

Nicole Bettè

Design Thinking in Stockholm, Sweden

Nicole Bettè, a Latina bioengineering student from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with learning and chronic health disabilities, discovered the power of design when she spent a year studying nanotechnology, structural biology, and Swedish at the Royal Institute of Technology and Design Thinking at Konstfack University of Arts in Stockholm, Sweden.

Ever since she was young, Nicole had known that she wanted to study abroad. Her father had a job that caused him to travel frequently, and she was enamored by the stories that emerged from his travels. Both of her parents were also passionate about languages, and they transferred that passion to their daughter.

Nicole (center, wearing scarf) and friends enjoy entertainment from circus performers on a cruise ship traveling from Stockholm, Sweden to Tallinn, Estonia in the Baltic Sea.

A Mix of Disabilities

Nicole has a mix of disabilities. Her autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) impact her ability to focus in class and on exams. Her Sensory Processing Integration Disorder (SPD), which co-occurs with ASD, creates difficulties with sensory processing and makes certain sounds, tastes, or smells almost intolerable. She also has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and dysautonomia, which cause difficulty walking long distances and standing for long periods of time as well as the occasional dislocation of joints. Her endometriosis means periodic bouts of debilitating pain, causing her to miss class.

Unsurprisingly, disability issues were top on Nicole's mind when she set out to study abroad. She was concerned about how she would receive extra time on tests and excused absences, and how she would be able to maintain access to her medications. Though only her ADHD and endometriosis had been diagnosed at the time, she still struggled with her other conditions and was concerned about how they might impact her experience.

She was able to get extended time on exams without incident. Though



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she was nervous about disclosing her ADHD, doubting if it would be recognized abroad, teachers were supportive. For example, one of her professors gave her more time than she would have received in the United States.

Rationing ADHD Medication

The medications, on the other hand, were a different situation. Nicole was not able to buy her ADHD medications in Sweden, and she was not able to bring a sufficient supply with her. So, she

had to economize. For most of the program she did without, limiting herself to times of particular need such as at exam time.

Another challenge came in the form of funding support. As a low-income student, she paid for her studies with university financial aid as well as scholarship support from a private foundation for STEM students and the U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship. One would think that with all that funding, she would not have had issues meeting

basic needs; however, the scholarship from the private foundation would only send the remaining half of Nicole's award at the end of the program, leaving Nicole with a large deficit that had to be made up with loans from family and credit card debt. By the time the remaining funding from that foundation was dispersed, it was not enough to cover the interest expense that she had incurred from the credit cards.

"The financial struggles represented the darkest, scariest, and most serious aspect of my study abroad experience."

That is why Nicole would like to see more scholarships, like the Gilman, that provide access to all funding at the beginning of the program. Many low-income students cannot call on other resources if awards are paid in 50% increments.

At Home Away from Home

One aspect of her program that was definitely not a challenge was adapting to the different cultural backdrop. As someone who was raised in Puerto Rico by Cubans, she grew up feeling like her ways of doing things and thinking about the world were different from those of the Michiganders with whom she went to school. Given her different cultural background, moving from Michigan to Sweden was really like changing from one study abroad experience to another. In another way, going to Sweden was like returning home, in the sense that for the first time, she was recognized as an American, rather than that girl from Puerto Rico who happened to have a U.S. passport.

Her time abroad in Stockholm also helped her to clarify her career interest. A class she took on design thinking impacted her professional path by allowing her to realize her passion for design. Now she works in human factors engineering, a profession focused on ensuring that medical

The U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program (Gilman Program) provides awards for U.S. undergraduate students who are receiving Federal Pell Grant funding at a two-year or four-year college or university to participate in study abroad or intern abroad programs worldwide. The Gilman Scholarship Program aims to support students who have been traditionally underrepresented in study abroad, including students with disabilities!

Learn more at <https://www.gilmanscholarship.org/>

devices are developed with under-represented populations in mind.

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