Yes, Youth with Disabilities Can Travel to Study Abroad

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National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

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Objectives

- PURPOSE—Discuss why international exchange is important for youth with disabilities and how it meets youth development standards
- NUTS AND BOLTS—Answer frequently asked questions about international exchange programs
- IMPLEMENTATION—Provide suggestions for student plans and follow-up actions to address.
What is International Exchange?

- Traveling abroad with a purpose to volunteer, study, or do a cultural tour.
- Examples include: visiting historical sites in Germany, living with a host family in Japan, studying at a school in Brazil.
Why go abroad?

• An opportunity to gain and practice new skills such as time management, interpersonal communication, self advocacy, and problem-solving

• International experiences serve to dispel preconceived notions people in decision making positions such as college admissions, employers, and other people in control of resources may have about an individual and their disability
Why go abroad? (cont.)

• People with disabilities may have special skills such as the ability to communicate non-verbally that go unrecognized in day to day living at home.

• Everyone who travels abroad feels out of place so they will not be the only one.

• People who have gone abroad gain new self confidence and an understanding of their true capabilities.
Transferable Skills

- Time Management
- Meeting deadlines
- Budgeting
- Asking for accommodations
- Creative problem solving
- Record keeping
- Interpersonal communication
- Cross cultural understanding
- Building support networks
- Flexibility
- Foreign language skills
- Independent thinking
International Experience & Successful Transition

• Allows participants to experience and use the skills necessary when integrating into a new community such as making connections (e.g. friends, local services), finding housing, setting daily routines

• Helps participants identify new interests, try activities outside of their normal comfort zone, and can solidify commitments to current paths
Results released in 2005 showed impressive gains for high school exchange students in foreign language skills, intercultural competence, knowledge of other countries, and comfort in interacting with people from other cultures.

Hammer Consulting and AFS Intercultural Exchange Programs survey of 2100 high school students (1500 traveled abroad, 600 stayed at home)
“My parents said I was more open to things after my exchange. It gave me an understanding of other cultures and how things work in different countries.”

Paula Geiselman, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, went overseas on a Social Studies European trip with her school, currently working as a social worker.
FAR FROM HOME

Overseas, students are exposed to settings that have their own unique cultural idiosyncrasies, including the need to use one’s personal resources more than in one’s home country where it is easier to retreat to the comforts of family and friends for social and emotional support.

(Kauffmann et al. 1992)
LEAVING HOME

“Perhaps the most dramatic changes following high school occur for youth whose plans entail leaving home… These changes can require youth quickly to ‘step up’ to increased expectations for maturity and independence and, for college students, academic performance.”

Mary Wagner IN After High School: A First Look at Post School Experiences of Youth with Disabilities April 2005: the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2
“It helped me with my independence – being in another country realizing mom and dad weren’t there and I actually can get around and do things on my own…. When I got home and ran into things that were a bit of a challenge, I could get through new things that cropped up.”

Robin Sutherby, cerebral palsy and learning disability, went on a short trip to Mexico with her Spanish class.
Exchange studies have long reported:

• an increase in general self-confidence
• a clearer self-concept
• vocational self-crystallization.

Gaining Independence

“I was always afraid of going out, but [on my exchange] I gained a lot more independence as far as self-confidence overall…now I’m very interested in working with Finnish culture and Finnish companies that do business in America.”

Eugene Arinosky, visually impaired, did a six week homestay program in Finland with AFS
Expanding Horizons

“It made me stronger learning how to control emotions, to become more independent, to stick up for myself. Looking back at it, if I didn’t have that experience then I may not be able to expand my horizons – to go to a school in the east, to be able to live away from parents.”

Rachel Berkston, hearing impaired, went to Israel on a summer arts program
Nuts and Bolts

- Choosing a Program
- Foreign Language
- Costs
- Accommodations and Services
Choosing a Program

- A family could participate together
- Go with a group (tourist, school, volunteer, leadership)
- Go as an individual on a work, study, intern, or volunteer program
Finding a Program

Search International Exchange Program Databases

- www.miusa.org/exchangeprograms
  (use keywords “high school” and “youth”)
- www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com
- www.csiet.org
  (see the “Advisory List” publication)

Ask your local teachers, counselors and community organizations for upcoming opportunities
Questions to ask potential programs

• How long has the program existed?
• Where is the organization’s home base?
• What do program fees cover?
• What about cancellation policies?
• How are host families selected?
• What are the language requirements?
• How are participants selected?
• Are there any deposits? Are they refundable?
• What arrangements are made for coping with illness/accidents/ or needing to go home early?
Disability-Related Questions

• You should not be required to answer any questions related to your disability prior to your acceptance.

• After you have been accepted it is appropriate for the program to begin asking what kinds of accommodations needed to participate fully.

• They cannot create special rules or limit your participation on the basis of your disability.
Foreign Languages

• Most high school programs do not require foreign language skills.
• Teachers, exchange leaders or other adult chaperones go with the students abroad and often facilitate the language barrier.
• Students with all types of disabilities have enjoyed trying to use the local language with people they meet or host families.
“It took long for me to learn my language because I do have a learning disability but within seven months I learned it. I could understand everything and could speak so everyone could understand me even though it wasn’t perfect. What I liked to do was watch movies in German with subtitles in English...and going to school everyday, I had to put myself out there.”

Rebekah Elsen, learning and physical disability, studied abroad in Germany for a year
Program & Travel Costs

• Many are low cost programs.
• Most involve fundraising on the student’s part (e.g. $500 to $2000)
• Some have scholarships like Rotary Int’l
• Talk with your exchange program or school advisor about financial support
• Download a resource list of funding, scholarship and disability-specific fellowships (www.miusa.org/ncde/financialaid)
Accommodations & Services

• So what happens as far as needing a sign interpreter or accessible transportation overseas?
• Work with the group leader or sponsoring school or organization to find what accommodations are needed abroad. Programs may do what is needed to include your student/child.
• Check if the student is able to qualify for protections by laws in other countries.
• It is not clear that the ADA would apply to these exchange organizations for activities happening overseas.
Implementation

• Equality of opportunity and inclusion in exchange programs is the goal.

• Students with disabilities have historically not participated at the same levels as non-disabled students.

• How can this change?
Student Plan Suggestions

- Become proficient in a second language
- Successfully complete World History classes
- Volunteer with local international organizations like Sister Cities or Rotary International
- Actively participate in a school cultural or international group and language club
- Meet with the guidance counselor and research international exchange options
- Browse exchange websites or participate in online international pen pal or school connection programs like www.iearn.org, www.kidlink.org, www.epals.com
Action Steps

• Participate in International Education Week November 14 – 18, 2005 (exchanges.state.gov/iew) by tapping into international online school connection projects and activities.

• Invite AFS or YFU or other exchange recruiters to present to your students or to consider your school for placing a foreign exchange student with a disability (www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com)
Action Steps

• Begin a model United Nations program in your community for students to participate in or involve students with disabilities in those that exist.

• Gather information on if students are participating in international exchange activities as part of the exit or post-school outcomes surveys to better assess its impact.
Action Steps

• Become a host family for an international student with a disability or lead a group of students abroad.

• Attend inclusive education conferences overseas or teacher / professional exchanges to get a better understanding of situations in other countries and to share your knowledge with others.
Action Steps

• Let us know of IEP or transition plans that have included international activities, and stories about international students with disabilities in your classrooms

• Read and share our *A World Awaits You* magazine Teens Abroad issue and our other online resources with others (www.miusa.org/ncde/away)
National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

- Researches individual information requests for free thanks to sponsorship by U.S. State Dept.
- Provides technical advising on issues related to disability and exchange
- Publishes how-to books full of tips and personal stories of exchange participants with disabilities
- Maintains a peer network
- Provides an online database of disability organizations worldwide and international exchange programs
National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

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Foreign Exchange Students

• Full article published mid-September in the LRP Inclusive Education newsletter (www.lrp.com) addresses legal and practical issues including tips and case studies.

• Schools that accept foreign exchange students must also expect those with disabilities and these students are covered by IDEA, 504 and ADA.

• Feel free to ask questions on this topic or contact our Clearinghouse.