

Inclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students and Sign Language Interpreters in International Educational Exchange Programs

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Abstract

Mobility International USA's (MIUSA) interactive session focused on creating strategies for increased participation of deaf and hard of hearing students in the wide range of international exchange programs. Presenters described MIUSA's exchange programs as well as its National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange's (NCDE) information and referral services for university education abroad programs. Dialogue included answers to basic exchange questions, creative strategies for providing sign language interpreters abroad, and perspectives on legal and funding issues.

MIUSA and NCDE are deeply committed to increasing diversity through the inclusion of people with disabilities in international educational exchange programs. The resource center staff, university administrators, faculty, ASL interpreters, and service providers can empower students who are deaf and hard of hearing at the postsecondary level by providing information, encouragement, and unique opportunities for them to explore the world.

Organizational Overview of MIUSA

The mission of Mobility International USA (MIUSA) is to empower people with disabilities around the world through international exchange programs, promoting cross-cultural understanding, leadership development, and disability rights training. It also provides consultation, resources, and technical training to promote full participation of people with disabilities in these programs.

Located in Eugene, Oregon, MIUSA is a national organization. It has provided technical assistance in consultation with governmental and non-governmental agencies working towards more inclusive policies regarding people with disabilities. It facilitates national and interna-

tional partnerships between people with disabilities and those working in international exchange organizations.

MIUSA Exchange Programs

For 21 years, MIUSA has been actively committed to including deaf and hard of hearing people in their exchange programs, and there have been many changes in the history of the organization. When it started, participants primarily had physical disabilities. At the time, the most urgent concerns focused on physical access. As MIUSA grew, access issues for deaf and hard of hearing people came to the forefront.

One of MIUSA's favorite sayings is: "Everybody does everything." In other words, how does any MIUSA group going to an inaccessible place (e.g. having physical barriers or barriers to communication) think of ways around the barriers? When a MIUSA group does an activity, and there are stairs prohibiting wheelchair access, then no one in the group does the activity. The group must find a way through the barriers using creative strategies and teamwork to get everyone inside safely. The same is true if there is no communication access for a deaf individual. The question becomes: how does the group make this work for *everybody*? MIUSA sends interpreters if there are deaf participants in a group. For more information about current exchange programs and MIUSA's philosophy, please see their Web site at www.miusa.org.

MIUSA's exchange programs last from three to five weeks. Participants do not usually receive college credit, although it is possible to do so. Participants live with host families, and the programs usually have a theme (e.g. diversity awareness, leadership development, or the arts).

National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE)

MIUSA has a variety of resources available to individuals and organizations. NCDE can help everyone from interpreters to disabled students from another country to disability services providers with questions about reasonable accommodations. NCDE is sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State. NCDE also assists colleges and universities in making their exchange programs more accessible to students with disabilities. These information and referral services are free.

Publications are also available through NCDE. The *A World Awaits You* journal is free and features stories by

and about deaf and hard of hearing participants (and people with other types of disabilities) who have gone on exchanges. It also contains resources and practical tips related to successful participation in international exchange. Another resource is *Rights and Responsibilities*, a free guide to the ADA as it relates to international exchange. Yet another resource is a manual called *Building Bridges*, which is especially helpful for disability service providers. Topics include information about insurance, interpreters, low cost accommodations, and more.

Building Bridges is an excellent general reference manual for university study abroad offices as well. It answers the questions study abroad coordinators ask most frequently, such as the following: How can universities make their study abroad programs inclusive? If students are vocational rehabilitation (VR) consumers, how can they work with their VR counselors to include study abroad as part of their vocational plan? This book costs \$20.00.

Another type of resource available through NCDE is its Peer-to-Peer Network. People with different types of disabilities who have already been on exchange programs are listed in NCDE's extensive resource database as peers. Students can then request a contact for a peer as a resource. For example, if a deaf person plans to go to Venezuela, s/he could request a contact to learn more about traveling in that country as a deaf person.

The NCDE also has a lot of free information sheets available upon request or at <http://www.miusa.org>. NCDE's e-mail address is clearinghouse@miusa.org.

MIUSA Exchanges and NCDE Working Together

Many college students with disabilities try a MIUSA exchange before going on an exchange through university study abroad programs. With MIUSA, students are able to participate in programs that are aware of access issues. They have a supportive group of peers for their first experience abroad. A student who has never been overseas may benefit from experimenting with MIUSA first. For deaf students, this experience can also give them some understanding about how interpreters work during an exchange. Some fears may be eased, because they will know how to travel in a foreign country, live in someone else's home, etc. MIUSA also has lists of other national and international exchange programs that provide interpreters for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Wendy Harbour shared how a student at the University of Minnesota went on MIUSA's Costa Rica program, and then signed up for the university's program in France. At this time, he is getting ready for a third exchange. Even if students' parents are very nervous about their children going abroad, knowing that it is a MIUSA exchange is often reassuring.

If a student wants to go on a university study abroad program, the Clearinghouse can refer him or her to a wide variety of academic and non-academic programs. Any college staff member or student can get in-

formation from NCDE. Even if it is an exchange through a university in another country, the resources are available from NCDE. College and university study abroad offices also make use of NCDE services, as they strive to make their programs accessible for students with disabilities. The number of deaf and hard of hearing students studying abroad is increasing as more students learn about the opportunities available to them. Programs such as NCDE have certainly contributed to this positive trend.

Providing Accommodations on Exchange Programs

This section of the paper contains questions and answers by participants in the PEPNET session.

Q: Does the university pay for the interpreter? Did the University of Minnesota pay for sign interpreters for a deaf student to go abroad?

WH: At the time I worked for the University of Minnesota, the campus decided to go ahead and fund accommodations for every trip that deaf or hard of hearing students wanted to take – unless it was not affiliated with their academic career in any way. One student decided to go to East Germany on her own, and the University would not pay for that. Although she did an independent paper for a class, the University did not sponsor the trip, so an interpreter was not sent. There were other situations where we did send an interpreter, because it was clearly related to that student's degree. One must make a judgment call about this. I think the question to ask is: "Is this affiliated in any way with our university?" If so, in my personal opinion, I think the postsecondary institution is responsible. Something else to consider is whether or not the trip will be made in conjunction with another organization that will pay. For example, MIUSA provides sign language interpreters on their own programs. Overall, though, deciding when to fund interpreters is a sticky issue.

Q: What is involved in sending interpreters abroad?

MS: I am going to talk about interpreters on exchange programs in two ways – in terms of MIUSA's programs and then in terms of university programs.

MIUSA's programs provide interpreters. There are always at least two interpreters for each outbound program. The exchange coordinator has to make some decisions about who to select. Interpreting for these types of exchange programs is very different from an academic setting. It is essentially an all-day, seven-day-a-week job. The entire exchange group is moving constantly, because the group is doing activities all the time. Interpreters need to understand that, and they need to understand that the dress code is going to be different (among other things). In a normal environment in the United States, an interpreter might not be assisting other students. While interpreters are overseas, they might be helping push a wheelchair up a steep hill, because everyone helps

out. Interpreters need to be aware of that, because there are different roles and responsibilities on an exchange program (compared to work in the United States).

Also, the exchange participants themselves learn to communicate with someone from a different culture and community while abroad. In the past, some deaf participants were with deaf host families in that country. In other countries, MIUSA has not been able to do that, because in other countries a lot of families who have people with disabilities in them are not financially able to host a visitor for several weeks. MIUSA has avoided that by giving host families some meal stipends, so the exchange can happen. This is really important.

It is not a requirement on MIUSA's programs (or on many other study abroad programs) to know the language of the country you are going to visit. However, on the MIUSA Mexico exchange, for example, there were specific times set aside for language development. The MIUSA group from the United States found local deaf people who came in and taught Mexican Sign Language, and anyone who wanted to do that as their language component could participate – whether hearing or deaf. This facilitates better intra-group communication, too. On each of the MIUSA exchanges for which I have interpreted, the involvement of the interpreters has been different, and it is always a very different experience from interpreting in the U.S.

WH: I went to Venezuela on a site visit for work. I am pretty confident and independent. I know how to work with interpreters. Then we get to Venezuela, and I suddenly wanted my interpreter there with me all the time. I would ask if the interpreter could go with me for something I would do at home with no problem, such as going to the store. The point is that there might have to be some preparation with students and the interpreters before they go. The interpreter cannot always – at every second – be with the students. They cannot make it easy for the students. Part of the fun is to experience an unfamiliar culture. Likewise, I think the interpreters have to be firm about saying, “No, I need a break,” “No, I am not going to do that,” or “Yes, I will go with you, but *you* have to communicate.” There was a lot of negotiation occurring about what we would do or how we would work out a situation. It can be extremely fun but challenging.

Q: Do organizations have coverage, such as health insurance, or emergency provisions?

MS: MIUSA does have insurance and contingency plans. I was on one exchange in which, only a couple of days into the exchange, someone needed to come home because of some health issues. Some people have particular systemic disabilities or conditions, and some have physical disabilities and use catheters; students have ready access to sanitary catheters in the United States, but it may become a huge issue in other countries. What is not an issue at home can be a huge issue if you are in a different country.

Many other study abroad programs either require students to get insurance before traveling abroad, or they provide group insurance or individual options through the university or exchange organization. It is important to inquire about this, especially since Medicaid and Medicare often do not transfer overseas.

Q: *Before a group goes on an exchange, do organizations generally provide orientation for things such as health and safety issues?*

MS: MIUSA does a pre-trip orientation on everything from safety issues and transportation to a preview of what is going to happen. One of the things they do is get the whole group together for at least a day. It might be in a hotel in the departure city where the orientation takes place before the flight. Also, all the participants learn basic or emergency signs if there is a deaf person in the group so they can communicate. Orientation sessions include the rules and guidelines for the participants in the program. They also talk about differences in the host culture. Lots of those issues are covered in the orientation before leaving.

Most exchange programs will provide an orientation handbook or session on the first day they arrive in the country. It is important to encourage students to read these materials and participate in these sessions – if they are available before they go, that is. If students are going on a university study abroad program, they can also contact NCDE for other useful information when pre-planning.

Q: *How can one address the upper level administration at a university who will not pay to send an interpreter on such a trip, since they are afraid of setting a precedent?*

WH: While Mobility International USA would not provide interpreters for a university program, they would provide free one-on-one consulting to help brainstorm creative options, or they would give referrals to help find interpreters in that country or negotiate through the law. In my personal opinion, especially given that your university counsel said no, you might be vulnerable for an OCR complaint. I believe study abroad is clearly a program under the university – any other student can go. If you are not making it accessible, you are vulnerable. Know that it is expensive, and I know that the institution would be setting a precedent, causing other students to want to go, too. At the same time, I encourage you to talk about the benefits and focus on the fact that this is a program available to every other student. It is tantamount to saying they will not provide interpreters for off-campus internships. This is one that just happens to be very far away.

I was a disability services director for seven years, so I have looked at it from the budgetary side. One basic issue is this: Is the person going to England where they speak English, or Spain where they speak Spanish (and every other student who is going to that program has a language requirement before they can go)? That supports the decision; if the deaf student wants to go, it

must be determined whether or not they have access to Spanish language classes on campus. Once they get there, if part of the responsibility and expectation is that students are taking classes in Spanish in Spain, is it appropriate to send an interpreter from the United States who knows Spanish and is giving the language in ASL? Or, do we have to give them access to Spanish Sign Language? That is one issue.

The issue of legal obligations is another, and there is a lot of disagreement here. It is unclear whether the ADA applies overseas or not. There are employment situations where it does apply overseas. Section 504 is very clear that all programs have to be accessible. Some campuses wonder if their institution has a campus overseas somewhere. Harvard, for example, has one overseas. That is a program access issue. Some universities are drawing the line with their international exchange programs, declaring that, for instance, they contract with another university in England and cannot force that university to become accessible. Here in the United States, we say our program is accessible and that students can apply and go, but I cannot promise you that they will provide interpreters in England.

Universities are splitting hairs over these issues, and it depends upon funding. If we send an interpreter, it will be expensive. What is the mission of the university? If part of the mission is cultural diversity, then there is really the encouragement for students to participate in a study abroad program. We are not supporting our mission if we do not allow students with disabilities to go. Try to talk to institutions in ways that tie into these “hot button” issues. Legally, there are some rulings that support my comments, and some that do not. But, as a university, I believe it is the right thing to do. You need to find those “hot buttons” that the administration will buy into to sell it to them.

The other thing you might want to do is make a contact list (with the help of NCDE) of other universities that have done exchanges. Contact universities that have sponsored an exchange, and even contact a couple of them that did not and discover what happened as a result of that response. Provide that information to the administration.

Audience member: In my opinion, at a liberal arts university, almost everything is optional, so it should not factor into the considerations. You have optional extracurricular activities and student organizations. Study abroad programs are one more optional thing. It is an attitude really, and money becomes a non-issue when you overcome that. I have worked with the administration at my university. For a while, they would ask what the cost is and how much each student costs in our program. I told them I would not do that. So, instead, I submitted GPAs of the students I served and documented their retention rate as compared to the university at large. I would go to the President and the Provost to ask if these students are the ones they did not want at the

university. Most of the students had 3.5 GPA or above. This was another angle I used to discuss the issue, instead of focusing on the cost. The point to make might also include the value of having cultural diversity experiences. I would bring it back to the mission of the university and turn it around on them. Take the “deafness” out of it and ask if this is not the kind of student they want at their university. Turning the angle, as opposed to just saying it’s the “right” thing to do, may work.

WH: If you need a pep talk, it is worth it to contact MIUSA’s Clearinghouse and ask questions – not only for the deaf students but also for the students with other disabilities. The National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange can help.

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