

Students with Disabilities Studying in the United States: Resources and Opportunities

By Olivia Hardin

Feature

David Albala heard stories from a young age about his uncle's experience at a U.S. university with the Fulbright program. As a graduate film student in Chile, David followed through on his childhood dream of going to the United States like his uncle by applying for and receiving a Fulbright award. Using a wheelchair did not impact David's plans. He found that the people who supported him looked at him as a person with a myriad of interests and ideas.

David is not an unusual case. Rauf Salokhodjaev, who has cerebral palsy, is studying in the United States as a Muskie Graduate Fellow. Rauf sees his experience in America as a way to improve the place of people with disabilities in his home country of Uzbekistan. He says, "I would like to dedicate my life to disability-related issues. My country is young, and I think people like me who have appropriate education and experience and who are confident in their goals are ready to contribute their best for the development of their country and can really make a change. These two years of study at the State University of New York may determine the course of my whole life!"

Thousands of people with disabilities around the world have similar goals to David and Rauf: to study in the United States. There are over 650 million people around the world with a disability. Most people with disabilities are in large part underserved and underrepresented within the educational, social, political and employment sectors of their communities, and likely to live in poverty. Only 2-3% of children with disabilities worldwide receive a formal education. Those who pursue an education often do so utilizing skills and resiliency while countering discrimination and lack of resources. But broader changes are occurring in large part due to people with disabilities around the world advocating for the right to contribute to society and be regarded as equal citizens. In 2008 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (<http://www.un.org/disabilities/>) entered into force. This landmark Convention focused worldwide attention on the importance of equal access for people with disabilities, including the equal right to access education. Currently 147 countries have signed the Convention, signifying a commitment to disability rights in many countries that have yet to develop anti-discrimination or other disability-related legislation.

People with Disabilities Accessing International Exchange

As more people with disabilities are increasingly included in society and opportunities for equal education, more have the chance to study in the United States. International students with disabilities may find that their daily lives and place in society while in the U.S. are quite different than at home. In some ways this transition may be quite difficult, but in some ways it may be welcome. Such is the case with Humphrey Fellow Svetlana Vasilyeva, who is blind: "Sometimes I think that [my college campus in the United States] is my utopia. I have all conditions needed for me to focus on my studying and to



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get around campus comfortably. I can go to all my classes by myself; all of my class materials have been converted into an accessible format; and I have met many friendly and helpful people. I know that many, difficult challenges are waiting for me back in my country—but now I'm just a student and I'm very happy here!"

Here are some key elements of U.S. disability culture that international students with disabilities will likely experience in the United States:

• Assistive equipment and technology

Using technology, such as the electronic door openers, vibrating alarm clocks, and screen-reading software, to make an environment more accessible to people with disabilities is common in the United States.

• Inclusive education

The emphasis is to educate those with and without disabilities together at all levels of education, and in a way that benefits all students in the classroom. There are generally not special institutions of higher education for people with disabilities,

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with the exception of optional schools for people who are Deaf or learning disabled (see page 5).

- **Independent living skills**

Individuals are encouraged to develop skills to control their own life choices, and to have the right to choose when and how to accept assistance from others. Individuals often prefer to receive assistance from service dogs, a power wheelchair, or paid professionals and to make adaptations to their home and work space rather than rely on family and friends for basic living needs.

- **Recognition of a variety of disabilities**

Disability is widely defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws to include non-apparent disabilities such as learning and mental health disabilities.

- **Social/human rights model of disability**

Disability is defined as a problem within the structure of society and targets changes to the environment and attitudes of others to create inclusion; it replaces the out-dated “medical model” that views disability as a problem within an individual that needs to be fixed with medical intervention.



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Non-discrimination Laws in the U.S.

One other significant difference in coming to the United States may be the extensive anti-discrimination laws that protect people with disabilities in the United States, and a culture with the means to enforce these laws (see “Non-discrimination Laws in the US” sidebar for more information). People with disabilities, including people in the U.S. who are not citizens, have significant protection under U.S. laws, but this does not mean that discrimination and prejudice do not still exist in the United States. These laws also require non-discrimination in the higher education and scholarship application processes. Disability status cannot be considered a disadvantage in a school’s admission decision. Also, schools are not allowed to inquire about disability in the application process. A student may disclose a disability and request accommodations, such as an application in braille, but the school must make sure that this is not considered when making an admissions decision. This also means that it is the student’s responsibility,

after admission, to request disability-related accommodations.

In the U.S. higher education system, colleges and universities are required to provide equal access through “reasonable accommodations” to people with disabilities. (See chart outlining examples of

U.S. Non-Discrimination Legislation

International students and other non-U.S. citizens are covered by the following laws when in the United States, and can become more familiar with these through Disability.gov.

Americans with Disabilities Act

This broad-reaching civil rights law covers anti-discrimination protections for people with disabilities in employment, education, communications, public facilities, public transportation and government agencies. It requires the agency, business or institution to provide reasonable accommodations and services for an individual with a disability to access goods and services.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504

This section of legislation governs disability-related access to educational institutions that are receiving any type of federal funding, which includes most colleges and universities with the exception of some private or religious educational institutions.

Air Carrier Access Act

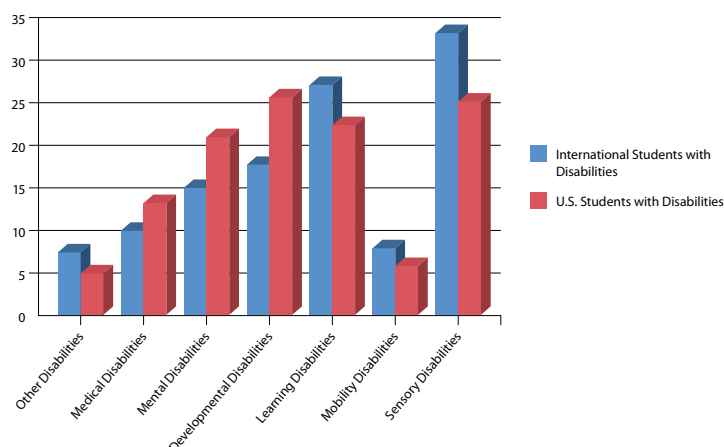
This federal legislation protects people with disabilities against discriminatory treatment and requires airlines to accommodate access to air travel. This includes foreign carriers to and from the United States.

Fair Housing Access Act

People with disabilities are among the groups protected from unfair practices in housing, such as from landlords discriminating as to whom they rent housing units or disallowing renters to make access-related modifications.

Americans with disabilities also have access to social security and public health insurance programs that non-U.S. citizens will not have access to because it is considered public assistance. This includes access to funding for personal assistants, equipment such as hearing aids or wheelchairs, mobility training for blind individuals, and health care that covers pre-existing conditions and medications. To learn more about how to access other community-based services and prepare for health insurance, see online Resources sidebar, on page 4.

Disability Types among the 830 International and 30024 U.S. Students with Disabilities*



2010 National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE)

*Percentages may add up to more than 100% since students may have reported more than one disability.

accommodations.) This is usually coordinated by a disability services office on campus that assesses needs and makes arrangements for reasonable accommodations for all students with disabilities. The student is encouraged to talk with the disability services office before and after admission. Staff in this office will not disclose a student's disability to the admissions office. When researching a school, students should ask this office about disability-related services and programs available at that school. In some cases, a student may also want to speak with another student who attends the school and has a similar disability.

Online Resources

Accessible Advising: Reaching Students with Disabilities
www.miusa.org/ncde/trainings/accessadvising

AWAY Topics International Student Advising
www.miusa.org/publications/books/awaytopics1

A Recruitment Guide: Youth and Adults with Disabilities for Exchange Programs to the United States
www.miusa.org/ncde/tools/inboundrecruit

Advising Students, Scholars and Professionals with Disabilities for Exchange to the United States
www.miusa.org/ncde/tools/inboundadvising

Coming to the USA as a Person with a Disability
www.miusa.org/ncde/comingtousa

You can contact the NCDE anytime by calling them at (+1) 541-343-1284, emailing clearinghouse@miusa.org, or through the website <http://www.miusa.org/ncde>.

Providing disability-related accommodations in the United States is typically more formal with rules and procedures in contrast to other societies in which people with disabilities are more likely to receive informal support from friends, family or negotiating directly with faculty and other staff. For example, in the United States specific institutional guidelines regulate what types of accommodations may be provided and how they are requested. Students are required to provide documentation, from a doctor or other qualified professional, of their disability. Every student's situation is considered on an individual basis, so a student who has trouble obtaining documentation should contact the school's disability services office to inquire about other options. Some schools may be more flexible than others on documentation requirements. Students with disabilities should be prepared to disclose and provide documentation of their disability in order to request accommodations.

Privacy and confidentiality laws in the U.S. protect the information from being shared unnecessarily with others. Federal and institutional rules govern who has access to the disability information of students, and confidentiality is taken very seriously. Oftentimes, international students may be uneasy about who will know about their disability, and disability services staff can answer any questions the student has in this regard. International students may find that many of their U.S. peers are very open about their disability identity and have pride as a person with a disability. Many campuses have students groups specifically for students with disabilities. This can be a great place for international students to meet other diverse students on campus, find support for challenges they are facing, and learn more about disability culture in the United States. Argiroula Zangana, a Fulbright Student from Greece, experienced this when meeting other deaf students at her college. She says, "It amazed me to meet Deaf people who were able to attend college and do other things that would not be possible or accepted in Greece, like piloting an airplane. I experienced different points of view that helped me to face aspects of my own deafness and accept it." This sharing can go both ways with international students sharing their experiences of disability in a different culture.

Other students and disability services staff can also let international students know more about what resources are available to them off campus. Are there accessible public buses or local public transportation services specifically for people with disabilities? Where is the best accessible housing? When do movie theatres show captioned movies that are accessible to people who are deaf? Where can a student take orientation and mobility training to learn how to use a white cane? While many community programs will be available for international students to use, some may be restricted to U.S.

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citizens, especially if the programs are funded by federal, state or local governments.

Selecting an Institution

As with any student, students with disabilities may choose schools based on location, cost, quality of programs and other factors before they consider disability. Because inclusive education is emphasized, there are very few colleges and universities in the United States specifically for people with disabilities. Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. (www.gallaudet.edu) and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (www.ntid.edu) specifically serves people who are Deaf and Landmark College in Vermont (www.landmark.edu) serves students who have learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. Besides these schools, some schools may be more attractive to people with disabilities, for example, by having excellent physical accessibility, a large community of people with a specific disability, or a reputation for having exceptional services for people with disabilities on campus or in the community. Students who are interested in finding schools such as these can do online research, but should also try to connect with disability communities in the United States to hear the opinions of others.

Advising Students with Disabilities

The best way for advisers to improve their advising of students with disabilities wanting to study in the United States is to learn from

the experiences of students who have already had the experience of study in the U.S. Students such as Yelena Semyonova from Russia, who attended a community college in Iowa and has a prosthetic leg, says, “Going to America wasn’t just my goal — it was my dream. Even before I realized it was a goal, I was moving toward it all the time on a sub-conscious level.”

Many articles written by and about international students with disabilities are available on the ECA-sponsored National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) website at www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/destination/namerica. The NCDE welcomes students with disabilities who are studying or have studied in the United States to add their stories to this collection by submitting their information to www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/featuredpersonform. Every individual has a story to tell that will encourage others and let the world know that people with disabilities should be included!

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Examples of Accommodations

The chart below is a sampling of accommodations for some disabilities. Specific accommodations will depend on the individual situation. Though there are many accommodations not provided by the school, there may be community organizations that will assist students.

Type of Disability	Examples that may be provided by the school	Examples that may not be provided by the school
Deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none">American Sign Language interpreterFlashing light/vibrating alarm system and doorbell on campusClosed captioning or FM system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Vibrating alarm clockVideophoneHearing aid
Learning Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">NotetakerExtended time on testQuiet place to take test	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Personal screen reading software
Blind	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Conversion of written materials to accessible formatScreen reading software in computer lab	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Orientation and mobility trainingPersonal screen reading softwareService dog
Mobility-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none">RampsAutomatic door openerAccessible dorm roomAccessible parking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">WheelchairPersonal assistantAccessible housing off-campus