One of the most enriching experiences college students can have is studying abroad, either for a semester or a school year. While the idea of studying another language, traveling, and soaking up the food, music and customs of another country or region sounds incredible for the enthusiastic college student, invisible barriers can exist if they have a disability. This is especially true for blind students. The perception is that if the blind student is away from their safe and comfortable college ecosystem, where perhaps they are helped from class to class or provided with note takers, then surely they will not be successful. They will not be able to take charge of their school work or travel independently. Unfortunately, this is an all too familiar narrative. Even if a blind student travels from class-to-class independently using a long white cane or guide dog and takes their own notes using braille and/or assistive technology at their college or university in the states, it is assumed that because they are further away from home and the Disability Services office that they are destined to fail or not survive on their own. This is where self-advocacy, solid blindness skills and self-confidence come into play.

When discussing your desire to study abroad, it is important to have a general plan as to how you will access course materials, travel around and explore an unfamiliar city, and take notes in class. If you have a solid foundation of blindness skills at your home college or university, stress the idea that alternative techniques such as reading and writing braille, using screen-readers traveling using a long white cane or guide dog are transferable to any environment. Provide concrete examples of how you will accomplish tasks, such as using a braille notetaker or laptop to take notes in your classes, asking for directions when traveling, and requesting electronic course materials or using a human reader if that is not a possibility. If possible, reach out to faculty or professors at the school where you will be studying via email providing them with similar information in advance of your arrival. Being clear and specific about the alternative techniques you will use demonstrates that you are self-sufficient, comfortable with your blindness and hopefully will put them at ease.

Navigating an airport in another country can be stressful for everyone, especially if there is a language barrier. While you may be comfortable with your blindness, it is important to remember that disability or blindness is not always viewed the same way from one culture to another. Being sensitive to how blindness is perceived can help when being confronted by people who want to be overly helpful. Perhaps in their culture, blind people rarely or never travel without a friend or family member. Be polite and respectful when declining their offer. When traveling in an airport or anywhere really, it is always important to listen for sound cues. Airports have signature sounds that can be unique to the experience, or at least to in-door travel. Escalators, luggage carousels, security check-points, and even the line to board the plane at your gate can all be identified by their sounds, and even when you are unsure, it never hurts to ask for directions. Sighted people get turned around in airports and frequently ask other travelers or airport personnel for directions. If the people you ask speak another language and you know a few words, it can be a great opportunity to practice your language skills. If not, keep asking other people you pass. Language barriers can be frustrating for sighted and blind travelers alike.

Be sure to do research into the climate and weather of the area where you will be studying abroad. Will it be tropical? Snowy wintery weather? Bringing a combination of long-sleeve and short-sleeve shirts, pants and shorts will ensure that you will be ready for any type of weather conditions. Also, what do people usually wear at your host university? Bring slacks, dress shirts, or skirts and dresses as well as more casual attire. You might buy clothes at some point during your study abroad experience. Also, buying converters or outlet adapters may be something that you need to do before leaving, so you will be able to charge your laptop, notetaker or other electronics while abroad.

Traveling to another country or studying abroad can be a fantastic experience. It is important though, that you have a really solid foundation of adjustment to blindness skills and a positive philosophy about blindness first. Attending adjustment to blindness training at one of our three NFB centers, learning the skills and alternative techniques of blindness, and building self-confidence will give you an advantage when deciding to spend a semester or year studying abroad.