

Students become advocates for the disabled in Europe

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Lina Rendon pushes Kelsey Oslan, 21, a senior majoring in special education, through the streets of Paris while Oslan journals about her experience. Rendon and Oslan were part the Recreational Therapy Study Abroad program to France and Italy this summer where they experienced mobility challenges faced by people with disabilities.

Getting around in a wheelchair can be draining – especially when traveling abroad.

“You’d think you’re there sitting and relaxing but it takes a lot out of your body,” said Juan Agudelo, 24, a senior majoring in recreational therapy. “The constant vibration of the wheelchair, the up and down at sidewalks, going over curbs all take their toll.”

Agudelo, one of 12 students who participated in the **College of Education**’s Recreational Therapy study abroad program to Paris and Florence, came fact-to-face with the mobility challenges confronted by people with disabilities – people he hopes to treat one day.

“My legs started to fall asleep and my back hurt,” he said. “The next day I was sore, and my arms were sore because I tried pulling the chair myself.”



Juan Agudelo, 24, a senior majoring in Recreational Therapy is wiped out from his wheelchair simulation experience in Florence. Students in the Recreational Therapy study abroad course experience Florence and Paris as if they had disabilities to better understand what their future patients encounter and to help them advocate for change.

And that was just after eight hours.

The goal of the study abroad program isn't just to help students empathize with their future patients; it's also to help them realize more can be done to make places accessible.

It's estimated that in 2012 approximately 56.7 million people in the United States had a disability, and of those, some 30.6 million faced mobility challenges and used a wheelchair, crutches or a walker to get around, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Census Bureau also estimates that almost 8.1 million Americans have trouble seeing and about 2 million are blind or unable to see.

"We do this so intensely that they look at everything differently," said Associate Professor Alexis McKenney, who led the students on their two-week journey abroad that followed one week of classes in Miami covering a variety of topics ranging from attitudes toward people with disabilities, to the Americans with Disabilities Act to adaptations to include people with disabilities in a wide range of activities.

That's especially the case in historic cities such as Paris and Florence, where cobblestone streets and imperfect sidewalks are commonplace and access for people with disabilities often is limited.

This is a reality her students encountered when visiting the Duomo di Firenze. Florence's cathedral had a

gift shop at the very bottom of a set of stairs and ultimately, the students chose not to risk injuring a classmate by wheeling them down the steep steps.

“It’s going to take time for Europe to retrofit its cities because they’re very old cities,” McKenney said. “It’s hard to put an elevator in a building from the 1500s.”



Students participating in the Recreational Therapy study abroad course this summer took turns guiding each other through the Louvre museum while blindfolded to simulate blindness. Here they get a chance to interact with reproductions of famous sculptures on display in the museum.

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by students, however, was serving as a guide for their blindfolded classmates in The Louvre.

“When you describe something, it’s not just about describing its physical appearance because that’s not very helpful for someone with congenital blindness,” McKenney said. “What helped was describing how a piece of art made them feel.”

Kesley Oslan, 21, a special education major, came to that realization even before reaching the museum.

“My classmate was trying to describe everything but it didn’t fit. She was giving me random facts,” Oslan said. “She was telling me ‘we are going down some steps, there are walls to your right and walls to your left, and here’s the railing.’”

“But it didn’t fit. I couldn’t visualize where we were.”

Now picture trying to describe paintings and sculptures to someone who was blindfolded – it didn’t get

easier Oslan said. Instead, she coaxed her classmate to help her move her body to match the pose of sculptures.



A fellow student describes a sculpture to Kelsey Oslan in The Louvre.

better educator.

“This may help me understand what students with cerebral palsy or who are in a wheel chair experience,” she said. “The fact that I lived through it and pushed someone, it’ll help me understand what my students feel.

“This made me feel like a better human being in the end,” Oslan added. “Every positive or negative encounter was an amazing experience that no class lecture or book can ever replace.”

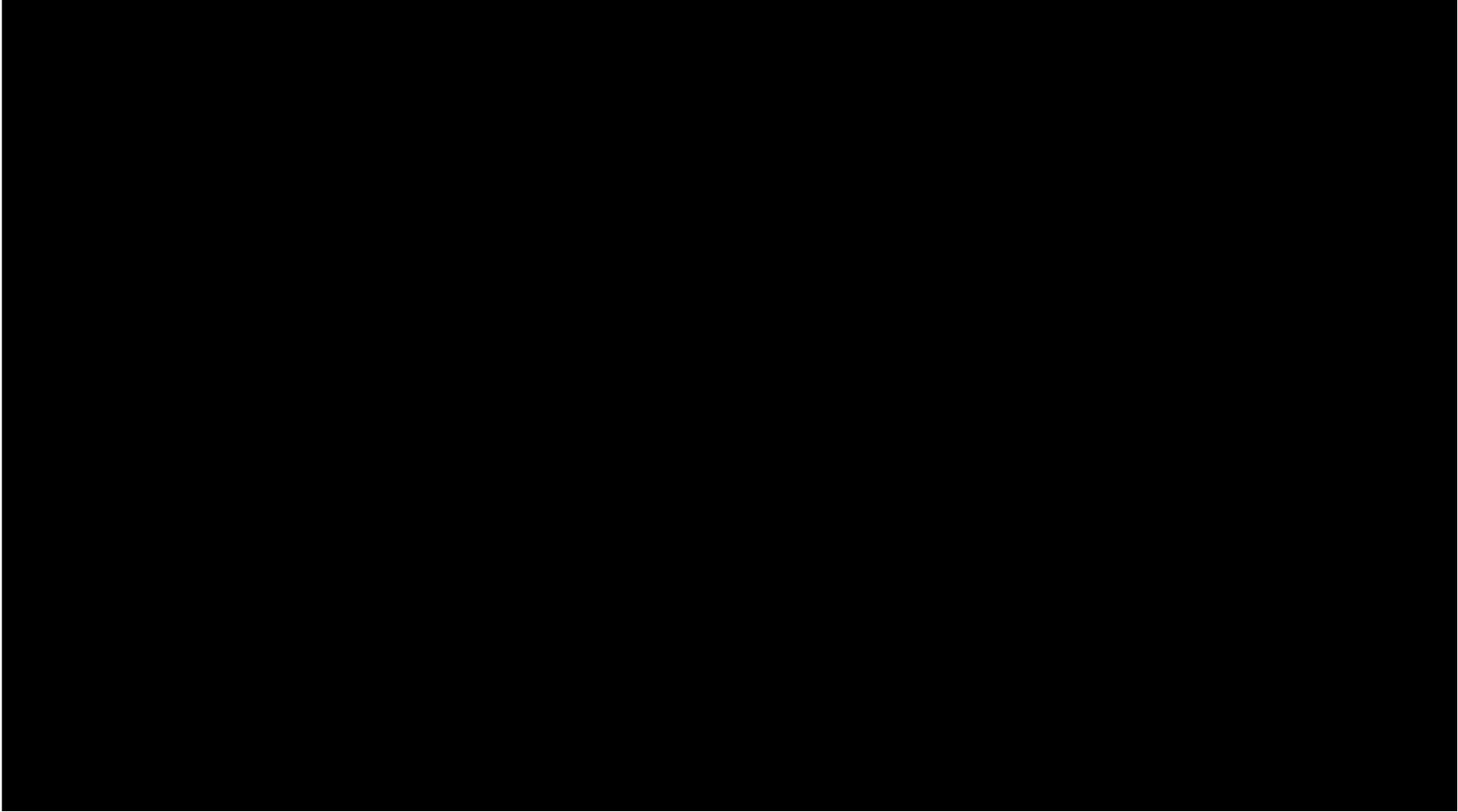
The course, which is open to students of all disciplines, is available to undergraduate students as the Global Learning-designated course LEI 3707 and to graduate students as LEI 5907.

“She would tell me how to move my hands and my body to understand how the sculpture or the painting looked,” Oslan said. “She would help me move my face so I can understand the art.”

When it came time to reverse roles, Oslan said she felt responsible for making sure her classmate would feel safe and would get the most out of the experience. She would count the number of steps on a set of stairs so her classmate knew how far up or down they needed to go and she would vividly describe the scenery around them.

“I knew I had reached my goal,” Oslan said. “She felt like she was included and she was having fun. I was making sure she was good and was experiencing everything I was too.”

Thinking beyond graduation, Oslan, a senior, said the trip will make her a



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