

Bethany Kuwitzky

Navigating Disability Disclosure During Study Abroad in Iceland: When Not Disclosing Works



At Stone Bridge, a natural landmark located in the fishing village of Arnarstapi, Iceland.

Bethany (left) with a friend at the Eyjafjallajökull glacier in Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland.

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Individuals must consider a variety of questions when evaluating whether to disclose a disability: When should they disclose? Who should they tell? Will they need to show documentation, such as a letter from a doctor? Will they be believed? Will they get the disability-related accommodations that they are requesting?

The complexity of the decision combined with past experience can lead some participants to choose not to disclose their disability to international exchange program staff or faculty. Nevertheless, these participants may have already planned on how they will manage disability related issues abroad.



Bethany on one of many scenic hikes along Iceland's Snaefellsnes peninsula.

During her undergraduate studies, Bethany Kuwitzky spent an academic year studying abroad in Reykjavik, Iceland through the Mid-American Universities International consortium. She took classes in geophysics and geology, which were related to her major. "My specific classes were incredibly unique and nothing like I was able to take at Texas Tech."

She was also involved with a student organization called Fjallið, which translates to "the Mountain." They would attend information sessions to learn about local companies and lectures on various topics. The group also organized a prom where Bethany was named Ungfru Skiptanemi (or Miss Exchange Student).



After studying abroad as a student, Bethany went on to work for Texas Tech as a study abroad advisor. In this role, Bethany traveled to various study abroad locations, such as Seville, Spain (pictured here).



Iceland's skies treat Bethany and friends to a dazzling display of the northern lights.

"I hiked mountains, walked on glaciers, flew a 4-person plane, climbed volcanoes, camped in the snow, zip lined, and so much more that I thought I couldn't do."

Disability Was Not at the Forefront

Bethany has rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia, autoimmune conditions that result in limited energy and physical mobility. While her rheumatoid arthritis is mostly managed, the fibromyalgia can result in body aches, joint and eye pain, brain fog and intense fatigue. That means Bethany must be very intentional about punctuating active periods with rest. What most would consider to be a relatively light activity, such as a hike, could easily knock her off her feet for days.

While it may surprise some, disability was the last thing on Bethany's mind during the planning of her exchange experience. With so much to consider, she was mostly busy with logistical details like financing and packing. When she started to settle in on her program, it quickly became apparent that her disabilities would impact her day-to-day activities.

Instead of approaching program staff, Bethany decided to arrange her own support. Before studying abroad, she had found that disclosure did not always get her where she needed to be. Very often people would not understand the degree to which fibromyalgia caused pain, the reason for her brain fog or why she sometimes needed more sleep than others. "There were (and continue to be) many misconceptions around autoimmune disabilities, and I did not think people would classify it as a 'real' disease," Bethany shared.

Non-Disclosure Does Not Mean No Disclosure

Although Bethany opted not to disclose to program staff, she shared about her disability with a network of trusted friends she made while in Iceland. Whenever she would have a flareup, her support system would make sure that groceries, homework assignments, and class notes made it to her apartment. While she had been able to bring a sufficient medication supply with her on a previous exchange program which only lasted a month, she would need refills during her year in Reykjavik. She connected herself with a local care provider recommended by her landlady, who also had an autoimmune disability. The provider looked over the list of medications that she had been taking in the US, wrote prescriptions for each, and recommended an alternative for a medicine that was not available in Iceland.

During one weekend when her symptoms had grown particularly unruly, Bethany decided to treat herself. She took a trip to a well-known tourist destination called the Blue Lagoon where she took a dip in a hot spring and got a massage. It was very expensive, but Bethany reflects that "the health services did help with some of my immediate fibro symptoms."

Overall, these experiences helped Bethany to cultivate a greater sense of mental fortitude. Up to that point, she had found it to be very easy to settle into negative patterns of thinking, discounting what she could accomplish because of her chronic health conditions.



Bethany's cozy cabin in Iceland's Snaefellsnes.

"I hiked mountains, walked on glaciers, flew a 4-person plane, climbed volcanoes, camped in the snow, zip lined, and so much more that I thought I couldn't do."

A Formative Experience

Her fondest memory was taking a trip with her friends to a peninsula called Snaefellsnes to celebrate some birthdays. They rented a cabin at the foot of a mountain and spent the weekend going on hikes and visiting interesting

destinations in a friend's car. The northern lights provided a vibrant backdrop throughout her entire year abroad.

Before her exchange experience, Bethany was focused on geophysics, but she very soon realized her keen interest in international education. Upon her return to Texas Tech, she became president of an outreach club to educate students about study abroad. And before she finished with her program she was hired on as a staff in the international programs office, where she continues to work today. ■

Ways Exchange Professionals Can Encourage Participants to Disclose their Disabilities: From Bethany's Perspective

Most students will not automatically feel comfortable disclosing aspects of their identity to staff and faculty. This includes disabilities, goals, and experiences. It is so important that international exchange professionals create spaces for students so that they feel safe to disclose anything about themselves that might impact their experience abroad. As someone who has experience both as an exchange participant with an autoimmune disability and now as an international education professional herself, here are Bethany's suggestions for creating such spaces:

One-on-One Situations

- Ask students what they like to do to relax. After a student responds, I usually chime in with a blurb I have in my back pocket: "I have an autoimmune disease so for me, relaxing depends on the severity of my symptoms, but usually I like to bake." I doubt the student cares what I do in my free time (we're not there to talk about me), but in those first 5 words, I am sharing something about myself that makes me appear more vulnerable and open, and this can sometimes create a safe space for students.
- When talking about a program or university, highlight any resources they offer for disability accommodations or support. "For example, if I am looking at a partner provider program, I will go to their accommodation pages and discuss the support they can offer for specific things. I also usually mention here that I didn't have this type of accommodation while studying abroad and follow up with how great it would have been to have university support during disease flareups. Again, this creates a space where they feel they can learn more about you, and hopefully that will help them feel safer opening up."

In Larger Group Settings (e.g. Pre-Departure Orientations)

- Give anonymous examples of how accommodation support has helped previous students with disabilities.
- Be clear that the purpose of disclosure is to aid the student, and not to deem them unfit or different. Make sure students know that disclosing a disability will not affect their ability to study abroad.
- Assure students that they may choose to use accommodations or not, but that it might be useful to learn what accommodations exist before making a decision. Many countries offer better support for students with disabilities than the United States, so U.S. students might find that they appreciate the accommodations they use abroad more than they do at home.
- Remind students that on-campus disability support follows them abroad.
- If students don't feel comfortable disclosing to you directly, encourage them to reach out to their on-campus disability office.