

# Preparing for Study Abroad

## Guide for family and friends

Thank you for supporting your student in the decision to study abroad. Planning, applying and preparing to study abroad is an exciting process, yet it can be overwhelming at times, and your student can use all your help, advice and guidance. With this guide from the Office of International and Exchange Programs, we are hoping to answer some of your questions.

**Student's Responsibilities:** You should encourage your student to assume primary responsibility for planning and preparing for his or her study abroad trip. This is a great opportunity for your student to become organized and a good test in being on their own for one or two semesters. The study abroad staff here is available to answer questions and offer guidance. The staff at the host institution abroad and/or the program provider organization can also answer some specific questions. Your student will receive some time-sensitive materials from our office and the program provider/host institution, and it is critical that those be returned by the specified deadlines. We also encourage your student to keep you informed about his or her study abroad program and to refer you to relevant websites and resources for additional information. The federal law known as the Family Education Reform and Privacy Act (FERPA) prevents us from releasing student information even to immediate family members unless we have permission from the student. If you have questions, therefore, your first point of contact should be your student who will most likely have the information already.

**Academic Policy:** Study Abroad programs are just that – study. They are **not** vacations or tours in foreign countries, or a break from a student's studies at UMF. We expect students to attend class, meet all course requirements, stay for the duration of the program, take their examinations, and earn respectable grades during their time overseas. Students need to earn the equivalent of C- abroad in order to transfer the academic credits back to UMF. While abroad, your student must maintain full-time status, i.e., he or she should take courses at the host institution equivalent to at least 12 UMF credits for a semester program, and at least 6 credits for summer programs. For the duration of the study abroad program, your student will maintain his or her status as a UMF student registered to study abroad. If the student does not fulfill this requirement, his or her financial aid will be affected. It is very important that students find out as much as possible about the educational and grading system of their host institution from various sources (past participants, exchange students, program representatives, online information). In many countries, higher education is a privilege and one of the things our students very quickly learn is that there is less hand-holding in universities abroad than what they are used to at UMF. Grade inflation is also nonexistent abroad. Most students from UMF in the past have done well academically while abroad.

**Financial Aid:** If your student is participating in a direct exchange program, expect to pay the regular UMF semester tuition and fees to UMF. Some direct exchange programs also have a UMF program fee that will be added to their student account. Students will pay all other costs out of pocket or directly to the host institution abroad. Students participating in recommended provider programs (USAC, API, GlobaLinks, etc) pay a comprehensive program fee charged by the program sponsor, but added to the UMF student's account. No additional UMF direct costs for tuition or fees are charged. Invoices from recommended programs are sent to the Office of International and Exchange Programs and we arrange to have the program fee added to the UMF student account. This allows your student to make payment directly to UMF for their study away semester. For your student to remain eligible for financial aid he or she must complete our *Verification of Study Away Enrollment* form (provided in our Pre-departure packet), have it signed by a host school/program provider administrator, and fax it to the Office of International and Exchange Programs so that financial aid can be processed and disbursed. The Offices of Student Financial Aid and Administrative Systems process aid, with funds released to student UMF accounts or mailed out (within the U.S.) according to prior arrangement. The student cannot access the funds from abroad, neither can UMF send the funds abroad to the student. Most students will make arrangements to have any refund due them sent to their permanent

address so that their parents can deposit the funds into the student's bank account. This eliminates the need for Power of Attorney for financial aid refund purposes. You and your student will need to consider if Power of Attorney for other purposes is necessary. Because refunds may take time to be processed and mailed, it is critical that students have enough funds for the first 6 weeks until financial aid funds are available. For outside scholarship recipients, please confirm with the appropriate scholarship agency or administrative office that those benefits will apply if the student studies abroad. Students studying abroad could request a payment plan through the UMF Student Accounts Office.

**Power of Attorney:** Giving a family member or trusted friend power of attorney while the student is abroad may be a good idea for some students. Power of attorney gives that designated person the power to act on the student's behalf in case a legal document requires a signature. You can also give someone power of attorney by simply writing what duties that person will be allowed to perform on your behalf and having the paper notarized.

**Travel Plans:** You can start researching travel costs and available flights, but you may want to hold off booking the flight until the student has been accepted to his or her study program and received an acceptance letter, and has obtained a visa. When booking the student's flight, don't focus solely on the cheapest airfare. Pay attention also to layover time between connecting flights, how many connections the student has to make, and arrival time at the final destination. Traveling overseas can be exhausting and bewildering. If a direct flight costs just a little bit more than another that has several connections, opt for the former. The convenience will be worth the additional price. The student should receive arrival instructions from the host university. We recommend that students plan on arriving on a weekday and during office hours in case they need help. It is also a good idea to make travel plans with other students participating in the same program. Students should bring \$50-150 in foreign currency for food and drinks during a layover or to take a taxi immediately after arrival. Currency can be ordered prior to departure, exchanged in airports or obtained via ATM upon arrival. They should carry a change of clothes in their carry-on in case their luggage is delayed. We recommend that students have the address of their residence hall or apartment with them, find out what transportation they will use to get from the airport to the housing location, and whom to contact once they arrive on site. Finally, we encourage students to have contingency plans in place in case something goes awry with their arrival plans. Ask them to contact you once they arrive at their final destination or if the flights are delayed. Allow them some time to get to a phone or computer. Give them at least a day, and do not panic.

**Packing:** When the student arrives at his or her destination, he or she may have to walk from the airport to a train, taxi, bus or subway station, walk a few blocks, more if he or she gets lost, and go up a few flights of stairs to the apartment or residence hall. (Elevators may not be available!) They must be able to do all these while hauling their luggage. Help the student pack just the essentials — change of clothes for a week, prescription medication, extra pair of shoes, computer and camera, small bag containing toiletries and cosmetics, and important documents. Advise them not to bring anything you and the student do not want lost or stolen, such as valuable jewelry or family heirlooms. There are now stricter government regulations about luggage weight and what cannot be packed in a carry-on bag. Please check with the airline about weight limits and the State Department website about items that can be brought on board. No student has ever complained of not having packed enough. On the contrary, every single returned student advises outbound students to not bring too many clothes and shoes. What's fashionable could be different at the host country (often a year ahead of the United States) so students will most likely buy new things. What to bring? Pack a sturdy, broken-in, comfortable pair of shoes. Your student will do a lot of walking. In many countries, it's how people get around in cities. Pack clothes that can be easily washed and line dried. Most things that are available in the U.S. are generally also available overseas. Thus, hairdryers, toiletries, linens, eating utensils, and others are best purchased onsite. Your student might also consider bringing his or her overseas academic advisor, host parents, exchange student coordinator, or resident director a small souvenir from Maine on arrival (keychain, fridge magnet, etc).

**Passport and Visas:** Make sure your student packs all vital documentation in their carry-on luggage. Check before you leave the house for the airport! To determine whether your student needs a visa (an entry/residence permit and official permission granted by the authorities of the country via their embassy in the U.S.) please contact the Study Abroad Advisor at UMF or the staff at the program provider. Not every country requires a student to obtain a visa.

**Data File:** Gather all of the information and documents you and your student might need while he or she is away, including:

- Contact information for your student (address and cell phone number abroad)
- Contact person on site - resident director or study abroad advisor at host school, and for recommended programs - the home office of program provider
- U.S. State Department Office of Overseas Citizen Services – Citizen assistance section of the U.S. embassy or consulate nearest your student's program site
- Insurance policy number and how to submit claims
- Emergency and communication plan
- Student's bank account, and credit card numbers and contact info in case of loss
- Student's passport number and duplicate lost passport kit containing: two passport photos, official copy of his or her birth certificate, copy of student's passport information and visa pages
- Program calendar
- Name of local physician if your student requires medical supervision

**Currency Exchange:** Traveling with large amounts of cash is not recommended. Students should consider using several different forms of payment for expenses. Credit cards, debit/credit cards and cash can all be used effectively depending on the country. It is always good to have some local currency when you arrive on site. Exchange a *small* amount of US dollars upon arrival at the international arrival airport where the exchange rates and fees are better than at the departing US airport. Later on students are encouraged to use major national banks. The banks and their ATM machines usually offer the fairest exchange rate but you will pay a small commission fee each time. Traveler's checks are not used much these days as it is becoming more and more difficult to cash them abroad. Most credit cards have a 3% surcharge for each international purchase. Some students open a bank account in the host country for their period abroad.

**Credit and Bank Cards:** Credit cards can be used to get foreign currency at a good rate of exchange and are invaluable if an emergency arises. They are widely accepted in most places in most countries, although some countries will only allow cash for financial transactions. A debit/check card is also recommended. Check before your student leaves to be sure that the card PIN number can be used overseas. Ask your student to call his or her bank to let them know that he or she will be using the credit and/or debit/check card abroad so the bank does not freeze the student's account assuming there are fraudulent charges from overseas. Most banks will ask for specific dates and locations abroad. The student should increase his or her daily and weekly withdrawal limit in case he or she needs funds in an emergency situation.

**Safety Issues:** UMF carefully selects its exchange partner institutions and recommended programs. We stay informed of safety issues where our students are studying abroad. We recommend that you use [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov) and [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) to read about the country and receive updates. Please ask your student to share with you the safety resources we included in his or her pre-departure information.

**Insurance:** UMF requires all study abroad students to have health insurance coverage during their time abroad. Discuss with your student the procedures he or she must follow to file claims or to get approval from your insurance provider for medical care in an emergency or non-emergency situation abroad. Verify with your insurance provider that coverage is provided abroad and that it will be sufficient for your student's needs. Students participating in UMF direct exchange programs will purchase the iNext Travel Insurance through the Office of International and Exchange Programs, which provides supplemental coverage. Most recommended programs include an international medical insurance plan in their overall cost. Please check with the program for more information.

**Physical Health and Regular Checkups:** As part of the UMF pre-departure process, your student is required to complete a Medical and Consent/Emergency Contact Information form. After completing the form, your student must make an appointment to see a nurse or doctor at the UMF Student Health Center. During this appointment they will discuss the medical information your student has disclosed, general health and safety for traveling abroad, specific

prescription needs, and any required or recommended vaccinations for their host country. Your student may also want to have a physical examination during this visit, and depending on insurance coverage, there may be a \$20 visit fee. You and your student should visit the Centers for Disease Control website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) to learn more about country specific vaccination requirements/recommendations. For routine medical services while overseas, the student should pay the doctor or hospital directly and then file a claim later. Fortunately, health services costs in many parts of the world are not as exorbitant as they are in the U.S., so paying for services directly should not present undue hardship to the student. Be sure to remind the student to save the physician or clinic invoice for filing a claim at a later date.

**Prescription Medication:** Some medications that are quite common in the U.S. could be illegal in some countries. For example, Adderall that is used to treat conditions such as ADHD and narcolepsy is prohibited in the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic. In some countries, even over-the-counter medications are prohibited. While enforcement may be inconsistent, you certainly do not want to take the risk that your student's medication is confiscated at customs. Contact a travel clinic or the consulate of the country or countries where the student will be traveling to determine which medications are permissible. If your student takes prescription medications regularly, he or she should bring a supply to last throughout the time abroad. Foreign drugs are not necessarily closely related to those standards in the United States, even if they have the same chemical formula. They may be marketed under different names and may not be available in the strengths you desire. Students should also have a letter from their home physician or pharmacist describing the student's medicines, their dosage, a generic name for them and describing the condition being treated. This letter could be helpful in an emergency. Make sure all drugs are in the original pharmacy containers and are clearly labeled. Students should carry copies of the prescriptions to avoid problems with Customs. In the case of narcotic medicines, it may not be prudent to carry additional supplies because of possible Customs difficulties. In that case, bring a prescription with the drug's generic name.

**Emotional and Mental Health:** Emotionally and mentally, international living can be stressful. Most travelers will experience a degree of culture shock during the normal adjustment period. Culture shock causes feelings of disorientation and unease which can be intensified for students dealing with ongoing unresolved emotional or medical issues. It is thus very important that students with such problems discuss these with their study abroad advisors, mental health providers, or other trained medical personnel before leaving. Again, this discussion will be part of the UMF Student Health Center visit. Check with the program to see what psychological counseling is available, should the student need it. Remember, study abroad is hard work and not therapy.

**Family Emergencies:** Discuss with your student what you will do in the event of a family emergency, illness or death. It is much easier to have these conversations around the kitchen table prior to departure than in an intercontinental phone call in the midst of a crisis.

**Culture Shock and Adjustment:** Being able to adjust to the new environment and culture is perhaps one of the most important facets of a student's experience abroad. "Culture shock" is the term given to the collection of feelings that sometimes arise when travelers are overwhelmed by cultural differences. The symptoms can include feeling lonely, homesick, overwhelmed, fearful, angry, confused or judgmental. The onset, severity, and length of time with which culture shock will affect any one student will vary. Keep in mind that culture shock is a common and a natural part of the study abroad experience. When students first arrive at the host country, they usually feel happy and excited. Everything is new and interesting, and they want to explore it all. This is the honeymoon stage when students fall in love with the host country and nothing could possibly get in the way of a fabulous experience. A few days, weeks, or months later, the students start feeling somewhat disillusioned and while things in the environment have remained the same, they now regard everything negatively. This is the next stage of culture shock and the time when some students are apt to feel that they've made a mistake and would like to return home. Fortunately, with effort, time, and support from family and friends, this stage usually passes and the students achieve a state of balance or equilibrium with the environment. The students are finally able to discern cultural differences and feel less like interlopers in the new culture. The anger and disappointment fade as the students realize that they can function effectively outside the home culture.

We hope you will not become distressed and alarmed if your student starts complaining about his or her situation. In all likelihood, the student is going through the second stage of culture shock. Empathize but urge the student to keep his or her chin up and soldier on. Remind him or her of all the things that can be gained from this experience. Applaud the student's efforts to become immersed in the host culture. Offer encouragement to interact with fellow students or the host family, participate in local or university activities, and learn from mistakes. In a few weeks, the student is likely to look back at these seemingly dark days and be incredulous that he or she even considered returning home! Thanks to you, the student did not have to miss out on this great experience! However, if you feel that your student's symptoms of culture shock are particularly severe, please let us know so that we can direct him or her to appropriate support services at the host institution; we can also notify our contacts abroad if necessary.

**Staying in Touch:** You and your student should work out a mutually acceptable system regarding how to stay in touch. While some families may be used to daily calls/emails with their students away at school stateside, frequent calls to and from abroad may result in high phone bills and can make it difficult for students to adjust abroad. Many families use video-conferencing software such as Skype or Face Time. Often, however, time zone differences make it exceedingly difficult to schedule conversations conveniently for both parties. E-mail may be a preferable form of communication, but you may receive spontaneous messages that vent frustration as your student confronts a new culture: take these "with a grain of salt." Above all, remember that part of the study abroad experience is learning how to maneuver through another system, so don't panic when the student panics. And don't try to supply all the answers to his or her myriad questions. There are professionals on-site who are experienced in assisting American students in navigating their way through their study abroad experience. Encourage them to tap that expertise.

Stay in touch – but not too often! The acculturation process will be slow if the student spends too much time talking on the phone or emailing folks back home. Temper your email updates and phone calls to no more than once a week. Instead, encourage your student to spend more time exploring the city, making new friends, and learning the ways of the host country. Don't let their real experience become a virtual study abroad.

**Sending Mail / Packages:** Now more than ever, mail and care packages from home will be appreciated. Your student may be especially grateful for familiar foods or cosmetic items. (Be sure to check customs regulations.) Cards, newspaper items, drawings by siblings, and notes will be especially meaningful. Packages do not need to be large nor should they contain expensive or valuable items. Personal and familiar items are very welcome. Do your research to find the best mailing options; mail systems in other countries can sometimes be unreliable.

**Visiting:** Visiting your son or daughter abroad can result in a memorable bonding experience. However, it is important to ensure that they don't skip classes to be tour guides for parents. Find out the vacation schedule before locking in flights and hotels. If there are no visa restrictions for your student, consider traveling to their host country at the end of their program when they will have free time to introduce you to their new culture. They will be much more familiar with their surroundings and can act as your personal tour guide!

**Course Credits: *Transfer Credit vs. UMF Credit:*** Students participating in direct exchange programs will earn UMF credit for their classes taken abroad. Grades for UMF credit courses are factored into the UMF GPA. This means the student's GPA will be affected by UMF credits earned while participating in a UMF direct exchange. Students participating in recommended provider programs will earn transfer credits and only courses in which the student earned the equivalent of a grade of C- or better can be transferred back to UMF. The UMF transcript will list all transfer credits and the letter grades earned. However, grades earned for transfer credit do not affect the UMF GPA. Before returning to the U.S. at the end of the study abroad program, students must request that an official transcript be sent directly to the Office of International and Exchange programs. Once we receive it, we evaluate the courses, make any necessary conversions into the US crediting system and submit a formal grade report to the UMF Registrar's Office, who ultimately posts the grades to the student's record. Receiving and evaluating transcripts and posting credit can take several months post program completion, depending on schedules and priorities at the host school, program provider, and UMF.

**Returning Home:** The student who returns home is not the student you sent abroad. He or she might dress differently, like new foods, speak differently, express new political perspectives, or even speak disparagingly of the U.S. This is not very unusual. Do expect some changes and be patient. This transition can be a positive experience, but it can have its moments of drama. Read up on reverse culture shock so that you understand the adjustments they need to go through when they return. And be sure to be proud of their exceptional accomplishments. Encourage them to share their experience by becoming mentors to other students interested in study abroad. Adapting to another culture, making new friends, studying in a new system and returning to their previous lives are powerful achievements. And congratulate yourselves that you trusted them enough to let them have this unique and life-changing experience!

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**Useful Phone Numbers**

International and Exchange Programs 207-778-7122	Lynne Eustis, Study Abroad Advisor
UMF Merrill Center 207-778-7100	Financial Aid, Student Account, Records and Enrollment Questions

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**Emergency Procedures and Contacts**

1. We strongly recommend that each student find out the 911 equivalent in the host country and keep it with her/him at all times. It is advised that *these services be called first* in any emergency.
2. Students and families should be familiar with a local program representative (Resident Director, Study Abroad advisor on site or similar liaison) and should *follow instructions provided for emergency situations*.

Other resources:

UMF Office of Public Safety – 24-Hour Assistance – 207-778-7400

Study Abroad Advisor – Lynne Eustis 207-778-7122 (office), 8:00-4:30 p.m.; after working hours contact UMF Public Safety Office.

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