

## Episode 5: Alexis McKenney on Designing Transformative Study Abroad Experiences

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STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> You're listening to Making Global Learning Universal, conversations about engaging diverse perspectives, collaboration, and complex problem solving in higher education, on campus, online, in local communities and abroad. I'm your host, Stephanie Doscher, Director of Global Learning Initiatives at Florida International University and co-author of Making Global Learning Universal, promoting inclusion and success for all.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Advocacy is often thought of as or get confused with activism, thinking it has to be something really big. Some of them might go on to do something really big, but what is equally important is can you have that conversation? Can you go back and diplomatically and carefully challenge a friend or a family member who is making a decision that could potentially be harmful or limit a person's access to something or ability to experience something?

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> In this episode I talk with Alexis McKenney, Professor and Director of the Recreational Therapy Program at Temple University. While Alexis was teaching at FIU she created a study abroad section of her global learning course, Inclusive Recreational Services. And this decision turned out to be transformational, for her and for her students we start off by discussion what the field of recreational therapy is all about. We explore what's global about it and when global learning should be infused into any degree program. We take a deep dive into how she designed study abroad experiences that guide students beyond sympathy to empathy, advocacy and action. Regardless of the discipline in which you teach, whether you led a study abroad or are just considering it, I think you're going to take away great ideas from this talk. Here's my conversation with Lexi. So, let's start off a little bit with you just describing your field of scholarly work, your field of expertise, your passion for your work. Just talk a little about what you were doing at FIU for 19 years and how things have transitioned as you've moved to Temple University now.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Sure. I started at FIU in 1998. I hadn't quite finished by dissertation so I spent my first semester there pretty much hunger down at nighttime in the office getting that done. So by early 1999 I was done and officially an assistant Professor. They brought me in for a semester as an instructor. I was the only faculty member recreational therapy for quite some time. We were struggling to get the numbers for quite awhile. And I did some marketing that didn't go so well. Then changed up the marketing program drastically and it really kicked in right about the time I became a partner chair for the Department of Leadership and professional studies. Which I don't remember the exact year, but I was in that position for three years, which is a very typical run. And at that time, I leveraged that position to be able to get some help, because I was working well with the dean. She wanted to keep me in the position, so I was able to get a full-time faculty line. And then we brought it online, which meant that we were able to secure even more resources. So the program by the time I left had close to 800 students or so and I think they're sitting around 700 now. And that was when we were averaging, before we were averaging 25 to 30. So it was a struggling program, it was hidden in recreation sport management and then emerged out on its own and it's still very robust strong program there. I would venture to guess it's the large he is undergraduate program in the country.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So who takes those courses? Who is studying this, who is taking this degree?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> It's a mix of students. As we are the lesser known of the health professions, allied health professions, people are, even if they don't necessarily know exactly what a physical therapist or occupational therapist does, they're familiar with those terms. So quite a few students come into that program here, there, everywhere across the country with their eye also set on a graduate program in PT or OT. That's often. So, there is a considerable number of students that do that every year. And we have a lot of students who also come in saying, I want to be a recreational therapist. They have a fundamental understanding of that. Sometimes it's because they have a family member with a disability, or they themselves were injured, perhaps went through treatment and was exposed to recreational therapy that way or through word of mouth. Then there is something else that happens, I always think it's pretty magical and that's the student this comes in and says, I want to be OT, I want to be PT, they take some classes and they fall in love with RT. Because they start to understand the remarkable and importance of the things we love to do being part of helping us get better.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Ah. You know, one time I was on a plane, it was in the Pacific Northwest. I was flying from Seattle to the San Juan Islands. And there was this gentleman on the plane with me, he had this really big beard. And we just got to talk. And he said, I just came from Alaska. He had spent a lot of time in Alaska studying how Inuit communities use games to teach children the life skills they needed for survival, right, so hunting, also different kind of citizenship and social skills. So, when you're talking about recreational therapy, are you talking about like games or are you talking about the things that we do on an every day basis or is that more physical therapy? I just want our listeners to really understand your specific space.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> I appreciate that and I didn't know you were going to ask about that and I truly appreciate it.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> I didn't know I was going to ask about it either, but I think it's important for the conversation. Yeah.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> No, it's not limited to those things but certainly it involves what you're talking about. It can, it can involve games, sports, recreation, any sorts of recreation activities. I could be life skills. It really comes down largely to the things that people enjoy, because very important part of the recreational their job is to do a good assessment upon admission into a hospital facility or even a community based setting such as parks and recreation. To understand not just what limitations, not what disability a person enters treatment with, but also is what they like to do. Because if we understand what motivates them, then we can create a treatment plan that embeds the things that they enjoy to help them get better. I'm going to give you an example that's very specific to Miami. And I've always loved students have this moment. For years we have put, placed student interns at Baptist Hospital Rehab. In their rehab, they have a big component that is working with people with traumatic brain injury. So it could be a person whose had a stroke, car accident, hit their head on something. But as you know until Miami, Dominoes is huge. People love the game of Dominoes. Now, somebody who has experienced a stroke might neglect a little on one side and say the person is neglecting the one side, because they're unable to use their left side completely. Of course they have to go to the physical therapist. They might co-treat with a recreational they are publications and start working in the gym to increase strength and mobility. Or they might come into the recreational gym after that and the rec therapist might sit them down and start playing a game of Dominoes, maybe not even telling them that there is a

therapeutic outcome involved or a goal set related to that; but modify the activity so it forces them to have to start using the side they're neglecting. So, they're thinking about the game. They're very happy to be playing. They might be questioning why am I doing this in the hospital? But when they have that insight and it's processed correctly with a recreational therapist, it's powerful. When they realize they just did something that they've been telling themselves they can't do; because they're participating in something they love.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So, this begs the question, because you just brought up geography and a little bit of our culture. What's so global about rec therapy? I could imagine listeners thinking why would we want to infuse global learning, perspective taking, diversity, problem solving, collaboration. Why would we want to at all in a course or degree of this type? Where is this room for that, why would we want to do that?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Because it makes sense.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Help me make sense.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> No, I didn't mean that to be facetious, I'm sorry. It makes sense because a person's culture, the language, what they bring to the table, helps determine what to do and how to move forward. It's part of that assessment. It's not just coming in and saying, using that example, that something is happening and as a result they're unable to lift their left arm completely. But we have to know much more about that about the person. Part of that also is health care has changed so drastically in gosh, when, from when I practiced to now, when you used to have more time working with people. Now you have a very limited amount of time. And you have to move quickly. You have to have a much deeper understanding much more quickly about not just the limitations but who they are as human beings. And culture plays a part in that.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So how do you in a course that you teach either online or in the classroom in a more traditional face-to-face base, how do you bring those questions, that background information, how do you bring that into your course? How might your course have even changed over time?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> I have learned to do that very early on because of the privilege of working at FIU. I was work with students from diverse backgrounds. So I quickly learned to have them inform me and the discussion. So it started that way and then I increasingly learn more and more about the importance of that, and also myself doing my own homework and learning more about the cultural differences and expectation students have in higher education of me as a Professor, instructor and their expectations when they go out into the field. I used to marvel at some of the things I would see students be able to step out in the field and do that were specific to language and cultural differences and that informed my teaching too. Give you an example of a student now, who is a very successful recreational therapist down there was quiet in class. Just sort of sat back there and paid attention. Did pretty good work, nondescript sort of student. I had him in his final internship section and I went to visit him at Jackson. It's a very, very challenging intern site. They deal with some pretty significant cases. So, this student was charged with facilitating a group with a PT and OT as co-facilitators. I did not know what the activity was going to be, but when I went in, I saw that the group was, it was formed by, let me see, there is probably seven or eight people in it. Three of them spoke French Creole, three of them spoke Spanish and then maybe one that spoke just standard American English. And I did not know until that moment that he also spoke French. I knew he spoke a little bit of Spanish. And they charged him with this because he had the ability to be able to lead that activity and translate between all of them.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So what I hear you saying is that culture plays a role in a couple of different ways. It plays a role in one's sensitivity to the patient. Is that the right terminology, the patient?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Patient or participant depending on the site, yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Okay. So the patient or participant being sensitive to the fact that their everyday activities may vary, the things that are preferable to them, they're used to doing, that they enjoy doing are different based only culture and geography, but also it's the space that we're working in professionally.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Which is a much more diverse and internationalized space, and that certain three true in south Florida, but you're in Philadelphia now. Like, are these same issues of cultural sensitivity for the patient participant and enter cultural communication with our colleagues, do they also manifest in Philly?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Yes, but language to a lesser degree. Completely different cultural differences here than in Miami, but yes, same issues. We speak to the same things. Students have to go out and be aware and be able to ask the right questions, but more importantly recreational therapist are trained and by nature should be always thinking about how you modify or adapt an activity. And it's not just based on disability, but what it is that motivates the person to participate.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Okay. So how do students learn that? Do they learn by reading it in a book, by watching a movie? How do you do this in your classes?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> I think the internship is the biggest part of that. And here we have a clinical class that is unique. I had not been exposed to that before we came here. So in addition to learning how to lead the activities early on in a modalities type of class, they have a first internship which is similar to FIU where they get exposed to the field. They go out and have to be challenged to start leading activities, but they also have a clinical class that is supervised by the professor and they go to sites and work with actual patients or participants in leading activities live with a professor helping them. Then it culminates at the end with the 600 hour internship where they have to be under a certified recreational therapist and that's their transition into becoming a practitioner.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> And when you said a modalities class, are students getting any hands-on, or even in a role play situation? Are they getting any kind of enter cultural, and inter personal practice or is it really just saved until the end of the program? This is kind of an essential question that runs across lots of disciplines and not just the professional fields, but even in the peer sciences and social sciences, when do we build in that kind of hands-on problem solving piece.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Very early on. This is usually right at the beginning, a junior level class. The modalities which there, it's recreational therapy facilitation techniques. And it's something that I've been teaching and co-authored the primary textbook for it for years. And we have definitely shifted our thinking more hand more to speaking much larger than just the hypothetical of the disability and how to modify an activity or create an adaptation so the participant can be fully

engaged, to speaking to the variations in the people themselves and where they come from and their backgrounds and how they might respond to that, or how they might see one particular activity one way as opposed to another, or something that the students might think, well everybody knows about that activity, this should be simple, but not necessarily. You have somebody that migrated here and maybe has never seen that particular activity and now you're telling them they need this to get better. Why?

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> You teach your courses not only online, face-to-face, type of modality, but you've taken the extra step, the extra effort on your own behalf to teach rec therapy courses abroad. That really blew my mind, like why would these students do that? Why would you want to do it beyond just a simple act of well it's recreational, it's fun, we are going to tour, it's food, fun and festivals. There is something entirely different going on in your courses. You've written about it. We actually featured your course as a case study in the book. What could study abroad look like. So, if I could just kind of take you back to the beginning, how you envision this course, why you did it and maybe even some of the tweaks that have happened along the way over the years as you've refined things.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Sure. I would love to. It started, well first of all let me back up a little. The class itself is not technically a recreational therapy class. It is offered through the recreational therapy program because, and this is across the country, because it's typical that recreational therapy professors are trained in the concepts of inclusion, accessibility, disability. So this class I had been teaching for quite some time there, to pretty large sections. A lot of athletes were in it. The recreation and sports management students were required to take the course as well as RT. Plus we had students that came from other majors that took the course.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> And what was that course again?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Inclusive recreation services is the course pair.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Got it.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> And I've embedded those concepts into a class here called disability identity and taken that one abroad. Similar to how it is a global learning course there, it is considered a Gen Ed course here, general education. That way it becomes attractive to students outside the major across the campus. The reason I bring up teaching that before is because one of the things that the class does is help train you to have an eye for things. To, instead of just walking around a curb that's full of water because of the rain one day, stopping and thinking, how would I get through that if I couldn't walk around it. Or being aware of, for example, here every time I take the subway every morning and I cringe when I hear the announcement saying that the next stop is an accessible stop. Every stop should be an accessible stop. But that's the kind of thing this class trains you to do. Well then there was the summer that I was in Paris with a colleague presenting a couple research papers and she was off to museums and I have on my own. And I had one of these moments where I realized, I had compartmentalized. Here my trained eye when I was in Paris was gone. I had been running out of the Metro to go here, to go there and not really keeping the watchful eye that you usually do, which is something that the class teaches and I wasn't doing it. Until the one day, I was at shot lay, one of the major stops and transitions when I happened upon a family that I was watching mightily. Getting on an off the train. They had a girl, I would say somewhere around 12 in a wheelchair, a younger boy, and they were rotating who was pushing. Then they had to carry the kid all the way out because there was no elevator. And it was such a struggle. And I stayed behind them because I didn't want them to

think I was talk stalking them, which I kind of was. But I was watching them the whole way. And when I came out of the Metro that day, I'll never forget, it was Saint Georges. And I stepped out and I thought, this is a perfect laboratory for the concepts that I teach. I didn't quite understand what that meant yet though.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Right. So, I just want to make sure I got I correctly. So you're saying that you have this trained eye so that when you're in the states, in the any city in the states, you really noticing things around you.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> You have real situational awareness. You're applying your knowledge and your skills in your field constantly, but when you are in Paris, you didn't realize that it's like that radar was almost turned off.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yeah. I wasn't thinking about it. I wasn't watching. I went through this Metro system, I gone through it a million times over and didn't once consider how easy it was for me to navigate in and out of it, yet still physically difficult. It's a, if anyone has seen it, it's layers and layers.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So that is super interesting to me, because even when we're trying to teach our students kind of the attributes of having perspective consciousness, right, to understand their own perspective and to have a sense that others have a perspective that's different from our own, even that is contextual, right.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Like we might in a certain geographic cultural disciplinary context really have that kind of multi layered sensitivity. And as soon as we go into a different case or a different context, we may not be able to apply those super powers in the same way, right? And so what you're saying, if I hear you correctly, is we can actually kind of put hyper fuel into those super powers by intentionally taking students who may be really expert, you know, in one space, and moving into a different context in order to kind of tweak those again, like that kind of happened for you.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yes. Yeah, for me, personally professionally in that moment. What to do with it was what I had to figure out next.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yeah, so what did you do?

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> I went back to my friend's flat and I called FIU, study abroad office. That day. And said, I don't know what any of this involves. I don't know what I'm doing, but I know this is the right thing to do. And the person who was then in charge was fantastic. She said, well, we're part of, I can't remember what the acronym stands for, MIKFA. It's connected to the Sorbonne. You want me to get you in there to meet with them. And two days later I was in a meeting over at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. Having a fantastic conversation which was also the beginning of some hard lessons, because one of the professors there when I was telling her my idea, that was ill thought out. What I told you is all I knew at this point and here I was being given this opportunity to make a connection and she stops me and she said, Alexis, I've been to New York. It's terrible. And I said, you are absolutely correct. And I am not at all saying that we

are perfect. I do know right now that we are a younger country. We tend to tear things down and rebuild them and maybe get it a little better each time. And yes, some of our older more historic areas still need a lot of retrofitting, a lot of changes, I said, but it can't compare to how much we can learn from a city with this level of history and preservation and trying to negotiate how to make things accessible while preserving the history and the sites as they are. I said, I suspect that this will be the perfect laboratory for that. And I said on top of that, it's pretty hard to organize a group of students to do something intensively in your own backyard compared to actually doing a study abroad. That much I knew. But anyway, I tripped all over that because I insulted her by talking about Paris as being the right place. Well it didn't end there. The next night I was invited to a dinner party with my good friends Jen, who also had heard me talk about this and announced to everybody at the dinner party that I wanted to study there because of how bad they are. And I went no, no, no, no, again, no. And I was having a terrible time trying to explain this class. So I went back to FIU and really started working on that. Really started working on why Paris, why would I do it there aside from just being a city that I'm familiar with, which does have its benefits as far as planning, but more importantly I went down, went and sat and had dinner with see seal orange. She used to work there. She led a number of study abroad programs. And pretty much every idea I put on the table she went, no, do it this way, do it that way. So, the whole class was designed based on meeting with her and meeting with John.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> John.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> From the Honors College. Why am I drawing a blank. He's been doing this forever. In fact he just did a study abroad program in Miami and it made press.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> John Bailly, or as they say Bailey.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Bailly, yeah.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yes, he is an expert.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Study abroad designer. In fact we'll link in the show notes to some of the things that he does. Cool.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> He was very helpful. So, I was a sponge. I wanted to get everybody's advice on everything from setting up the itinerary to where to go and how to set it up. And then use my academic expertise to develop the curriculum.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Okay. I got to say two things that I just heard that I think are super important. And can get in the way of doing really hard things, because you did a really hard thing.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Okay. The first thing is that you practiced some radical self trust to use a term in a framework developed by my friend Katie Linder, which was I didn't know exactly what this was going to look like, but I just knew it was the right thing to do. So, you were willing to follow the idea to its logical end, whatever that was going to be, because maybe some people along the way would say, this is not realistic, it's not a good idea, but you're willing to, to go there. The second thing that I heard you say that you did, was you were vulnerable around this. Because

it was a space, study abroad, that you had no expertise in. So, you were willing to just go and ask a lot of questions and take in a lot of information and even in so doing, you stepped on some toes, right, like you offended some people. But you were willing to keep pushing past that, right, until you could refine your own argument and figure out the right kind of intercultural communication strategy to enable others to see your perspective, right, which was not that you wanted to go criticize, you know, the French people and the French culture, but that you realized that there were different things not working in Paris that don't work in New York, and by virtue of understanding the things that aren't necessarily working, and the things that do work in Paris, we can actually also see the things that are working and not working in New York or any other city in the US from the completely renewed perspective, as an outsider. Which, it strikes me is one of the things you're trying to teach your students, to have that design thinking perspective. I need to understand a lived experience of the other, and I need to understand how others see things that I don't see. That's a global perspective. Did I get you correctly? (Laughter).

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Absolutely. In fact you did a much better job of it than I could, thank you.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Well, no, you just said it, but I wanted to draw it out a little bit, because so often when we talk about faculty taking students abroad or students making a decision to go abroad or even faculty making the smallest tweaks to their courses, these two pieces, the self trust that I don't know exactly how to do this but I know I need to make this change. Following that idea. And then the vulnerability to, well, it may not work so well or I may make some mistakes along the way, but I'm going to keep working at it. It's a theme that came up last season in an interview with Micah Oelze. And I think it was in a different context and I think it's really important to bring it out in this context as well.

So, I've been just talking too much of. So, let's get back to the study abroad course. So you do all the stuff to make it so that it could happen. And then what happens?

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Well I spent an entire year learning how to about how to design a study abroad program and to work with, at that time, for the first three years I worked with panorama travel, and they helped with the itinerary planning and costs. One of the things I learned right away, sort of an aside to the topic but it was interesting and this came from Cecille as well, I thought you had to build the flights in and do all that as part of it, but it turns out that students want to travel before and after. I had a lot of students with relatives all over Europe. So, they would plan around that and sometimes go before or go after. I know that's an aside, but I, I found that interesting to learn that right from the start. Then also students are pretty resourceful at finding less expensive flights. So have them do that. But anyway, after getting that first one going, it was down to the wire. Everybody had to get their deposits in and there was one student who still hadn't for this program to go the first time. And I'll never forget. I mean he's actually still a good friend of mine. He's a rec therapist out the San Diego. I call him Manny the Nanny from Miami. And the reason being is Manny to make this happen realized that he had to find work over there. So he ended up interviewing for this family in Venice who hired him as a nanny. And he went there immediately after this class. But once he knew he got that hire, he was able to borrow some money from his church to be able to get that deposit in. And then he got a job also teaching volleyball in Belgium and working with kids with disabilities in equestrian therapy in Austria. So he spent the summer over there. He's the only student I ever had that came back with money.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> That is a brilliant story. I would think that that would be a great advising tactic and strategy to help more students be able to afford to go abroad.



ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Oh, I've learned a lot from the students about how to figure that out. He was extraordinarily creative in doing that, and he was the one that called me that day and said, I don't think I'm going to do this. And my response is, yeah, you are.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yeah. Yeah.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Let's figure this out.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> For the whole group.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Because he really wanted to, but he didn't, like most of the students that came to my office, they didn't have financial resources. They just knew that this was something they had to do.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Right.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> And I heard that a lot. I had one student who came into my office before year two, told me these horrible stories about her family's financial position. And I said I think maybe you should consider this for next year. She slams her hand down on my desk and said, you don't understand, I'm going! And she and that group did Go Fund Me's, they picked up jobs, they did car washes together amend they're all still the closest group of students I ever had.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Wow.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Their WhatsApp blew up this weekend talking about apprehensive the football game.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Right.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> They've all long since graduated. But back to your question is, we went, the first year we went and I had the activities what I thought were all perfectly planned out and every single one had to be changed on the dime.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Oh, man.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Had to be constantly tweaked and changed and that's the way it still is this year in Rome. We had the heat wave. The temperatures were over a hundred degrees for one week solid. It's not easy to do wheelchair simulations activities in that heat. Do I want them to get alike experience, a similar experience to people that travel like that, yes, but they are also not custom to that.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Right.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> So I tweaked the time frames. I tweaked where we go, like all sorts of changes on the fly, you have to. We do very intensive activities over there. They're exhausting. Physically and emotionally exhausting.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Okay.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> You've heard some of the stories.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yeah. And I've heard some of the stories and now the rest of the world needs to hear these stories, okay, because an important caveat here, not every study abroad course at FIU has automatically a global learning designation. Study abroad courses have to apply for that designation, just as any other course does. And we're going to look for the same kinds of attributes in that course. So, just because we are teaching and learning in another country does not make it global learning. Global learning is a process. It's not what we learn nor where we learn but how we learn. And it's a process that must involve diverse people, diverse perspectives in collaborative efforts to understand and address complex problems that transcend borders of difference. Whether those are geographic borders, ideological borders, cultural borders or in this case physical borders. Kind of a combination of the cultural and the physical, and historical.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Interesting, yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> And economic. Right? So the complex problem is how do you make your way? The course is inclusive rec services, how do you make your way through a space? And then how do we make it so that people of all types, shapes, sizes, abilities, can make their way through spaces. So, you're not just going and having students observe and take notes and make, like make a plan of action that they would do or like take pictures and critique it or compare and contrast, with the Metro in France and the subway in New York. You do something that is truly a global learning experience. So, now we got to get, this is like, this is the, this is the treasure of this interview, I think. So tell us. (Laughter). I know, you're like all excited. You're feeling a little bit of pressure, I know. But this is it. This is the secret sauce of this course, are the activities and how you designed them in situ, and we do want to hear about the activities, but even your story about how you open your mind to what they could be and how you tweak them, you know, those pieces are really interesting too, because your process, I think is applicable to others, whether teaching abroad or designing a study abroad course or even a community based course or campus based course. So maybe you could just start a little about some of the basic things that happen in your course.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yeah. I'll share a couple of the stories that helped illustrate things. But I'll start by, I'll quote student this year, ended an interview with. She said I walked away realizing I did not learn for a test. We didn't have tests, she said. I learned from life. These are things that will stick with me. I'll be able to apply them every day. I'll be able to observe the world through a more informed lens and be able to affect change somehow. But the learning for life is a very important part of this. Which gets me back to the center piece activities. They study all different disabilities. They study disability identity, the effects of disability on socialization, attitudes people have toward disability whether positive or negative. But these disability simulation activities, in some people's eyes, are controversial. Some people are dead set against using them. That's because there has been some research that shows the short term use of them, meaning sending somebody out on their own. Say you're going to spend an hour in the chair and then you're going to reflect on that, has a negative effect. Meaning it's not that they come back and say, that was difficult and I know what my part is. The social model of disability doesn't apply in their minds at that time. They're thinking I don't want that to happen to me. And then it becomes a fear, more than it is a learning experience. So I was aware of that in designing this. And very, very careful about how I was going to design the activities. One, they had to be extensive. They had to occur over a long enough period of time where they truly get firsthand experience with the challenges. Being able to access sites. Being able to see things. Being able to get on a train. Being able to get on a bus. And being in the caretaker role, where you're pushing someone or assisting someone who has

visual impairment. And seeing the challenges with that as well. But most importantly is it doesn't end there. It's extraordinarily important that we have very intensive debriefings. Not just immediately after. We have that. But they're often tired. So that's more of an emotional response. But I make them, I do, I'll tell you it's a requirement of the course, it's part of the trade off, you don't have exams. You have to journal. You have to go back that day, I don't care how tired you are, and reflect on it and be prepared to discuss it at greater length the next day before we do it again. And this builds and builds. So they get more and more exposure to what these challenges are and their thinking starts to shift. I did not even notice their shift in thinking until I started doing the research that's associated with the class and started noticing that they did indeed start more from this idea of having a sympathetic response to it. I don't want this to happen, that's terrible, I feel bad for them, to becoming more empathetic and think more from an advocacy perspective. But from your questions of the activities themselves and the stories, because I don't want to get too far off track. One of the ones that you're familiar with that I shared was the very first wheelchair simulation I ever did. Made some mistakes. Did not pick the best route possible. Will not use that route again. But at the same time it afforded this one experience that was very eye opening for everybody. We get to the first view. This is in Florence, Italy. We go around the curve and we get to this place where you can walk across about 20 or 30 feet over and then stand on a ledge and have this beautiful view of the city. Half the students were in wheelchairs. They parked them. They parked them at this curb, whether it's 30 feet away or whatever it was. Went over to start taking pictures. Turned around, noticed that they were not getting to see anything and went back and took their phones and took their pictures for them.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Okay, so you're saying, these are partnered activities, so.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Right.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So there is a caretaker and a person in wheelchair. And they're in Florence and they get to this beautiful overlook. And the people that are pushing the chairs, right, they stop, park the person in the wheelchair, run over, see the gorgeous view. Realize that the students in the wheelchair can't see it so they said, no problem, we'll take care of this, give me your phone and I'll take a picture for you.

>> Right.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> That you can post.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> And as a professor, it was all I could do not to ask, do you see anything wrong with this?

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Right.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> But I didn't. I want, this is all part of this experience and I always keep in the back of my head, if they want to return to a site, they're certainly welcome to, we're staying there for eight or nine days at a time. But no, I had to let this go and hoped something happened as a result. Even if I have to bring it up later, but not in that moment. So, we resumed. We get up to the Piazzale Michelangelo and all the way up to San Miniato and that was really challenging. We get up there, everybody is tired. They want to go into the church. There is a small ramp. I tell them, you guys go in, I'll meet you inside. I went and got water and sat outside. It was beautiful. About 30 minutes passed and I realized they hadn't come out. I don't know where my class is. And I'm thinking, I hope they're okay. So I go in and I find them all sitting together in the back

quietly. Now, there is an upstairs in that church that they couldn't access. And I ask, I says what are you all doing? They said, we realized we made a mistake back there. We realized that getting their phones was not giving them an inclusive experience. We should have found a way to get them over to the ledge. So we made a decision as a class that if we can't all do it, we're not going to do it. So, they made the choice not to, because they were physically tired. They probably didn't want to worry about helping people up and down. And the students in the wheelchairs at the time probably conceded that they don't really care if they miss going up those stairs at that time. But I guarantee from that point forward, if anybody had said, I want to do that, they would have found a way to make it happen.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Right.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> And it was very profound moment for them to come to that conclusion on their own.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So, I want to take that back to something you just said a moment ago, that there is a difference between sympathy, empathy, and then advocacy. So, you were saying that the sympathy, which is I feel sorry for them, let me grab their phone and take a picture of them so they don't have to feel so bad, when they go home or when other people are watching their Instagram feed and they don't see, right, the picture. But then the empathy piece. Help us go that deeper step. What does that mean to be truly empathetic?

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> It's to have a better understanding of what the person is experiencing, trying your best. And you can't ever say you fully understand what somebody is experienced if you do in the have the same disability or experiencing this day-to-day as opposed to a simulation activity. But you get a better understanding of the challenges and your emotional responses to these challenges, the more you do it, the more it becomes less about I just want this to be over, because then I can go back to the way I live, to more, I get a better understanding of what this is. This is serious. There are serious limitations to being able to get to see and do the same things that I could have run up here and done much more quickly. And that's taking on more of an empathetic approach than to how you respond to everything. This is a very important quality to any of the allied therapists, recreational, therapy, PT, OT, we all have to be thinking more along those lines, because the sympathetic response does very little tosis in therapy. Yes, we have sympathy it's not to negate that, we're going to as humans, but we can't let that be what, what pushes our therapy, because then it stops, it's just feeling bad as opposed to really starting to understand the challenges and being able to immerse yourself in it. But what the intensive experiences did, by doing this over and over and really guiding the discussions and the debriefings processing what they experienced, is get them to start thinking about their role in making the world a better place. Advocacy is often thought of as, or gets confused with activism. Thinking it has to be something really big. Some of them might go on to do something really big. But what is equally important is cuff that conversation? Can you go back and diplomatically and carefully challenge a friend or a family member who is making a decision that could potentially be harmful or limit a person's access to something or will ability to experience something. So it can be at the micro level in a conversation, to somewhere in between where you go do the M S walk and you raise money for research, to being somebody who starts something and takes it more to the activist level. But if these activities actually get somebody to think from an advocacy perspective, they're going to be so much better prepared and informed as practitioners. It's also they are going to be better human beings because they're seeing the world. They're better understanding by thinking, using the social model of disability as a foundation of thought. You realize that you are as a person who is a member of society, are contributing to the things that cause the limitations. You

are, we are all responsible as opposed to why, why isn't somebody taking care of this? Where is the government in this? We all take a role. That's the social model of disability is understanding your part and that makes you, positions you to be a much stronger advocate. Whether again it's a micro or macro level.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> And we'll definitely include something, I'll ask you to share with me something that I can share in the show notes around the social model for disability, because I think that that model, others might be able to apply it in their fields. And another concept that you just spoke to, which we find in our research around global learning on our campus, given that we have, you know, tense of thousands of data points. We use the global perspective inventory as a survey. And we analyze students's scores, and their outcomes from a post test, pretest difference point of view. And we are in a multivariant model looking at, given the number of courses and activities students are taking, what is the relative impact of each additional course and each additional activity. And, we have found, with a truly massive amount of data, that there is absolutely a step-wise positive correlation between the more global learning courses, the more activities one engages in, that even gauges us, that engage us with diverse perspectives; or problem solving with diverse others, the more is the better, right? So, this is not a one-off situation. We can't, as you so like eloquently said at the beginning, a one-off can actually elicit the opposite response.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Right.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Because one is disrupted, their thinking, their feelings are disrupted. And when we have that disruption, we have a tendency to kind of take a step back on our default beliefs about the world. Protect, protecting our cognition, protecting our emotions. And what I hear you saying is that global learning is, as a process, occurs over time, its development mental, it's not just once, it has to be multiple times to go deeper and deeper from sympathy to empathy to some type of action.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> That makes sense within the context of our students and lives.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> It's what you do with what you learned.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> It's what you do with what you learned. Groovy. (Laughter). So, Lexi, what are you doing with what you learned? But what's next for you? I mean, you're always innovating. (Laughter).

>> Well, one thing that I'm very excited about and it involves our colleague there at FIU, Doctor Haiying Long, we have been working together on developing a scale that emerged from the first study that was done with, the second group that I took at FIU. And I alluded to this awhile back in our conversation, that, I started noticing their shifts in thinking. And that came out through qualitative interviews. Then when I was analyzing the data, it just popped out at me, this change of thinking that was happening. Yes, it's partially because you guide them, like I said, I don't just start debriefing without a knowledge set, knowing what it is that I'm, I'm wanting them to do, to think about and to expand upon, but my questions gotten more in depth based on those responses and seeing that they were changing. So, I started adding to the questions and eliciting more and as a result, could clearly see this change that was happening, this sympathetic empathetic to advocacy. Where again, it doesn't mean they let go of the things they're a part of, sympathy to empathy, it was richer in thinking. They were looking beyond themselves. They are looking at all the different

variables that affect a person's ability to experience the world, and everything around them. And then started to have ownership to that, started seeing their part in that. So, Doctor Long and I developed a scale called the perceptions of disability scale using their quotes. And it now measures, you could use this scale if you want to do a training, a disability training, or for a course, the beginning of a course, and maybe do probes throughout the course. You could see where the class or an individual goes in, in thinking. It measures and we got the reliability validity. It measures where they fall on that continuum. And you can then tweak or adjust your training or your course-based on that or the individual again or the class overall, because your goal is to move them more toward that advocacy perspective. This scale that allows you to see where you are along the way, with that group. If your goals are being met. Or if you meet them at the end. So, we just submitted that. So hopefully sometime after the holiday we'll have an indication whether we're going to get that published, which will be exciting to get that out there, because that's pretty neat to get that from where it began.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Where it began which was just this radical self-trust moment of I don't know what this is, but I got to do it.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> Yes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> And it went from we're going to go abroad to now your own, an impact on our own scholarship.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> It changed my scholarship, my direction completely.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Oh my God.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> It was as if I was starting over at some level, because I had immersed myself in this. The timing was good. The line of research that I loved that I had done through my doctorate on, was getting more and more difficult because of the changes in mental behavioral health care. I was doing most of my research in these freestanding facilities that were closing. It was getting difficult to be able to get to the same population. See, my interests were changing anyway as a scholar and it was shifting more towards something that I had never considered and that's this, through the study abroad. I can see that from the first year. So, I'm hoping to continue this line of research. I'm hoping to be able to continual study abroad.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yeah.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> See where it goes.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> So I often end our conversations with a request for recommendations, right? Because you've been talking about how your perspective has been kind of transformed. And so, you know, I want a little taste of that, right? So, if you had a book, a film, a journal article, an experience, a song, a poem, anything that you could recommend to me or to anyone who might be listening that might help to kind of give some insight into something that has been transformed for you, perhaps, but you think could, it was really kind of mind blowing, we love to hear it.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> That's difficult. When you couched in do I have a book or something, nothing came to mind right away, because when I think about study abroad and the challenges of getting this sort of program moving, it was largely because it was unheard of. The study abroad program specifically to disability are usually going over and participating in some sort of disability

sports event, but this, nothing like actually accessing these cities and using them as laboratories and then comparing the laws. So, I don't have that guide book for this.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yeah.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Yeah, it's not like that. But what I can speak to that we haven't talked about and I would like to make sure we talk about this before closing. I think it's extraordinarily important factors. Students with disabilities themselves getting to go abroad. In the first three years, I had none. I had some students come to me, but we ran into all sorts of barriers, which is ironic when you think about it, to getting them to go abroad. Lots of limitations, lots of things thrown up in front of them, because, does the Americans with disabilities act, does it matter if you're overseas. Do you have to adhere to it. Things like that. Which to me were no brainers. Excuse me for being a simple ton, but really.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Yes.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> You apply all the same concepts no matter, and every student should have the same opportunity. So the last year at FIU, I just want to add that I, my eyes were really open to the realistic challenge, not the simulation challenges, because we took two students who were deaf, one student with a rare neurological disorder and needed a chair full time while we were there, and one student with a severe traumatic brain injury and was 29 and returning to school. So, we had to make all the accommodations for them to be able to attend the program. They also became the people that helped inform the program. So I guess where we're going with that, I really think it's important, one, we make every effort in higher education to make sure that students with disabilities feel welcome in study abroad. Understand that those opportunities are available to them too, because I suspect a lot just think, no, why would I even bother. How am I going to bring a chair? How am I going to be able to study this, how am I going to be able to study that. When we should all be as academic, saying, well we'll figure that out. We'll just make it happen. There is no reason you should not be able to go. And that's a mindset that I don't think is there yet. I think we're talking more. I think the issues of disability. But I think there is a much bigger conversation that has to occur across higher education. And that's the other direction I'm taking this. I know I'm not offering you something that you just asked, but I really do think that bringing up that point before we close is important. Thanks to you by the way, you all introducing me to diversity abroad that's part of the area I'll be presenting on. And working on that. I've been teasing out the data from those students and writing something separate just about them.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Well, this is perfect actually. You just said the most perfect things because the very next episode in this series is going to be an interview with the founder of diversity abroad.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Good.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> And also a staff member from Mobility International which is an NGO that is devoted to ensuring that all students, no matter their cognitive, physical, behavioral challenges are able to study abroad. So, Lexi, that was a perfect segue, my dear.

ALEXIS McKENNEY >> Wonderful, thank you.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Thank you so much for giving some insight into both the design, the process of the design of your study abroad, your global learning study abroad, but also your own process of transformation as a scholar.

ALEXIS MCKENNEY >> You're welcome. And I thank you. I am very hum believed and honored to be asked to do this. I really appreciate it Stephanie, thank you.

STEPHANIE DOSCHER >> Thanks for listening to this episode of Making Global Learning Universal. This podcast is brought to you by FIU's Office of Global learning initiatives, Media Technology Services and our Disability Resource Center. You can find all our episodes show notes, transcripts and discussion guides on our web page, [globallearningpodcast.FIU.edu](http://globallearningpodcast.FIU.edu). And if this episode was meaningful to you, please share it with colleagues, friends and students. You can even give it a rating on iTunes. Thanks again for tuning in and for all you do to make global learning universal.