Responsible Education Abroad: Best Practices for Health, Safety, and Security

The Joint Task Force on Education Abroad Health, Safety, and Security was convened in the winter of 2020/21 by The Forum on Education Abroad and NAFSA: Association of International Educators to review and update good practices published in 2002 by a previous interorganizational task force on safety and responsibility in study abroad. The goal of the Joint Task Force was to outline basic 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 all the many variations in education abroad programs and all health, safety, and security cases that will inevitably occur. When responding to any specific situation, those responsible must also rely upon their collective experience and judgment and the regulatory guidelines of their respective organizations.

For a comprehensive list of all of the considerations that responsible parties (sending and hosting) and personnel need to attend to, please see The Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad. For more recommendations on considerations when developing, reviewing and restarting a program, please see Guidelines for Conducting Education Abroad. For a comprehensive list of competencies that professionals in education abroad should possess please see NAFSA International Education Professional Competencies.

Readers should review the 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.
Participants

**Definitions:**

**participant**
individual who attends, provides, or teaches an education abroad program, including, but not limited to:
- program leader
- on-site administrator
- student

**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

**DURING THE PRE-DEPARTURE PERIOD, PARTICIPANTS ARE EXPECTED TO:**

A. Assume responsibility for personal preparation for the program and participate fully in orientations which include 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 planned location(s) to visit with particular emphasis on health safety, and security concerns, as well as the current social, cultural, and political situations. This should also include information specific to identity and accessibility concerns.
D. Consider their physical and mental health, and other personal factors and identities that may have a bearing on a participant’s wellbeing in the new context. Disclose to responsible parties accurate and complete disability, 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 identification of healthcare options while abroad.
F. Obtain and maintain appropriate health and travel insurance coverage, including adequate evacuation coverage, during the program to include any extended travel beyond the education abroad dates, and understand what exclusions apply. Understand insurance basics and have insurance information readily available including policy number and carrier contact information.

DURING THE PROGRAM, PARTICIPANTS ARE EXPECTED TO:

A. Comply with all terms of participation, codes of conduct, and emergency protocols of the program.
B. Accept responsibility for their decisions and actions.
C. Behave in a manner that is respectful of the rights and wellbeing 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 your wellbeing.
F. Communicate actively any needs / concerns to responsible parties and the participant’s support network.
G. Know how to access health care, safety, and security assistance in the host location.
H. Recognize that if there are any issues too challenging to continue to address, a return home is always an option to explore.

UPON RETURN, PARTICIPANTS ARE EXPECTED TO:

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 actively any health, safety, or security concerns to responsible parties.
C. Address any ongoing physical or mental health concerns.
D. Recognize in advance that re-entry may often be the most challenging part of the experience; identify resources to utilize during this time.

PARTICIPANTS RECOGNIZE LIMITS TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND:

A. Recognize there is inherent risk in any travel, including for education abroad.
B. Understand that responsible organizations cannot guarantee the health, safety, or security of the participant and may be limited in their capacity to assist.
**Support Networks**

**Definition:**
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.

**SUPPORT NETWORKS ARE EXPECTED TO:**
- A. Be part of the participant’s decision-making process when selecting 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:
- C. Be available in case of emergency or crisis
- D. Be available in the event the participant becomes incapacitated and they need to advocate on behalf of the participant

**SUPPORT NETWORKS RECOGNIZE LIMITS TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND:**
- A. Cannot accept responsibility on behalf of the participant.
- B. Cannot expect to be the first line of contact between the participant and the program.
- C. Must recognize the limitations for sharing records and privacy (e.g. FERPA, HIPAA, and GDPR).
- D. Cannot arrive on the program uninvited or expect to participate in program activities.

**Responsible Personnel**

**Definitions**
- **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
  - professional school

- **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
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)

RESPONSIBLE PERSONNEL ARE EXPECTED TO:

A. Support a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all personnel and
   participants.
B. Commit to inclusion and accessibility in all processes to support student health,
   safety, and security.
C. Develop accurate marketing information about the respective location(s).
D. Collaborate with partners to ensure that destinations, itineraries, and activities
   are consistent with health, safety, and security policies of the responsible
   institution.
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 or about local conditions.
G. Remain informed, through ongoing professional development, of best practices
   related to student services in education abroad appropriate to area of
   responsibility.
H. Provide participants with up-to-date health, safety, and security information so
   that each participant they can make informed decisions about their participation
   in programs.
I. Develop and maintain communication protocols, emergency management, and
   response plans.
J. Provide both pre-departure and onsite orientations to participants.
K. Conduct regular reviews on a scheduled basis of policies, processes and
   services that support health, safety, and security.

RESPONSIBLE PERSONNEL RECOGNIZE LIMITS TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS
   AND:

A. Cannot guarantee or assure the health, safety, or security of participants or
   eliminate all risk from the education abroad environment.
B. Cannot monitor or control all the daily personal decisions, choices, or activities of
   participants.
C. Cannot prevent participants from engaging in illegal, dangerous, or unwise activities.

D. Cannot be expected to offer health advice or administer any medications unless authorized to do so on the program.

E. Cannot assure that home-country standards of due process apply in international legal proceedings or provide or pay for legal representation for participants.

F. Cannot assume responsibility for actions or for 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. 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 they are able to share with partners or with participants’ parents, families, or support networks.

**Responsible Organizations**

**Definitions**

**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

**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

**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

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:**

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 education abroad program.

E. Provide appropriate equity, diversity, and inclusion training to 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) with 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.

K. Establish procedures for reporting health, safety, and security incidents (i.e., discrimination, physical assault, and/or sexual misconduct) to all responsible parties.

L. Develop policies for program cancellation and evacuation in the event of a health, safety or security emergency.

M. Conduct a post program review with all partners.

N. Consider behavior and disciplinary history of participants 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 current knowledge about location specific laws, regulations and protections that may or may not be accorded to participants.

Q. Consider the impacts on health, safety, and security of host environments of programs being proposed or conducted, to mitigate risk to those communities.

R. Provide information for participants regarding program start and end dates and the limits to the responsible organizations’ responsibility related to the program.

S. Provide comprehensive orientation 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 that 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, and security, and access to appropriate services.

RESPONSIBLE ORGANIZATIONS RECOGNIZE LIMITS TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND:

A. Cannot guarantee or assure the safety or security of participants or eliminate all risks from the education abroad environments.

B. Cannot monitor or control the daily personal decisions, choices, and activities of participants.

C. Cannot prevent participants from engaging in illegal, dangerous, or unwise activities.

D. 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. 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. Cannot prevent discrimination 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. Cannot ensure support before program start date or after program end date.

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

www.cdc.gov/travel
www.forumea.org
www.nafsa.org/ea
www.osac.gov
travel.state.gov
www.who.int
https://tripprep.com/
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- Keshia Abraham, Ph.D., Founder and President at Abraham Consulting Agency. Representing The Forum Council
- Catherine Ebelke PA-C, CTH; Physician Assistant, Certificate in Travel Health, Montana State University - Bozeman. Representing the American College Health Association
- Michelle Dippold, M.Ed., Study Abroad Coordinator, Otterbein University
- Darla Domke Damonte, Ph.D., Associate Provost for Global Initiatives, Coastal Carolina University
- Caroline Donovan White, M.A., Senior Director for Education Abroad Services, NAFSA: Association of International Educators
- Jason Hope, M.S., Director of International Health, Safety and Security, University of Kentucky. Representing the NAFSA Education Abroad Knowledge Community
- Patricia C. Martin, Director for Off-Campus Study, Swarthmore College. Chair of the Interassociational Advisory Committee on Health and Safety (2002-2014)
- Natalie A. Mello, M.A., Vice President for Programs, Services and Training, The Forum on Education Abroad
- Caylie Middleton, MS.Ed., Associate Director of Education Abroad, University of Maryland, Baltimore County
- Ahmad Refky, Associate Vice President of Operations, Verto Education
- Christine Sprovieri, M.S. Director of International Travel Risk Management, Brown University. Representing the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) Academia Sector Committee