



## Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

# Yes, Youth with Disabilities Can Travel to Study Abroad

presented by:

**Michele Scheib**, Project Specialist

**Melissa Mitchell**, Outreach and Training Coordinator

National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

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**Ms. Mavis:** Good afternoon, everyone. <sup>1</sup> Welcome to our teleconference entitled, “Yes, Youth with Disabilities Can Travel to Study Abroad.” I’m Ann Mavis and I’m the Coordinator for the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition at the University of Minnesota and we’re very pleased today to have Michele Scheib and Melissa Mitchell of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange at Mobility International USA as our presenters.

Michele Scheib has worked for Mobility International USA since 1998 and is currently Project Specialist for its National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, focusing primarily on youth-related initiatives. Michele previously served as manager of that project. She has a master’s degree in Comparative and International Development Education from the University of Minnesota where she addressed the topic of students with non-apparent disabilities and education abroad. In 2003, Michele received a Rotary Scholarship to visit disability organizations in Thailand. In 1994, she volunteered as a teacher at a school for deaf children in rural Kenya.

Melissa Mitchell is the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange Outreach and Training Coordinator. She holds a degree in communications from Central Washington University and has developed several trainings for the National Clearinghouse that are based upon recent publications. Melissa uses a wheelchair and has a service dog and can relate her training to her own experiences studying and teaching abroad on exchange programs in France. Prior to this, she worked on Washington State’s Disability Council Youth Development Project’s disaster preparedness training for people with disabilities.

The format of today’s call will be a 45-minute presentation and then we’ll have a question and answer period. We ask that you hold your questions until after the presentation is completed.

Also, there is a PowerPoint presentation that

Michele and Melissa have put together and it’s on our Web site if you want to follow along. The Web site is <http://www.ncset.org> and if you go to Teleconferences you’ll see the link to the PowerPoint.

I’ll now turn the presentation over to Melissa.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Thank you for that introduction. Good afternoon, everyone. It’s great to be here with you. As was previously stated, our presentation today is entitled, “Yes, Youth with Disabilities Can Travel to Study Abroad.” We have put this presentation together especially for the NCSET audience and hope you will find the information useful.

<sup>2</sup> Our objectives today include discussing why international exchange is important for youth with disabilities, the nuts and bolts of participating in the exchange programs and frequently asked questions about that process, and how to implement these ideas and concepts into student plans and address possible follow-up actions.

<sup>3</sup> I’d like to start by explaining a little bit about what we mean when we say international exchange. Here at the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, we consider international exchange to include things like studying abroad through high school or university programs or international research projects, working abroad, volunteering abroad, and interning abroad. Examples of these types of programs would include visiting historical places in Germany, living with a host family in Japan, or studying at a school in Brazil.

<sup>4-5</sup> The next important question that we would like to entertain is, “Why go abroad?” Many people say, “Well, yeah, it seems like fun and seems like a good thing to do, but why is it really important to do it?” Particularly for people with disabilities, it’s a great opportunity to gain and practice skills, such as time management, interpersonal communication, self-advocacy, and problem-solving. Beyond that, international experiences serve to dispel precon-

*Superscript numbers refer to the slide of the accompanying PowerPoint being discussed.*

ceived notions people in decision-making positions—such as college admissions officers, employers, and others who control resources—may have about individuals with disabilities.

Furthermore, people with disabilities may have special skills—such as the ability to communicate non-verbally—that go unrecognized in day-to-day living at home but become indispensable during an international experience. Also, people with disabilities often speak about feeling out of place or sticking out in their own culture. Well, one of the advantages of traveling internationally and going on an international exchange program is that everyone on the program gets to feel that way. Everyone is a foreigner, and so they get a chance to experience that feeling of being out of place and relating to that feeling. Lastly, people who have gone abroad gain new self-confidence and understanding of their true capability versus what they imagine themselves to be capable of.

<sup>6</sup> Next, international exchange provides a great opportunity to gain what the business and employment world might refer to as transferable skills:

- One such transferable skill people have stated that they have gained through their international experience time and time again in articles, interviews, and personal conversations is time management. Because if you don't show up for that train or plane on time, it's gone and so is your money, usually.
- Meeting deadlines grows in importance—applications deadlines, paperwork deadlines, choosing various elements of programs, etc.
- Budgeting for expenses, making sure you have enough money for food and snacks and souvenirs and things like that, becomes a necessary skill.
- Asking for your own reasonable accommodations and, furthermore, being able to explain to someone what you need and how you need it done is very important and often a skill gained by young people with disabilities who go abroad.
- Creative problem solving also relates back to the last topic. Students ask for accommodations without considering other options that may be available beyond that accommodation, such as a student who may be used to having a person translate or interpret for them for sign language

could go the route of having someone take notes or accommodations like real-time captioning.

- Record-keeping and managing tickets, flight numbers, and emergency phone numbers so that they are available when needed, becomes critical to learn.
- Interpersonal communication—this is a big one that comes out in travel. Relating to others and talking to others and helping others understand what your situation is and what needs to be done.
- Next, cross-cultural understanding. In today's ever expanding global economy, this is absolutely necessary for anyone who wishes to work in even the most entry-level positions.
- Building a support network. We find that young people with disabilities are so comfortable in their existing support networks at home that they don't get the opportunity to practice the skill of building new networks and finding people who are able to help them in a given situation. When you travel, it's starting anew and it's figuring out who knows how to get from place to place, where's the best place to get a quick fix on a wheelchair? Those kinds of things are learned time and time again during an international experience.
- Flexibility, foreign language skills, and independent thinking round out the list that I have today. However, this list is not all-inclusive.

<sup>7</sup> International experiences can do a lot to improve a young person's chances of successful transition by allowing them to experience and use the skills necessary for integrating into a new community, such as making new connections, networking with new friends and local services, finding housing, and setting new daily routines according to the community and their required tasks for day-to-day living.

It can also help the student identify new interests and try activities outside of their normal comfort zone. Beyond that, some students find that it solidifies their commitments to their current paths, such as the student who thinks that they may be interested in ecology and they go on an international exchange with an ecology focus and they find that they really enjoy field work or that they're really good at maintaining records and identifying species.

And now I will turn it over to Michele for the

next part of the presentation.

**Ms. Scheib:** Melissa talked a lot about some of those skills that we're really looking for youth with disabilities to develop as part of their transition plans, as they're getting ready to go out into the community. Although self-determination skills are really important, another important aspect of international exchange is the intercultural and global awareness that is gained from being on an exchange program.<sup>8</sup> There's a lot of focus lately on what works and the research that shows that it works.

There is a recent study done by AFS Intercultural Exchange Programs along with a research consulting firm (and if you don't know, AFS is a long-standing high school exchange program that sends people worldwide to do study abroad programs or volunteer abroad). They did a survey of over 2,000 of their alumni that had participated in their programs as well as a large control group. What they found was that 47% of the students became fluent in the language of their host culture. These are students who are spending anywhere from a summer to a semester to a year immersed in a foreign language. All of them do not need to know the language before going, so that's quite impressive.

They also found incredible gains in intercultural competence, knowledge about other countries, and comfort in interacting with people from other cultures. These are all things that you're hearing now are important in business, trade, and all of the different fields out there—there are more global perspectives needed, and more multicultural workforces. So these are valuable skills that youth with disabilities, just as any youth, need to learn, experience, and become aware of.

In writing an article for the new issue of our *A World Awaits You* student journal, I had the opportunity to interview many young adults with disabilities who had gone overseas (mostly during the summer when they were in high school) and it was quite telling.<sup>9</sup> There was a student that I talked with that had attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, and I'm going to quote a part of what she said: "My parents said I was more open to things after my exchange. It gave me an understanding of other cultures and how things work in different countries." So it really shows that what the AFS research study showed is true as well for youth with disabilities that

are going abroad and learning these skills.

<sup>10</sup> When they're overseas, students are away from their support networks, like Melissa said, and that's what makes it unique.<sup>11</sup> In the recent large study, the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, I found it interesting to see that students with disabilities are improving as far as more and more are taking foreign languages when they are in high school. It also noted that when students leave school, those who went away from home, away from their support network, whether it was going away to college or going into the military or I'd like to think, going to another country, they tended to step up to increased expectations, they matured, and they showed greater independence. I think this is part of why we should encourage youth with disabilities to consider going away from home and having an international experience.

<sup>12-15</sup> On the PowerPoint, I included some other quotes from the students I interviewed, and I encourage you to read them. A lot of them talk about how being in another country, when mom and dad weren't there, really increased their independence and that was transferable when they returned home. When a challenge came up, they had more self-confidence and better problem-solving skills to deal with those barriers and get through them. These are students that are now in college or are recent graduates looking back and seeing how that international experience has impacted their lives.

I think I'm just going to end there. I encourage you go and view our *A World Awaits You* journal that's up on our Web site (<http://www.miusa.org/ncde/away>) because it's really interesting to read all of the experiences that these young people had and how it expanded their horizons and improved their skills. Students with different disabilities are included there. Even when they had difficult experiences overseas, all of them said it was more than worth it. The benefits outweighed any barriers that came up.

So, with that, we're going to talk a little bit about some of the barriers that might come up and also some of the how-to's that make an international exchange program work.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Okay.<sup>16</sup> We're going to get down to what we like to call the nuts and bolts: choosing a program, foreign language requirement, costs, and obtaining accommodations and services.

So, let's start right off with some things that need to be considered for a young person with a disability who is trying to choose an international program.

<sup>17</sup> First off, there are many different types of programs. There are programs where an entire family could participate together. There are group programs where you can go as a tourist or as a school, volunteer, or leadership group or you can go as an individual on a work-study internship or volunteer-type program.

<sup>18</sup> Finding a program can be challenging because there are many wonderful programs out there. And many of them have also had experience with participants with various types of disabilities and disability categories in their history. I would recommend searching our online exchange program database (<http://www.miusa.org/exchangeprograms>) using keywords specifically like "high school" and "youth" to find programs that are most open to participants of that age group. There's also another Web site: <http://www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com/>. Or, check with our Roundtable Consortium advisory member, CSIET, at <http://www.csiet.org/>.

**Ms. Scheib:** CSIET is the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel. They're a national umbrella organization for all of these smaller organizations across the U.S. that run youth exchange programs. CSIET has set standards to ensure that these programs are running safe and high-quality programs. So, if you go on to Web sites and find a program that's run by an organization, see if they are also listed on CSIET's Web site because that means that they have met these national standards.

**Ms. Mitchell:** And finally, never underestimate your local teachers, counselors, and community organizations, such as Rotary or Sister Cities International, for some really interesting opportunities.

<sup>19</sup> Anyone looking for an appropriate international exchange program should ask a number of questions, including:

- How long has this program existed?
- Where's the organization's home base? This question becomes particularly important for people with disabilities because it addresses whether or not laws like the ADA and 504 could be applicable in the program.
- What do your program fees cover?

- What are the cancellation policies?
- How are host families selected? Most programs for high-school age students have host families or if they go as a group, they live together in a hotel- or dormitory-like setting.
- What are the language requirements?
- How are participants selected?
- Are there any deposits that are necessary? Are those deposits refundable? If so, how much, by when, and when is it too late to request a refund?
- What arrangements are made for the possibility that someone may need to return home early due to illness, extreme homesickness, family issues? Those kinds of things come up.

<sup>20</sup> Disability-specific concerns that persons should be aware of while they are looking for a program include:

1. A person with a disability should not be required to answer any questions related to their disability prior to their being accepted as a participant in the program.
2. Once one has been accepted as a participant, it's fully appropriate for a person to disclose the fact that he/she has disabilities and may need accommodations and for the program to begin asking what that means and what does the cost look like, if there is any. Half of all accommodations provided incur no financial costs.
3. Participants need to be aware that a program based in the U.S. cannot legally create special rules or limit the participation of that person on the basis of their disability status. So, for instance, if you are a wheelchair user, and part of the program is to go on a field trip to the beach and you're supposed to take a bus, they cannot decide that just because you are in a wheelchair that you cannot participate in the program. If that field trip was meant to be a part of your program, they need to look into making the bus accessible or other satisfactory alternatives.

<sup>21</sup> Foreign languages. This is a huge question that comes up time and time again for students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities or who are in a disability category where

their ability to learn language and meet language requirements may be affected. Most high school programs do not require previous knowledge of a foreign language. It doesn't mean that a person might not learn some while they're over there. After all, they are living in the culture.

It should be noted that we've been told by many people with various learning disabilities that they were told time and time again here in the U.S. that they couldn't learn a foreign language, that they would be excused from the requirement and that they shouldn't worry about it. However, when these same students participated on international exchange programs in Spain, in Germany, in other places that are very common for people to go, they found that just by living in the culture and being immersed, they were able to learn the language. Yes, it did take them a little bit longer to learn it or they might have had to take notes or learning to write was difficult, but they did learn to communicate in the language and get their needs met on a day-to-day basis.

Secondly, on high school programs, often the teachers, exchange leaders, or other adult chaperones who go with the group facilitate the language barriers; they are familiar with the language of the host countries and it's their job to make sure that the group gets what it needs and everyone gets the food they want, appropriate accommodations, and things like that.

Students with all types of disabilities do and have enjoyed trying to use the local language. A group leader might say to the group, okay, we're going to go here today. What's one phrase that you could try to say to somebody in a café and make yourself understood?

<sup>22</sup> In our PowerPoint we have a quote from Rebecca Elsen who has both a learning and physical disability who chose to study abroad in Germany for a year. And while she says it took her a long time to learn the language, she says that within seven months, she learned it. She could understand everything, she could speak to everyone and they could understand her even if it wasn't perfect. Seven months to learn German is not too shabby.

<sup>23</sup> I'm going to turn it over to Michele to talk about program and travel costs.

**Ms. Scheib:** Okay. The good news is that there are a lot of scholarships out there for youth

exchange programs. The other thing, though, that students often have to do is fundraising. That's very typical, especially for the summer music exchange to Europe or the sports team that goes to Australia. Fundraising needs can be anywhere from \$500-\$2,000. Most students are pretty successful. If they have a real clear idea of what they're going to do abroad, a lot of people are going to feel with this tangible goal, they will give money to help a young person achieve that. We do have on our Web site some fund-raising tips that have worked in the past (<http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/tipsheets/fundraising>). There are a lot of good ideas out there.

Many programs at the high school level are low-cost. They know people don't have a lot of money as high school students, unlike maybe if they go in college where they can use their financial aid or their vocational rehabilitation funding towards career-related exchange programs.

Some of the scholarships out there: I know AFS, Youth for Understanding or AYUSA, and other large youth exchange programs, have scholarships. Ask about their diversity scholarships because a lot of times they will use disabilities in their definition of diversity. Also, Rotary International, there are Rotary Clubs in many cities across the U.S., has a fully funded youth exchange program that you have to apply for through the Rotary Club in your area. They have been supportive of including youth and young adults with disabilities in their scholarship exchange programs. Also, just look on our Web site. We have other disability-related fellowships listed for all ages (<http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/financialaid/us>). Also, talk to the school advisor or whoever is leading the program.

<sup>24</sup> As far as money for accommodations and services, that's not as clear-cut. The program falls under the ADA if they're U.S.-based regarding the application process. They can't discriminate. But when the group actually goes overseas, the ADA is less clear as far as whether the exchange needs to provide and pay for accommodations that are happening outside of the U.S. Some people might take the legal approach and try to get accommodations paid for. There are also other ways that you can still make it happen through creative thinking and collaboration.

Many people want to see this young person who's qualified for the program be able to go and

to participate fully in the program. So, preparation should involve a lot of talking with the group leader up front, talking with the people overseas to find out what accommodations are needed, finding out what they need to bring with them, what they could get overseas. A lot of times there will be resources that they can find overseas or that a fellow student that's going on the program can provide. The group programs are run by adults as leaders and as chaperones, so there is support on the programs compared to an independent exchange program where they might be the only one placed at a high school in Finland with a staff member in the host country that checks in with the student and host family periodically. Some high school programs that go for a year are like that. I interviewed a couple of students with disabilities on these more independent programs, and it's just a matter of finding out what's available. There are laws listed on our Web site as far as what is provided for educational services for persons with disabilities in other countries (<http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/youthexchange/othercountrylaws>). Use us as a resource as well if you need to find out what is available overseas as far as transportation or other services. That's one of the things we do. We provide free information and referral services and can research some of the questions you might have and help you able to find some of the resources to make it work for the student.

What I found is that some of the students I interviewed did not ask for accommodations, which was particularly surprising with some of the deaf students who didn't even ask for a sign interpreter. One who did was lucky in finding an interpreter that really wanted to travel to the country and paid her way to come along. So, there are different things that work. Sometimes service organizations within a community can help. Ask us and we'll help brainstorm with you.

<sup>25</sup> So let's move now into implementation. We've talked a little bit about why it's important for youth with disabilities to participate on these overseas experiences, and discussed some how-to's and practical tips. So now let's talk a little bit about what to do from this point forward. How you can implement what we've talked about today. Melissa is going to do this part.

**Ms. Mitchell:** How do we make these hap-

pen in our own communities? Both NCSET and NCDE's goals are quality, opportunity, and including students with disabilities in all opportunities that are available to those students who do not have disabilities. Unfortunately, students with disabilities historically have not participated at the same levels as non-disabled students in international exchange. It is estimated to be about 1-3% of the people who participate in international exchange are students with disabilities, and that only counts those who self-identify. The exchange community knows that there are a lot of students with non-apparent or invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities, ADHD, and other categories who are going abroad who are not self-identifying for one reason or another.

How can we help those students with disabilities who are interested in international exchange, and who can benefit from those opportunities, who are aware of these opportunities and are actively preparing to participate in these programs? <sup>26-30</sup> We have some suggestions for including international experiences in the student's plans, be it a 504 plan or an IEP or whatever system the student has set up to meet their educational needs and accommodation requests, recognizing that a lot of this may be done informally.

- First, and what may seem obvious, become proficient in a second language. While this is not necessary to qualify for many programs or some countries where English is the primary language, a lot of people's interest in international travel/exchange is sparked while learning a second language.
- Successfully complete World History classes where they are introduced to the world as a whole—its geography, some of the culture and the history of various places in the world.
- They could, on their own time, volunteer with local or international organizations such as their chapter of Sister Cities International or their chapter of Rotary International. Both of these organizations have a specific youth focus as part of their mission.
- Another thing the student could do and could be written into their plan is to actively participate in a school cultural or international group or language club or clubs for students with Spanish

heritage, students with African American heritage, etc. These kinds of things often spark an interest in going to other places in the world or places that are related to a student's heritage.

- Encourage students to meet with guidance counselors and discuss international exchange as an option and to research programs that are available to these students and which programs they may already meet the definition of a qualified applicant.
- Another thing the student could do if they are interested in international exchange but not quite sure about going or concerned about not knowing anybody, is to take advantage of online opportunities for international pen pals and international classroom connections at places like <http://www.iearn.org/>, <http://www.kidlink.org/>, <http://www.virtualclassroom.org/>, and <http://www.epals.com/>. All of these places are moderated and youth-focused and quite safe.
- Another thing that a school or classroom or a student might consider doing is participating in activities or hosting activities during International Education Week, which this year is November 14-18 (<http://iew.state.gov/>).
- Next, a school or a teacher may wish to invite a program like AFS or Youth for Understanding or another exchange recruiter to present to the students or to consider your school for placing one of their incoming students with disabilities.
- Another thing that could be done on a school basis is to begin a Model United Nations program in your community or to involve students with disabilities in a program that may already exist within the community.
- Have a student gather information on participating in international exchange as part of the exit or postschool outcomes and assessing its possible impacts.
- A student or a family may be interested in getting their feet wet with international exchange by becoming a host family for an international student with a disability or leading a group of students abroad.
- Parents can attend inclusive education conferences abroad and teachers can also attend professional

exchanges to get a better understanding of situations in other countries and share their knowledge with others. Then teachers and parents can bring that knowledge back to the young people and the students that they are in contact with.

- We also ask as part of your action steps that you would let us at the clearinghouse know of IEP or transition plans that have included international activities as well as if you hear a story of a student who has participated in an international exchange.
- Finally, we encourage you to read and share our *A World Awaits You* magazine (AWAY for short). Our most recent issue focuses on teens abroad (<http://www.miusa.org/ncde/away>).

<sup>31</sup> I'd like to go through just a little bit about what the NCDE is and what we do. Our primary responsibility is to research and respond to individual requests for information. This service is provided for free and is administered by Mobility International USA through a federal grant from the U.S. Department of State and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. We provide technical advising on issues related to disabilities and exchange, both to individuals who are seeking to participate and exchange organizations who are seeking to better include a participant with a disability. We also publish many how-to books, tip sheets, and personal stories of exchange participants with disabilities. Many of these are free and downloadable and available on our Web site.

We maintain two different peer networks. One is a peer-to-peer network made up of individuals with disabilities from around the world who have all participated in an international program and wish to share their experience and their lessons learned with somebody who is just preparing to or is thinking about participating in such programs. The other is our colleague-to-colleague network for exchange professionals.

Finally, we provide an online database of disability organizations and exchange opportunities worldwide. It is searchable and updated regularly.

<sup>32</sup> Our contact information for those of you who don't have it is included in the PowerPoint is MIUSA, PO Box 10767, Eugene, Oregon 97440 USA, Tel/TTY: 541-343-1284, Fax: 541-343-6812, Email: [clearinghouse@miusa.org](mailto:clearinghouse@miusa.org). We are located in Eugene, Oregon, which means that we do work

on Pacific Standard Time. Our staff can be found in the office on a regular basis, Monday through Friday, 9 to 5 p.m. And our Web site is <http://www.miusa.org/> for Mobility International USA. Once you go to that page, just click on National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange and you will find all of our information and contacts.

**Ms. Scheib:** It looks like we're getting close to time to open it up for questions, but I did want to just briefly mention that we didn't get a chance to cover the topic of foreign exchange students with disabilities that come here and are enrolled in our U.S. schools. They come from all over. We have worked with many of these students and heard their stories of what it took to adapt to the U.S. education system.<sup>33</sup> We had an article just recently published, I think just last week, in the LRP Inclusive Education Programs Newsletter. It's available on <http://www.lrp.com/>. The article addresses the legal issues, how the IDEA and ADA and other disability laws protect and impact foreign exchange students while they are here, and what the rights and responsibilities are once you have a foreign exchange student at your school or in your community. It also includes tips for when these students arrive, and don't know, for example, grade 2 English Braille. Some might not come with mobility skills. Some might come with all of these. These are usually students that are top-notch in their schools, which is why they received a scholarship or were selected to come to the U.S. They can be really enriching students to have in our classrooms and we're happy to answer any questions you have questions about those foreign exchange students that might come here.

So, Ann, I think we're just going to turn it over to you and you can open it up for questions.

**Ms. Mavis:** Thanks so much. That really was a lot of information and you did a great job of letting us all know the reasons why students with disabilities should travel abroad whenever possible. Are there any questions out there?

**Ms. Freeman:** My name is Glenda Freeman and I work in the field but I am also the mother of an 18-year-old with a fairly significant physical disability, cerebral palsy, which really affects all his activities of daily living. My question is whether it is really realistic to think that he could be able to do an exchange because he really does need a lot of

personal care.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Glenda, I'm going to personally answer that question because I am a person with cerebral palsy myself. I've traveled abroad and I know many other people with cerebral palsy with varying degrees from extremely significant to barely noticeable who have all traveled abroad. It is possible for him to travel abroad and it is possible to make arrangements for personal assistance while traveling abroad.

It would be up to you and your son to work out what exactly his needs would be and how that personal assistance would need to look. Not knowing him and not knowing his level of disability, some people when they go abroad actually find that they need less help than they thought they would need whereas other people go abroad and they all of a sudden realize everything that their family actually did for them without ever being asked, becomes an eye-opening experience as to how much is just done without ever questioning why it's done that way.

**Ms. Scheib:** We do have, Glenda, a tip sheet on our Web site. We have lots of tip sheets to address these specific questions and we have one on what if he needs a personal assistant while abroad (<http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/tipsheets/providingacompersonalassistant>). We also have a couple of stories of people who talk about how they did it:

- [http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/copy\\_of\\_stories/physicaldisability/away7johana](http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/copy_of_stories/physicaldisability/away7johana)
- [http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/copy\\_of\\_stories/physicaldisability/away7shanda](http://www.miusa.org/ncdel/copy_of_stories/physicaldisability/away7shanda)

The biggest issue is funding. For the most part, programs don't pay. Our organization, Mobility International USA, runs one outbound summer program a year for three weeks for 18-24 year olds. We went to Japan recently. We do provide some partial funding and scholarships for people who need personal assistance, and we always have at least two people who bring personal assistants along on our exchange. So there are some programs like ours that will provide or help provide the funding. Otherwise, it's going to have to be a lot of fundraising. Depending on whether or not he can find other people in the group to support him on the airplane ride over, he might be able to find and communicate with someone overseas to be an

assistant so you don't have to pay to send someone with him. Maybe someone will go along with the group. People have found various solutions. But it's certainly possible and we've heard of it working.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Another resource that we have that might interest you and your son is our peer-to-peer network, which right now numbers 275 individuals. Forty of them are people with cerebral palsy and about 15 of them traveled with personal assistance and would be more than happy to talk with you and your son about the nuts and bolts for traveling with a personal assistant: what worked, what didn't work, what they wished they would have done differently, what they thought they did really well, all of those kinds of things. What would be really interesting for you to consider as his mother is this may be the perfect chance for him to learn how to choose a personal assistant and how to explain his needs and how to set up that working relationship without a lot of risk, being that he could go abroad with a group program and if something fell through, I'm sure one of his friends would pick up the slack.

**Ms. Freeman:** Thank you.

**Ms. Scheib:** You're welcome. And if you do get to that point where you're actually doing this, where you've already found a program and he's going, please contact us again and we can talk about the personal assistant issues: how much the assistant is going to get paid, the time schedule commitments, and other details to think through.

**Lynette:** This is Lynette. I'm the transition program director for Vermont Parenting Information Center. I have a question about how to promote the programs that are available within the schools, not being in the school myself and just working directly with parents and youth. Do I start with the parent and say, "Your child has a transition plan, we can write foreign exchange goals," or something like that? Or do I actually go to the high school? I'm just trying to figure out, do these kids do it on their own, or do they do it with high school groups or what is the norm? I think that's what I'm asking.

**Ms. Scheib:** There are a lot of options out there and it really depends on the students and what their goals are for the exchange. What they hope to achieve by going on an exchange.

**Lynette:** I have worked with some kids that have been excluded from school trips. Like the

fourth-year Spanish class going to Spain. "Johnny can't go because he is deaf, or blind."

**Ms. Scheib:** That's where you call us. We advise the people who run these programs. Many don't know what's possible. And if it's being offered through the schools...

**Lynette:** We have to be able to access it. Yes.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Technically, under the ADA and 504, they cannot offer a program that specifically excludes a student with a disability if the student is otherwise qualified to go on the program, such as a requirement for a foreign language program that probably calls for a certain level of proficiency.

**Lynette:** Right. Exactly. If the child has participated in the four years of Spanish...

**Ms. Scheib:** Yes, we think they should go and we can work with the program or teacher to troubleshoot. We have a lot of ideas to find out what is needed overseas. We have a lot of information, and can walk through people's misconceptions.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Right. And usually when a program's being offered through an individual school like that, it comes down to the fact that the teacher or the administrator who's responsible for the program just hadn't had any experience with having a student with a disability who both met the requirements for going on the program and actually wanted to go on the program.

**Lynette:** I hear you loud and clear. I think working through the parents is sometimes the best way to do it.

**Ms. Mitchell:** Now, one of the things that you could do with a student who has shown interest in other cultures and travel is to start small. Maybe have the student and the parent participate in a cultural event in the community, like a Native American event or something of that nature where they can get a feel, for a short period of time, of being in a different culture. What that feels like adjusting to that culture and learning how to conduct one's self within a different culture.

Another thing that can be done to encourage students to think about these ideas is to request materials from the clearinghouse. We have four different postcards that we've made up that are free and can be requested on our Web site that include images of people with various disabilities on international programs (<http://www.miusa.org/publications/>)

*freeresources/twap*). What we've done is on the back side, we have put our contact information and left a rather large blank space where a program like yours might make a connection with an international exchange program and include their information for somebody to just pick up that card if they're interested and make contact with that program.

**Lynette:** Oh, that's a great idea. Okay, thank you very much. This has been great. I appreciate it.

**Ms. Mavis:** I really want to reiterate that. You just have a wealth of information and I want to thank you for being on the call today. The transcript of this call will be posted on the NCSET Web site within the next three to four weeks along with the PowerPoint. If you have any further questions, you can contact NCSET or contact the Clearinghouse directly. Thanks again, Melissa and Michele. It's been wonderful.

**Ms. Scheib:** Thanks for the opportunity and the questions.

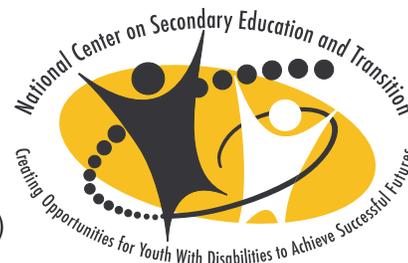
**Ms. Mavis:** Yes, the questions were great. Also, I want to let everyone know that our next NCSET teleconference, "Career Planning Begins with Assessment," is scheduled for Tuesday, October 25, and Joe Timmons here at the University of Minnesota and Mary Podmostko from the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC will be our featured speakers. So look forward to that and thank you all very much for joining us today.

*This teleconference was coordinated by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition.*

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**Contact us at:**

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition  
Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD)  
6 Pattee Hall  
150 Pillsbury Drive SE  
Minneapolis MN 55455  
(612) 624-2097 (phone)  
(612) 624-9344 (fax)  
ncset@umn.edu (E-mail)  
<http://www.ncset.org> (Web)



# Mobility International USA

## Yes, Youth with Disabilities Can Travel to Study Abroad



Presented by Michele Scheib and Melissa Mitchell  
National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

**NCSET  
Teleconference**

**September 29, 2005**



# Objectives

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



# What is International Exchange?

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

# Why go abroad?

- An opportunity to gain and practice new skills such as time management, interpersonal communication, self advocacy, and problem-solving
- International experiences serve to dispel preconceived notions people in decision making positions such as college admissions, employers, and other people in control of resources may have about an individual and their disability





## Why go abroad? (cont.)

- People with disabilities may have special skills such as the ability to communicate non-verbally that go unrecognized in day to day living at home
  - Everyone who travels abroad feels out of place so they will not be the only one
  - People who have gone abroad gain new self confidence and an understanding of their true capabilities
- 

# Transferable Skills

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





# International Experience & Successful Transition

- Allows participants to experience and use the skills necessary when integrating into a new community such as making connections (e.g. friends, local services), finding housing, setting daily routines
  - Helps participants identify new interests, try activities outside of their normal comfort zone, and can solidify commitments to current paths
- 

# International Exchange Works!



Hammer Consulting and AFS Intercultural Exchange Programs survey of 2100 high school students (1500 traveled abroad, 600 stayed at home)

Results released in 2005 showed impressive gains for high school exchange students in foreign language skills, intercultural competence, knowledge of other countries, and comfort in interacting with people from other cultures.



“My parents said I was more open to things after my exchange. It gave me an understanding of other cultures and how things work in different countries.”

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



## FAR FROM HOME

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

(Kauffmann et al. 1992)



## LEAVING HOME

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



*Mary Wagner IN After High School: A First Look at Post School Experiences of Youth with Disabilities April 2005: the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2*



“It helped me with my **independence** – being in another country realizing mom and dad weren’t there and I actually can get around and do things **on my own**.... When I got home and ran into things that were a bit of a challenge, I could get through new things that cropped up.”

Robin Sutherby, cerebral palsy and learning disability, went on a short trip to Mexico with her Spanish class





## Exchange studies have long reported:

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

*(Carsello & Grieser 1976; Nash 1976; Pfinister 1979; Pyle 1981, Hannigan 1998).*



## Gaining Independence

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

*Eugene Aronosky, visually impaired, did a six week homestay program in Finland with AFS*





# Expanding Horizons

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

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





# Nuts and Bolts

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

# Choosing a Program



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

# Finding a Program



## Search International Exchange Program Databases

- [www.miusa.org/exchangeprograms](http://www.miusa.org/exchangeprograms)

(use keywords “high school” and “youth”)

- [www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com](http://www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com)

- [www.csiet.org](http://www.csiet.org)

(see the “Advisory List” publication)

**Ask your local teachers, counselors and community organizations for upcoming opportunities**



# Questions to ask potential programs

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

# Disability-Related Questions

- You should not be required to answer any questions related to your disability prior to your acceptance.
- After you have been accepted it is appropriate for the program to begin asking what kinds of accommodations needed to participate fully.
- They cannot create special rules or limit your participation on the basis of your disability.





# Foreign Languages

- Most high school programs do not require foreign language skills.
- Teachers, exchange leaders or other adult chaperones go with the students abroad and often facilitate the language barrier.
- Students with all types of disabilities have enjoyed trying to use the local language with people they meet or host families.



**“It took long for me to learn my language because I do have a learning disability but within seven months I learned it. I could understand everything and could speak so everyone could understand me even though it wasn’t perfect. What I liked to do was watch movies in German with subtitles in English...and going to school everyday, I had to put myself out there.”**

Rebekah Elsen, learning and physical disability, studied abroad in Germany for a year



# Program & Travel Costs



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



# Accommodations & Services

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

# Implementation

- Equality of opportunity and inclusion in exchange programs is the goal.
- Students with disabilities have historically not participated at the same levels as non-disabled students.
- How can this change?



# Student Plan Suggestions

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



# Action Steps

- Participate in International Education Week November 14 – 18, 2005 ([exchanges.state.gov/iew](http://exchanges.state.gov/iew)) by tapping into international online school connection projects and activities
  - Invite AFS or YFU or other exchange recruiters to present to your students or to consider your school for placing a foreign exchange student with a disability ([www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com](http://www.highschoolprogramsabroad.com))
- 



# Action Steps

- Begin a model United Nations program in your community for students to participate in or involve students with disabilities in those that exist.
  - Gather information on if students are participating in international exchange activities as part of the exit or post-school outcomes surveys to better assess its impact.
- 



# Action Steps

- Become a host family for an international student with a disability or lead a group of students abroad.
  - Attend inclusive education conferences overseas or teacher / professional exchanges to get a better understanding of situations in other countries and to share your knowledge with others.
- 



# Action Steps

- Let us know of IEP or transition plans that have included international activities, and stories about international students with disabilities in your classrooms
  - Read and share our *A World Awaits You* magazine Teens Abroad issue and our other online resources with others ([www.miusa.org/ncde/away](http://www.miusa.org/ncde/away))
- 



# National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange

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

# National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange



Mobility International USA

PO Box 10767

Eugene, Oregon 97440 USA

Tel/TTY: (541) 343-1284

Fax: (541) 343-6812

Email: [clearinghouse@miusa.org](mailto:clearinghouse@miusa.org)

Web: [www.miusa.org/ncde](http://www.miusa.org/ncde)

# Foreign Exchange Students



Photo by Carol Ramdoski

- Full article published mid-September in the LRP Inclusive Education newsletter ([www.lrp.com](http://www.lrp.com)) addresses legal and practical issues including tips and case studies.
- Schools that accept foreign exchange students must also expect those with disabilities and these students are covered by IDEA, 504 and ADA.
- Feel free to ask questions on this topic or contact our Clearinghouse.