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Prioritizing Health, Safety & Security: Hosting American Students

This webinar is part of the "[Internationalization of Higher Education in the COVID-19 Era](#)" series jointly organized by the Department of State's [USA Study Abroad](#) branch, the [Fulbright Finland Foundation](#), and the [Association of International Education Administrators \(AIEA\)](#).

Guest Speakers

- Andrea Bordeau, Global Safety and Security Manager, Vanderbilt University. Also serves as president of Pulse: International Health and Safety Professionals in Higher Education, Inc.
- Terence Miller, Senior International Officer, Marquette University

This webinar was a moderated discussion between senior administrators in international education at two US private universities. Vanderbilt University has no students studying abroad during Spring Semester 21 whereas Marquette University maintained study abroad opportunities for a small number of participants during both Fall 20 and Spring 21 semesters.

After introductions, speakers outlined the lessons learned regarding student health, safety and security from Spring 20, both by sending and receiving institutions including:

- Realization that institutions have different perceptions around risk, safety and risk tolerance. Clear, honest communication about these perceptions and expectations between partner institutions is primordial.
- Adopt strategies recognizing shared value systems between partner institutions when making decisions about return of study abroad. Recognize importance of « front line workers » and their expertise at receiving institutions.
- Know your institution and your internal stake holders and within that structure, emphasize importance of international engagement, even during times of crisis.
- Do not go beyond reasonable expectations in regard to risk which has always existed in study abroad and in many other aspects of daily life. Don't put up unnecessary walls: we can't wait until everything is perfectly safe to open up study abroad again. There are always going to be health and safety issues in study abroad.
- Focus on fostering student agency throughout preparation and orientation before abroad program. Ensure that informed consent is indeed informed. But be aware that European partners may not be aware of this cultural preference for empowering students to make their own informed decisions guided by support structures. Infrastructure for this type of model may not exist in some partner institutions (exchange programs especially).

What are current challenges in partnerships with « Global South » institutions ?

- Covid has impacted these partnerships in ways that other pandemics have not. Everything was shut down. But it is still possible to foster collaboration on research

and among faculty. Virtual internships or other projects are still possible in theoretical research/internship courses.

- Third party provider organizations have taken a tremendous « hit » and many sites have disappeared, especially in the Global South. So wrenching as these engagement opportunities have been so long in development and have been so important in moving students away from « traditional » destinations. It is extremely important to maintain a variety of program sites and experiences so that as study abroad resumes, students aren't being sent only to popular destinations that attract large cohorts of students, living in a bubble which is antithetical to managing Covid concerns. Important to maintain smaller program models (direct enroll, smaller exchanges, partnerships with institutions or third party providers in the Global South). This being said, important to ensure that local health systems are up to the challenge of arrival of international students.
- As an aside, it was noted that an unexpected positive consequence of Covid has been that foreign language learning and cultural immersion have been fostered by the lack of travel opportunities while on site for the few students who have been able to study abroad. They are more « embedded » in their host communities and more engaged in language and culture learning. This is the time to look at how we “do” education abroad and resolve some concerns that have been expressed about non-immersive program models.
- Highly immersive, high research or service learning programs will be prioritized in « controlled return » to study abroad. This is a reset. If we don't send our typical number of students abroad, who will we send, how will they learn abroad ? How can we re-prioritize so that most deserving students are going abroad with, if possible, financial aid to support well thought-out projects of motivated and prepared students?
- Take advantage of this time to hit « pause » and reflect on what we really want study abroad to look like in the future.

Practical tips concerning risk assessment, crisis communication and study abroad:

- Widen network of sources informing decisions (OSAC, Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, medical and travel alerts from insurance providers, study abroad administration software providers, Alert Traveler app, etc.)
- Clear communication, setting standards and benchmarks, working with risk management and controlling their expectations. Ask partners for their protocols and procedures for return of students instead of just imposing your home institution's protocols and procedures. Move away from setting the criteria for functioning with partner institutions, trust them to know what works best in their onsite-specific circumstances.
- Share and leverage experiences between institutions to communicate expectations and needs from products and partners, for example, insurance providers.

What will requirements for testing and vaccination be for your institutions going forward?

- The learning curve will be real. We will have to deal with issues regarding access to testing and vaccination, both in US and abroad. Situation will require creativity. Perhaps financial support to ensure equal access to testing among students in need.
- Vaccination and testing requirements will reassure all travelers and be good for return of student mobility.
- ALL travel may well require testing and vaccination, including US domestic travel.
- Travel restrictions that are applied with little notice will continue to be difficult to manage. Requires careful monitoring of rapidly evolving situations.
- Realize that this may be just the first global pandemic that we must adapt to.

Is it ethical to send US students abroad to countries whose health care systems may not be able to deal with this additional potential burden?

- Dual argument: yes, US students bear inherent risk to health care systems in some countries that may not be able to support that BUT they also have significant positive financial and cultural exchange impact. Which is more impactful?
- Involve students in this discussion and give them agency rather than imposing a decision.