In 2011 and 2012, more than 280,000 American students participated in study abroad programs, and that number appears to grow each year. Study abroad programs range from the traditional semester abroad in Europe to shorter programs in developing countries around the globe. Regardless of destination or duration, there is one constant—study abroad presents risks.

UE’s claims involving study abroad programs often result from insufficient attention to the selection and preparation of staff, host families, and student participants. Common issues that lead to claims include:

- Program leaders engaging in heavy drinking with students
- Faculty members intimidating students into having sex
- Host family members sexually assaulting students placed in their care
- Program leaders failing to obtain or supervise medical care provided to students
- Students visiting restaurants or nightclubs in high crime areas and becoming victims of robbery and other crimes

The steps below can help your program leaders, host families, and student participants avoid many risks common to studying abroad.
Select and prepare study abroad program administrators, faculty, and host families with care.

Care and diligence in choosing and training personnel can prevent problems later. Institutions that rely on contractors to fill staff positions or run a host family program should be sure to hire those that exercise the same level of attention that the institution would.

Study abroad faculty and administrators

Study abroad faculty and administrators handle student discipline, counseling, risk management, and crisis response. A study abroad trip leader, in addition to performing his or her regular teaching duties, routinely encounters challenges that include sick students, motor vehicle accidents, student misbehavior, and lost passports.

Institutions typically provide faculty and administrators with guidance on developing study abroad programs and shepherding a proposal through the academic approval process. Fewer, however, provide detailed guidance on the nonacademic duties study abroad leaders are expected to perform and the difficulties they are likely to encounter. When study abroad leaders are confronted with situations for which they are unprepared or ill equipped, they may make poor decisions. This can lead to unsafe conditions or inappropriate behavior that jeopardizes students’ well-being and results in legal claims. To prevent such issues:

1. Exercise judgment when selecting study abroad program leaders. The opportunity to lead a study abroad program should be a privilege, not a right. In addition to reviewing a study abroad program for its academic merit, consider whether the faculty member or administrator has the traits necessary to successfully lead the program. Questions to consider include:

   - Has the faculty member or administrator traveled abroad previously? How does the person describe the experience?
   - Does the individual have a specific background (for example, language skills, academic expertise, or cultural interest) that would contribute to the program’s quality and success?
   - Does the individual generally follow the institution’s rules and guidelines or create his or her own rules?
   - What kind of reputation for student management does the faculty member or administrator have?
   - How resourceful is the individual? Will he or she have the judgment to handle the myriad minor crises that can arise during the program, such as lost identification or minor illnesses?
2. **Develop a handbook for faculty and staff that specifies and offers guidance about the duties that they will be required to perform.** Specifically, the handbook should describe:

- **Student behavior:** Be clear about the need to set expectations of student behavior and guidelines for disciplining students when problems occur. Be sure to include guidance on dealing with alcohol consumption, which is a key factor in many behavior problems. Michigan State University’s (MSU) study abroad faculty handbook advises study abroad leaders to establish program-specific policies and communicate them to participants in an orientation prior to departure. Faculty leaders are encouraged to engage students in community-building activities during these orientation sessions to discourage inappropriate behavior. The MSU handbook also provides suggestions for dealing with minor behavioral problems and lists infractions that warrant immediate program dismissal.

- **Safety:** Provide guidance on how to locate country-specific information on health, crime, political instability, and other matters. Program leaders should include crime and safety information, such as advice on dress and locations to avoid, in their program materials and discussions. Also, encourage program leaders to identify safe transportation by discussing any institution guidelines for selecting providers and reviewing contracts.

- **Health:** Describe the institution’s general guidelines for handling minor illnesses while traveling as well as any health insurance requirements for students, faculty, and staff. For example, does the institution provide access to and require purchase of certain health insurance for faculty and students, or must participants simply demonstrate proof of insurance? Regardless of the insurance arrangement, all participants should have some form of health care coverage for the duration of their study abroad program.

- **Crisis response:** State the institution’s crisis plan as well as actions required of the study abroad leader in an emergency. The University of Richmond faculty handbook provides detailed guidance for several types of crises that study abroad program leaders may need to respond to, including health emergencies, rape, and safety or security threats.

3. **Require an orientation program for study abroad program leaders.** Consider faculty orientation sessions that cover the scope of responsibilities for study abroad program leaders and include guidance from those who have already led overseas programs. Be sure to include information on health, safety, and crisis management.
4. **Establish support mechanisms for study abroad program leaders.** Even with thorough preparation, some program leaders will have questions or need guidance from abroad. Provide program leaders with contact information for support personnel on campus. By dealing with minor crises or perceived emergencies as they unfold, leaders can often prevent a real crisis from developing.

5. **Publicize the facets of the study abroad program.** Many institutions promote their study abroad program through their website. This is an excellent way to communicate the various components of the program to all involved parties. MSU, for example, divides their information into sections for students, faculty and advisors, and parents.

**Host families and foreign national staff members**

One of the primary reasons students study abroad is to experience another culture, including a stay with a host family. Because the accepted cultural norms of a study abroad location can be quite different from those of the United States, especially with regard to interpersonal relations, it is important that institutions select host families and foreign national staff members who understand the cultural differences and have the sensitivity and skill to help resolve any difficulties that may ensue.

Establish a thorough vetting process for host families and foreign national staff members. It can be difficult to complete criminal background checks on foreign nationals, so institutions must consider other steps to ascertain an employee’s or host family’s suitability. This includes requesting both employer and personal letters of reference, contacting named references for a follow-up discussion, and having personal interviews with several representatives of the institution sponsoring the program. In each discussion, the institution should ascertain the candidate’s motivation for employment or status as a host family and explore characteristics such as openness to new ideas, flexibility, and adaptability. If a third party will be selecting the host families, ask that person to follow this careful vetting process.

Finally, be sure to document the hiring process and maintain records of interviews and letters of reference that support your decisions. Claims can be filed many months after an employee is hired or a host family selected, and it will be up to the institution to demonstrate that its decision or selection was appropriate. Good records will help your institution make its case.

In addition to establishing a thorough vetting process, institutions are encouraged to provide host families and foreign national staff members with suitable orientation and training. The Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET) recommends the completion of host family selection well in advance of a student’s departure from home “to ensure adequate time for preparation and orientation of the host family.” CSIET’s host family orientation program includes discussion of the customs, religions, and norms of the student’s native culture. Similar strategies can be adopted for training foreign national staff members.
Train study abroad administrators, faculty, and host families about the most common risks.

Study abroad program administrators often face the same challenging risks as administrators at the home campus—allegations of sexual harassment and assault and students with mental health concerns. However, the issues are often compounded overseas because of the distance from home, absence of campus support systems, and insufficient preparation of program leaders. Adequate training in how to handle these situations can help ensure participants’ safety and well-being.

Sexual harassment and sexual assault

An allegation of sexual harassment or assault requires immediate attention, thoughtfulness, and understanding of the serious legal ramifications if these allegations are ignored or mishandled. The following scenarios are all too common in UE’s study abroad claims:

- A student notified a program administrator that a member of the host family was making unwanted advances and requested another placement. The program administrator was slow to respond, believing the student was overreacting to a difference in culture.
- A student told a faculty leader that the program’s bus driver sexually harassed her. The faculty leader failed to report the situation and no investigation or action was undertaken.
- After an evening of drinking and dancing, one student sexually assaulted another. A third student reported the incident to the program leader, but the leader did not investigate or report the incident to the home institution.

Students often sue their institution because they believe the institution did not adequately respond to or investigate a report of sexual harassment or sexual assault. As the institution’s representative, study abroad program staff and faculty need to be prepared to respond appropriately when confronted with such reports.

The University of Richmond faculty handbook provides detailed steps that program leaders should follow if a member of their group is sexually assaulted. These include:

- Meeting the medical and psychological needs of the victim
- Providing a secure environment for the victim
- Notifying the home campus of the assault
- Notifying local authorities as well as embassy or consular officials of the assault, if the victim consents
- Facilitating contact between the victim and family members.

Sexual assault allegations can be particularly difficult to handle when the alleged perpetrator is a member of the victim’s study abroad group. While it is critical to tend to the needs of the victim, it is also important to protect the alleged assailant’s due process rights. If the home campus has an established sexual assault policy under the student code of conduct, this policy should be applied in study abroad programming. Information about how to report a sexual assault and what university policies and procedures will be applied—including information on reporting under Title IX—should be included in student study abroad handbooks and orientation sessions. The University of Notre Dame notes that sexual assaults abroad reported to the university will follow the same disciplinary policies and procedures as on the home campus.

In all cases of sexual harassment or assault, program leaders should inform the home campus of the situation as soon as possible. Prompt notification allows administrators with experience in student affairs and legal matters to provide guidance to the program leader and ensure that the student receives needed support.

Finally, study abroad faculty, staff, and host families should receive training on sexual harassment and assault to prevent behaviors that are unacceptable or illegal.
Education about sexual harassment and assault is particularly important for foreign national staff members and host families because their understanding of and tolerance for certain behaviors may differ from that of U.S. staff and students. The Texas A&M University’s pre-departure handbook reminds faculty that “the behavior of study abroad faculty are based on Texas A&M University student rules and policies, not the practices of [the] host country.”

**Student mental health**

Many study abroad administrators and advisors rank students’ emotional and mental health problems second only to alcohol abuse as a health and safety concern during overseas study. UE’s foreign studies claims experience substantiates the seriousness of the problem.

Program leaders should receive information on student mental health with their orientation materials. Training should cover how to identify students in distress, how to provide assistance (without treatment), and how to refer a student for professional help. The University of Notre Dame’s mental health handbook for study abroad faculty lists behaviors, personality changes, and physical indicators that signal a student’s possible distress, and offers guidance for getting the student appropriate help.

Program leaders should also notify the home campus if they are concerned about a student’s mental health. They should get in touch with the campus as soon as possible if a student exhibits suicidal thoughts, severe depression, or eating disorders, or shows a significant decline in mental health. The student may need to return home for professional assistance.

**Select suitable student participants for the study abroad experience.**

With the wide variety of study abroad programs, students are finding it easier than ever to fit overseas study into their academic program. Yet not every student may be academically, developmentally, or mentally prepared to meet the challenges of study abroad.

**Students who possess appropriate maturity**

Most students view study abroad as an opportunity for a rewarding academic experience. Others, however, see study abroad as an opportunity to experience greater freedoms away from parents and the home institution. Each year, UE receives several study abroad claims stemming from binge drinking or other unchecked behaviors. Institutions can minimize the risk of inappropriate behavior by limiting program participation to students with acceptable academic and disciplinary records. Minimum eligibility criteria, focused on the student’s academic standing and disciplinary record, should be established. Some institutions, for example, require that students be in “good academic and disciplinary standing” and “making good progress toward graduation.” Students on academic warning or dismissal from the university are not permitted to participate in study abroad.

**Students who are mentally prepared**

While a few students may be tempted to equate study abroad with spring break, others may find the study abroad experience a particularly challenging and stressful time. The University of Notre Dame’s Mental Health and Crisis Management handbook says that students do not always leave their stresses at home when they study abroad. Because study abroad can induce stress, students may find their condition worsens overseas and those who have never had mental health concerns may develop them while abroad.

Institutions should take steps to determine each applicant’s suitability for participation by considering his or her health history, including mental health history. Consider asking students to voluntarily complete a medical history form that includes questions about their mental health. The form should be presented with the understanding that the institution would like the information to help ensure each student’s successful participation in the study abroad program. Institutions that request a mental health history should include a mental health professional in the application review process to advise them about an applicant’s suitability and any accommodations the student may require abroad.
When drafting the medical and mental health history form, obtain the assistance of legal counsel, health professionals, and study abroad administrators. Institutions are also encouraged to circulate a list of students who have applied for study abroad to campus health and counseling centers. While medical professionals normally cannot disclose which students are seeking treatment, professional staff can review the list in order to better counsel any patients about the suitability of their participation in study abroad.

4 Prepare students to ensure a successful study abroad experience.

Just as faculty and staff need specific information to successfully lead a study abroad program, students need the right information to ensure a successful study abroad experience. Students benefit from having details about behavioral expectations and disciplinary procedures as well as the program’s academic requirements and expectations. Students are more likely to live up to an institution’s expectations if they are explicitly aware of those expectations. Programs can provide the information through handbooks, websites, brochures, orientation sessions, and other means.

Each participant should receive a handbook that explains the institution’s policies and procedures governing study abroad, including:

- Academic and disciplinary requirements for acceptance to study abroad programs
- Academic policies and procedures, including voluntary and involuntary withdrawal
- Disciplinary policies and procedures, including dismissal
- Health and safety information
- Insurance requirements
- Emergency action plans (EAPs)

Many institutions offer pre-departure orientation sessions to ensure that students understand the policies and procedures. A few creative approaches to orientation include:

- Skits by peer educators
- Online orientation programs with built-in quizzes
- Study abroad alumni question-and-answer sessions

Some institutions develop their orientation programs with the assistance of student affairs professionals or faculty who have insights into students’ learning styles and preferences. Others encourage parents to attend student orientation sessions or have specific orientation programs for parents. One motivation for including parents is that it will encourage students to behave appropriately and minimize their risk-taking while abroad.

An orientation session is a good time to describe EAPs to students and ensure that they prepare a plan before they depart. A personalized plan allows students to consider what they will do if they lose their wallet or passport, become separated from the group, or need other assistance in a hurry. Having students work through these scenarios can help groups avoid having one student’s problem become the entire group’s crisis. San Diego State University provides students with a form that instructs them on how to prepare
an emergency plan before departure. The university also encourages students to compile contact lists and detailed itineraries, register with embassies, and create and carry an emergency card. The form identifies pertinent documents students should copy and those individuals that should receive copies of a student’s emergency plan. The Center for Global Education at Loyola Marymount University has a helpful website that walks students through the process of developing an EAP.

Some institutions also find it helpful to have an on-site or post-arrival orientation at the program destination to reinforce behavioral expectations, health and safety tips, cultural sensitivity, and crisis preparedness.

MSU encourages program leaders to include local law enforcement or U.S. consular officials in the onsite program. MSU study abroad administrators find that students are particularly attentive to crime and safety information when presented by these individuals.

5. Develop program-specific crisis response plans and have program leaders and participants discuss them in advance.

Most study abroad programs never experience a serious crisis. However, as the 2011 tsunami in Japan and the outbreak of Ebola in Western Africa demonstrate, any city or country can fall victim to a natural disaster or health-related epidemic. Before overseas travel begins, every institution running a study abroad program should develop a crisis management plan to guide the home campus response to an overseas emergency.

According to an article published by NAFSA, Brenda Robinson of Grand Valley State University in Michigan advises study abroad administrators to start building a crisis response plan by reviewing their home institution’s overall crisis response plan. The procedures used to address mental health episodes, rape, severe accidents, and other crises can be a model for how to respond to crises in study abroad programs. Components of Grand Valley’s home campus study abroad crisis plan include:

- A comprehensive insurance policy that includes evacuation and repatriation
- A 24-hour, on-call emergency team on campus
- Neon-colored cards for students and faculty with country-specific instructions for contacting home campus and an emergency assistance provider in case the campus cannot be reached first
- Institution credit cards for program leaders for emergency cash
- Copies of the crisis response steps on neon sheets for all directors

Loyola Marymount University’s Center for Global Education has developed a planning resource based on the Peace Corps safety manual that many institutions find helpful. The handbook offers thorough guidance on pre-departure planning and suggestions for handling emergencies while traveling. Topics include the types of emergencies that could be encountered, planning for and dealing with health and safety concerns,
and planning for and managing evacuations. The center also has a crisis management workbook that study abroad program staff can use to facilitate a discussion of crisis preparedness with students.

All faculty and staff traveling with or leading programs in foreign destinations need to establish contingency plans that are specific to the program’s particular location and activities. For example, Emory University encourages faculty and staff engaged in study abroad to develop contingency plans that detail evacuation procedures, ensure that participants register with embassy or consular officials, and provide communications strategies with the home campus. Also, the university requires that each program provide a written copy of its contingency plan to university administrators prior to departure.

Finally, study abroad administrators and staff should test the study abroad crisis plan to ensure its effectiveness. Various tools, such as program audits, case studies, or table-top discussions can test the effectiveness of a crisis plan.

Safety in study abroad: getting the right people to make good decisions

While no one can guarantee every study abroad program will be problem free, institutions can help by implementing a few key steps. Chief among them are ensuring that the right people are participating in and administering your programs and providing those individuals with the necessary information to make good decisions throughout the program.