

Summer 2019

Promoting safety and wellness while abroad through continuous reflection and peer education

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Recommended Citation

Pai, G. (2019). Promoting safety and wellness while abroad through continuous reflection and peer education. *The Global Impact Exchange: A Quarterly Publication of Diversity Abroad*, (Summer 2019). Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.diversitynetwork.org/resource/resmgr/gie_summer_2019.pdf

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A Quarterly Publication of Diversity Abroad

SUMMER 2019 EDITION

**BEING _____ ABROAD:
HEALTH, SAFETY, AND
SECURITY CONCERNS FOR
DIVERSE STUDENTS**



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PROMOTING WELL-BEING AND SAFETY ABROAD: THE ROLE OF CONTINUOUS REFLECTION AND PEER EDUCATION BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER TRAVEL

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Standard pre-departure safety and security training for study abroad programs in higher education consists of sessions on topics like health and safety issues, conduct expectations, insurance, registration with the State Department, crisis management and response, and having clear communication plans (McCarthy, 2016). Increasingly, trainings on the Clery Act and Title IX legislation are also mandatory components of pre-departure orientations (Forum on Education Abroad, 2017). Intercultural trainings, which could include addressing topics such as gender and other cultural norms, also work towards increasing student safety while abroad, particularly for diverse or underrepresented groups like students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students.

As the overall number of U.S. students studying abroad continue to increase (Institute for International Education, 2018), resources abound on everything from how to create a culture of inclusivity, to countless student guides on studying abroad. Rather than a checklist of safety tips or “top-tens,” this article details a promising approach towards supporting the safety and wellness of first-generation, community college students of color as they study abroad. This is accomplished by following one simple, guiding philosophy: using a peer-to-peer model alongside engaging students in continuous reflection. Such a model ensures that any training is naturally grounded in the students themselves, as well as the real experiences of similar peers who preceded them. This model is particularly powerful for schools serving underrepresented and nontraditional student

populations, who might face challenges in finding resources tailored to supporting marginalized student populations in being _____ abroad.

School context

Stella and Charles Guttman Community College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution in New York City where 86% of students are Hispanic or Black, 72% are Pell recipients, and 43% are first-generation college students. Our distinctive Global Guttman program fully funds students—most of whom have never traveled abroad—to participate in short-term, faculty-led travel experiences. Since 2014, over 140 Global Guttman students have navigated 4 of the 7 continents—including countries such as Germany, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Belize, Chile, and China.

About the program

Global Guttman's three-phase study abroad model entails: 1) preparation, 2) immersion, and 3) community education. Central to all three phases is students' engagement in continuous, individual and collective reflection through writing, blogging, videos, and photography. Each of these phases is further described below:

Near-peer Preparation

Like with other stages of Global Guttman's study abroad model, reflection underpins how students are prepared to travel. Pre-departure orientations on Title IX, risk management, wellness, and intercultural awareness incorporate pre-trip reflection activities such as writing a letter to themselves that is then returned to them after the trip, and answering pre-trip reflection questions that are aligned to the learning outcomes delineated in the AAC&U's Global Learning VALUE rubric (AAC&U, 2018). However, what makes Guttman's pre-trip trainings truly unique is that they are all grounded in a near-peer model. Near-peers are those who are similar in age, ethnicity, gender, interests, and past or present experiences (Murphey & Arao, 2001). Near-peer past participants are invited to be on the student Selection Committee during the interview phase. Moreover, nearly all pre-departure trainings feature panels of alumni participants who are diverse in nature, and can collectively answer questions, share experiences, and field concerns as near-peers who can speak directly to issues that students might face while traveling abroad. For example, students of color participating in the Global Guttman China program revealed that the most helpful piece of cultural training they received was from a Black returned study abroad participant who shared his experience in China of being treated like a celebrity and being constantly

asked for picture-taking. Though anecdotal, incorporating near-peer models into pre-departure training provides students with real-life examples and experiences from those who most resemble them and are most likely to understand their experience of being _____ abroad.

Individual and Collective Reflective Immersion

During the trip, Global Guttman participants continue to engage in reflective exercises. Individually, students complete daily reflections that are posted to their personal ePortfolios. Collectively, students create an online travel blog that is shared with the larger college community and posted to the school's social media outlets. This regular journaling allows students to process their experiences, which is vital to maintaining their mental wellness while abroad. The shared travel blog also serves as a way to demonstrate the group's well-being in real time, as well as to potential future participants who often steer away from studying abroad because of safety concerns.

Integrative Reflection and Peer-to-peer Community Education

Upon their return, Global Guttman participants engage in post-trip reflections that are designed to parallel their pre-trip reflection. For example, a pre-trip reflection question designed to assess global self-awareness asks students to describe the ways in which their day-to-day life is connected to global issues. Upon return, students reflect on how this experience changed the way they think about their connection to global issues. This parallel design allows not only for assessment of change and growth but also for students to integrate their travel experiences and learning—a critical step underlying many of the high-impact educational practices (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Furthermore, the reflections scaffold students

towards leading a community education event where students compose presentations in multiple media (e.g., booklets, presentations, photo exhibit, videos, podcasts) to share their experiences with the community at large. Most importantly, the audience includes peers who were not afforded the opportunity to study abroad. Through sharing their experiences at community events, students are not only able to spread the program's impact on them to their peers but also able to inspire future participants to consider studying abroad.

Student feedback on the model

Qualitative survey data revealed students' positive responses to continuous reflection and the impact it had on their curiosity and personal growth. For instance, a first-year Dominican student reported, "I liked the individual reflection because it made me realize exactly how I feel about this trip." Another student shared: "every step pushes me to wanting to know more about new cultures." Students also overwhelmingly praised the near-peer model of training. A second-year student who had never traveled out of the US before shared, "I liked the information the students who went on the trip last year gave us. It was nice to hear first-hand experiences." An Asian student whose only previous travel experience included a service-learning trip to Costa Rica with his high school shared a similar sentiment: "I thought the panel discussion with past Global Guttman participants was very informative and they gave valuable advice. I wish we had a few more minutes to talk to the panelists."

Conclusion

This case demonstrates how guiding study abroad participants to complete individual and collective reflections on a continuous basis—pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip—can promote students' well-being throughout their travel experience. This is even more impactful when combined with learning from past participants who are most similar to them as near-peers, particularly for underrepresented students who face greater challenges but who often are not reflected in the health and safety training resources that exist. Finally, empowering current students to share their experiences upon their return expands access to study abroad by instilling in the minds of potential future participants that, no matter their background, they too can succeed in being _____ abroad.

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