

A Gilman Scholar Surveys Access for Deaf People in the Dominican Republic



DORIS ALCÁNTARA

FROM: United States

TO: Dominican Republic

EXCHANGE TYPE: Internship Abroad

BOARDING PASS

If the program that you want to do is not available, create it.

That is what Doris Alcántara did during her Junior year at Gallaudet University, when she interned in the Dominican Republic for three months with the support of the U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship which supports American undergraduates to study or intern abroad.

Doris knew that she wanted to do a service project in another country. Her late father was from the Dominican Republic, and she had always been interested in that country. So she started to research her options.

"I searched online to see what information I could find regarding the Deaf community in the Dominican Republic and that's when I came across ANSORDO."

The Asociación Nacional de Sordos de la República Dominicana (ANSORDO) is an association of Deaf people that advocates for the rights and inclusion of Deaf Dominicans. "Growing up, I had gone to the Dominican Republic on a few occasions, and I had a growing curiosity about the everyday lives of Deaf Dominicans" says Doris. "Determined to learn more, I reached out to ANSORDO." After a video interview with the leaders of the organization, she had found her opportunity.

She put together a research proposal and submitted it for approval to Gallaudet University's board of trustees and institutional review board. Soon her proposal was accepted. All she had to do now was figure out how to pay for it.

"I was actually pretty concerned about that aspect for a while being that I come from a low-

income background. Then, one day, I came across a Gilman scholarship flier in the lobby of my dorm building."

The Gilman Scholarship enables U.S. students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad, providing them with skills critical to U.S. national security and economic prosperity. Applicants must be Pell grant recipients. The Institute of International Education (IIE) has administered the program since its inception in 2001 on behalf of the U. S. State Department. After meeting with an advisor in the university's international education department to learn more about the scholarship, Doris submitted her application.

Doris Alcántara knows the value of education and communication access. All through high school, she had had access to neither as a Deaf Latina woman. As a result she had to stumble her way through her education with inadequate supports graduating with a 1.8 GPA.

Her experience as a student at Gallaudet University, where all classes were delivered in American Sign Language (ASL), was as different from high school as night from day. A recruitment advisor took the time to get to know Doris beyond her grade point average and test scores. Gallaudet University's Jumpstart Program, designed to prepare incoming students who previously had limited access to education for college life, gave her a chance to strengthen her sign language and academic skills before her first semester. Jumpstart also continued to provide support after Doris started classes.



“While everyone else saw a lousy student, Gallaudet saw a person with potential who just hadn’t been provided with the right resources.”
-Doris Alcántara.

On track to graduate from Gallaudet magna cum laude, Doris wondered how education and communication access could be available to more Deaf people especially in the Dominican Republic. In the summer of 2018, she would get her chance to explore those questions when she set off for her internship, where she would spend the next three months.

During her internship with ANSORDO, Doris primarily focused on supporting the organization to build its advocacy platform. She did this by researching daily life including social and political developments for Deaf Dominicans.

Her project with ANSORDO squared perfectly with her senior thesis, titled “The Current Status of Deaf Education in the Dominican Republic.” She developed her project in collaboration with her mentor, Dr. Catherine O’Brien, one of the top researchers at Gallaudet University. The purpose was to learn about the state of education for Deaf people from the point of view of parents, students and advocates. Another goal was to learn about the perceptions of teachers of Deaf students and the resources that they felt were necessary to carry out their work.

Through ANSORDO she was able to visit schools, meet with institute directors, interview the minister of education, and converse with a senator.

Doris supported ANSORDO in other ways as well. She provided basic administrative support. She assisted with promotion and outreach. She also contributed to the organization on community and cultural events.

Since most of her internship was working with the Deaf community, Doris did not encounter many accessibility issues, nor did she need to request any reasonable accommodations. That said, she did find that there were some barriers related to communication that she experienced along with other Deaf Dominicans. For example, since the Dominican Republic has no free video relay service like in the United States, she could not simply call a store and ask if they had something, and instead had the option of either relying on a hearing person to make the call for her or showing up in person.

The bigger barrier that Doris encountered was the low expectations and misconceptions of hearing Dominicans.

It was pretty common for people to associate the idea of deafness with being incapable in ways beyond the inability to hear, which is a barrier Deaf individuals face globally. One of the many impacts of ANSORDO’s work is advocating for Deaf people to be viewed as equal.

After returning to the United States, Doris presented her thesis at the conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in Toronto, Canada in 2019. She was the only undergraduate student to present an original project.

“Overall, my internship was a humbling experience. I am vastly appreciative of all the resources and opportunities I have been given. I am looking forward to the undergoing shifts happening on the international stage. I strongly believe that through cross cultural communications, the Deaf community can foster the developments needed to create equitable and inclusive environments.” Doris Alcántara ■