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Latitudes: How two Deaf students studied abroad in silence

1 message

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Latitudes

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‘We want to break the statistics’

Julia Bronneberg and Macy DeGraw have spent the past three months traveling to Europe, Africa, and Asia with Semester at Sea, the shipboard study-abroad program.

By the time their voyage ends on December 22, they will have visited 10 countries, doing field work in each destination to better understand the culture and environment. In between stops, they study ecology, global studies, oceanography, and geography with other on-board classmates.

The women, both junior biology majors at Gallaudet University, have also met with Deaf leaders in every country they visit — a chance not just to learn about another culture but to understand more about the Deaf community around the world.

In Portugal, a Deaf student told them she has to schedule and pay for her own interpreters if she wants to take classes. In Ghana, they visited a deaf school and learned that many parents delay sending their children for education because they struggle to accept their

deafness. Instead, they hope religious leaders or medical providers will “cure” them.

The pair, two of the first Deaf students to travel with Semester at Sea, started an American Sign Language club on the ship and have documented their travels on their YouTube channel, [Sailing in Silence](#).

About 11 percent of Americans who study abroad have [disabilities](#), an increase over the last decade and a half but still a lower rate than other students.

The Chronicle caught up with Macy and Julia just before they docked in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, one of their final destinations. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Did you have any hesitation about going abroad as a Deaf person?

Macy: I was hesitant to spend part of my college career in a mainstream, non-Deaf environment, especially since Covid had already impacted some of my educational experiences in high school, leading to increased feelings of isolation. We want to break the statistics and prove that Deaf students, and all people with disabilities, can study abroad.

Julia: People with disabilities tend to face hesitation in their daily lives and international-travel experiences based on the environments around them not being set up to welcome them fully. I joined Semester at Sea to learn and prove to the world that we can do anything hearing people can.

You've made it a point to meet with Deaf leaders when you've visited different countries. What have you learned?

Macy: We wanted to meet Deaf locals in every country to learn about their daily lives, barriers, goals, educational systems, and governments firsthand. The U.S. Deaf community does not tend to focus on international Deaf communities often. These experiences have revealed how privileged we are as Deaf people in America with the different laws and rights afforded to us.

Julia: At Gallaudet, we often host international visiting scholars, and I have always wanted to travel outside the U.S. and be in their shoes for a bit — to know the contexts they are coming from personally.

The biggest theme I recognized is that none of us are looking for pity as Deaf people. Rather, we take pride in all the gains we experience and the valuable perspectives we have to share. Everyone struggles with something at some point in their lives. The Deaf people we met in each country are proud of their hard-earned successes and advances in human rights.

What was the response like from your fellow students when you formed the ASL club?

Julia: We had more than 180 people sign up for ASL club the day we pitched our student organizations. Initially, Macy and I co-led the sessions with the alphabet, basic conversational phrases, colors, countries, and ship vocabulary. However, in the middle of the semester, it became apparent that with newcomers and continuing learners, we needed to split into beginner and advanced groups.

Macy: There are approximately 15 “ship kids” on the voyage, children of our staff and faculty, and we were invited to teach them the basics of sign-language communication. We also shared our stories of growing up with parents who were willing to learn to communicate with us. We believe it is vital for *all* children to be exposed to sign language when they are young, so it was extra special to connect with them. They reserve front-row seats for us in all of their ship productions and love practicing their signs with us!

What will you take away from your study-abroad experience?

Macy: I semi-naively expected every country to be fun and upbeat. However, I have been appropriately challenged by exposure to the history of colonialism, power and privilege, wealth disparities, and environmental factors across various countries. This program is much deeper than sailing on a ship, going to classes, and being tourists.

Julia: We learned about the concept of “and” from [one of our lecturers]. We can experience joy *and* grief, abundance *and* scarcity, gains *and* losses, while visiting other countries. There will always be people and places with more or fewer resources than we have. Instead of feeling guilty, we have learned to be aware of our privileges and the incredible opportunity to visit each country with humility and curiosity.



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China travel warning is downgraded while students going to Italy face new barriers

The U.S. government has downgraded a warning for American travelers to China, removing a barrier to scholarship and study abroad.

The State Department lowered its travel advisory for China from level three, "reconsider travel," the second-highest warning, to a level two, "[exercise increased caution.](#)"

Many colleges tie their travel policies to government warnings, restricting students from going to countries with higher risk ratings. Despite efforts by the Chinese government to encourage academic exchange, the number of Americans studying there remains [low](#).

Other countries with level-two warnings include Britain, France, Germany, and Spain. A State Department spokesperson told [Politico](#) that a prisoner swap that included three American citizens "was a factor" in the decision to change the advisory.

Meanwhile, international-education groups are alarmed about Italian visa changes that could hamper travel to the most popular destination

for Americans studying abroad.

Beginning in January, the Italian government will require foreign visitors staying for more than 90 days to go to Italian consulates for fingerprinting as part of their visa application. The requirement could “dramatically increase capacity demands” at consulates and create logjams for applicants, the Forum on Education Abroad and NAFSA: Association for International Educators wrote in a [letter](#) to Italian officials. Some students could be deterred by the additional cost of travel for the visa appointment.

The new requirements could also “effectively eliminate” batch processing, in which colleges and study-abroad providers submit applications in bulk, streamlining the process.

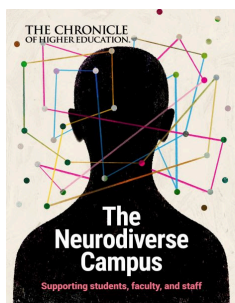
Italy is the top destination for study abroad, hosting nearly 42,000 American students, according to the latest [Open Doors report](#). Their average length of stay is [16 weeks](#).

In the letter, NAFSA and the Forum warn that the new visa measures could limit students’ study in Italy, pushing them to programs shorter than 90 days; lead them to go to other countries; or reduce access to study abroad. The requirement could “cripple” semester-long study-abroad programs in Italy, said Melissa A. Torres, the Forum’s president.

The Italian government should restore batch processing, devote more resources to student-visa appointments, and allow fingerprinting to be done by honorary consulates or local police departments, the groups said.

Noting that students studying abroad contribute to the Italian economy, the two organizations asked for a meeting with Italy’s ambassador in Washington, D.C. “International education, including study abroad, provides a way for burgeoning scholars, scientists, philosophers, linguists, and other young adults to collaborate and address complex problems that we face together,” they wrote.

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The Neurodiverse Campus

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Trump said he wants to aid Dreamers

President-elect Donald J. Trump said he would look for ways to safeguard young people brought illegally to the United States as children, known as Dreamers. But during his first term in office, he tried to gut a federal program that gave them some legal protections.

“We have to do something about the Dreamers, because these are people that have been brought here at a very young age,” Trump said on [Meet the Press](#) on Sunday. “And many of these are middle-aged people now. They don’t even speak the language of their country.”

Asked specifically if he wanted Dreamers to stay in the country, Trump, who campaigned on [mass deportations](#), said, “I do.”

His remarks led to head scratching: Trump previously tried to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program, which allows undocumented young people to study and work. His attempt was [blocked](#) by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Immigration advocates expressed skepticism. “Actions speak louder than words, and Donald Trump’s track record in attacking DACA, fueling depraved disinformation and violence, and scapegoating immigrants extend back to his very first day in office,” said Bruna Sollod, senior political director for United We Dream.

It’s not the first time that Trump has seemingly contradicted his own record on immigration and international students. During the campaign, he said he would make it a “[day one](#)” priority to keep “brilliant” international students in the United States, while during his first term, he pushed for more restrictive policies that would have made it tougher to attract and retain top foreign students.

Around the globe

Many exchange visitors, including research scholars and high-skilled workers, will not have to meet a [requirement](#) that they return to their home

countries and reside for two years when they complete their program as part of their J visas.

Congress could pass [legislation](#) this week that would bar U.S. Department of Defense grants from going to colleges that work with universities in China, Russia, and other adversarial countries that have ties to their military or intelligence agencies.

An U.S.-based Zionist group is using facial-recognition technology powered by artificial intelligence to [identify international students involved in anti-Israel protests](#) on American campuses. The group plans to give the information to Trump after his inauguration in hopes that he will make good on campaign promises to [deport](#) such students.

A Florida bill would repeal a decade-old law offering [in-state tuition](#) to state residents who are undocumented immigrants.

Some 1,600 students from all 50 states are the latest recipients of the [Gilman scholarship](#) to help low-income and first-generation students study abroad.

Quebec has adopted legislation that gives the Canadian province's minister of higher education authority to [cap international enrollments](#) in certain academic programs.

British universities may be enrolling foreign students with inadequate English-language skills, according to a [BBC investigation](#).

The Taliban has issued a decree forbidding Afghan women from pursuing [medical education](#), removing the last opportunity for women there to pursue higher education.

Palestinian scientists living in Gaza, the West Bank, and abroad, talked about how the Israel-Hamas war "[looms over](#)" their research.

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First patriotic education — now [love education](#)?

The Chinese government has long sought to shape the curriculum in its colleges to emphasize certain ideological perspectives and freeze out foreign ideas. Now it's trying something new: urging colleges to promote positive views on marriage, love, fertility, and family to try to

boost the country's flagging birth rate. The goal is to create a "healthy and positive marriage and childbearing cultural atmosphere."

Almost 60 percent of Chinese college students in a recent survey said that they did not want to fall in love because of the difficulty of balancing a relationship with their studies.

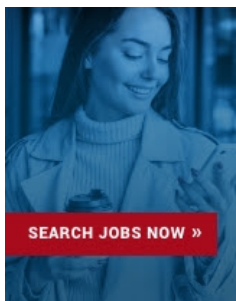
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