

Creating a Successful Pre-Departure & On-Site Orientation Program

Short-term study abroad programs do not afford students the luxury of time to understand all that they may need to know about their host country. To enable students to make the most of their time overseas, they need to have as much advance preparation as possible. Of course, much of what students may learn in a pre-departure orientation meeting will not mean much to them until they are on-site. But if you, as faculty leader, have provided sufficient academic, logistical and cultural information, it will make sense to them once they have arrived. In addition to the expected benefit of increased student preparedness, solid pre-departure and on-site orientation programs can also help to reduce institutional liability. If it can also be documented that students were advised against certain behaviors, SF State will be in a much better position in any legal situation.

PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION

When planning a pre-departure orientation meeting for your students, please be careful not to assume they have any advance knowledge of the host country, culture or language. They may not have any idea how to go about obtaining a passport; the only visa they may know if a credit card; and some may not know that it is not safe to drink the water in some areas (and yes, that includes ice).

You may want to include the following information in your pre-departure orientation:

Logistical

- **The need for a passport, visas, and other essential documents should be explained.** Explain the process for obtaining a passport. If students already have passports, ask them to check the expiration date. If a visa is required, give students the necessary information about how to obtain one.
- **International travel arrangements should be spelled-out clearly in writing** by the travel agent or other service provider and shared with the students in writing, with extra copies for family & friends. Tell students what time to arrive at the airport and where to meet the group. Talk to them about security measures they are likely to experience in airports.
- **You may want to clearly spell-out in the course description exactly what is and is not included in the program costs** (i.e. housing, homestays, meals, etc.). If there is to be a homestay, students should be given as much information as possible about the host family, including family members' names and ages, and if available, the address and phone number. You may also want to encourage your students to bring hospitality gifts.
- **Students should be advised about how much additional cash will be required to cover meals not included in the program costs, recommended amounts for personal spending, additional travel, etc.** They should also receive advice on how to carry their funds (i.e. will a credit card work or do they need cash...U.S. dollars or local currency, etc.?).

- **Packing recommendations and airline luggage restrictions:** include a list of suggestions about appropriate clothing to bring, how many formal outfits (if any) should be taken, etc. Encourage the students to pack what they think they need and then walk at least four blocks with their fully loaded suitcase. If they cannot do it, they will need to lighten the load.
- **Phone and email/Internet services abroad:** advise students that access to these services may be more limited than in the U.S. If students buy phone cards, make sure that they know how to use the cards correctly. Students have been surprised to receive large phone bills from hotels despite the fact that they were using a pre-paid phone card. It is fine to visit an Internet café occasionally to touch base with home. But encourage students to spend their limited free time exploring the culture – better to take in one more museum than to spend an afternoon sending emails to friends! Also, students will be very interested in knowing if they will be able to use their cell phones while overseas to send/receive text messages as well as to make phone calls.....not only to each other but also to family and friends in the U.S. Some questions to consider include:
 1. Will WiFi be easily accessible in your host city/country? If so, where (only at the hotel, Internet café, Starbucks, etc.)?
 2. Should students purchase an international plan with their U.S. cell phone carrier or can they rely on WiFi service?
 3. Should they rent a cell phone in your host country (perhaps at the airport)? If so, what are the rates they will need to pay?
 4. Can they purchase a SIM card at the airport upon arrival in your host country and will that work with their cell phone? What are the costs?
 5. Should students bring a laptop computer?
 6. Will an iPad/tablet work overseas?

Please note that there are various smart phone apps that students can download that will allow them to make/receive Free text messages/phone calls to other who have also downloaded these same apps to their smart phones (Viber, Line, Whatsapp, Tango, to name a few). And, of course, there is always Skype and FaceBook! Keep in mind that these apps will only work if students have access to either cellular, Wi-Fi, or Internet connection. Encourage your students to do their homework regarding cell phone usage overseas well in advance of their trip!

- **Parental contact:** Advise students NOT to promise to call their parents the minute they arrive at their program site. Airline delays, problems with phone and Internet systems and just plain jetlag can interfere with a student's well-intentioned plan to phone home. This results in nervous parents and anxious calls to the SF State!

Academic Policies

- **As faculty leader, you will want to provide syllabi and class expectations,** a schedule of class meetings (before, during and after travel), and any on-site activities.
- **Grading and assessment policy:** like any course, expectations must be spelled-out clearly.
- **Policy to add/drop courses** after the program has begun (i.e. if a student wishes to withdraw from the course after the program has begun, what are the academic and financial penalties?).

- **Academic policies about plagiarism and disciplinary procedures** should be clearly articulated.

Health, Safety & Legal Issues

Although the Office of International Programs (OIP) will provide you and your students with a general “Health & Safety” orientation, you may want to also discuss the following issues of concern with your students as part of your pre-departure orientation meeting:

- **Inoculations** (if necessary) and requirements for medical examinations before departure.
- Precautions and recommended procedures for **transporting prescriptions** and over-the-counter medicines.
- **Explanation of how medical emergencies will be handled**, and the general availability of medical facilities in the host country.
- **Advice on how to keep oneself healthy** before, during and after travels; include information about “jetlag” and “traveler’s flu.”
- **Caution about depression and eating disorders and other medical conditions**; ask students to be open and honest about sharing medical information with you about such issues.
- **Risks of being sexually active** with other group members or with local people during the program.
- **The policy on alcohol and drug use abroad** should be discussed and should also be distributed separately in writing.
- **Health insurance coverage**: explain that students will need to purchase travel insurance through SFSU.
- **The list of emergency contacts and telephone numbers** can be printed on wallet-sized cards to ensure that students always know how to call for help.
- **Explain that students will need register with the U.S. State Department** (<http://www.travel.state.gov>). The State Department also publishes a number of pamphlets that include both country-specific recommendations as well as general travel advice for Americans traveling overseas.

Group/Team Building

- Short-term study abroad programs are very often intense experiences that require group cohesion and cooperation. During your pre-departure orientation meeting, you may want to discuss **issues around “group travel”** and the accompanying stress that this may put on students and their intergroup relationships. **Make sure that students understand that there may be times when the wishes of the individual might be sacrificed for the good of the group.**

- Encourage students to talk openly about their personal reactions, ideas, etc.; **discuss differences of opinion among group members fairly and openly**. This not only builds trust among students but also provides for great discussions about respect for different opinions, perspectives and viewpoints. **As faculty leader, you will want to foster an environment of trust and mutual support.**

Country/Culture Awareness

The U.S. State Department (<http://www.travel.state.gov>) has a wealth of country-specific information on their website that can be used to supplement any materials that may already want to share with your students concerning the people, culture, religion, politics, climate, language, etc. of your host country.

ON-SITE ORIENTATION

- The on-site orientation may be one of the most important moments of your study abroad program. Your orientation meeting will set the tone for the overseas experience your students are about to begin. A good orientation should address the practical issues as well as the cultural challenges the students are about to face. Your meeting makes everything real because the students are now (at last) in the host country and your task is to facilitate their transition to the new environment.
- While planning your on-site orientation, remember that certain practical issues should be addressed. You will, however, want to tailor your orientation to the specific type(s) of student(s) in your class, the length of your program, and the nature of the material being studied. Goals to keep in mind as you plan and prepare your pre-departure orientation meeting may include:
 1. Giving the program a solid beginning;
 2. Providing a strong foundation for your program;
 3. Establishing trust and respect among the students and yourself; and
 4. Preparing and informing the students for the weeks ahead.
- Also, try not to overwhelm your students with too much information at your on-site orientation. You may want to consider dividing your on-site orientation into several meetings over a period of a few days so that your students will have time to focus on the subject at hand. Remember, students will need time to get settled, as well as time to sleep and get over jetlag, before they can absorb information in an appropriate and timely fashion.

You may want to include the following information to our students upon arrival:

Arrival and Survival

- You may want to make arrangements for a group check-in upon arrival at your housing accommodation. This can facilitate tasks such as handing out items such as keys and linens, explaining rules, regulations, curfews, and security. It makes pointing out important facilities

such as kitchens, cafeterias, bathrooms and showers, laundry and Internet access much easier as well.

- Upon arrival and check-in, you may want to provide your students with the following written materials:
 1. Program obligations such as times and places of important first program meetings;
 2. A map of the area where they will be living (with pharmacy, ATM, police station, subway stop, and food shops clearly marked);
 3. Directions to and from the housing site and your various destinations/site visits;
 4. Information on how to call home/Internet use;
 5. Business card from your housing site

- A walking tour of the neighborhood is always useful and appreciated by the students. You may want to point out:
 1. Public transportation stops
 2. ATM machines
 3. Supermarkets
 4. Pharmacy
 5. Police station
 6. Historical sites
 7. Parks

- A walking tour is also a good time to give students a few important safety tips for the host city or country. Keep to basic issues that are easy to remember such as not walking back to your hotel late at night. Keep in mind that your students are generally extremely tired and that your more in-depth safety talk will be at your general orientation meeting the following day.

General On-Site Orientation Meeting

- A general on-site orientation meeting should be held with your students as soon after you arrive as possible, although it is better not to schedule it on the actual day of arrival in the host country. Experience has shown that covering important topics on arrival day is ineffective because students are too tired to absorb or learn anything of importance.

Tips on running a successful on-site orientation meeting include the following:

1. Have a specific agenda of subjects to cover;
 2. Try to be brief yet complete in your explanation of the subjects covered;
 3. If possible, have more than one person present the information, to keep the students engaged;
 4. If available, use visual aids such as slides, posters, a PowerPoint presentation, handouts, etc.
 5. Allow some time for questions and answers after each topic is covered, but keep the meeting moving.
- You may want to consider providing each student with a packet of information and a program calendar. Your orientation packet should include written material about the topics covered at

the orientation for future reference. You may also want to include maps, timely periodicals or articles about the host city or country, any in-house publications you may have, as well as information on local happenings, concerts, exhibits and events occurring during the program's duration.

Topics that you may want to consider covering at your on-site orientation meeting include:

Program Calendar

When reviewing the program calendar with your students, make sure that they understand departure points and times for any excursions for each day of your trip. You may also want to review events for the last day of your program including the group's departure from your housing accommodations (check-out policies, times, etc.) as well as logistics for transportation to the airport.

Money & Banking

During the money and banking segment of your orientation, it may be useful to have some of the local currency on hand for students to refer to while you explain the notes and coins used in your host country. Be sure to explain how and where to change currency in your host city, as well as local banking hours. Assume that most of your students have never traveled abroad before and supply them with reliable and convenient addresses for banks, ATM machines, etc.

When discussing money and banking issues, explain sales tax in the host country as well as local tipping practices. Because student budgets are personal and can vary enormously, it is generally not useful to discuss budgeting at length, though emphasizing that planning ahead will help students' budgets. It may also be a good idea to point out items or services that may be particularly expensive in the host city.

Communications

You may want to explain to your students how the telephone system works in your host country. Students will be most interested in using their cell phones to send text messages/make calls, etc. not only to one another but also to family and friends back in the U.S. as well as accessing the Internet from either their phones or from the laptop computer, iPad, etc. You may also want to explain how students can contact their family in the U.S. Review time differences between the U.S. and your host country and provide students with the necessary dialing codes if they plan to call their family and friends in the U.S. Try to identify nearby Internet cafes and other places where students will be able to access email, FaceBook, etc. Finally, please remind students that it is critical that they maintain contact with family and friends throughout their study abroad experience!

Transportation

As part of your on-site orientation meeting with your students, you will also want to discuss transportation in your host city/country. Some students may have never taken public transportation before. You may want to plan an activity on your first day or so where students can take public transportation with you the first time. That way their transportation orientation is "live and in person."

When talking about public transportation, you will want to include a discussion of the subway and bus system in your host city. Includes the hours the system operates and anything pertinent or special to the system that students will need to know. Make sure that each student has a map, and during your

meeting, run through a couple of sample trips to places in town that they may want to visit. Mention areas that are best to avoid in the evenings or parts of the city that are less safe. Be sure to give students the correct vocabulary for purchasing tickets or passes and have current prices available.

You may also wish to talk briefly about using taxis in your host city. Provide students with approximate costs and how best to hail a cab, again always keeping in mind that your students may have never taken a taxi before. Whenever possible, you may want to supply students with a phone number to call a taxi should they need to get home late at night. Make sure that the taxi company you suggest is legitimate and reliable.

Health & Safety

Certainly one of the most crucial parts of your on-site orientation meeting is the discussion of health and safety. It may be useful to provide students with a list of English-speaking doctors they can contact should they become ill (or maintain a list yourself). Information on local hospitals and pharmacies is useful as well. Be sure to explain to your students how health care is paid for in your host country: are students expected to pay first and then be reimbursed by insurance later? Inform them of how much a typical visit to the doctor will cost as well as what method of payment of accepted. Make sure that you have a copy of the travel insurance policy which your students purchased prior to departure, and that you have read it over and understand it as you may at some point during your program be asked to provide an explanation of the policy to a sick student.

Students should also be given the phone number to call for ambulance, police and fire, the host country equivalent of 911 in the U.S.

Staying safe is an on-going process for your group of students, so you should be available to discuss safety issues at any time during the program. Sometimes the best safety discussions with students may happen in more casual settings and situation, such as during a group meal or during a long train ride. Students need to think about their safety at all times and should be instructed, reminded and encouraged to make good decisions for themselves throughout their time abroad.

During the safety part of your on-site orientation may also be a good time for you to review the rules and regulations of student conduct. This includes discussion of the use of alcohol and drugs. Be familiar with SF State policies as well as the legal drinking age in your host country. When discussing alcohol, be clear about what may be tolerated (i.e. a glass of wine at dinner with their host family) versus what may be considered grounds for expulsion from the program. Remind students that one of the keys to staying safe in a foreign environment is keeping their wits about them in order to recognize anything that doesn't feel right and to make good decisions. If a student's thinking is clouded by alcohol or drug use, their chances of making the best choices and decisions are not as good, thereby putting themselves at a higher safety risk.

You may also want to prepare an emergency card to give to each student showing simple steps to take in case of an emergency. Keep it simple and to the point. The card should have emergency contact numbers, including the U.S. embassy/consulate in the host city.

Also, encourage communication with your group. For example, always provide information about how students can contact you when not together as a group, after hours, etc. Ask students to provide you (or another member of the group) with information about their destination as well. Should you need to account for everyone on short notice at least you will have an idea about where the students are and when they are expected back.

It is important that this part of your on-site orientation be taken seriously. You need students to understand the seriousness of what you are discussing as well as the importance of having a “what if” plan of action. But you do not want to cause confusion or panic among your students.

In conclusion, remember that orientation is an ongoing process throughout the entire program. After all of your meetings, both pre and post-arrival, walking tours, and cultural lectures are done, the process continues. For the cultural learning and understanding of the host country to continue, you need to be available throughout the time you are abroad to act as a sounding board, to give students guidance, help or sometimes to just lend a sympathetic ear. The more prepared your students are for their study abroad experience, the better, deeper and more enriching the experience will be for all concerned.

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