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Talking about sex with college students may be, for some, challenging and complex. However, this should in no way diminish our responsibility as international educators to prepare students to grapple with these topics and understand how they relate to a student's overall health and well-being on an education abroad program. It is my goal that this booklet will open the door for discussions in our field and among students, their families, friends, and advisers to help ensure a safe and positive experience abroad.

I dedicate this in loving memory of my mom, Christine Chambers Novak, who taught me that each of us has the ability to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

The stories highlighted in red are by U.S. students and young adults and are reprinted with the permission of Glimpse, a nonprofit organization devoted to sharing stories about real life abroad, www.glimpse.org.

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INTRODUCTION
Congratulations! Education abroad is an amazing opportunity and will change your life. You'll learn more than you can imagine in your classes, experiencing and exploring a new culture, and about yourself and how you fit into our world community. Many education abroad alumni say their experience abroad was the most transformative event in their lives so far. And you're well on your way to starting the adventure of your lifetime—you've probably chosen a program, applied, been accepted, and are now in the final stages of getting ready for your time abroad. And there's so much to do to get ready... getting your passport, packing, making sure your academics are all set, and beginning to imagine your day to day experiences in a new culture.

Sex, Sexuality, and the Education Abroad Experience
College is a time when many students are exploring their ideas about sex and sexuality, though this does not mean that all college students are sexually active. Whatever decisions you make about sex, it is important to make smart and healthy decisions. In preparing for your program abroad, you will likely attend a predeparture orientation and be given a lot of material. These materials will cover very important topics such as cultural adjustment and culture shock; maintaining your health, safety, and security while away from home; packing lists; advice on how to handle money, credit cards, and how to budget; understanding academic differences in your new host country; and dealing with reentry culture shock. Although all of these are very relevant and necessary topics, it is also important to think about the topics of sex, sexual health, and your sexual behaviors and how they connect to your experience abroad. These topics are at times lost in the shuffle of the bigger, more obvious issues, but it's essential to remember that sex and sexual health can play a large role in the kind of experience you have abroad. These topics are often best explored privately or with close friends, family, and advisers on a more
individual basis. This guide will help you to get started thinking about these important issues.

The term "sexuality" refers to more than just the physical acts of sexual intercourse. In this booklet, sexuality refers to both your own concepts of sexuality as well as cultural, societal, legal, and religious aspects of sex and sexual behaviors. Your concepts of sexuality are a part of your physical, emotional, intellectual, gender, and social identity. This affects how you think of yourself and how you relate to others, as well as how they relate to you. Your sexuality is a part of you, informed by your own culture and values.

**Information Is Power**

This booklet briefly discusses several areas vital to a better understanding of sexuality and sexual health as it relates to living in a new culture. It is designed to augment the predeparture materials you will receive as you prepare to leave for your term abroad. You cannot be too prepared for an education abroad experience. You will find that once you arrive in your host country, you will discover new things about yourself, about new friends on the program, and about the new culture in which you are immersed...things you cannot learn from a book. This booklet is not a comprehensive guide to understanding sex or sexuality abroad or a substitute for proper sex health education, but rather a jumping off point for your own research.

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**CULTURAL CONCEPTS OF SEX AND SEXUALITY**

**Understanding Culture**

Living in a new culture is exciting but not without challenges. Thinking about sex and what it means in a new culture is even more complex because our assumptions about sexuality are informed by our existing cultural framework. But what exactly is culture? There is no one universal definition for culture as it means many things to different people. For our discussion we can define culture as the behaviors, norms, and values that are commonly held by people of a community, region, country, religious group, or other like group. Culture has many layers, and many factors contribute to a given culture's attitudes about sex and sexuality. Culture is often referred to as an iceberg, a term originally coined by Dr. Elise Hamayan, former director and special consultant for the Illinois Resource Center. To better understand her analogy, imagine how only a small part (the tip) of an iceberg is visible above the water and the vast majority is invisible. It's easy to make assumptions about a culture based on what is visible—but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Some visible parts of culture include dress, food, language, literature, and art. But it's the invisible traits of a culture that will tell you the most about the attitudes about sex and its roles in your host culture. These traits may include concepts of self, social interaction patterns, familial roles and responsibilities, concept of personal space, notions of modesty, definition of sin, concepts of friendships, how emotions are handled, and concepts of beauty. So how a culture approaches the idea of sex and sexuality is learned through many different, complex factors.

**The Role of Sex and Sexuality in Host Cultures**

We often base our assumptions about a culture's attitudes toward sex and sexuality on what is visible. Let's use the culture of the United States as an example. If you only based your assumptions about sexual behaviors in the United States on what you saw in the media, television, and observed in how we dress, you might have some pretty strong ideas about what constitutes the role of sex and sexuality in the United States. Think for a minute about some of the most
extreme examples of sexual behaviors on television, for example. If this was your only basis for understanding U.S. culture, you might think that all college students were like the cast members of MTV's "Real World." And while this may be true for some, it is certainly not true for all. Do you think shows like "Gossip Girl" or a reality TV dating game show accurately reflect you as a person? Do you think these programs define you and what you believe about sex and sexuality? In the same way, what you see on TV or read about your host culture is only one small part of what defines your host culture's attitudes about sex and sexuality. Using only the visible traits can perpetrate stereotypes about a culture that are only a small part of the picture. For example, watching telenovelas is not a good way to learn about how sex is perceived in Latin America. The real story is much more complex.

For the French, sex is a natural part of everyday life. It isn't hidden, but seen as something beautiful and natural. It is, however, a subject that you would mostly talk about with someone who is in your close social circle. The French have their private lives and their public lives. Talking about sexuality in a work setting or with people that you don't know is overstepping the bounds of others' private lives.

-Student, studied in France

Religion and Government
The roles of religion and government may play a role in understanding sex and sexuality in your new host culture.

This too, is only part of the story. For example, many countries have a predominant religion that plays a major part in why certain things seem okay and others are not. If you are going to study in an Islamic culture, the role of religion may shadow many external signs of attitudes toward sex and sexuality that are fairly straightforward. On the other hand, in a predominantly Roman Catholic country like Italy or Brazil, do not assume that the church's omnipresence is the only influence on how citizens of those countries think about premarital sex, birth control, and abortion.

Uganda was not nearly as conservative with regards to sexuality as I'd expected. In fact, its mainstream media was far more graphic in its discussion of sexuality than anything I had experienced in the United States.

-Student, studied in Uganda

In some Eastern countries the government allows or does not explicitly prohibit the sex trade, as in the Patpong area of Bangkok which is famous for its sex shows and brothels. But if you are studying in Thailand, you may find that the average person in Bangkok does not necessarily support or agree with what goes on in this infamous region of the city. You need to be aware of cultural norms because in some countries, even displays of mild affection, heterosexual or homosexual, can lead to legal problems. And in still others, public displays of affection can surprise even the most open-minded students.

SAFER SEX AND HEALTH MATTERS

Contraception, Preventive Measures, and STIs/STDs

No matter what your decisions about sex while studying abroad, be smart about it. You need to plan ahead for birth control/contraception and preventive measures to help protect against sexually transmitted infections and/or diseases (STIs/STDs) and HIV/AIDS. While you may think you’ve heard all this before, please read through the next section very carefully as this is information you need to consider as possible with your decisions.

You, and only you, can protect yourself. It is your responsibility, and one way you can do this is with a commitment to sexually responsible behaviors. Even if you choose not to be sexually active while abroad, you may still find this information helpful to friends or classmates you meet in your host country. What would you do if you or your partner became pregnant while abroad? Are you ready to be a parent or to deal with the emotional decision of terminating the pregnancy or finding adoptive parents? And while many STIs/STDs are treatable, some of them have no cure (including the world-wide pandemic of HIV and AIDS) and all will have some impact on your health. This isn’t meant to frighten but simply to give you the tools you need to protect yourself. Practicing safer sex is a sexually responsible behavior. Why use the term safer sex rather than safe sex—because there is no such thing as 100 percent safe sex. Even with proper and consistent use of reliable contraceptives and/or preventive measures, anytime you engage in sexual activity there is still a small risk of acquiring an STI/STD and of pregnancy for heterosexual contact. By practicing safer sex, you will greatly reduce your risk of pregnancy or acquiring STIs/STDs and HIV.

The health issue was not one I was comfortable broaching with my South African students because any discussion of health issues must include HIV/AIDS. One of my fellow volunteers had mentioned AIDS several weeks earlier and been met with silence. AIDS remains a predominantly black disease in South Africa, and the HIV/AIDS rate in Kayelitsha is estimated to be close to 30 percent. The harsh reality of the disease pervades people’s daily lives
Birth Control

The terms birth control and contraception are used interchangeably in this booklet to mean the prevention of pregnancy. There are many safe and reliable methods of birth control available to women today. Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a sexual and reproductive health care advocate and provider, lists some of the most common methods of birth control available to women, and in some cases to their partners:

- Abstinence
- Birth control implant (Implanon®)
- Birth control patch (Ortho Evra®)
- Birth control pill (oral contraceptive)
- Birth control vaginal ring (NuvaRing®)
- Birth control shot (Depo-Provera®)
- Birth control sponge
- Cervical cap ( FemCap®)
- Condom
- Diaphragm
- Emergency contraception (Morning After Pill/Plan B)
- Female condom
- IUD (intra-uterine device)
- Outercourse (non-penetrative sex)
- Spermicide

For a complete list and further reading on these contraceptives visit Planned Parenthood Federation of America’s Web site at www.plannedparenthood.org. To learn more about using one of these methods, see your doctor or the health clinic on your campus, or check the Planned Parenthood Web site to find a clinic near you.

Do remember that using birth control pills or other prescription birth control methods alone does not reduce the risk of contracting STIs/STDs or HIV. Combining use of these with use of a latex condom gives the most secure protection against infection.

For women taking oral contraceptives—the pill—or using any other method of prescription contraceptives, talk to your doctor, your insurance company, and in some cases, the company providing your insurance while abroad to see if it’s possible to obtain enough supplies of your contraceptives to take with you. If not, you will have to research to see if your preferred contraceptive will be available in your host country through a local doctor or pharmacist. Your education abroad adviser or local on-site staff may have information on some additional resources for you. Mailing your regular dose of birth control can impact your overall health so you really need to research this before you go abroad.

In China, where there is a strict one-child policy, there seems to be very little knowledge of preventive birth control. The main forms of birth control in use are abortion and emergency ‘morning-after’ pills. . . . In my experience, it was difficult to even locate hormonal birth control pills.

Preventive Measures

Other than abstaining from intercourse, when used properly, condoms (sometimes called “male” condoms) are the most reliable method of preventing STIs/STDs, HIV, and pregnancy. Most condoms are made of latex or polyurethane (plastic) and come in all colors, flavors, textures, and sizes. Plan to take condoms with you, and you can share them with your classmates and friends even if you don’t use them on your trip abroad. In many developed countries, latex condoms are widely available and are generally reliable. However, while condom production and packaging in the United States is monitored by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for quality standards and reliability, this may or may not be the case in all the countries you may spend time in. Also, condoms are lightweight and easy to pack so why not take them along? If you need instructions on how to use a condom, or education about the different types of condoms available, here are a few resources to get you started:

- Your home campus health clinic
- American Social Health Association: www.ashastd.org/
- Mayo Clinic Men’s Health: www.mayoclinic.com/health/condoms/HQ00463
- Planned Parenthood Federation of America: www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control/condom-10187.html#use

You may also encounter lambskin condoms. These are made from the intestinal membrane of the lamb and generally are not recommended for prevention of STIs/STDs and HIV. The membrane material of a lambskin condom may allow some fluids to pass through the surface, possibly spreading STIs/STDs or HIV. The most effective way to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections/diseases and HIV is the proper and consistent use of a latex condom. If you find you need to purchase these while abroad, turn to a reliable source on-site (such as your on-site staff) to ask where the best kind may be available. In developing regions, condoms may not be available or the reliability may be in question. Again, it’s always better to be prepared to plan to take some with you.

The use of a lubricant, depending on the kind, can make the use of a latex condom more or less reliable. It is imperative to use water-based lubricants. This may prevent condom breakage and will not degrade the quality of the condom. However, oil-based lubricants (such as petroleum jelly, hand lotion, etc.) are likely to cause the latex in the condom to break down and decrease its capacity for protection.

Regarding oral-vaginal and oral-anal sex, a dental dam is the most reliable way to prevent the contraction of STIs/STDs and HIV. For more information on dental dams, check out the University of Chicago’s Student Care Center fact sheet at: http://scc.uchicago.edu/pdf/library/Dental_Dams.pdf. For fellatio, the use of a latex condom is the most reliable method for prevention of the spread of STIs/STDs and HIV.
Contraception is widely available in Egypt, but there is little to no public sexual education during which correct contraceptive use is explained, so people often use it infrequently or incorrectly. Many men consider condom useemasculating, and some people I have spoken to consider any contraception, except under exceptional circumstances, to run counter to religious teachings.

—Student, studied in Egypt

STIs/STDs

Confused about the difference between a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and a sexually transmitted disease (STD)? The American Social Health Association Web site provides this brief explanation:

Diseases that are spread through sexual contact are usually referred to as "sexually transmitted diseases"—STDs for short. In recent years, however, many experts in this area of public health have suggested replacing STD with a new term—sexually transmitted infection, or STI.

Why? The concept of "disease," as in STD, implies a clear medical problem, usually some obvious signs or symptoms. But in truth several of the most common STDs have no signs or symptoms in the majority of persons infected. Or they have mild signs and symptoms that can be easily overlooked. So the sexually transmitted virus or bacteria can be described as creating "infection," which may or may not result in "disease." This is true of chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, and human papilloma virus (HPV), to name a few. (www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_statistics_v5.cfm)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2007 STD Surveillance Report, there are an estimated 19 million new cases of STIs in the United States each year (http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats07/trends.htm). The American Social Health Association cites that one in two sexually active persons will contract an STI/STD by age 25 (http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_statistics.cfm). While these statistics refer to cases in the United States, this is relevant because you are just as likely to contract an STI/STD while abroad as you are at home; and in some regions of the world, you may be more likely to be infected.

Some of the most common STIs in the United States and abroad include:

- Chancroid
- Chlamydia
- Crabs (pubic lice)
- Gonorrhea
- Hepatitis
- Herpes
- HIV and AIDS
- HPV
- Scabies (mites)
- Syphilis
- Vaginitis/Trichomoniasis

With many STIs/STDs, you will be asymptomatic (displaying no obvious symptoms) so it's a good idea to have regular STI/STD screenings as part of your overall physical with your doctor. If you think you may have contracted an STI/STD while abroad, contact your local/on-site staff to find a clinic or treatment center. To learn more about the symptoms and characteristics of these STIs/STDs, visit the following Web sites:

- American Social Health Association: www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_overview.cfm
- Go Ask Alice! Columbia University's Health Q&A Internet Service: www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/Cat7.html
- National HIV and STD Testing Resources www.hivtest.org/
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Section on STDs www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm.

I lived in a large city in Mexico when I learned that I needed to be tested for a common STI. Only two of eight hospitals in the city could test me for it. The tests thankfully came back fine, but had they not, I am not confident I would have received sound information about treatment. STIs are not as widely known or talked about in Mexico. The STI problem in Mexico is reportedly growing due to people (Americans and Mexicans) traveling from the United States into Mexico. However, I'm sure numbers of STIs recorded in Mexico are affected by the fact that testing is hard to come by.

—Student, studied in Mexico

Alcohol and Date Rape Drugs

Many education abroad professionals speculate that the majority of the problems—disciplinary, academic, personal, and emotional—that happen to students abroad are related to the abuse of alcohol. This is particularly relevant to this discussion since alcohol may alter your ability to make smart decisions about your personal safety and sexual health and may put you at risk of being drugged with date rape drugs.

Follow Cultural Cues

It's important to obey the laws of your host country as well as any countries you travel to during your education abroad term. In some countries, the legal drinking age is lower than it is in the United States; in other countries—in particular many Muslim countries—alcohol is prohibited by law. Similarly, recreational drug use may be permitted in some countries abroad (such as the use of hashish and marijuana in the Netherlands) but may carry serious legal penalties in other countries.
Know in advance what the laws are because if you break the law, you will be responsible for the penalty imposed by that nation. The U.S. embassy cannot bail you out and ignorance of the law is not accepted as an excuse for breaking it.

Just like when you’re at home, alcohol and drug use can impact your sexual health abroad, intoxication can lead you to have unprotected sex, to hook up with people you wouldn’t normally, and to make decisions that will put you at risk for physical or sexual assault.

You may find that in many countries abroad, attitudes and behaviors about alcohol use are different than your own values. In countries where social drinking is more common than it is the United States, it may help to take your cues from how the locals use alcohol. You may find that in many countries, attitudes about binge drinking or being drunk are different than they may be at home. In some cultures, while drinking alcohol is a significant part of the social and familial activities, rarely do the locals drink to excess. And in other cultures, you may find binge drinking is common—but keep in mind you need not feel compelled to keep up. As a guest in your host country, being intoxicated in public may be frowned upon and most certainly will make you stand out—but not in a good way. In many cultures, the rules for what is acceptable behavior for locals and what is acceptable behavior for visitors (including education abroad students) may be different. It’s a bad idea to do anything that singles you out as a target for anyone. If you do go out drinking, make sure you stay with a group of friends and don’t let anyone go off alone with a stranger. There is wisdom in the old phrase “safety in numbers.” Take care of each other when you are all out together.

I always thought I could drink with the best of them, but it turns out I may have been wrong. One drink led to another and another...someone else had control of me, and to this day I’m not sure what happened but I’m pretty sure I was violated.

—Student, studied in Ireland

Keep in mind that even if you regularly drink alcohol, you should know your own limits when it comes to alcohol consumption. Your tolerance for alcohol may be different for you in a new situation with different types of alcohol than you are accustomed to drinking. In many alcoholic beverages abroad, including beer, wine, and liquor, the alcohol content is higher than it is in the United States so you may consume less but become intoxicated more quickly. Sudden intoxication may also be a sign that you have been drugged.

Date Rape Drugs
There are four major types of date rape drugs:

- Rohypnol (Roofies)
- GHB (Liquid X)
- Ketamine Hydrochloride (K, Special K, Vitamin K)
- MDMA (Ecstasy or X).

These drugs have been dubbed date rape drugs because they can cause blackouts or periods of memory loss that follow the ingestion of the drug combined with alcohol. Victims of these drugs often wake up with a strange sensation of having been sexually violated, occasionally with visible signs of rape, such as bruises or other injuries, but with no memory of the events leading up to the attack or of the attack itself. There have been reports of these drugs used on both men and women.

How can you protect yourself? Knowledge and awareness! Find out what date rape drugs are common in your host country and what effects they have. If you are at a party and see someone “dosing” a drink, leave immediately and contact your on-site staff for advice on what to do next.

Consider bringing your own drinks. If you are going to a party, take your own drinks with you whenever possible will both protect you and help you be a thoughtful guest all at the same time!

Don’t accept drinks from anyone other than a bartender or server. If someone offers you a drink from the bar at a club or party, go with them to the bar to order your drink, watch the drink being poured, and carry the drink yourself. Always open your own drinks if they are offered by someone at a party, and don’t share or exchange drinks with anyone. Don’t drink anything that has an odd taste, smell, or odor. Watch out, in particular, for a salty or bitter taste, excessive foam, or unexplained residue.

NEVER leave your drink unattended. If you go to the restroom or to make a phone call, take your drink with you. If you get up to dance, finish your drink or take it with you. A friend watching your drink can easily be distracted, so if your drink has been left unattended then throw it away regardless of what it cost. It’s not worth the risk.

Party safely in numbers. Check in with your friends every 20 minutes or by using some other plan. Watch your friends for signs of over-intoxication. If someone appears overly intoxicated, gets sick after drinking, passes out and is difficult to awaken, seems to be having difficulty breathing, or is behaving uncharacteristically, do what’s needed to ensure your friend’s safety.

People who have been drugged can appear extremely drunk, with slurred speech, poor coordination, and bloodshot eyes despite drinking little alcohol. If you are with someone you think has been drugged, contact your on-site staff immediately for help. Someone who has been drugged is usually not aware anything has happened to them until the effects of the drug wear off.

Signs that you may have been drugged

- You feel more intoxicated than usual after drinking within your normal tolerance level.
- If you wake up very hung over, feeling “fuzzy,” experiencing memory loss either in small or large gaps, or if you remember taking a drink but don’t remember what happened after that.
- If you feel as though someone has had sex with you but you can’t remember any or all of what happened.
If you feel violated in any way or have strange bruises or body aches that you can’t explain.

If it happens to you
- Get to a safe place.
- Ask for help immediately.
- Ask a friend you can trust to stay with you and assist you in getting the help you need.
- Contact your on-site staff or other emergency contact. Depending on the locale, your on-site staff may advise you to call the authorities and get emergency medical care, which may include an examination and evidence collection. If you do receive emergency medical care, a urine sample may be taken to test for the presence of the drugs. In addition, you may need to preserve as much physical evidence as possible—do not urinate, shower, bathe, or throw away the clothing you were wearing.
- Consult your on-site staff for counseling resources and if possible a rape crisis center for information and support. If not available abroad, seek counseling on your return home.

You should never be afraid to go to your on-site staff for assistance. They are there to help, not to judge. Your safety and well-being is most important so don’t keep things to yourself in fear that you’ll get in trouble for partying with friends and drinking too much. Don’t be afraid to speak up and ask for help.

**Relationships and Dating Abroad**

Dating is a fun way to meet new people, both on your education abroad program and within your host culture. Talk with the on-site staff as well as with other students about what some of the norms are for dating in your host culture. Our assumptions about meeting people and dating are informed by our cultural framework. In any culture, there are unspoken rules—cultural norms—that guide the way romantic partners interact that you don’t know about unless you ask. In many cultures, dating is done in groups and individual dating does not take place until the relationship is quite serious. And sex may or may not be a part of a dating relationship. As you can imagine there are many possibilities for miscommunication and confusion. Add in another language, and the chances for misunderstanding are compounded. However, if you learn a little bit about how things are done, a relationship can add even more fun to your term abroad.

Dating experiences abroad may provide some of your most colorful stories from your experience. In some developing countries where poverty and oppression is a fact of daily life, education abroad students from the United States—both men and women—have shared stories about the many marriage proposals they received while studying abroad. This may be hard to believe, but it really is not uncommon in certain parts of the world. Stereotypes about the United States may contribute to this. As a culture, the United States is seen as an affluent people living easy, comfortable lives. For many in the United States this stereotype does not reflect their realities, but in comparison to many other cultures most of us are indeed quite fortunate.

Some of you may be in romantic relationships during your education abroad term. It can be hard on a relationship when one partner goes away for the adventure of a lifetime and the other stays home, but don’t let this hinder your experiences. You can meet new people, explore new places, and have great memories to share with your partner when you return home. Be sure to take advantage of your short time abroad. You may regret it later if you realize at the end of your term abroad that you spent the entire time talking to your partner on the phone or on Facebook instead of savoring new experiences in your host culture.

Occasionally, partners will choose to study abroad together. This can be a wonderful experience for the two of you to share, but be sure that you individually meet people and make new friends outside of your relationship with each other and immerse yourselves in the local culture. You can maximize your time together by studying on different programs in different cities or staying in different neighborhoods in the same city. This will give you an even wider circle of friends and more places to explore, together or on your own.

Although the United States has come a long way as a society toward acceptance of interracial relationships, challenges and discrimination still do exist in this country for many interracial couples. This may or may not be the case in your host culture. Some cultures are more accepting of interracial couples, and in others you may be the subject of cruel words and behavior. It is helpful to know about these challenges in advance so you are better prepared to cope.

*Even without a language barrier there are inevitable challenges with education abroad relationships. I was fluent in Japanese and my boyfriend could speak English; our communication was excellent. . . . I was there for a year . . . going back to the U.S. constantly loomed over the relationship and was the source of much stress. He became extremely possessive of my time and it greatly influenced my experience and ability to take advantage of all that my time abroad could have offered.*

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*Student, studied in Japan*
Group Dynamics

If you’re on what is called an “island” program—a program made up mainly of U.S. students studying and living together—think about what it will mean if you decide to go out with or hook up with another classmate on the program. This could be a wonderful opportunity to find a new partner and have an even better time while you are abroad. But if it’s not a good match, remember that you will be with this person in your classes, on group excursions, and in some cases, in the same housing. Think of it as high school all over again and remember what it was like to live in that kind of fishbowl. This could definitely be awkward or uncomfortable because it usually doesn’t take long for everyone to figure out the two of you made a connection. If you’re okay with this, go for it. If not, you might want to wait until you get to know everyone in the group and just a little better before letting relationships (or lust) and the excitement of the moment take over and make a decision you might regret later.

Sex and Your Emotions

Your sexual health and sexual behaviors while abroad can impact your emotions, mental health, and overall well-being. Living in a new culture can be a stressful experience that can add additional strain. Starting any new relationship, sexual or otherwise, can affect how you feel about yourself and experience abroad.

Additionally, if you have had previous challenges with depression or anxiety, you may find that studying abroad can bring up these old feelings of depression or anxiety. The same can be true if you’ve ever had an eating disorder or a problem with drugs or alcohol abuse. Know that you are not alone and there is help available. Talk to your on-site staff or to your advisers back at home for local resources to help you through the challenging times.

Check out these Web sites for more information:

- Mental Health America Beck to Campus Web site
  www.mhha.org/go/backtocampus

- Mental Health America mpower Web site
  www.mpoweryouth.org/ir/index.html

Date Rape, Sexual Assault, and Dating Violence

A very real part of thinking about sex abroad is being aware of the realities of sexual violence, including date rape, sexual assault, and dating violence. Sexual violence refers to any type of sexual activity where consent is not given. Not all types of sexual violence include physical contact—sexual harassment, threats, intimidation, and spying or peeping, while not physical, may be considered sexual violence. In the United States and many other countries, sexual violence is a crime.

Sexual violence can happen to anyone regardless of gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, or religion. The Rape Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) estimates that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men have been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. Many people believe that most sexual assaults are committed by strangers; the reality is that it is more likely to be someone you know—a friend, date, neighbor, or relative—rather than a stranger. In fact, RAINN estimates that 73 percent of all rapes are committed by someone the victim knows (www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims).

Minimize the Risks

It is important to remember that sexual violence is never your fault. Sexual violence is violence and is not sex. It happens for the same reasons other types of violence occur and is not driven by sexual desire. Some ways to minimize your risk factors for becoming a victim of sexual violence are:

- Drink in moderation and don’t take drugs. Being intoxicated can make you a target for predators because of impaired judgment. If you are drinking in excess, make sure you are with friends and keep track of each other.

- If you are feeling vulnerable, make sure you are with friends and keep track of each other.

- If someone is pressuring you, trust your instincts. You should never feel comfortable with, and remember no means no! If you feel cornered by someone, look for a way to get out of the situation . . . a door, a window, any route that gets you away and toward safety.

- Be aware of your surroundings at all times. Walk confidently and act like you know where you’re going, even if you don’t. Avoid poorly lit, deserted areas and try not to walk alone, especially at night. If you do need to walk alone, know the emergency number for your host country (it is not 911 as it is here in the United States). If walking alone and wearing headphones, only use one ear for your headphones so you can hear and be aware of what is going on around you.

- If you are approached and think you are at risk of an attack, run as fast as you can in the other direction. Yell, scream, do whatever you need to do to draw attention to the situation and get help.

- If you do become a victim, contact your on-site staff immediately for assistance and advice about what to do next. Do not shower or discard any of the clothing you had on during the assault. Your on-site staff may be able to direct you to crisis services and possibly with the authorities. If available, seek counseling and remember it is not your fault. It is the fault of the person who attacked you. Counseling may not be available while abroad but it will be available to you when you return home. Your home campus health clinic or counseling office can provide additional resources.


When traveling with a group, I have always taken a dose of Plan B with me (and let the other students and trip leaders know that I have it) in the unfortunate case of rape or a poor sexual decision. Pharmacueticals can be extremely different in other countries so one never knows what is available, particularly on short notice.

—Student, studied in France
Dating Violence

Abuse in romantic relationships can happen to anyone. If you are involved in a relationship abroad, you need to consider whether it is a healthy one built on respect, honesty, trust, and communication, or an unhealthy relationship where you feel that your partner does not treat you with respect, lies to you, or abuses you emotionally or physically. Physical abuse is something that should never be tolerated in a relationship. If you are being abused, seek help immediately from a trusted friend and your on-site staff. If your partner is coercing you to have sex against your will, it is rape and you do not have to be a victim. Don’t assume that if your partner assaults you that it is somehow okay or acceptable. It is never okay for someone to force you to have sex against your will.

Abuse can be inflicted emotionally as well. Emotional abuse by either partner can happen in any relationship and may be hard to recognize. If you feel that your partner is controlling, jealous, puts you down or insults you, or he or she is often critical of you, do not blame yourself. You are not to blame, and you do not need to change who you are to meet the standards of someone else. This is a sign of an unhealthy relationship. Ending this kind of relationship is not always easy, especially when far from home in your host culture. Seek counseling or talk to someone you trust if you need help to end the relationship.

For more information on date rape, sexual assault, and dating abuse, check out these Web sites:

- Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN): www.rainn.org/
- CDC Web site on Sexual Violence: www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/sexualviolence/index.html
- Men Can Stop Rape: www.mencanstoprape.org/index.htm
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center: www.nsvrc.org/
- Victim Assistance Online—An International Resource: www.vaoonline.org/

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR WOMEN AND MEN

According to Institute of International Education 2008 Open Doors Survey for education abroad, more than 65 percent of all education abroad students were women. Students, and especially women, from the United States are often subject to unique issues abroad, in part because of the rampant stereotypes that circulate about them in many countries as well as the different attitudes and cultural norms regarding gender roles in other cultures. As long as you go in with a lot of patience and an open mind, you can have the experience of a lifetime and learn more about yourself along the way.

Gender Roles and Stereotypes

Both women and men on education abroad programs may find that they are challenged by different gender roles in their host culture. In some cultures, women and men fill very traditional roles in society, especially in terms of marriage, family, and career choices. But a word of caution: don’t assume that your perceptions of the visible signs of gender roles define what it means to be a man or a woman in your host culture.

In Spain, for example, one cultural stereotype is that women are submissive in their interactions with men. However, you may not feel that this is true at all if you meet and spend time with some Spanish women! A common stereotype is that all women from the United States are promiscuous. Whether or not you are sexually active, it is doubtful you will feel this stereotype reflects who you are. It’s important to keep in mind that this concept of women from the United States does exist and you may encounter attitudes about this during your term abroad.

In other cultures, you may find that women and men dress more modestly than in the United States. This is certainly not true of every culture, but especially for women, you may find that how you dress sends signals about you that may not be true.

Sexual Harassment

Here in the United States our concept of sexual harassment is very different than it is in other parts of the world. What we consider sexual harassment may be part of the cultural norms of
how men (and other women) treat women and sometimes men in many other cultures. Although less common, men can be victims of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment abroad can take the shape of cat-calls, staring, gestures, and usually is more uncomfortable than unsafe. But note that sexual harassment can escalate to sexual assault. If you feel you are being harassed, ignore it and move on as quickly as possible—if you feel unsafe, seek help immediately.

Safety Tips and Common Sense

- Trust your instincts and intuition. If something feels off, wrong, or strange, get out; move on, whatever is appropriate. Your inner voice is usually right.
- Be firm and assertive when you say no. Being clear and direct will help make sure you are understood.
- If you are traveling alone, try to get a room above the first floor for extra security. If someone is with you in the elevator and plans to get out on the same floor, select a different floor if the person makes you feel nervous or uncomfortable. Then you can go back to your own floor on your own. Also, put a business card from the hotel in your pocket or bag. If you're out and about and get lost, showing the card to a police officer or cab driver will make your return easier, especially if there's a language barrier.
- Always keep your doors and windows locked, whether you are in your regular housing or in a hotel while traveling.
- Study a map before you take off so that once on the street you know where you are headed. Try to avoid struggling with a map or looking like a tourist in front of others because this makes you a target for petty thieves and criminals.
- Special notes for women:
  - Take your cues from local women. Look at how they dress and interact with strangers. Of course, you want to be able to express your own individuality, but be mindful that the way you dress may attract unwanted attention from men and women alike.
  - Don't respond to any catcalls that you receive. Just walk on.
  - If you have to wait somewhere alone, like a train station, stay near other women or families. This may help keep you from being harassed or approached.

If you are ... in London and you are a female, the one thing to be aware of is mini cabs... small cars that pose as cabs but are illegally operated. If you use one, are a girl, and are alone, the possibility of getting sexually assaulted is tragically high. I had more friends than I would like to remember have traumatic experiences of having to fight off cab drivers who drove them... and tried to assault them in the back of their cab. So why do people take mini cabs at all? ... they are a lot cheaper than normal black cabs and when you are spending time in one of the most expensive cities in the world saving a few bucks to get home at the end of the night can look pretty tempting.

—Student, studied in United Kingdom

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED STUDENTS

All of the information provided in this guide applies to every education abroad student. However, if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT), or are exploring your sexual or gender identity, there are some additional factors to consider when planning for your education abroad experience.

What Does It Mean to Be Out Abroad?

In almost every corner of the world there are GLBT individuals and allies, but the day-to-day reality for GLBT individuals will vary greatly from region to region. In some cultures you may find that expressing the reality of your sexual and/or gender identity is very open and supported by the local community. In other parts of the world however, those who identify as GLBT are still a hidden part of society and being out may put you at risk for harassment or violence. In many of these cultures, GLBT social, romantic, and sexual interactions are carried out with extreme caution, and it may not be apparent to outsiders what is safe. It's important to know what the laws are and to use discretion. Sexual behaviors that are considered homosexual may be illegal in your host country, and in some cases, even the perception of homosexual activity may put you at risk for legal penalties, imprisonment, or death. Since you've already chosen an education abroad destination, it's likely that you've done some research on what it means to be out while in your host culture. An important point to keep in mind is that while studying abroad, you will be a guest in your host country. This means observing local customs and understanding the role GLBT culture has within your new host culture. This does not mean that you will have to pretend to be someone you are not; rather, to maintain your personal security you will need to be certain of what is safe and appropriate in your new culture as do all education abroad students.

Good resources for you are GLBT students and allies from your host culture. If your host culture does not
allow you the same freedom of expression you are used to at home (if indeed you have this freedom in your day to day experiences), the situation may require a little patience, respect, and understanding of cultural differences. Many people are afraid of what they do not understand, and you do not want to put yourself in an unsafe situation where your personal safety and security are at risk.

Homosexuality is illegal in Egypt and frowned upon by the society. People tend to cite religion (Islam and Christianity) as the main reason for their condemnation of homosexuals, and references to homosexuality in the media tend to be met with broad disgust and discomfort. Despite all this, homosexual activity in Egypt is frequent and foreign homosexual men with whom I have spoken usually have no problem finding Egyptian partners.

—Student, studied in Egypt

Some questions to think about when getting ready to study abroad include:

► What are my safety needs and perceptions, and how can they best be met? Is the program able to make special accommodations for students who request single rooms, private baths, or certain roommates?

► What are the host country’s cultural and local attitudes toward GLBT residents and visitors?

► What are police attitudes toward GLBT residents and visitors?

► What are the expectations of customary masculine and feminine social behavior and gender relations in the host country?

► What are the norms and behavioral expectations within GLBT communities in my host country?

► What may make the coming out process different in the host country compared to that of the United States?

► For transgendered individuals, are there particular medical or travel documentation needs that I need to discuss with my doctor or adviser before I go abroad?

(Adapted from the Michigan State University education abroad Web site: http://studyabroad.msu.edu/forms/glbt.html#Get)

**Coming Out While Abroad**

Many students find that going abroad provides a new opportunity to explore different parts of themselves and possibly different identities. Perhaps for the first time, you’re no longer identified by the people in your life. You can be whoever you want to be in a new atmosphere where no one identifies you as Pat’s girlfriend or Shawn’s brother or Sue’s daughter. This newfound freedom may lead you to want to try out different identities, and for some of you this may mean experimenting with your sexual or gender identity or even by coming out. For all of us, the process of knowing who we are and how we wish to identify ourselves is a journey. Your education abroad experience is part of that journey. If you do decide to come out while abroad, be sure to find and develop a good support network as you cope with the new changes this may bring to your life. You may also want to consider what this will mean for you at the end of your education abroad term when you return home. Again, a good support network to help you on your journey is crucial to your overall well-being and happiness.

There are international organizations that can help understand the different realities in other cultures for GLBT individuals, as well as to help you understand and cope with your own sexual and gender identity during your term abroad.

► NAFSA: Association of International Educators Rainbow SIG section for education abroad students: www.indiana.edu/~overseas/lesbigay/student.htm

► The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission: www.gilhr.org/

► The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association: www.ilga.org/

_The gay and lesbian parade in Sydney [Australia] was huge and everyone came out to celebrate. I didn’t feel like there is a negative stigmatism if someone is gay like there is in the United States._

—Student, studied in Australia
REACHING YOUR GOAL

After reading this booklet, you should have a better understanding of some of the issues related to sex, sexual health, and sexual behavior while abroad. The goal now is for you to explore some of these issues in greater depth on your own. Education abroad is considered by many students to be a once in a lifetime adventure. The idea of living abroad becomes surreal and it doesn’t seem possible that anything bad can happen to you during your experience. But the fact is that anything can happen to you—anywhere—at any time. To maintain your overall well-being and happiness while abroad, educate yourself and be prepared for anything. Have fun and be safe!

Education Abroad, Travel, and Student Resources

Always check with your on-campus health center, counseling office, and women’s center for additional services and info.

The Center for Global Education Student Study Abroad Safety Handbook
www.studentsabroad.com/

Columbia University's Health Q&A Internet Service Go Ask Alice!
www.goakalice.columbia.edu/

Journeywoman
www.journeywoman.com/

Mental Health America Back to Campus Web site
www.mhha.org/go/backtocampus

Mental Health America mpower Web site
www.mpoweryouth.org/index.html

NAFSA: Association of International Educators Rainbow SIG section for education abroad students
http://www.nafsa.org/member_services/ms/member_interest_groups/sig_rainbow

SAFETY Adaptation of Peace Corp Resources
www.globaled.us/peacecorps/introduction.html

United States Department of State Students Abroad
http://studentsabroad.state.gov/

Other Resources

American Social Health Association
www.asaastd.org/index.cfm

American Social Health Association, STD vs. STI
www.asaastd.org/learn/learn_statistics_vs.cfm

CDC Alcohol
www.cdc.gov/alcohol/index.htm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Section on STDs
www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm

CDC Sexual Health
www.cdc.gov/sexualhealth/

CDC Sexual Violence
www.cdc.gov/ViolencePreventionsexualviolence/index.html/CDC

Women's Health
www.cdc.gov/women/

The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission
www.iglhr.org/

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
www.ilia.org/

Mayo Clinic Men's Health
www.mayoclinic.com/health/condoms/HQ00463

Men Can Stop Rape
www.mencanstoprape.org/index.htm

National HIV and STD Testing Resources
www.hivtest.org/

National Prevention Information Network's STDs Today
www.cdcnpin.org/scripts/std/std.asp

Pennsylvania Coalition against Rape
www.pcar.org

National Sexual Violence Resource Center
www.nsvrc.org/

Planned Parenthood Federation of America
www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control/condom-10187.html#fuse

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)
www.rainn.org/

Sexual Harassment in College Students
www.globaled.us/safeti/vln2_newport.html

University of Chicago Student Care Center Fact Sheet on Dental Dam

Victim Assistance Online – An International Resource
www.ovaonline.org/
MORE STORIES FROM ABROAD

In Singapore, there seems to be complete avoidance of the topic of sex. I became really good friends with a couple of local Singaporeans, and amazingly, sex was never brought up.

—Student, studied in Singapore

In Spain, there is lots of kissing. Even if you had just met a person, it was almost expected and when you said ‘no,’ it was like a foreign word.

—Student, studied in Spain

Homosexuality was definitely one of the biggest differences I experienced between Thailand and the United States. In Thailand, people are so open about it and so many people I met were either gay or bi. Transvestites were also very prevalent.

—Student, studied in Thailand

Homosexuality isn’t really accepted in America or China, but I would say it’s more taboo in China. Unlike in America, where homosexuality is frequently declared immoral, in China it’s simply not talked about.

—Student, studied in China

I did discuss sex (in Uganda) with local friends and my oldest host brother and sister, but it was always in veiled terminology. My host sister in particular used to talk to me about a boyfriend she had at school, but she never called him her boyfriend. In front of her parents because she was afraid they would pressure her to marry him.

—Student, studied in Uganda

In Amsterdam, there was far more acceptance of homosexuality and just the general idea that everyone is entitled to have their sexual desires fulfilled. BDSM, role playing and various fetishes all were thoroughly supported.

—Student, studied in the Netherlands

I got my nose pierced in Brazil and my host mother was shocked. She was a teacher and said, ‘I can’t take you to my school anymore—people will think that you’re a lesbian.’

—Student, studied in Brazil

I got a little scared when I was simply making conversation with a guy in the hostel and he suggested we “hook up” later that evening. I thought to myself “this guy’s a bit forward” so I mentioned it to my other Irish girlfriend. It turned out that in Ireland to “hook up” simply means to meet up with someone—as in friendship.

—Student, studied in Ireland

Walking on the street in Spain (which I did a lot of) I came to expect being called “guapa” (beautiful) all the time, by males aged 8, 10, 8, or anywhere in between. However, topless on the beach, as was the custom in that area, men would appear to ignore you.

—Student, studied in Spain

This guy seemed so nice and we had been chatting online through an online dating site a few weeks before we went abroad. Once I got off the plane I was so excited to meet him. A few drinks later and I’m lying in the arms of this person I hardly knew. More hours later he leaves my apartment but also leaves something behind with me to live with... an STI—don’t just assume that all people are nice.

—Student, studied in Ireland

The stories highlighted in red are by U.S. students and young adults and are reprinted with the permission of Glimpse, a nonprofit organization devoted to sharing stories about real life abroad, www.glimpse.org. Those stories highlighted in blue were shared with the author by colleagues and former students.

ABOUT NAFSA

NAFSA: Association of International Educators is an association of individuals worldwide advancing international education and exchange. NAFSA serves its members, their institutions and organizations, and others engaged in international education and exchange and global workforce development. NAFSA sets and upholds standards of good practice; provides training, professional development, and networking opportunities; and advocates for international education.

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