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IDEAS Incubator COVID-19 Webinar FAQs

IDEAS Incubator Webinar Series – *The Future of Study Abroad*

The following is an account of relevant questions and answers from the IDEAS Webinar series *The Future of Study Abroad*. The responses have been provided by the webinars' presenters: Andrea Bordeau of Vanderbilt University, Maureen Handrahan of Michigan State University, and Michael Zoll of SIT and are intended as general guidance that institutions should adapt to their unique situations. Responses are not definitive guidance given by IDEAS. The categories of questions are:

1. Decision Making
2. In-Country Activities
3. Duty of Care
4. Risk Assessment

This document will be updated as needed and posted in the [IDEAS Library of Resources](#), along with recordings of the aforementioned webinars.

Decision Making

1. Do you anticipate considering requiring immunization or other behavioral mandates for those participating going forward?

A1. Immunization requirements are based on host country expectations. Some universities expect to develop a COVID-19-specific code of conduct and, possibly, a COVID-19 risk acknowledgment/behavioral mandate. Whether universities can mandate immunization for study abroad participants is a question for the institution's general counsel.

2. Would a COVID-19 training be best developed as a general health module or on a location-by-location basis?

A2. Both – COVID-19 pre-departure training would best be developed in conjunction with student health centers and on-site staff/program-based content; location-by-location in partnership EA office and program providers (COVID-19 is a part of the training).

3. How might institutions address the idea that travel abroad is not just an issue of personal risk, but of the risk that "high risk tolerance" students pose to other students?

A3. This is a great question and speaks to the complex job of creating an effective student code of conduct for COVID-19. This is something that should be created with buy-in from all the relevant stakeholders at your institution so that everyone is on the same page with respect to how you will approach this issue. This is particularly important with respect to consequences for violating the code of conduct. Important question to consider may be: Will your code of conduct be zero tolerance for violations because of the risk posed to others? If so, are you actually prepared to enforce the policy? Is that consistent with how you have approached student behavior issues in the past? Are there concerns that a zero-tolerance policy may lead to students engaging in prohibited behavior and not disclosing a potential COVID-19 risk for fear of the consequences?

COVID-19 is certainly a new and complex challenge for study abroad programs, and there are no easy answers to the questions above, but your institution should have an articulated approach to student



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behavior issues abroad that can help guide you as you develop COVID-19-specific behavior requirements and disciplinary processes.

Another thing that can be part of a risk assessment process that was not covered in the webinar is evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of your risk mitigation measures. COVID-19 behavior agreements are a recommended risk mitigation measure, but we should acknowledge its weakness is that it relies on compliance. That is why we cannot rely on COVID-19 behavior agreements alone; it is just one in a series of risk mitigation strategies. That said, there are ways to try to strengthen behavior agreements as a mitigation strategy by investing in pre-departure orientation and community-building.

4. Is it appropriate to adopt disciplinary policies related to students creating risk for others?

A4. See above. This depends on your institution's approach to student behavior on study abroad programs. Question to consider: What have you done in the past for student behavior that poses a risk to others? How is your institution enforcing campus policies relating to COVID-19?

5. Aside from ethics, what about the role of insurance providers in deciding whether or not to send students abroad, considering that some insurance companies may refuse them coverage?

A5. To determine this, please review and understand your insurance policies, including any fine print. [The Forum on Education Abroad put out a great resource](#) for study abroad on this topic. It is also recommended to ask this question of your institution's risk management/insurance office, broker, etc.

6. How do we best cover a "full array of risks" when we cannot predict everything ourselves?

A6. This is related to your institution's risk tolerance and its capacity/resources. The uncertainty presented by COVID-19 is absolutely a risk and it is challenging to mitigate. Your institution should consider both its risk appetite for adapting to unexpected situations and its ability to do so successfully. Consider things like staffing, insurance coverage, relationships with on-site staff/providers, and contingency budgets. If you are not confident that you have the capacity and resources to adapt, that probably translates to a "high risk" proposition.

Informed Consent

7. Is "Informed Consent" different or separate from liability documentation required by an institution or 3rd party provider?

A7. Although both are ultimately concerned with liability, informed consent is different than a waiver. A waiver is a formal statement giving up a right. Informed consent is permission granted in the knowledge of the possible consequences. (*e.g. that which is given by a student to their school for participating in study abroad with full knowledge of the possible risks and benefits*)

Informed consent is concerned with understanding. Has the subject received the necessary information (verbally and in writing)? Has the subject adequately understood the information? After considering the information, has the subject arrived at a decision without having been subjected to coercion, undue influence or inducement, or intimidation?

8. Informed consent at my institution only focuses on the possible negative outcomes (e.g., death). Should we be including possible positive outcomes as well?

A8. As informed consent is concerned with understanding risk, and risk is a situation involving exposure to danger, subjects may perceive the topic as negative. The positive outcome, then, comes in the understanding and full acceptance of the risk presented.



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9. What is the thinking post-student return to campuses in times of COVID-19 about the capability of college-aged students to provide informed consent? Universities have placed the burden for safety on them despite their track record of disregarding safety rules. What lessons should study abroad learn from this?

A9. For this reason, it has never been more important to implement an informed consent methodology. Properly implemented, students will become engaged learners in understanding risk and their role (and their program's role) in mitigating that risk.

In-country Activities

10. What are the risks and considerations around limiting or permitting student travel while abroad? i.e. permitting or prohibiting students from leaving their host country?

A10. Risks and considerations will vary depending on the location. If we were to follow the model of most U.S. based campuses, institutions limited travel outside of the local area. The same logic could apply to study abroad programs. Work with a health and safety expert to weigh the risk of the destination(s) and/or method of travel along with the added educational benefit of the excursion if travel is built into the program model. Personal student travel should likely be prohibited.

11. What are the risks of different student housing options (host families, shared apartments, student residences, etc.) during the pandemic?

A11. The option with least risk is likely independent student housing where students have a single room. The risk increases as density increases.

12. What are the ethics and/or things to be considered when it comes to expecting homestay families to be tested for COVID-19 before a student moves in (and/or throughout the program)? How do we as institutions hold host families accountable for the expectations institutions have set for them regarding the hosting of our students?

A12. Work with program providers on this. The safest option for students would be single occupancy, independent housing. However, if a family is willing to participate in serving as a homestay option, ideally, they would have already weighed their own personal risk tolerance when it comes to hosting students. Unless a partner builds in mandates for homestay families to get tested initially and/or on a regular basis, institutions will likely not be able to mandate this as a requirement. When building homestay families into your risk assessment, consider to what extent your institution can reasonably enforce your expectations on a local family in their own home.

13. How do we monitor and enforce new student behavioral expectations (social distancing, masks, etc.) when on-site, particularly knowing they were challenged in following the 'rules' when on campus?

A13. Options are limited regarding monitoring and enforcing student behavior expectations. It is recommended to leave this largely to student accountability offices on your campus; clearly outline what happens if there are repeated violations of expectation. Many campuses had students sign or agree to a COVID-19 acknowledgement before returning to campus, and study abroad programs would likely use something similar.

14. If you send students abroad and a new outbreak of COVID-19 occurs in the area that your traveler is residing in, is it more ethical to quarantine them there or have them return home?

A14. Generally speaking, the mass return of students that took place in Spring 2020 will not be repeated.



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It would be recommended to prepare students to shelter in place in case of a new COVID-19 outbreak. Ideally, students would not be sent to a location where the necessary infrastructure to shelter in place or manage a student with COVID-19 was not present.

Duty of Care

15. How do we counter the perception held by people in other countries that our students demand more (and therefore a more costly) Duty of Care than students from elsewhere in the world?

A15. It may be best to approach this question by reframing it entirely. Is it necessarily a problem that U.S. students have an expectation for a higher standard in Duty of Care? The field of international education possesses the ability to advocate the importance of providing strong support. Institutions abroad grow when they have a reputation for being good partners.

Risk Assessment

16. Who is on a risk assessment team? Can you talk about how you structure that and how often you meet?

A16. Risk Assessment team structures vary by institution. Key components include: Academic Affairs staff, Study Abroad Director, Risk and Insurance staff, Legal Counsel, and Student Health Services (including mental health). Ideally a person with international safety expertise (such as a member of PULSE) would lead or chair on this team, which would meet as needed based on request volume.

As an example, please review the composition of [Michigan State University's Risk and Security Assessment Committee](#) (RSAC). RSAC meets monthly or as needed. Note that RSAC is the high-level oversight committee that makes recommendations to the Provost. The daily work of risk assessment (among other duties) is done by the three-person Office of International Health and Safety in close collaboration with the Office for Education Abroad.

17. What is meant by the term "International Security Adviser"?

A17. This refers to an institution's international security provider e.g. ANVIL, International SOS, Drum Cussac, etc. We also strongly recommend joining the [U.S. Department of State's Overseas Security Advisory Council](#). This is a free resource that gives you access to the Academic Sector Committee and Department of State risk analysts.

18. Is there any list available (albeit maybe a working list) of sample "new program requirements"?

A18. Below is a sample, working list to be reviewed and revised by individual institutions.

- Maximum of 10-12 students on faculty-directed programs depending on current COVID-19 risk level.
- Single occupancy housing strongly recommended and may be required in some cases. Maximum occupancy is double occupancy for all programs.
- Limit travel to, ideally, one location. Multiple locations may be considered on case-by-case basis.
- All faculty-directed programs must have two qualified on-site university staff.
- All programs must submit detailed itinerary, quarantine plan, student support plan, academic contingency plan, health care access plan (including access to COVID-19 testing), and emergency action plan.
- Classroom and meeting space must accommodate physical distancing (1/3 capacity recommended).



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- Working with approved program provider is strongly recommended and may be required in some cases.

19. How much of a factor are the CDC and State Department advisories incorporated into risk assessment? In other words, even if the CDC or State Department ratings improved, would you still potentially cancel a program due to these other overriding factors?

A19. CDC and State Department provide good baseline metrics, but ultimately programs should be reviewed holistically. Our institutions see these advisories as an important piece of data, but they are not necessarily the deciding factor either in approving or not approving a program.

20. Who absorbs extra expenses related to contingency plans for COVID-19? How do you address the potential price increases related to contingency plans that may affect accessibility and diversity of programs?

A20. This will largely be dependent on your institutional infrastructure and available funds. Sometimes these costs will be passed on to the student. Institutions will have to weigh this potential consequence.

21. Where does the risk of travel in general (flying, physical distancing, etc.) come into play in COVID-19 Risk Assessment?

A21. This is a great example of why each potential participant (student, faculty, or staff) also needs to understand their personal risk tolerance. Airlines and airports have made significant adjustments to mitigate COVID-19 risk, and the [latest research suggests](#) that viruses and germs don't spread easily in an airplane because of the air filtration system, however, there are risks associated with navigating a potentially crowded airport, standing in security lines, etc. Some people may see this as no different from the risk of standing in a grocery store line, while others might be unwilling to accept this risk.

Institutions should take steps to mitigate known risks (e.g. strongly advising wearing masks at all times during travel). Institutions should also honestly present the risks to participants and describe their decision-making criteria and risk mitigation strategies to help the prospective participant understand why the institution supports the program. The participant can consider this information vis-à-vis their own risk tolerance.

22. How do you see a COVID-19 vaccine impacting assessment of risk management for study abroad?

A22. The COVID-19 vaccine will likely make administrators feel more confident in resuming travel. The vaccine should be seen as a strong risk mitigator, but it will not automatically make things go "back to normal." There are many unknown factors about the vaccine e.g. rollout, public trust, insurance, general availability, etc.

23. How often does or should an institution update their Risk Assessment matrix?

A23. Risk Assessment matrices should be seen as a living document. Generally, they should be reviewed about once per year.