



NAME

CHRISTOPHER ORTEGA

LENGTH

SIX MONTHS

PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY STUDY ABROAD
IN CUBA



Never Too Advanced for Language Study

The best thing about language study is that it never ends. The best thing about a road trip on a makeshift bus for 13 hours across Cuba, is that it does.

No one knows this better than Christopher Ortega, who, despite growing up speaking the language with his family of Mexican immigrants, benefited from participating in a Spanish immersion and traveling with new-made friends in Cuba.

Christopher, who is blind, originally found the Cuban program through the University at Albany where he was completing his undergraduate work. Looking through the

program offerings, Cuba seemed like the most interesting option, given his fascination with recent political history between the Castro government and the United States. As someone who is already an advanced student, Christopher was challenged by the classes offered. Despite having taken Spanish for native speakers in high school, and qualifying for the most advanced level in the Cuba program, he was still surprised at how little he knew. Only one of the four classes was about Spanish language. In the remaining three, students developed their Spanish proficiency by studying Cuban economics, religion, and history.

The conversation about reasonable accommodations began immediately after Christopher's acceptance, which offered lessons learned for others.

"Make sure to get your books digitalized early, make friends, and be patient as you negotiate your reasonable accommodations while confronting the unexpected."

However, sometimes issues would come up. At the beginning of his program, he had an instructor who would regularly bring in printed handouts that had not been emailed to him beforehand. Eventually his teacher began planning lessons further in advance so that Christopher could receive the materials for class time.

After receiving the names of the textbook titles, the Disability Resource Center on the Albany campus managed to convert all the books into accessible formats by the time he arrived to Havana two months later.

Also, due to limited access to internet and printers, his classmates also were required to handwrite their assignments. He was, upon reconsideration, allowed to turn in his typed assignments on a thumb drive.

Christopher has never regretted his choice to spend a semester abroad studying Spanish or road tripping in Cuba. His sense of Spanish grammar, writing, and professional vocabulary has improved significantly, and he feels more confident as he goes forward to pursue a career as an immigration lawyer.

