Chapter 4
Community College Education Abroad Health and Safety Concerns: Standards Needed to Meet the Challenges

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ABSTRACT

There has been a good deal already written about health and safety with education abroad at four-year colleges and universities. Although the authors found significant publications with a university focus, they found no published literature that specifically addresses community college overseas health, safety, and legal issues. The purpose of this chapter is to review what the literature already says about health and safety challenges and apply it to community colleges. In so doing, they bring forth US court cases and real-life examples at community college education abroad programs in order to ground recommendations and strategies for responding to today’s challenges. In the same way that community colleges implement “on campus” policies and procedures to both limit and respond to student health and safety crises, community colleges should also implement policies and procedures to limit “study abroad” risks to students and be prepared to act if issues arise overseas. This chapter provides essential strategies to improve health and safety and legal standards for community college education abroad programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Research confirms broad-ranging positive impacts of education abroad on students (Institute of International Education, 2014). Positive impacts include international learning, personal development, support for retention and success, and enhancing professional and career development (Donohue & Altaf, 2012). We can conclude that this applies to community colleges who also offer study abroad opportunities. Additional benefits include bringing international learning back to the campus upon re-entry, allowing community college students to have institutional residential experiences as a full-time student while abroad, and being fully engaged in education without needing to focus on external responsibilities (Raby & Rhodes, 2018).

Despite the benefits of studying abroad, there are potential negative health, safety, and legal problems. Problems extend to issues with program design, academic learning, housing, and other aspects of program implementation. In our experiences of working with community colleges for more than 30 years, we have seen three ways in which community college administrators respond to health and safety challenges. First, is to fear the potential problems and close down the education abroad program. Second, is to either not know that there are risks or know that there are risks but to choose to not take any actions to protect and support students. Third, is to understand that ignorance of policies and standards is dangerous and that well-planned administrative practices are important to effectively support student health and safety, and to limit potential liability to the institution.

While it is typical for US community colleges to have risk management policies that govern student actions on campus, including issues related to land and property, campus vehicles, student programming, science laboratories, and competitive athletics, the same is not always applied to students who study abroad. While there is vast literature on health and safety and education abroad at four-year institutions, we only found one unpublished manuscript specific to community colleges that outlines a legal framework for California community college education abroad (Henry, 1985; 2006).

The purpose of this chapter is to review what the education abroad literature states about health, safety, and legal challenges and apply it to community colleges. We use United States (US) court cases and real-life examples to ground recommendations, strategies, and standards.

BACKGROUND ON STUDY ABROAD POLICIES AND HOW THEY APPLY TO COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A prevailing belief is that education abroad practices are the same for all institutional types. However, the uniqueness of community colleges mandates some specific modifications. For example, community colleges have low to free tuition which impacts the cost of studying abroad. Open access favors access over selectivity, which impacts who studies abroad and questions program and administrative hidden fee costs. Multiple missions, guided pathway programs, and stackable credentials result in highly sequenced classes that accommodate career and workforce certification, but that can negatively impact who is able to study abroad. Emphasis on performance funding that is linked to student learning outcomes and assessment often ignore contributions made by studying abroad. Minimum qualifications for faculty hiring that adhere to state and federal hiring regulations impact faculty who teach on campus and abroad. Finally, national enrollment and funding declines are challenging community colleges to remain open. In sum,