

RESPONSIBLE STUDY ABROAD: HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Because the health and safety of study abroad participants are primary concerns, these guidelines have been developed to provide useful practical guidance to institutions, participants, and parents / guardians / families. The guidelines are intended to be aspirational in nature. Although no set of guidelines can guarantee the health and safety needs of each individual involved in a study abroad program, these guidelines address issues that merit attention and thoughtful judgment. Although they address general considerations, they cannot possibly account for all the inevitable variations in actual cases that arise. Therefore, as specific situations arise, those involved must also rely upon their collective experience and judgment while considering the unique circumstances of each situation.

A. Guidelines for Program Sponsors.

To the extent reasonably possible, all program sponsors should endeavor to implement these guidelines as applicable. At the same time, it must be noted that the structure of study abroad programs varies widely and that study abroad is usually a cooperative venture that can involve multiple sponsors. The term "sponsors" refers to all the entities that together develop, offer, and administer study abroad programs. Sponsors include sending institutions, host institutions, program administrators, and placement organizations. The role of an organization in a study abroad program varies considerably from case to case, and it is not possible to specify a division of efforts that will be applicable to all cases. All entities should apply the guidelines in ways consistent with their respective roles.

In general, guidelines that relate to obtaining information and assessing circumstances apply to all parties involved. Much of the information called for by these guidelines is readily available and can be conveyed to participants by distributing it and referring them to, or utilizing materials from recognized central sources. Guidelines that refer to the provision of information and the preparation of participants refer to parties that advise, refer, nominate, admit, enroll, or place students. Guidelines that suggest operating procedures on site apply to the entities that are directly involved in the operation of the overseas program.

In addition, program sponsors that rely heavily on the collaboration of overseas institutions may exercise less direct control over specific program components. In such cases, sponsors are urged to work with their overseas partners to develop plans and procedures for operating consistently with these guidelines

Program sponsors should:

1. Conduct periodic assessments of health and safety conditions for the program, and develop and maintain emergency preparedness processes and a crisis response plan.
2. Provide health and safety information for prospective participants so that they and their parents / guardians / families can make informed decisions concerning preparation, participation and behavior while on the program.
3. Provide clear information concerning aspects of home campus services and conditions that cannot be replicated at overseas locations.
4. Provide orientation to participants prior to the program and as needed on site, which includes information on safety, health, legal, environmental, political, cultural, and religious conditions in the host country, dealing with health and safety issues, potential health and safety risks, and appropriate emergency response measures.
5. Consider health and safety issues in evaluating the appropriateness of an individual's participation in a study abroad program.
6. Either provide appropriate health and travel accident (emergency evacuation, repatriation) insurance to participants, or provide information about how to obtain appropriate coverage. Require participants to show evidence of appropriate coverage.
7. Conduct appropriate inquiry regarding the potential health and safety risks of the local environment of the program, including program-sponsored accommodation, events, excursions and other activities, on an ongoing basis and provide information and assistance to participants and their parents / guardians / families as needed.
8. Conduct appropriate inquiry regarding available medical and professional services, provide information for participants and their parents / guardians / families, and help participants obtain the services they may need.
9. Provide appropriate and ongoing health and safety training for program directors and staff, including guidelines with respect to intervention and referral, and working within the limitations of their own competencies.
10. Communicate applicable codes of conduct and the consequences of noncompliance to participants. Take appropriate action when aware that participants are in violation.
11. Obtain current and reliable information concerning health and safety risks, and provide that information to program administrators and participants.
12. In cases of serious health problems, injury, or other significant health and safety circumstances, maintain good communication among all program sponsors and others who need to know.
13. In the participant screening process, consider factors, such as disciplinary history, that may impact on the safety of the individual or the group.

14. Provide information for participants and their parents / guardians / families regarding when and where the sponsor's responsibility ends, and the range of aspects of participants' overseas experiences that are beyond the sponsor's control. In particular, program sponsors generally:
- a) *Cannot* guarantee or assure the safety of participants or eliminate all risks from the study abroad environments.
 - b) *Cannot* monitor or control all of the daily personal decisions, choices, and activities of individual participants.
 - c) *Cannot* prevent participants from engaging in illegal, dangerous or unwise activities.
 - d) *Cannot* assure that U.S. standards of due process apply in overseas legal proceedings or provide or pay for legal representation for participants.
 - e) *Cannot* assume responsibility for the actions of persons not employed or otherwise engaged by the program sponsor, for events that are not part of the program, or that are beyond the control of the sponsor and its subcontractors, or for situations that may arise due to the failure of a participant to disclose pertinent information.
 - f) *Cannot* assure that home-country cultural values and norms will apply in the host country.

B. Responsibilities of Participants

In Study Abroad, as in other settings, participants can have a major impact on their own health and safety abroad through the decisions they make before and during the program and by their day-to-day choices and behaviors.

Participants should:

1. Read and carefully consider all materials issued by the sponsor that relate to safety, health, legal, environmental, political, cultural, and religious conditions in host countries.
2. Consider their health and other personal circumstances when applying for or accepting a place in a program.
3. Make available to the sponsor accurate and complete physical and mental health information and any other personal data that is necessary in planning for a safe and healthy study abroad experience.
4. Assume responsibility for all the elements necessary for their personal preparation for the program and participate fully in orientations.

5. Obtain and maintain appropriate insurance coverage and abide by any conditions imposed by the carriers.
6. Inform parents / guardians / families, and any others who may need to know, about their participation in the study abroad program, provide them with emergency contact information, and keep them informed on an ongoing basis.
7. Understand and comply with the terms of participation, codes of conduct, and emergency procedures of the program, and obey host-country laws.
8. Be aware of local conditions and customs that may present health or safety risks when making daily choices and decisions. Promptly express any health or safety concerns to the program staff or other appropriate individuals.
9. Behave in a manner that is respectful of the rights and well-being of others, and encourage others to behave in a similar manner.
10. Accept responsibility for their own decisions and actions.
11. Become familiar with the procedures for obtaining emergency health and law enforcement services in the host country.
12. Follow the program policies for keeping program staff informed of their whereabouts and well-being.

C. Recommendations to Parents / Guardians / Families.

In Study Abroad as in other settings, parents, guardians, and families can play an important role in the health and safety of participants by helping them make decisions and by influencing their behavior overseas.

When appropriate, parents / guardians / families should:

1. Obtain and carefully evaluate health and safety information related to the program, as provided by the sponsor and other sources.
2. Be involved in the decision of the participant to enroll in a particular program.
3. Engage the participant in a thorough discussion of safety and behavior issues, insurance needs, and emergency procedures related to living abroad.
4. Be responsive to requests from the program sponsor for information regarding the participant.
5. Keep in touch with the participant.
6. Be aware that some information may most appropriately be provided by the participant rather than the program.

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INTER-ORGANIZATION TASK FORCE ON SAFETY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN STUDY ABROAD

*A Joint Venture of AIEA, SECUSSA, Council,
other professional organizations, and
a number of major study abroad providers*

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Explanatory Notes

Background

Safety is a prime concern of all who are involved in study abroad ventures—participants, their families, advisers, institutions that send students abroad, those that host them, and the staff of all organizations that operate programs. Although statistics are in short supply, most study abroad professionals believe that study in a foreign country is no more dangerous than study in the United States. On the other hand, there are risks that are unique to the overseas settings, and when incidents occur, the impact on participants and their families is often more profound because of the unfamiliarity of the context and the distance that separates participants from their primary sources of consolation and support.

In order to contribute to the effort to make study abroad as safe as possible, the Inter-Organization Task Force on Safety and Responsibility in Study Abroad was formed in May, 1997 by the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA), the SECUSSA section of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, and Council on International Educational Exchange, as an outgrowth of initiatives that had been taken earlier by each of these organizations individually, and by many other organizations and study abroad providers who were concerned about safety issues. The intention in forming a Task Force was to bring these efforts together. Representatives from several other organizations and from study abroad providers became members of the Task Force (see list at the end of these notes), and collectively drafted the Guidelines. Preliminary versions of the Guidelines were presented at the most recent conferences of all three organizations and comments were requested from session participants.

The first formal draft of the Guidelines was produced at a meeting in Boulder, Colorado in January 1998, and the final draft that is enclosed was produced at a meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in June 1998, after a thorough discussion of comments received from many study abroad practitioners.

Since we are now seeking endorsement, and it is important for institutions to be able to endorse the same text, this is to be considered a final draft. Naturally, as with any document of this type, it will be revisited in three to five years so that the experience gained in connection with implementation can be taken into consideration.

Call for Endorsement and Adoption

These guidelines are now presented to the profession for endorsement and adoption. We urge the major membership organizations (NAFSA, AIEA, Council, and others) to consider formal endorsement as soon as practical. We urge institutions of higher education, especially those that offer study abroad programs, to consider both *endorsement* (a formal process that may require approvals at various levels, and may take some time) and *adoption* (a practical implementation that, in most cases, can be initiated by the senior study abroad administrator, and can begin immediately).

These guidelines were written with the specific circumstances of study abroad in mind, although some or all of them may be applicable to other forms of international educational exchange as well. They are admittedly reflective of a US point of view, although practitioners in other countries may also find them useful.

Future Work of the Task Force

Beyond the production and advocacy of these Guidelines, members of the Task Force believe that future work of various types is needed on health and safety issues, and have agreed to continue their commitment by working on the following projects:

1. Review of legal and insurance issues
2. Compilation of resources and publication of a bibliography
3. The drafting of additional documents to accompany the guidelines, providing additional explanations and suggestions for implementation on each of the guidelines
4. Drafting suggested forms for various purposes
5. Development of a training program for study abroad administrators, advisers, and resident staff.

A sub-task force has been created for each of these tasks, and we welcome the participation of any who may have time, skills, and/or information to contribute. We would also like to hear from anyone willing to promote endorsement in a specific state or region of the country, or to serve as liaison with an organization or with individual professionals in a country other than the United States.

Discussion of comments from the three conference sessions

At the discussion sessions numerous questions, suggestions, and general comments were offered by study abroad professionals. Many of these resulted in changes in wording. Others will contribute to the future work as outlined above. There are four basic themes that were repeated at all three conferences, and the task force has discussed these four themes in depth and we feel that it would be useful to include a summary of our discussion here. The four themes are: (1) the question of the precise definition of "sponsor", (2) the need for guidelines for other parties—primarily advisers and overseas

partner institutions, (3) concerns related to Family Rights and Privacy, and (4) issues related to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The first two have been addressed explicitly in the final version of the Guidelines. See in particular the preamble to Section A. The other two are more complex and more difficult, and will no doubt be addressed in different ways at different institutions. Opinion seems to vary widely on these issues and diverse opinions were expressed both at the conference sessions and at the Task Force working meetings.

Both issues are instances of a common phenomenon in a complex society—situations involving competition between two laudable goals that, while not directly contradictory, often pull practitioners in different directions with respect to some practical decisions. While we have not resolved these issues in the Guidelines, we feel that some discussion would be useful.

Family Rights and Privacy

The provisions of the Family Rights and Privacy Act (Buckley Amendment), coupled with the age of majority at eighteen, often come into conflict with (a) study abroad program directors' need to have full information about the participants they will be serving, and (b) the desire of parents and home institutions to be briefed fully when something goes wrong. This conflict is not unique to study abroad—the issue is faced continually at colleges and universities in this country—but it does pose a more delicate challenge for study abroad because of the heightened sensitivities and the distance.

In study abroad situations, open communication is essential to successful resolution of difficulties, and for that reason, the Task Force has tended to err in the direction of asking for and providing more information, not less. Our approach has been to set forth our view of what is morally, professionally, and ethically the best course of action, independently of what may be contained in the law. (The Task Force is not in a position to offer legal advice.) We recognize that specific decisions at study abroad institutions will respond not only to these guidelines, but to the views of local administrators and advice of counsel as well.

Americans with Disabilities Act

There is also a tension between our desire to make educational opportunities available to all participants, including those with disabilities and/or special needs, and the need of study abroad administrators to be sure that the needs of individual participants can be met. We believe that in most cases, this tension is best addressed through counseling, which most appropriately takes place after the selection process has been completed. Here again, it is clear that seeking the proper balance will produce different decisions as institutions deal with specific cases.