



STUDENT SAFETY IS TOP PRIORITY

When students head off on a study abroad program, they're excited to travel to another country. While they dream of all the positive memories they will make, the experience is not without potential risks, ranging from illnesses and accidents to crime and terrorist attacks.

"Student health and safety is one of the concerns of greatest priority as we send students abroad," says John Tansey, Executive Director of the Frank J. Guarini Institute for International Education at Dartmouth College. "We want them to have robust, deep learning experiences, but they can only do that if they are healthy, safe and well supported."

Like many schools, Dartmouth integrates health and safety programming into its pre-departure orientation. Each quarter, the college conducts a mandatory health and safety orientation session featuring a panel presentation in conjunction with videos and PowerPoint slides covering everything from health insurance to emergency support abroad. Those general sessions are complemented by program-specific orientations run by faculty. A professor leading a trip to India, for instance, might discuss taking precautions to avoid pickpockets or when accessing public transportation.

In the spring, Dartmouth partnered with Adam Rubin, an independent international education consultant with more than 25 years of industry experience, to evaluate its pre-departure health and safety orientation programs. "It's been some time since we've stepped back and looked at our programming," says Tansey. "We thought it would be helpful to have somebody from outside the institution give us a fresh look not only at what we were doing, but also provide input on how others are handling the topic."

PRE-DEPARTURE
STUDY ABROAD
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ADDRESS PERTINENT
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TAKING **RESPONSIBILITY** FOR YOUR STUDENTS

It's never been more critical to prepare students for international travel, says Rubin. "Right now in the world there's an increased level of fear and uncertainty about global issues," he says. "As part of that, students, parents, faculty and all those involved in international education are really stressing the importance of having a well thought out health, safety and security plan. And that includes pre-departure programming."

The No. 1 priority of such programming is to help keep students as safe as possible. But it also protects schools, too. "If you haven't really done a thoughtful pre-departure health and safety orientation, you are opening yourself up to liabilities associated with failure to do your due diligence," says Rubin.



One mistake he sees universities make is relying too much on outside providers—insurance companies or travel medical and security assistance firms—to handle health, safety and security issues. Schools assume they've paid for the best possible support, and while that may be true, they still need to take responsibility, says Rubin.

"If you paid a lot of money for insurance or outside security support, that doesn't take the pressure off what you have to do on campus," says Rubin. "It's important to do things well on your campus—to offer a strong pre-departure health, safety and security orientation. If you rely solely on external providers or create a false belief amongst the students that these external organizations are going to solve any problem at any time, you are rolling the dice."



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO HEALTH & SAFETY EDUCATION



“I don’t think there’s one recipe for success,” admits Rubin. “The challenges that people shared with me were relatively consistent, but how they approached those challenges was different.” Two primary challenges relate to time constraints and information overload.

Students, faculty and staff are all busy. “How do you deliver a lot of important information on a campus where everyone is very busy and adding another required meeting is not seen as a good thing?” says Rubin.

In addition, some topics are complicated. Take insurance coverage, for example. “It’s easy to overwhelm people very quickly with details about who’s providing program coverage, who students and faculty should contact, what the provider covers versus the school and so on,” says Rubin. “It’s a necessary topic to cover, but difficult to do effectively and quickly. And students often forget the details when they are overseas and actually need to use their insurance.”

In his work with Dartmouth, Rubin reviewed the college’s existing health and safety orientations, interviewed key stakeholders and conducted market research with a handful of other universities and international education organizations to ascertain best practices around health and safety orientation. The college is currently considering how and when to implement his recommendations.

WHAT HEALTH AND SAFETY TOPICS SHOULD YOU COVER?



The format of your pre-departure health and safety orientation is important, but content is king. Here is a partial list of topics you should cover, suggested by Adam Rubin, an independent international education consultant:

- **Self-Responsibility**—Students need to think proactively about their own well-being and their chosen study abroad destination. “The more that you can encourage students to take a proactive approach to their own wellness, the better prepared they will be to care for themselves while abroad,” says Rubin.
- **Situational awareness**—“Students sitting in a nice auditorium on campus often don’t think about their personal responsibilities,” he says. “But the reality is when you leave the comfort zone of your familiar community, you need to give extra thought to your own situation. Why should you treat a stranger offering you a ride or drink at home differently from a stranger doing the same thing in a foreign country?”
- **Region-specific threats**—That may be earthquakes in Japan, Malaria in east Africa or mudslides in Colombia.
- **Personal health and mental health issues**—“Mental health issues are on the rise on college campuses, so that’s an issue that more schools are talking about during pre-departure orientation,” says Rubin. Among other topics discussed, they share with students the importance of creating a proactive plan with college staff and healthcare providers and bringing a sufficient supply of any necessary medications.
- **Sexual health and harassment**—It’s important to talk about making good choices, avoiding potentially dangerous situations, understanding cultural mores around sexuality in the countries where students will travel and intervening as a bystander if they witness sexual harassment.
- **Independent travel**—“A lot of incidents that occur on study abroad programs happen during downtime,” says Rubin. “By talking about it in advance, you plant the seed in students’ minds so when they plan a spring break trip in South Africa or hop across four countries in Europe, they remember some of the concerns they heard about in the pre-departure orientation on campus.”
- **Perception of Americans**—“There’s an increasing need to discuss what it means to be an American abroad,” says Rubin. “What is the perception of Americans in the country where you are traveling? How do you engage safely with the community without exposing yourself to unnecessary risks?”

FIGURING OUT A FORMAT THAT WORKS

So how do you pack in all the pertinent information? “Schools are trying to figure out how they can provide relevant information in as many formats as possible and still make it accessible to students in case they forget,” says Rubin. Here are a few ideas for a multi-tiered approach to health and safety orientations:



- **Offer two sessions**—Like Dartmouth, several schools offer a general orientation session for everyone participating in a study abroad program, followed by program-specific ones geared toward individual programs. It provides “a chance to go from a 35,000-foot perspective down to 5,000 feet,” explains Rubin.
- **Vary the information delivery mode**—Students will tune out fast during two-hour sessions where staff drone on while clicking through 72 PowerPoint slides. Include a mix of case studies, group discussions and interactive exercises “to get students thinking about the experience more actively rather than passively sitting in an auditorium,” says Rubin.



- **Include returning study abroad students**—Future travelers will listen more intently to peers who have just returned from an international education program as they share their experiences, concerns and tips and tricks for staying safe and healthy.

- **Make the sessions longer**—This may seem counterintuitive given the time constraints on faculty, students and staff. However, it’s imperative to relay certain information; make sure you set aside sufficient time to do so. Consider serving a meal or snacks to entice participants.
- **Build complementary online platforms**—Dartmouth has an online module featuring all of the information from its general orientation sessions for those who can’t attend them. In addition, placing health and safety information, policies and procedures online provides a good backup for students to refer to before, during and after traveling (if they experience re-entry issues).
- **Create take-along materials**—Some schools develop small handbooks with pertinent health and safety information for students to carry in their backpacks while abroad. Others print and laminate safety cards that fit in a student’s wallet and list all the important contact information for people should an issue arise.

“It’s increasingly important that schools make sure they are focusing in on the health, safety and security of their students before they leave campus,” says Rubin. “When students are in front of your team, you have the best opportunity to educate them about specific things to keep in mind while they are away.”



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