

The Family Guide to Supporting Your Study Abroad Student

This guide is intended to offer some information for helping your student to have a successful study abroad experience. We in the Office of International Affairs at Chatham University are certainly available to provide assistance and to help your student prepare, but the support that well-informed family can offer is also important. Please use this guide to educate yourself, but remember that the study abroad experience is an exercise in learning independence. Whenever possible, encourage your student to do her own research, find answers to her own questions, and take responsibility for her experience. You and your student will be extremely glad that you did!

Program Cost and Financial Aid

If your student is participating in an exchange program, the cost will vary depending on the program, length of the stay, the cost of living in the study abroad location, and incidental costs such as insurance and spending money. Your student should research costs and formulate a plan for how to fund the experience.

If your student is eligible for financial aid, it may be possible to use that funding for the study abroad. Your student should contact Chatham's Financial Aid office to discuss this. There are also some scholarships available to defray the cost of studying abroad. Your student can check the Office of International Affairs website for a list of those scholarships and the qualifications. There are also scholarships available outside of Chatham that are easy to find if your student is willing to do some searching on the internet.

Safety Issues

While the Office of International Affairs believes that students are in no more danger by studying abroad than by staying in the United States, we take safety concerns very seriously. You can be assured that the social and political climate in the area in which your student will be traveling is conducive to studying. Our approach to safety includes careful monitoring of U.S. Department of State travel warnings and advisories, regular consultations with onsite resident program directors and/or responsible officials of foreign host universities and with other experts who are well informed on international issues and events. We do not permit students to study in countries where a travel alert has been issued. For more information concerning the safety and health of your student, you can review the Study Abroad Handbook that we provide to all students who plan to study abroad.

We cannot guarantee the absolute safety of each participant or ensure that risk will not ever be greater than at home. Similarly, we also cannot monitor the daily personal decisions, choices, and activities of individual participants any more than is the case on the home campus. We can only hope that our students use sound judgment and common sense when going about their daily life abroad. To offset safety concerns, we address these issues thoroughly in the Study Abroad Handbook and during the mandatory pre-departure orientation. We encourage you to go through the safety tips listed in the Study Abroad Handbook and discuss them with your student.

Insurance Coverage

The medical insurance that covers your family is not always valid outside the United States. U.S. Medicare and Medicaid programs also do not cover medical services outside this country. Furthermore, doctors and hospitals abroad often expect immediate cash payments for medical services. For these

reasons, Chatham University requires that all students on study abroad programs obtain medical insurance.

You should check with your family insurance provider or have the student check with her medical insurance provider to obtain information about coverage while abroad. There are other options for short term insurance. The International Student Identity Card (ISIC) that we offer through our Office of International Affairs provides some insurance coverage, and you can research other providers as well. Be sure to ask questions about access to prescriptions while abroad and emergency services such as medical evacuation.

Culture Shock

Being able to adjust to the new environment and culture is perhaps one of the most important facets of a student's experience abroad. Not only will the cross-cultural adjustment help in her learning and development in a new country, it will make the experience more rewarding and interesting. While nearly everyone goes through a period of adjustment, i.e., when going off to college, beginning a new job, or moving to a new city, starting life in a foreign country is relatively more challenging.

Culture shock is the term given to the collection of feelings that sometimes arise when travelers are overwhelmed by cultural differences. The symptoms can include feeling lonely, homesick, overwhelmed, fearful, angry, confused or judgmental. The onset, severity, and length of time with which culture shock will affect any one student will vary. More experienced travelers could snap out of it rather quickly, while others might have to work a bit harder to get past the feelings of distress. The thing to always keep in mind is culture shock is a common and a natural part of the study abroad experience.

When students first arrive at the host country, they feel happy and excited. Everything is new and interesting, and they want to explore it all. This is the honeymoon stage when students fall in love with the host country and nothing could possibly get in the way of a fabulous experience.

A few days, weeks, or months later, the students start feeling somewhat disillusioned, and while things in the environment have remained the same, they may now regard things negatively. This is the next stage of culture shock and the time when some students are apt to feel that they've made a mistake and would like to return home. They're also exhausted from constantly making behavioral adjustments and frustrated because the usual emotional support system – family and friends – are not there.

Fortunately, with effort and time, this stage usually passes and the students achieve a state of balance or equilibrium with the environment. This is the stage when the students become more integrated into the host culture, aware of cultural expectations, and cognizant of the behaviors and attitudes of people from that country. Culture shock has an ephemeral nature. It will end — but it will not disappear magically.

We hope you would not become distressed and alarmed if your student starts complaining about her situation. In all likelihood, she is going through the second stage of culture shock. Empathize but urge the student to keep her chin up and soldier on. Remind her of all the things that could be gained from this experience. Applaud the student's efforts to become immersed in the host culture. Encourage her to continue initiating interactions with fellow students or the host family, participating in local or university activities, and learning from mistakes. In a few weeks, the student is likely to look back at the seemingly dark days and be incredulous that she even considered returning home!

The Supportive Family

Studying abroad will certainly be a defining period in your student's educational experience. It will be a personal journey that will likely transform her into a global citizen with new ideas and perspectives about the world and its people. Studying abroad is also an experience that will distinguish your student from peers and enable her to stand out in the eyes of prospective employers or post-graduate interviewers.

Just the same, we understand that there will be conflicting feelings about the upcoming experience. You and your student are excited at the opportunities that lie ahead but at the same time, there is some trepidation about being several thousand miles apart. Fortunately, there are some things you can do before, during, and after the Study Abroad period to support and maximize the learning experience for your student. Your support is very important and how you handle the time away will go a long way toward enabling your student to thrive and learn from the overseas experience.

Encourage your student to be in charge of pre-departure preparations.

Students will have to do many of the tasks involved in preparing to study abroad while attending to their regular semester activities. As tempting as it may be to relieve your student of some of the responsibilities, she will be in a better position to cope with next semester's challenges if the student attends to pre-departure preparations personally. Next semester, the reliable support network of family and friends will not be as readily available and the student must be prepared to fend for herself. If the student has had very few opportunities to handle challenges at home, imagine how daunting it could be to have to do so in another culture. So stand back and let your student handle this responsibility.

Stay in touch but maintain a level of distance.

One way to reduce the feeling of homesickness next semester is to for you and your student to stay in touch regularly. There is a close correlation between morale overseas and messages from home. Stay informed about current events in the country and region where the student is studying. Many friends and family find reading about the overseas location to be both interesting and a good way to feel more in touch with the experiences of their student.

However, while you will be very eager to know everything about your student's novel experiences, it is usually not a good idea to encourage your student to call or email home *constantly*. If the student is always on the phone or the internet communicating with family and friends, the incentive to integrate with the community abroad is much decreased. If the student is participating in a language program, she would more readily improve second language proficiency by immersion in that language rather than communicating extensively in English by email or phone. You can support your student's efforts to become more immersed in the host culture by reassuring her that you do not expect frequent long email messages, a daily phone call, or text messages several times a day.

Prepare for the transformation.

Your student will return home changed by the experience. She may dress a bit differently, like new foods, speak differently, and express new political perspectives. This is not unusual. It will take time before your student sorts through her experiences to determine which traits and personal lessons learned abroad are worth keeping. Be prepared also for some reverse culture shock. After the excitement of being back and regaling friends and family with tales of their adventures, many students find themselves moping and feeling sad because they miss their new friends, the novel experiences that happened almost daily, the exciting activities, or their favorite food. Again, your support, interest, and understanding will be crucial. Discussing these feelings and changes in your student's outlook is an

excellent way of sharing her international experience. Encourage her to stay in touch with overseas friends but to find local avenues in which the knowledge and skills gained from their time abroad could be useful.

Passport and Visas

http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html

New passports could take 4-6 weeks for processing so we advised the students to apply early to avoid delay. If your student already has a passport, make sure it is valid until at least six months after her return date to the United States. General information about obtaining a passport can be found at the State Department web-site.

A visa is an entry/residence permit and official permission granted by the authorities of the country (via its Embassy or Consulate in the United States) where your student will study. Not everyone needs a student visa to study abroad. Your student should ask the Study Abroad coordinator if a visa is needed or not. Applying for a visa can be complicated in some ways, so it is best if your student asks questions and gets guidance from the Chatham Office of International Affairs well in advance of their travel abroad.

Data File

Gather all of the information and documents you and your student might need while he or she is away, including:

- Contact information for:
 - Your student (street address and cell phone number)
 - On-site resident director/host family/other residential contact
 - Home office of program provider or host university Study Abroad Office
 - U.S. State Department Office of Overseas Citizen Services
 - Citizen assistance section of the U.S. embassy or consulate nearest your student's program site
- Insurance policy number and how to submit claims
- Emergency and communication plan
- Student's bank account, and credit card numbers and contact info in case of loss
- Student's passport number
- Duplicate lost passport kit containing:
 - two passport photos
 - Official copy of student's birth certificate

- Copy of student's passport information and visa pages
- Program calendar
- Name of local physician if your student requires medical supervision

Health Matters

We are sure you want your student to remain healthy while overseas. To be ill in another country, where Mom's chicken soup won't come to the rescue, is not going to be fun. Of more importance, a healthy person will have a sunny outlook and your student will regard her overseas experience in a more positive light.

Before departure, your student should have a general physical, eye, and dental exam. If your student has a chronic ailment, make sure she packs a complete medical record and typed copy of any prescription medication. Encourage the student to practice healthy lifestyle while abroad and to know the conditions at the host country. Is water safe to drink? Will the student need vaccinations? Check the Centers for Disease Control website for information. Stress can be a factor overseas and the student should be prepared with tried and tested coping mechanisms.

If your student has special medical or dietary needs, we suggest that you have your physician indicate the generic name of the medication. The brand name of your student's medication could go by another name in the host country. Research how the student's condition is typically treated in the host country, or how pharmacies dispense prescription medication. Know how the medical condition is commonly known in the host country so she can make the condition known without delay if medical attention is needed. Inform the Study Abroad Office if the student needs special accommodations.

Packing

When the students arrive at their destination, they will have to make their way from the airport to a train, taxi, or bus station, walk a few blocks, and go up a few flights of stairs to the apartment or residence hall. (Elevators may not be available!) They must be able to do this while hauling their luggage. Here is a test to see if the student has over-packed: have her walk around the block a few times and go up and down a flight of stairs carrying all of the packed luggage (checked bags as well as all carry-ons). If the activity becomes very trying after only a few minutes, take out a few items. As a traveler's adage states: **Take half as many clothes and twice as much money!**

There are now stricter government regulations about luggage weight and what cannot be packed in a carry-on bag. Please check with the airline about weight limits and the State Department website about items that can be brought on board.

What to bring? Your student's study abroad handbook includes a good basic packing list. You can also do some internet research to see what is most appropriate for the particular country and type of trip that your student will be taking. Hairdryers, toiletries, linens, eating utensils, and other everyday items are best purchased onsite. Also, research what the electrical specifications are at your student's host country before she packs items that need to be plugged in to the wall and you might consider buying a power converter.

Your student might also consider bringing his or her overseas academic advisor, host parents, ex-change student coordinator, or resident director a little souvenir from Chatham on arrival. The present does not

have to be extravagant: a Chatham keychain, T-shirt, pen, calendar, and other small items are quite appropriate. A gift is a small token of appreciation and a gracious gesture that will establish goodwill between the student and her hosts.

Handling Money

Decide with your student how to access money for both everyday financial needs and emergencies. For the most part, students studying abroad secure cash by withdrawing money from an ATM using the debit or cash card they already use in the United States, and paying for large purchases with a credit card in their name. Using these two methods is not only convenient it also offers the best exchange rate. ATMs are readily available all over the world and a student's current debit or ATM card can be used abroad as long as the card is in the Cirrus or PLUS network (check the logos at the back of the card).

Students should withdraw a larger amount every once in a while rather than small amounts every day because there are fees each time the student withdraws money. To withdraw cash using an ATM or debit card, the student will need his or her 4-digit PIN number. While the student will be able to get money in the local currency, the amount will be debited from his or her account in U.S. currency. Avoid sticker shock — be sure to know the current exchange rate! The dollar is weaker against many currencies so be sure the student is not overdrawing her account.

Make sure to inform your bank that your student will be using her credit and ATM card abroad to avoid deactivation of the cards for irregular use. Check with the bank to determine the daily limit of funds received. Many U.S. banks also charge a transaction fee every time the card is used on a non-bank ATM. You might want to inquire if this fee could be waived when your student is studying abroad. While each transaction may only cost a couple of dollars, if your student withdraws money a couple of times a week, the charges could add up by end of the term. Also, be aware that most banks assess a one percent or more fee every time a credit card is used for purchases.

For some long-term study abroad students, opening a bank account while studying abroad has proven to be quite a convenient money saver. They did not have to pay any ATM transaction fees within the host country and in other countries, thus saving themselves a few hundred dollars in fees. Having a local bank account also made it easier to make housing and other local payments. If you decide on this route, the onsite staff should be able to assist your student in selecting a bank and completing the required procedures.

With the convenience and ease of ATM and credit cards, traveler's checks are not as common as they once were. However, we suggest that students bring a couple of hundred dollars worth of traveler's checks for emergencies. Have the student make a copy of the numbers and keep this information separate from the actual checks. In case of theft or loss, he or she will have to provide these numbers in order to get replacements.

Phones and Electronics

We are frequently asked if students can use their regular cell phone abroad. The best advice is to check with your cell phone provider. They can help you adjust phones for overseas use or advise you to choose another calling option.

Because the internet is so ubiquitous now, it may be wise to use email and services like Skype to communicate. For emergencies, your student may purchase a phone card to use at public phones. If your student will only be gone for a few weeks, this is much easier than arranging for phone service.

Long-term study abroad students may wish to purchase a phone abroad. Buying a cell phone abroad is no more expensive than buying one in the US. Furthermore, there is no need to get a plan that involves a monthly fee. For the most part, students pay as they go by. Your student can research this option before they leave.

As for computers, returning students have told us that having a laptop computer made writing papers and downloading photos more convenient. The AC adapter of most laptops to-day are dual voltage and can be used anywhere in the world with a plug adaptor. Some students however, especially summer participants, had little use for computers and usually just went to numerous and affordable internet cafes in their host city to post photos online and communicate with family and friends by email.

Digital cameras are invaluable for ease of use, and for the speed with which students can share photos with family and friends. If your student does not have one and does not wish to purchase one, disposable cameras are a good alternative.

Information for Arrival in Host Country

The host University/program organizer should have provided arrival information in the acceptance materials sent to your student. However, one of the things you might want to do as the departure date nears is to review with your student what to do on arrival. The first day at the host country is very important and we would like the student to get off to a good start. Specifically, we ask Study Abroad students to make sure they have the following information:

What to expect at the airport (layout, immigration and customs procedure, location of ATMs, ground transportation, etc.)

Directions to the place the students will be residing and the program office

What form of transportation to take and where to get it

Who to contact or where to go in case of emergency

How to say a few key expressions and questions in the host country's language (e.g. greetings, directions to restrooms and food, thank you, etc.)

Contingency plans in case Plan A goes awry

Family members and friends frequently ask students to call home immediately after arrival. We understand your concern but please be aware that it may not be always possible. On some programs, students may need to catch an airport shuttle immediately after retrieving their luggage and going through Customs and Immigration. Other times, the student may be swept into a program bus, through formalities, and into their accommodations where they are not immediately in a position to make special arrangements to call you. Some may arrive late at night or after having traveled for a day to reach their destination and are too exhausted to even think about calling home. Give them at least a day or two to get settled, and do not panic.

Emergencies Abroad

In an emergency, the student must contact the onsite staff and local authorities first. There is little that anyone in the United States can do if the person needs immediate assistance. Only after the matter has

been attended to should the student call home. Your student should also have contact information for the Office of International Affairs and the Chatham police in case there is a need to report an emergency.

Double-check the host country's equivalent to 911. Often it is 112.

We strongly recommend doing some contingency planning before the student leaves for a program site. Should an emergency occur, decide now what steps should be taken. Will the student fly home? If not, consider ways to lend emotional support while she remains overseas. Who will relay information about the emergency to the extended family? You might also consider getting a passport now in case you would have to go overseas to attend to an emergency involving your student. A little advanced planning will make dealing with unexpected situations much easier.

Additional Resources

[Chatham Office of International Affairs website](#)

Chatham Study Abroad Handbook

[U.S. Department of State](#) and [State Department's Study Abroad webpage](#)

[Amadeus](#) - Good source of travel information

[Frommer's Travel Guides](#)

[Time-Zone Converter](#)

[Currency Converter](#)

A Final Note

Above all, we wish to remind you that the Office of International Affairs at Chatham is available to help your student with planning and questions. We offer support and resources so that students are fully prepared when they travel. Encourage your student to work with the OIA staff to get the help necessary to make studying abroad an enjoyable and successful endeavor. Your student can stop in to the office at Braun Hall, 2nd Floor, Suite 1 or call us at 412-365-2714 or email kchipman@chatham.edu