Study Abroad Access & Inclusivity for Students on the Autism Spectrum

FORUM ON INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON
MARCH 31, 2017
Introductions

• Dr. Peg Alden, Landmark College
  • Currently: Director of International Education, Professor of Social Sciences, Program Director of Landmark College’s Study Abroad Program to The Netherlands
  • Previously: Founding Director of The School for International Training’s Gender & Sexuality Studies Program in Amsterdam

• Andy Donahue, Landmark College
  • Director of Social Pragmatics Programs
  • Support Specialist for Landmark’s pilot Study Abroad (+) program to Berlin this summer

• Participants

studyabroad@Landmark.edu
• One of the only accredited colleges in the U.S. designed exclusively for students who learn differently, including students with learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
• Offers a range of AA/BA programs to a student body of +/- 450.
Few “experts” here

- Academic Search Premier turns up one result for “study abroad” and “autism”.
- Google search for “study abroad” and “autism”:
  - Penn State study abroad program in Ireland on *Culture and Disability*, Kent State study abroad program in Brazil on *Global Understanding of Autism*
  - Putney Student Travel high school program to Oxford & London for students on the spectrum (discontinued)
  - Personal blogs (*Abroad Whilst Autistic*)
  - NAFSA *Education Abroad Advising to Students with Disabilities*
  - MIUSA (*Mobility International U.S.A.*)

**OUR GOAL:** TO SHARE SOME IDEAS THAT WE AT LANDMARK COLLEGE ARE EXPLORING AND TO OPEN A DISCUSSION WITH PARTICIPANTS
Agenda

• Review definitions and diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
• Framing the issues for students on the spectrum on study abroad
• Small group work on challenges and ideas for addressing challenges in the pre-program, program and post-program phases of study abroad
• Two approaches to creating more ASD-friendly programs
• Voices of students on the spectrum from study abroad
# Autism Defined

**American Psychiatric Association**

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of “Mental Disorders”*

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<tr>
<th>DSM-4</th>
<th>DSM-5</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pervasive Developmental Disorders</strong>&lt;br&gt;Autism&lt;br&gt;Asperger’s&lt;br&gt;Childhood Disintegrative Disorder&lt;br&gt;Rett’s&lt;br&gt;Pervasive Developmental Disorder-NOS</td>
<td><strong>Autism Spectrum Disorder</strong>&lt;br&gt;Level 1: requiring support&lt;br&gt;Level 2: requiring substantial support&lt;br&gt;Level 3: requiring very substantial support</td>
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**2013**
DSM 5 Diagnostic Criteria A: Persistent deficits in social communication & social interaction

- Abnormal social approach
- Failure of back & forth conversation
- Doesn’t share interests, emotions, or affect
- Fails to initiate or respond to social interactions
- Deficits in nonverbal communication
- Deficits in developing, understanding, & maintaining relationships

**Autism spectrum disorder**
DSM 5 Diagnostic Criteria B: Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities

- Insists on sameness
- Repetitive motor movements
- Rigid thinking
- Perseverative interests
- Extra distress at small changes
- Hyper- or hypo-reactive to sensory input

Autism spectrum disorder
Framing the Issues for Students on the Spectrum on Study Abroad

• **Pre-program Considerations**: recruitment, application process, readiness assessment

• **Program Considerations**: academic success & skill building, travel & residential issues, social integration & learning

• **Post-program Considerations**: re-entry, cultural reflection, transfer of skills/learning
Given the deficits in social communication & social interaction and the restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities...

What might the challenges be for ASD students on study abroad? How might these challenges be addressed by study abroad providers?

Small group work

• Pre-program Considerations: recruitment, application process, readiness assessment
• Program Considerations: academic success & skill building, travel & residential issues, social integration & learning
• Post-program Considerations: re-entry, cultural reflection, transfer of skills/learning
Pre-program considerations: Examples of recruitment, application & readiness issues

- CHALLENGE
- IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
Pre-program considerations: Examples of recruitment, application & readiness issues

**CHALLENGE**
- Much more involvement of parents
- Self-understanding (meta-cognition)
- Self-advocacy
- Program anxiety
- Ideal participant (per marketing) = “flexible”, “adaptable”, “tolerant of uncertainty”, “sensitive to others”, “socially curious”, able to “get along”

**IDEA FOR ADDRESSING**
- Use parents as allies (when appropriate)
- Compare student’s understanding with advisor, instructor, resident director, and parent understanding
- Face-to-face interview is very important. Pose hypothetical cultural dilemmas. Allow time for processing.
- Orientations, program handbooks, previewing
- Review marketing materials with ASD in mind
Program considerations (A): Examples of academic success & skill building issues

- CHALLENGE
- IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
# Program considerations (A): Examples of academic success & skill building issues

## CHALLENGE
- Academic and cultural learning can decrease as the program goes on
- Upsetting cultural activities can be overwhelming
- Academic anxiety

## IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
- Encourage “down time”
- Keep the goal on ACADEMIC and CULTURAL learning
- Preview/allow for opting out/virtual options
- Decrease transition/Increase learning-COGNITIVE CONSERVATION
- Office hours/academic support
- Post detailed daily/weekly/program agendas and schedules
Program considerations (B): Examples of Travel & Residential Issues

- CHALLENGE
- IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
Program considerations (B): Examples of Travel & Residential Issues

- **CHALLENGE**
  - Roommate challenges
  - Homestay anxiety
  - Directional issues/easy to get lost
  - Limited ability or interest in exploration
  - Limited interest in new & unusual foods
  - Physical limitations

- **IDEA FOR ADDRESSING**
  - Offer single rooms when possible
  - Provide coaching and understanding hosts
  - Arrange travel partners
  - Student carries contact information card
  - Suggestions of “familiar” foods or shared food preparation
  - “test” for skills (i.e. biking)
Program Considerations (C): Examples of Social Integration & Learning Issues

- CHALLENGE
- IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
Program Considerations (C): Examples of Social Integration & Learning Issues

**CHALLENGE**
- Slow to make social connections
- Group impatience with behaviors associated with ASD
- Getting into social “binds”
- Inappropriate use of “personal space”

**IDEA FOR ADDRESSING**
- Delayed “icebreakers”
- If possible, have student explain their “difference”, mix-up groups
- Be very clear about rules (alcohol in particular), “tight” programs
- Be explicit
Post-program Considerations: Examples of Re-entry & Cultural Reflection Issues

- CHALLENGE
- IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
Post-program Considerations: Examples of Re-entry & Cultural Reflection Issues

• CHALLENGE
  • Heightened difficulty with articulating the study abroad experience to others
  • Adjusting to the “old” schedule

• IDEA FOR ADDRESSING
  • Allow for sharing in non-threatening forums, such as a blog or informal presentation
  • “Resume builders” as part of wrap-up
  • Stressing the importance of self-care: sleep, healthy food, down time
Two approaches/phases to creating ASD-friendly study abroad

Phase one: continue with current program models, but provided ASD-relevant information

Phase two: develop (re-evaluate) your programs incorporating ASD-friendly elements. i.e. Landmark’s STUDY ABROAD (+) model.
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## STUDY ABROAD (+) PROGRAM

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* These program elements would be optional or scaffolded.
VOICES OF STUDENTS ON THE SPECTRUM

- MIUSA – Mobility International USA
- personal blogs
- Landmark College student reflections

At Landmark we are undertaking a research project that will continue to ask students (parents and program directors), “What is likely to make for the best short term study abroad program for students on the autism spectrum?” Stay tuned or get involved.