



October 12, 2016

Re: Safety and health considerations for study abroad students at Western Michigan University

Dear students, parents, colleagues, and friends of study abroad at Western Michigan University,

An increasing number of WMU students are choosing to undertake learning opportunities abroad through exchange programs, faculty-led study abroad programs, internships, field work, etc. Recent health and safety concerns have left some students and their families worried about overseas travel and I am writing today to respond to these concerns and to update you on the procedures WMU has in place to monitor the health and safety of our students overseas.

How does the Haenicke Institute monitor and assess health and safety issues?

Health and safety issues are assessed at the development stage of each program sponsored by WMU. We select directors of faculty-led programs based on their knowledge of the region(s) they teach in, work closely with our exchange partners to ensure optimal conditions for students, and evaluate the success and professional administration of organizations providing international study programs before entering into agreements. In times of heightened security and/or health concerns, such as now, a final assessment may be conducted before the program begins. We use a number of sources of information for this purpose, including services provided through governments, such as the travel information from the U.S. State Department online at <<http://travel.state.gov>> and other countries; travel intelligence services; contacts within the country; and input from faculty and staff with expertise in the appropriate countries.

This ongoing monitoring of health and security issues by the study abroad staff may lead to review by the WMU International Security and Health Committee to explore additional actions if situations warrant. Potential actions include modifying the planned itinerary of a program, granting final approval for a program conditional to modification of contingency plans, changing the site and/or dates of a program, or suspending or canceling a program. Such decisions are made on a case-by-case basis using all information available to us. The university also maintains other committees for emergency management that meet regularly to review procedures. An emergency situation involving our students overseas would be addressed through existing university structures and procedures.

Dr. Lisa Marshall, Medical Director at Sindecuse Health Center, serves on the study abroad review council and provides expert medical advice on health concerns for overseas study. Sindecuse Health Center is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays to assist students with medical needs. For additional questions regarding health care services at Sindecuse Health Center, call (269) 387-3287 or visit: <http://www.wmich.edu/healthcenter>.

Students studying abroad through WMU are enrolled in health and emergency assistance insurance. Details are available from the Health and Safety link (left-hand menu) of the study abroad web site: <http://www.wmich.edu/studyabroad>.

Should WMU decide to cancel a program prior to departure, or recall students currently abroad, every effort will be made to assist students in reintegrating their studies at home at the earliest possible time. In addition, given such exceptional circumstances, the normal refund policy may be modified to help students recover as many of their expenses as possible. However, students will remain responsible for any expenditures made on their behalf that cannot be recovered by the University.

What are the student's responsibilities for safety while studying abroad?

Above all, personal safety at home and abroad is primarily the student's responsibility. We ask students to take a number of steps to increase their preparation for and confidence in their program. These steps concern their connection with WMU, their local arrangements, and communication with family and friends.

Research your destination and program

1. GeoBlue travel intelligence database

The study abroad staff enrolls all study abroad students in GeoBlue Health and Security, one of the leading sources of travel intelligence available today. You will receive an e-mail with a login for both your GeoBlue insurance policy and the Health and Security database. You should research information on your chosen destination, particularly regarding health and security concerns. Please share this information with your family. Parents of study abroad students who are enrolled in an GeoBlue plan are eligible for free registration on the [GeoBlue Parents web page](#).

Much of the information presented in the travel intelligence database as well as in government publications may seem alarming at first. As you prepare for your trip and do further research, you will learn to put the information into context. Students who spend time preparing for their program are more likely to achieve success.

Maintain communication with WMU Study Abroad

2. Provide up-to-date contact information

It is very important that we have up-to-date contact information for you on file. As part of the pre-departure contract, every study abroad student must agree to provide their overseas contact information. This information should be added to your profile located on the right side of your applicant home page within the Broncos Abroad application system: <http://broncosabroad.international.wmich.edu>. This should include a street address overseas, phone number, and current e-mail, if available. Maintain and routinely check your wmich email account because that is how the WMU Study Abroad office maintains contact with you while overseas.

3. Inform study abroad of your travel itinerary

Please provide WMU Study Abroad with a copy of your travel itinerary by uploading it to your application in Broncos Abroad. This will be particularly useful at the beginning and end of your program. Should you decide to travel prior to or following your program, such travel would be under your own responsibility, of course, as it would not be considered part of the study abroad program. Nonetheless, please let us know if you do not plan to return home immediately upon conclusion of your official program. In addition, if you plan a trip during your program, please inform your local host contact of your plans, particularly your expected return date.

4. Confirm safe arrival after travel

Please send us a brief e-mail or fax to confirm your safe arrival at the beginning of your program, as well as another email at the end of the program to let us know you arrived home safely. For faculty-led WMU programs, this will be done by the program director, when appropriate.

5. Contact WMU immediately in the event of an emergency

In the event of a safety or medical emergency, please phone the WMU Department of Public Safety at **(269) 387-5555**. DPS staff will know how to contact the appropriate person from our office and activate our emergency response procedures. WMU has an established emergency response system that allows us to call on qualified colleagues from various units across the University, as necessary.

Local communication abroad

6. Register with the U.S. Embassy

WMU requires all students to register with the U.S. State Department before departure. There is a simple form to complete through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/>

7. Monitor travel alerts

You should actively seek information to help you make informed choices concerning your personal safety. While study abroad staff will respond to any questions and concerns that you may have, the best source for local information is often an international education professional at your site.

8. Confirm contingency plan with local contact

If an emergency situation developed, who would be your main contact at your host organization? This resource should be available 24/7. Note this contact information and carry it with you along with contact information for WMU on the orange emergency assistance card provided at your pre-departure meeting. Also, familiarize yourself with local emergency numbers and the most appropriate choices for medical care. Should you experience difficulty in obtaining this information, please contact us for assistance.

9. Increase your personal awareness of safety

Just as it is important to be aware of your surroundings and personal affairs when traveling in the United States, it is equally important to do so when traveling in a different country. Many suggestions are provided in the pre-departure orientation session on safety and health. In addition, it is important not to draw undue attention to yourself in terms of clothing and personal conduct. You should try to blend in with the local population as much as possible. Avoid locations where large groups of tourists and Americans gather, as well as public demonstrations. You may grow quickly in your knowledge of and comfort in the local culture. As you become more comfortable, it may be more difficult for you to remember to take necessary precautions.

A good comprehensive online resource for safety considerations during study abroad is the SAFETI Clearinghouse at: <http://www.globaled.us/safeti/>

Communication

10. Agree on means and frequency of communication with family and friends

Please consider the concerns that those who care about you may have. It is often very difficult for the people who care about you to put the local situation into proper perspective from a distance. It is important your family understands that you might not have the same access to modern communication tools, such as the Internet, with the same frequency as at home. The routine of your life abroad may be very different from what you were accustomed to at home. Discuss means of communication—phone, e-mail, Skype, etc.—with your family and agree on how often you will be in contact. A set routine for communicating with your family will go far to reassure your loved ones. Always communicate with family and friends if an international incident occurs that is likely to concern them about your safety.

Per University policy, study abroad staff may discuss your situation only with the two emergency contacts you have authorized. Please inform your family and loved ones of this information. We have a Web page with useful information for parents under the Parent Resources link (left-hand menu) at: www.wmich.edu/studyabroad. Family members are welcome to attend pre-departure sessions for your program.

Further communication

A small number of WMU students choose a program through another organization, such as a different university or with a program provider. For questions regarding safety protocols, feel free to contact directly the program provider for non-WMU programs. Many organizations provide such information on their web sites. WMU security protocols are reviewed during mandatory pre-departure orientation sessions.

Recent events reinforce the need to promote knowledge and understanding of other cultures in our increasingly interdependent world. We commend you for exploring ways to contribute to international understanding and we hope all our study abroad students have an experience that is educational, enriching, and safe. Western Michigan University and the professional staff at the Haenicke Institute for Global Education are pleased to provide continuing support. For further questions regarding WMU study abroad programs, please contact our office at (269) 387-5890.

Sincerely,

Lee M. Penyak, Ph.D.
Director, WMU Study Abroad