



Students Studying Abroad: Are they adequately prepared for the possible dangers?

Studying abroad has long been considered an exciting educational opportunity, rich with cultural and academic rewards. But shocking media headlines, such as the tragic story of Natalee Holloway, have raised concerns about student safety while in the care of study abroad programs.

According to ABC News, in April 2007, two Florida State University students at the college's Panama campus died when their car plunged off a cliff on a mountainous road.

In 1998, three St. Mary's College students were attacked while studying in Guatemala, and an Earlham College student was reportedly sexually harassed, then raped by her Japanese host father, who had been paid by the program.

Katie Sherman, a 21- yr old journalism major at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst died in a village near the Indian city of Auroville of an apparent suicide. The FBI has since opened an investigation due to evidence inconsistent with a suicide.

In 2005, Miami University junior John Thomas Petters was stabbed and killed in Italy while on Spring Break. Nate Kirkland, a Dickinson College student drowned in Guatemala while on a 'serve the world' trip with fellow students and staff.

According to the U.S. Department of State, over 1, 500 citizens have died abroad since 2008. These are just the ones officially cited and authorities believe countless more go unreported. The majority of overseas deaths are caused by vehicle accidents, drowning and homicide.

A recent Wall Street Journal article also reports that more children and adolescents are on behavioral medications, which gives rise to new concerns, including lost pills and mental-health crises in unfamiliar environments.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204261704574272140181146368.html>

There is no specific death or injury data for students, as there are no requirements for universities to report such incidents abroad. This 'lack of information' often gives parents a false sense of security.

According to a USA Today article, http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-11-16-study-abroad_N.htm there has been a marked increase in programs and opportunities to study abroad. A record 241,791 U.S. students went abroad for academic credit in 2006-07, up 8% from the previous year, and nearly 150% more than a decade earlier.



This summer, the former chair and vice chair of the 9/11 Commission urged Congress to approve a bill that aims to increase to 1 million the number of students studying abroad in a decade. With more students going abroad and a growing number choosing to study in less-developed countries, safety and health risks are growing, as well.

Clearly there are inherent risks in any travel, international or domestic. But while the majority of program directors inform students of the risks and provide an orientation before they depart, few are experienced enough to truly prepare the students for the various risks they may incur. Severe illness or injury, muggings, kidnappings, and sexual assault are rare, but they occur more than universities are willing to report. Properly training students on how to protect themselves will enable them to act swiftly and calmly in situations in which they may have otherwise panicked.

“The most difficult thing is getting a student to think about health and safety issues and plan ahead,” says Julie Friend, international analyst for travel health, safety and security at Michigan State University in East Lansing, which operates its own travel clinic for students. “They are really living in the moment.”

In 2008 the family of 16 year old Tyler Hill, who died of severe dehydration while on a school trip to Japan, began lobbying for the Traveling Youth’s Standards of Safety Bill to ensure safety protocols are in place to protect children. Currently no safety standards exist to protect children’s health and safety rights while entrusted to third parties, especially during travel programs, and there are no criteria for the selection of leaders entrusted to care for the children.

While there may not yet be legislation to protect your children, there are training resources available to mitigate safety risks and properly prepare students for the potentially life-threatening situations that international study may present.

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