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## WORKING WITH STUDENTS ON SITE

*By Stephen Robinson*

On-site education abroad professionals, including resident directors, program support staff, and faculty, provide wide-ranging support for students experiencing a new country and culture. Education abroad is often described as a transformative experience, leading to increased global awareness, maturity, independence, and academic growth, yet much of this transformation is mediated, supported, and facilitated by on-site staff.

Nearly every student who goes abroad works with multiple host country residents or other program leaders at the education abroad site. These host country connections could be on-site program staff and faculty, housing providers, homestay families, internship hosts, community members, or tour guides.

On their home campus, students interact with and gain support from multiple units. For example, students would have regular interactions with faculty and staff from academic departments, residential and student life, and health services. While these home campus groups all fall under the structure of the overall institution, to a student they may appear as distinct services, and in many cases, they are indeed operating independently of one another. In contrast, while education abroad programs provide many of the same support services, the on-site staff are generally fewer in number and are expected to work with students to support them across many aspects of their academic, personal, and professional lives (see Robinson et al. 2020), often in the context of a different country, culture, and language.

On-site student support is one of the most critical components for an abroad program to get right for a student to have a successful, safe, and enriching education abroad experience. Some students may expect the on-site staff to be there as a customer service provider, and it is the responsibility of the staff to manage student expectations at the same time as they create a balance between support, challenge, and self-discovery so that students can learn on their own (Buffington 2014). Regular and clear communication between the on-site staff and the home institution(s) is also critical for program success.

On-site program leaders and staff are dedicated people intent on creating the best possible experience for students on their programs. In a recent survey of more than 200 European education abroad resident directors (Robinson et al. 2020), the top-three responses to the question “What do you see as the biggest benefit of being a resident director?” were (1) being a major part of transformational global student

learning, (2) being a cultural bridge for students in a new country and culture, and (3) having contact with students.

This chapter is written from the perspective of an experienced on-site education abroad leader, who has worked with students first as a faculty-led program leader and later as an abroad campus director. While on-site staff may deal with many issues not directly visible to the student (e.g., property, legal, and human resource issues), this chapter will focus on the areas in which on-site education abroad staff directly work with students.

## **Program Types and On-Site Staff Roles**

Education abroad programs operate under many different models, including (1) faculty-led programs, (2) exchanges (3) self-contained or study center programs, and (4) hybrid programs (see chapter 5). Established programs will have developed different models for on-site staffing, but in general they fall into the categories of (1) program leadership, (2) academic, (3) on-site logistics, (4) student support, and (5) student engagement roles. Smaller programs (e.g., those with fewer than 50 students on site at a time) may require individual on-site staff members to work across more than one of the previously described roles. Roles may be divided among staff members from the home institution and host institution or program provider, and clearly defined responsibilities are critical to program success.

### **Faculty-Led Programs**

Faculty members are often well equipped to provide a robust academic experience in a foreign setting, but in many cases require additional on-site support to handle the variety of situations that can arise (Hulstrand 2013). The organizational structures available to the faculty members on the home campus (e.g., residential life staff, medical and mental health support, student security and conduct staff, diversity and intercultural staff) may still be available for advice remotely but are not present on site during the program. The faculty member must be prepared to assume many of these roles if required, which can be a daunting role to play. Best practice dictates at least two program leaders, and perhaps more depending on location and student numbers.

In many cases, faculty-led programs obtain local support from professional providers to share responsibilities. These professional providers often play the roles of language and cultural interpreter, logistics expert (e.g., housing and local transportation), and emergency responder. In addition to being the local liaison, local support providers should be trained on the standards and expectations of U.S. programs abroad. Many highly experienced program providers have offices in-country to provide these services for faculty-led programs and are already familiar with best practices within the sector (Heyl 2011).

## **Exchange Programs**

For exchange and direct enrollment programs, the student enrolls directly at an institution in the host country, takes classes in the local language, often lives with local students, and is responsible for ensuring credit transfer. Ancillary student support services are provided by the host institution but often not in the same ways experienced on students' U.S. home campus; however, some institutions have offices or roles to support incoming U.S. education abroad students as a part of their international offices.

## **Self-Contained or Study Center Programs**

Most often operated by U.S. institutions or large program provider organizations, study center programs are developed for U.S. college students and operate outside of the educational system of the host country. The dominant language of instruction is typically English, and academic structures follow the U.S. models, academic credits, and pedagogies (Sanderson 2014). In terms of on-site support, staff and faculty may be locally hired or brought in from the home institution, sometimes on a rotating basis. Students attending these programs may be primarily from one institution or in some cases from more than one U.S. institution. Therefore, on-site staff are charged with fostering a cohesive group. Additionally, staff at study centers that host students from multiple sending institutions likely will be required to work with several home institution administrations on issues such as student recruitment, student conduct, and credit transfer.

These programs provide the greatest level of academic and student support services compared to the others. Adequate staffing is critical, as these programs likely have the lowest staff-to-student ratios of any program type. On-site staff are often employed by, and are directly supervised and answerable to, the home U.S. institution. In effect, many of these programs are mini-U.S. campuses abroad, and there is a general expectation that they will provide many of the same supports. On-site staff often wear multiple hats, including academic, cultural, and pastoral student supports, in addition to the legal, corporate, human resources, facilities, financial, and immigration program supports that the students do not necessarily witness (Robinson et al. 2020). On-site staff also face many challenges in providing a program that meets U.S. expectations in a country where standards may differ significantly, such as with housing or teaching styles.

## **Hybrid Programs**

Hybrid programs combine facets of the other program types, often with academic programs provided by host country institutions, and support services provided most often by a U.S. institution or program provider. Students attending these programs often come from multiple home institutions. Support staff on these programs manage range of program relationships and expectations, including multiple home

institutions, often more than one host institution, and the institution for which they work.

## On-Site Orientation Programs

A robust predeparture orientation program can prepare the student for the new country (see chapter 3). Several resources exist detailing standards for predeparture orientation, both in the literature (e.g., Highum 2014) and on university websites, yet little guidance exists concerning the standards of on-site orientation. While predeparture orientation helps prepare students for the abroad experience, the learning, questioning, and experience continues upon arrival. A detailed on-site orientation program should be designed to provide students with all of the information needed for a successful abroad experience and also allow them to express and discuss concerns, opportunities, and goals for their time abroad. These on-site orientation sessions may be several hours in the case of short-term faculty-led programs or spread over several days in the case of longer programs. Table 1 highlights some common elements of a rigorous on-site orientation program. Of course, the specific content of orientation programs will depend on program length, program type, and issues related to program location and may involve other program partners such as academic and housing providers.

**TABLE 1.** Common Elements of an On-Site Orientation Program

<b>Program information</b>	Introduction to on-site staff and their roles and responsibilities
	Program rules, regulations, and codes of conduct
	Physical and mental health abroad
	Safety and security abroad
	Support and emergency networks, including communication channels
	Visa information
	Academic and host campus information
	Internship and professional experiences, where applicable
	Housing and residential life
	Independent travel
<b>Local information</b>	Local geography, language, history, and transportation
	Cultural norms and traditions
	Local laws
	Issues and resources for diverse and LGBTQ+ students
	Gender and gender-based violence (Title IX) abroad

<b>Tips for successful abroad experience</b>	Culture shock and adjustment, integration, and coping strategies
	Being a foreigner abroad
	Developing goals for the education abroad experience
	Student expectations of the education abroad experience

Students arrive in-country jetlagged and often experience significant culture shock or cognitive overload in their first few days, impacting their ability to absorb information. With that in mind, it is advisable to avoid overloading students in a purely lecture-based orientation session. Instead, orientation programs should provide lots of breaks, team-building exercises, walking tours, and meals and be spread over a period greater than that needed to simply impart the required information. An extended orientation session can also span the period of most significant culture shock for students, providing the support when most needed.

Students need to be able to access information delivered during orientation throughout the program, and thus distributing an up-to-date program handbook or providing a website is recommended. Kutner (2010) suggests using digital libraries for orientation and other education abroad resources in collaboration with librarians. Buffington (2014) notes that information related to personal experiences, especially about safety, alcohol, and drugs, tends to be better received when delivered by younger staff or local students rather than an administrator much older than the participants.

Orientation is not just an opportunity to pass on program information to students. It serves as an excellent opportunity for on-site staff to get to know the group and individual students. Arrival and orientation is often a time when issues and concerns start to emerge, such as mental health concerns, interpersonal conflicts, and adjustment challenges. A good on-site team will have already reviewed student information available to them (e.g., medical and mental health declarations) and use this period to observe and engage with students who may be experiencing adjustment challenges.

During the orientation period, there will be moments of discovery and joy interspersed with confusion and trepidation. The students have just landed in a new country and culture, and on-site staff need to meet the student where they are—that is, jet lagged, excited, nervous, and potentially overwhelmed—and together work toward a positive start to the abroad program. Orientation should also be viewed as an ongoing process, and bringing the group back together on a regular basis during the time abroad to reinforce information and reflect on experiences is strongly recommended. A strong orientation program, with key information being reinforced regularly throughout the time abroad, can set the stage for a successful student experience abroad.

## Experiencing Culture Shock and Phases of Adjustment

On-site staff have a front-seat view of all stages of a student's culture shock and cultural adjustment and are key in helping students navigate their adjustment phases. Almost all students will go through some form of culture shock, even seasoned travelers studying abroad in locations with many similarities to their home. Visiting an overseas country is very different from living in an overseas country. There is always something new, difficult, uncomfortable, or unexpected about the new culture and locations, such as the sudden change in environment, separation from family and friends at home, and a new housing experience.

Students commonly start their abroad experience in the **honeymoon phase**, in which everything is new, exciting, and the opportunities appear endless. The subsequent **transition phase** is often when challenges appear, such as frustrations with the language, living situation, and missing friends and family at home. Students experiencing distress in the transition phase may express it as homesickness, anxiety, irritation, or a lack of motivation to engage with the abroad experience. Students also commonly compare the host country to home, often negatively, and retreat into activities in which they feel comfortable, such as streaming their favorite TV shows. If students do not process the first wave of culture shock, their struggles may become exacerbated by anxiety and depression. On-site staff should be aware of where students are in the culture shock spectrum and be ready to step in with support. Staff can support students by reminding them that their adjustment may take time; to focus on the positives; to not compare themselves to others; and to keep an open mind.

One-on-one meetings and check-in sessions early in the time abroad can help students navigate the worst of the culture shock with the support of on-site staff. Staff can also larger groups facilitate discussions focused on coping strategies, program-facilitated immersion opportunities, and lessons learned from past students. Some students deal with culture shock by seeking out something familiar in the host country—often facilitated by on-site staff—such as a religious community of their denomination, a club that plays their sport, or a venue that plays the type of music they love. Other students may attempt to deal with culture shock by remaining in close contact with family, friends, and partners at home. While this may be a suitable short-term way of dealing with the challenges of being abroad, students should be reminded that in order to immerse themselves in the new culture, a degree of checking out of the home culture needs to occur. On-site staff should also keep in mind recognize that minority and LGBTQ+ students may need additional support to feel comfortable in the host country.

As time passes and experiences in the host country become more familiar, most students move into the **learning and growth phases** of adjustment. Activities facilitated by the program can lead to students developing confidence in the new culture (i.e., the learning phase), but true personal growth and cultural immersion is most

advanced when it is taken on independently by the students on their own terms. Students in these zones are heading toward intercultural competence and personal growth, and the value in having a cultural mentor during these stages cannot be overstated (Paige and Vande Berg 2012). However, that not all on-site staff possess the required intercultural training, skills, and knowledge to be truly effective (Paige and Goode 2009), and thus training staff as cultural mentors should be a priority. ConquerAbroad (2016) offers an excellent guide on the causes, signs, and stages of culture shock during education abroad.

Students experience and adapt to culture shock in a variety of ways. Some students appear not to be bothered at all and proceed straight from the honeymoon phase to the growth phase, while others struggle to escape the transition phase for the length of their time abroad despite the best efforts of program staff and fellow students. Students also have different personal expectations and definitions of what immersion means to them. Some students, for example, only feel immersed if they have local friends, language competence, and strong cultural learning. Other students feel significantly immersed just by passively participating in the culture and community, such as sitting in a coffee shop and people watching.

## **Housing**

Housing quality, location, comfort, and safety has a tremendous impact on how students experience their time abroad. For most programs, housing is arranged and provided by the on-site staff and follows one of the housing models in table 2. The homestay model often dominates in programs where community, language, and cultural immersion are key objectives. Other programs may use host university housing, separate student accommodations within the city, program-rented apartments, or even hotels.

Each of these housing models brings different benefits and challenges when working with students on site, and on-site program staff hold a significant amount of responsibility in each of the housing models. Students often find great differences in housing abroad compared to home- or campus-living, and this can cause them anxiety and discomfort.

**TABLE 2.** Housing from an On-Site Perspective

Type	Benefits	Considerations
<b>Homestays</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High potential for language acquisition and community and cultural immersion</li> <li>• A strong push for students out of their comfort zones</li> <li>• Often an inexpensive option, with funds entering the local economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant on-site staff time to source and manage</li> <li>• Clearance certificates needed for hosts</li> <li>• On-site staff needed to mediate any conflict or complaints</li> </ul>
<b>Host country university housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High potential for interaction with host country students</li> <li>• A moderate push for students out of their comfort zones</li> <li>• Provided and managed by host university, which also often provides support services</li> <li>• Relatively little on-site staff time to manage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs often must follow host university academic calendar, except in summer</li> <li>• Mid-range in cost</li> </ul>
<b>Private student housing facility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often intentionally built for students</li> <li>• High potential for interaction with host country students</li> <li>• Often managed by contracted staff, although there may be supplementary support services provided by the program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contractual challenges for short-term programs</li> <li>• Often an expensive option</li> </ul>
<b>Program-rented or -owned housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very flexible</li> <li>• The most independent living model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires significant management from program staff</li> <li>• Often mid-range in cost</li> </ul>
<b>Hotels</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good for short-term stays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offers poor community and cultural immersion opportunities</li> <li>• Often lacks study spaces and communal facilities</li> <li>• Often expensive compared to other housing options</li> </ul>

## Academic Support and Advising

Students studying abroad are often placed in an unfamiliar academic environment, one which may not be as student-centered as their home institution. In many cases, it falls to the on-site staff to support and advise students in this academic transition and be cultural moderators regarding the host country educational system (NAFSA 2015; Forum on Education Abroad 2018a). While it is important that students take personal



responsibility for staying informed about academic opportunities and curricular fit of courses abroad, the on-site staff can provide the important bridge between student, host institution, and home institution. Students enrolled in academic programs at host country institutions may also have an education abroad coordinator who is employed by that institution to facilitate academic success. In other instances, the role may fall to staff of the program provider who act as intermediaries between the student, their home institution, and the host institution. Many standalone programs have their own faculty, locally hired or from the main campus, to provide academic program support modeled on the U.S. home institution. In all cases, the transition from home to host country academics can be eased for students when provided with proper on-site academic support (NAFSA 2015; Forum on Education Abroad 2018a) and regular communication with the home institution.

### **Emergency Support**

Programs abroad have a responsibility for providing emergency support services for their students (NAFSA 2015). Education abroad involves risks related to specific countries and cities as well as to the international travel itself. Most students have limited knowledge of the language, culture, and emergency services in the program location, thus adding to the potential health and safety challenges during education abroad. Best practices indicate that students should be prepared for possible risks during predeparture orientation as well as during the on-site orientation programming.

Students should all have a mobile phone with a local number while on the abroad program. On-site staff must have robust emergency protocols and a system for responding to these emergencies 24 hours a day, 7 days a week during the program. They should also keep in mind that what may not appear to be an emergency to them could well be a significant emergency to the student—and, of course, to their parents. Best practices in on-site emergency support include

- o developing emergency protocols and emergency action plans, including both local and international support and communication plans;
- o ensuring a 24/7 emergency phone monitored by on-site staff with rapid response requirements;
- o forming relationships with mental and physical health practitioners, including after-hours access and access to confidential sources;
- o connecting to local police, hospitals, and U.S. embassy services;
- o devising response protocol for emergencies that occur on independent student travel away from the program;
- o facilitating support from the home campus; and
- o encouraging students to register with U.S. State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP).

Program risk assessments, such as those described by Friend (2011), should incorporate the local knowledge of on-site staff. A total of 90.3 percent of European resident directors somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they were adequately prepared to deal with emergency response situations on their programs (Robinson et al. 2020). Emergency response resources for education abroad can be found through NAFSA (n.d.) and SAFETI (n.d.). More detail can also be found in chapter 21.

### **Mental and Physical Health Support**

Students abroad are away from their usual physical and mental health supports and often rely on the on-site staff to help them source similar local resources. The stresses of studying abroad may serve to exacerbate preexisting conditions or result in the development of new physical and mental health challenges. Students must also be made aware that, in some cases, overseas medical support is not of the same method, cost, or convenience (e.g., restricted hours). It is best practice for programs abroad to have links with English-speaking health care facilities that will directly bill the student's insurance; otherwise, students may decline support owing to out-of-pocket costs. Lucas (2009) reports that while students may have shown signs of mental health distress at home, most did not disclose this information on education abroad medical forms, complicating the support role of on-site staff. NAFSA (Lindeman 2016) provides a resource for education abroad staff working with students facing mental health challenges. In a survey of European resident directors, Robinson et al. (2020) reported that 20.9 percent of respondents strongly agreed and an additional 44.0 percent somewhat agreed that they felt adequately prepared to deal with student critical mental health issues. In terms of dealing with noncritical mental health issues, 58.9 percent strongly agreed and an additional 30.2 percent somewhat agreed they felt adequately prepared.

### **Student Conduct and Responsibilities**

Education abroad students are often held to codes of conduct outlined by their program, host institution, and home institution. These codes or policies are put in place to ensure a safe, respectful, and enjoyable abroad experience—not just for the students themselves, but also for the community in which they are guests. Many of these policies remind students that they are ambassadors for their institution and country while abroad. On-site staff are often tasked with enforcing codes of conduct in consultation with the home institution. Several programs (e.g. IES, 2020) have combined student conduct with student responsibilities, including codes of academic conduct.

It is important during both predeparture and on-site orientation to let students know of codes of conduct, including alcohol and drug policies, local laws and customs, student responsibilities, the application of Title IX abroad, and academic

policies. For sample codes of conduct, see CIS Abroad (n.d.), Global Education Oregon (n.d.), and DIS Abroad (n.d.).

## **Working with Diverse Students**

On-site staff need to be aware of the in-country challenges that may be faced by an increasingly diverse student population in terms of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability and be ready to lend support and guidance where appropriate. Since every country differs socially, culturally, ethnically, and politically, it is important to prepare the students for what to expect and develop strategies to adapt. Students' identities can significantly impact their education abroad experience as they may be perceived quite differently abroad than they are in the United States.

On-site staff members should collaborate with the home institution—in particular the offices responsible for diversity, gender equality, and accommodations—to receive training related to working with and supporting students. Such training should also include host country experts to provide site-specific guidance.

Strategies to support diverse students include connecting students from under-represented populations with members of the local community who share common identities, bringing in guest lecturers to discuss diversity issues and present diverse perspectives in the host country, and preparing a set of resources related to diversity issues and support in the host country. Program leaders and staff also need to be cognizant of specific challenges faced by women abroad, especially considering study abroad participation has been approximately 65 percent female for several decades (IIE 2020). Faculty members should practice inclusive pedagogy in terms of assigned readings and lecture content, guest speakers with diverse perspectives, and excursions and other curricular programming that is inclusive. On-site staff should also take a proactive approach to reviewing their programs in terms of access for students with limited and take steps to amend identified barriers.

## **Independent Travel While Abroad**

The education abroad experience for many students provides the opportunity for independent travel outside of excursions offered by the program, often on weekends or during a semester break. In most cases this is positively encouraged, and while it may be at the students' own risk, on-site staff remain responsible for supporting the student while they are on the program. In case of emergency, this may involve working with U.S. embassies, law enforcement, and health professionals in the country of travel, as well as airlines, parents, and the home institutions to provide student support.

Best practices indicate that on-site staff maintain a register of where and when students are traveling off program, transportation and accommodation details, and the names of travel partners. Students should also have a mobile phone that can

send and receive calls, texts, and have data access at their travel destination, and be instructed to contact the program staff in case of emergency. In recent years, mobile phone apps such as Terra Dotta's Alert Traveler system have become available, providing country and city intelligence to allow informed decisions to be made about travel. This app also provides alerts to program staff and traveling students of emergencies in locations where program participants may be, based on uploaded itineraries and GPS coordinates. Staff can set a check-in option allowing students to report their status, for example if they need help, back to program staff. In cases of extreme emergency, on-site staff may be required to travel to the incident location to provide student support. In some cases, students may choose to extend their time abroad travels with pre- and post-program travel. In these instances, it should be made clear to students that program supports do not extend past the program dates, and any program-supplied insurance is unlikely to cover their independent travel.

## **Collaboration with Home Institutions**

On-site staff play key roles in facilitating safe, successful, rewarding, and academically stimulating education abroad experiences for a broad range of students. These staff members have experience with the host culture, share their knowledge and connections, and are partners in the great leaps in maturity, global understanding, and academic growth often shown by education abroad students. Yet, according to survey results from Robinson et al. (2020), on-site program leaders often feel disconnected from the home institution and the education abroad sector as a whole.

It is critical that lines of communication are developed and maintained between home institution and on-site staff. While on-site staff most often report to and take instruction from U.S.-based institutions, they are the experts in the ways of the host country, and having both sides represented in information-sharing and decision-making helps programs succeed.

## **Support Networks for On-Site Staff**

On-site staff form a unique subset of the international education community, often working in small groups remote from their sending institutions or provider headquarters. Several in-country associations composed have been established, mainly in Europe, based on the needs for communication, discussion, and education around best practices of operating abroad programs. Well-established country associations include the Association des Programmes Universitaire Américains en France (APUAF), Asociación de Programas Universitarios Norteamericanos en España (APUNE), Association of American College and University Programs in Italy (AACUPI), and the Association of American Study Abroad Programmes/United Kingdom (AASAP/UK). Recently, many of these associations came together in a pan-European collaboration called the European Association of Study Abroad (EUASA).

## **What Abroad Staff Want U.S.-Based Education Abroad Administrators to Know**

Many on-site education abroad staff, including resident directors, do not feel empowered, acknowledged, or included in the overall conversations and developments within the sector (Robinson et al. 2020), even though they are integral to making programs operate successfully in the host country. Robinson et al. (2020), noted the top five challenges resident directors face are (1) the multiple responsibilities, work-life balance, and stress of a 24/7 role, (2) communication, support, and connection challenges with the home institution, (3) navigating cultural differences, (4) managing home office expectations, and (5) managing student expectations. On-site staff provided additional comments about their ongoing frustration that they do feel that are heard by their U.S. peers and that many assume U.S. norms apply overseas, especially in terms of laws (e.g., Title IX, privacy standards, and HR laws), cultural norms, available student services, and academic services and standards.

U.S.-based administrators can develop networks, learn from their colleagues, and undertake professional development through associations such as NAFSA and The Forum on Education Abroad. Funding for professional development can be an issue, however, with only 42 percent of European resident directors receiving professional development funding (Robinson et al. 2020). Greater efforts must be made by the entire education abroad sector to include staff playing critical on-site roles for programs around the world.

## **Conclusion**

On-site education abroad professionals provide wide-ranging support for students experiencing a new country and culture. On the students' home campus, support can be found in an array of offices, yet on site a small team of dedicated staff is often responsible for student health and safety, learning, engagement, and immersion. The challenges and responsibilities are great (and often underappreciated), but the rewards are also immense. On-site staff celebrate with the students when everything goes right and provide support and guidance when it does not. Education abroad can be a transformative experience for students, and on-site staff are the key facilitators in that transformation.

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