



What if I'm Not Yet Ready?

Growing Globally Without Leaving Home

When Courtney Thompson misplaced her train pass for the fourth time in one month, she realized her challenges with visual configuration and short-term memory were not something she could leave behind in the United States. She had planned to study Russian for four weeks that upcoming summer in St. Petersburg, Russia.

“Initially I was so flustered by scholarship applications, the development of my Russian skills, and visa processing that I neglected to sincerely consider the impact of my disability and measures that could mitigate it abroad.”

She sought out a counseling center on her U.S. campus to learn strategies to compensate for issues related her nonverbal learning disability (NLD) and anxiety, but the several weeks until departure proved too close to learn what she needed.

Among other concerns, Courtney worried about potential tensions in tight living quarters with a host family due to her organizational challenges and the extra costs for living closer to campus, which she needed for her visual spatial disorientation. The physical negotiation of all her luggage, shoes, and more through airport security would have also been taxing because of motor coordination and muscle tone issues with NLD.

Ultimately, she concluded that she was not ready to live independently.

“I had wanted to be courageous and confront my disability abroad, but recognizing I needed to withdraw from the program and focus on my well-being, was in its own way a display of growth and self-awareness.”

Courtney had to resist the urge to compare herself to others with disabilities that had successfully studied abroad, but who did not have her “breadth of complex challenges that traditional compensatory strategies and accommodations did not fully address.”

In retrospect, Courtney wishes she had tested herself leading up to the experience, perhaps going on a weekend trip by herself, then an entire week away – preparing herself incrementally to leave home. She may have also chosen either a program with more support or travel with someone who knew her needs.

I have the tendency to minimize the functional limitations of my disability when sharing it with strangers because I do not want to arouse concern, but transparency is of paramount importance when planning for study abroad. American programming staff can advocate for the needs of students with disabilities, but there may be no anti-discrimination legislation to ensure students are accommodated – and treated with dignity – once abroad.

While Russia may still be in her future, she has found other ways to grow globally without leaving home. Courtney opted to volunteer at a local immigrant resource center as a co-teacher of an English as a Second Language class, which turned out to be quite an enriching experience and eased some of the disappointment from not having gone abroad.

“When I am navigating through a trying time, I read about Russia where oppression and optimism, decay and dreams have learned to coexist. I have found no better mirror for the paradox that characterizes our human experience.”

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