

Consider Risk before You Set Sail for Study Abroad

Source: www.ue.org

The opportunity to study abroad is a dream-come-true for many students. For parents, it can be a combination of excitement and anxious feelings. For everyone, student safety is at the forefront of this awesome experience. Schools can keep students safe while reducing liability by focusing on key areas:

Vetting foreign host families

When a program includes placing students with host families, schools face a conundrum: They want to provide the cultural immersion experience of a homestay, yet American-style background checks rarely exist. It is recommended that schools do their best to create a vetting process for host families using methods such as personal interviews and local references. If a school can't gather sufficient information about potential host families to feel reasonably comfortable about student safety, they should carefully consider whether a homestay experience is truly central to the purpose of the program.

Crisis management and waivers

Develop a checklist to help schools review and revise their study abroad policies and practices. The checklist should include questions on training trip leaders to handle students in emergencies and recommendations for drafting and distributing waivers and assumption of risk forms.

The checklist would ideally cover the major areas on which school administrators should focus, including:

- Study abroad program formation and approval
- Selection and preparation of program leaders
- Student selection and pre-departure orientation
- On-site orientation
- Managing key risks during the program
- Program evaluations by students, parents, and leaders
- Waivers and assumption of risk forms

For example, the section on managing key risks would address concerns related to:

- Accidental death or injury
- Motor vehicle accidents
- Assault
- Discrimination and harassment
- General violations of school policies

By focusing on safety and preparedness, study abroad will be an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience for these lucky students!