

An International Trip Without Borders: Exploring Inclusive Opportunities In London And Ireland

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Why Study Abroad?

While there are at least 220 postsecondary education program opportunities for students with intellectual (learning) disabilities (ID) in the United States (thinkcollege.net), there are also several postsecondary programs to explore and learn from internationally. Traveling internationally has great benefits. First, international trips can expand horizons for individuals with and without disabilities. Unfortunately, even in the United States, there is limited research related to individuals with ID traveling abroad as part of their college experience. Many young adults are living with aging parents who are not always able to travel internationally to provide these experiences to their son or daughter (McConkey & McCullough, 2006). Second, it is important for individuals with ID to experience international travel like many other college students and same aged peers. Third, these travel experiences can provide strategies and support for social and independent living inclusion internationally while using peer mentors and social networking for lasting relationships and increased self-determination skills. Finally, study abroad opportunities provide numerous transportation and travel training experiences serving as primary learning initiatives within actual settings with natural supports. It takes a

collaborative team effort to pull off trip planning, but the benefits are endless allowing for opportunities of experiential learning and friendships that last a lifetime. Let me take a moment to share our recent study abroad experience with you and lessons learned along the way.

But First...A Little About the UP Program

The UP program serves as a model demonstration site for the state of North Carolina for individuals with ID between 18 and 25 years of age. The program was developed in 2007 as a pilot program designed to provide a two-year, full-time, inclusive, on-campus living and learning experience for college-age persons with ID. Participants' learning activities are developed through an individual, person-centered planning process resulting in an Individual Plan for College Participation (IPCP). The IPCP focuses on five areas: Personal Development Skills, Community Participation Skills, Vocational Preparation Skills, Social Participation, and Elective Course Auditing. At the completion of the program, when IPCP goals have been met and a sufficient number of hours per learning area have been documented, participants are awarded a Certificate Accomplishment by the Division of Educational Outreach at WCU. The overriding purpose of the program is to facilitate the transition of participants from secondary school to adult life. While in the program, UP participants live on-campus in rooms distributed throughout university residence halls under the same guidelines and policies that apply to all university students. Their on-campus life is fully integrated and inclusive. All activities are individually determined and implemented; there are no separate facilities, settings, or classes for program participants. Undergraduate students are recruited to provide natural supports to facilitate participants living in dorms, attending classes, engaging in social and recreational activities, becoming involved in student organizations, and developing natural friendships and relationships.

And Now...Our International Travel Experience to London and Ireland

On **May 13, 2014**, a small group from the UP Program at WCU (located in Cullowhee, North Carolina) set out to explore first hand programs and services available for individuals with ID in London and Ireland. Our first visits were in London. We visited CHANGE in Leeds, the British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) in Birmingham, Westminster Society for People with Learning Disabilities, and Mencap before taking the entire Saturday to sightsee Big Ben, Tower of London, and Buckingham Palace on a double decker bus.

On **May 18, 2014**, we traveled to Dublin, Ireland. As we landed, the Ireland rain showers and Irish Pub instantly greeted us with live music welcoming us to the beautiful city. While visiting Ireland, we visited the Inclusive Learning Initiative (ILI) at National University of Ireland (NUI), Maynooth, the National Institute for Intellectual Disabilities (NIID) Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) at Trinity College, and the University College Dublin (UCD) to learn about the different services and research opportunities. Here and in many places we visited throughout London and Ireland, we were asked to share about the UP Program.

On **May 21, 2014**, it was time to head back to the United States. The travel itinerary was packed with visits to programs and services for individuals with ID and we found many connections and differences among the services provided in England and Ireland in comparison to the United States. Below are some valuable reflective lessons learned.

Reflections and Lessons Learned from Our International Trip

“Today was by far the best day so far on this trip.” Taylor Furr, WCU undergraduate student on her reflection from the visit to the Inclusive Learning Initiative (ILI) at National University of Ireland (NUI), Maynooth.

“Today was one of the most inspiring and gratifying days I’ve ever had. Today gave me an experience that I would have never gotten sitting in a classroom or anywhere else. I am so thankful I got this opportunity to be a part of this exchange and especially so early on in my

student years. Today's experience at Maynooth helped confirm why I chose the field that I did and helped me see that there are others out there around the world that share my same passions." Megan McAllister, WCU undergraduate student.

"I met some really nice people over at the university. They talked about their program and what they do there. It was very moving to hear what those people said. When Michael showed us his video about his life it made me cry. What made me cry was he was talking about his experiences in the university and how it made a difference in his life and all around him... I made a lot of friends in Maynooth." Casey Schading, WCU UP student.

As you can see, learning happens more powerfully through the eyes of real traveling experiences and building relationships. Additionally, in comparing London and Ireland's adult services and programs to the United States, all of us still have a long way to go in accomplishing a greater quality of life with more inclusive experiences for individuals with disabilities. Many programs and policies for all of us need to adopt more inclusive practices that provide increased opportunities for individuals with ID. While we have made great strides, this has not happened quickly enough. It is important to keep paving the way across the world to set higher expectations among administrators, school personnel, community service providers, families, researchers, and even individuals with ID in all areas of inclusive community living. Let's continue to unite and be the change in London, Ireland, the United States, and beyond.

McConkey, R., & McCullough, J. (2006). Holiday breaks for adults with intellectual disabilities living in older carers. *Journal of Social Work, 6*(1), 65-79.

Think College (2014). *College options for people with intellectual disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://www.thinkcollege.net>