

# What Students Need to Know

BY JANET HULSTRAND

Among many of the responsibilities of education abroad advisers today is advising students about sexual health in the context of studying abroad.

**A**s institutions go about improving the health and safety aspects of their education abroad programs and activities, addressing how to educate students about sexual health issues and prepare them to keep themselves safe while studying abroad is a matter of increasing concern.

“Sexual health abroad” encompasses a broad range of topics, from the availability of condoms and birth control pills in other parts of the world to behavioral practices, that can help students minimize their risk of becoming victims of sexual harassment or assault.

## Talking “the Talk”

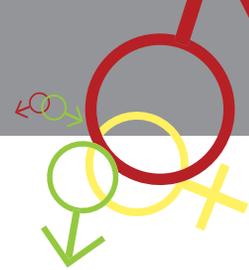
What students need to know about sexual health while studying abroad is in many ways the same as what they need to know at home but studying abroad often introduces complicating factors that students may not be sufficiently aware of. “One of the most important things students don’t know is that there are places in the world where there is a higher rate of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, hepatitis, things like that. If they don’t know this, and don’t protect themselves against it, they may be at a higher risk for contracting those diseases,” says Julie Anne Friend, associate director for international safety and security at Northwestern University.

While many educators may feel that discussing sexual health issues with students is a delicate matter, according to Stephen Ferst, director of the Kean University Center for International Studies, “The topic isn’t as delicate as one might think. Millennial students are quite open and frank when talking about sex and sexuality, and many of them have been through on-campus training for safe sex, rec-

ognizing abusive relationships, and avoiding sexual violence.”

In fact, their casual attitude about sexual matters may be one of the challenges educators face as they try to build proper awareness in students who are preparing to study abroad.

“Many students assume that they already know everything they need to know about sex,” says Nancy Ericksen, assistant director for study abroad at Trinity University. “But because many of them have never traveled abroad before, or have never traveled abroad on their own, they may be completely unaware of the kinds of issues that may arise in being sexually active in another country. The culture of dating, local attitudes about gender identity, roles and stereotypes—the possibilities for cultural misunderstanding on all levels—makes sexual health abroad a complex topic with no standard answers.” She adds, “Students who are sexually active in the U.S. are likely to be sexually active abroad. In fact, students going abroad sometimes have the ‘What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas’ mentality.”



"Many students don't really think about sex and sexuality in the months leading up to their departure," says Paige Weting, who as assistant director of the Office of Overseas Study at Indiana University in 2002 was involved in conducting a study of student dating and sexual behavior while abroad. "However, they need to prepare in *advance* for the possibility of sexual activity. Asking how to say 'condoms' in a foreign language isn't typically the first impression students want to give to their resident director or host family."

Students who were not sexually active at home may become sexually active while studying abroad as well. Weting was surprised at the number of students in the study who reported losing their virginity abroad: "I was also alarmed by the open-response comments that students made about risk taking and sex—experimenting with different partners, mixing alcohol and sex, and putting themselves in potentially dangerous situations, such as going to a house with someone they didn't know."

According to Ferst, "It's important to note that the risks are not necessarily greater abroad. What changes is that students are less adept at reading cultural cues, and often engage in activities that place them at a higher risk for something to not go as planned."

He adds, "There is a general lack of attention paid to these matters among students. Much of this can be attributed to their attitudes of invincibility, and their lack of acknowledgement that some behaviors are risky." He also points out that "although most programming is aimed at women, men can be victims as well. It is important to recognize the ability of anyone to be a perpetrator or a victim. These types of crimes also do not necessarily only involve locals: it could be participants in the same program. And everyone has a role in prevention."

## Collaborating With Student Services, Health Services, and Other Campus Resources

"We try to remember that student services and health services have tons of experience in this area and have developed programs and resources for all students on campus—most of which are applicable abroad also," Ericksen says.

Friend agrees: "It's important to work with the folks on your campus who deals with these issues on a daily basis," she says. "We work very closely with those individuals to prepare content, to provide

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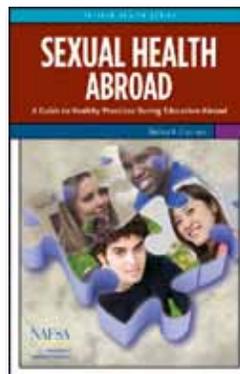
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## NAFSA Publication

### SEXUAL HEALTH ABROAD—A GUIDE TO HEALTHY PRACTICES DURING EDUCATION ABROAD

Melissa B. Chambers



This installment in NAFSA's To Your Health series provides excellent preparatory information for U.S. students as they plan for international study. The booklet covers critical topics regarding cultural norms, contraception, GLBT issues, date rape/drugs, as well as helpful insights from students who have navigated the potential pitfalls during their own time abroad. This booklet is an excellent addition to any education abroad orientation program. 2009. 28 pp.

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students with the information they need, and to train the study abroad staff. Then it's our job as education abroad professionals to educate our sexual health educators on where we are sending students, and what types of program experiences they might have."

Northwestern University has its alcohol awareness and sexual health educators help with education abroad website materials and they are included in risk management training for faculty and staff who will be leading education abroad programs. "I think the important thing is not to be pretend to be an expert in something you're not, especially when there are people on your campus who can do it better than you can," Friend advises.

At Northwestern there are two full-time staff dedicated to sexual health education and support for victims of sexual violence. Education abroad offices on smaller campuses may need to reach out to community resources to find partners who can help provide the information and expertise needed to properly inform students. "I think it's important for faculty and staff preparing students for study abroad to know what their comfort level is," says Eva Ball, coordinator of sexual violence response services and advocacy at Northwestern. "If you're not comfortable talking about sex, you need to know that about yourself and maybe get someone in the room

who is, who can talk to your students about these matters."

## When the Worst Happens

Certainly one of every education abroad leader's worst nightmares would be having one of their students become the victim of sexual assault; one of their most important responsibilities is to have thought through what they would do if this happened.

"I think we want to tell all students that if something like this happens to them, they should report it to somebody they trust," says Friend. "That could be a variety of different people, depending on the program, the program structure, and the relationships they've built around their study abroad experience. So maybe they e-mail their adviser here on campus; maybe they call their institution's emergency line; or maybe it's a resident director or faculty member onsite. I think the important thing for the institution that's sponsoring the program is that all of these people know what to do next. Our job is not to train leaders to be rape counselors, but how to manage the instant disclosure, and then to turn to the experts on campus for guidance on next steps." She adds that in such a situation, "In my experience going through OSAC is the most effective way to engage with a U.S. embassy or consulate, to get advice about what

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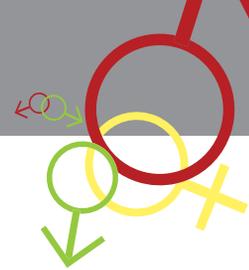
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the student's options are, whether or not it would be worthwhile for him or her to report to the local authorities. We want to encourage reporting, because we want communities to recognize these crimes; but we understand that there are some locales where that would not be a positive experience for the student."

#### **OSAC: An Invaluable Resource for Responding to Overseas**

**Emergencies:** OSAC is a federal advisory committee responsible for promoting security cooperation between private sector interests worldwide and the U.S. State Department. Membership is free. Visit [www.osac.gov/pages/AboutUs.aspx](http://www.osac.gov/pages/AboutUs.aspx)

## Educating Ourselves to Educate Students

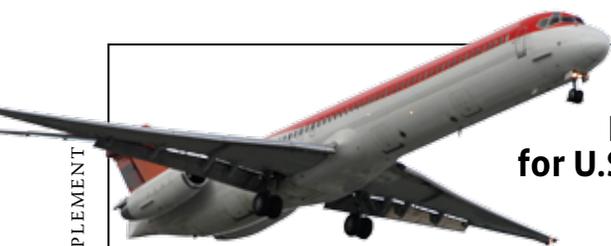
"One of the biggest pitfalls that well-meaning people can make when dealing with a survivor of sexual assault is to somehow communicate to the survivor that what happened is their fault," says Ball. "This can be obvious, or it could be more insidious: for example, in the orientation just covering all the things you can do to keep yourself safe, but never talking about how rape is never the victim's fault: that you always deserve support, you always deserve to be

respected no matter where you are in the world."

As in any other endeavor, developing a high-quality sexual health awareness program takes time and requires constant—retooling to keep the information up-to-date and appropriate to changing circumstances. Keeping an eye on evolving best practices, participating in webinars and workshops sponsored by NAFSA and other organizations, and consulting with colleagues are all ways to ensure that students are receiving the best information available.

"We always tell students, 'Don't be out late, don't walk alone, be careful who you make friends with, don't accept a drink from a stranger: then if they do any of these things and they end up being assaulted, that contributes to their feeling like it's their fault,'" Friend says. "The question is, how do we promote best practices for students to safeguard their health and safety that are realistic; that are meaningful; and that don't end up making them feel guilty if they end up becoming the victim of a crime?"

**JANET HULSTRAND** is a writer, editor, and teacher of literature and writing based in Silver Spring, Maryland. She has created and taught study abroad courses in Paris, Florence, Honolulu, and Havana, as well as faculty and staff development workshops for education abroad programs for Queens College, CUNY. Her most recent *International Educator* article was "Curriculum Integration: It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint" in the September/October 2012 issue.



## Resources for U.S. Citizens Traveling Abroad

The U.S. Department of State encourages students to be well-informed before they travel overseas. One of the best ways to do that is to enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), a free service for U.S. citizens who are traveling to or living in a foreign country. <http://step.state.gov>. Students who enroll receive up-to-date reports on possible risks and security threats so that they can make informed decisions about their travel plans and activities.

Study abroad administrators and faculty can also encourage students to visit the State Department's student-friendly website, [www.studentsabroad.state.gov](http://www.studentsabroad.state.gov), which provides useful safety and travel information, with information covering everything from absentee voting to assistance for victims of crime.

The State Department advises all travelers to learn as much as they can about local laws and customs when traveling. "For example, public displays of affection in certain locations are not

only frowned upon, but can provoke negative reactions from the local population. LGBT travelers should research tourist sites and accommodations that are LGBT-friendly," says John Hanna from the Office of Overseas Citizen Services at the U.S. Department of State.

"Victims of sexual assault are urged to seek medical assistance immediately," Hanna advises. "They should also contact the local U.S. embassy or consulate: embassy and consulate staffers are familiar with local resources and can provide assistance and guidance to victims of crime on a 24/7 basis."

Study abroad program administrators can contact the local U.S. embassy or consulate to receive an in-country briefing. Study abroad program leaders and administrators can call 1-888-407-4747 (1-202-501-4444 when outside the United States) to speak to the American Citizens Services country officer.

**Credit:** Information provided by the U.S. Department of State.

