, cross-cultural learning and cross-disability perspectives; and increases educational equity for people with disabilities. The following will offer an understanding of the issues, provide valuable resources and discuss how people who are Deaf or hard of hearing can become involved in a variety of international educational experiences.

Mobility International USA (MIUSA) is a non-profit, US-based organization established in 1981 with the mission of empowering people with disabilities around the world through international involvement, promoting cross-cultural understanding, providing leadership, and disability rights as part of diversity training. MIUSA's involvement internationally includes coordinating exchange programs, surveying international development organizations for inclusive practices and providing free resources through the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE). The NCDE, managed by MIUSA and sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State since 1995, educates people with disabilities, resource centers' staff and higher education administrators about international educational opportunities in order to increase the participation of people with disabilities in international programs. NCDE also facilitates partnerships between people with disabilities, disability-related organizations, international exchange organizations and higher education institutions.

An example of a successful partnership project at the postsecondary level is Access Abroad (which was highlighted during the conference session by Wendy Harbour from Disability Services Office at the University of Minnesota). The University of Minnesota's disability office collaborated with its education abroad office to develop models, tools and other resources to enhance study abroad for students with disabilities at the University of Minnesota and Access Abroad's partner, affiliate and overseas higher education institutions. This three-year project, funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, has resulted in a multimedia online tutorial that can be used by disability service providers, overseas coordinators and international exchange professionals when recruiting, advising and arranging for the successful participation of students with disabilities in study abroad programs. It also includes useful information for students with disabilities interested in or already planning a study abroad experience.

It is important in this ever-changing global society to focus on creating strategies for the successful inclusion of postsecondary students who are Deaf or hard of hearing in international exchange programs. International educational experiences provide a deepened knowledge of and interest in diversity, cross-cultural learning and the cross-disability perspective for all students, including students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Students with disabilities must have the opportunity to experience the benefits of interna-

tional programs, as do their non-disabled peers. As our world turns to a globalized economy and the job market becomes increasingly competitive, international educational opportunities, such as volunteering, interning, studying, working, living with a homestay, and teaching or researching abroad provide life-long skills and enhanced employability. Although attitudinal barriers do exist all over the world, it is vital to individual development that people with disabilities have the right to choose to have an international experience.

As students who are Deaf or hard of hearing become increasingly interested in international educational programs, it is the resource center staff and the college and university administrators and faculty who are in key positions to give these students the information and encouragement that they need to successfully pursue international educational opportunities. NCDE publishes (in print, audiovisual, alternative formats or online) several books, captioned videos and tip sheets on rights, options and creative solutions for students with disabilities regarding full participation in international educational programs. By reviewing and sharing these resources, administrators, faculty and staff can assist in preparing students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to make contributions and reap the benefits of international educational opportunities.

If a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing is pursuing a career in which international experience is vital, there are some options to consider for funding. If a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits and has the opportunity to participate in an international exchange program, he or she should apply to have his or her benefits continue while abroad. There is a little-known SSI provision that allows for the continuation of benefits while participating in a U.S.-sponsored, overseas, accredited program that is not available in the United States and will further one's employment options.

This is an exception to the more well-known "SSI 30-day rule" that does not allow for the continuation of SSI benefits while outside the United States for more than 30 days. The "30-day rule" was amended through legislation introduced by Congressman Peter Stark of California in 1994 as part of the Social Security Independence and Pro-

gram Improvements Act and became effective January 1, 1995. Even though there are set requirements to qualify, this provision makes it possible for people with disabilities, who financially need to continue their SSI benefits, to gain the international experience they need to increase their employability. Another option available to SSI beneficiaries to proactively plan for international exchange is through the SSI work incentives program. An individual with a disability receiving SSI benefits can apply for a PASS (Plan for Achieving Self-Support). If an international experience is approved by the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor as necessary to meet an individual's career goal, income can be set aside to be used to cover some of the expenses related to participating in the overseas program.

Other questions that need to be answered regarding Deaf and hard of hearing students are how accommodations will be arranged abroad. Sign language varies from country to country, and not all countries have a uniform national sign language. Countries where the people's spoken language is English may have sign languages that are very different from American Sign Language or have accents that are difficult to lip-read. Some students have successfully learned another country's sign language or practiced lip-reading the spoken language by finding international individuals in the United States that use the foreign language. Other students have found it useful to arrive a month early in the host country and locate sign language classes or Deaf clubs where they could learn the language before the exchange program begins. NCDE has contacts with Deaf organizations overseas that may be of assistance in locating sign interpreters abroad. Some universities overseas may have sign interpreter programs and have interpreting services in the native sign language available to their students. It is important to find out the availability and certification of interpreters that may be found overseas.

Other study abroad options may be "island" programs where participants take classes with other U.S. students in the English language while studying the host culture's history, language, and other subjects. Not all programs are classroom-based; there are also internship, independent research, homestay and volunteer options that can provide a different type of

international exchange experience and could be conducted with the Deaf or hard of hearing community in the host country.

To learn about these different program options and the experiences and strategies of past exchange participants who are Deaf or hard of hearing, contact NCDE to inquire about our publications, peer to peer network and our several stories written by Deaf and hard of hearing individuals published in our free *A World Awaits You* journal and on our website.

MIUSA/NCDE is deeply committed to increasing diversity through the inclusion of people with disabilities in international programs. Resource centers' staff, university administrators, and fac-

ulty have the chance to empower post secondary students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, through providing information and encouragement, and creating opportunities of which these students can take advantage to experience the cultural diversity that can lead to a desire to explore the world!

For more information on the services and resources mentioned above, please contact:

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