



VANDERBILT
UNIVERSITY

GEO
Global Education Office



Study Abroad SURVIVAL TRAINING

Photo: Carnevale in Venice, by Sarah Walker '15

About

Study Abroad SURVIVAL TRAINING



The Global Education Office welcomes you to **Study Abroad Survival Training**. The training modules within introduce you to a wealth of information, information that you will need to know to have a successful and safe experience abroad. Please read everything carefully.

You can take the Quick Tour now for a very brief introduction to the Training interface. It will quickly show you what all of the elements on this page are and what they do.

[Take the Tour](#)

From time to time, you will see a red box like the one below that provides more detailed information on a topic or topics. Just click on the red links to check them out.

In-Depth
Information

[Click here for a sample, just to see how it works!](#)

When you're ready to move on, hit the big blue Continue button at the bottom of the page!

Browser support

This presentation works best with recent versions of the major browsers on desktops, tablets, and smartphones. If you are having trouble with the presentation, try upgrading your web browser. Or you may [download the presentation in PDF format](#) instead.

Additional Information

In-Depth Information

From time to time, we need a bit more space to dig into a topic. This sample shows what an In-Depth Information page looks like. In-Depth Information pages provide more information about a given topic.

You can tap on the “Back” link below to go back and finish reading the previous page.

Introduction

What you'll get out of study abroad

Academics, Cultural Competence, Personal Growth

Congratulations, you are getting closer to lift-off! Let us take a moment to remind you what you will get out of your study abroad experience.

Academic Training. Without a doubt, you will be *studying* abroad. You will have the chance to take classes that are not available at Vanderbilt and expand the breadth of perspectives you draw on.

Experiential Learning. As a study abroad student, you will learn in part by doing. In or out of the classroom, everything you do overseas will be a learning experience. It may even lead to [increased creativity](#)...

Cultural Competencies. You will build [cultural competencies](#) by experiencing cultural differences, gaining a new perspective on your own culture, and acquiring skills that help you interact with a diverse set of people.

Personal Growth. Regardless of where you go, facing the world outside the Vanderbubble will help shape you as a person and hone your life skills. You will become more self-reliant, confident, and self-aware. In fact, 97% of Vanderbilt study abroad alumni say that study abroad helped them develop self-confidence and independence.

According to Recent College Graduates Who Studied Abroad...

- 84%** Studying abroad helped me build valuable job skills, including language proficiency, cultural training, tolerance for ambiguity, adaptability, communication skills
- 80%** Studying abroad helped me develop confidence to deal with new skills required for my first job

Source: [IES Recent Graduates Survey](#)

Your Survival Training guidebook

What to expect from this training

Over the next hour or so, you will learn much about what to expect during your study abroad experience and how to prepare for it. It is a lot of information, but you can access it at any time, even while you're overseas!

The chart below shows the modules included in this training. You can expect to spend 5 to 10 minutes per module. Keep an eye on the progress meter at the top of the screen to track how far you've come!

Module	Description
Basic Policy Information	Things you need to know about being a Vanderbilt student abroad, conduct, and the law
Academic Policies	How credits work, rules for determining credit, and how study abroad will impact your Vanderbilt transcript
Travel	What you need to know before you get on the plane, and how to prepare for your journey
Living and Learning Abroad	Answers to questions about on-the-ground logistics
Health and Wellness	How to have a healthy study abroad experience and what to do when you are not so healthy
Safety and Security	Information on staying safe and protecting yourself abroad
Returning Home	How your study abroad experience will impact you when you return to Vanderbilt
Finishing Up	Your next steps including verifying with GEO that you completed this required module

Basic Policy Information

Student status and billing

You remain a Vanderbilt student while abroad!

While studying abroad, you remain registered as a Vanderbilt student and you retain access to on-campus resources. You can register for the next term's classes, log in to YES and other campus applications, and make use of services.

To make this possible, GEO enrolls you in a study abroad "placeholder course." The placeholder will appear on your YES account before you go abroad. The actual courses you take abroad, as well as the grades you earn, will eventually replace the placeholder. This will occur only after your transcript arrives from abroad and both GEO and the University Registrar have processed it. **It may take 2 to 6 months** from the end of your program for your transcript to arrive, depending on individual circumstances.

Billing works just as it does for on-campus students. [Vanderbilt Student Accounts](#) will bill you, and your bill will arrive at the same time as usual, with the same payment terms. You can find the fees for your program in GEO's [Cost Calculator](#). Be aware that there are costs that are not billed by Vanderbilt—including airfare, visa fees, and more—which you should factor into your overall budget. Contact your program provider or GEO advisor for more information.

What's in my bill?

Regular Vanderbilt tuition

Study-abroad program fee (different for each program)

(Reduced) activity fee

More information: [Billing policies and procedures](#)

In-Depth
Information

[What about financial aid?](#)

Additional Information

Financial aid

All **semester-long programs available through GEO are eligible for US federal and Vanderbilt financial aid**. All types of financial aid other than work study are applicable to semester-long study abroad. If you aren't sure about your financial aid package, check with your financial aid officer.

Summer and Maymester abroad programs are normally not eligible for Vanderbilt financial aid. However, there may be some circumstances in which financial aid can apply to summer study. You should speak with your financial aid officer if you think an exception might apply in your case.

The [Office of Financial Aid](#) disburses funding from the scholarships covered by the **GEO Common Scholarship Application**. Scholarship funds will be credited to your student account *on or about the day that your account is billed for your abroad program*. Please feel free to contact the Global Education Office's [scholarship coordinator](#) with questions about this process.

Preparation and responsibilities

Getting ready and seizing opportunities

There are many things that you need to do to prepare to go abroad. What should you do about your on-campus housing? Your meal plan? Your Commodore Card? What if you would like additional funding?

GEO can't help you manage everything, of course, but we have put together a checklist of things to do not only before you leave, but also while you're abroad and after you return to the US. (Later in this presentation, we'll also discuss tips for packing, getting a passport/visa, traveling with prescription drugs, and other topics.)

In addition to responsibilities, the checklist also highlights opportunities you can prepare for or take advantage of while you are abroad. Download it here:

[Semester Responsibilities & Opportunities Checklist !\[\]\(9ea682cef02bbbdc0191f78cdae1d433_img.jpg\)](#)

Conduct and law

Be a good ambassador

While you are abroad, be an ambassador for both Vanderbilt and your home country. You are part of a worldwide web of interactions, and the impression you make on the people of your host country reflects on where you came from.

Take some time to learn about norms in the country you're visiting so that you can attempt to blend in socially. Beyond that, treat those you meet courteously and with sensitivity toward cultural differences. Remember, you are in their world!

Moreover, you are **subject to local laws** while you are abroad. Foreign laws and legal systems may be quite different from those in your home country, and you need to know the differences. If you break local laws while abroad, neither Vanderbilt nor the U.S. Embassy can get you out of jail.

Whether you are studying abroad at a university or on a smaller program with one of GEO's partners, you must also **follow that institution's rules and policies**. These institutions may sanction or dismiss you if you violate their rules. *Dismissal from an abroad program will have the same consequences for your GPA and four-year plan as a dismissal from Vanderbilt!*

Vanderbilt conduct policies

Vanderbilt policies apply abroad as well as on campus

You are subject to your abroad institution's rules, but you *also* need to abide by Vanderbilt's conduct policies. The standards of behavior described in the VU [Student Handbook](#) and [Honor System](#) remain in effect while you are abroad. Conduct that violates these codes may result in sanctions when you return to Vanderbilt, *even if you already received sanctions from your program abroad.*

Be sure to read the section in the Student Handbook on [conduct in study abroad programs](#).

In-Depth
Information

[Is Vanderbilt's alcohol policy different abroad?](#)

[What should I know about rules surrounding sexual misconduct abroad?](#)

Additional Information

Vanderbilt policy on alcohol abroad

Vanderbilt does not really treat alcohol use abroad any differently than it does on campus. You still need to abide by the legal drinking age of the country you're in. In all of the countries where Vanderbilt has approved study abroad programs, the drinking age is lower than it is here in Nashville, so you may find that your legal status is different. Remember that violations of law or of institutional policy overseas may also become grounds for disciplinary action both at Vanderbilt and under the rules of your abroad program.

At the same time that you are considering the legal implications of drinking, be mindful of cultural norms surrounding alcohol use in your host country. In many countries, for example, American-style "binge drinking" may appear pathological or merely pathetic. Take the opportunity to see cultural practices in a new light.

The Student Handbook says:

Students are required to abide by the laws of the respective countries in which they reside, study, or travel, with respect to the age at which alcoholic beverages may be consumed. Otherwise, the policies with respect to [alcoholic beverages and controlled substances](#) included in the Vanderbilt *Student Handbook* apply. Students are subject to student-accountability sanctions, including expulsion, and referral for prosecution for violation of these policies.

From [VU Student Handbook, Study Abroad](#)

Additional Information

Sexual misconduct abroad

Social norms—and civil and criminal laws—vary from country to country. Even so, Vanderbilt's policies, including the university's Student Accountability and Sexual Misconduct and Power-Based Violence policies, apply in all study abroad programs in which Vanderbilt students participate, whether those programs are administered by Vanderbilt or a third party. Vanderbilt students, faculty and staff participating in study abroad programs must comply with local laws, the rules and regulations of their study abroad program, and with Vanderbilt's policies.

If you are a victim of sexual misconduct while abroad, contact the resident director of your program for help. If your program is directly administered by Vanderbilt faculty, you should consult with your program leader. If you are unable or unwilling to discuss the issue with program staff, please contact Vanderbilt's [Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services Department](#) (EAD) or [Project Safe](#). Project Safe has someone available around the clock every day of the year. The Student Handbook's [policy on Sexual Misconduct](#) identifies confidential resources (see also [Project Safe](#)).

The range of sanctions for violations of Vanderbilt's Student Accountability and Sexual Misconduct and Power-Based Violence Policies are set forth in the Student Handbook. Individuals who engage in gender-based or sexual misconduct—or other forms of misconduct—may also be subject to local laws, and the civil and criminal consequences may be severe.

Resources

[VU Student Accountability Policy](#), from the Student Handbook

[Sexual Misconduct and Other Forms of Power-Based Violence Policy](#), from the Student Handbook

[VU Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services Department](#)

[VU Project Safe](#)

Academic Policies

Grades and Credits

You're earning Vanderbilt credit abroad

Courses you take on programs offered through GEO earn **direct Vanderbilt credit**. This means that your grades will appear on your Vanderbilt transcript and will factor into your GPA, almost exactly as if you had taken them at VU.

Just as at Vanderbilt, you must take the equivalent of 12-18 hours of credit. Courses taken on GEO programs can count toward majors and minors, or as hours toward graduation. However, they *do not* count toward AXLE requirements.

Study abroad courses come with some special rules:

1. You may not take courses pass/fail.
2. You cannot retake classes abroad that you have already taken on campus (and vice versa). If you do take a course abroad that is equivalent to a course you've already taken on campus, you may get *no credit* for it!
3. You cannot opt out of credit for a course you took abroad. Withdraw from courses you don't want to take during the drop/add period!
4. Vanderbilt cannot change any grades you earned abroad. If a grade is incorrect, you will need to work with your program provider abroad to get it changed and to issue a new transcript.
5. You must monitor prerequisites and other requirements for courses you take abroad. Consult with your VU academic advisor, but understand that ultimately you are responsible for taking appropriate courses abroad!

Academics
Abroad

[How might academic systems abroad differ from Vanderbilt?](#)

Additional Information

Academic systems abroad

Higher education and academic systems abroad can vary greatly from what you are used to in the United States. Here are some things that might be different depending on the country. Talk to your GEO advisor to find out more about what you might encounter on your program.

Potential differences in academic systems abroad

- There are fewer hours spent in the classroom, and students are expected to spend more time studying on their own. This doesn't mean that there will be assigned homework! A lot of responsibility for deciding how best to spend your homework hours may be left up to you.
- Depending on the course and level you are taking, and whether you are taking it in a foreign language, you may need to spend extra time learning and mastering the material.
- There are fewer tests and quizzes, and students may earn a grade based on just one final exam, or a mid-term and a final. This means you'll have little opportunity to gauge how a professor grades in the weeks or months before an exam.
- Professors are less accessible for office hours and by email.
- Classes may be more lecture-style than discussion-based. This may leave fewer opportunities to ask questions or express your opinions.
- There may not be much sense of privacy attached to grades. For example, the instructor might post all exam grades publicly. In some places, individual grades may be discussed openly in class.
- The prevailing academic culture may be very different. For example, students may not be as concerned—or concerned at all—about getting high grade point averages.
- In some places, such as Latin America, students pursue something like a strict professional degree, without a liberal arts component. They may have a much more focused academic experience.
- Students likely do not live on campus, which may mean that you need to meet people

through academics at first, or by joining a club or other activity.

Every country is different! If you want to know more about systems in your host country, talk to your GEO advisor.

Course equivalency evaluations

Making sure your courses count for Vanderbilt credit

Every course you take abroad needs to be evaluated by Vanderbilt faculty to earn Vanderbilt credit. This process determines how the course will count at Vanderbilt—or if it will count at all.

The single most important thing to remember about course equivalency evaluations is that **you are responsible** for making sure it gets done! GEO facilitates the process, but it falls on you to ensure that your courses get evaluated for credit. Vanderbilt can't process your grades until *all the courses* you took have evaluations on file.

How to get your courses evaluated

- ① Check the [list of evaluated courses](#) for your program. Are all of your courses already on the list? Great, you're done! Skip to Step 5.
- ② If not: Get your hands on syllabi for the missing courses, either online, by writing the department abroad, or by going to the first day of class. Get the most complete syllabus you can for the best shot at an evaluation.
- ③ Submit a [Course Equivalency Evaluation Request](#) for each course.
- ④ GEO will do the rest! We contact faculty and find out how the course will count, and then we email you the result.
- ⑤ Relax. Enjoy life.

Need more information? Check out our very detailed [guide](#), or talk with your [GEO advisor](#).

Travel

Traveling while abroad

Important things to keep in mind when planning travel

First, always **keep your Resident Director or program staff informed** of your travel. Also keep your family in the loop; if there is an emergency back home, they will want to know how get in touch with you.

Some countries that you plan to visit may have different entry requirements than your primary host country. **Investigate all the countries you're interested in** before you leave the US. If any require a visa, it will probably be easier to get the visa while you're in the US —this applies to both international students and US citizens!

In every country you visit, make a point of knowing where your **home country's nearest embassy or consulate** is. You want to know where you can find support if you get into real trouble. (If you're a US citizen, you should bookmark the [list of US embassies around the world](#) 

Finally, independent travel is one of the **most expensive activities** you can undertake abroad. Be sure to budget appropriately, and remember to consider safety while you're on the lookout for ways to travel on the cheap.

Wisdom from alums

Every year, students tell us that while they loved the traveling they did abroad, they also regretted not getting to know their host city better. Consider the value of staying put sometimes rather than skipping town.

Passport Check

Be sure that you have a valid passport, and that it will not be expiring within the next year or so.

Before we go any farther, take a moment to check your passport's expiration date.

Most countries will not allow you to get a student visa or residence permit if your passport is near its expiration date.

Be sure that your passport does not expire until at least 6 months after your program ends!



Where to find the expiration date on your main passport page.

In-Depth Information

[Uh oh, it looks like I need a new passport!](#)

Additional Information

Getting or Renewing a Passport

To get a new passport, or to renew an old one, you will need to contact the proper issuing authority for your home country.

US citizens should visit the State Department's website for [passport services](#) to view requirements and to check on [current processing times](#). Be sure that you will receive your new passport in time to complete any visa or resident permit applications.

In Nashville, locations near Vanderbilt where you can apply for a passport include:

Church Street Post Office	Midtown 1718 Church Street	(615) 321-0172
Acklen Post Office	Hillsboro Village 2006 Acklen Ave	(615) 383-5396
Broadway Post Office	Downtown 901 Broadway	(615) 255-3613
Davidson County Clerk	Downtown 700 2nd Ave South, Suite 101	(615) 862-6223

You may need to **call in advance** for an appointment.

You'll also need to get **passport photos** taken before you can apply. FedEx-Kinko's, Walgreens, and CVS are locations near Vandy that can take passport photos.

Passport and Document Security

Keep your passport and other key documents safe

When you are abroad, no single document is more important than your passport. Without it, **you will not be able to cross international borders**, and other tasks—such as transferring funds—may also become difficult or impossible. Losing your passport can be a major headache, and might even cost you thousands of dollars in airfare for missed flights. Do everything you can to keep it safe.

In general, you should keep your passport on your person only when you are traveling across borders. Otherwise, **find a safe place for it and leave it there**. Make a photocopy and carry that on you when you are out and about.

If you must carry your passport with you, keep it in a special **passport wallet** under your clothes.



(Potentially) Good Places to Keep Your Passport

Hidden in the room of your homestay or residence hall

In your hotel's safe (*not* the room safe)

With your study abroad provider, if they offer such a service

In some situations, even these options may not be secure. Use your common sense and evaluate the situation. If in doubt, talk to your Resident Director for advice.

In-Depth
Information

[How do I go about getting a travel visa?](#)

Additional Information

How to Get a Travel Visa

A **travel visa** is not a credit card! It's a stamp or sticker placed in your passport that allows you to enter a foreign country. Depending on your own nationality and your reasons for traveling, **you may or may not need a visa** to visit a given country.

If you will be taking classes from an institution based in your host country, you will usually need a student-class visa to enter. Entry requirements are often lower when you are simply visiting as a tourist.

Requirements to get a visa may include photographs, financial information, a letter from your host university, a criminal background check, an HIV test, or even a personal appearance at the foreign consulate. Your own nationality may have a major impact on the requirements you face in getting a visa. For example, US citizens typically face lower barriers than students of other nationalities.

In certain cases, students may be able to enter a country without a visa, but will need to obtain a **residence permit** after entering.

Your study abroad provider will inform you about your visa requirements. If you are uncertain or have general questions, please contact GEO.

Further information

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Travisa | Easy access to visa requirements for all countries and most nationalities |
| Visa @Wikipedia | Article providing information about visa policies around the world |

Traveling with medications

Ensure continuity in your medical care

Drugs that are regularly prescribed in the US can sometimes be more restricted abroad. Even some over-the-counter drugs may be interdicted overseas. Take precautions when traveling to ensure that your medications don't get you in trouble.

Keep all of your medications in their original packaging when traveling. This will trigger less suspicion from customs agents and law enforcement.

To find out if any of your medications are restricted or banned in your host country, [contact the country's embassy](#). Ask about over-the-counter drugs too if they are a part of your regular care regime.

Whatever the legal status of your medications, [request a letter from your physician](#) explaining why the drugs you are transporting have been prescribed to you. Also include over-the-counter drugs if needed. You will want to take this letter with you *whenever you travel!* Request that your doctor use the local brand names or generic/chemical names for your drugs (see resources below).

When possible, [take enough medicine with you to cover your entire stay abroad](#). If your medicine is only available in limited supply, or your doctor prefers that you have a clinician onsite to refill your prescription, please discuss with your physician and program staff how you will obtain enough for your stay.

Be aware that medications **cannot be sent through the mail!**

Resources

[MedlinePlus](#), information on prescription and over-the-counter drugs, including generic/chemical names

[HTH Drug Translation Guide](#), offers equivalent brand names and availability for frequently visited countries/destinations

[Directory of Foreign Embassies](#), US Department of State

Tips for packing

Pack light and pack smart

In GEO's experience, students experience two primary difficulties with packing: They bring too much stuff, and they often don't plan well enough for their specific destination. Here are some tips to help out.

Research your location's climate and the prevailing weather patterns for the time you will be there, and pack accordingly. Wikipedia is a good source for basic climate data on nearly every city in the world (just search for your city), but commercial guidebooks are probably the single best source of information.

Bring only one suitcase, one you can lift and maneuver without help. If you bring a backpack as your carry-on, it can double as a weekend travel bag.

Consider bringing a light duffel bag that you can fold up and put in your large suitcase. You may need it to bring the things you buy abroad back home.

Only pack wardrobe pieces that are interchangeable and are good for layering. If it can't be used to make multiple outfits, it doesn't belong in your suitcase! Items that can be dressed up or dressed down are ideal.

For more tips and a detailed list of suggestions, download GEO's [packing checklist](#).

Living and Learning Abroad

Identity and diversity

Research beliefs, attitudes, and experiences

Our surroundings shape us and help to define who we are. Living in another cultural context will give you the chance to explore many facets of your identity, and to do so in light of new surroundings. Students overwhelmingly tell us that this process leads to increased personal growth and insight. However, it often carries difficulties too.

As you gear up for your time abroad, prepare yourself for how people in your new culture will perceive you. Just as in the US, people abroad will have beliefs, myths, stereotypes, and prejudices about aspects of personal identity. You may also find that the way(s) in which you identify yourself in the US differ from how others will identify you abroad.

You might be surprised to learn...

No matter what their background, the components of identity that most impact the experience of students abroad are **nationality** and **gender**.

Research the viewpoints held by people of your host country, including beliefs, laws, and customs that revolve around nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, mobility, and more. You may be able to prevent or at least alleviate cultural misunderstandings by learning as much as you can about your host culture before leaving. But also prepare for how your time abroad might change, challenge, and strengthen your identity.

In-Depth
Information

- [Being American abroad](#)
- [Gender roles abroad](#)
- [Race and ethnicity abroad](#)
- [Sexual and gender identity abroad](#)
- [Religious identity abroad](#)

Additional Information

Being American abroad

If you grew up in the US and identify as American, your American-ness will probably be the most important factor in how natives of your host country relate to you. (This is true no matter what your background.) While other components of your identity may be important factors, the fact that you are American will be a critical component of your identity abroad.

Be prepared to encounter curiosity and interest. America's unique economic, political, and cultural position in the world means that people all around the world feel like they have a stake in what the US does. You may be asked all sorts of questions, from what it's like to live in America to what you think of politics and other issues in the US. (The FBI has recently warned that American students abroad may also be the target of espionage recruitment.)

Most interest you receive will probably be friendly, even if frankly or passionately expressed. But do prepare yourself to encounter actual hostility as well, and to consider how you might handle it.

In many places, people may assume that because you are American, you are also rich. Or they may have other assumptions, based on media portrayals, local history with US policies or intervention, or other sources. Do some research before you go so that you can have some idea of what being an American might mean in your host country.

Quick tip

In some parts of the world, you should be careful about referring to yourself as "American." The entire Western Hemisphere is properly called America, and in Central and South America people may find the term "American" arrogant when used for just one country. Plan on referring to yourself as North American (*norteamericano*) instead.

Resources

Diversity Issues in Study Abroad [\[link\]](#): A booklet that collects statements of Brown University students about their experiences of identity abroad. A bit dated now, but many comments remain reflective of realities today.

A Student Guide to Study Abroad, a guide to many aspects of the process of study abroad, is a physical volume that you are welcome to reference by visiting GEO's reading library.

Additional Information

Gender roles abroad

Expectations surrounding gender roles vary from country to country, and even within countries. Because so much of our communication with others is interpreted in terms of gender, it is helpful to learn something about gender roles in your host culture. One of the best things about study abroad is making new friends, and you will want to avoid undue friction due to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Things to think about include:

Americans are accustomed to having non-romantic friendships with the opposite sex. How does your host culture view opposite-sex friendships?

If you are considering being sexually active abroad, research safe sex and birth control practices as well as attitudes toward sex outside marriage.

What constitutes sexual harassment under local law or understanding?

How do locals dress on the street? What might your manner of dress communicate to them about you?

While men studying abroad will certainly see cultural differences in their roles, it is women who will need to adapt most to local norms and values. North American women should be aware that they may face special sets of attitudes and assumptions.

Women may want to further research questions like these:

In some countries (particularly Latin countries), catcalls or other forms of harassment of women might be common. Is this sort of thing likely in your host country? How will you deal with it if so?

Are there stereotypes about North American women in particular? In many places, women from the US and Canada may be seen as "easy" or out for sexual adventure.

What behaviors might be construed as sexual? Smiling or greeting strangers? Looking directly at others? Going out at night without a companion of the opposite sex?

It can be useful to talk with [study abroad alumni](#) of your host country about what they've experienced. Get in touch with GEO to see if we can find you someone to talk to.

Resources

[Women: What You Need to Know Abroad](#), a pamphlet for women traveling abroad

[Her Own Way](#), a travel guide for women published by the Canadian government

[Tips about appropriate clothing from women travelers](#)

[Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center](#) at Vanderbilt

Additional Information

Race and ethnicity abroad

Depending on who you are and where you are going, you may feel a part of a racial or ethnic majority for the first time in your life. Or you may have the opposite experience, becoming a racial minority in one fell swoop. Either way, you will likely find that your ethnic or racial identity has different implications in your new host country than it has at home.

These new vantage points on self and identity can be exciting, but they can also be difficult. People may consistently misidentify you based on physical appearance, for example. Or you may be surprised at how freely people comment on appearance. If your appearance is very exotic for your host culture, you may find that you are stared at, or that people want to touch your hair or skin.

Or, it's possible that your physical appearance and racial or ethnic identity is almost totally ignored, and all that really seems to matter is your nationality or gender.

If you are traveling to a location that is part of your own heritage, be aware that people there may not see your heritage as the most important thing about you. If you are from the US, you may find that people there identify you as an American first. You should be prepared to be considered an outsider.

For all of these reasons, it will be wise to prepare yourself in advance for the attitudes on race and ethnicity held by people of your host country. Do some research, and also see whether talking with alums of the program might help. GEO can help you find alums to talk to, just ask!

Resources

Diversity Issues in Study Abroad : A booklet that collects statements of Brown University students about their experiences of identity abroad. A bit dated now, but many comments remain reflective of realities today.

[AllAbroad.us](#), which has a wide variety of specific information for African American, Asian/Pacific Island, Latino/Hispanic American, and Native American students

[Diversity Abroad](#), a collection of resources for underrepresented students traveling abroad

[Heritage seekers](#), thoughts and resources for students interested in exploring their own heritage through study abroad

Additional Information

Sexual and gender identity abroad

If you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, or intersex, you will want to take time to consider whether and how you plan to be out abroad. Depending on where you are traveling, your destination may provide you with either a more open environment than the US, or a much less welcoming one. Either way, be prepared: make yourself aware in advance of local attitudes, beliefs, and understandings. Ask yourself questions like the following:

Questions for LGBTQI Students to Consider:

What behaviors are legal in my host country? If I am interested in activism, are there ways to practice it both safely and legally?

Is it safe for me to be out in my host country and city?

How open do I want or need to be about my gender or sexual identity while abroad? Do I plan to be out? How specifically will I reconcile my human rights with the cultural values of my host country?

If my destination is one where I need to conceal my identity, how will this impact my experience?

What are the cultural norms surrounding friendship and dating in my host culture?

What norms surround publicly identifying as LGBTQI in my host culture? How does my self-presentation “read” in my host culture’s system of gendered norms and expectations?

What is the LGBTQI community in my host city like? How is it different from the community at home?

What on-site resources will I have if I experience any issues/concerns while I am abroad? Are there LGBTQI organizations or other resources at my host university or in my host city?

Do I have concerns about my housing situation? (If living with a host family, consider making the housing coordinator aware that you would like a host family that has hosted LGBTQI students in the past.)

Might I face challenges with travel and documents due to my gender presentation?

Regardless of self-identification, all students should be aware not only of local attitudes and beliefs surrounding sex and sexual identity, but also of local laws. Some countries criminalize speech as well as behavior, and you need to be well informed about matters that could affect your safety and well-being. The [ILGA website](#) is a good resource for checking on legal regimes around the world.

Study abroad is often a time when students explore identity and selfhood. If you are not out at home and are considering being out abroad, please make doubly sure that you do your research and ensure that your safety and well-being are provided for. If you will live with a homestay family and want to be out to them, consider telling the housing coordinator in advance that you would like an LGBTQI-friendly family. You can stipulate that they keep your request confidential, including from the family.

The local LGBTQI community will likely be quite different from that in your home country. Coming to know and understand this new culture will likely be exciting and rewarding, but like any process of cultural adaptation it may also be trying at times. Learn as much as you can in advance, but also adopt the attitude that difficulties are challenges to overcome rather than merely obstacles in your way.

It may be helpful to talk with others who have studied or traveled in your host country. You may be able to take advantage of welcoming contexts on campus, such as the [Office of LGBTQI Life](#), to help you network with past participants. Your study abroad provider may be able to connect you with LGBTQI alumni of your specific program. Your program staff can also serve as an excellent resource both before you leave and while you're abroad.

If you would like to talk about any aspect of your program with the Global Education Office, please do not hesitate to [contact us](#).

Resources

Vanderbilt's [Office of LGBTQI Life](#), a cultural center and resource for information and support about gender and sexuality

[International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association](#) provides legal information

on every country, as well as news and reports on the state of LGBTQI rights around the world

[International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission](#)  has extensive country-specific resources.

[Rainbow SIG bibliography](#) , bibliography of LGBQTI literature with an international perspective

[Rainbow SIG](#) , an organization of study abroad professionals knowledgeable about LGBQTI issues

[ILGA-Europe](#) , the website of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's European chapter, provides multiple resources, including a Guide to Europe

[Utopia](#) , an online guide to Asia-Pacific gay and lesbian resources, including legal and cultural information as well as links to country-specific resources

[Travel at Transgender Equality](#) : air travel tips for transgender people

[US passport requirements](#)  for transgender students

Additional Information

Religious identity abroad

Religion is a prominent feature of cultures around the world, even in countries that are officially atheist. During your time abroad, you will likely encounter fascinating and enriching ideas and practices. You may also experience things that challenge your notions of spiritual truth or even basic fairness.

If you plan to practice your own religion abroad, do some research first. You'll want to know whether there are convenient houses of worship, of course. But depending on where you are going, there may be safety issues to consider as well.

In some countries, there may be little commitment to religious pluralism. The state may sanction a religion. Or laws may restrict religious speech, particularly as it relates to political activism. In China, for example, it is a violation of the state constitution to use religion to "disrupt social order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system of the state."

Even if the society is generally an open one, be aware that safety concerns may still exist. Just as in the US, wearing symbols of some religions or frequenting houses of worship may make you a target for passionate violence from other groups.

Whatever your personal beliefs and circumstances, remember that your primary purpose is studying abroad. Consider your experiences an opportunity to understand the historical and social dimensions of religion in your host country. Be open-minded, save critical impulses for later, and open your own beliefs and practices to the same degree of scrutiny. If you approach your time in your host country as a time to learn about others' beliefs and attitudes, you can avoid many opportunities for conflict.

Questions to ask yourself

Is there a dominant religion in my host country?

What laws exist pertaining to religion? Are there strong societal practices that, while not codified in law, might shape religious practice?

How tolerant is my host country of religious diversity? How tolerant am I of beliefs and practices in my host country?

How tolerant is my host country of nonbelief (i.e. atheism, agnosticism)?

Where can I practice my religion?

How safe is it for me to wear symbolic expressions of my religion in public?

How can I accommodate my dietary requirements abroad?

Resources

[Pluralism Project](#), bibliography of research and websites on world religions

[International Religious Freedom](#), the most recent report from the US State Department on religious freedom around the world

[Jewish Travel Advisor](#), world-wide listing of kosher hotels and restaurants, synagogues, mikvaot, and Jewish communities around the world

[Halal Trip](#), website focused on Muslim travelers and including city guides with a focus on halal dining

Contacts and communications

Who should I contact for help abroad?

Communications abroad can seem difficult at first. You need to learn who your best resources are, as well as figure out the most convenient methods of communication within your host country and back home.

Your **Resident Director** will be your most reliable contact person: he or she is knowledgeable about the program, the host country, and the city—and he/she is *right there!* Whether you have a basic question, a scheduling conundrum, or you are in the midst of an emergency, your Resident Director and on-site staff should be the **first people you contact**. You will find out more about who your contact(s) should be in your program-specific predeparture orientation.

Remember this: Problems will be resolved faster if you work with someone who is on the ground with you rather than contacting someone back home who is a few time zones and thousands of miles away.

Hm...

[When should I contact Vanderbilt's Global Education Office?](#)

Additional Information

When to contact GEO

Most of the time, your most appropriate contact abroad will be your Resident Director, or if you are an exchange student, an advisor in your host university's international office. But there may also be times when it makes more sense to phone home to Vanderbilt and GEO. See the chart for things that GEO is well prepared to help you with!

What GEO Can Help You With

- You are uncomfortable discussing an issue with your on-site staff
- Questions about specific Vanderbilt policies
- Questions about billing
- Questions about your transcript
- You want to remain abroad for another term
- You're just not sure who to talk to!

Communicating with home

Striking a balance

You will need to strike an appropriate balance between the folks back home and your new life abroad. Your family wants to know you are safe and having a good time, and your friends want to keep in touch—so don't cut them off completely!

At the same time, be careful not to spend *all* your time chatting back home. Constant contact might be tempting, but it will ultimately make culture shock harder to bear and prevent you from experiencing your host country to the fullest. Our suggestion for keeping a healthy balance: get out and explore, make new friends, and set up a weekly schedule for contacting home.

Also keep your experiences in perspective when you call home. What you report from abroad can seem much more serious to family who aren't around to assess the situation for themselves. Beware of venting: You don't want to alarm anyone if you are only battling a head cold! Work with your on-site staff to remedy problems, and make sure your family knows you are safe and happy.

In-Depth
Information

[Phones and internet abroad](#)

Additional Information

Phones and internet abroad

Cell phones. GEO doesn't recommend one cell phone provider over another, but there are some resources to help you figure out what is best for you.

You may consider leaving your cell phone home and purchasing a cheap phone when you arrive. In fact, that is what we at GEO recommend you do. Or you could buy a cheap unlocked phone before you leave and get the appropriate SIM card when you arrive in your host country. (Some airports sell SIMs in the international arrivals section, so they can be quite easy to come by.)

If you do plan to take your own phone abroad, be sure to check with your phone company about their international plans and rates. Also check their data-roaming fees, since those can rack up fast!

You may want to talk to your provider (or look at their predeparture materials) to see if they have specific recommendations on how to handle phones abroad. You can also visit the Independent Traveler [international cell phone guide](#)  to get a good overview of the options.

Dialing Telephones. The details of dialing internationally vary depending on which countries you're trying to connect. Check out [How To Call Abroad](#)  and share it with family and friends.

Internet. Internet access abroad is typically not the same as in the US. While you will have access, prepare yourself for slower connections. Depending on your host location, you might have a weekly usage limit in your room or at your college, or you may need to pay for internet access at a cafe. Talk with your program provider or host university to find out what to expect.

Disabilities and accommodations

Getting physical and academic accommodations

If you have registered with the [Office of Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services](#) (EAD) to receive academic or physical accommodations at Vanderbilt, you will want to learn whether you can get similar accommodations on your program abroad.

Consult with the EAD staff and request that they send your accommodations letter to your program advisor or on-site staff. Do this *before* you depart! Program staff will use this letter in researching what accommodations are possible on site.

If you have a disability or challenge that you have so far managed without the EAD, you may want to meet with them before you study abroad. In addition to providing you with a letter, they can help you think through what you might need to ask of your program staff abroad.

Do understand that while most requests will be honored, laws in other countries regarding required or reasonable accommodations often differ from what is mandated by law in the United States.

Resources

[Vanderbilt Office of Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services](#)

[Mobility International USA](#), resources for travelers with disabilities

[Travelers with Disabilities](#), excellent information on traveling with physical disabilities

Money

Use debit and credit cards wisely to save money

The amount of money you spend while studying abroad will vary depending on the local cost of living, your personal spending habits, independent travel, and so on. *How* you access your money can also play a role in maintaining your budget.

Many businesses will not accept plastic, especially for smaller purchases, so it's a good idea to have **cash** on hand throughout your time abroad. The most cost-effective way to get cash abroad is to use your **debit card** (not a credit card!) in an ATM. You can usually find out where the ATMs you might need are before you leave the US—ask your bank how.

GEO also recommends that you bring a **credit card**. Be aware that every credit card purchase or debit card withdrawal will likely carry transaction fees. Shop around a bit for the best rates before you leave the US, but also minimize the number of times you use your cards. Take out as much cash as you feel comfortable with each time you use the ATM, and use your credit card only when necessary or when you have an especially large purchase.

Before you depart the US, and every time you enter a new country, you should inform your bank(s) of your location. If you don't, you may find your cards canceled as an anti-fraud measure!

Summary

Before you leave, consider seeking out the US banks with the best currency conversion and transaction fees for your host country.

Call your bank(s) to let them know you'll be abroad. Don't forget to call again whenever you cross an international border.

Use your debit card in an ATM to get cash on a weekly or biweekly basis.

Use your credit card for purchases. Do not use your debit card except for ATM withdrawals!

Use your credit card for large purchases if possible.

Only get cash from an ATM using your credit card in a dire emergency. Cash advances carry high fees.

In-Depth
Information

[More on credit cards](#)
[How do I budget for myself?](#)

Additional Information

More on credit cards

Europe and much of the rest of the world are moving to chip-and-PIN (or EMV) “smart” credit cards. These cards offer more secure transactions by adding an embedded microchip and replacing easily forged signatures with the entry of a PIN number.

You should be able to function abroad with a regular US swipe card, which are still accepted by most businesses. However, US swipe cards are not likely to work at most self-serve kiosks.

Depending on your bank, it may be possible for you to get a chip-and-PIN card in the US for use overseas. If you decide to explore this route, be aware that there is a difference between “chip-and-PIN” and “chip-and-signature” cards. Chip-and-signature cards will not work in automated kiosks abroad, for example.

Regardless of whether you choose a chip-embedded card, you may want to shop around for banks and credit card companies before you leave. Seek out cards that carry low foreign transaction fees, as well as debit card providers with overseas partnerships that allow for lower ATM fees.

Additional Information

Basics of Budgeting

Budgeting can be crucial to ensuring you have enough money to fund your study abroad experience. There are really two levels of budgeting that you need to keep in mind.

First is the **overall budget for your study abroad experience**. Getting a ballpark figure for this will help you and your family determine an appropriate monthly budget for you while you are abroad. Be sure to include not only the costs that are billed through Vanderbilt, but also the clear, fixed costs that you will pay out of pocket. Examples include: passport fees, visa fees, airfare, luggage fees, and purchase of clothing or other travel needs.

To this, you need to add an estimate of what you will spend on living expenses and entertainment and enrichment activities. These can be tricky to estimate, especially because a sudden change in currency exchange rates can alter the calculation substantially. GEO offers rough estimates in our cost calculator, but your program provider can give you a better idea of your costs on the ground. You can also use online cost-of-living calculators (see the Resources section below).

Now that you have a blanket estimate of costs, you and your family can determine how much you should aim to spend per month. Here is where you will need to figure out how to maintain your month-to-month budget while you are abroad.

A **month-to-month budget** is a detailed plan of the money you plan to spend, divided into categories: so much for food, so much for travel, and so on. You may need to revise it as you go. For example, you may overspend one month and need to cut back on future months. Keep in mind that students often spend more money the first few weeks while becoming acquainted with their new surroundings. [More tips on budgeting from GEO](#) .

Resources

[Numbeo](#) , international cost of living database and calculator

[Expatistan](#) , international cost of living database and calculator

[OANDA](#)  currency exchange converter, including historical trends

[Maintain a Personal Budget](#) , a general budgeting guide

[Budgeting While Abroad](#) , GEO's tips for maintaining a budget while abroad

[Budget tracking sheet](#) , a Google spreadsheet that helps automate budget tracking

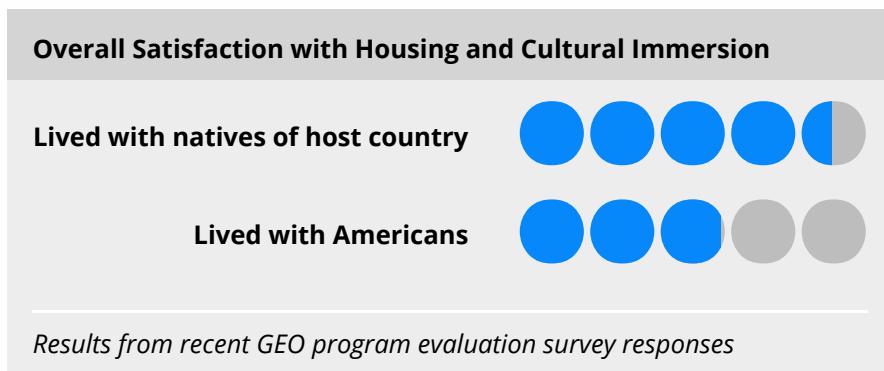
Where will you live?

What choices do you have in your housing abroad?

Some programs offer you the opportunity to select from multiple housing options. Which should you choose? (If you're not sure about your housing options, talk to the GEO advisor for your program.)

The answer, of course, depends on what you are hoping to get out of your time overseas.

But since you may be facing a choice soon, we want to share with you what alumni of Vanderbilt study abroad tell us in their program evaluations: Students who live with natives of their host country typically report greater satisfaction with their housing and integration into the local culture than students who live with Americans. This is true whether students lived with a homestay family or with native roommates of their own age.



Please note that [Vanderbilt University policy](#) does not allow you to find your own housing. The only exception to this rule is programs that don't offer prearranged housing.

Eating and diet

Balancing dietary requirements with cultural exploration

People everywhere eat differently because they *are* different—they have different cultures. Exploring another culture means exploring its food. GEO recommends that you keep an open mind, accept cultural differences, and try everything you (safely) can. Have a gastronomic adventure!

If you have dietary restrictions, eating well while fully experiencing your host culture may be a challenge. Whether you maintain your diet for medical, religious, philosophical, or other reasons, be sure to share the details with your program staff *before* you arrive on site. They will use this information to help identify appropriate housing for you. They may also be able to research restaurants, grocery stores, and useful vocabulary.

If you have a food allergy, be very detailed in disclosing what is safe for you. For example, if you have a nut allergy, can you be around nuts? can you eat food processed on the same equipment as nuts? are all nuts harmful for you? Let your program and host family know.

Learn as much as you can about your host culture's food, food culture, and food vocabulary before you go. Your diet and the terms you use for it may not be well understood there, so be prepared to explain why you can't, or choose not to, eat certain foods—ideally before someone cooks you a meal.

Resources

[Food](#), a pamphlet on “the edible part of culture”

[International Vegetarian Union](#), information and recipes for vegetarians and vegans worldwide

[VegGuide](#), a searchable guide to vegetarian restaurants worldwide

[SelectWisely](#), a library of links to information about traveling abroad with dietary restrictions

[Jewish Travel Advisor](#), world-wide listing of kosher hotels and restaurants, synagogues, mikvaot, and Jewish communities around the world

[Halal Trip](#), website focused on Muslim travelers and including city guides with a focus on halal dining

Making friends

Consider your goals as well as your opportunities

Starting off in a foreign country is in some ways like being a first-year student again. *Everything* is new, including all of the other students. Most study abroad programs offer orientation activities at the beginning of the semester. Take advantage of social opportunities during this orientation. It's your best chance to get to know the other participants, and it's not hard—luckily, they happen to be in the market for new friends too!

While it will be great to have friends in your program, you should be aware of the disadvantages of spending too much time with other Americans. If your goals include meeting local people, learning the language, or becoming something more than a long-stay tourist, you will need to look beyond the American crowd.

Making local friends

Get involved—outside your comfort zone

GEO strongly encourages our students to get to know local people and students in more than superficial ways. Not only does this provide the greatest opportunities for building cross-cultural and language skills, it will also give you a more meaningful experience. But getting to know locals can seem daunting. Here are some tips.

In most countries, your visa or residence permit will allow you to **volunteer** in the community or even do an **internship**: fantastic ways to immerse yourself in the local culture while also beefing up your resume. If you have questions about whether you can volunteer in your country, [contact GEO](#) or your program provider.

If you will be living with a **host family**, explore the opportunities provided by their wider social network. They likely know people that you might like to get to know!

If you are enrolled in or taking classes at a university, join **student organizations** on campus. Your campus probably has many clubs and intramural sports, and joining up is a great way to find locals who share your interests.

Visit your university's **office of international student services**. In addition to local knowledge about bus routes and student discounts, they may offer inexpensive excursions and other social opportunities.

Most important, **put yourself out there!** It may be uncomfortable at first, but it will pay off in the long run.

Homestays

[Gifts and relationships](#)

Additional Information

Gifts and Relationships

Presenting a gift shows that you place importance on a relationship. Consider a gift to start off your more important relationships abroad, such as with your homestay family or a host-country roommate.

In a cross-cultural setting, the best gifts can be those that let you bring a little of where you're from to the relationship. Examples might include a Vanderbilt mug or pendant, a photo book about Nashville or your hometown, maple syrup if you're from Vermont, or maybe biscuit or grits mix if you're from the South. Not only are gifts like these polite, positive, well-meaning gestures, they can also spur conversations ("Is a biscuit the same thing as a scone?").

Photos of home are another great conversation starter. Make sure you bring along some photos of your family, your house, your campus, your hobbies, and so on. It's a great way for people to feel like they are getting to know you and where you come from.

Health and Wellness

Before you leave

Know where you are medically before you depart

Regardless of whether you have an existing medical condition, there are a few things you should do before you go abroad.

First, consult with a travel medicine clinic (such as the one at the [VU Student Health Center](#)) about any **vaccinations** that might be necessary or advisable. You should do this as soon as possible!

Meet with your medical, dental, and other care providers for a **full checkup**. You don't want to be blindsided by an unnoticed condition when you arrive in your new location.

If you have an existing medical or mental health condition, have an honest discussion with your care providers about your current history and **how study abroad will fit into your care plan**.

While you know your history, your program staff does not. In an emergency, you may not be able to relay information that is critical to your care. *Please disclose any physical or mental health conditions* to your program staff prior to arrival. You can use the program's medical history form, or send an email detailing your history and current care plan.

Learn the generic names and legal status of any **prescription medications** you take *before* you leave the US. Request a letter from your physician explaining your use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs to ensure that you will be allowed entry into your host country.

Work with the travel clinic mental health team to **identify resources for obtaining your prescriptions** in your host country. Your provider may want you to obtain monthly prescriptions in the host country, and you may also need to have resources available in case you lose your medications.

In-Depth

[Do I need any vaccinations?](#)

Information

[How do I find out more about my medications?](#)

[Should I really disclose my medical information?](#)

Additional Information

Do I Need Any Vaccinations?

To find out whether any vaccinations are required or recommended for your trip abroad, you may visit the [Vanderbilt Student Health Center's Travel Medicine Clinic](#). You are also, of course, welcome to see a travel medicine provider of your choice.

Regardless of who you consult, schedule your initial appointment **at least 6 weeks before your departure**. Think about *all* of the countries you hope to visit and discuss them all with your travel clinician.

Be aware that most **medical insurance usually does not cover immunizations** or other medications needed for travel.

Resources

[Centers for Disease Control travel website](#), an excellent resource with country-specific information

[The Yellow Book](#), the CDC's extensive guide for foreign travel, with answers to questions you didn't even know to ask!

[VU Student Health Travel Medicine Clinic](#), information including list of documents to bring to your consultation

[List of information about vaccines](#) offered at VU Student Health, including approximate cost

Additional Information

Where to Find Crucial Information About Your Medications

There are two pieces of information that it will be useful or even critical for you to know about your medications: the legal status of the drug in your host country, and the generic/chemical name and/or the local brand names it goes by.

To **find out if any of your medications are restricted or banned** in your host country, contact the country's embassy here in the US. The US Department of State provides a [directory of foreign embassies](#). Even some over-the-counter drugs may be more restricted abroad, so ask if you have doubts.

To **find the generic or chemical name** of a drug, you can check the National Institutes of Health's [MedlinePlus website](#). It may be somewhat trickier to find out the brand name the drug might be sold under in your host country, but [this tool from HTH Worldwide Insurance](#) will provide answers in most cases.

Whatever the legal status of your medications, **request a letter from your physician** explaining why the drugs you are transporting have been prescribed to you. Also include over-the-counter drugs if needed. You will want to take this letter with you *whenever you travel!* Request that your doctor use the local brand names or generic/chemical names for your drugs.

When possible, **take enough medicine with you to cover your entire stay abroad**, unless your doctor prefers that you identify a physician in your host country to renew your prescription. You may discuss with your physician and program staff how you will obtain enough medication for your stay. Please be aware that medications *cannot be sent through the mail!*

Resources

[MedlinePlus](#), information on prescription and over-the-counter drugs, including generic/chemical names

[HTH Drug Translation Guide](#), offers equivalent brand names and availability for frequently visited countries/destinations

[Directory of Foreign Embassies](#), US Department of State

[Traveler's Checklist](#) from the US Department of State

[The Yellow Book](#), the CDC's extensive guide for foreign travel, with answers to questions you didn't even know to ask!

Additional Information

Disclosing medical information

GEO strongly recommends that you disclose all medical and mental health conditions to your program staff. Even if you are diligent in the management of your health, studying abroad can present challenges you may not have foreseen. You or your body may react in unexpected ways. It is in your best interest to give your on-site staff the tools necessary to ensure you have a safe and successful time abroad.

Any health-related history you provide is used to support your stay. It would only be shared in the case of a medical or mental health emergency—and only with the appropriate clinicians or staff on site. It will definitely *not* be used to determine your eligibility to participate in the program!

You are encouraged to discuss with your medical provider whether you should sign a Release of Information (ROI). This document would allow your doctor to discuss your medical needs with the person(s) named in the ROI. An ROI allows you to be cared for in the event that you are incapacitated and unable to grant the permission yourself.

Medical Insurance

You are covered by international insurance

You will be enrolled in international health insurance by your program provider, Vanderbilt GEO, or both (depending on the scope of the provider's coverage). Be sure to read your insurance benefits and know how to access health care providers in your host country. Also **know what your insurance covers** and how to file and pay claims.

This insurance only covers you outside the United States. GEO strongly encourages all students to maintain health insurance in their home country. If unforeseen circumstances force you to return home, you want subsidized care to be available.

International health insurance usually **only covers you for the official dates of your program**. If you are planning to travel before or after your program begins, GEO recommends that you purchase additional short-term coverage. You are free to select any provider, but **HTH Worldwide Insurance**  is readily available at reasonable prices.

If you are currently under medical care, your international health insurance can help in locating an appropriate care provider in your host country. Plan ahead! If you know you want to continue care overseas, contact your international insurance *before* you leave the US.

Resources

[Medical Care and Insurance](#) , a brief guide

[Brief plan info for HTH Worldwide Health Insurance](#) : If you have HTH health insurance through Vanderbilt GEO, this is a basic description of your plan. You may contact HTH for more information on particulars.

Culture shock

The process of adjusting to a new culture

Study abroad is an amazing time in the lives of students. Yet it is natural to have difficulty adjusting to a new culture. We call the feelings associated with this adaptation process “culture shock,” and they take a variety of forms. These may include homesickness, sadness, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and more.

Culture shock is usually not sudden or “shocking.” Instead, it is part of a continuum of feelings. Usually, there is a period of excitement when you first arrive—there is so much to see and do! Feelings of culture shock typically come soon after. The good news is that culture shock is temporary. Nearly all students will, after a few weeks, adjust to and thrive in their new surroundings.

How long culture shock lasts and how difficult it is, of course, differs depending on the person. If you are having a hard time adjusting—especially if others on your program seem to be doing fine—reach out to your resident staff or director to explain what you are feeling.

Keep in mind that you will likely experience a similar adjustment period when you return home and back to Vanderbilt. Students often tell us that this “shock” is harder than going abroad.

In-Depth
Information

[How should I cope with culture shock or other stress abroad?](#)

Additional Information

Coping with stress & culture shock

Culture shock is one expression of stress, but even after culture shock passes, living and studying abroad may sometimes be stressful. Stress may be harder to manage when you are far from your normal support group of family and friends. Learn to recognize the signs of stress and take steps to cope with the situation and make yourself more resilient.

Common signs of stress

exhaustion	fatigue	change in appetite
anxiety	isolation	alienation
frustration	extreme homesickness	increased use of nicotine, alcohol, or drugs
loneliness	change in behavior	self-harming
new or more frequent physical symptoms, e.g. headaches, stomachaches, etc.		

One of the best ways to combat stress in a new environment is to prepare for the new location. **Learn as much as you can about your host city** before you go. Read up on climate, foods, politics, culture, religion, and more. Buy a phrasebook and try to learn some of the basics of the language.

Take a step back. Analyze your situation and study your own reactions. Where exactly is the stress coming from? Ask yourself if cultural differences might be a contributing factor, and how you can work with or around them. Focus on what you can change or control, not on what you can't: If you can't change the situation, work on changing your reactions to it.

Take care of your body. Be sure that you are staying active, eating well, and getting enough sleep. Work on being positive, and be active—get out of your room.

Identify what helps you *healthfully* manage stress. Avoid using pills, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, overeating, undereating, or oversleeping to manage stress. Instead, focus on healthy antidotes and find the ones that work for you. Ideas include exercise, keeping a journal, regular social contact with *positive* people, hobbies, other leisure activities, or cultural activities.

Find your social support. Identify your support groups both locally and at home. These might include program staff, housing staff, homestay family, friends, home university staff, or family. Ask yourself who can best offer you the support you need, and then ask them for it!

Resources

[Life in a Foreign Culture](#), tips to ease your cultural adjustment

[Culture Shock, Homesickness, and the “Aha Moment”](#), firsthand description of culture shock, and of both failed and successful coping

[HelpGuide: Stress Management](#), practical tips for handling stress

[How Stress Affects Your Health](#), info from the American Psychological Association

[Vanderbilt Mind-Body Lab](#), includes self-help modules for stress management

[Vanderbilt’s Psychological & Counseling Center](#) Wherever you are in the world, the PCC can help you identify local resources. When you contact PCC, request the GEO resource provider.

Illness abroad

Know attendance policies and who to contact

Think about who can best help you if you become sick while abroad. It will usually be someone on site, with your program's resident director or staff at the top of the list. Don't contact home for help unless you've exhausted all your local contacts.

When you arrive at your program site, you should receive a list of all appropriate emergency contacts for your program or host university, as well as for emergency services (police, ambulance, etc.). If you don't receive this information, ask for it! Also consider recording it on a [handy wallet-sized card](#).

Remember that phone numbers for emergency services will be different in each country you might visit. Get that information before you take a side trip.

Be aware of the absence and illness policies for your program or host university. They may differ drastically from Vanderbilt policies. Always keep your program staff in the loop while ill (via email or phone).

Be sure to keep any doctor's notes for your files. You may need them later for academic or medical reasons.

Resources

[The Yellow Book](#), the CDC's extensive guide for foreign travel, with answers to questions you didn't even know to ask!

[Emergency services numbers abroad](#), the US Department of State's list of 911 equivalents around the world

[Vanderbilt's Psychological & Counseling Center](#) Wherever you are in the world, the PCC can help you identify local resources. When you contact PCC, request the GEO resource provider.

Safety and Security

Preparing for safety

Research your destination and register your travel

While generally not more dangerous than life in Nashville, study abroad is not a risk-free activity. You are traveling into an unfamiliar country and situation, and the most effective way to avoid problems is to plug the gaps in your knowledge.

The more you know and learn about your destination before you go, the safer you will be. Read all the program information you are given, and do your own research as well. Up-to-date commercial guidebooks are often good resources, particularly for coverage of local risks and high-crime areas. Country-specific information provided by the US Department of State and its counterparts overseas can also be helpful.

Know the local laws, and learn about behavioral norms and expectations. Outspokenness and ostentatious public behavior are not virtues in most places abroad. In some situations they may invite unwanted attention and problems. Dress in a fashion that is appropriate to cultural norms and religious sensitivities.

Register your overseas travel plans with [International SOS](#), Vanderbilt's emergency evacuation provider. This is **mandatory**, and *you should register not only your main trip, but also any side trips you take while abroad*. If you are a US citizen, you should also register with the Department of State's [STEP program](#).

In-Depth
Information

[What are the best resources for monitoring the safety of regions overseas?](#)

[How does Vanderbilt minimize risks that students face abroad?](#)

Download a [wallet-sized emergency numbers directory](#) to record information in a handy, portable format.

Additional Information

Resources for monitoring safety

You should keep an eye on the safety situation in all the places you are planning to travel. This includes the program site, but also countries you might visit on independent weekend travel, breaks, or holidays.

Potential resources include local and international media, as well as the websites of governmental and nongovernmental agencies. It can be a good idea to look at the advice of multiple sources, as they may have different perspectives and emphases. The resources here include country-specific resources from many governments to facilitate this sort of comparison.

Resources

[Learn About Your Destination](#) , country-specific resources from the US Department of State

[International SOS](#) , up-to-date risk ratings and travel security advisories

[US Department of State Traveler's Checklist](#) 

[US Department of State's site for student travelers](#) 

[US Department of State's STEP program](#)  (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program)

[Canadian Foreign Affairs and Int'l Trade Office](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English and French)

[UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office](#) , country-specific travel advisories

[Republic of Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#) , country-specific travel advisories

[German Federal Foreign Office](#) , country-specific travel advisories (German only)

[Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#) , country-specific travel advisories

[French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, French, German, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese)

[Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, Hebrew, Arabic, Russian)

[Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, French, Arabic)

[Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, Hindi, other)

[Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, Japanese, others)

[People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, Chinese, French, Russian, and Arabic)

[Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) , country-specific travel advisories (English, Russian, French, German, Spanish)

Additional Information

Vanderbilt's safety efforts

The safety and security of students studying abroad are primary concerns of Vanderbilt University. Vanderbilt takes care to minimize the risks students face abroad through several measures, including:

- Selecting responsible partners and organizations to provide educational opportunities abroad;
- Assessing the risks associated with all study abroad sites both when approving programs and throughout the program's lifetime;
- Assuring a high standard of personal health insurance coverage for all students studying abroad;
- Retaining emergency evacuation services and full-spectrum travel assistance for all students;
- Providing program-specific training to help students identify and mitigate potential risks;
- Providing access to on-site support staff and organizations trained to handle emergencies of all types;
- Training on-campus personnel to respond to crises and provide support where possible;
- Keeping abreast of conditions and events where students abroad are based;
- Training students in preventive as well as remedial strategies to avoid trouble abroad.

Basic safety abroad

Tips for staying safe while out and about

You are the best guarantor of your own safety! While abroad, commit yourself to being an alert and observant traveler at all times. Anticipate problems by learning to read the local environment, and by knowing where and when to be hypervigilant. If you aren't paying attention, you can easily become the victim of opportunistic crime.

Know where you are going and look like you belong. Definitely bring your map along, but don't check it in the open street, where looking lost could get you robbed. Be friendly, but don't hesitate to refuse offers of help from strangers, especially near ATMs, ticket machines, train and metro stations, and baggage lines. See a [list of common travel scams](#).

Avoid demonstrations and political disturbances of all kinds. Crowd behavior is unpredictable, and even peaceful marches can turn violent.

Get a working cell phone and carry it with you. Some programs require students to have a phone, and most will provide you information on getting a cheap phone that works locally. A phone can be a literal lifeline in an emergency—carry one!

Secure your travel and identification documents at all times, and store duplicate copies in multiple places. **Know your local emergency numbers**, particularly for your resident director or program staff and for the local equivalent of 911.

Learn local traffic patterns and traffic laws, as well as safe pedestrian habits. Road safety issues and driving accidents are the *primary* cause of injury to students abroad. Given the risks of traffic accidents, **Vanderbilt does not recommend the rental of motor vehicles while studying abroad.**

In-Depth
Information

[Road safety overseas](#)

Additional Information

Road safety overseas

Movies and media reporting have conditioned us to think that the greatest threats to safety abroad are dramatic, “foreign,” and of the “third world.” The reality is that the **number one cause of injury and death for American students abroad is traffic accidents.** And the vast majority of these occur in wealthy, industrialized countries.

GEO suggests that you train yourself to pay maximum attention at all times. Avoid earbuds as well as drinking—both can impair perception! Know the basic patterns of traffic, and remember to pay attention to the right side of the road in countries where traffic flow is reversed!

Avoid traveling late at night, and always choose the safest form of transportation available. If you have a choice between riding in a taxicab or on the roof of a crowded bus—choose the cab! If walking is your safest option, do that whenever possible.

Just as in the US, you should always wear a seatbelt. Avoid riding with anyone who appears intoxicated, over-tired, or emotionally distraught. Always sit in the back seat of a taxi.

Developing countries present other risks, including shady taxi drivers, unsafe vehicles, overcrowded transport, and more. Your program staff will provide you with information about your options and help you assess risk. Don’t be afraid to ask questions!

Vanderbilt strongly advises against renting a vehicle while abroad. Cars, SUVs, motorcycles, and mopeds are equally poor choices. The risks of driving when the rules of the road are unfamiliar are just too great.

Resources

[Road Safety Overseas](#) , US Department of State

Country-specific information from US Department of State , includes information on road safety for every country in the world

Personal emergencies

What to do after experiencing a personal emergency

Personal emergencies may arise from illness, accidents, behavioral health crises, or criminal/negligent behavior. They generally require immediate assistance, whether from a health professional, law enforcement, a counselor, or some combination of these. If you encounter a personal emergency abroad, follow these steps:

Request help immediately. Know the local [emergency number or numbers](#) (911 doesn't work abroad!) and have your phone with you at all times.

Notify your program's emergency contact. At least one member of your program's staff will be available to you around the clock. On-site personnel are best positioned to provide timely and appropriate emergency support. If you are reporting an emergency on behalf of a friend, be sure to identify yourself as well as your friend.

If you are in immediate danger, or have been in a serious accident or the victim of a criminal act, **contact law enforcement as soon as possible.** Your program staff may be in a better position to talk with law enforcement, and will also know the proper protocols. Work with him or her if at all possible.

Contact your insurance provider if the emergency requires medical attention of any kind. Depending on the nature of the emergency, it may also be appropriate to contact International SOS (ISOS). See information later in this presentation.

Notify the Vanderbilt Global Education Office. A direct notification from you will help us coordinate support services. We can often provide additional assistance or help streamline communications.

Contact the nearest embassy. Consular agents at US embassies are available 24/7 to help US citizens with emergencies. If you are not a US citizen, contact both the US embassy and your home country's embassy.

Contact your family. Your family will be anxious and concerned about your well-being. Your program staff and GEO are both limited in the information they can share, so be sure to communicate with your family directly.

Download a [wallet-sized emergency numbers directory](#)  to record information in a handy, portable format.

Large-scale emergencies

Procedures for dealing with large-scale disaster

Large-scale emergencies take many forms. Massive accidents, civil strife, acts of terrorism, natural disasters.... They are hard to predict and proper response depends heavily on local circumstances.

In general, your program staff will brief you soon after arrival on emergency protocols.

Local emergency plans typically include the following elements:

- a pre-established location where students and staff will assemble after a large-scale disaster;
- communications protocols designed to account for all program participants;
- an evacuation plan;
- contingency plans short of full evacuation.

The most important general advice that Vanderbilt can offer is this: **Know the protocols of your site's emergency plan.** Keep calm, follow those protocols, and act with common sense and your best knowledge of the local situation.

If you are traveling independently or are unable to reach your rally point, contact International SOS (ISOS). Vanderbilt contracts with ISOS to provide emergency services around the globe. They can provide you with information as well as direct aid. See the information on the next page.

Download a [wallet-sized emergency numbers directory](#)  to record information in a handy, portable format.

Resources

[FAQ on the US Department of State's role in crises overseas](#) 

[Vanderbilt's ISOS portal](#) , includes contact information

International SOS

Emergency and travel assistance for Vanderbilt students

Vanderbilt contracts with International SOS (ISOS) primarily to handle responses to major emergencies overseas. ISOS also offers other services, and as a Vanderbilt student, you have access to all of them. But you should be aware that *not all are free* to you.

The primary role of ISOS is to aid in response to large-scale disasters and crises. For example, during the “Arab Spring,” ISOS evacuated a Vanderbilt student from Egypt. The organization runs a worldwide network of centers, clinics, and ambulances to deal with ill or wounded people. If you use ISOS in such an emergency, Vanderbilt will cover the cost.

ISOS can also help you with medical, personal, security, legal, or travel problems. Examples might include dealing with a lost passport, a critical missed airline connection, medical help, or other issues. ISOS provides these services on a fee-for-service basis (it is *not* a health insurer). While Vanderbilt may cover the up-front charges in non-emergency circumstances, **you may be billed for these services after the fact!**

ISOS also offers excellent safety information both on its [website](#) and via emailed updates, but you must register your travel with ISOS to receive this information. You are required to register with ISOS and will receive instructions for how to do so via your online GEO account. Generally this information appears in the month before the end of the semester.

Resources

[Vanderbilt's ISOS portal](#), up-to-date risk ratings and travel security advisories. Register your travel here!

Returning Home

Reverse culture shock

Be prepared for coming home to be a bumpy ride

It may seem like a distant reality now, but part of the study abroad experience is returning home. Many students tell GEO that this is harder than expected, and often harder than going abroad to begin with!

Look, reverse culture shock is a fact. Returning home after a significant period of time abroad is in some ways just like going abroad. You have changed, your perceptions have changed, and you are now used to living in and interacting with a different culture. You may even find that readjusting to life in the US is more difficult than the initial adaption to your host country. Instead of ignoring this reverse culture shock, learn about effective ways to combat it. Rest assured, there are many resources that may be helpful as you make the adjustment to being back at home. You can find some resources on GEO's website (under [Reverse Culture Shock](#)); you might want to bookmark that page for when you come back. Some useful resources are also listed below.

Some students benefit from supportive counseling when struggling with reverse culture shock. You can contact [Vanderbilt's Psychological & Counseling Center](#) for counseling services at no charge.

Resources for Reverse Culture Shock

[Top 10 Challenges Faced on Returning from Study Abroad](#)

[Adjusting to Life Back Home](#)

[Common Challenges and Coping Strategies](#)

[Tips for Family and Friends on Welcoming a Student Home](#)

[Small Planet Studio, an online community for study abroad alums](#)

[Melibee Global](#)

[Vanderbilt's Psychological & Counseling Center](#)

Opportunities for returned students

There's sooooo much you can do when you get home!

Your study abroad experience doesn't have to end when you return to the US! In fact, our goal is to ensure that you can extend and process your experience when you return home.

GEO offers programming specifically for returning students. We sponsor a **student organization**, the Study Abroad Alumni Group, which hosts social dinners and workshops. Our [annual conference](#) helps you unpack your experience and/or share your newfound insights about the world with fellow students.

When you return, you can also **volunteer with** or **work for GEO**; it's a great way to share your experience with other students. You can also get involved in our own local community: you may be surprised how international Nashville really is!

Studying abroad can make you a great candidate for **prestigious honors scholarships** when you return home. Some of these, such as the Fulbright Fellowship or Critical Language Summer Institutes, may even send you abroad again. These opportunities may require advance planning, though, so we encourage you to study the offerings and discuss your interests with the [Office of Honor Scholarships](#) before you leave.

In-Depth Information

[More ideas and resources for getting involved after you return](#)

[What possibilities exist for me to go abroad again after I return?](#)

Additional Information

More Ideas and Resources for Getting Involved After Returning Home

Whether you're interested in publishing your experiences, submitting photos to the GEO photo contest, or getting involved with the international communities of Vanderbilt and Nashville, GEO has information for you. In fact, there's an [entire section of our website](#)  dedicated to giving you ideas for post-study abroad involvement. Check it out!

Additional Information

Going Abroad ... Again!

Students who return from abroad often feel the need to go abroad again.

If you are not graduating and you have room in your academic schedule, you are welcome to **apply for another GEO study abroad program**—there is no rule that says you can only go once! Or, if you are more strapped for time, consider **volunteering abroad**. You can go over break either with the [Office of Active Citizenship and Service](#) (OACS) or on your own. You may even be able to find funding (ask OACS about the [Nichols Humanitarian Fund](#)).

Or consider **graduate studies abroad**. Several universities around the world welcome international students for graduate degrees. Many have more reasonable tuition fees than you will find in the US, yet with comparable educational quality and prestige. It is often possible to apply US federal financial aid toward studies at recognized institutions. Some countries, like the United Kingdom, will even give you a 1- or 2-year work visa upon completion of an advanced degree in their country.

Another option might be **working or interning abroad**, including teaching English abroad. Visit GEO's [Career page](#) for resources and tips for finding an international job.

GEO's Annual Photo Contest

Keep the contest in mind as you decide what to photograph!

Every year, GEO conducts a photo contest. We solicit photos from students who went abroad in the 12 months previous and choose the best images to feature.

We will contact you via email, usually in the summer, to request your entries in the contest.

There are prizes, and we invite the entire Vanderbilt campus and alumni community to take part in the judging process. If you're a winner, your photo will be seen by thousands or tens of thousands of people! We put the winning photos on live exhibit on campus, and they tend to show up in campus publications as well, including *Vanderbilt Magazine*.

Photos can be of any subject (scenery, activities, cultures, etc.) but please be tasteful and respectful as you snap your pics.

If you just want to share photos of your experiences without entering the contest, [we have an outlet for that too](#) .

GEO is particularly keen on photos that show Vanderbilt students participating in academic and cultural endeavors. Scenery is beautiful, but action shots with Vandy representatives (such as yourself) tell interesting stories!

In-Depth
Information

[Quick guidelines for ethical photography](#)

Additional Information

Ethical Photography Abroad

As a representative of Vanderbilt, your home country, and the global community at large, you have a responsibility to follow ethical and respectful photography practices. Be mindful of the message your final product sends as well as the impact it has on the host culture.

Definitely **get permission** to photograph human subjects: There are cultures where people consider photography rude or a violation of modesty, or believe that the camera can be harmful to health. And in all cultures there are people who just don't like to be photographed. Don't be afraid to ask for permission, though. Instead consider asking for permission as an opportunity to make a connection, have a conversation, and to demonstrate your interest in the people of your host country!

Questions to ask yourself before you snap that picture

Does the photo make fun of the culture or people of my host country?

Does this picture tell a false story about my host country or its people?

Does the subject mind that I'm photographing them?

What message does this photo send about how I spent my time abroad?

More resources:

[Guidelines for Culturally Sensitive Photography](#) 

[Breaking Free from the Viewfinder](#) 

Finishing Up

What to do next

You have completed the training!

Congratulations, you have completed Study Abroad Survival Training. On the following pages you will find an Index that you can bookmark to return to any page of this training easily, as well as credits for the student photographs and other pieces that went into making this presentation.

Below are a few things you may need to take care of right now. Remember, if you have questions about your next steps or any other aspect of your study abroad experience, GEO staff are standing by! [Contact us](#) .

- **Apply for a passport** if you don't have one or if it will expire less than 6 months *after you return* from abroad.
- Check requirements for a **student visa** or resident permit, and begin applying if necessary.
- Download the [Semester Responsibilities & Opportunities Checklist](#)  for a guide to things you need to do on campus.
- Students, please **register your participation** in this training! Note that it may take a few days before your registration is reflected in your GEO account. Please fill out the form below to register. If you have trouble submitting the form, you can [fill it out here instead](#) .

Your Name *

First Name

Last Name

Email Address *

Please provide your official University email address

Comments

Optional

SUBMIT

Credits

Thanks to all for their contributions!

Study Abroad Survival Training logo image

Detail, Bonnie Renee Williamson '15, [Inside the Grotta Azzurra \("Blue Cave"\), Capri, Italy](#) 

Background Images (visible on wider screens only)

- Ben Woods '10, [Sand Dunes in Sossusvlei, Namibia](#) 
- Elizabeth Rose Wheelock '15, [Tulips at the Keukenhof Gardens, outside of Amsterdam](#) 
- Lori Ann Weinstein '14, [Sunrise at the lighthouse in Byron Bay, Australia](#) 
- Sushma Boppana '14, [Hillside Door in Budapest, Hungary](#) 
- Joshua Grubb '14, [Checkered Lawn at the Jardín Japonés \(Japanese Garden\), Buenos Aires, Argentina](#) 
- Danielle Antoinette Morrison '14, [Rooftop View, Segovia, Spain](#) 
- Abby Marie Pribish '14, [Lake Geneva Through the Foliage, Switzerland](#) 
- John Franklin Sims-Jones '14, [Fields and mountains near the Inca ruins of Moray, Peru](#) 
- Stefanie Tollefson '13, [Violet tree in Rome, Italy](#) 
- Jonathan C. Williams '14, [Beautiful clear beaches of Tarifa, Spain](#) 
- Martha Ann Babbitt '14, [Looking out onto Lake Como, Italy](#) 

Other Images

Browser icons from Cătălin Mariş's open [GitHub project](#) .

