

Inclusive Study Abroad Course for College Students with and Without Intellectual Disabilities (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

The development of postsecondary education programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) opens opportunities for inclusive study abroad experiences for students with and without ID. This article shares first-hand experiences based on a study abroad trip taken by students in the University Participant (UP) program at Western Carolina University (WCU) to London, England and Dublin, Ireland. Information is presented about initial planning, recruiting and selecting participants, course content and instructional procedures, organizations and agencies visited, providing travel support for students with ID, lessons learned, challenges, future research, and implications for practice.

Keywords: *study abroad, intellectual disability, postsecondary education, inclusion*

Study abroad programs, in which college students spend time in formal study activities in other countries, have become quite popular in recent years. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2013), in 2012-13, more than 289,000 U.S. college students studied abroad for academic credit (up from about 60,000 in the late 1980s). Included in this number were almost 3,200 students with disabilities coming from 265 different institutions. Of the students with disabilities, about 28% of them were identified as students with “mental disabilities” (IIE, 2014). However the potential for an increase among students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to study abroad is likely to increase considerably in the coming years. According to the latest data from Think College (www.thinkcollege.net), there are now more than 268 postsecondary education (PSE) programs for individuals with ID. This means that colleges and universities now have greater opportunities not only to offer study abroad experiences for students with ID, but to do so in an inclusive manner so students with and without ID may pursue study abroad courses together.

For over 30 years Mobility International and other comparable organizations have been advocating for international exchange and partnerships for individuals with disability. However, the proportion of students with all types of disability studying abroad in 2012-2013 was only 5% (IIE, 2014). Opportunities remain

limited despite the dissemination well over a decade ago of strategies for increasing international study for students with disabilities (Hameister, Matthews, Hosely, & Groff, 1999). When study abroad has been made accessible, students with disability have reported increased confidence, awareness of abilities, communication, and problem solving (Matthews, Hameister, & Hosely, 1998). The same students surveyed by Matthews et al. made abundantly clear that they favored inclusive study abroad opportunities.

In this paper, we share the strategies and tactics used to offer an inclusive study abroad course that included students with and without ID in May 2014, during which students visited London, England and Dublin, Ireland. We focus uniquely on creating components for an inclusive study abroad course for a heterogeneous group of students with and without ID associated with the University Participant (UP) Program at Western Carolina University.

Domestically, the UP Program also operates as a highly inclusive and individualized postsecondary education program for transition-aged students with ID. UP students live in inclusive on-campus residence halls, participate in 6-12 course hours of inclusive college classes each semester, work (often for pay) in inclusive jobs on and off campus, and otherwise access the same social opportunities as college students without disabilities. Through the two-year on-campus living

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and learning opportunity, UP students strengthen the skills required for independent living and competitive employment in the communities they choose. For more information about this program and its components, visit up.wcu.edu.

Institutional Application and Initial Planning

Our university, like most institutions, requires that the faculty member(s) organizing the course and leading the trip make an application several months ahead of the travel experience. This application requested details about such considerations as destinations, timelines, activities, safety precautions, number of students expected to participate, and costs. In this part of the process, it was important for us to indicate that we would be including UP students as well as traditional college students. To address this, we informed the study abroad office how we would use our students without disabilities to provide support for the students with ID on the trip.

We found that communicating about this issue informally before submitting our formal application was helpful. We also found it helpful to discuss our trip with other colleagues familiar with the locations we planned to visit. Networking in this way provided us with useful information about lodging arrangements, local organizations to visit, passport information, cell phone use and costs, immunizations, cultural etiquette, safety precautions, transportation services, and how to conduct money exchanges.

Once the university approved our international travel course application, we established key dates and deadlines, especially those related to payment of fees and deposits. At the initiation of planning, it seemed important that both faculty and students needed to know as soon as possible the overall cost of the trip, when certain fees had to be made, and whether payments for different components of the trip should be made to the school or directly to the service provider.

Recruiting and Selecting Course Participants

The course and associated trip was initiated because of a UP student's request for international experience and the recognition by the UP staff that many of our students could benefit from such an experience. However, we also realized that we did not want a segregated experience that would include only students with ID, so we designed a course that would include both students with and without ID and developed a recruitment plan to attract both groups.

Over the next few months we marketed the course to student populations both broad and specific. The Office of International Programs maintains a running list of faculty-guided study abroad options on their website. All interested students had the opportunity to compare our course against a variety of others, which spanned multiple areas of study and international destinations. We also actively recruited students with an affiliation with the UP program. In addition to creating and posting recruitment fliers in and around the UP offices, we emailed course announcements to all active program volunteers. We brought fliers to guide discussions of the international opportunity during person-centered planning meetings that included UP students, their parents, and program volunteers. Finally, we encouraged all potentially interested students to further discuss this opportunity with their families, including the trip details, costs, and payments schedules.

By stated deadlines, interested parties completed the university's study abroad application that required, among other information, any charges or convictions of violations against the student code of conduct, current health conditions, and assumptions of risk. As an addendum to the university application, we required a one-page narrative describing the applicant's voluntary involvement in the UP program and anecdotes of personal responsibility. Applications were used to scrupulously build a class with the greatest potential to benefit from course objectives and form a respectful, cohesive group.

We then reviewed application materials and notified students about their eligibility to participate in the trip. Accepted students were provided with cost and fee information and payment due dates. All students with and without disabilities who had submitted completed applications were selected. Our final group included six college students without disabilities and three UP students with ID. The authors comprised the faculty and staff who accompanied the students (see Table 1 for demographics).

Course Content and Instructional Procedures

The course was a special topics course whose primary objective was for students to develop knowledge about programs and services for adults with ID in England and Ireland. This topic was relevant to both students and faculty and would serve as the central theme of our course. Although the academic structure and activities were planned by the faculty and staff, all students were involved in planning course and travel details.

At an initial meeting, students and instructors collaboratively planned the travel itinerary and made

some key decisions. For example, we initially were eager to visit a great number of relevant organizations throughout England and Ireland, but ultimately decided as a group what was most feasible within the time we had. Based on our rather limited time, students decided to center the visit in London and Dublin with a quick side trip to the National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth.

Following this initial meeting, the course continued for several weeks in advance of our departure. We used the Internet to explore various disability related groups, agencies, and organizations located in and around London and Dublin that we might visit on our trip. Ultimately we identified the agencies and organizations listed in Tables 2 and 3, located in England and Ireland respectively.

The course topics identified were broad, but were very relevant to the organizations and places we were to visit. They included:

- Laws and policies in England and Ireland relevant to adults with ID;
- Definitions and terms used in the adult services systems in England and Ireland;
- Living arrangements for adults with ID in England and Ireland;
- Employment options for adults with ID in England and Ireland;
- Postsecondary education options for adults with ID in England and Ireland; and
- Attitudes toward people with ID in England and Ireland.

During the on-campus part of the course, we read relevant literature and reviewed other materials available on the websites of the targeted organizations. To make our learning more interesting, we also used scavenger hunts to find information on websites. Additionally, many formats and course assignments varied to meet diverse learning needs.

Providing Travel Support for Students with ID

Within the UP program on campus, students without disabilities volunteer their time to provide natural supports for our UP students with ID. When we began planning for our trip, we thought the same practice would be useful for traveling abroad. Therefore we aimed to recruit enough students without disabilities to serve as supports for the students with ID. We were successful in doing so, and this arrangement worked in numerous ways. We started before the trip by working in mixed ability teams to learn how to engage in

various travel-related activities. For example, before departing, we encouraged the use of a buddy system and used direct instruction to teach students to use the navigational signs located in airports. We also watched and learned from YouTube videos how to go through security screening gates and practiced doing so before our departure. We also provided a packing list to students and their families based on Transportation Security Administration specifications so no disallowed items would present a problem.

Because persons with ID face challenges when traveling, such as the limited use of landmarks for navigation (Courbois, Blades, Farran, & Sockeel, 2013), we had pre-planned to meet the support needs of our UP students during the trip. When we arrived at the airport for departure, all the students helped each other through the screenings and navigated their way to the departure gate. As we prepared to board the plane, students provided support and encouragement to each other. Once on the plane, the supports continued. In-flight support included assistance reading menus, accessing entertainment devices, and providing reminders for movement and restroom breaks. Students also knew where instructors were seated if they had any questions during the flight. There were also many opportunities for incidental learning as our students interacted with other passengers throughout the flight.

We spent three and a half days in London, and the same amount of time in Dublin. In each location, we had pre-arranged travel from the airport to our accommodations, made planned visits to the sites listed in Tables 1 and 2, and allocated free time to explore area sites (see Figure 1 for itinerary). Just as we do on campus, we had assigned one or more supports for students with ID while in London and Dublin. Of course many times the entire group, or large sub-groups, traveled together to sites of common interest so support assignments were naturally embedded in the groups. In addition to supporting each other in travel, the students worked together to develop and make presentations to organizations and to produce daily video/journal blogs.

The new and different environments also presented important learning experiences. Students with and without ID learned together and gained confidence in using public transportation, experienced local restaurants and pubs, and took advantage of various cultural opportunities. As students gradually adapted to their new surroundings, they worked together to assure everyone was able to “mind the gap.”

Lessons Learned

All the students benefited from the rapport they built with each other prior to leaving for their transatlantic adventure. While traveling abroad together, students deepened their familiarity and trust as they shared new opportunities and experiences with each other. Inclusive travel gave all members of the class the opportunity to view physical, social, and political landscapes in ways that would be otherwise impossible. While we encountered a few differences with our international counterparts, primarily in language use and terminology, we were nevertheless able to make meaningful personal and professional connections through shared values about the importance of quality of life for individuals with disabilities. The collaboration, connections, and exchange of information were almost magical. Particularly memorable was the instantaneous connection that was forged between us and the faculty and students in the inclusive PSE program at NUI Maynooth. Many students in the Maynooth program quickly connected with the UP students and the natural supports. Some of the other organizations we visited also provided great resources and information about their services, but offered less opportunity for exchanges among individuals with ID.

Challenges

Many of the challenges we faced were challenges that would be faced with any international experience. Cost was a consideration for all students and families. The amount of time allowed for the trip, nine days, also presented a challenge. Additionally, because there were so many interesting organizations and groups to visit, the time went by quickly with many in the group thinking we lacked sufficient time to see the sights. In hindsight, a little more time on the trip and a little less time devoted to class activities may have been preferred.

Although our travels for the most part were uneventful, functioning in the airports presented us with some of our most challenging and unexpected issues. Despite using YouTube videos and studying and practicing our movements through security before the trip, we still had difficulties with some UP students who misunderstood some of the security requirements. For example, two UP students were subjected to full searches by airport security after bringing drink or liquid medicine bottles that were greater than the allowed carry-on capacities.

Finally, with families, despite the fact that we had developed a long-term sustained trust, there was still some anxiety and fear associated with the trip.

Concerns were varied. Some families were worried about financial and security documents being lost or undertaking successful money exchanges. Others worried about uncontrolled spending by their son or daughter or limited phone availability for receiving daily updates. Still others were concerned about health and travel fatigue or medication management. Interestingly, upon return, parents commented that they had observed greater levels of confidence, decision-making, independence, and better money handling skills among their college students, similar to findings in McConkey and McCullough (2006).

Future Research

There have been numerous studies documenting the benefits of studying abroad for typical college students (Byram & Feng, 2006; Dwyer, 2004; Langley & Breese, 2005). However, we could find no such studies about students with ID who studied abroad and none about inclusive groups in study abroad courses. This is not surprising. But with the increase in inclusive college programs for students with ID, we can anticipate that more such opportunities will occur in the future and that these opportunities will be of an inclusive nature, such as occurred on this trip. That being the case, we can see important research being generated around these courses. Specifically, future research should identify institutional and international program strategies deemed most essential for creating inclusive study abroad opportunities for students with ID. Such recommendations should begin by synthesizing recommendation for inclusive study abroad for students with all disabilities and Think College's standards, quality indicators, and benchmarks for inclusive higher education (Think College, 2012). At individual levels of analysis, greater attention to perception and development of students with and without ID will be necessary in order to create opportunities that are maximally beneficial for all who participate.

Implications for Practice

While there are no specific guidelines to prepare students with ID for study abroad opportunities, based on our experience, we offer these suggestions. First, because reading maps, paying for transportation, time management, literacy, and problem solving may be barriers to travel for adults with intellectual disabilities (Davies, Stock, Holloway, & Wehmeyer, 2010), it was important to organize a balanced, pre-planned natural support system. Undergraduate and graduate students worked with UP students to provide support with travel (airport security, customs, accessing the planes, bus, trains, tickets, correct bus numbers), leisure (sightsee-

ing and recreation agendas), academics (filming and transcribing daily journals, assisting with course readings and assignments, co-presenting to organizations), and daily routines (food options, morning and evening routines, packing, arriving and leaving on time). It is important to have an organized way to strategically plan and balance these supports so they also get opportunities to learn with and without students with ID.

A second consideration is the great connection made with a similarly structured PSE program in Maynooth due to multiple opportunities and pathways for information exchange across individuals with and without disabilities. Programs should continue to explore the possibilities available to increase opportunities for direct interactions between individuals with and without disabilities.

A third consideration is the need to create more incidental learning experiences among peers, especially more sightseeing. This may mean extending the trip length in order to provide more bonding time between students with and without disabilities during common leisure activities. Jones and Goble (2012) reported that students with and without disabilities benefit from collaboration during spontaneous leisure and social activities outside of events shaped by strict task orientation. By lengthening the duration of international trips, academic and recreational components will be better balanced allowing paralleled equity between the social roles of “support” and “friend.”

While it takes a collaborative team working together to plan and embark on study abroad experiences, the benefits and experiential learning far outweigh the challenges. The lessons learned and friendships made for those sharing these experiences together will last a lifetime and make the countless hours of planning the effort of travel worthwhile.

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Dr. David L. Westling joined the faculty at Western Carolina University as the Adelaide Worth Daniels Distinguished Professor of Special Education in 1997. Before arriving at WCU, Dr. Westling was on the faculty in special education at Florida State University. He received the Ed.D. Degree in Special Education from the University of Florida in 1976 with related areas of study in Applied Behavior Analysis and Educational Research. He is the co-author of *Teaching Students with Severe Disabilities*, *Special Education for Today's Teachers: An Introduction*, and *Inclusion: Effective Practices for All Teachers* and has published more than 50 papers in refereed journals in special education. Dr. Westling is past-president of the Board of Directors for TASH, is co-director of the personnel preparation project in severe disabilities at Western Carolina University, and director of the Western Carolina University's University Participant Program. Dr. Westling was a Fulbright Research Scholar in Salzburg, Austria in 1994. He can be reached at: westling@email.wcu.edu

Table 1

Student Travelers

Student/Age	Level/Disability	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Martin/24	UP Student/Down syndrome	Caucasian	Male
June/20	Undergraduate	Caucasian	Female
Meredith/23	Graduate	Caucasian	Female
Donnie/22	UP Student/Cerebral Palsy	Caucasian	Male
Monica/22	Undergraduate	Caucasian	Female
Veronica/23	Undergraduate	African American	Female
Marlene/19	Undergraduate	Asian	Female
Tessa/20	Undergraduate	Caucasian	Female
Cassandra/20	UP Student/Mild ID	Caucasian	Female

Table 2

Organizations in England

Organization	Location & Transportation	Mission	Rationale for Visit
CHANGE http://www.changepeople.org	Leeds via Underground and National Rail	Focus on human rights; employment; production of accessible materials	To explore accessible materials; employment for equal wages
British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) http://www.bild.org.uk	Birmingham via Underground and National Rail	Focus on human rights; funding and services supporting dignity and respect of individuals with disabilities	Shared value system of equal access and full participation in communities for individuals with ID
Westminster Society for People with Learning Disabilities http://www.wspld.org.uk	London via Underground	To provide quality services and new opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities	Shared services for community living and similar values of inclusion/support across a lifespan
Mencap https://www.mencap.org.uk	London via Underground	Advocacy and policy change for individuals with learning disabilities	Shared mission in advocacy efforts and greater quality of life

Table 3

Organizations in Ireland

Organization	Location	Mission	Rationale for Visit
Inclusive Learning Initiative (ILI) at the National University of Ireland (NUI) https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie	Maynooth via bus	Program going beyond theory and successfully integrating students into the university learning environment	Innovative practice and shared inclusive values in postsecondary education
National Institute for Intellectual Disabilities (NIID) Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) Program https://www.tcd.ie/ciid/	Trinity College in Dublin via walking	Focus on teaching, research, and innovation within the CCL program	Use of person centered approaches and applied research within a college program
University College Dublin (UCD) http://www.ucd.ie	Dublin via bus	Expert researchers in intellectual disabilities with a focus on palliative care and respite	To explore medical care and complex support needs of aging adults

May 13, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
1:00 p.m.	Check in at Asheville Regional Airport (only if flying from Asheville)
2:25 p.m.	Board US Airways 2733 to Charlotte and arrive between 3:18-3:30 p.m.
5:00 p.m.	Check in at Charlotte Airport and meet at the appropriate gate for flight
6:55 p.m.	Depart from Charlotte on US Airways 730 to London Heathrow Airport
-----	Fly overnight and arrive in London the next morning (time difference of 5 hours ahead)

May 14, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
7:50 a.m.	Arrive in London Heathrow Airport
8:30-9 a.m.	Ground transportation from Airport Connect
9-10 a.m.	Transport to Flats in London. Drop luggage.
10 AM-2 p.m.	Explore surrounding area with walking tour as a group and eat lunch
2-3:30 p.m.	Pick up keys, settle in flats, unpack, quick power nap- may get in earlier if they have ready
3:30-4 p.m.	Travel to first seminar meeting at instructor's flat
4-6 p.m.	Opening Seminar (covering sight visits, rules for traveling, important timeline of events) sightseeing)
6-10 p.m.	Dinner and sightseeing as you wish

May 15, 2015

TIME	ACTIVITY -Groups Split-Two Organizations-Then Meet Again
Group 1 7:00-7:35 a.m.	Meet at 7 a.m. to depart to CHANGE organization to Leeds by train (2 hrs, 12 min)
9:17-9:50 a.m.	Depart from train to taxi in route to CHANGE (taxi fee TBD)
10:15 AM- 12:00 p.m.	Visit with CHANGE Unit 11, Shine, Harehills Rd, Leeds, LS85HS- Be prepared with presentation
12:00 p.m.- 12:30	Travel to train station from CHANGE at Leeds back to Westminster Society.
GROUP 2	
10:00-4:00 p.m.	Travel and visit with BILD by 2 p.m.; Travel back to meet with Westminster by 6 p.m.
6:00-8:00 p.m.	Visit with Westminster for football (soccer) group- Queens Park Rangers Club, Dinner together
9-10:30 p.m.	Travel from Westminster to Acorn Flats

May 16, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.	Check- in seminar (debrief yesterday's visits, plan for today's visits) Visit to Mencap in morning from 9:30 a.m.-11 a.m. LUNCH and travel to Orchard Hill College by 2 p.m.
6 p.m.-8 p.m.	Group dinner in London if you choose to join

May 17, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
Sightseeing Opportunities – ALL DAY IN LONDON! Check back in with instructors by 11 p.m. UP STUDENTS WITH SUPPORTS BASED ON YOUR COMMON INTERESTS- use whentowork	

May 18, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
8 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	Breakfast, morning routine, and packing up all belongings to go to Dublin
10:30 a.m.-10:45 a.m.	Wait for van transport from flats to London Heathrow Airport
10:45 a.m.-11:45 a.m.	Travel to London Heathrow Airport
11:45 a.m.-1:00 p.m.	Check in, security, and proceed to gate for flight to Dublin with lunch on the way in the airport
1:00 p.m.-1:35 p.m.	Board Aer Lingus Flight 163 to Dublin
1:35 p.m.-2:55 p.m.	Flight from London to Dublin with arrival time at 2:55 p.m.
3:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.	Pick up baggage; take ground transportation (Aircoach) from Dublin Airport to Harding Hotel; unpack
4:00 p.m. -5:30 p.m.	Opening Seminar in Dublin Harding Hotel lobby- go over details and visits for next few days
5:30 p.m.-	Dining and tourism

May 19, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
9:30 a.m.-10:30 a.m.	Coach (66/66x) from city centre to Maynooth
11:00 a.m.-1p.m.	Meetings and presentations with NUI Maynooth people
1:30 p.m.-2:30 p.m.	Coach (66) from Maynooth to Dublin
2:30 p.m.-10:00 p.m.	Tourism and dining on your own; complete reflections independently

May 20, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
10:15 a.m.-11 a.m.	Walk to NIID building, 4th floor, 3 College Green (beside Starbucks) – this is only .6km from Harding hotel
11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	Class with Dr. John Kubiak
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.	Extended conversation with Dr. Kubiak- sharing research with Trinity's CCL Program director
1:00 p.m.-2:00 p.m.	Lunch and site seeing on Trinity's campus and surrounding area
2:00 p.m.-2:30 p.m.	Nassau St. Bus stop across from Fredrick St, take bus 39a to University College Dublin
3:00 p.m.-4:30 p.m.	Discussion and sharing with Dr. Suzanne Guerin and colleagues
4:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m.	Walk to UCD bus stop across from Sillorgan Rd. Bus 39a to Essex Quay near Fishamble St. Walk to Harding hotel from bus stop

May 21, 2014

TIME	ACTIVITY
6 a.m.	WAKE UP AND PACK TO HEAD HOME
6:30 a.m.-7:15 a.m.	Travel by van or taxi from Harding Hotel to Dublin Airport (7 miles= about 30 minutes)
7:30 a.m.- 9:00 a.m.	Customs, security, proceed to gate for flight departure
9:30 a.m.- 12:50 p.m.	Depart Dublin on U.S. Airways 725 to Charlotte (flight time 8 hrs, 20 min), Collect baggage or wait on connection
2:50 p.m.	Depart from Charlotte on U.S. Airways 4288 to Asheville Regional Airport (48 mins)
3:38 p.m.	Arrive in Asheville, Collect Baggage and belongings- Go home and sleep
Before Mon 5/26	Complete all homework and assignments for SPED 493/593 course- grades in by 5/27

Figure 1. Travel itinerary for England and Ireland.