

EDUCATION NEWS

Students, Institutions Must Manage Risk While Studying in Conflict Zones

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For students studying abroad in unconventional locales, the positives may seem endless: an enriched educational experience, a trip of a lifetime, an opportunity to put classroom lessons into action – yet, before students pack their bags and board their planes, colleges and universities must assess the risks involved with these international trips. While untraditional study abroad experiences are becoming increasingly more common, some locations have the very real threat of becoming conflict zones overnight.

If a greater number of students choose to forgo classic study abroad destinations like Western Europe and instead set their sights on locations like the Middle East, this not only creates risky situations for your students, but can also lead to duty of care oversights that can have financial and reputational repercussions for your institution. Although students [report feeling safe](#) in locations like Palestine and the greater Middle East, there are many safety threats in these types of geopolitical hotspots: just two years ago in Egypt, for example, students had to be [evacuated from the country](#) due to political upheaval amid violence and protests in the country.

With these situations in mind, institutions who offer exchange or study abroad programs in potentially unstable regions must prepare their students, as well as their study abroad offices, for the risks inherent to those destinations. Managing risk in dangerous areas begins with a proactive approach: taking the right steps **before** a student is even enrolled in a program.

Understand the Risk

When institutions choose program locations, they should fully vet the safety of the location – this includes the host country’s political, economic and social issues, as well as any ongoing security concerns. This process includes a thorough review of student accommodations – if there is a natural or man-made crisis, are students housed in a safe location?

Every detail of a student’s study abroad trip should be examined, and if possible, a risk manager should make regular site visits to the study abroad locations and student accommodations to verify their safety.

Know How to Respond

When a crisis erupts, time is of the essence. As shown in locations like Haiti and Nepal, the confusion surrounding the aftermath of a disaster makes communication and safety difficult to organize. Institutions must have fully-developed contingency plans for their students that enforce proper crisis response protocols in any situation. Everyone with decision-making authority should understand their roles, communication chains and how to best work with third party emergency resources during a crisis to ensure an agile and timely response.

Students should also understand what to do and who to call should they experience an emergency while abroad. If a violent political demonstration erupts, would students know where to turn for assistance? How about if they had an accident or became seriously injured? It’s the institution’s responsibility to not

only have the proper resources lined up to support their students during a crisis, but to also make sure they understand how to access them.

In addition, an extraction plan should also be in place for all students. This is a necessity in case of severe host country instability, and should be planned for in case the worst occurs. When planning, institutions must look ahead to ensure travel, food, water and back-up security are provided for if a student must be quickly removed from a volatile location.

Train Students on Emergency Response Procedures

The best preparation for a crisis is a comprehensive, proactive plan set in place by the students' institutions. By actively engaging students in risk management planning, institutions can ensure their students are cognizant of the dangers surrounding them, and understand the precautions they should take if disaster strikes. One of the simplest, most effective emergency procedures higher education institutions can teach to their traveling students is the "near/far" protocol:

Near

If any dangerous situations strike, students should perform an immediate 360° intake of their surroundings and situation.

Are you injured? If so, is it safe to leave your current surroundings? Is your location secure? Do you have access to immediate necessities like food, water and medication? Remember, when a crisis happens, travel routes are often the first disruption to occur, and public modes of transportation will lack security and safety.

When students find themselves in a dangerous situation, the first priority should always be ensuring their immediate safety and health.

Far

After taking stock of immediate surroundings, students should focus on the "far" concerns that await.

Assess the lines of communication – is the power out, and are phone lines down? If there is still access to phones lines or an internet connection, can students reach their institution to update them on their safety and location? One of a student's first calls should be to their travel risk management provider who can offer on-the-ground help and resources.

Next, is there a way the students' institution will attempt to contact them? If communication is impossible, is there a trusted local program manager who can provide assistance? Look ahead to the next 24 hours to determine the most responsible safety and communication steps to take.

As long as students continue to become citizens of the world and study in potentially risky destinations, an effective and *proactive* approach to travel risk management is critical in protecting both study abroad students and their institutions.