



# Responsible Education Abroad

*Best Practices for Health, Safety, and Security*



THE  
FORUM  
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ABROAD

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## *Best Practices for Health, Safety, and Security*

The Joint Task Force on Education Abroad Health, Safety, and Security was convened in winter 2020–2021 by [The Forum on Education Abroad](#) and [NAFSA: Association of International Educators](#) to review and update the practices published in 2002 by a previous interorganizational task force on safety and responsibility in study abroad and to provide a new set of best practices. The goal of the Joint Task Force was to outline fundamental expectations for health, safety, and security in education abroad that could be easily understood by a variety of audiences, from participants to policymakers.

This new document reflects changes and advances in education abroad management; a recognition of an expanded view of education abroad to include study, internships, service learning, and research abroad; and an appreciation of how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion affect health, safety, and security.

The following statements of best practice have been developed to provide guidance to participants and their support networks, responsible personnel, and responsible organizations. The statements are intentionally general; they are not intended to account for the many variations in education abroad programs and all health, safety, and security situations that will inevitably occur. When responding to any specific situation, those responsible must also rely on their collective experience and judgment and the regulatory guidelines of their respective organizations. These best practices recognize that each participant comes to the education abroad experience with different identities, experiences, levels of awareness, knowledge, interests, and preparation. These statements are intended to be supportive of meeting each participant where they are and demonstrating areas of preparation and support so participants can take action and access necessary resources.

For a comprehensive list of all of the considerations to which responsible personnel and organizations need to attend, see the [Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad, 6th Edition](#). For a comprehensive list of competencies that professionals in education abroad should possess, see the [NAFSA International Education Professional Competencies](#).

Readers should review this document in its entirety to fully understand the expectations and limitations of all parties.

The use of letters is provided for ease of reference only and does not imply priority. All definitions of terms come from the [Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad, 6th Edition](#), with the exception of “support networks,” which was crafted specifically for these best practices.

## EXPECTATIONS OF PARTICIPANTS

During the predeparture period, participants are expected to do the following:

- A. Assume responsibility for personal preparation for the program and participate fully in orientations that cover relevant health, safety, and security topics.
- B. Read and carefully consider all materials issued by the responsible parties that relate to safety, health, legal, environmental, political, cultural, and religious conditions in the host location(s). Be familiar with current relevant resources, and seek additional information before and during travel as needed.
- C. Conduct research on the intended program location(s), with particular emphasis on health, safety, and security concerns, as well as the current social, cultural, and political situations. This research should also include information specific to identity and accessibility concerns.
- D. Consider personal physical and mental health, as well as other personal factors and identities that may have a bearing on a participant's well-being in the new context. Disclose to responsible parties accurate and complete disability and physical and mental health information.
- E. Arrange for appropriate support while abroad, which may include physical or mental health needs. Consider multiple means of communication with support networks and health care providers back home, and identify health care options to use while abroad.
- F. Obtain and maintain appropriate health and travel insurance coverage (including adequate evacuation coverage) during the program. Understand coverage; exclusions of coverage; and how to access benefits, coverage, and claims, as well as information about regulations and costs related to extending travel beyond the education abroad dates.

During the program, participants are expected to do the following:

- A. Comply with all terms of participation, codes of conduct, and emergency protocols of the program.
- B. Accept responsibility for their decisions and actions.

**Participant:** individual who attends, provides, or teaches an education abroad program, including, but not limited to:

- program leader
- on-site administrator
- student

*\*Unofficial travelers (e.g., spouses, children, etc.) are not considered participants by this guidance. Each institution may define this differently.*

**Program:** specific education abroad experience, including, but not limited to:

- regular offering of a faculty-led or instructor-led experience
- ongoing direct exchange opportunity
- regular offering of a host institution abroad
- internship opportunity
- service learning experience
- research

**Responsible party:** individual responsible for specific task or program, including, but not limited to:

- advisor
- program leader
- education abroad director
- risk manager

**Support network:** individuals or groups who provide the participant with practical or emotional support, which may include a participant's parents, guardians, family members, friends, spouses, or significant others. Any support network is by invitation of the participant with expectations as appropriate.

- C. Behave in a manner that is respectful of the rights and well-being of others, and encourage others to behave in a similar manner.
- D. Obey host country laws and follow program guidance on respecting local and national customs.
- E. Understand the components of risky behavior, both inherently and in a cultural context, and how to behave appropriately. Make decisions that are well informed and supportive of their well-being and the well-being of others.
- F. Communicate any needs and concerns to responsible parties and their support networks.
- G. Know how to access health care, safety, and security assistance in the host location.
- H. Recognize that returning home can always be discussed if there are any issues too challenging to address or resolve.

Upon return, participants are expected to do the following:

- A. Complete all post-travel health activities (e.g., sexually transmitted disease testing, infectious disease mitigation) that are appropriate or required by responsible parties or local health departments.
- B. Communicate any health, safety, or security concerns to responsible parties.
- C. Address any ongoing physical or mental health concerns.
- D. Recognize in advance that reentry may often be the most challenging part of the experience; identify resources to utilize during this time.

**Responsible organization:**

entity responsible for the execution of a program or portfolio of programs, including, but not limited to:

- university
- college
- program provider organization
- partner
- education abroad office
- professional school

Participants recognize limits to these expectations:

- A. There is inherent risk in any travel, including for education abroad.
- B. Responsible organizations cannot guarantee the health, safety, or security of the participant and may be limited in their capacity to assist.

## EXPECTATIONS OF SUPPORT NETWORKS

Support networks are expected to do the following:

- A. Be part of the participant’s decisionmaking process as the participant selects the appropriate education abroad program, including, but not limited to, financial, legal, or medical considerations.
- B. Maintain contact with the participant as appropriate.

If identified as an emergency contact by the participant, a member of the support network should do the following:

- A. Be available in case of emergency or crisis.
- B. Be available in the event the participant becomes incapacitated, and be prepared to advocate on behalf of the participant.
- C. Be prepared to travel in an emergency with a valid passport and/or any other necessary documents.

Support networks recognize limits to these expectations:

- A. They cannot accept responsibility on behalf of the participant.
- B. They cannot expect to be the first line of contact between the participant and the responsible parties.
- C. There are limitations for sharing a participant's records and private information (e.g., FERPA, HIPAA, and GDPR).
- D. They cannot arrive to the program uninvited or expect to participate in program activities.

## EXPECTATIONS OF RESPONSIBLE PERSONNEL

Responsible personnel are expected to do the following:

- A. Support a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all personnel and participants.
- B. Commit to inclusion and accessibility in all processes to support participants' health, safety, and security.
- C. Develop accurate marketing information about the respective programs(s).
- D. Collaborate with partners to ensure that destinations, itineraries, and activities are consistent with health, safety, and security policies of the responsible organization.
- E. Understand and convey the provisions, processes, and exclusions of the institutional insurance policy covering participants on the program.
- F. Seek relevant and current knowledge about the health, safety, and security of education abroad offerings and local conditions.
- G. Remain informed, through ongoing professional development, of best practices related to participant services in education abroad, as appropriate for the area of responsibility.
- H. Provide participants with up-to-date health, safety, and security information so that each participant can make informed decisions about participation in programs.

**Partner:** party involved in the processes of sending students abroad or receiving students abroad (when at least two parties are involved), including, but not limited to:

- home institution
- host institution
- independent provider
- consortium
- travel or logistics provider
- government agency
- scholarship organization



- I. Develop and maintain communication protocols, emergency management, and response plans, including cross-organization collaboration as appropriate.
- J. Provide both predeparture and on-site orientations for participants.
- K. Conduct regularly scheduled reviews of policies, processes, and services that support health, safety, and security.

Responsible personnel recognize limits to these expectations:

- A. They cannot guarantee or ensure the health, safety, or security of participants or eliminate all risk from the education abroad environment.
- B. They cannot monitor or control all of the participants' daily personal decisions, choices, or activities.
- C. They cannot prevent participants from engaging in illegal, dangerous, or unwise activities.
- D. They cannot be expected to offer mental or physical health advice or administer any medications unless authorized to do so for program participants.
- E. They cannot assure that home country standards of due process apply in international legal proceedings or provide or pay for legal representation for participants.
- F. They cannot assume responsibility for actions or events that are not part of the program, nor for those that are beyond the control of partners, nor for situations that may arise due to the failure of a participant to disclose pertinent information.
- G. They recognize that all personnel are bound by the legal and regulatory environments of the countries in which the program is based, which may limit the information that personnel are able to share with partners or with participants' support networks.

**Personnel:** individual(s) with responsibility for any aspect of the portfolio or program, including, but not limited to:

- full-time and/or part-time faculty
- hourly employees
- administrators
- staff
- paraprofessionals (e.g., student employees, interns, graduate assistants, and volunteers)

## EXPECTATIONS OF RESPONSIBLE ORGANIZATIONS

The responsible organization may be different for each program or institution. Such institutions are often accredited or sanctioned by the relevant national, regional, or discipline-specific education authorities or equivalent authorities. Educational institutions may also be operated by private organizations, including, but not limited to, religious bodies, special interest groups, or private educational and training enterprises, both for-profit and nonprofit. An institution may be referred to as an organization, but not all organizations are institutions.

Responsible organizations are expected to do the following:

- A. Maintain policies related to health, safety, and security information, and inform participants of these policies.
- B. Understand the legal contexts around privacy and information sharing in the countries in which they are operating.
- C. Collaborate with partners to establish clearly defined roles and responsibilities with respect to supporting the health, safety, and security of participants.
- D. Provide training for personnel and participants to support effective and accurate awareness and implementation of health, safety, and security protocols; behavior management; and emergency management before, during, and after the program.
- E. Engage in culturally appropriate equity, diversity, and inclusion training with all partners.
- F. Conduct periodic review of partnerships to include services that support the health, safety, and security of participants.
- G. Provide information to participants regarding limits of the organization's responsibility and the range of participants' experiences abroad that are beyond their control.
- H. Vet all vendors and contractors (e.g., travel and tour agents) using the program's established procedures.
- I. Evaluate the organization's risk tolerance and develop ongoing risk assessment and mitigation measures that leverage available support for health, safety, and security.
- J. Develop and maintain emergency preparedness processes and an emergency response plan, including a communication plan for all stakeholders prior to participants' arrival in the host country.
- K. Establish procedures for reporting health, safety, and security incidents (e.g., discrimination, physical assault, and/or sexual misconduct) to all responsible parties, subject to the legal and regulatory environments of the countries in which the program is based.
- L. Develop policies for program cancellation and evacuation in the event of a health, safety, or security emergency.
- M. Conduct a postprogram review with all partners.
- N. Consider the behavioral and disciplinary history of each participant that may impact the health, safety, and security of the participant and others.
- O. Develop and communicate codes of conduct for all participants, as well as consequences of noncompliance in advance of program participation.
- P. Maintain and communicate to participants current knowledge about location-specific laws, regulations, and protections that may or may not be accorded to participants.

**Institution:** entity that provides education as its main purpose, including, but not limited to, a school, college, university, or training center

**Organization:** entity involved in providing education abroad programs

- Q. Consider the impacts on health, safety, and security on the host environments of programs being proposed or conducted, to mitigate risk to those communities.
- R. Provide program start and end dates and the limitations to the responsible organizations' liabilities related to the program dates.
- S. Provide comprehensive orientations to participants.
- T. Develop policies for program cancellation in the event of situations that could potentially jeopardize a participant's health, safety, and/or security, including contingency planning that addresses evacuation of participants.
- U. Provide information about health, safety, and security and program conditions, including access to and quality of health and emergency services, to prospective participants so they can make informed decisions concerning choice of program, preparation, participation, and behavior while on the program.
- V. Assess the program experience by including in participant evaluations questions related to health, safety, security, and access to appropriate services.

Responsible organizations recognize limits to these expectations:

- A. They cannot guarantee or assure the safety or security of participants or eliminate all risks from the program environments.
- B. They cannot monitor or control the daily personal decisions, choices, and activities of participants.
- C. They cannot prevent participants from engaging in illegal, dangerous, or unwise activities.
- D. They cannot assure that home country laws and standards of due process apply in overseas legal proceedings or provide or pay for legal representation for participants.
- E. They cannot assume responsibility for actions or events that are not part of the program, nor for those that are beyond the control of the responsible party and its subcontractors, nor for situations that may arise due to the failure of a participant to disclose pertinent information.
- F. They cannot prevent discrimination from occurring within the host country environment. Responsible organizations can work to develop settings and training that minimize the probability and provide redress and communication with the participant and home institution.
- G. They cannot ensure support before the program start date or after the program end date.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following are additional resources for information on health, safety, and security for education abroad:

- American College Health Association: [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Travelers’ Health”: [wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel)
- The Forum on Education Abroad: [www.forumea.org](http://www.forumea.org)
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators, “Education Abroad”: [www.nafsa.org/ea](http://www.nafsa.org/ea)
- Overseas Security Advisory Council: [www.osac.gov](http://www.osac.gov)
- U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs: [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov)
- World Health Organization: [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

## ABOUT THE JOINT TASK FORCE ON EDUCATION ABROAD HEALTH, SAFETY, AND SECURITY

Members of the Joint Task Force were appointed by NAFSA: Association of International Educators and The Forum on Education Abroad or recruited through an open application. The Forum and NAFSA wish to thank the following Joint Task Force members for their collaboration on this project:

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