

# MENTAL HEALTH & STUDY ABROAD



**One in five young adults experiences a mental health** condition, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. It stands to reason that many of them will participate in education abroad programs during college.

“Students experience the same types of mental health challenges abroad as they do at home,” says Barbara Lindeman, Director of Study Abroad and Assistant Director of the International Center at the University of Missouri. These range from anxiety disorders and depression to eating disorders and addiction. However, such mental health conditions don’t preclude students from having a positive study abroad experience.

“Limited research indicates that students with documented histories of mental health concerns tend to succeed in study abroad just as well as their peers who have not disclosed or don’t have mental health concerns,” says Dru Simmons, International Risk Manager at The Ohio State University.

It behooves universities to help students with mental health concerns prepare for—and succeed at—their education abroad programs. The first step is encouraging disclosure.

UNIVERSITIES CREATE SYSTEMS THAT HELP STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS SUCCESSFULLY PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATION ABROAD PROGRAMS.



TERRADOTTA

# ENCOURAGING STUDENT DISCLOSURE



“Getting students to disclose any mental health conditions before they go abroad is ideal so we can put in place the resources they need,” says Lindeman. “We can help make appropriate arrangements so they continue to receive the care and medications that they need to be successful in a study abroad program.”

At Ohio State, students apply and are admitted to study abroad programs without any reference to their overall health history. Once admitted, students have two primary options for disclosing any issues:

- **A health information form** – Students list any current health concerns and conditions they are managing, as well as medications they take. The confidential information is routed to and reviewed by the medical director at the Office of Student Life, Student Health Services. “She considers where the student is going abroad and assists determining if the student’s health history might raise any concerns for travel based on a variety of factors – the time they are traveling, the location and so on,” says Simmons. Then the medical director can provide necessary resources to help the student.

- **An accommodations and disabilities form**

– This open disclosure form allows students to share a variety of concerns for which they might require special accommodations, ranging from a vegan diet to medical allergies. “It also provides students the option to list disabilities documented with the Office of Student Life Disability Services and if they are seeking accommodations prior to or during travel,” says Simmons. “Anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder—these and others are qualifying conditions that students can seek accommodations for with the office.”

Students also can choose the extent of disclosure. For example, they may share concerns only with health services and a designated person in the study abroad office, who share the information only in the case of an emergency. Or students may want program directors to know, too. “We had a student with a severe anxiety disorder ask that we disclose a condition to the study abroad program director on site because the student wanted that person to know and help set up onsite support services and ongoing counseling,” says Lindeman. “It depends on how widely the student is comfortable disclosing.”



# PUTTING HELPFUL MEASURES IN PLACE

Once students have disclosed any mental health issues, there are several steps universities can take to assist students. Lindeman and Simmons recommend the following:

- **Build relationships with other campus experts** – “Know what resources are available on your campus, and work with people in your disability center and counseling center to develop materials and help students set up plans for managing their mental health conditions abroad before they leave,” says Lindeman, who recently co-authored the NAFSA publication, “Addressing Mental Health Issues Affecting EA Students.”



- **Include a mental health section in your pre-departure materials** – Ohio State’s pre-departure health and safety website encourages students to discuss any health concerns in advance with mental health professionals, develop a proactive plan to manage their health abroad, ensure that any necessary prescriptions are legal and available in countries where they are traveling, and arrange continuing care while abroad.

- **Line up international resources** – Before you send students to a location, make sure you have investigated the healthcare and mental health counseling resources available,” says Lindeman. “Know where there are reputable English speaking counselors so if students do manifest mental health problems while they are abroad, you can direct them to the appropriate care.”



- **Train faculty and program directors** – The International Center, Office of General Counsel, and Risk and Insurance Management Office at the University of Missouri provide health, safety and security training for faculty and staff leading study abroad programs that includes specific guidelines for assisting students who manifest a mental health issue while abroad. The university also provides a field guide for program directors that includes health guides for students with stress, depression, eating disorders and other common issues. The health guides feature signs for each condition and step-by-step directions for helping students.

- **Offer a supplemental insurance plan** – All Ohio State students who travel abroad on a program officially administered or sponsored by the university are enrolled in a supplemental insurance plan. Ohio State recently amended the plan to ensure it covers pre-existing conditions and removes caps on in-patient and out-patient mental health care. “We removed any exclusions related to care regarding self-harm or substance use or abuse, so any student that has an injury, illness or health concern related to mental health care can access the appropriate resources,” says Simmons.



- **Offer support from your campus counselors** – “Have emergency response plans and 24-hour access to campus experts, so if something does go wrong you can easily contact your colleagues on campus and connect them with students,” says Lindeman. Ohio State is currently working with a professional organization to streamline counseling services offered outside of the on-campus counseling center’s standard hours. “The people who answer the phone will understand Ohio State policies and protocols so they can respond to the student,” says Simmons. “In addition, students will have the comfort of talking to someone who is familiar with their home culture and how our culture treats mental health.”

Above all, says Simmons, it’s important to remember that your goal is to support students with mental health conditions who want to study abroad, not find ways to exclude them from programs out of fear that they might not be successful. Your mission is to set up all study abroad participants to thrive.

“Many students who have ongoing mental health considerations are excellent at managing their own health and have been successfully managing these conditions for a long time,” adds Lindeman. “They know what they need. We just need to provide them with the resources to take care of themselves while abroad.”



TERRADOTTA

#### ABOUT TERRA DOTTA

Our mission at Terra Dotta is to offer the very best products and services in higher education software. We are committed to delivering a user-experience that transforms the way our clients operate and engage with their constituents. We accomplish this through the continual deployment of best-in-class technology, and the focus we place on mutual trust in each and every one of our business relationships. These values form the Terra Dotta difference.

For additional information please visit [www.terradotta.com](http://www.terradotta.com)