Keeping Students Safe Abroad

by Janet Dudley-Eshbach

For higher education leaders who work hard to create global learning experiences for students, the recent instability in Egypt is a reminder of the many dangers inherent in this endeavor. At Salisbury University (Md.), we have been able to sit this one out, with no students studying abroad in Egypt and no programs immediately planned.

We have not been so lucky in the past. The blizzard in London (2010), the coup in Honduras (2009), the terrorist attacks in Mumbai (2008), the post-election violence in Kenya (2007) and the ongoing narco-violence in Mexico all have affected study abroad programs offered by my campus.

There are, of course, specific individual incidents, such as the student who needed an emergency appendectomy in Ecuador, one who was hit by a motorcycle in Spain, and another who suffered mental health problems in China.

With so many risks, what can university presidents do to help keep our students safe when they are abroad? Many organizations offer support, such as NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the Forum on Education Abroad, the Overseas Security Affairs Council of the U.S. State Department, and the SAFETI Clearinghouse, to name a few. All campus presidents and chancellors should be certain that staff members know about these valuable resources.

As I learned from my own experience as a student in Mexico, international education can be immensely rewarding and, indeed, transformational. In today’s world, I believe it is absolutely vital. All students should have the opportunity to travel abroad. Here are a few ways to try to keep them safe, before and after they step on that plane:

1. Establish a “standard of care” and stick to it. All of our study abroad programs are approved at three different levels, each time they are offered. Professors who want to lead international trips follow procedures laid out in a faculty handbook for such programs.

2. Get to know students. We ask students to self-disclose health information to faculty directors. Before students leave the U.S., we know, for instance, if they are allergic to bee stings or penicillin, or are taking any prescription medication.

3. Buy insurance. Many products and services are available. For short-term study abroad programs of two to three weeks, a quality international health insurance policy for all students will add only about $1 per day to their program cost. That investment buys a lot of peace of mind.

4. Choose foreign partners wisely. For semester and yearlong programs, this is a must. Even for short-term programs, faculty and students will be safer if they collaborate with trusted academic partners abroad and do not stay in hotels or residences on their own.

5. Have an emergency plan in place. In the past, our campus emergency plan instructed faculty abroad to call collect to University Police in an emergency, and yet officers had separate instructions to never accept international collect calls. Current policy ensures that a professional staff person is available by cell phone 24/7 to all faculty traveling with students.

After building a solid infrastructure to support students abroad, the most important thing we have learned is to take a step back and relax. Dangers for students do exist. Still, most all of them return safe and sound. Often, students have matured and have been profoundly changed and enriched by their experiences in other countries.

In fact, the greatest risk for our campuses, our nation and our world is not that our students might be harmed while studying abroad. The greatest risk is that they do not engage in study abroad at all.