

Frequently Asked Questions

by William Hoffa

Why is study abroad so popular these days?

At the beginning of the 21st century, in a world becoming every year more interdependent, the ultimate educational value to students of pursuing at least some portion of their undergraduate years living and learning in another country is no longer really debatable. Not only is the global competence and alertness gained by such an experience crucial to American national and international interests, but students who leave college without having had a significant 'globalizing' experience as part of their undergraduate education, many educators now believe, will increasingly be thought of as not fully educated for the world they will enter. Your son or daughter understands this.

Indeed, the proverbially well-rounded education in preparation for living and working successfully in the 21st Century needs not only to be 'higher,' but also deeper, broader, and less nationalistic and monocultural than that which has served past generations. As stated by national report after national report, we now live in a global society in which knowledge, resources, and authority transcend national and regional boundaries. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes it takes to understand and prevail in such a society can be best achieved by living and learning through direct experience in a culture beyond one's own.

But why does one need to go far away to learn these lessons? Don't nearly a half million students from other countries come each year to study here?

It is important to learn about the 'foreignness' of other lands, cultures, and people, but it is also important to learn invaluable lessons about what it means to be an 'American.' Students studying abroad learn how to distinguish those parts of themselves which are products of their time and place in American society from those parts which are universal to all of humankind. This degree of personal and national self-knowledge simply cannot be gained at 'home.' Whatever the resources of their college or university and however high their motivation, students' perspectives remain limited by the blinders of being only in their own culture.

What would a summary of all the reasons for studying abroad look like?

- First, study abroad enriches and diversifies undergraduate education by offering courses, programs, and academic learning of a sort not possible on the home campus
- Second, study abroad provides U.S. students with a global outlook, which emphasizes the contemporary inter-relatedness of nations and cultures, the universality of human values, and the necessity for working together
- Third, study abroad enhances career preparation by teaching cross-cultural and work-place skills of value to today's employers, often through internships and other hands-on experiences
- Finally, study abroad deepens intellectual and personal maturity, fosters independent thinking, and builds self-confidence.

What are our roles as parents in helping select the right program?

There seem to be hundreds to choose from! Following are important considerations that must be factored into your daughter's or son's choice of a particular program. In order to be able to

provide the requisite confirmation and support, which she or he might need, it is important for you to have a basic grasp of the following:

- How study abroad resembles and differs from domestic study
- How it is structured, and its many varieties in duration, location, and program type
- How credit is earned and used toward degree studies
- What the full costs will be
- What financial aid resources are available
- How safety can be maximized
- How the admissions process works

What are the primary causes of health and safety problems that students might face overseas?

Many of the health and safety problems that students find abroad are similar to those that they find on US college and university campuses. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that individual student behavior (sometimes misbehavior) is the cause of most illnesses, injuries, and fatalities. When students don't prepare themselves properly, ignore the advice and counsel of campus and overseas personnel, or act naively or as if they are invulnerable, they can get into a lot of trouble. This is especially true when they travel excessively on their own or engage in dangerous social behavior, such as binge drinking or hanging out in unsavory local nightspots. Your daughter or son is considerably less likely to be the victim of a natural catastrophe, of social violence, of disease, or of program negligence than of being victimized by her or his own poor judgment, exercised in unfamiliar surroundings.

However, there are health and safety problems that are not the direct responsibility of students themselves, but which can victimize them. These involve modes of travel (airplane, bus, van, taxi, car, etc.); criminal behavior directed against them (theft, sexual assault); and permanent or evolving health and safety conditions in the local environment (disease, natural catastrophes, political upheaval). In order to be prepared to meet the challenges specific to particular programs and locations, it is important that you and your daughter or son learn from information provided by the program sponsors, as well as, if possible, from the experiences of students who have participated in all programs being considered. Make sure to cover not just what's what during the 'program' of the program, but what can happen on excursions, as well as during independent travel. Obviously, there are many variations between countries, regions, and programs.

Are there any program types or locations, which should be avoided or at least looked at extra carefully?

Many people believe that, more critical than the location of the program per se (apart from countries about which the State Department provides absolute prohibitions or unequivocal warnings), is the program itself. Many programs with excellent health and safety records occur in places which some observers would say present more than average risks, because they are well-planned and overseen. Conversely, accidents and injuries can certainly occur in 'safe' countries, if program activities are themselves risky or badly designed and managed. Your questions should, of course, cover where a program takes place, how it is run, and what, if any, potential dangers exist. You should also use extra scrutiny to investigate brand new programs and those run by colleges or agencies without much history of overseas programming. Finally, it is important to note that established on-going programs, a semester or more in duration, with permanent staff "on the ground" might be inherently safer than short-term, one-time, traveling programs led by an accompanying faculty or staff member not thoroughly familiar with the program site(s), especially if there is little or no on-site coordination.

How do we know that study abroad will be safe for our child? Recent newspapers and TV accounts suggest that overseas risks may be great. Is this true?

Established overseas study programs fully recognize their responsibility to provide a secure and unthreatening environment in which your daughter or son can live and learn safely. Responsible campuses and programs consult regularly with colleagues around the country who are involved in the administration of study abroad programs, with resident program directors, with responsible officials of foreign host universities, with contacts in the U.S. Department of State, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and with other experts, including faculty who are well-informed on issues and events. It is in no one's interest to risk student safety or well-being. If a program is brand new or seems to be hosted by a campus which has not been involved in study abroad programming in the past, you might want to be cautious and ask the questions that need to be asked.

But how do we identify a 'responsible' program? How do campuses here know what is going on over there?

In 1998, an Inter-organizational Task Force on Safety and Responsibility in Study Abroad published Guidelines for the study abroad field. These Guidelines can be found on the [NAFSA: Association of International Educators Website](#). They include fourteen suggestions of policies and/or procedures that institutions should have in place to maximize the health and safety of their students. Responsible programs should have reviewed the Guidelines and developed comprehensive health and safety policies and procedures to support students studying abroad. However, since this is a voluntary process, and there is no national enforcement of the Guidelines, individual programs can vary according to the experience, integrity, and foresight of their sponsors, domestic and foreign. As a result, it is critical that you and your daughter or son take the time and effort to learn in advance as much as you can about the academic, health, and safety standards in place for the specific program(s) being considered.

You should also know what communications exist to assist program sponsors not only in planning programs, but in their operations. The ability to communicate almost instantaneously worldwide via fax machines and electronic mail enables campuses, third-party program sponsors, and parents to obtain and share information quickly and accurately in planning programs. Modern telecommunications also allows for the monitoring of evolving events. In the event of an overseas emergency that may have repercussions for study abroad programs and students, it is possible to take immediate action. Most campuses and programs have an effective system of consultation in place for these purposes. They are thus able to make proactive and reactive decisions concerning the safe operation of their programs. Finding out about the level and quality of all communication systems between 'here' and 'there' is something every parent should pursue before the program begins, and all reputable programs should assist you in.

The programs look a lot alike from the materials we have seen. No hint of danger is evident in the fliers.

You are right that few promotional materials give mention of potential health or safety risks. While most programs are run by responsible sponsors and do not consciously send students into harm's way, their promotional materials necessarily accentuate the positive, especially initially. But most programs send follow-up materials to clarify many potential risks to health and safety that come with program participation. If they don't, you should feel free to ask sponsors at any point about anything that concerns you. Make sure that this information is current. If you do not get thorough and forthright answers, you and your child should discuss whether this is the program to choose.

Aren't most countries just inherently dangerous to Americans? What do US embassies do to guarantee safety of US citizens?

America has a long history of isolationism, and most Americans know what they know, not from direct experience in other countries, but from the confines of our culture and from the mass media, which tends to sensationalize world events. Few countries, for instance, have as much street crime and the potential for stranger-upon-stranger violence as the United States. In this sense U.S. students may be statistically "safer" in foreign cities and towns than they are at home or on their own campus. Many U.S. students report when they return from a period abroad that they had never felt safer in their lives. This does not mean that there is no crime elsewhere, or that a daughter's or son's personal safety is ever completely assured. Minor street crime (especially pick-pocketing) is a fact of life in many countries, especially in crowded cities that receive regular influxes of foreign visitors. Further, students living or traveling in countries that are internally unstable or at odds with their neighbors of course need to be made aware of this by their campus and program. Usually risks are knowable well in advance and precautions are taken. When a situation gets truly dangerous - that is, when visiting students could in fact be in danger, which can be quite different than the perceptions given in the media - departing programs are cancelled, and groups are brought home. This is standard operating procedure.

Aren't Americans often the target of terrorists and others unfriendly to our nation's values or foreign policy?

There are very few documented instances in the history of study abroad when it has been apparent that American students have been the specific targets of political violence. However, carrying a U.S. passport, in and of itself, is no guarantee of safety or absolute security. In certain places and at certain times, it is very possible to get caught in the midst of forms of political strife that may or may not be directed at foreigners generally or Americans in particular, but nevertheless can be very dangerous.

Who can help my daughter or son if trouble erupts?

In those few locations where even remote danger might occasionally exist, program directors work with local police, U.S. consular personnel, and local university officials in setting up whatever practical security measures are deemed prudent. In such places, students will be briefed during orientation programs and reminded at times of heightened political tension about being security-conscious in their daily activities. Terrorism is a twentieth-century reality and is not likely to diminish (or increase) significantly. To succumb to the threat by reacting in fear may well be the objective that terrorists seek to achieve. On the other hand, no one wants to make this point at the expense of the health and safety of your daughter or son. It is important to ensure that your son or daughter has sufficient insurance, which would include major medical, evacuation, repatriation, and 24 hour emergency assistance.

How can I tell in advance which countries might be dangerous? Is watching the nightly news and reading the newspaper enough?

The U.S. government monitors the political conditions in every country of the world daily. Parents with concerns about crime and security threats in a given country are urged to take advantage of U.S. State Department Travel Advisories, which are available to the public free of charge. Travel Warnings are issued when the State Department decides, based on all relevant information, to recommend that Americans avoid travel to a certain country. Consular Information Sheets are available for every country of the world, and include such information as location of the US Embassy or Consulate, unusual immigration practices, health conditions, minor political disturbances, unusual currency and entry regulations, crime and security information, and drug penalties. If an unstable situation exists which is not severe enough to warrant a travel warning, this is duly noted. Public announcements contain information about terrorist threats and other relatively short-term and transnational conditions posing significant risks to the security of American travelers. For current information, advisories, or warnings, you can contact the State

Department in Washington DC (tel: 202.647.4000), or get access to this same information via the World Wide Web, at http://travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html The US Department of State Consular Affairs Website includes "Tips for Students" http://travel.state.gov/travel/student_tips_brochure.html, a good background on how the US government can help, and issues that students should consider before going abroad.

If our child is abroad when something dangerous develops, how can we make contact? Or what if something happens here, and we want to communicate this immediately?

Don't let your child leave home without having as many reliable means of contact as possible in place - a mailing address, an e-mail address, and phone and fax numbers. These should be furnished in advance by the program sponsor (or campus study abroad office, or both). As noted, overseas programs and home campuses are likely to have set up regular and reliable means of communication, so it may be best to utilize these systems as a first resort, rather than trying to make direct contact with your daughter or son overseas. Nevertheless, you should develop a family communication plan for regular telephone or e-mail contact, with contingencies for emergency situations. With this in place, in times of heightened political tension, natural disaster, or other difficulty, you should be able to communicate with each other directly about safety and well-being. On the other hand, responsible programs may even anticipate your concerns, and make contact with you immediately. Instant international communication in emergency situations continues to improve with easy access to international e-mail access and cell phones around the world.

Can anyone absolutely guarantee our child's safety?

No. Nor can her or his home college or university guarantee safety on-campus in the US. But as long as you have asked all the questions of the campus, of the program sponsor, of your son or daughter, and of anyone else with information that is reliable, and have got the answers you conclude you need to have concerning potential health and safety risks, you have done all you can do. If the risks are unacceptable, you have every right to find another alternative or decide not to support study abroad in any form. If they are acceptable, then only fate can interfere with what should be a great journey and return.

About the Author

William Hoffa is the Principal Consultant of Academic Consultants International, where he works with colleges and universities to globalize their campuses. He is an active member of NAFSA and is well-known as an expert in education abroad with numerous publications, such as "NAFSA'S Guide to Education Abroad: For Advisers and Administrators," "Study Abroad: A Guide for Parents," and the forthcoming "Crisis Management in a Cross Cultural Setting." He is currently working on the "History of American Study Abroad." Dr. Hoffa also teaches in the International and Intercultural Management Masters Program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. He has held positions as Professor of English and American Studies at Vanderbilt University, Kirkland College, and Hamilton College, was Senior Fulbright Lecturer to the University of Jyväskylä, Finland (1974-75), and was National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, University of New Mexico (1978-79). He has served as Executive Director of Scandinavian Seminar (Inc.) and Field Director of Academic Programs for the Council on International Educational Exchange. Dr. Hoffa holds academic degrees from Michigan, Harvard, and Wisconsin.

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