



## AIEA ISSUE BRIEF

NOVEMBER 2018

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### Expanding Portfolios in International Programs: Non-Credit Experiences Abroad

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Marcia Henisz • *Drexel University*

Sean Gordon • *University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Kalpen Trivedi • *University of Massachusetts Amherst*





## INTRODUCTION

International travel safety, often the realm of the SIO's responsibilities, is beginning to evolve beyond 'just' study abroad. This issue brief discusses the growing challenges that SIOs and those responsible for international travel safety and risk management must address as international program portfolios expand to include a wide range of non-credit activities.



## 1. Non-Credit Experiences Abroad

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International travel safety, often the realm of the SIO's responsibilities, is beginning to evolve beyond 'just' study abroad. Consider the following shifts in typical student activities: instead of staying on campus, the university basketball team heads abroad for a team-building summer tour of Japan; students attend an academic case competition on entrepreneurship and social change in Shanghai instead of San Diego; an alternative spring break program takes undergraduates to the storm-torn Dominican Republic instead of the rural US South. These are all important and worthy causes that will largely occur without incident, but what happens when something goes wrong? Who ensures that appropriate planning has taken place to lower student risk and provide for the experience to be a positive step along a student's path to graduation rather than a disaster that puts the student at risk and damages the institutional reputation in the process? Such questions reflect the growing challenge that SIOs and those responsible for international travel safety and risk management must address as international program portfolios expand to include a wide range of non-credit activities.

While for-credit study abroad remains by far the most common reason that students enrolled at American colleges and universities travel outside of the United States, Non-Credit Experiences Abroad (NCEA), like those previously mentioned, are seeing a significant rise. According to the Institute for International Education, more than 23,000 students participated in non-credit work, internships, and volunteering abroad during the 2015/16 academic year: a 75% increase over four years ("Non-Credit Work," 2017). One reason for this trend seems to be that students recognize the opportunity to connect experiences like volunteering, internships, and service learning to the high-impact practice of study abroad: these experiences do not need to be limited to the boundaries of United States. As these activities increase, however, higher education institutions need to develop a set of best practices for meeting their duty of care with regard to student support, security, and risk management. This issue brief reviews the current landscape of NCEA and its relevance to the portfolio of Senior International Officers. We conclude with a number of recommendations for further action.

Industry support in the areas of travel safety and risk management has been strong, especially in recent years. The 2017 annual conventions of NAFSA and AIEA both featured panels and seminars entirely devoted to the topic<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, a recent edition of *International Educator* featured a "Risk Management Supplement," and

<sup>1</sup> For a small sampling, see "Equipping the Senior International Office to Manage International Risk" (NAFSA 2017) as well as "Risk Managers for International Travel: How it Works and How to Get One" (AIEA 2017).



the NAFSA website offers a suite of resources regarding health and safety in education abroad. Another indication of growing interest and expertise in risk management can be found in the expanding membership of PULSE, a national network of US-based international health, safety, and security professionals whose members are frequently in positions that report to the SIO. At the time of writing, there are one hundred fulltime PULSE positions representing sixty-seven universities or organizations, a 67% membership increase since 2015. Such efforts signal broad support for SIOs, who are expected to provide information and assurances about student travel safety to campus leadership and news media when political, environmental, and other disruptive incidents occur across the globe, even when such travel forms part of the many activities beyond the scope of traditional study abroad.

These efforts are encouraging. Travel safety and risk management processes and procedures, however, have been largely trained on traditional for-credit programming, and NCEA remains a fairly new area of concern. In its 2016 study of NCEA activities, “The World is the New Classroom: Non-Credit Education Abroad,” the Institute for International Education (IIE) offers a number of useful key recommendations for defining and tracking NCEA, but does not address the travel safety or risk management implications of such activities. Similarly, the guidance on Internships Abroad and Community Engagement, Service-learning, and Volunteer Programs Abroad provided by the Forum on Education Abroad (a 2018 update of the Volunteer, Internship Experience and Work (VIEW) Programs abroad guidance from 2013) offer helpful guidance on developing non-credit programming, including how to prepare students for the risks of traveling abroad, but assumes that institutions already have a handle on which of their students are travelling and where, which is often not the case. It is difficult to advise students, in other words, with whom we have no prior contact, and whose travel is largely unknown. How to address NCEA from an institutional travel safety and risk management perspective requires additional research and development.

## **2. Results and Lessons from “Assessing NCEA in Higher Education”**

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To begin to fill this gap, the Academia Working Group (AWG) of the State Department’s Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) designed and circulated a survey to help benchmark NCEA practices and develop guidance on tracking, risk mitigation, and support. The survey, “Assessing NCEA in Higher Education,” was developed in conversation with members of an AWG subcommittee on NCEA and was administered to the OSAC-AWG and AIEA list-



serves from late November, 2016, to early January, 2017. A total of 86 responses were recorded, reflecting a variety of academic institutions and a wide range of interested offices, including risk management, study abroad, international programs, public safety, and provosts' and deans' offices.

Initial findings from the survey indicate the challenges and vulnerabilities of current NCEA procedures. Ninety percent of institutions surveyed reported that they track NCEA, yet only a small number of respondents reported 100% tracking success; on average, institutions estimate that they are able to document only 50% of NCEA activity at their institutions. These and related figures from the survey suggest that while there may be processes in place to track NCEA activity, there are a number of barriers to coverage and compliance. For instance, although a large majority of respondents agree that NCEA has become more common in the past five years, how institutions define NCEA varies widely. At some institutions, what counts as NCEA includes familiar activities like volunteering, service learning, interning, and field work, while at others it means attending international conferences, or participating in university athletics and the performing arts. The responsibility for tracking NCEA is also a point of uncertainty. A large majority of respondents wish for additional resources, including national best practices and NCEA benchmarking.

The results of this survey by the OSAC AWG form the basis of a recent Guidance Document, summarized below, intended to help SIOs lead the NCEA discussion on their own campuses. A crucial first step to articulating an institutional approach to NCEA is defining what activities a university will support. The Guidance Document therefore provides a step-by-step approach to help schools to understand what they consider to be NCEA and what they do not. It also encourages SIOs, or those reporting to SIOs, to consider the many places where NCEA might occur at their institution -- factors that would lead an institution to decide whether the activity is university-affiliated and the levels of support that might therefore be required. Many schools may consider NCEA to fall under the purview of the Education Abroad office, but there are in fact many stakeholders involved in this work. Institutions may even consider housing the support staff for these activities in another office to provide a different perspective or approach.

In summary, the Guidance Document outlines a number of recommended steps to help higher education institutions define NCEA in ways that are appropriate to their context. Furthermore, the guidance aims to dispel a number of myths that may hamper effective management of NCEA travel safety, including the notion that the Study Abroad office has it under control, as well as the idea that a functioning registry will meet all travel safety and risk management needs. Part I offers four steps for articulating an institutional approach to NCEA:



- Understand your institution’s risk tolerance and level of duty of care
- Identify where NCEA exists at your institution.
- Engage with stakeholders to determine an institutional approach to NCEA
- Determine the NCEA that you will support

Part II covers how to raise awareness about NCEA and gain support resources through the following strategic areas:

- Communications & Marketing
- Policy, Process, & Data
- Outreach

## CONCLUSION

The lower cost and increasing ease of international travel have made NCEA increasingly attractive to students as an alternative or complement to traditional for-credit study abroad. Yet this wide range of international activities is not always adequately defined, vetted or tracked, making it difficult to support the health, safety, and security of our students and advance the mission of the colleges and universities where we work.

SIOs will need to drive the conversation on their campus for defining best practices for tracking and supporting NCEA. These practices will be quite complex, and the appropriate approach to these activities will engage individual institutions in difficult discussions about their tolerance for risk, definitions of university-affiliated activities, the duty of care that is consistent with their mission, and the level of resources that they are prepared to provide.

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The **Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA)**, a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS  
PO Box 90404, Duke University  
Durham, NC 27708, 919.668.1928  
aiea@duke.edu • www.aieaworld.org