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Reaching and Supporting Students with Disabilities in Study Abroad: An Analysis of Marketing Strategies to Institutional Barriers

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Abstract

As universities develop strategies to simultaneously boost study abroad participation and diversify participants, they are devoting more attention to understanding the unique needs of underrepresented groups. This study explores the institutional barriers and support services for students with disabilities by the 25 American institutions that offer the most robust study abroad opportunities according to the Institute of International Education (IIE). The paper offers a new way of evaluating the support and resources currently targeted at students with disabilities, points out future research needs, and concludes with recommendations for practitioners.

Keywords:

Students with Disabilities; Diversity and Inclusion; Study Abroad

Introduction

In recent years, focusing on diversity and inclusion has become a focal point in the strategic plans of many American universities. Increasing diversity and supporting inclusion is seen as a way to enrich the college experience.

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Diverse student populations bring different perspectives, lived experiences and opportunities for all students to challenge how they view themselves and others (Murry Brux & Fry, 2010). These skills are deemed essential to students' ability to thrive in an increasingly globalized world. While university administrations focus on ways to diversify their campuses, study abroad offices consider how they can simultaneously ensure that participation levels increase and reflects the same diversity. To manage this, study abroad offices are devoting more effort toward understanding which student groups are still underrepresented in study abroad. In addition to collecting feedback on programs, more offices are looking inward at their own practices to re-evaluate the effectiveness of their recruitment strategies, pre-departure and in-country support, and opportunities for post-program reflection and involvement. These strategies have seen some success. According to statistics from the Institute of International Education (IIE), study abroad participation in total and among broad groups on factors such as race/ethnicity, major and ability level has seen significant growth since 2010 (Institute of International Education, n.d).

In response to the necessity of better understanding the needs of underrepresented groups in study abroad in order to more successfully encourage their participation, a growing body of literature has emerged that highlights their experiences, the barriers they face, and their preferences for modes and models of education abroad that can work best for them. These studies have helped to highlight gaps in support, and well as make explicit some of the unique challenges and opportunities for promoting new outcomes of study abroad. In other words, the findings in these studies have illustrated that a study abroad sojourn is not a "one size fits all" experience.

Underrepresentation in study abroad encompasses a seemingly endless list of personal and social identities. Broadly speaking, any student who does not identify as a white, middle to upper class woman without a disability majoring in humanities may hold an underrepresented identity (Murry Brux & Fry, 2010; Institute of International Education, n.d). This consideration warrants that those interested in studying underrepresentation in study abroad consider narrowing down their focus as to avoid overgeneralizations.

While it would be in grave error to suggest that research on any underrepresented group in study abroad is sufficient, limited research exists on how study abroad offices are marketing their support to underrepresented student groups. In the study presented in this paper, I devote particular attention to exploring marketing strategies and resources for students with disabilities. According to IIE, there has been an increase in students with disabilities studying abroad (Institute of International Education, n.d). Participation has increased from 4.1% to 9.0% since 2010 (Institute of International Education, n.d). This increase demonstrates that students with disabilities do have a desire to go abroad and are able to participate successfully.

Guided by this assumption, this study asserts a Human Capabilities approach to study abroad for students with disabilities. According to Engel, Madden and Streitwieser, this approach asserts that education is an essential human right, and thus that opportunities must be made available to all persons to develop their capabilities so that they may live meaningful lives (2019). In relation to study abroad, this study interprets this definition as providing a moral obligation for universities to support students with disabilities to have the opportunity to study abroad.

In the US, while laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) create a mandate that American universities provide resources for students with disabilities to participate as fully as possible in higher education, the guidance on how this affects study abroad activities remain unclear (Holben & Malhotra, 2018). The ADA does not extend past American borders. This creates a conundrum as study abroad is often seen as a university-sponsored activity (Burke et al., 2010). This lack of clarity has blurred the lines of responsibility in ensuring that students with disabilities have the resources and support they need to participate in study abroad (Holben & Malhotra, 2018). Notwithstanding through what organization a student studies abroad or where their host institution is located, they are still a student of an American university and are seeking to earn credit for their experience abroad. Although this is not definitive evidence that all responsibility should be placed on either the student, their home university or the host institution, it seems fair to assume that the home institution should take at least some responsibility for preparing the student for what they may encounter while living abroad (Holben & Malhotra, 2018).

In order to explore the levels of support and resources marketed and offered to students with disabilities when planning to study abroad, this study analyzes the study abroad websites of 25 American universities. Before offering a description of the research design and findings, this paper includes a note on the definition of students with disabilities and the impact of institutional barriers to study abroad. The article concludes with a discussion of interesting findings and recommendations for practitioners and future researchers.

Defining Students with Disabilities

The label “students with disabilities” encompasses a vast range of conditions, abilities, appearances and levels of development. Its interpretation is also influenced by its application. For the purposes of this study, “disability” refers to the ADA definition, which includes “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (Ada.gov, n.d). This definition was chosen because of its national adaptation and its versatility to include conditions that are not commonly discussed in disability discourse. This definition also allows

for the inclusion of those who may meet the requirements of protection, even if they do not identify as having a disability (Holben & Malhotra, 2018).

Barriers to Study Abroad for Students with Disabilities

According to previous studies, there have been several attempts to categorize the barriers faced by students with disabilities who wish to study abroad. Of these, this study will incorporate the categories of barriers provided by Heirweg et al. (2019). The categories they provide in their research are noteworthy in that they reflect challenges perceived by students with disabilities themselves (Heirweg et al., 2019). The six categories described are: financial, technical and organizational, language and doubt about value, social barriers, psychological barriers and practical barriers (Heirweg et al., 2019). While all barriers deserve consideration, this study will mainly focus on practical and organizational and technical barriers. The rationale being that these are factors that the university can control. For the purpose of this study, these two categories will be combined to form a new category of “institutional barriers.” Examples of this type of barrier could include partnerships with other institutions, resources in understanding the host country, staff training, study abroad application process, etc.

Many aspects of study abroad could perpetuate institutional barriers. Not unlike many student groups, financial and academic concerns have a large influence on a student’s decision to study abroad (Heirweg et al., 2019). For students with disabilities, financial concerns may also arise regarding the cost of specialized equipment or support in another country (Heirweg et al., 2019). While some universities are willing to provide financial support or to loan equipment, others leave it to the student to figure those details out for themselves. This ties into a lack of information for students with disabilities who want to study abroad (Heirweg et al., 2019). Students may not feel that their university gives them enough information to develop a comprehensive plan for how they will be perceived by the host culture, supported by the host institution or be able to manage their condition abroad. This may lead to worries over interactions with faculty and staff in the host country, thus creating an additional barrier for students. Generally, faculty and staff serve as the greatest resources for students, however they can also become a hindrance if they are unfamiliar with, unwilling to provide accommodations to or hold negative viewpoints on students with disabilities (Gilson & Dymond, 2012). This could not only have a negative impact on a student’s ability to do well in their classes but may also affect their emotional wellbeing. (Gilson & Dymond, 2012).

Although support has been growing for students with disabilities in study abroad, research on the barriers they face remains limited. It appears that much of the existing literature focuses on examining barriers from the student perspective and relying on recommendations. By contrast, it does not appear

that many studies are in fact being conducted to address what (if anything) universities may actually be doing in response to these findings. To contribute to this gap in the research, the current study seeks to provide an analysis of the services and support that are marketed to students with disabilities from an institutional perspective.

Research Design

To gather data, this study analyzed the websites of 25 American universities' study abroad offices. The 25 universities sampled were selected because they are designated by IIE's Open Doors report as the top 25 leading institutions by study abroad total numbers during the 2017-2018 academic year (Institute of International Education, n.d). According to the website, the 2017-2018 school year offers the most up to date statistics. This designation is also publicized on many of the universities' own websites. The rationale for utilizing IIE's report is that it is considered one of the most reputable sources on large-scale study abroad statistical information. The rationale for choosing the leading institutions by study abroad total is that since they sent the most students abroad, they are also most likely to have resources for underrepresented groups, in this case including students with disabilities.

The decision to analyze web content was chosen with the rationale that students are likely to look online to search programs, to find contact information and to do their initial research. The information on all 25 institutions was entered into a spreadsheet and their websites were analyzed based on 10 key components. The rationale for each question will be explored in further detail below.

Institution Type

This was a yes/no question aimed at categorizing institutions. The rationale was to determine if a significant correlation exists between the type of institution and their level of services to students with disabilities who want to study abroad. Additionally, this statistic allows future researchers the opportunity to develop a more representative sample.

Mention of Students with Disabilities

This question was a yes or no item aimed at ascertaining whether study abroad offices acknowledged "students with disabilities" as a form of identity abroad. The mention of this identity would be interpreted to signal that the university has some level of understanding for the unique needs of this population.

Evidence of Collaboration with on-campus Disabilities Services Provider

Since accommodations are considered a vital part of success for many students with disabilities, this question sought to ascertain if the websites showed evidence of collaboration between the on-campus study abroad office and the disability services office. Responses were recorded as yes or no. Evidence is defined as links to external websites and the mention of specific office names.

Provisions of Resources- Direct vs. Indirect

This question sought to define the actual support and services provided on the website. The responses, direct and indirect, correlate to information written on the website and the inclusion of links to external sources. Examples of direct resources include general advice, advisor resources and considerations from the study abroad office. Examples of indirect resources include links to non-university sources for persons with disabilities, such as Mobility International (MIUSA) and Diversity Abroad. Institutions without any discernable resources received the designation “N/A.”

Photos of Students with Disabilities

Representation is often considered a crucial factor in recruiting students from underrepresented groups in study abroad. This can be especially helpful to students with disabilities in that it demonstrates that someone successfully studied abroad with a disability (Soneson & Fisher, 2011). This was a yes or no question that could be satisfied by the presence of a person in a wheelchair on a study abroad trip or in a student blog post in which a student discloses a disability.

Clicks

This question sought to gauge how many clicks it would take a student with a disability to find relevant information on a website. If information is too deeply buried, students may assume the information does not exist on the website. The range was set at 1-3, 4-6 and 7+. The term “undefined” was used in the case that a website did not have resources listed for students with disabilities.

Program Specific Information

This yes or no question gauged whether study abroad offices offered individualized information on the accessibility of their programs. This included general advice on location, host university accommodations and resources in-country. Many universities assert that students are responsible for researching programs, thus this question determined if students had access to sufficient and relevant information on accessibility of locations, host institution, accommodations, and other relevant aspects of program planning.

Ways to Stay Involved

This yes or no question gauged whether a university provided ways for returning students to continue to engage with their program, guide others and reflect on their experience. This category also tabulated, but was not limited by, student testimonials, additional opportunities to go abroad again, blogs, peer advising and ambassador programs. Having a way to process the study abroad experience is important since it helps students reflect and gives them an opportunity to build on and learn from the experience (Soneson & Fisher, 2011).

Types of Disabilities Mentioned

This question was included to ascertain if there was a trend in what types of disabilities study abroad offices tended to address. The method of recording this data included using key words in the online search such as “mobility, learning, mental and physical.” Often, when people think of students with disabilities, they may envision wheelchairs. Arguably, the wheelchair has become the universal symbol of accessibility. As already mentioned above however, a disability is present in a wide range of conditions and experiences that go well beyond the wheelchair and may be more subtle. It is not always visible or salient.

Findings

Findings of this study yielded some interesting results that both highlight progress and shed light on areas for improvement in supporting students with disabilities study abroad. To provide clear descriptions and organization to this section, findings directly reflect metrics mentioned in section 4. Following this section is a discussion on data of interest.

FIGURE 1. INSTITUTION TYPE.

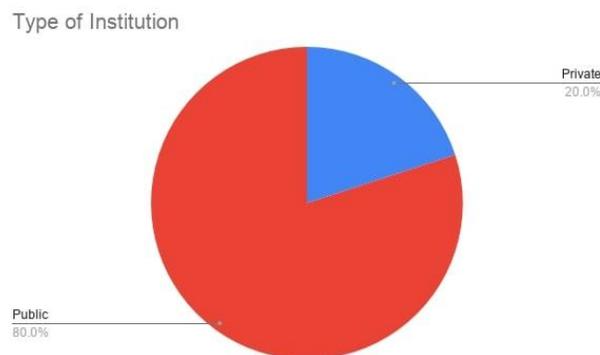
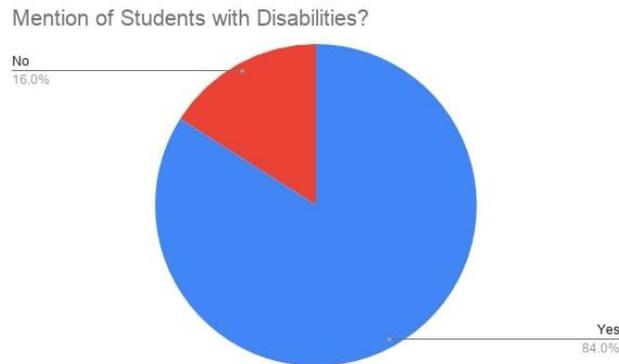


Figure one illustrates that 80% of institutions sampled reflected the perspectives of public institutions. Specifically, these public institutions were all doctoral

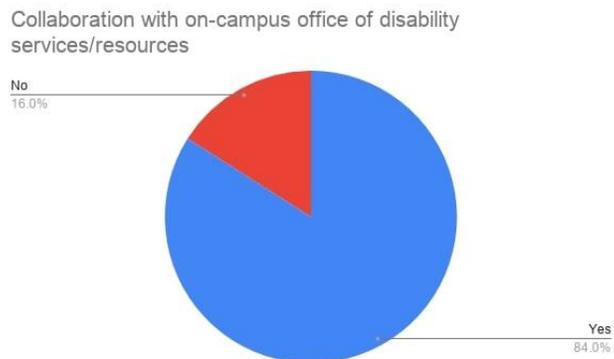
granting, research institutions. Private institutions (20%) included were also all doctoral degree granting and research focused.

FIGURE 2. MENTION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.



Based on Figure two, 84% of universities are in some way addressing the presence of students with disabilities in study abroad. This means that more universities are acknowledging their potential and desire to study abroad. It also is evidence that they view them as a group worth creating marketing strategies for in that their experience constitutes a need for a devoted section of their webpage.

FIGURE 3. EVIDENCE OF COLLABORATION WITH ON-CAMPUS DISABILITY SERVICES PROVIDER.



This figure shows that 84% of sampled study abroad offices are collaborating with a disability services office in some capacity. This means that study abroad offices are interested in better understanding the needs of students with disabilities. It also means that more disability service offices are willing to help students explore this opportunity.

Provision of Resources: Direct and Indirect

This question yielded a wide range of responses, with some universities offering unique resources, while others offered very little. Due to the wide range of offerings, categorizing and graphing of types of supports were determined to be outside of the scope of this study. Overall, most universities offered a combination of direct and indirect resources for students with disabilities. Typical ways that universities demonstrated direct resources were by providing general advice, encouragement and statements of commitments directly on their website. For example, the University of Wisconsin at Madison's study abroad office affirms their commitment and support for students with disabilities through the following statement:

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is committed to supporting students with disabilities in all aspects of their Wisconsin Experience and encourages students to explore the rewarding education opportunity study abroad offers. This includes students with disabilities of all types. Just as cultures differ, though, so does the degree of access and readily available disability services in the many countries and communities a student might consider for their study abroad experience. Students with disabilities have successfully participated in many study abroad programs; however, not every study abroad experience is a good fit from an accessibility perspective.

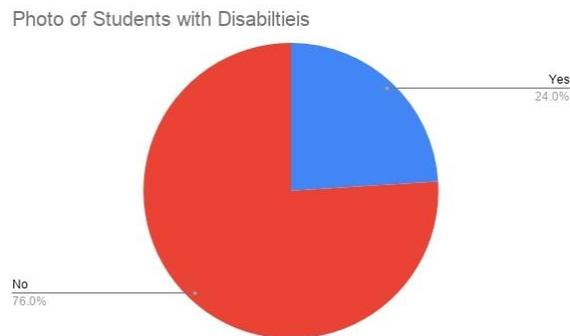
To maximize the opportunity to travel abroad and study internationally, it is essential that students allocate a minimum of six months (preferably up to one year) in advance of their travel to plan for accommodations, regardless of the type of disability. Experience tells us the key to success is early notification and planning. The McBurney Disability Resource Center and International Academic Programs are here to assist you before and during your time abroad (studyabroad.wisc.edu, n.d).

Indirect resource provision usually involved the inclusion of external links to disability networks, governmental resources and travel advice webpages. These included travel blogs for persons with disabilities, Diversity Abroad Network, MIUSA and the US Department of State's travel website. Notably, of the 25 universities sampled, only three did not appear to provide any resources for students with disabilities on their websites. This means that most websites contained at least some resources.

One university, the University of Southern California, proved a special case in that its study abroad programs are categorized by the schools/colleges of the university (i.e. school of Architecture, school of business, etc.). Although some colleges, such as the Dornsife College of Letters Arts and Sciences, did include a few resources for students with disabilities, the university's main

webpage for Global Experiences had no discernable mention or resources for students with disabilities. Since this research only examined the *main* website of the universities, these resources were not considered satisfactory to the research design as they required clicking away from the main website and the requirement that the individual schools of the university count multiple times in the statistics. For this reason, the individual schools were not counted, and the University of Southern California was considered to not have resources for students with disabilities studying abroad in this study.

FIGURE 4. PHOTOS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.



This figure illustrates that 76% of sampled websites do not appear to purposefully include photos of students of disabilities. This could suggest that while study abroad offices are considering students with disabilities as worth marketing to and worth providing resources for, they have yet to demonstrate true representation on their websites. While this may seem disappointing, it is important to consider that disabilities are not always physically present. Many websites sampled have sections devoted to sharing student stories and featured archives that stretched back years. This means that there are likely students with disabilities included in these archives that may not have disclosed their disability, chose not to address it in their story and/or did not choose to include a photo.

For most sites, it took about 4-6 clicks from the home page of a study abroad website to get to information about students with disabilities. The designation of “undefined” on this figure refers to universities that did not have any information available for students with disabilities. While there is no official measurement for how many clicks it should take to reach information, if a student must navigate deep into a webpage to find information, they may become frustrated or disinterested. Thus, contributing to the idea that study abroad may not be an option for them.

FIGURE 5. CLICKS.

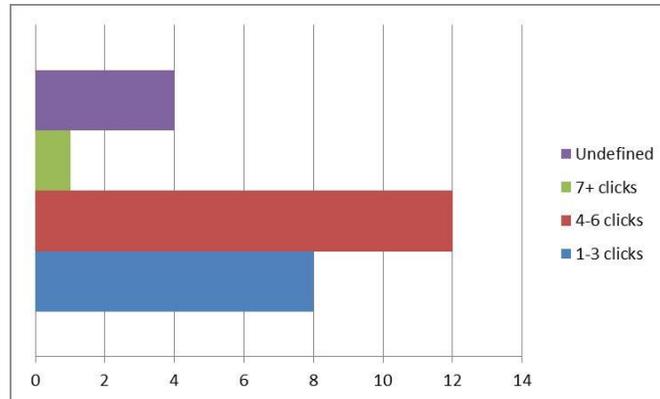
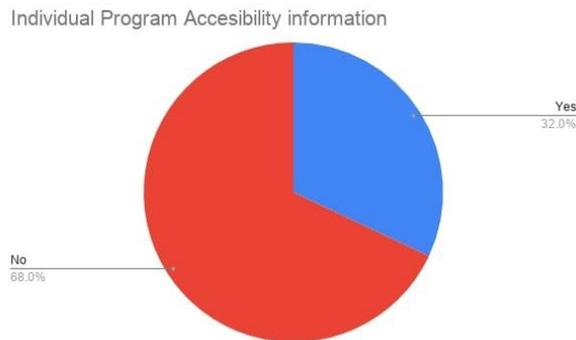


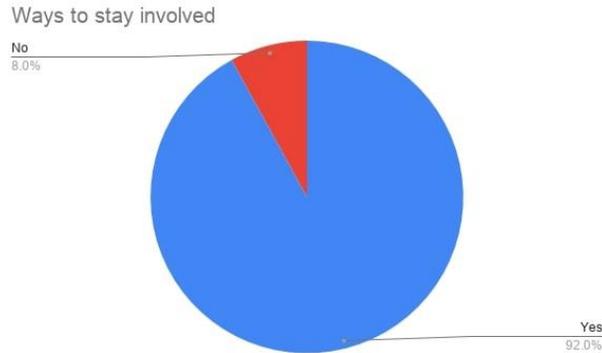
FIGURE 6. PROGRAM SPECIFIC INFORMATION.



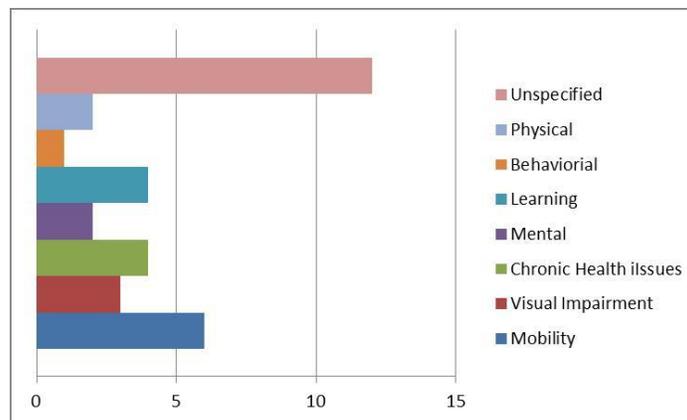
Of the sampled universities, 68% do not appear to include individualized accessibility information about their programs. For those that did, it normally consisted of a general reminder to remember accessibility. For example, the study abroad office at Purdue University states the following:

It is important to keep in mind that many foreign countries do not have the same accessibility laws as in the United States. Therefore it is imperative that you inform the study abroad office of your needs and/or concerns so that they can be of assistance, if necessary. If special accommodations for a physical disability or learning disability are needed, it is very important to inform the study abroad office in a timely manner as it may take a considerable amount of time to arrange (purdue.edu, n.d).

There were few instances of information specific to individual locations. In this category, it appears universities are still lacking in providing support in program selection to students with disabilities.

FIGURE 7. WAYS TO STAY INVOLVED.

This figure illustrates that 93% of universities sampled advertised at least one way to stay involved once students returned to campus. This is evidence that study abroad offices see the experiences of returning students as valuable. This also attests to the importance of peer-to-peer recommendations, personal reflection, and marketable skills as outcomes of study abroad.

FIGURE 8. TYPES OF DISABILITIES MENTIONED.

This figure displays key terms used by sampled universities who included resources for students with disabilities (21/25) to describe types of disabilities. To the knowledge of the researcher, none of the universities analyzed strayed from the use of the terms above. Overall, most (12 universities) did not choose to mention any specific type of disability and are displayed as “undefined” on the graph. Instead, these universities chose to re-affirm their dedication to providing support for students with disabilities. Of those who did mention types of disabilities, mobility issues were the most mentioned population needing resources. Of interest, chronic health issues were grouped

in as a type of disability. The meaning of this will be explored more in the next section.

Discussion

If data from these universities sampled are indicative of anything, it would be that awareness and support for students with disabilities are present in study abroad. While universities appear to be doing well in most categories, their support in providing students information on programs and highlighting the experiences of students with disabilities in the form of photos and testimonials is still lacking. These shortcomings have important implications for students with disabilities who are attempting to study abroad. Without access to adequate information, these students cannot make informed decisions about which program may be the right one for them. When these students are also clearly represented among the wider population of study abroad participants it also helps to reinforce that they too can study abroad and that study abroad offices care about them.

In terms of representation, scanning university websites for photos of students with disabilities proved difficult in that disabilities are not always immediately discernable. While best efforts were made to search websites for captions with explicit mention of students with disabilities, it is important to remember that many students may not feel comfortable disclosing this aspect of their identities. They may see it as a personal identity that they would rather conceal. For this reason, chart 5.4 should be interpreted acknowledging this possibility.

There were some types of disabilities included that are not often mentioned in the research. These included physical disabilities and chronic health conditions. Even from IIE's website, these two categories made up 4.1% and 16.1%, respectively, of students with disabilities studying abroad during the 2017-2018 academic year (Institute of International Education, n.d). Of interest, the term "sensory" disability and "autism spectrum" were not addressed in the websites but are addressed by the IIE (Institute of International Education, n.d). These two types of disabilities also do not seem to be addressed often in the research. The exclusion of these types of disabilities is something that should be further explored and understood. This may tell us something about how many people define disability and which are normally included.

Conclusion

Universities are committing themselves to increasing diversity on their campuses and study abroad offices are committing to increasing diversity in their participants. These are lofty aspirations that require intimate understanding of a multitude of student groups and experiences. Universities

are on the right track, but they still have a lot of work to do to develop tangible solutions and, even more importantly, collecting reliable evidence of their effectiveness. At least as far as students with disabilities may be concerned, they appear to be heading in the right direction.

In turn, students with disabilities are engaging more with study abroad opportunities. Now more than ever, students with disabilities are increasing their participation in study abroad. In keeping with Human Capabilities approach, one could safely argue that the more resources and support students with disabilities have access to, the more willing they are to consider participating in study abroad. While institutional factors do not constitute the only barriers to study abroad, they are often seen as a large contributor of stress as students try to navigate through the arduous planning process, condition management abroad and accommodation negotiations. By working closely with students with disabilities, universities can help diminish worries in many of the areas of concern they currently have. Although universities are making progress in ensuring that their needs are being addressed, their presence on study abroad websites remain quite faint overall. The following section attempts to help practitioners better improve this aspect of their marketing for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

Through conducting this research, some universities stuck out in their unique offerings for students with disabilities who are interested in study abroad. For this reason, this study will address some ideas that practitioners could consider implementing in their own offices. These include:

- Hiring an advisor for access (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) - The person in this position would be responsible for addressing general accessibility concerns for students who may be worried about their disability abroad.
- Get the conversation going with a graphic (University of Michigan- Ann Arbor) - Create a graphic detailing advice or information for students with disabilities that is accessible on the website and can be distributed at campus events. This allows students who may not be comfortable immediately disclosing their disability to see the resources that are available and acts as a way to get a conversation going.
- Create an interest form (Arizona State University- Tempe) - Study abroad offices could create a form to help better match students with programs that may be of interest to them. This may allow study abroad advisors to get the “initial” meeting details out of the way before a student comes in. This may be especially helpful for students who are uncomfortable disclosing their disability.

- Outline the responsibilities of all parties involved (i.e. student, study abroad office, disabilities services office and host institution) (University of Wisconsin - Madison) - While many schools indicate on their websites that students are the main driving force behind planning their study abroad experience, they are also encouraged to seek guidance from the appropriate offices. Since accommodations and needs are determined on a case by case basis, the lines of responsibility can become blurred. Nonetheless, it takes collaboration to make a study abroad program successful. Thus, offices could consider outlining the basic responsibilities of each party on the website so that students know where to turn for more information.
- Providing program specific resources (New York University) - Offering a brief overview by program location could help students further identify how their disability will affect their time in any given location abroad. While suggestions of specific programs based on ability are great, it is important to not assume which activities students can or cannot participate in.
- Intentionally including photos and experiences of students with disabilities on website (University of Michigan at Ann Arbor) - While many universities included blogs, stories and student testimonials, the archives are large. Thus, a student looking for a specific experience may not want to dig through all the stories with the hope of coming across one that is relevant to their experiences. Thus, organizing the stories to align with identities may be a useful strategy in helping to find students with similar identities much quicker.
- Keep number of clicks to a minimum (Texas A&M University at College Station) - The more a student must click to get to resources applicable to them, the more convinced they may become that resources do not exist. Try to keep the amount of time a student needs to get to resources down to 1-3 clicks. If this is not possible, consider ways in which to link from another section of the website directly to resources.
- Keep a record of students with disabilities who go abroad (Soneson & Fisher, 2011) - Many universities do not keep statistics on the number of students with disabilities who go abroad each year. Thus, reporting this figure is considered a good practice in itself. This will allow universities to display this figure on their website or make note of ways to improve it, which in and of itself will be potentially good marketing not only of their services but also of their sensitivity to the wide diversity of all interest groups who may be seeking a study abroad experience.

Limitations

As mentioned above, this study only sampled 25 universities in the United States, of the more than 4,000 higher education institutions that exist and may offer some form of education abroad experience to their students. Of these institutions, the majority were public. Thus, this study cannot be considered representative of all universities in the United States, nor can it be seen as such for all public universities. Obviously, a vast amount of unique resources could still exist at other institutions not sampled for this study. Future research should consider enlarging the sample size and including various institutional types, such as community colleges, technical colleges, religious institutions, and for-profit institutions.

Websites provide a wealth of information; however, they are not the ultimate and only source. Choosing to incorporate only website information has its drawbacks. Universities may offer services not listed on their website. Furthermore, applicable student data may be buried deep in archives and user error can always influence interactions with a website. Additionally, time constraints and COVID-19, may have influenced the ability to gather relevant data as study abroad offices change their sites to respond to the pandemic. This has also made the ability to deepen the understanding of the institutional perspective through conducting interviews with representatives from all schools impossible at the present time. Future research could benefit from incorporating the perspective of representatives from the offices listed through in-person interviews, focus groups, as well as possibly an in-depth survey.

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