

RETHINKING IDENTITY

Abroad

"[Going abroad] really made me think about the parts of my identity I choose to identify with."

—Emely Recinos, study abroad alum



As an International Relations major at NYU, there was no question that Emely would study abroad. After all, it was a requirement of the program. She also had already applied for and received a U.S. Department of State-sponsored Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship which supports students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad. And given her academic focus on Latin American studies, Buenos Aires - NYU's only site in Latin America - seemed to be the most obvious choice of destination. Or was it?

"I did have a lot of concerns specifically because of my identity as a person with a disability," says Emely, who is visually impaired and uses a white cane to navigate. "Is Buenos Aires a city that is going to be accessible to me? Will I be able to receive materials in braille? Will my professors allow me to submit my assignments over email?" With these concerns in mind, NYU offered Emely the option to instead study at its overseas site in London, perceived to be more readily equipped for disability-related access. Despite the uncertainty, Emely ultimately decided to stick with her original plan to study in Argentina to meet her academic interests. "It was just a matter of how I would make that work for me."

Fortunately Emely didn't have to do that alone. To work through some of her concerns about access abroad, Emely met with NYU's disability specialist who coordinated a fruitful meeting with staff at Argentina's School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Not only did the school have access to a braille embosser - a machine capable of printing out hard copy braille - that Emely could use if needed, but the staff also assured

Name:

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Home Institution:

New York University

Major:

International Relations

Programs:

NYU Global Programs;
Gilman Scholarship
Program

Destination:

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Emely that they would meet with her professors in Argentina beforehand to share best practices for working with blind students, including equitable treatment. “Unfortunately being treated differently than our non-disabled peers is a common experience for most of us with disabilities, so I wanted to minimize that as much as possible.”

Emely also had pre-arrival chats with her host mother. It was important to Emely that she would be paired with a host family understanding of her disability, respectful of her space, and trusting in her independence. To Emely’s delight and relief, she discovered that her host mother was a bit experienced in this area, having had a blind son-in-law.

Something else was working in Emely’s favor during the pre-arrival conversations: as a native Spanish speaker, she could easily express herself to her host mother and to the overseas staff in their language and describe her concerns about disability access. “Even though some of the staff in Buenos Aires were learning about accommodations for the first time, my ability to communicate with them in Spanish really helped for their understanding.”

But despite all of this careful planning around disability, Emely was completely caught off-guard by local people’s preoccupation and curiosity about a different aspect of her identity.

“One of the most shocking things for me happened the first week I arrived,” Emely laughs. When the host mother’s grandson came over, she introduced Emely as a study abroad student from the United States. Emely could tell by the way the grandson paused that he was confused by what he had just heard. Emely’s host mother explained: “He doesn’t believe that you’re actually from the U.S. because you don’t look like the typical students that came to stay with me before.” Those students were typically blonde, blue-eyed, white. “I don’t look like that at all!” says Emely, who is a Latina with Salvadoran ancestry, “and so he had a hard time believing that I was from the U.S.”

He wasn’t the only one. Throughout her time in Argentina and during side trips to neighboring countries, Emely continued to encounter local people who reacted to Emely’s U.S. nationality with disbelief, assuming she was from anywhere else. She didn’t look like the typical U.S. foreigner, and she spoke Spanish with such a native-level fluency that she didn’t even sound like the typical U.S. foreigner. Trying to explain the nuances of diversity in the United States could sometimes be exhausting and futile, so she experimented with her responses. “Sometimes I’d just say ‘I’m from El Salvador.’ That’s where my family’s from, and no one ever



questioned that! It really made me think about what parts of my identity I choose to identify with.”

Some of the interactions Emely treasured most were the connections she made with local blind students. Their stories underscored how different their higher education experiences had been from her own. For example, Emely’s host institution had been cooperative in arranging disability-related accommodations for a foreign visitor from the United States, but domestic students didn’t have someone who could transcribe for them, nor did they have easy access to audiobooks. “Hearing these issues from the students themselves really stuck with me. To any study abroad student, I would say to go meet local people with similar identities to your own. You’ll gain a better understanding of how local people’s experiences are shaped by the country in which they happen to live.”

Emely returned to New York with a newfound appreciation for what she had available to her in terms of access and independence. Even the subway system, for all of its flaws and accessibility issues, was something she had missed while in Buenos Aires, where taxi fares had added up quickly.

She also brought back ideas for implementing her study abroad follow-on project, a responsibility of all recipients of the U.S. Department of State’s Gilman Scholarship to promote the scholarship to other underrepresented students in study abroad. Her international experience had

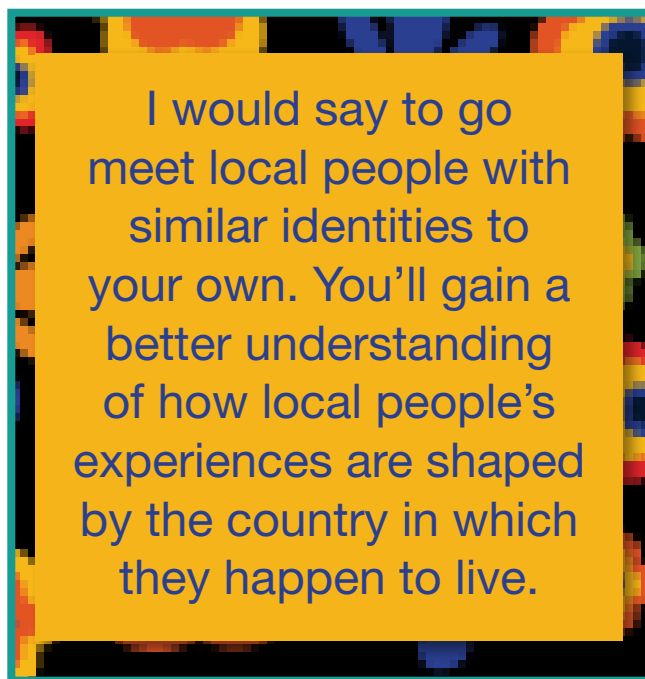
been shaped by multiple facets of her identity, so why not design the follow-on project to do the same?

She wanted the first part of her project to reach students with disabilities. “At NYU, I noticed there is a huge focus on promoting study abroad to people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, but there was no mention of people with disabilities at all. I wanted my university to address that.”

As the co-president of NYU’s Disability Student Union, she teamed up with the Global Programs office to promote and host a panel of international exchange alumni with disabilities who shared their travel experiences and lessons they wanted to share with other disabled students about going abroad, things they wished they had known. The second part of her Gilman follow-on project was focused on engaging the

Latino community and first-generation students, which she did by creating a short video clip about different study abroad scholarships for her church’s website.

Regardless of what community she’s speaking to, Emely would encourage any student to think about themselves holistically in terms of all of their identities before going abroad. “When I was preparing to study abroad, I really only honed in on my disability. I wasn’t thinking about the fact that I was first-generation or Salvadoran. I was so lost in thinking that people would only ask me questions about my blindness that I didn’t think that they would ask me about my experiences in the U.S. as a Latina. I wasn’t ready for people to be interested in those things as well.” ■



Diversity-Positive Scholarships to Fund Your Experience Abroad

The Gilman Scholarship made it possible for Emely to fund her studies in Argentina, but the opportunity almost slipped through her fingers. “I didn’t even know that there was funding available to do things like study abroad. I found out about the Gilman program just a week before the deadline and had to rush to submit my application.” It made her wonder what other scholarships she might have received if she only knew about them.

Emely suspects that information about study abroad and financial aid is especially slow to reach first-generation American students and first-generation college students like her. “If you don’t have family members who have gone abroad before, you might not know all of the resources available to you.” So take note of the following scholarships; not only can they be applied towards international exchange, they also prioritize students with diverse backgrounds and identities. Just be sure to get those applications in on time!

Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship Program,

<https://www.gilmanscholarship.org/>

The U.S. Department of State’s Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program supports U.S. undergraduate students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad. To be eligible for the Gilman Program, applicants must be receiving a Federal Pell Grant during the time of application or provide proof that they will be receiving a Pell Grant during the term of their study. Under the Gilman Program, the John McCain International Scholarship for Children of Military Families supports U.S. undergraduate students who are children of active duty military personnel and receive any type of federal title IV funding, to study or intern abroad.

Fund for Education Abroad,

www.fundforeducationabroad.org

The Fund for Education Abroad’s general scholarships are awarded to students of color, community college students, and first-generation college students. In addition, all applicants are automatically considered for any number of specialized scholarships for which they are eligible, including the Rainbow Scholarship for LGBTQI students, the Tamara H. Bryant Memorial Scholarship for African-American students, and more.

IES Abroad Diversity Scholarships & Grants,

www.iesabroad.org/scholarships-aid

Many study abroad providers award scholarships to students who participate in their programs, including students who have historically been underrepresented in study abroad. For example, IES Abroad offers a variety of diversity-focused funding such as scholarships open to students attending Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) or

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as well as Disability Grants awarded to students who have disability-related expenses.

Frederick Douglass Global Fellowship,

www.ciee.org/go-abroad/college-study-abroad/scholarships/frederick-douglass-global-fellowship

Offered by The Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), another study abroad provider, the Frederick Douglass Global Fellowship is a fully-funded summer study abroad program open to students of color from Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Only 10 students are accepted per cohort, making this a highly competitive opportunity. However, eligible students who apply but are not selected may be able to receive a Frederick Douglass Summer Scholars Grant toward any CIEE summer program.

Diversity Abroad Overseas Ambassador,

www.diversityabroad.com/overseas-ambassador

Calling all influencers! For creative travelers who plan to document their study, intern, volunteer, or teach abroad experience, Diversity Abroad offers \$500 scholarships to student correspondents tasked with writing articles, making videos, and sharing photos from their travels to motivate other diverse students to go abroad. Economically disadvantaged students, first-generation, students with disabilities and ethnic and racially diverse students are strongly encouraged to apply.

