

The NCDE's Lasting Legacy:

Professionals Reflect on Best Practices

By Justin Harford, NCDE Project Specialist

The legacy of the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE) is woven into the policies, practices, and philosophies of countless institutions and organizations. The impact is evident through the experiences of the professionals who have partnered with the NCDE over the years, individuals like Irene Scott from Texas A&M University, Julie Pollard from the University of California Education Abroad Program (UCEAP), and Maritheresa Frain, formerly with the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). Their stories highlight a journey from hesitant first steps to a collective, proactive commitment to making global education accessible for all.

A Foundational Resource for Practical Guidance

For many professionals, the NCDE has served as a foundational and indispensable resource. Irene Scott describes the NCDE as an "essential part" of her team's efforts at Texas A&M University, a go-to for "additional guidance, best practices, or destination-specific insight." Her team regularly consults the NCDE's searchable databases and practical tip sheets, tools that provide the on-the-ground support needed to navigate the complexities of international programs.

For Maritheresa Frain, the NCDE's resources were a source of empowerment at a pivotal moment. After a MIUSA conference session in which she heard from a student with a physical

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disability who had successfully studied abroad, Frain was determined to make her programs more accessible. However, when she returned to her team in Seville, their initial reaction was skepticism. Frain credits NCDE tools and guidance with empowering her team to know what questions to ask and how to prepare for a student's access needs. These resources were the first steps toward making the dream of accessible programs a reality.

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Driving Professional Development and Training

Julie Pollard recounts working with NCDE staff to build knowledge and confidence among her UCEAP colleagues. She notes that many professionals are hesitant to ask or address disability-related questions, feeling they lack the expertise.

Pollard shares a powerful example of a student with hip dysplasia, who routinely used accessible transportation on their U.S. campus. The student had not considered that accessible transport might not be available in a major European city, and therefore hadn't thought to inform UCEAP about their disability. The student struggled with access during the program, which Pollard described as a "failure on [UCEAP's] end."

In response, with training and support from NCDE, UCEAP developed a collaborative process that more effectively encourages students to identify potential access needs, in order for the program to identify resources and arrange accommodations.

A Collaborative Feedback Loop: Listening to the Field

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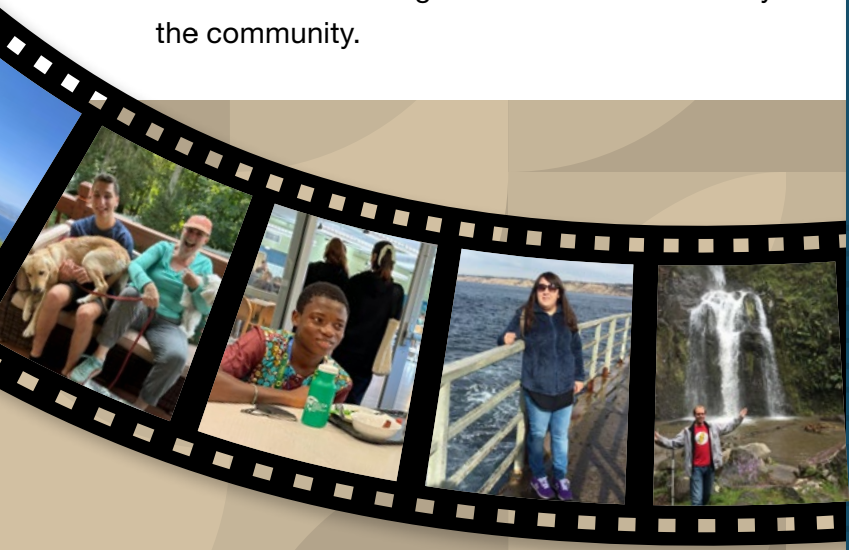
Maritheresa Frain highlights these crucial "feedback loops," explaining that her on-the-ground team at CIEE would validate the NCDE's checklists and then report back on new best practices. For instance, after working with a blind student, CIEE developed training modules for faculty on how to use descriptive language that would make excursions and lectures more accessible.

Frain notes that these modules were eventually used by the NCDE, a perfect example of a localized solution becoming a resource for the entire field.

Similarly, Julie Pollard points to the importance of localized examples and real-world challenges in shaping the NCDE's work. She was inspired by a university in Cairo that had designed its campus with fountains that sounded differently in each quadrant to assist visually impaired students with navigation.

According to Pollard, this kind of creative, practical application is something the NCDE is uniquely positioned to "lift up in our field" and share more broadly.

This experience, shared with the NCDE, informs the clearinghouse's advice to other institutions, ensuring its resources are grounded in the latest challenges and solutions faced by the community.



Forging a Community of Practice

One of the NCDE's most significant contributions has been its role as a convener and coalition-builder.

Maritheresa Frain's story is a testament to this, starting with that pivotal conference panel where the NCDE brought a student's voice to the forefront. This simple experience transformed Frain's perspective, and initiated her commitment to making international exchange accessible.

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Over the years, the partnership between organizations like CIEE and the NCDE has flourished, leading to a NCDE's regular presence at conferences, convening sessions featuring both professionals and participants with disabilities. This dynamic created a repository of experiences and practices that has strengthened programs and fostered a community dedicated to a shared philosophy.

This collaborative spirit has led to tangible outcomes, such as a scholarship program, offered by CIEE in collaboration with NCDE, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The scholarship program demonstrated an innovative approach for supporting costs of disability related accommodations, and also spotlighted CIEE's investment in accessible international opportunities as a fundamental part of an organization's mission.

The Ripple Effect: Cultivating a New Philosophy

Ultimately, the NCDE's work has inspired a fundamental shift in the philosophical underpinnings of education abroad. Frain explains that the NCDE helped move the field from a passive, reactive mindset to an "active philosophy that all students can study abroad." This shift has led to more critical conversations



and creative solutions. Her team, for instance, learned to look to local resources, such as the Organización de Ciegos Españoles. (ONCE) in Spain, which provides services for people who are blind. This connection allowed them to develop tactile models of cathedrals for a student and create faculty training modules that were later adopted by the NCDE.

Irene Scott's organization embodies this philosophical shift. She highlights her team's "just because it has never been done, does not mean it cannot be done" mentality, which directly mirrors the NCDE's ethos. Her team is proud of their efforts to facilitate complex accommodations, such as arranging sign language interpreters for Deaf students or covering increased transportation costs for wheelchair users. The NCDE's strength is in its ability to listen to these successes and challenges, learn from them, and then amplify these innovative solutions to the broader community. The NCDE's work is a testament to the power of collaboration and the idea that true expertise is built on shared knowledge.

The work continues, as professionals look to the future, planning new ways to build awareness and encourage disclosure, ensuring that every student has the opportunity for a transformative international experience. ■