

Tips for International Exchange Providers on Supporting People with Disabilities in Experiential Programs.

The individuals featured in the 2022 edition of the *AWAY* journal, focused on experiential programs, have mentored second grade teachers, addressed policies and practices for Deaf people in the Dominican Republic, consulted with business owners in South Africa and more. But what was this like from the point of view of those who supported them? Consider these tips for supporting people with disabilities on work, volunteer or intern programs overseas.

1 Start with the person.

International exchange programs are not interchangeable for everyone. Make sure that you start with the individual's goals and work with them to match with the appropriate program.

When Sara Giraldo Gavarria was accepted to participate in the Youth Ambassadors Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department Of State, she was the first blind participant that program staff had met. Amigos de las Americas scheduled a phone call to learn more about her and discuss how she might be successful on the program and what staff might do to render support.

2 Be clear on requirements.

People with disabilities know their limits better than anybody, and when they are acquainted with the requirements of the program they will make their own choice. At the same time program providers should not assume that discomfort or risk disqualify someone from participating.

The faculty member in charge of the Mercer University Service Scholars Program in South Africa doubted whether Johna Wright could be safe traveling to a rural South African community with her sighted peers. There was a great deal of uneven terrain in South Africa and program planners thought that Johna might trip and injure herself. The reality was that Johna possessed the ability to orient herself in unknown places and the social skills to obtain assistance from others when necessary.

3 Don't assume it will cost extra.

Sometimes exchange providers shut down the dialogue before it starts, when they assume that a disabled person requesting reasonable accommodations is automatically asking for money. Many reasonable accommodations don't cost anything. If funding is needed, there are a variety of ways of obtaining it that won't break the bank, but you cannot discover those without dialogue.

When Gallaudet University was looking for a service program for one of their students, they connected with Kaya Responsible Travel. When the exchange provider met with Gallaudet

to discuss the funding of communication access services, it turned out that Gallaudet was actually willing to cover those expenses.

“We put in a lot of time for a lot of different students. When you drag your feet with a student with a disability, you are going to end up with a lot more work than you would if you just sat down and had a conversation with the student early on about what they need.” Becca Aburrakia-Einhorn, Manager of Education Abroad, Gallaudet University

4 Seek Training.

Exchange providers should seek out training on disability for their staff on a regular basis. Such workshops might cover topics like advising, setting up a procedure for people to request reasonable accommodations, or strategies for providing specific types of reasonable accommodations. The NCDE has provided many of these trainings over the last few years. Get in touch with us to discuss your options.

Cultural Vistas periodically conducts brown bag sessions in which it trains staff on various topics in the field. In the spring of 2021, they invited NCDE to discuss disability inclusion techniques for one of those sessions.

5 Publicize a procedure for requesting reasonable accommodations.

Every program offers guidance for participants on visa applications, safety, cultural customs and more. Why not provide information on a procedure for requesting a reasonable accommodation? In guidance about health abroad, participants should also receive information about traveling with medications, service animals and adaptive equipment.

“In our applications we do currently ask if people need any special accommodations or if they have mobility or sight issues. In the application we specify that we are asking so we can provide accommodations. We phrase it in a way that it will not be part of the decision of whether to accept.”- Alex Kurki, Program Officer, Edmund S. Muskie Professional Fellowship Program & Exchange Visitor Programs at Cultural Vistas. (The Muskie Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State)

In conclusion, supporting persons with reasonable accommodations on experiential exchange is not much different from any other international program. Start with “yes”, approach the situation with an open mind, and refrain from applying higher safety standards based on disability. ■

“A student who you have gone the extra mile with to help them with their situation is much more likely to actually carry through with the program while someone else who might find it easier to find a lot of different programs that they have access to, might change their mind ten different times. It is to our benefit. If we do the work they come with us.”

—Heilwig Jones, owner, Kaya Responsible Travel