



Protesters throw rocks at the Egyptian military outside the American University of Cairo in 2011. Many colleges in the U.S. have suspended study-abroad programs in Egypt because of unrest in the region. Ahmed Ali/AP

## After Terror in France and Unrest in Turkey, Schools Grapple With Whether to Send Students Abroad

Some colleges have suspended entire programs because of fears of terrorism, while others are running them as usual.

**EMILY DERUY** JUL 20, 2016 **EDUCATION**

Study-abroad programs are designed to expose students to ideas and cultures different from their own. They are a soft-diplomacy tool, a chance for young people to share positive exchanges with students in parts of the world that aren't always fond of the United States, places with different philosophies for governing and doing business. Studying abroad is not supposed to be easy or comfortable. But it's also not supposed to be fatal.

A series of recent terrorist attacks and uprisings around the world in the past few weeks have left several students dead. Last week, Nicolas Leslie, a 20-year-old UC Berkeley student taking courses in France, was among the more than 80 people killed during a terrorist attack in Nice. Another Berkeley student, Tarishi Jain, perished during the attacks earlier this month in Bangladesh, where she was interning through a university program. Earlier this year, the body of an Italian doctoral student was found in Cairo. It showed signs of torture. A University of Wisconsin at Madison student recently turned up dead in Rome.

So, in the aftermath of unrest in Turkey, terror attacks in places as varied as Brussels and Bangladesh, and continued instability in places like Egypt, universities are attempting to walk a fine line between keeping students safe and promoting the global exchanges that advocates say could ultimately help reduce such acts of intolerance. "It is actually more important than ever today not to do things completely out of fear," said Wagaye Johannes, the project director of a campaign to double the number of U.S. students who go abroad at the nonprofit Institute of International Education.

There's no fast rule when it comes to how schools decide when to move forward with a program, and when to pull the plug. And schools make different calculations based largely on whom they serve. Texas

Tech University announced in March after the Brussels attack that it would suspend its summer and fall programs in Belgium, and prohibit students from visiting the country. The decision signaled a move few other schools seem to have taken and one that narrows the list of options Texas Tech students have when it comes to approved places to study abroad.

Tibor Nagy, the school's vice provost for international affairs and a retired U.S. ambassador to Guinea and Ethiopia, acknowledged the school is "more conservative than many other institutions in selecting our study-abroad destinations." That's because the college serves a high number of first-generation students, he said, and many young people are the first in their families to have a passport.

Well before the chaos in Turkey erupted, Texas Tech halted its study-abroad program there because the region is home to a number of active terrorist organizations and the environment seemed "too uncertain," Nagy said. But France, unlike Belgium, he said, is a larger country with a police force that is "about as competent as anybody," so Texas Tech students will be permitted to study there. "We reevaluate literally on a day-to-day basis," he said.

While Texas Tech is more cautious than many others, Nagy said individual cases may warrant a more lenient approach. A student of Nigerian descent who is born in the U.S. but still has family in Lagos and is familiar with the culture and "what to do and what not to do," he said, might be permitted to pursue a research opportunity there that the school might have concerns about approving for other students. "This world is inherently dangerous because of the scourge of terrorism," he said, "and the choices one has is 'Do you hunker down in Lubbock, Texas, and not go anywhere?' and the opposite extreme would be going for birdwatching in the mountains of Afghanistan."

There has to be a happy medium.”

Josh McKeown, the director of international education and programs at the State University of New York at Oswego, which has worked in recent years to increase both the number and diversity of students going abroad, wrote in an email that while his school will “constantly monitor events and take government warnings seriously,” administrators plan to continue offering all programs, including a Turkey semester exchange in the fall.

Most schools seem to fall somewhere in the middle when it comes to study-abroad precautions. Many have suspended or canceled programs in Turkey and Egypt because of continued instability in the region, but most are continuing to offer programs in France, Belgium, and other places in Europe that have been the recent target of terrorists, including London and Madrid.

For instance, the University of California’s Education Abroad Program (UCEAP), which serves some 100,000 students across the system’s 10 campuses, announced it was suspending its 2016-17 programs at Boğaziçi University, Koç University, and Bilkent University in Turkey because of “safety and security concerns.” UCEAP has also suspended its program at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, because of “sustained unrest and instability” in the region.

When the school halted the Egypt program in 2013, some alumni supported the decision, but others called it a mistake. “The suspension of this EAP program represents a great loss of opportunity for UC students,” Ali Glenesk, a Berkeley student who studied in Cairo in 2008-09, told the Daily Californian. “I’d encourage all students who can to still find a way to study and learn in the Middle East.” (Berkeley and UCEAP did not immediately respond to interview requests.)

Regardless of where schools maintain programs, they are all paying more attention to how they respond in a crisis and how they ensure the security of the students they send abroad. Nagy says he responds as an embassy would, figuring out where students are as quickly as possible and reaching out to families with information.

**Middlebury College, a liberal-arts institution in Vermont, hired a security company called Global Rescue during the Arab Spring to evacuate more than 20 students from Alexandria, Egypt, after things got dicey, and ultimately signed a contract with the company to provide security and medical advice for all students who go abroad. “We learned a lot from that situation,” said Jeff Cason, who oversees study abroad as the school’s vice president for academic affairs. The company sends students notifications and advice tailored to wherever they are studying, and helps the school communicate with families, instructors, and others when an emergency occurs.**

Middlebury also purchases health insurance for all students going abroad with no option to opt out. The school had about 50 students in Paris during the attacks there last year, Cason said, and was able to communicate in real time where students were and how they were doing. “Communication—that’s the key thing,” he said.

When schools close a program, there is sometimes a concern about whether students will be able to reap the same benefits somewhere else. Middlebury hasn’t operated an Egypt program for several years but plans to open a new program in Morocco so students who want to study Arabic have an option in the region. Decisions about when to maintain a program and when to call it quits come down to a conversation among high-level administrators, Cason said. And while the safety and concerns of students and parents are an obvious factor for schools, so is input from boards of trustees, who have a vested interest in making sure schools are prepared to handle crises abroad. Cason gave a presentation in May to reassure his board that Middlebury is prepared. “Risk is everywhere,” he said, “and the best we can do is try to mitigate that.”

After the University of Wisconsin student died in what seems to be an isolated incident, the school published a note saying it had recently hired a director of international safety and security, and that it was directing more attention and funding toward safety and security than at any time in the past. John Lucas, a school spokesman, wrote in an email that it would maintain programs in France and Belgium, but that it would not allow students to travel to Turkey because school policy states that students won’t travel places that are under a State Department travel warning or a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention “warning level three” notice without a waiver.

Ronald Machoian, the director of international safety and security at the University of Wisconsin, explained the school’s reasons for continuing certain study-abroad programs in an interview with the Badger Herald. “The public agencies and infrastructure in both France and Belgium remain intact and able to interdict, respond to, and investigate terrorist and criminal actions,” he said. In 2010, the university had pulled the plug on its Tunisia program because the shaky government structure prevented the school from getting a good sense of the country’s infrastructure, Machoian told the paper.

Max Walczyk, a Wisconsin student who was studying in Paris when the November attacks occurred there, appreciated his university’s willingness to keep its students abroad. “In my case, my program has allowed me to discuss and process these events with students from all over the world, an opportunity that I likely would not have had if I had stayed on Madison’s campus all four years,” Walczyk told the Badger. “I think that it’s that type of dialogue that allows us to deal with the pain of these tragic events and hopefully prevent similar events from occurring in the future.”

While some schools, like Wisconsin, follow State Department guidelines, others, like Middlebury, see them as one factor among many as they make decisions. There is no specific rule specifying how colleges respond to travel warnings. In an email, a State Department official urged Americans going abroad to notify the department through its Smart Traveler Enrollment Program. “The health and safety of exchange program participants is our top priority,” the official said. “The State Department is deeply committed to the effective management of our exchange programs for participants from around the world to ensure positive and productive exchange program experiences. We are constantly monitoring world events to ensure the safety of our exchanges participants, as well as the ability to successfully carry out the goals of our exchange programs.”

The Institute of International Education sells a guide for parents who have concerns about their children going abroad. Johannes, the project director there, said it’s too early to tell whether recent unrest will negatively influence the number of students going abroad or the destinations they select, but she hopes students will continue going abroad and having “those people-to-people interactions” that can foster global cooperation.

Aaron Morehouse, the executive director of a project to give more low-income students of color an opportunity to study abroad at the nonprofit World Learning, thinks recent events may prompt more schools to look to organizations like his to facilitate international experiences. World Learning is more than 80 years old and has support from different government agencies and local contacts in countries around the world, which, Morehouse said, means it has “backup plans for backup plans and [is] prepared for anything to happen.” When individual schools run their own small programs, he said, they don’t always develop deep contacts on the ground, which can make responding to a crisis difficult.

But as Morehouse, and others, pointed out, “Everywhere that you go, you have certain levels of risk.” Remaining in the U.S. is not necessarily safer than going abroad. “We’re in an age where disruptive events are borderless,” Johannes said. “Whether you’re in your own country or overseas, you should be aware of the risks and use common sense.”

And of course, concerns go both ways. After a Chinese graduate student at Boston University died in the Boston Marathon bombings and a Saudi Arabian student was misidentified as a suspect, both students and officials expressed concerns about sending foreign students to the U.S. More recently, some have expressed concern about tension between police and young people of color.

The upshot is, there is no way to guarantee students’ safety, whether they are in Orlando or Dallas, or Brussels or Nice. There is risk everywhere. But every single person interviewed for this story said there is still great reward in studying abroad. As Nagy at Texas Tech said, students today need to be prepared to have “globalized careers.” And yes, said Morehouse, there’s rising extremism, but there’s also “this amazing connectivity that is allowing for great innovation and great creativity in the world, and to stop the connection that happens through exchange would counteract exactly what we need in the world.”