

Chapter Two

Making Your International Experience Happen





You have found one or more exciting opportunities to work, study or volunteer overseas. Now comes the work of making it happen—applying to the program of your choice.

In some cases, application and acceptance are fairly straightforward processes. For example, Tanis Doe was an active member of the Canadian Association of the Deaf when the organization was asked to send someone to live and work at the Atlantic College in Wales, staffing the International Deaf Youth Rally. Doe submitted her resume, and was chosen. The Canadian Association of the Deaf raised money for her travel expenses.

The job in Wales was a perfect opportunity with a ready-made funding source for which Doe easily qualified. In contrast, Doe decided a few years later that she wanted to volunteer to work at the school for the Deaf in Brownstown, Jamaica, where she had gotten to know some staff members while on vacation there. “No one sponsored me,” she says. “I went on my own. I made my own opportunities.” She knew it would be up to her to get the job, and to get herself there. She submitted her resume to the school, along with several letters of recommendation. Once accepted, she applied for a work permit and reached her goal. She worked at

the Jamaican school for one year, training teachers and also coaching the children in swimming and general physical education.

The complexity and competitiveness of your application process can vary widely, depending on the nature of the program and how you come to be involved in it. If an opportunity presents itself to an organization or educational institution with which you're already active, and you are already known to have the skills needed for the opportunity at hand, you may be the natural choice. This is most likely in situations involving research and conference delegations, consulting projects, teaching opportunities and exchanges between groups. Your chances of being selected will improve if you have a solid track record in the appropriate field and a longstanding relationship with groups involved in international work.

On the other hand, if you are a newcomer to international work, or approaching a group that doesn't know you well, you may have to prove yourself. Most overseas jobs, and some study abroad programs, are highly competitive and may involve a lengthy application process requiring resumes, references, tests and interviews. For example, Jillian Cutler, who has cerebral palsy, applied for a Marshall Scholarship, a prestigious award for American university graduates to study at a British university for two years. She wanted to study social and political science at Cambridge University. Cutler spent months drafting personal statements and undergoing personal interviews. Her efforts were rewarded when she received word from the British Embassy that she was selected for the program.

For those looking for something less competitive, several exchange programs offer short-term work or volunteer abroad opportunities that don't require a lot of experience or special skills. You might

also consider applying for an international internship, which is a good way to gain work-related experience abroad that you can build on for later opportunities.

Most international educational exchange organizations have selection criteria outlined in their application material. Once you have selected the programs you think will best satisfy your interests and desire to study or live abroad, and for which you believe you are qualified, you should contact the sponsors for information and a program application. It is always best to talk with someone—a program coordinator or program officer—who directly coordinates the exchange program. Another option is to contact the overseas study office at your college or university, or an information center at the embassy of the country where you want to go. They will frequently have applications for programs. They can also assist you in determining whether high school or college credit is available for the program in which you are interested, as well as being able to direct you toward other resources.

Telling and Asking: Disclosing and Accommodating Your Disability

Under what circumstances should you tell prospective exchange program staff about the nature and extent of your disability? Some veteran travelers recommend full disclosure, while others sound a note of caution.

“I would not hide the disability,” says Don Galloway, who is blind. “I would bring it up up front, so they know what kinds of reasonable accommodations will be needed.” As you explore various international exchange opportunities, you should strive for clear

communication between yourself and the program staff regarding what accommodation, if any, you may require. It is sometimes the case that the staff will not have much experience accommodating people with disabilities and may not understand what this entails. While you should not be required to answer questions about your disability *during* the application process, it is appropriate for program staff to inquire about disability accommodation *after* they have reviewed your application and accepted you into the program. In order to avoid miscommunications and assumptions, it may be necessary to provide the staff with information specific to your disability and any accommodations required.

Whether public organizations run their own programs overseas or contract out with local partners to run their programs in a foreign country, U.S.-based exchange organizations are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and cannot discriminate against people with disabilities. International program coordinators must not discriminate against a participant based on a perception of the individual's abilities, and must work to provide appropriate accommodations to ensure that a disabled applicant can participate fully in the program. Similar laws may cover organizations based in other countries. U.S. organizations should make clear to their foreign affiliates and contracting partners the expectation that people with disabilities must be able to participate equally. Organizations in the United States that receive federal funding are also covered by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Additionally, some exchange programs, such as those funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State, proactively support the inclusion of people with disabilities in their programs. If you encounter barriers with the local program representative, do not be afraid to contact the headquarters office to inquire about their policy on inclusion.

Susan Brown encountered difficulties because of her disability when she applied to become a Peace Corps Volunteer. Because she was seeing a therapist, the Peace Corps put Brown on medical deferment status. With the support of her therapist, Brown appealed the deferment, which involved “a long process of getting letters and writing letters.” Her efforts paid off and she ultimately received her assignment to work in Ukraine.

Some applicants have found creative ways to present their disability and their other attributes realistically and positively. Christa Bucks Camacho, who uses a wheelchair, served in the Peace Corps as an urban youth volunteer in Fernando de la Mora, Paraguay. “When I was invited to interview, I prepared by thinking about how the Peace Corps would support my majors in Spanish and international studies,” says Bucks Camacho. “I also did a self-assessment of my skills from things I had been involved with earlier. I really emphasized my ability to organize recreational and educational activities for children and teenagers, so my application showed heavily my Spanish ability as well as my abilities to work with children and teenagers.” Even though the Peace Corps staff seemed reluctant to ask about her physical condition, Bucks Camacho wanted to put her disability and her coping skills on the table. “One of the things I did was prepare a video I titled *A Day in the Life of Christa Bucks*,” she says. “The video helped Peace Corps get to know me in terms of my interests and abilities as well as how I live on a daily basis. I went through my independent living skills, and I also showed them some of the work I was doing as a facilitator on a ropes challenge course. After that, I persistently followed up and that was the key to my success.” This strategy proved to have an additional benefit once she arrived in Paraguay. “My personal video was shown to my homestay family so they knew all about me before I came,” she says. “My homestay family was wonderful; they welcomed me to be a part of their family.”

Your decision about whether to disclose your disability, and how, may also depend upon your personal view of your own disability. Rhonda Neuhaus spent five months in Costa Rica in 1996 with the School for Field Studies. “Part of the process before leaving for Costa Rica involved completing a medical exam form,” she recalls. “My doctor filled out the information stating that I wore two BK (below knee) prosthetic legs. Then, a question on another form made me pause for a moment. It asked, ‘Do you have any physical limitations?’ I pondered this question. If it had read, ‘Do you have any physical disabilities?’ I would have clearly answered in the affirmative. However, the question did not ask that. The question referred to limitation. I do not see myself as having limitations, and I did not need to request any disability-related accommodations. Until one tries something, one does not know if one can accomplish it. I have had many successes in my life where some people had thought that success would be impossible. So, in answering this question, I wrote, ‘No.’ Upon arriving in Costa Rica, I saw some initial surprise on part of the staff. However, everyone involved in the program, especially the professors, was open and accepting of me.”

Neuhaus felt vindicated in her refusal to equate her disability with the word “limitations.” Her study program in Costa Rica, she says, “was an active one, and I fully participated without any problems. We hiked mountains, explored both rural and urban regions and visited protected areas. We studied exotic plant species, performed economic analyses, reviewed watershed management techniques, and analyzed Costa Rica’s Organic Law of the Environment. Each day I became more confident, surmounting things that I could have perceived as potential obstacles.”

You may want to carefully consider your decision about when and how to disclose your disability, especially if you have a

stigmatized disability such as mental illness. Weigh the risks and the benefits, Judi Chamberlin advises. Chamberlin is an advocate for people diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities, and she has traveled the world providing consultation and training services. She advises that if you're concerned about the possibility that an international exchange program may discriminate against you because of your psychiatric history, you may want to withhold this information in the application process—as is your right.

On the other hand, if you have disability-related needs that should be accommodated, then disclosure is the only way to get such accommodations. Talking to the people who will be closest to you, those who will be spending time with you during your exchange, may be the best way to create the safety and stability you need. “People with psychiatric disabilities who think that they might have some sort of stress-related episode or whatever should learn in advance as much as they can about what kinds of support systems they can set up,” says Chamberlin. Otherwise, the people around you might overreact to, and mishandle, difficult situations. “If people are not familiar with psychiatric disability,” says Chamberlin, “and you say to them, ‘I’m just terribly depressed, or I’m having an anxiety attack, or I’m beginning to hear voices,’ and people are naive about it, they might send you to a hospital.” In some cases, you might be hospitalized against your will, which is something you can avoid with advanced planning and clear communication about your support needs.

When asking for disability-related accommodations, give exchange program staff as much advance notice as possible. This is especially important when requesting equipment that may be hard to obtain, or services that need to be arranged ahead of time, such as sign language interpreting. If the exchange program shows hesitation or confusion in response to your requests, you may want to offer

to help in locating appropriate services. You are probably much more familiar with your needs and with how to find appropriate services and resources. Therefore, the more involved you can be in arranging your own support and accommodations, the more likely you are to have a smooth and successful transition to your overseas activity. Information on where to find resources overseas is listed in the Appendix and following chapters.

Fundraising: How to Finance Your Program Participation

If you're independently wealthy, skip this section.

If you're still reading, you may be wondering how you will afford your airfare, lodging, tuition and other expenses associated with overseas travel. Depending on where you're going and what you're doing, your budget can run into the thousands of dollars. That may sound overwhelming, maybe even impossible; but many other people, no richer than you, have garnered the resources to participate in international exchange.

How did they do it? The answers are as varied as the individuals who developed their own fundraising strategies. After Tanis Doe received the opportunity to volunteer at a Deaf school in Jamaica, she collected 40,000 soda and beer bottles on her college campus and returned them for the deposit. "I made \$2000," she says. "That was enough for me to go." You will find your own funding sources, and dream up your own schemes for generating the money you need. The same skills and drives that lead you abroad—your talents, your convictions, your resourcefulness, your enthusiasm—can serve as a reservoir upon which you can draw when you take on the task of raising money.