

Dealing with Negative Doubts

Most of Our Original Concerns Have Been Unfounded

Alyssa Hillary, an Autistic student blogging about her study abroad experience in China, is having a successful time but the initial reaction from the overseas university would have made one think that was not possible.

“[Chinese administrators] said people like me shouldn’t go to college, and they tried to get the program to un-accept me, and they tried to have me sent home.”

Instead the professors have worked with her to use augmentative communication in class as needed and to allow her to email other responses as part of her class participation. Alyssa has also learned from her experiences, and in working with the resident director, to better transition during and following excursions. This includes building in breaks during the activities, and on return reducing changes to routines and taking rest away from human interactions.

“Directly insulting a person to their face isn’t so much a thing [in China]. Makes it hard to know what people are really thinking of me, but it also helps shield me from the worst of the discrimination stuff – my residence director [dealt] with it instead.”

Resident directors or other exchange leaders do have the responsibility to navigate and negotiate not only the cultural setting but individual differences of participants in the destination. This can be frustrating and enlightening at the same time.

In Jordan, Elena Corbett, a resident director for Council on International Educational Exchange, found the information she received from the home institution, or when trying to read about a participant’s disability online, tended to couch disability in a way that brings more worry than necessary.

“We wish the home institution would have just said, ‘You have an awesome student coming to study with you, and she is an autistic person.’ The different issues related to being autistic weren’t defining in our experience with her. She was one of our best students – she is really bright and very social.”

If cultural or disability assumptions arise when seeking access solutions and arranging disability-related services at an overseas location, the following tips lay the groundwork for a positive response:

- When you are signing or renegotiating contracts or partner agreements or training exchange leaders on their responsibilities, make it clear that you have a diversity of participants, including those with disabilities, and provide policies for non-discrimination.
- If you encounter attitudes that are barriers to inclusion, get specifics about what concerns they have and problem-solve or dispel them one at a time.
- There are allies or champions for people with disabilities in every community; find those with the right connections to join you and educate your partners.
- Learn how change happens in the host culture and what motivates reconsideration - is it leveraging personal connections, bringing up legal or economic arguments, or showing how others do it?



15 Tips for Planning an Autistic-Friendly Exchange Program

- Explain the social features of the program to all participants.
- Accommodate sensory sensitivities by discouraging scented products.
- Supply name badges to be worn throughout the program.
- Discuss acceptable behavior on the program.
- Provide opportunity, but not pressure, for social interactions.
- Create ways for participants to signal if they want to interact or not.
- Designate a calm, “sensory-friendly” space.
- Schedule breaks throughout the day.
- Explain food options and how to culturally decline food.
- Arrange for peer social mentors to explain cultural cues.
- Provide opportunity for self-disclosure during orientation.
- Provide a list of what could go wrong while traveling and what to do.
- Modify program policies if needed for a reasonable accommodation.
- Set clear guidelines for housing and communication with staff.
- Encourage self-advocacy if something is needed.



Read More on Each Tip

www.miusa.org/resource/tipsheet/autismfriendlytips

Learn more about Global Disability Culture

www.miusa.org/resource/tipsheet/culturalreactions

Read Alyssa’s Blog “Yes That Too”

www.yesthattoo.blogspot.com