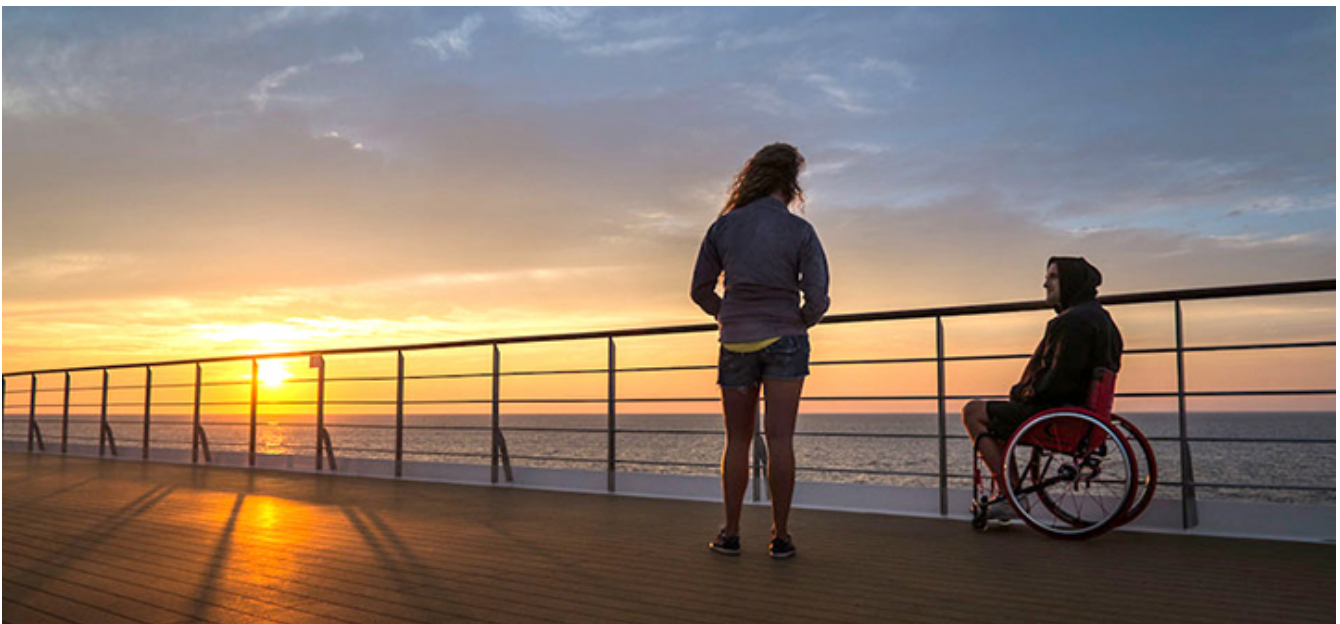


An Ocean of Courage

Disabled students find confidence and seize opportunities at UC San Diego



“It was scary. It was emotionally draining. It took everything out of me more days than not,” said Jacob Robinson. Being in a wheelchair, Robinson had some fears about circumnavigating the Atlantic Ocean, but last summer he seized the opportunity to explore the world through the Semester at Sea Program. “In the end, it was a life-changing experience that I will never forget,” he said.

Before his accident in high school, Robinson participated in every sport he had time for. Now, as a senior at UC San Diego studying biology, Robinson continues to be active in his wheelchair through adaptive sports, training for a triathlon, mono skiing and, most recently, visiting 14 countries and four continents on a 525-foot ship.

The Semester at Sea program is open to all majors and offers hands-on learning and exposure to diverse cultures to promote global understanding. Participants join students from more than 300 colleges around the world, where they learn about art, religion, politics, health and more. While at sea, students take four courses, including a required class called Global Studies, which is tailored to the

particular ports on the trip, with an emphasis on comparative cross-cultural study of the political issues, social development and traditions of each country. Upon arrival at port, students are then invited to become immersed in field studies and direct interaction with the people and places they learn about. The Semester at Sea program is organized by the Institute for Shipboard Education in conjunction with the University of Virginia.



“Spending time in each country provided one of the best classrooms imaginable. And living with professors and fellow classmates created one of the strongest communities I have ever been a part of,” said Robinson. “Being in a wheelchair presented challenges in certain countries, but the ship’s crew and the friends I made ensured that I was included in what everyone else was doing.

Robinson has been heavily inspired by medicine and loves studying the human body. He is enrolled in the Division of Biological Sciences’ B.S./M.S. program, with a goal of attending medical school. He is also a student representative for the Committee on Inclusion and Disability to provide resources to disabled students, in coordination with the Office for Students with Disabilities.

“The Office for Students with Disabilities does a great job ensuring classes and labs are accessible as well as having note-takers and interpreters available to help students succeed regardless of what their abilities are,” said Robinson. “Personally, I have never been disappointed, and I have always gotten everything I need.”

More than 500 undergraduate, graduate and professional school students with physical limitations, chronic health issues, psychological disabilities and learning disabilities utilize the resources at the Office for Students with Disabilities. Students who wish to participate in professional opportunities, campus events and academic endeavors will find customized resources to get them started. Services include classroom accommodations, alternative or extended exam scheduling, campus housing and transportation assistance and coordination with faculty to obtain additional class resources.

“Our top priority is to ensure access to all students,” said Joanna Boval, director of the Office for Students with Disabilities. “We meet with each student to determine the best ways we can accommodate each individual and provide them with opportunities for participation and success.”

A senior at UC San Diego studying human biology with a minor in healthcare and social issues, Alesha Thomas would like to help others in the future as a physician’s assistant or nurse practitioner. Thomas, who has cerebral palsy, is interested in physical medicine and rehabilitation, and plans on pursuing further education after she graduates from UC San Diego in December.

Because the campus is situated on a hill, Thomas noted that there are often challenges to getting around in a wheelchair. That's where Autumn, her service dog, comes in. The golden retriever is there to assist at every turn. "She makes life easier for me," said Thomas. "Autumn is a big help when I drop things; she makes sure I'm doing my best everywhere I go."

In addition to utilizing the note-taking and accommodation services offered by the Office for Students with Disabilities, Thomas took part in the TRiO Student Support Services Program organized by the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS). The program introduces new low-income and first-generation college students and students with disabilities to the campus and works to empower them through mentorships and involvement in the campus community. Students meet and form a network of staff, faculty and peers that help tutor and cultivate a sense of belonging and confidence beginning the summer of freshman year and lasting throughout their career at UC San Diego.

"I took part in the program during my first summer at UC San Diego, and without their mentorship, I might not be graduating this year," said Thomas. "They helped me through some rough patches and were extremely supportive."



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