

KEEPING STUDENTS SAFE



Among the 130 or so people killed during the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks was a student from California State University—Long Beach studying abroad in Sèvres, France. While the news is tragic, the death of a study abroad participant is a rare occurrence. In fact, students are more than twice as likely to die on an American college campus than while studying abroad, according to a March 2016 report from The Forum on Education Abroad, which develops standards of good practice for education abroad.

“The majority of U.S. students going abroad have a very positive, healthy experience,” says Caroline Donovan White, Senior Director of Education Abroad Services at NAFSA, the Association of International Educators. “That’s why students have continued to go abroad and why the numbers continue to grow.”

Still, risks do exist. *And that’s why organizations such as The Forum on Education Abroad and NAFSA educate universities and other members on the potential risks of international travel and how to help students mitigate them.*



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A TEAM APPROACH TO HEALTH & SAFETY



Both NAFSA and The Forum on Education Abroad offer their members resources, publications, workshops and conference sessions to help them understand risk mitigation and develop an international risk management plan. (For more information, check out the article “How to Create a Risk & Crisis Management Plan.”)

“A lot of times when things go awry, it’s nothing the university could anticipate,” says Caroline Donovan White, Senior Director of Education Abroad Services at NAFSA, the Association of International Educators. “To offset this, international education professionals and risk professionals need to work together to have a risk management plan in place before students go abroad.”

It’s also important for universities to work with students pre- and post-departure, helping them understand any potential risks. Natalie Mello, Vice President for Member Services and Training at The Forum on Education Abroad, says onsite orientations are critical. “Rather than giving students a list of dos and don’ts, successful programs create an atmosphere

of partnership with students, giving them a sense of responsibility in keeping themselves—and each other—safe,” she says.

Mello cites two programs that do this well. The CEA Paris Center introduces study abroad participants to the concept of “les droits et devoirs”—the rights and duties of French citizens. “In Paris, this is a way of life,” she says. “Students are living in a Parisian atmosphere and must know their rights and duties.”

The CIEE program in Madrid uses photographs of current events in the city to talk to students about risk perception. A program representative asks students to point out any potential risks they see in the photos. “It exposes them to the notion that they are not cultural natives in this new environment, so they may not know if they are in a risky situation or not,” says Mello.



5 PRIMARY RISKS TO CONSIDER

The Forum on Education Abroad maintains a Critical Incident Database to track critical incidents that occur while students are abroad. The database noted 313 incidents in 49 countries in 2014, ranging from illnesses to natural disasters. The most common incident by far was illness, with nearly 80 episodes cited.

“The risks associated with international travel go from A to Z,” says Natalie A. Mello, Vice President for Member Services and Training at The Forum on Education Abroad. “They range from traveling to countries on the U.S. State Department warning list—which most people would agree are probably riskier places to send people—to health issues like Zika.”

Here are some of the main risks that universities and their students may face:

■ Accidents

U.S. State Department statistics indicate that the primary risks for any international traveler are road and water accidents, says White. Road fatalities are the leading cause of death for teens and young adults in the U.S. and worldwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. The possibility of international road accidents may be compounded by local risks, such as inferior roads, an inadequate infrastructure, poorly maintained vehicles and scanty traffic laws.

■ Travel-related illnesses

There always seems to be an “epidemic du jour” that news outlets focus on—Zika this year, Ebola a couple years ago, SARS in 2003. People should pay heed to such illnesses, as well as more common respiratory and gastrointestinal viruses. According to The Forum on Education Abroad’s Critical Incident Database, more than half of all illnesses in 2014 were due to vomiting, nausea, diarrhea and other gastrointestinal issues. Adding to the risk, some countries have insufficient healthcare facilities to provide timely, high-quality medical care.

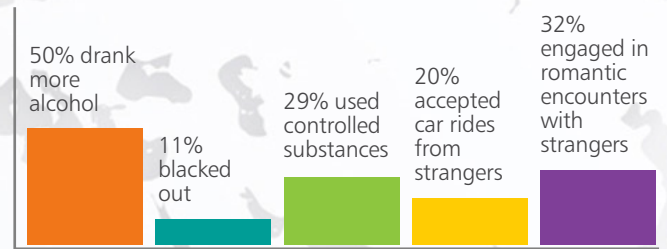
Primary Risks to consider, continued . . .

■ Political Unrest

"Terrorism is high on people's minds because of recent attacks in Paris, Brussels and Nice," says Mello. "The number of Americans who die at the hands of terrorists is unbelievably small. But the perception is that it's something to worry about." Universities should have crises response plans for terrorist attacks, as well as political unrest in potentially volatile areas. Many avoid sending students to schools on the State Department's warning list.

■ Natural Disasters

"I didn't know how to spell 'tsunami' when I had students in Thailand in 2004," recalls Mello, who at the time served as Director of Global Operations at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Mass. "But I did have plans in place for other types of emergencies, and I was able to translate those." Though unlikely, students may have to contend with hurricanes, mudslides, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, avalanches, blizzards and other natural disasters.

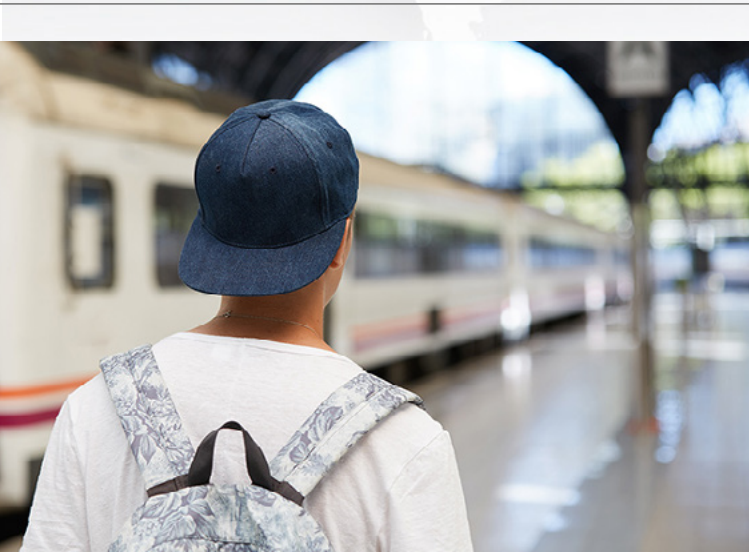


■ Risky Behavior

"The biggest factor in student health and safety is the choices they make," says Mello. On Call International, a travel risk management company, released a survey earlier this year on risk-filled activities and study abroad. According to the survey of 1,000 students, half admitted to drinking more alcohol while abroad, 11 percent blacked out from binge drinking and 29 percent used controlled substances. Students surveyed also admitted to accepting car rides from strangers (20 percent) and engaging in romantic encounters with strangers (32 percent) while abroad.

"We can't imagine all the terrible things that might happen to students, but if you've got the resources in place for things you can imagine, then you are well equipped to deal with the things you can't," says Mello. That's why creating a solid risk management plan is so important.

"The health and safety of students is something that everybody thinks about when they send students abroad because they can't be successful academically if these other things are affecting them," says White. "It's important for people to realize what the primary risks to students abroad might be so they can prepare for them."



T E R R A D O T T A

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