The Study Abroad Experience:
Student at the University of Illinois (UIUC) shares his experience

Studying abroad as a student with a disability was instrumental to my growth academically and personally. In the fall of 2010, I touched down in Sydney, Australia with more than a few apprehensions. Up until this point, the study abroad experience had been made extremely easy by both my study abroad advisor at the U of I as well as our connections with my host university in Australia. Any hurdle that might have existed, be it housing, inaccessible classrooms, or making sure medical supplies would be available abroad was assessed and taken care of by these staff members. The determined nature in which they fought for my wellbeing was not only humbling but extremely comforting to know that I would be well taken care of. While it did calm my nerves somewhat, I was still nervous. Not only had I never been this far away from home for so long before, but I also had never really tested the boundaries of my comfort zone since I had gotten hurt. I came in to the program knowing the next semester would bring many different trials that would test me emotionally and physically. It was with the realization that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to experience a culture from within that I gained the confidence to really truly live.

Study abroad allowed me to experience things that I never could in the U.S. I went diving with great white sharks, traversed Southeast Asia, and became a master of the Sydney public transport system. It was the challenges unique to living in another country, however, that truly gave me the best lessons. Whether it be losing a wheel in Thailand, figuring a way to get my wheelchair on a very small train in New Zealand, or trying to fight through the language barrier in Beijing study abroad taught me that there is no such thing as a “comfort zone” only barriers that you put up yourself that eventually must be bypassed in order to grow as a person.

Meeting a baby elephant and his keeper around the floating markets in Ratchaburi, Thailand
The confidence and insight into myself that I gained from this experience have become invaluable to me as I left the University and entered into my post-graduate life. I realize now that the challenges I faced abroad emboldened me to assess and accept the challenges I face every day. The successes I encounter in my life today would not be possible without the knowledge I collected through study abroad.

When helping a student with a disability the best thing to note is you have to go into the experience with an open mind. Be ready to work with them and on their behalf. Another thing to keep in mind is that the accessibility standards of one country may not be on par with another. It is therefore extremely important to understand exactly what the student needs in regards to accessible accommodation abroad. Lastly, when helping a student with a disability, one has to be fearless. While it may seem intimidating and daunting getting everything needed for a student with a disability to go abroad, just know that they are willing to take an extremely large and extremely brave step outside this “comfort zone”. Let their courage help motivate you.