

Risk During Off-Campus Academic Experiences

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Model for Review of Off-Campus Academic Experiences within the USA

The process for review of off-campus domestic academic experiences is designed to provide a graduated review process for experiences within the USA that may involve risk to participating students. (International travel is reviewed by the Study Abroad Risk Assessment Committee; see <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/vio/travel/safety-security.php>. Travel by student organizations is reviewed through the Dean of Students process.)

For academic experiences involving off-campus travel, most situations can be reviewed and approved by the instructor(s) or through a second level review by instructor together with Department Chair or Director of Undergraduate Studies. Those programs involving elevated risk will be forwarded to the school's Associate Dean who will decide whether or not a full review through the Off-Campus Risk Assessment Committee (OCRAC) is warranted.¹ In Blair and Engineering, the Associate Dean will review any travel situations requiring a review, including those with elevated risk. Most situations should be resolvable at the department or school level. Individual departments will develop disciplinary norms that may (with the approval of the Associate Dean) involve some exceptions to the process described here.

Conference and research travel is a grey area; most such travel can be approved at the level of the instructor/adviser/department chair. Students are asked to leave travel plans and contact information with their department and/or adviser. The Graduate school requires such review if any University funds will be used for such travel.

Guidelines for Review

For an academic travel checklist with guidelines for review, see <http://as.vanderbilt.edu/overview/faculty/forms/>.

The trip request should be reviewed at the department level (or at the Associate Dean level in Blair and Engineering) if it includes any of the following triggers:

- travel over an hour by car and/or travel involving overnight stay.
- travel between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m.

¹ The Off-Campus Risk Assessment Committee (OCRAC) is responsible for authorizing travel for the University's academic experiences within the USA when those programs involve elevated health or safety concerns. The Committee is also responsible for deciding whether to suspend an educational opportunity when health or safety concerns emerge shortly before a program starts or while it is in progress. The Off-Campus Risk Assessment Committee is chaired by the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education. The other members of the committee are the General Counsel, the Vice-Chancellor for Public Affairs, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Risk and Insurance Management, the Director of Environmental Health and Safety, the Manager of Compliance, the Dean of Students, the Director of Student Health, the Dean of the School sponsoring the program, the Faculty Director of the sponsoring program or department, and the faculty member of the course under consideration. These officials may delegate their responsibilities to others as needed.

- travel without faculty presence.
- solo travel (requires more contingency planning than group travel).
- any class activity that involves directly working with subjects (people in the field).
- independent student research for which a professor recommends a review.
- travel to sites with hazardous materials.
- travel with destination risk, including but not limited to:
 - national/local disaster zones.
 - high crime areas.
 - experiences addressing populations under stress including the homeless, the incarcerated, or the medically at-risk (also reviewed at Associate Dean level unless a departmental process for site review is approved in advance).
 - volatile experiences that elevate the student's risk of arrest (e.g. protest sites and demonstrations) (also reviewed at the Associate Dean level).

Concerns that would invoke review by school Associate Deans and possible elevation to the OCRAC include:

- any trip that involves two or more triggers.
- any trip that involves a national or local disaster zone, a warning from a governmental health organization, or a Homeland Security warning.
- any trip that involves sustained contact with persons that we know have been convicted of felonies and that entails a reasonable expectation of elevated risk, unless a departmental screening process has been approved by the dean.
- any trip to a physically remote site or a site more than 60 miles from the nearest hospital.
- any trip that requires students to participate actively in a protest or similar collective action, especially if a police presence is likely.

Whenever possible, field trips and other off campus activities should be disclosed on the syllabus in advance so students are aware of course expectations.

Criteria for Review of a Program already underway

Suspension or cancellation of a program will be considered should one or more of the following events occur in the program city or surrounding area:

- Travel warning and/or specific directive by appropriate Government offices.
- Recommended evacuation by local officials.
- Widespread disease or epidemic.
- Severe weather advisory such as hurricane warnings.
- Wide-spread civil unrest, violence, criminal activity and/or rioting.
- Declaration of martial law.
- Significant terrorist activity.
- Extended disruption of public utilities and/or services.
- Recommendation for suspension/cancellation by either Vanderbilt officials or on-site staff.
- Protracted or indefinite closure of the host university or organization where the program is based.

- Inability of the local staff to organize and carry out an academic program outside of the university.

The decision to suspend or cancel will be based on information from the program staff and students; the program provider or host location; University officials; Local and US Government agencies; and any other appropriate source.

In the case of students on programs offered by an external provider, Vanderbilt University will generally follow the procedure of the program provider, but reserves the right to make an independent decision.

Non-University Sponsored Educational Opportunities

The Committee also has authority to decide whether the University will register students and allow them financial aid or academic credit to participate in non-University-sponsored educational opportunities in regions or areas where there is a significant health or safety risk as discussed in this policy.

Emergencies

In emergency situations where it is impractical for the Committee to meet, the Associate Provost may take immediate steps to have students removed from a region or area. Program staff members also may take immediate steps to remove students from a region or area in emergency circumstances without prior action by the committee. The individual program director or designee will notify the Committee within 24 hours of any such emergency action.

Sample Scenarios

Example 1. A faculty member in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences would like to take her class on a series of field trips to various sites on the Cumberland Plateau to have her students experience dynamics of geomorphology in a real world context. The faculty member writes up the proposal and submits it to her Director of Undergraduate Studies. Since this will involve only one of the Low Level Risks listed above, namely traveling over an hour by car, it may be approved by the DUS or Chair of Earth and Environmental Sciences and require no further review. Because the faculty in question wrote a proposal that had well organized travel plans and contingencies in the event of possible travel problems, the proposal was approved by the DUS. The faculty member left contact information for all individuals involved with the trip and a copy of the approved trip proposal with the department chair, the departmental administrative assistant, and the Associate Dean.

Example 2. A faculty member in the Department of Human and Organizational Development would like to take his class to meet survivors of a recent coal sludge disaster in Kentucky to discuss the organizational dynamics that affect preparedness or response to public health crises. He submits the proposal to his DUS and Chair. However, this trip involves several of the Low Level Risks listed above, including traveling over an hour by car and involving an overnight stay, direct work with human subjects, travel to a national disaster zone, travel to a physically remote site, and travel to meet members of a population that is under stress. Therefore, it is passed from the DUS and Chair to one of the Associate Deans in Peabody College. Because the

faculty member had thorough plans for safe travel and lodging in the disaster zone, contingency plans for health related problems students may encounter in an area far from a hospital, intellectual and ethical preparation of students, and debriefing and reflection with students after the trip, the proposal was approved. The faculty member left contact information for all individuals involved with the trip and a copy of the approved trip proposal with the department chair, the departmental administrative assistant, and the Associate Dean.

Example 3. A faculty member in Economics wants to introduce students to the lived effects of poverty by having them visit a local homeless shelter in Nashville. The faculty member submits a proposal to his DUS and Chair. Because the trip involves two of the Low Level Risks – work with human subjects and experiences with a population under stress – it is reviewed by one of the Associate Deans in the College of Arts and Science. However, while the proposal had plans for travel to and from the shelter and a safety plan while on site, it did not detail how students would be prepared to understand or interact with guests of the shelter in an informed and ethical way, nor did it plan for much debriefing or reflection with students after the trip. This might pose problems for students who encounter issues that are troubling and hard to understand without any preparation or reflection, and it may lead to interactions with guests of the shelter that are insensitive, harmful, or even unsafe. The faculty member also needed to include provisions for the students in the class to complete background checks included under the campus “protection of minors” policy (URL). The proposal is returned to the faculty member for revision.

Example 4. After several travel requests from faculty in the Department of Sociology, the DUS and/or Chair recognizes that nearly all of these requests involve two or more risks. They work with the Associate Dean’s office in the College of Arts & Science to develop a departmental norm that defines when future requests can be reviewed and approved by the department, and when they need to involve the Associate Deans.