

Should They Go?

Academic and Disciplinary Considerations for Education Abroad



ONE OF THE KEY ELEMENTS IN A SUCCESSFUL education abroad program is the good behavior and satisfactory academic performance of the students participating in it. As education abroad professionals continue to seek ways to improve the quality of their programs, finding ways to ensure that students take education abroad as seriously as they do their on-campus studies, and that they understand that study abroad is not a vacation, but an essential part of their overall education, is of fundamental importance—both for the success of the students as well as for the reputation of the institution.

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“We expect that students make a commitment not only to their studies but to their ability to be a steward of good behavior while abroad,” says Joanna Holvey-Bowles, executive vice president and COO of Butler University Institute for Study Abroad. “Poor student conduct reflects badly not only on the student, but on the provider, and on the student’s home institution as well.” On a more positive note, she adds, “Behaving well enables students to cross cultures with greater success.”

Maintaining a Seamless Approach to Institutional Policies

Most institutions have a well-established, well-defined, and clear code of conduct that governs student behavior on campus, and for the most part, these policies can and should apply to education abroad as well.

“We make it clear to our students that the university’s code of conduct applies to them when they are abroad, and that there are potential disciplinary consequences for behaviors committed abroad immediately upon return to campus,” says Barbara Lindeman, director of study abroad at the University of Missouri at Columbia.

According to Stacey Tsantir, director of international health, safety, and compliance at the University of Minnesota, “We are very integrated in our communications to students, so they understand that their time abroad is not separate from their time as a student with us. If they’ve got a record on campus and something

happens abroad that is a violation of the Student Code of Conduct, we look at that as part of one comprehensive picture. In the same way, if they get into trouble abroad, the record comes back to campus and our behavior offices look at that as part of a comprehensive picture. So it’s not a vacation from the policies of the university, it’s all part of the same experience.”

Where there are variations in the code of conduct for education abroad, it should be made clear to students exactly what those variations are. For example, the University of Minnesota Student Code of Conduct says that students cannot drink if they are underage, and that they cannot drink irresponsibly. “We don’t expect them to adhere to the age 21 part of it if they’re in a country where the age is 18, but they still have to adhere to the drinking responsibly part of it,” Tsantir says. “So, they can’t be drunk, or pass out, or drink irresponsibly even if they’re doing it legally.”

Working closely with on-campus partners who deal on a regular basis with academic and disciplinary issues is essential in establishing a seamless approach to institutional policies and procedures. “We coordinate closely with the behavior office and the on-campus housing experts regarding disciplinary issues, and with academic advisers and the deans and colleges for academic issues,” Tsantir says. “We rely a lot on the expertise of the folks who do this every day on campus. We want to be consistent. So when we write warning letters, or when we assign

Best Practice Tips

- Work with on-campus partners to identify students with academic or disciplinary issues that should be addressed prior to education abroad.
- Work closely with campus partners to understand, and then maintain, a seamless approach to academic and disciplinary policies for students abroad.
- Be clear in conveying policies, rules and expectations to students, as well as the consequences of failure to comply with them.

disciplinary sanctions, we're always going back to them, to verify that it seems like the right approach, that we're wording things appropriately, because they're doing this every day. They're up to date on best practices, and they know just how to approach the situation. We could never do this without a very close collaborative relationship with those folks here."

Disciplinary Issues

It's not only the good name of institutions that is at stake when it comes to student behavior abroad.

"Student disciplinary issues present risk exposure for study abroad programs and institutions," says Joe Brockington, associate provost for international programs at Kalamazoo College. "For an institution to knowingly send a miscreant overseas is an invitation for a plaintiff's attorney to seek enormous damages if the miscreant injures someone, on the program or off. And FERPA is not an excuse for not knowing."

"We added a proactive disciplinary records review a few years ago," says Tsantir. "We were starting to see a trend where a disciplinary case would arise on study abroad,



FERPA and Study Abroad

DOES FERPA PROHIBIT campus officials from sharing academic and disciplinary information about students with education abroad administrators and advisers? Definitely not, says Joe Brockington, associate provost for international programs at Kalamazoo College. “A common scenario is that a study abroad office requests student conduct information from the dean of students office, and is told that the information is private and will not be shared. The study abroad office may not know that FERPA does not apply to this situation under the educational need to know clause,” he explains.

In fact, it is important that this kind of sharing be done so that institutions can ensure that they do not unknowingly send students abroad who are likely to cause problems for the program, the faculty and students on the program, and ultimately for the institution.

Indeed, “school officials with legitimate educational interest” is the very first category listed in which student information can be released without the consent of the student: <https://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.

Many schools choose to have students sign a release or FERPA waiver, stating that they know that their disciplinary records may be reviewed in the process of evaluation for education abroad. While this is not required by FERPA, it is a way of encouraging students to disclose any academic or disciplinary issues that may be on their records, and to work cooperatively, openly, and honestly with school officials as they make their plans for education abroad.

and when we would start to work with our partners on campus to follow up on the incident, we would find out that the student was a known entity on campus. That prompted us to think we could be a lot more proactive about this kind of thing. So we added a preconfirmation review of the student’s disciplinary record. This has allowed us to have really targeted and informed discussions about behavior and expectations abroad with students. It’s not about preventing students from having future opportunities. It’s about helping them to have future opportunities, and helping them learn.”

At the University of Missouri, reviewing students’ disciplinary standing in conjunction with the division of student affairs prior to education abroad has been standard procedure for the past 12 years. As part of the application process, students sign a waiver stating that they understand that their disciplinary records will be reviewed as part of the education abroad application process, and giving their permission for the study abroad office to review these records.

Not surprisingly, many behavioral incidents involve alcohol use.

“The primary issues I find when reviewing students’ campus disciplinary records are related to underage drinking and driving while intoxicated,” says Lindeman. “Our student affairs division provides outstanding educational programming to students who are on disciplinary probation for underage alcohol use and/or abuse. In most cases, we put students who have committed offenses of this type on notice by having them sign a behavioral contract prior to their participation in an education abroad program. The contract clearly states that if the violation that has occurred on campus is repeated abroad, the student will be dismissed from the program, and must return home at his or her own expense. We tell students that we have never had a student violate a behavioral contract and that we do not expect them to be the first. So far, students have adhered to the conditions of these contracts.”

“We regularly look at student disciplinary files, with the proper releases from the students, and the agreement of the dean of students, especially when students indicate

on their applications that they have received a disciplinary sanction from the college” says Brockington. “About 10 years ago we were having trouble with students claiming that no one had ever told them this could affect their chances to study abroad, despite the fact that it had been in the catalog for the past 50 years. We then came upon the idea of automatically sending a memo, printed and sent out by the Dean of Students office, to all students who receive a disciplinary sanction, explaining that this infraction could affect their chances to study abroad. The Center for International Programs receives a copy of the memo—showing the student who has been turned down for study abroad a stack of these memos often forestalls an argument.”

Having information about students’ academic or disciplinary issues allows education abroad advisers to help steer students toward experiences where they’re more likely to be successful.

“We have recommended that students go on a different program, or that they wait and go in a future term once they’ve dealt with whatever outstanding issues there

are on campus. We’ve required that they complete outstanding sanctions before going abroad, or we’ve put them in different housing arrangements [based on their record],” says Tsantir. “But students who have had a disciplinary issue on campus are not foreclosed from learning and moving past that experience.”

Reviewing disciplinary information as part of the application process and dealing proactively with students who have had issues in the past is probably one of the best ways to prevent student misbehavior abroad.

“The greatest challenges are instances where no prior record exists for a student,” says Holvey-Bowles. “It’s a first offense or the home university did not disclose the record, and we must work quickly to understand what the motivation is for the problem and develop an appropriate and fair response. When, despite all efforts, students don’t respond and cannot change poor choices, those students may not be ultimately successful abroad. However, our resident staff works together with our headquarters to review all the facts, who is involved, what our existing policy is, and what the appropriate

solution is. We treat each student as an individual, and try a multipronged approach to help the student become successful...Our philosophy is to try to help students modify their behavior whenever possible and to provide alternatives to destructive behaviors they may have used in the past. Encouraging them to become more involved in the host culture while being mentored and/or receiving therapy from a psychologist abroad can lead to a really positive outcome for all involved.”

Academic Issues

“Study abroad is very much an academic endeavor at Kalamazoo,” says Brockington. “Academic issues, often measured in terms of GPA, are a predictor for academic achievement. However, GPA does not tell the whole story. We offer our students the opportunity to appeal the GPA requirement, for our own programs only (not for direct-enroll, or provider programs). We often find that students who have a year, or even a year and a half of very poor performance, usually in science, do fine in their other coursework. Because our study abroad programs are not major-specific, there is no reason why these students can’t do well. We also work closely with the registrar’s office to make sure that study abroad does not put students on the five-year plan, and to ensure a smooth transfer of credit earned abroad.” At Kalamazoo, the institu-

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tional structure supports these efforts—the associate provost for international programs is a member of the provost’s staff, and meets every other week with the provost, and the entire provost’s staff meets biweekly as well.

At the University of Minnesota, Kimberly Hindbjorgen, assistant director of curriculum and career integration in the Learning Abroad Center, works closely with her colleagues in Academic Support Services, as well as the Office for Student Conduct and Academic Integrity. “We now have a detailed plan in place that provides a framework of who should be contacted and how things should be handled when academic integrity issues arise abroad,” Hindbjorgen says.

“Consulting with your colleagues across campus is so important. It takes time to develop relationships and procedures, but the long-term benefits are immeasurable.” The Learning Abroad Center’s academics manager also attends a biweekly academics

policy meeting with colleagues from all of the university’s colleges. “Having her be a part of this group has proven to be effective, and has strengthened our relationships with all the academic units,” Hindbjorgen says, and adds, “Knowing how academic issues are handled when they happen on campus is the first step in handling issues that come up on study abroad. After that gets defined, it is easier to weave in the education abroad factors and processes involved.”

Promoting Student Success Through Adherence to Disciplinary Policies

When asked what the most important thing is for institutions to take into account when dealing with disciplinary issues for education abroad, Brockington quotes what a dean of students he knows used to say. “Remember that we are an academic, not a penal institution.” Brockington adds, “One infraction is not necessarily grounds for disqualification for the ability to apply to study abroad.”

Tsantir says that the process of working closely with campus partners can be eye-opening, even transformative for education abroad professionals, in terms of understanding an institution’s approach to disciplinary issues. “When we first implemented this process, many of us on the education abroad side of the house had never intimately understood that the university was using the Code of Conduct for education as opposed to punishment. It was so important for us to partner with the people who do this every day, and to understand that the goal and the philosophy in all of this is about education. We take that super seriously—that people can learn and grow, and move beyond mistakes they’ve made.” **IE**

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Online Resources

Student Code of Conduct for Education Abroad, Kalamazoo College

<https://reason.kzoo.edu/cip/handbook/conduct/>

Selection Criteria for Education Abroad, Kalamazoo College

https://reason.kzoo.edu/cip/handbook/pre_application/#policies

Student Code of Conduct for Education Abroad, University of Minnesota

<http://umabroad.umn.edu/assets/files/PDFs/policies/rightsResponsibilities/studentConduct.pdf>

Student Orientation Manual, University of Missouri

https://mystudyabroad.missouri.edu/_customtags/ct_FileRetrieve.cfm?File_ID=575