

Strategies and Challenges for Creating an Inclusive Study Abroad Program

Tanja C. Link¹

Abstract

In 2013, 14,304,467 U.S. students participated in a study abroad program related to their academic course work, marking an average increase of 5.2% to the previous year among the reporting institutions. Students with disabilities continue to be significantly underrepresented in such programs. Given the consistent popularity of studying abroad, its documented benefits to students, and the documented desire for inclusion of students with disabilities, it is imperative for study abroad directors and staff to improve opportunities for this underserved population. The current practice brief addresses specific experiences with the planning and on-the-ground operations of a study abroad program to the Netherlands and Germany that included a student with a physical disability, and provides recommendations for future inclusive programs.

Keywords: *Study abroad, criminal justice, disability, Germany, the Netherlands*

In 2013 14,304,467 U.S. students participated in a study abroad program related to their academic course work, marking an increase of 5.2% to the previous year, and a more than a threefold increase over the past two decades among reporting institutions (Open Doors, 2013/2015). The majority (62%) of programs were short-term (either summer or eight weeks or less), underscoring a multi-year trend that shows an increase in short term programs and a decrease in long-term programs (academic or calendar year) (Hoye 2006; Open Doors 2013/2015). According to the same report, currently nine percent of undergraduates in the United States will study abroad for some duration before they graduate. Overall, about 87% of study abroad participants were undergraduates, 65.3% were female, and 74.3% were white (Open Doors, 2013/2015)¹.

Students with disabilities have traditionally been and continue to be underrepresented in study abroad Programs (Ableva 2012; Dessoff, 2006; Hameister, Matthews, Hosley, & Groff, 1999; Sygall 1994). Remarkably, only 5% (or 2,786) of students who studied abroad in 2011/12 reported any disability at all. Of those, 43.4% had a learning disability, 28% a mental disability, 7.6% a physical disability, 3.8% a sensory disability, and 17.2% fell into an "other disability" category. While the overall participation of students with disabilities is steadily increasing (2.6% - 4.1% between 2006/07 and 2010/11), it

is obvious that improvement is needed (Johnson, 2000). Matthews, Hameister, and Hosley (1998) found that the barriers to studying abroad for students with disabilities are not necessarily predicated upon their abilities. The authors found that the three most prevalent issues were "lack of knowledge," "lack of available assistive devices and services," and "financial barriers." Furthermore, participating in a program open to both, non-disabled as well as disabled students, as opposed to a program focused on students with disabilities was important to the respondents (Matthews et al., 1998). Given the steady popularity of studying abroad, its documented benefits to students, and the documented desire for inclusion of students with disabilities, it is imperative for study abroad directors and staff to explore opportunities for this underserved population and increase the understanding of needs that might need to be accommodated.

Participant Demographics

To give some context to our experience, the group consisted of three faculty members and 24 students, including one male student with spinal bifida who was using a wheelchair but occasionally could walk short distances on crutches. Students' ages ranged from 21 to 39 years, and the group included 9 males and 15 females.

¹ Kennesaw State University

Description of Practice

The program started with four days in Amsterdam, followed by one week in The Hague, and wrapped up with one week in Hamburg. The focus of the program was International Crime and Justice, with a focus on international organizations of criminal justice, such as Europol, Eurojust, the International Criminal Court, as well as human rights, prostitution, and drugs. In addition to visiting a number of large international organizations, we received presentations from smaller and non-profit organizations, and engaged in community service activities.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Pre-Program Planning Phase

The institutionally-set deadlines for students' applications, deposits, and full payment² for the study abroad program can make accommodations requests challenging. While accommodations and airline tickets can often be held for some time prior to final booking, the inability to commit until close to departure can stand in the way of being able to secure accessible rooms or preferred seats on a plane, for example. It helps tremendously to have a good standing relationship with the contacts at the hotels or hostels so that deposits can be pushed back and late changes do not result in additional charges.

Per university policy, a disability cannot be assumed and the program director has to wait until the student discloses. If the disability is apparent, such as the use of a wheelchair, a conversation can be initiated *after* the student officially applies and commits to the program. Some abroad programs require students to disclose any condition or disability that could impact their participation eight weeks prior to the start of the trip, which in many cases is very late with respect to plane tickets and room accommodations. We worked with the Student Disability Services and the Education Abroad Office and met with the student to discuss the itinerary and requirements of the trip in detail. The purpose here was not to point out what the student cannot do or make unrealistic promises of being able to accommodate fully, but rather have an honest conversation of what the activities and conditions in the respective countries are and work on a plan to accommodate as much as possible. This also gives the student the opportunity to talk about their concerns. It is important not to make any assumptions prior to meeting and talking with the student while at the same time making sure that the student gives an accurate account of his or her abilities and needs. Traveling abroad brings with it a host of things that cannot easily be anticipated, especially if the student has not traveled

before. Being able to live independently at home might provide a false sense of confidence, and it is important to try to prepare the students for the unknown challenges, both emotional and practical, without being patronizing.

Air Travel

Air travel presents its own set of challenges for those traveling abroad for the first time with a mobility disability. Of particular note on this trip was additional time needed to be processed through security with a wheelchair, having medications checked, making sure to get assistance for boarding and limiting the risk of the wheelchair being damaged. To be prepared for the unfortunate case that some damage might be done to the chair, it is good to know who to contact for a claim and where to get the chair fixed at the destination. Oftentimes bike shops are well-equipped to make small repairs on mechanical chairs.

Commenting on his own experience and that of other travelers with disabilities, Davenport (2013) noted that "the main impediment to a successful trip around Western Europe is public transportation, including the airlines" ("Accepting the challenge," para. 2). Depending on the length of the flight, inform the student that access to a bathroom may be difficult for a variety of reasons. They might need to make special arrangements regarding seating or temporary medical devices.

On site

Amsterdam. We arrived at Schiphol airport after a 9+ hour flight. Immigration and customs were easy to navigate. We chartered a shuttle bus to get to the hostel. Despite prior confirmation via phone, when we arrived at the bus, it was very apparent that it was not accessible—steep stairs to get on and no ramp or lift. For a student who uses a wheelchair this can mark a challenge, as he or she has to be carried/ lifted onto and off the bus, and it is important to assume that being carried is not acceptable for the student.

Alternative transportation arrangements should be considered, provided they are reasonable with regard to cost and duration of travel. From Schiphol, a train can be taken to the main station in the center of the city. However, the trains in Amsterdam are very crowded, which can make the transport of a big group (we were 27 people) with luggage challenging. Another, albeit more expensive, option would be an accessible taxi.

This was the second year we stayed at the Stayokay Vondelpark, and once again the central location of the hostel was an asset. We were able to reserve an accessible group room, which turned out to simply mean that a person using a wheelchair could fit through the door, but not much else. The bathroom was not accessible, and the room was cramped.

Most of the sites we visited were within close proximity to the hostel. The cobblestones made for a strenuous ride with a manual wheelchair, a fact that was mentioned by other travelers who wrote about their experience in Amsterdam. For example, Davenport (2013, "The Irish Way", para 5) observed "The city's cobblestone sidewalks make it difficult for people who use manual wheelchairs to get around." In addition, the sidewalks do not have many lowered curbs, so it is oftentimes necessary to go out of the way to cross the street. One recommendation another traveler made was to equip the wheelchair with a bicycle bell and use the bike lanes (Murphy, 2007).

Our itinerary in Amsterdam contained a number of cultural outings to museums, parks, and historical sites, as well as social gatherings at restaurants and bars. Among the highlights were the Heineken Experience, a canal tour, the Anne Frank house, the Van Gogh museum, and the Rijksmuseum. The Heineken Experience had an alternate route plan available for visitors in wheelchairs. We were given a map and an access key to elevators and lifts that at times took us behind the scene of the place. Elevators and lifts were tricky, which caused our smaller group to be separated from the larger group. Overall, it was a bit cumbersome but allowed our student to have the full experience.

Despite prior confirmation via phone, the canal boat we booked was not accessible, and the student had to be lifted into and out of the boat. There was no secure place on the dock to leave the wheelchair, so the wheelchair was broken down and occupied one of the booths on the boat. Again, if a student had not been comfortable with being carried onto and off the boat, this particular canal tour would have not been possible or appropriate for the group⁴.

When we arrived at the Anne Frank House for our reserved time slot, staff were hesitant to even let our student try to go on the tour, due to the narrow steep stairs and lack of elevators in the building. Since our student had limited ability to walk on crutches for short distances, he was able to see part of the house, but decided to turn around and wait outside for the group about halfway through. There is unfortunately no alternative route to get through the hiding place of Anne Frank's family.

Many of the city's bars, cafés, and restaurants have outdoor seating in the summer and some accessible indoor space; however, their bathrooms are typically not accessible and oftentimes up or down a flight of very steep and narrow stairs. It is useful to make a list of a few lunch spots and cafes, with both indoor and outdoor seating, that have the ability to accommodate a person in a wheelchair as well as accessible restrooms.

The Hague. The second stop on our program was The Hague, which is located about 40 miles southwest of Amsterdam, easily reached by train. Part of the group, including our disabled student and one of the professors, rode in accessible taxi vans to the central train station with most of the luggage, while the rest made the trek by tram. We reunited at the central train station and headed to our platform.

The train was not really accessible. There were huge gaps between the platform and the train where one could easily get a wheelchair stuck. Additionally, the aisles in the train compartments were too narrow to maneuver with a wheel chair. There was some open space where one could park a wheelchair close to the exits, however it did not make for a comfortable trip as it was a through-fare for people getting on and off, very drafty, right in front of a bathroom, and loud.

Public transportation in The Hague was not as crowded as in Amsterdam. However, we were repeatedly confronted with very unpleasant and outright rude tram conductors as we lifted the wheelchair in and out of the trams. Some of the trams were equipped with a lift or small ramp, but we were never offered that service. At this point, some students in our group had fallen into a good routine of being available and ready should assistance be needed and wanted. Overall, while very convenient and efficient, utilizing public transportation in The Hague was an at times rather aggravating experience.

We stayed in another Stayokay Hostel in The Hague. The room set up was similar to the one in Amsterdam, with a small elevator servicing the building, as well as a bar area and meeting rooms. The staff was once again incredibly nice and helpful. One point to note is that their outdoor patio overlooking the river, a popular hangout spot for guests, did not have a ramp and thus was not accessible with a wheelchair.

Our schedule in The Hague included a variety of visits with International (Criminal) Justice agencies, as well as several cultural landmarks and museums. Some of the agencies (e.g., Europol and the ICC) are housed in recently constructed buildings where accessibility is no issue. The organizations located in older buildings were very accommodating with ramps and small (service) elevators. Of the museums we visited, the Escher and Prison Gate museum in The Hague, as well as the Prinsenhof museum in Delft were located in very old buildings and thus not accessible. The great halls of the Oude and Nieuwe Kerk in Delft could easily be navigated in a wheelchair, while the 376 steps to the top of the bell tower of the Nieuwe Kerk were an obstacle that could not be scaled. In any event, it was helpful to call or email ahead of time informing the contact persons that we had a student in a wheelchair in our group, so

that necessary arrangements could be made or we could be alerted that accessibility might pose a problem due to different issues such as the building structure or a broken elevator and the like. All of our contacts were very professional and willing to help.

During our week in The Hague, students also visited Madurodam⁵, a large outdoor park with miniature models of Dutch landmarks. Scheveningen beach, another stop for the group, boasted a lively boardwalk with numerous bars and restaurants that were accessible with a wheelchair⁶. Many of the bars in The Hague had covered outdoor seating, but were typically not wheelchair-friendly. Again, bathrooms were almost never reachable without having to climb or descend step sets of stairs.

Hamburg. To get from The Hague to Hamburg, our final destination, the available options for the group were to travel by train or bus. We opted to take a bus with Eurolines. The bus was very inaccessible, including steep steps to enter, and a tiny toilet that was hard to get to and maneuver for even an able-bodied person. There were several short stops to provide passengers the opportunity to get off, stretch, and use a bathroom but this was difficult for our student due to the extra time he required to accomplish these tasks. Overall, the experience did not live up to the expectation of a more restful travel when compared to travel by train.

In Hamburg, we relied more on public transportation and it quickly became obvious that additional time was needed to get from one place to another. Some tram stations were not accessible, so we typically opted to exit at a different station and walk/roll to the point of interest. But even the stations that were officially accessible had a cumbersome maze of elevators and long distances to and between the platforms. In addition, Hamburg is another old city with more of the rather uncomfortable cobblestone.

In Hamburg, our group stayed at the Generator hostel in St. Georg, which is centrally and conveniently located across the street from the central train station, a hub to go anywhere in the city and beyond. The hostel's main entrance had several steep steps, but the side entrance featured a wheelchair lift, which in the end turned out to be more undesirable for our student than assistance from peers to go in and out the main entrance due to the time it took to get the lift to work.

The only accessible room was a private room on the first floor, offering a bit more space and privacy compared to the other hostel rooms. The doors to the room were very heavy and hard to open, especially from a seated position. Being on the first floor rather than ground level became an issue when the fire alarm was activated in the middle of the night. With elevators not operating, the student had to crawl down crowded stairs and sustained minor injuries and scrapes.

Our cultural site visits included a harbor cruise, a visit to the Panoptikum and the Tierpark Hagenbeck, as well as playing minigolf and attending a public viewing of a German world cup soccer game. For the harbor cruise, we opted for a bigger boat that had more room and less potential for sea-sickness. The minor trade-off was a lack of access to the outside with a wheelchair. The Panoptikum, one of the oldest wax figure museums, also had several floors without an elevator or lift. The Tierpark (zoo and aquarium), on the other hand, was very accessible with accommodating and trained staff to assist throughout the park.

The group also had appointments with the police and several non-profit organizations. The meeting with the police took place on the third floor of the police department, but an elevator was available only to the first floor. At DrobInn, a drug consumption room and needle exchange, we were able to move our meeting to the main room on the ground floor. Ragazza, a non-profit providing services to drug addicted prostitutes, was housed in a small building with steps throughout. Many restaurants and bars are located in small spaces, but staff were very accommodating. Some obstacles and physical barriers were structural, so it was helpful to scope out potential locales for lunch and dinner and call ahead.

Implications and Portability

Overall, this experience of traveling with a big group that for the first time included a student who used a wheelchair was easier than anticipated, yet at the same time still very eye-opening and humbling. Even though we tried to prepare as much as possible and called ahead to ascertain that accessibility would not be a problem, there were situations, such as the fire alarm, that we simply did not foresee due to our inexperience. The description of some of our experience is not intended to be negative, because all of them were manageable and can be ameliorated with the right preparation. The way the group worked together to ensure inclusiveness was remarkable. It was very apparent that they created lifelong memories and formed a bond that is very unique to this type of program. The structural barriers of old European cities made travel and getting around more cumbersome but in no way impossible. One of the most inspiring lessons learned was watching others in the group becoming more aware of how difficult our surroundings can be for a person with a disability and learning to assist when needed without simply taking over and being inclusive without being (unintentionally) patronizing.

In addition to the factors for consideration and planning purposes explicitly illustrated throughout the

paper, the following points should be contemplated when planning an education abroad program that can include students with physical disabilities. First, the personal needs of the student(s) need to be taken into account. Every person is different with varying levels of mobility and needs. The long hours in the chair, traveling, staying with (at least at the beginning of the trip) strangers in small cramped multi-person hostel rooms with even smaller bathrooms and showers are challenges that are not easily anticipated, even if the student is very independent at home. Adding to the physically strenuous factors of traveling abroad are the emotional and psychological factors that students typically cannot foresee simply due to a lack of reference. The exhaustion, missing home, and not having your regular routine are all challenges that can affect even the most enthusiastic and adventurous study abroad student. It is also not uncommon for students to take regular prescription medicines, and it is very important to continue medications while abroad. Since laws regarding the regulation of medicinal substances vary from country to country, students should familiarize themselves with the regulations in the places to be visited and if possible carry a valid prescription or note from their physician in case the medication gets lost or stolen. For this conversation to be initiated in a timely manner, it is imperative for promotional and informational materials on the program to encourage students to disclose any disability early on so their needs can be met. Additionally, school policy should be amended to allow the director and coordinator to initiate conversations and planning prior to the institutionally set payment deadlines.

Another possible complication is associated with the functioning of the wheelchair. Unfortunately, there is a chance that parts get broken as early as on the initial flight. Depending on the issue, bike shops might be able to repair flat tires or other small mechanical problems, provided they can get spare parts if needed. Fixing a power chair can be more tricky. Additionally, in many countries 220 volts are the norm, rather than the American standard of 110 volts, which might impact the ability to properly charge a power chair. Mobility International USA (n.d.) has several very helpful tip sheets and first-person accounts addressing travel abroad with a physical disability. Bringing a backup manual chair and extra tubes or tires would be wise. Research whether international vendors of the wheelchair company, and shops where wheelchairs can be rented on site or repaired prior to the trip⁷.

Students need to have access to information on what is available and what might be difficult abroad. At this time, there are several organizations that provide excellent free resources and guides for students with

disabilities, such as MIUSA. Several countries have similar publications, although not always available in English. The Education Abroad Office should include such information in their promotional materials and on their website.

Above all, it is imperative to create an inclusive environment and keep the channels of communication open to all students, since the student with the physical disability will not be the only one affected personally and emotionally. At the beginning of the trip, it is likely that students need to be reminded of small things, such as not standing right in front of a person in a wheelchair with their back facing them, or not crossing streets when curbs are high and inaccessible. Our experience was that very soon most of the students were very tuned in to the needs of everyone in the group, and we were able to create a wonderful experience. We learned that even when we thought we had prepared, such as having called ahead to ensure accessibility or booking an accessible room, the reality was not always in line with what was confirmed, and we improvised and pulled together, which turned out to be a series of great, albeit unplanned group bonding exercises. In conclusion, preparation and flexibility are key to a successful inclusive experience for all participants.

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About the Author

Tanja C. Link received her law degree from Eberhard-Karls Universität Tübingen and Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Georgia. Her experience includes directing a study abroad program for college students to the Netherlands and Germany. She is currently an Assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Kennesaw State University. Her research interests focus on vulnerable populations and their experiences with regard to a variety of sociological and criminological issues. She can be reached by email at: tlink1@kennesaw.edu

Footnotes

¹ According to Open Doors (2013, 2015), short term programs have increased from 58.1% in 2010/11 to 62.1 in 2012/13, while mid-length (one semester or one to two quarters) and long-term programs have decreased in the same time frame from 38% to 34.9%, and 3.9% to 3.0%, respectively.

² Our application deadline that includes a small non-refundable deposit for a summer program is the beginning of February. Full payment is received by mid-March.

³ <http://amsterdamcanalcruises.nl/index.html>, across the street from the Heineken Experience

⁴ According to Accessible Amsterdam, the Blue Boat Company provides a ramp, but we could not confirm the actual overall accessibility of their boat

⁵ <http://www.madurodam.nl/en/>

⁶ Some of our favorite casual eateries for the group in The Hague are Vapiano's (<http://www.vapiano.com/en/home/> - bathroom on second floor with no elevator) and Will's Pancake House (<http://www.willspancakehouse.com/>)

⁷ For Amsterdam, contact the SGOA- Stichting Gehandicapt Overleg Amsterdam (Amsterdam Forum for the Disabled), Phone: + 31(0)20 577795, E-mail: sgoa@xs4all.nl or • RSA Wheelchair Rental Amsterdam, Williem Fenengastrat 33-35, 1096 BM Amsterdam, Tel: 020 435 2540 Fax: 020 435 2541, Email info@reacare.nl; In Hamburg: Reha-Technik, Morgenroth GmbH, Großlohering 68 / 70, 22143 Hamburg