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Latitudes: For Students with Disabilities, Opportunities for International Study

1 message

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Latitudes

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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How a college that serves students with learning disabilities created a study-abroad home in Italy

Beacon College, a liberal-arts institution in central Florida, prides itself on meeting the educational needs of students with learning disabilities, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other learning differences.

But in one area, the college was falling short: study abroad. Although Beacon ran 10-day international trips during the summer, its students had no opportunity to take part in longer-term immersive and academically focused overseas study, said Shelly Chandler, the provost.

Chandler and her colleagues set out to change that. In the fall of 2017, they started Beacon in Tuscany, which the college says is the first semester-long global-education program for students who learn differently.

Nationally, students with disabilities study abroad at lower rates than their classmates. While about one in five American undergraduates [report](#) having a disability, according to the U.S. Department of Education, only 11 percent of students who go abroad do, the [latest findings](#) from an annual survey by the Institute of International Education show.

Still, their numbers have increased. When the institute first began collecting such data, in the 2006-7 academic year, less than 3 percent of study-abroad students said they had a disability. Learning and mental disabilities are the most prevalent among current students.

Beacon exports its distinct educational approach to Italy. “We take our teaching model here to another culture and place,” said Russ Bellamy, a professor of studio arts who was a leader of the first Tuscany program.

Beacon’s efforts show that it is possible to expand international opportunities for students with disabilities and suggest some strategies for serving them.

Beacon’s model is a cohort approach, taking groups of students abroad who often already know one another from campus. The program leaders are also familiar faces, and the opportunity to go to Italy with their professors can encourage students to take part. “They

sometimes need a bit of your confidence to feel confident,” Bellamy said.

A recent graduate acts as a resident assistant, while Andrea Brode, the program’s coordinator, serves as a learning specialist. A doctor and psychiatrist also work with the program.

Gina Mann, a 2020 Beacon graduate, went on the Tuscany program in 2018. The professors “knew how to teach me,” said Mann, who is now in graduate school studying clinical mental-health counseling. “They knew how I worked, the way I worked, as a person.”

While the faculty leaders have experience teaching neurodivergent students, they are called on to assist students in broader ways. “There’s a lot of crisis management,” Brode said. “When a student has high anxiety at 3 a.m., you have to deal with it.”

Beacon keeps the program small — although 28 students went the first year, the typical limit is 20, Chandler said — so that professors can provide individualized attention.

The program’s location, in the small city of Prato rather than the nearby study-abroad hub of Florence, is meant to give students support and push them out of their comfort zones. Just one other American college has its program in Prato, so Beacon students are embedded in the community, living in a local hotel and using vouchers to eat meals in local restaurants. Unlike in Florence, which hosts thousands of Americans a year, many Prato residents do not speak English, and students have to navigate an unfamiliar culture.

Kyle Richardson, who spent this past fall in Tuscany, said he learned a “different way of living” during his semester abroad. “When I went off to college, I really got a lot of independence, but leaving the country without my parents was the next step — a big one,” he said.

The college regularly posts program updates on a private Facebook page for parents and invites the families to Italy for a special Thanksgiving celebration.

Richardson, who will graduate this spring, is a computer-information systems major with a minor in hospitality, so the 2022 program, led by Michael S. Fallon, an instructor of business management, fit with his course of study. The academic focus differs annually depending on the program leaders: Bellamy taught art, while Gretchen Dreimiller, the director of library resources, led a course on travel writing. Next fall's program will focus on psychology.

Beacon tries to offer courses that can count as electives and work with major requirements for large numbers of students, in order to reduce students' anxiety that studying abroad could delay their graduation.

Although Beacon has a small faculty body, this year eight professors submitted proposals to lead the Tuscany program, Chandler said. Student demand is also high, and she hopes to expand destinations beyond Italy. In spring 2020, the college ran a program in Puerto Rico but had to withdraw students when Covid-19 struck. Now Chandler is looking at Tokyo as another possible site.

"There's absolutely no reason why neurodiverse students shouldn't study abroad," Brode said. "They're quirky and interesting and challenging, and I fall in love with every one."

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Report on disabilities among international students released

About 2 percent of international students in a new survey say they have a disability, but efforts at a census may be stymied by colleges' data-collection abilities and by foreign students' understanding of and willingness to report their status.

Still, the [report](#) from the Institute of International Education provides an initial glimpse at the scope of the disabled international-student population. While the organization has collected data for more than 15 years on students with disabilities who study abroad, this is the initial attempt to measure the share among overseas students.

The 386 colleges responding to the survey hosted 35 percent of all international students in the United States in the 2021-22 academic year. The number of students self-identifying with a disability was equal to 1.6 percent of the international-student population at the reporting institutions.

A third of the reported disabilities were mental-health disabilities. One in five students had attention-deficit disorder, while about 15 percent had learning or chronic-health disabilities. Smaller numbers had mobility, physical, sensory, or autism-spectrum disabilities.

But even as the survey sheds light for the first time on the prevalence of disabilities among international students, it also highlights the many ways in which it is difficult to adequately assess the issue. More than half of the colleges surveyed by the institute were unable to share data, often because of reporting gaps within institutions. For example, disability-services databases might not include information about students' visa status. Likewise, international-student offices might not collect or receive information about whether students have disabilities.

The hurdles to a full accounting are not just institutional. Disabilities recognized in the American context may not be understood as such in students' home cultures. "International students may not have the vocabulary" to discuss disabilities, said Julie Baer, a research specialist at the Institute of International Education and a co-author of the report.

International students may also face challenges in documenting their disabilities, in getting translations of medical documents from overseas, or in affording such assessments. And for some foreign students, there may be a cultural stigma to acknowledging a disability.

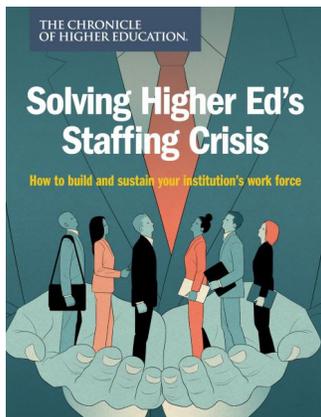
The institute makes a number of recommendations, among them:

- Colleges should encourage greater collaboration between disability-services and international-student offices on campus in order to more accurately collect data and better coordinate services. More than two thirds of responding institutions said the survey had prompted them to think of ways to have such offices work more closely together.
- Colleges should improve outreach and support to international students with disabilities so that they understand the availability of such services and how to access them. They also should help educate foreign students so they better understand American definitions of disabilities. Colleges "should be more proactive so they're not just responding when students need accommodation," said Laurie Laird, a program manager with

Mobility International USA, a group that advocates for people with disabilities to take part in international exchanges.

- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security should update student-visa guidance for international students with disabilities. While reduced courseloads are a common accommodation for students with disabilities, student-visa regulations limit the amount of time foreign students are permitted to be enrolled less than full time for medical reasons.

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The Covid-19 pandemic upended norms surrounding how academic institutions work, putting the relationship between colleges and their staff members under greater stress. [Order your copy](#) to explore how higher education can better manage a crucial part of its work force.

Education Dept. to change rule that penalized native foreign-language speakers

The U.S. Department of Education plans to amend a [controversial rule](#) that penalizes applicants for the prestigious Fulbright-Hays award for research abroad if they are native or heritage speakers of a foreign language spoken in the country in which they plan to work.

Under current regulations, doctoral students and faculty members applying for the overseas-research grant can be docked points on the language-assessment portion of their application if they grew up speaking or exposed to the language they propose to use in their fieldwork. The change would allow all applicants to receive up to full points for language proficiency.

The rule had been the subject of a [lawsuit](#) by graduate students who said their applications were rejected because they were penalized for being native speakers. They argued that it discriminated against applicants based on national origin, particularly those who are immigrants from non-English-speaking countries, or the children of such immigrants.

In response to the court case, Education Department had waived the penalty for 2022 Fulbright-Hays applicants only.

The grant program seeks to encourage international research and foreign-language proficiency among aspiring teachers and professors as well as current scholars. The current rule, which has been in place since 1998, was meant to eliminate a perceived advantage among native speakers of a foreign language.

In a [proposed rule](#) published on Tuesday in the *Federal Register*, the Education Department said that while it had a “reasonable basis” for the language criteria, its “updated consideration of these programs as they have evolved over time has led to the conclusion that this change will better promote fairness in the application review process for native speakers of languages other than English.”

The revision would also bring Fulbright-Hays into alignment with other federal foreign-language and international-area-studies grants, which do not include exceptions for native-language speakers. The public can submit comments on the proposed rule until April 20.



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Around the globe

Legislation introduced in Ohio would bar the state's public colleges from having academic partnerships, including research collaborations and study-abroad programs, with universities or other entities in [China](#).

A bipartisan group of U.S. senators proposed a [bill](#) to create federal policy to hold foreign governments or individuals responsible when they [harass or intimidate](#) international students and others across national borders.

The Department of Education has released [updated guidance](#) about when Afghan refugees resettled in the United States can qualify for federal student aid.

The New England Commission of Higher Education has upheld its decision [withdraw accreditation](#) from a Chinese-owned for-profit college in Massachusetts.

The University of Pennsylvania has denied that its endowment is invested in "adversarial" foreign entities, a charge made by House Republicans, *The Daily Pennsylvanian* [reports](#).

Members of a group opposed to the Chinese Communist Party are [suing](#) the University of Maryland-Baltimore County because of a

court order forbidding them from holding demonstrations on the college campus. The organization, the New Federal State of China, has been [accused](#) of publishing a student's personal information without permission.

A new report said China diverted some postdoctoral researchers to Canada, giving them several weeks of training to avoid security scrutiny, after they were denied visas to the United States.

Britain's Foreign Office barred a [record number](#) of foreign scientists and postgraduate students from working there amid a crackdown on research collaboration with China.

China plans to overhaul its [science ministry](#) in order to direct more resources to achieve faster breakthroughs and to become more "self-reliant" amid growing global competition.

Australia's Deakin University will become the first foreign higher-education institution to [open a campus in India](#), according to an announcement by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

Scholars at Risk is urging the Iranian government to grant [amnesty](#) to students and scholars who have been imprisoned there.

The College of Europe announced it will open a [new campus](#) in Tirana, Albania, which could be a sign the country is moving closer to full membership in the European Union.

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And finally ...

As the number of international students in the United States soared over the past decade and a half, colleges have paid growing attention to the academic performance of that population. Now, as institutions seek to recover from the double whammy of Covid-19 and nationalist politics hitting international enrollments, foreign-student retention and satisfaction may be more important than ever — particularly as the number of college-aged Americans declines.

For *The Chronicle*, I wrote about colleges' [international-student success programming](#), aimed at demystifying the American higher-ed experience. Such approaches — such as an ambitious, far-reaching effort at Syracuse University — are showing promising results.

I'd like to hear from you: What is your institution doing to help international students get through the often-rocky transition to college in America? Email me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com, and I'll share readers' strategies and insights in a future issue of *Latitudes*.

I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line or connect with me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#). Thanks for reading.

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