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MOBILITY INTERNATIONAL USA – MIUSA

“Ready for Takeoff: Disability and International Exchange”

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>> JOHNA WRIGHT: All right, all right, thank you, everybody, who has joined so far. We are waiting for more people to join, and then we can get started.

All righty, folks, thank you, thank you, we do have just a couple of minutes before we're going to get started with the webinar. So we're just waiting for a few more people to join, and I'll continue to play some international music for you guys for the next couple of minutes. I guess this isn't too international, but I like it. All right, all right, so it is one minute past 8:00. We can go ahead and get started and then for anyone else who joins, we can just catch them up. So first of all, hello, and thank you, guys, for joining. My name is Johna Wright, and I'll be your host for tonight's webinar. I am an extern this summer with Mobility International USA, and that's who I partnered with to bring to you this webinar. And I'm also a Fulbright Scholar, studying comparative social policy and welfare in Finland.

I've always been interested in disability advocacy and recently through my role in the National Federation of the Blind, I have honed in on that passion, and between that and my now four study abroad exchange experiences, I've really realized how life-changing going abroad can be, and I want to share that with other students to be sure that they have the same opportunities that I did, and that I'm so grateful for. So basically, how tonight is going to work is we're going to have a panel discussion with some awesome friends of mine who have studied abroad and who also have disabilities. I won't disclose for them. I'll let them disclose if they so choose. But I'll ask of them some questions, and I'll probably answer some of them as well if we have enough time.

And I want us to be interactive, so we are going to take a couple of questions from you guys who are watching. And then we're also going to give you guys a chance to ask any questions to me or to the panelists. And then I will invite you to participate with me or a volunteer so you can find the program that works best for you, since we won't have enough time, unfortunately, tonight to look in on that for each student on the call. But I do want to help you with your specific needs as much as possible.

So without further ado, I'm going to let the panelists introduce themselves to you, starting with Samantha Flax.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Hi, everyone, happy Friday night. I don't know about you, but I am very excited it's Friday, even though I have a lot to do this weekend. But my name is Samantha Flax. I am the president of the Minnesota Association of the Blind students for the MSC, I am currently a graduate student at the University of Minnesota at the Humphrey school, focusing on a master's on children and women rights. I grew up in New York and while I was there getting an anthropology and history degree, I spent a summer in Ireland and it was really awesome studying abroad, something I always wanted to do and something I hope to be able to do again, maybe, at some point. So I'm happy to answer everyone's questions and I'm excited to be here because I absolutely love talking about my time in Ireland. And thank you, Johna, for inviting me.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Thank you so much, Sam, and I'll turn it over to our other lovely panelist, Swatha.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: I graduated in May, I studied abroad once in Spain and once in Belfast by Ireland. So they were programs that were led by an assortment of different -- a professor and advisor and went to -- so it was like -- (frozen) and that -- and also, I studied Spanish, so yeah, I loved studying abroad and I want to -- be a resource for people who are studying abroad as well. Thanks, Johna, for inviting me.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Perfect, thank you so much, Swatha, excited to have you on the call, as well as Sam. Both of these ladies are a wealth of knowledge, and I'm excited they were able to come and share a little bit about themselves and their study abroad experience with you guys. Before we get going with the panel, I totally forgot to tell you where I studied abroad, I did a study in Cape Town, South Africa, I worked on entrepreneurship and business development. Then I went abroad for a summer in Sweden and studied sustainability of the Baltic Sea. After that, I went to the UK for a semester and studied programs and psychology and then now, of course, I am going abroad in Finland as soon as the situation with COVID permits, and I'll study for two years. I'm getting my master 's in comparative social policy and welfare. So after that long introduction that you may or may not care about, I'll go ahead and open up with the first question I'm going to ask the panel. Give me one second to pull that up. I'm unprepared. Imagine that.

Okay. So the first question, I think we actually kind of covered, but I'll let you guys give details if you want to share additional things, but can you tell us a little bit about your study abroad or international exchange program? Either one of you can start off. Swatha, you've got it.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: Okay. So I studied abroad twice. I went to Ireland and went to Spain. So the first one, the Irish -- the islands of the UK and the Ireland, like split, and how it affected the citizens of Northern Ireland of their own, with their -- and so that was ten days in January of this year. But we joke that was the last time any kind of travel was allowed because of COVID. But yeah, so two years ago, in the summer, I went to a month for Spain to study, and that was more of a home study, stayed with a family, in the city itself, and school there, partnership with the University of Chicago, so yeah, I did that, and traveled a lot to different places, different places, like a group, different places like the -- the mosques and cathedral, we all went abroad to Granada and Seville. It's a great program. I learned a lot from -- the history of Spain, which I didn't know too much about. So yeah.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: That's awesome. I'm so jealous that you've done a home study. I've never done a home study before. Samantha, is there anything you want to talk about your study abroad program?

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Sure, and my program was through the university as an undergrad, and what happened was I had always wanted to study abroad, but I wasn't sure where I necessarily wanted to go. I had a few places in mind. And I remember just sitting there one winter evening during freshman year, and I was like, you know what? I'm going to apply to do it this summer. I'm afraid if I don't do it now, I'll never do it.

So I chose Ireland, because sadly, something that I really wish I did, it's the one gap on my resume that I really don't like, other languages, so I'd be able to take classes in English. So I applied, and it was a program where there were other American students going at the same time so it was like a big group, which meant that I got to meet not only people in Ireland, but I got to meet students from all over the United States as well. And there were a few people actually from my high school who went as well. So it was kind of cool because I had some new friends for when I came home too. I wish my program had had a little more like taking classes within the actual like -- with native students and everything, but it was -- it was still really great. And because of the structure of the program, we got to do a lot of touring and historical visits and stuff, which is really great. And I got to do an unofficial home stay.

So I went to Ireland with my parents a few years before and my mom and I are blind, so is my stepdad, and I guess some friend of hers had decided to introduce her to this family with blind kids in Galway, because all blind kids have to know each other. Because of that, I had a friend and I stayed at her house for a little while while I was there. So even though it wasn't a part of the program, I managed to get my own home stay and it was cool to go to the program but venture off on my own and explore different areas without the rest of the program.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Awesome. That sounds like a really great program. I do like that you were able to do things with a bunch of other internationals and branch out and just kind of explore the area. As far as the programs, South Africa, we were all from the same school, and we stayed in a hostel together. There were two Swedish people in our cohort, and the regular university wasn't really in session, so we were kind of the only ones. For the UK, I just studied within the regular university. There were other Americans, but most of the students I hung out with were British students. And then in Finland, they were literally from all over the place -- multiple continents, but we all are getting ready to convene together in Finland and Austria as well. But yeah, I won't take up any more time since I kind of told about my programs already and what the purpose was.

So the next question that I'm going to ask you guys is what types of obstacles do you face as a result of your disability in the process of either selecting a program, applying for it, or actually completing the exchange or study abroad? So whoever wants to go first can.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: I can go. I have a couple of different things. First, when I was choosing a program, I didn't want to limit myself because of my disability, but I also wanted to think about where I would have a good experience and where I would be able to advocate for myself well and get materials I needed. Part of my was hesitant to go to a country where I'd be learning a language, I think, because I was afraid of getting materials and -- I mean, if I were to do it now, I don't think I would limit myself in that way, but I was a freshman and I was nervous, so I think I wanted to ease myself into it, sort of.

I actually really wanted to go to South Africa because I had already been to Ireland and I always wanted to go to South Africa but my mom was nervous about me going there because of cultural superstitions, so I went to Ireland because it was somewhere where I had been before and I knew something about the culture and the accommodations and stuff. But in terms of when I was there, and this is something that I've sort of been realizing my first year living at college, but it didn't hit home until I got to Ireland.

While I had a really, really great experience and I'm really glad I went when I did and everything, I realized when I was there, my skills were not at the level they should have been. I never really went anywhere myself, and I, you know, I got -- I had a lot of trouble learning the campus. It was a lot of wide open spaces and things like that, and I was always the kind of person who I really didn't like accepting help. I liked to prove that I was independent and stuff. While I was there, because -- while I had relatively comprehensive language training, there was more I needed to learn. So while I was in Ireland, I struggled a lot with being independent and doing a lot of things myself and going to places myself. So honestly, it was the obstacles I faced there were a large reason to why I went to blindness skills training after I graduated college.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: So for me, because the program -- the part of -- funded by the university, like applying with departments talking to the -- when I did meet -- it was more like getting there and trying to figure out what the environment's like. When I asked questions, I kind of -- it was my first time going abroad, by myself, going abroad also, so for me also, I didn't know what to expect, in the airport, never have gone to Europe, never had gone to -- I thought I was -- through India, with my family. I just like -- I was kind of naive, I guess, a little bit, but I wanted a country that would -- that would be like something more like developed. So I have -- I'm blind, but I also have disability that's physical, and also, mitochondria disease, and -- because of that, I realized, like, I -- the inclusion I got was good, but because I went in a group and I went like in the program where at home stay. I liked the experience -- I -- I don't like to be alone much because everyone around me was trying to -- I couldn't really -- because of the environment I was, feel comfortable, so I couldn't walk on my own because it was too uneven. I couldn't -- it was hard for me to get around there, so like I couldn't really be myself because I couldn't get around by myself, so I realized that because -- I need to like do more research and do more planning beforehand.

But like I still was able to like kind of manage and show how like I can be more independent, health, and if there's questions, so like more so like me, just like -- I need to like be prepared and ask for help more often. In Ireland, in the City of la Barrett, Spain, I expected Europe, the country to be like better than that, but being in South Africa, I could get around easier, a lot more even, like -- I didn't know what to expect and I knew like -- what I encountered, but I -- it wasn't as hard as Spain was for me, but -- yeah.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Awesome. Thank you, both, for sharing. I think this is a really cool question, because it really shows the individuality between us three, take Sam's experience, for instance. Mine was the totally opposite. Most of my obstacles came before, South Africa was my first abroad experience aside from a cruise, which doesn't count.

So the professors were really, really nervous about bringing me along on the trip because we weren't always in a metropolis or in a developed city. Cape Town is developed, but the towns around it or not. It's a different feel and different story. But as I went with the honor's program, I knew that I had earned that trip just like everyone else in my cohort. So I decided it was going to be time for me to buckle down and really advocate for myself.

It took a lot of convincing, but I was able to go on the trip and I had a really, really great time. My blindness did not get in the way at all of me participating fully with everything that we had to do and completing everything that I needed. Also, I do have a chronic illness, and that also did not hinder me too much. Of course, sometimes I got super tired. Like I remember the first day I was super sick. But after that, smooth sailing. And all good to go.

Sweden, had absolutely no problems anywhere. UK, no problems. Finland, the only issue when I was applying to Fulbright, I think, as a person with a disability, I am charged with having to doubly prove my worth for the scholarship and prove that I deserve to go abroad, because a lot of people do have misconceptions about people with disabilities and about what they can do. So I worked extra hard to kind of use my background and my broad experiences as well as what I aspire to do to really kind of show the clinician that I was going to be able to be successful and be a positive representation of the Fulbright program.

So I want to move to the next question. And if any of you have questions, definitely hang on to them so that we can answer them at the end or if you want to pop them in the chat, I can look at those toward the end.

Okay. Here's a fun question. What is your most memorable moment abroad? This can be anything. It doesn't have to be necessarily related to your studies or your program, but literally, anything.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: So for Belfast, we took a trip one day down to the bridge, the Sweden bridge, and (frozen) I -- and so it was really nice -- Ireland is like they were -- it was like kind of very -- it's a concrete jungle down there, so to just get out in the fresh air, go across the bridge, it's a bridge -- it's very skinny and very like -- the lens, by the ocean. So doing that was a really exhilarating and also -- kind of like "I did it!" I felt great doing it. I can do -- I got this. I got this. The bridge was rough, under me, so like now I can do everything.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: I'm so jealous. I don't want to interrupt you. Go ahead. Good to go.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Okay. It's really hard for me to just think of one, but I think one of my favorite memories was going to the islands. I had been there once before, but there's something so beautiful and there's an amazing fairy ride across Galway Bay to these islands and there are islands that people have been living on for hundreds of years and very interesting history. It's something I've always wanted to do. I'd wanted to go swimming in a lake or ocean in another country, and because Ireland is pretty far north, it was freezing. I don't think I've ever been in such cold water in my life. I can't say it's the coldest, because I live in Minnesota now. That was nothing compared to Minnesota cold. But it was just a very -- I think a lot of times people go on these trips, you know, people think we're missing out if you're a blind person because you're missing the beauty, a lot of the things that you're going to or these beautiful visual places. But I think this is so great because it's more like I can fully experience and appreciate the nature of the whole trip and also, getting to do certain things, like go on this tandem cycling trip where we rode 20 miles. I don't think I'd ever gone that far exercising in my life. So that was really great. The things I could participate in were really valuable, and the opportunities when I got to show my opportunity -- windmills and may or may not have had a good life choice, but --

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: That is amazing. That is such a good story to tell to your grandkids or whatever, in 50 years. Guess what I did?

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: I'll tell them not to do it, because it was really, really dumb.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Also, the tandem biking, and for you to be able to go 20 miles. I rode around once in DC and thought I was going to die. But nevertheless, I guess I'll just -- to make it quick, so -- distant memories or -- because I haven't been to Finland yet, I'll just pick one. No, two. I can't just pick. I think climbing Table Mountain in South Africa was really cool. I don't know, for those of you who know me, you know that I'm one of the most unfit people that there is. But I felt just super proud of myself and accomplished and just like a warrior power woman when I got to the very top and was able to take all the selfies and the pictures to keep for later and for Facebook. That was really cool. Something I'll never forget, hopefully.

And I think -- my favorite memory from Sweden, aside from being able to jump into the Baltic Sea, which sounds really cool, I liked just being able to hang out with my friends and go out and explore the city that we lived in, and ask everyone if we could pet their dogs. That was the only first and complete dog I learned in Swedish, and now -- sentence I learned in Swedish, and no, I can't remember it now, but I remembered it then, and that's what's important. Petted so many doggos. So that was wonderful.

I have one more question we're going to end on, and then we'll be able to take questions from the audience. So super excited for that. But the last question is, what one piece of advice would you give a student who is considering going abroad? And I think I'll take this one first, just because it may require a little bit of thought, and I was to jumble up the order, because I'm chaotic like that. So I think the one thing that I would tell a student with a disability or really, any student, is not to let others' expectations of what you can do affect what you decide to do. Just get out there and do it. And prove them wrong. And do what makes you feel good. Do what makes you happy. Do what makes you proud. Do what you thought you could never do. You know, it's great when you push those limits, I mean, within reason, of course. I'm not telling anybody to jump off of a bridge or anything. But when you push your limits and then you come out on the other side and you realize, hey, I did that. That's the best feeling. And I really want as many of you guys as possible to have that same feeling.

Just don't let the naysayers discourage you because there are always going to be naysayers in the world, but I think it's our job to not only educate, but to prove them wrong and just show them that people with disabilities exist, we're here. We want equality. We want to do the same things as those of you who are able-bodied. And, we can, of course, with appropriate accommodations we can accomplish anything that our able-bodied counterparts can accomplish. This is getting way too cringy and sentimental, so I'm going to pass it to someone else now. Sam or Swatha.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Mine is very much related to yours, Johna. Knowing me, I'll say more than one thing, because I can't help myself. But to not only not let others' expectations limit you, but not to let your own fear or your own worries or your own expectations prevent you from doing anything either. I think sometimes the harshest critic we have or the largest naysayer in our own lives can be ourselves. So I think when I say, even if you're not sure, if you're not sure that you'll get the accommodations, if you're not sure that you have a certain skill, if you're not sure that you're ready, apply and do it anyway. Because it will, as long as you're proactive -- and that's the other thing. Be proactive about accommodations. Be proactive about what you'll need. But if you do that, even if you're worried, even if it doesn't go perfectly or you wish you had done something differently or something like that, you'll be so proud of yourself and so glad that you did it. So won't -- not even just letting others' expectations limit you, but don't limit yourself, I think is what I'd say. Don't let others' expectations factor into what you think about yourself and what you can do, because you're going to be your own harshest critic. So go out there and do it anyway, and just -- don't be afraid. Just step out of your own comfort zone.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Definitely, 100%, just agree with every word you said. It is so true that we are our harshest critic, our own worth enemy sometimes. With me, just forget it, I don't even want to go abroad, and honestly, I can tell you right now, that would have been the worst decision that I could have possibly made so far in my life, other than getting arrested for something crazy, but barring these exceptional circumstances, that would have been the worst decision that I would have made. Going abroad has changed so much and has really paved the way for me to understand more about the world, more about myself, and more about my goals and my aspirations and my passions. So yeah, definitely, reach out for help, you know, if you're nervous or you're unsure, there's a huge community of people who are there to help you, to listen to you, to encourage you, and to just see you through to your accomplishments. I don't want to take time away from Swatha, so I'll go ahead and pass it over to her and listen to her words of wisdom.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: I guess in that same vein, don't think it's too much -- or -- even if it accomplishes nothing normal in your home country, there's always a way around it. Don't let people tell you it can't be done. I wouldn't have found the bridge, I wouldn't have -- at all, just like -- definitely prepare yourself and definitely just look at what the program has and what you can do, but don't -- don't think that because something is too much of a demand, a burden of somebody else -- it goes bad and do what you want to do, don't let people -- don't let people tell you you can't like have what you need because it's unsafe.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: 100%. Yes. Don't ever let someone tell you that you're a burden or that your accommodations around feasible or aren't possible or won't work. You know yourself. You know what you need. You know how you're going to best succeed. That rhymes. That was great.

Thank you, girls, so much for sharing your experiences. I really appreciate both of you being on the call tonight. What I'm going to do now is I'm going to transition into a Q&A style portion of the call. So if anyone in the audience has questions or even if you have a story that you might want to share or just anything that you feel compelled to share about study abroad or anything related to that, definitely, you can unmute and say your name and then I'll call on you or you can type in the chat. If you want to remain anonymous, you can also chat to me privately and I will read your question anonymously.

And Justin Harford, if you can help me monitor the chat box, please.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: Yes. I can do that.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: And a clarification, questions can be answered or asked to a single panelist or everyone, whatever you would like.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: Maybe in the meantime, Johna, you can ask a question for me. You said you felt you had to do double duty for the Fulbright Finland and I wondered if there was any message that you got from the Fulbright commission on that, inadvertent or purposeful about any doubts they had as a blind woman and what information you would give to pushback against that information or doubts.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Thank you for asking that. Really good question. From the Fulbright Finland Foundation, I did not receive any pushback. From the Fulbright US Foundation, there was a bit of pushback. Of course, nothing was explicitly stated that my disability was going to play a role in whether or not I received the grant, the fellowship, but there was a bit of communication or miscommunication about if I was going to be able to pass the medical examination to go abroad. Which it basically is just a glorified physical form, so I knew that I would pass it. Plus my blindness would not in any way hinder my ability to study, especially in a country such as Finland.

They actually, in Finland, were very, very accommodating and still are, my university and the Fulbright Commission in Finland. I just know from my experiences with people in the Fulbright US Foundation and also applying for other -- I guess you could say prestigious -- I don't want to sound like a braggart, because I have lots of things that don't get done, but with me applying for other scholarships and not getting them, and in the explanations for why I didn't get them, my capabilities or my abilities were often mentioned. And I found that to be very disheartening and frustrating.

What I would say that would be the best course of action, definitely do not let it go. That's the first thing that you always get told. Oh, they didn't mean it that way. You know, there was probably just a better candidate. Which will always be their excuse. But if there is anything within their response that ever suggests to you that it was because of a disability or that your disability played a role in their decision, definitely -- I would start by writing them back an email and asking for clarification, more information about why you weren't accepted. You know, you could frame it politely, in a way such as, you know, I want to improve for my next application. But I think also, you can definitely start by bringing your concerns that your disability did have something to do with the decision. And if they come back and give you a -- you know, a whatever type of response, what I found to be useful is starting off by going to a professor, one that you really trust. They will fight for you to no end. That's definitely how I ended up getting the Fulbright Scholarship. I have one of my professors and advisors, Dr. David Davis, a shout-out, I have him to thank for basically being in my corner for four years and fighting for me every single time I applied for a scholarship, for a fellowship. Sometimes it worked out in my favor. Sometimes it didn't. But he really was there to assist me.

And if that approach doesn't work, of course, I don't want to say, you know, always jump to litigation as your first line of defense, but you could have a lawsuit. I mean, if someone explicitly were to say that your disability played a role. I would reach out to a disability organization that kind of aligns with your specific disability. So, for example, I would reach out to the National Federation of the Blind because that's the organization that I'm a member, but I can always keep my contact and reach out to me. I have contacts I can connect you with if that happens. But yeah, I'm just here to support all of you and make sure we get you abroad and get you a scholarship if you need it. Yeah, that's the end of my long explanation. That does happen often, so like I said, if you feel like you were cheated, say something.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: Thanks for the clarification, Johna. So you were able to get the Fulbright, weren't you?

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Yes.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: Perfect. Okay.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: What my professor did for me and the Spanish Fulbright Commission was really helpful. I was able to get that scholarship.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: Congratulations. I think what you did with your professor was excellent and valuable and definitely the litigation should be people's last line of defense. And it tends to be pretty sparing in the litigation it takes up and most people are sophisticated for not communicating specific reasons if there is something as blatant as the blindness, but the medical clearance struck me, anyone applying for government scholarships, they need people applying and there is a certain amount of -- mental health clearance is brutal. I applied for Peace Corps six years ago and almost got taken out in the medical clearance because my doctor said that I could not go anywhere that I couldn't receive immediate care for my glaucoma, and my eye wasn't stable, so that was a concern. And I -- I was going back and forth for a while with my placement folks and they were quizzing me about my competence in Spanish and other kind of assorted essentials which ultimately what they were doing was seeing in they could place me in Costa Rica which would have been one of the Peace Corps sites that I could have served in, but medical clearance is something you have to keep an eye out for.

I guess another question, I haven't heard people asking questions yet, but Courtney Gross, so Courtney Gross, she's an advisor and if, what type of support you wish you had from abroad staff prior to going abroad, from professors. Quantitatively, did they share access information with you, whether they helpful, did you have questions about accessibility they were able to answer? Was it steps that they made to provide accommodations? Does anybody have any response to that?

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: No, you're good. I was going to go.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: Yes for me. My professors were -- they sort of understood what I needed, but they didn't quite have all the answers, so they couldn't tell me like how long, tell me -- how they would -- so especially in Spain, the professors were not up front about the test would be. So I would spend like the morning getting up, getting up 7:00 in the morning and going -- not having a break until 7:00 p.m., and I'd go straight, like from classes to activities to like other activities, like homework, and homework was -- and homework was not -- where the homework was, so it was like a long day, and I couldn't handle long days. And I wish some of my professors like were more up front about that. And more like -- that they didn't -- they didn't sugar coat it, but they -- up front with like how much I would spend in a day. So yeah.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Yeah, definitely. I think that's something to keep in mind, the study abroad professor or the study abroad coordinator, it would be super helpful for students with physical disabilities or chronic illnesses if we could have some sort of structure, what the day would be and how intensive it would be, both mentally and physically. That would help a lot.

Sam, do you have anything? I definitely do, but I want to give you all a chance first.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Sure. So I think a few different things. First, I was really lucky in that my study abroad professor was really helpful helping me get in contact with the disability office at the university I was going to be studying at. So they were really helpful in terms of helping me get my accommodations and, you know, letting them know what I need. So it was really helpful that my home university was able to connect me with the people I needed to talk to in Ireland.

So I think on a very general level, I think it's really important for professors and the study abroad advisors to know what accommodations are needed, what the process of getting accommodations -- I think even before, having a student with a disability wanting to study abroad, I think that probably should be incorporated into the general training or information or how is even having that accessibility information on the study abroad website, I think a lot of times one of the best ways to encourage

accessibility and to be inclusive is to just have information available and just sort of normalize it into the normal sort of information of what's provided.

I think that that could encourage students who may not always consider to study abroad to study abroad. So overall, I think being informed. Another personal sort of like anecdote about that, I did another program, it wasn't a study abroad but within the country. It was just going from my university to New York City, but I got very close with the professor who ran the program, and she was writing my recommendation for grad school, I asked if she was nervous about having me in the program and she said no, because she had talked to my other professors and seen me around campus. So I think if advisors have concerns to be honest and communicate about that. I think a lot of times whether it's a professor or advisor or another student, people worry and assume and not -- I wonder how someone will do something. And I think sometimes the best thing in that situation is to ask and openly communicate. So I'd say making sure about information about people with disabilities is readily accessible on any study abroad materials. For making sure that the programs that exist, you have connections to the disability office, whatever is listed in that country, and then also, just open communication, I think would be the main three things that I would say are really important.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Definitely agree with open communication. Both my study abroad advisors personally were amazing. Again, I'll shout-out Rebecca Anaya and Professor Armbruster if they watch that. They made contact with the university I was interested in studying with or maybe the top two choices and asked -- they gave them the lay of the land in terms of my disability and what types of accommodations I received at Mercer, which was my homeschool. -- home school. Of course with my consent. They talked about how they would be able to accommodate me on campus. And after that initial conversation when I had picked which school I wanted to go with, they helped me through the process of applying for accommodations at that university, since the process is fairly different for each university that you study with. If you're not doing a program through a university, there are also, like, for example, with South Africa, they also worked with the professors of the class and kind of told them what types of things I get in the classroom, which they knew because I'd already taken a class with them, but -- so that worked out.

Another thing that we worked on at Mercer that I can totally get new contact with Rebecca for this, but we worked on a project where we reached out to each of the universities that we have affiliate programs with, so exchanges and such. I guess maybe I shouldn't have said -- with which we have exchange agreements. And I think that was like give or take 20 universities. And we kind of let them respond with their process for applying for accommodation and what types of resources you can get from that university. We didn't specify any type of disability. We just said for students with disabilities in general. And there was a -- responses, surprisingly, one of our most accessible countries ended up being South Korea and Japan, certain we had trouble with the university.

I don't want to judge a country on a university, but in Germany, there was a real disconnect how they defined the accommodations process versus how we do. So just know -- don't let that deter you from going to Germany, because Germans are great, but just know that it may be a very different process than what you're used to. But yeah, to Courtney, who asked the question, I can definitely get you those resources. And then the last thing I think that was really important, they helped me look up information about the country itself and also what types of organizations or resources would be there to support me as I was abroad and they also, you know, gave me their WhatsApp numbers and I texted with them when I was abroad. So basically, in Sweden, they gave me information for an organization of the blind, which was super cool. They were there if I ever needed to reach out or had questions about the city or anything like that.

But, yeah. Yeah. Also, apologies if you heard a distressed sounding groan. That was my dog laying down.

Justin, did we have any more questions in the chat?

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: One question, actually, just came up, kind of the summary of it is -- I apologize if I don't get it verbatim. I'm listening on my screen reader and I'm not seeing it. The gist of it is, access technology is important for blind people to be accessing information, of course, you know that material is the biggest, and this leads to the question, which is, were you ever in an area with limited access to internet. Or maybe you could more broadly state more limited access to materials or resources.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: I'll answer in a short way because we only have a couple of minutes. But in South Africa when we went into the township there wasn't ready access to stable internet. And there also wasn't, of course, ready access to the same kind of luxuries we have, such as copying and faxing things and, you know, printing out large-print documents and such. So basically, the accommodation that was made during our workshop, instead of me reading text that was printed on a sheet to interview our clients, I just interviewed our clients by voice, because I already knew the structure of the interview, and then had someone take notes of what the conversation was.

I will say normally if you're studying with a university there's probably not a chance that you won't have stable access to internet. No matter what country you're studying in. Although I'm not 100% on that, so I'm not going to make any claims. But I think, you know, regardless of if you are in the developed world or the developing world, you should have internet access at a university. But there are workarounds that you can use in an emergency situation or if you know ahead of time that you're not going to have internet, you can do like I did with my professors and do things by voice. I think that will just depend. It's more of a case by case situation. You'd have to work with whoever is in charge of your program. Sam, Swatha, do you have any advice or experience in that area?

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: I think for my study abroad I was lucky because I was basically able to get everything electronically. One thing I say, whether you're studying abroad or not, if there's a problem with access to technology or some reason why you can't get electronic documents or Braille documents or whatever you need, it's a good time to talk with readers. Readers is something we don't use as much with the technology. I don't have as much experience using readers as I probably should, but I do think that's definitely an option to consider. I think there's a lot of advantages to that when studying abroad, particularly if you were to let someone who was a national student at that university, it would sort of give you more of an opportunity to show your abilities to interacting with the language of wherever you're studying.

So I would say first trying to get materials using access, but if you can't, have readers, and then have your own ways of recording and taking notes. So maybe that's making sure you have a -- making sure with people's consent you can record interviews rather than taking notes. I think just using different options to get what you need and to sort of thing outside the box a little. But I think readers in that situation, if I were to think of a situation where technology was an issue, I'd say that readers were probably the best way to go.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: This is Justin from Ability International, county second Sam's comments. I studied ten years ago in Chile, and in reference to the specific question, you probably will have internet in most places. If nothing else, you'll have access to cell phone data. So I think most internet is pretty ubiquitous these days. The university in South America, and I think I might be able to say this is how it is at a lot of universities in South America, they had photocopy machines so it was possible to scan books. It was common. All students had access to photocopying and it was about $5 or $10 US to copy a book. That would be a photocopy. But theoretically, there would be the possibility of scanning. The engineering department helps me to scan photocopies of books, which I would just pay for to have photocopied like all the other students, and then I recruited volunteer readers to help me with some of the other. The optical reader was not nearly as good as what you probably have access to today. So many times the photocopies did not process very well on my computer at times, so I needed human readers as a backup.

And my program was complicated, it was a full-on year in Chile. Each semester you choose your classes. So it was pretty hard to know in advance. So I think that's what necessitated that situation I was in. I spoke to a blind student who studied in Cuba, and it was more of an arranged program and I think the biggest catch is students were required to write assignments by hand and the teachers allowed him to do it on a thumb drive.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Awesome. Thank you so much for your insight, Justin. I don't see any more questions at the moment and I know we are at time, so I'll go ahead and wrap up, but I will -- I'll stop recording, but I'll stay on the line for a few minutes in case anyone has questions and I will send some follow-up communication after the meetings.

>> JUSTIN HARFORD: Johna, do you want to mention advising what people might do or follow up on advising?

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Yeah, so on the follow-up information, I'll have information for you to sign up for a one-to-one advising appointment, a basically, those will be 30-minute spots. I'll probably ask you a few demographic questions ahead of time and what kind of program you're interested in studying in, so if you fill that out, I'll have that already, so I can really tailor the session to you and hope you find a suitable program and kind of help with resources, help with scholarships. For example, there's the Gilman Scholarship that I'm very familiar with and tons of resources for finding scholarships for different programs, so I can help from choosing a university to the process, logistical questions or if you want to know how to get a cell phone when you're abroad, anything like that, I can definitely help out with. But yeah, you'll get information about that within the next week, hopefully within the next couple of days, but we'll see.

But yeah, as a final word, I want to thank our panelists, Swatha and Sam again, you were amazing, thank you so much for donating your time to us and this webinar. On behalf of myself, thank you to everyone who attended. I really enjoyed getting to share with you guys about my experiences and hearing about others' experiences as well. You know, this is not the end. So I do want to keep that door open for communication if anyone does need or want to reach out. You know, definitely, you've got my email address. You can do that anytime.

But just as a final word, I hope you gained something from this webinar and I really hope to hear all about your adventures abroad when you decide that it's appropriate to go abroad. So definitely, email me with all your pictures and, you know, your experiences. I'd love to hear that. So thank you guys, and I'm going to end the meeting here, but I'll leave the room open for a few minutes afterwards if anyone has additional questions for me. Have a great night, y'all!

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: You too.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Thank you so much, Johna. If anyone has questions for me, send them my way. You have my contact information.

>> JOHNA WRIGHT: Yes, I have contact information for both of our panelists, so if you have questions of them, I can get you in contact.

>> SAMANTHA FLAX: Have a great night, everyone.

>> SWATHA NANDHAKUMAR: Bye, everyone. Okay. There are only three of us left in the room, one of which is the captioner, I'm going to end the meeting now.

(End of session 9:06 p.m.)

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