
Safety Issues For International Students in the United States

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At noon, one robber was interested in me. Then he wanted to know about my information. At that time he looked too much drunk, also he had a bottle of alcohol with him. Fortunately nothing was happening. That's it.

Japanese female

Orientation workshops for newly arrived international students are common at U.S. colleges and universities today. An important issue to address in these workshops is safety. Students and their parents as well as host institutions have concerns about students' safety. Moreover, international students coming to the United States often find that safe behavior in their countries differs from safe behavior in the U.S. Stories of international students in the U.S. and safety abound: students publicly pulling out large amounts of cash to pay for a small purchase, students walking alone in a local park late at night, students being approached for money while they are waiting for the bus, students being robbed, and even students being physically harmed.

Issues of health, safety, and responsibility are integral to education abroad programs. An Interorganizational Task Force on Health and Safety in Study Abroad, with NAFSA: Association of International Educators as a member, developed a set of "guidelines designed to promote health and safety in study abroad," including evaluating health and safety aspects of each program, and providing students and parents with information and orientation regarding health and safety issues (Safety, p. 54). Some of these guidelines also apply to international students studying in the United States. Those of us involved with international students in the U.S. ask ourselves what safety issues to cover, when to cover them, how much time to spend on them, and how to introduce and deal with them without making our students overly fearful (e.g., Hafernik, Vandrick, & Messerschmitt, 1999; Kast, 1977; Safety, 1998). To examine these and other questions about safety issues, we conducted a survey of 58 international students at a small private urban university on the West Coast. This paper reports on that survey, with special attention to students' responses to the open-ended questions. The results suggest that there are things we can do to educate students about safety.

Results of the Survey

After conducting a pilot survey, we revised and administered it to 58 international students (27 males and 31 females) from 13 countries, with the majority (74%) from Asia. Ninety percent of the participants were single and 52% were between the ages of 18 and 21. The respondents included undergraduates (48%), intensive English program students at the high intermediate and advanced levels (36%), and graduate students (16%). These international students had a variety of living situations with the largest percentages living on campus (40%) or off campus with relatives (22%). Most of the students were somewhat familiar with the United States; 93% had traveled to the U.S. before and 69% had been in the U.S. over six months. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Importance of certain safety issues

Both male and female respondents felt that a wide range of safety issues were important, such as knowing which areas are safe and which are less safe; knowing about safety using public transportation, using private cars, being at home, being around drugs and alcohol, being with members of the opposite sex; and knowing what is a dangerous situation and how to get help. (See the Appendix for the survey). In rating 14 types of information on a four-point Likert scale from (1) "very important" to (4) "not important at all," respondents felt that all the issues were "important" (2 on the Likert scale) to "very important" (1 on the Likert scale), with the group means ranging from 1.36 (knowing how to get help if you are in a dangerous situation) to 1.81 (knowing how to deal with members of the opposite sex). Unpaired two-tailed t-tests with males and females showed similar results, with only one of the group means for the males and females on the 14 items being statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level: Knowing how to prevent sexual assault. The group mean for females was significantly lower (1.50), rating the item closer to "very important," than the group mean for males (1.92), rated closer to "important." Two themes appeared in the answers to this question: "What other safety issues concern you?": concern about safety at night (3 responses) and concern about strangers (3 responses).

Preferred ways to learn about how to be safe in the United States

Respondents seemed to have no preference about whether safety issues were discussed in orientation or in regular classes. These international students seemed to be comfortable learning about discussing safety issues in coed groups, with only 34% indicating that they preferred single-sex discussion groups. Females seemed to prefer single-sex groups (37%) slightly more than males (31%). With regard to who should conduct the discussion on safety, 57% of the respondents indicated that they would like an adult, faculty member or advisor, rather than other students, to lead the sessions. There

seemed to be no preference for having the material covered in orientation or in individual classes. The data suggest that the important point is that these issues be covered and a variety of methods seems advisable.

Suggestions for how the university can help international students be safe

Twenty-seven respondents (47%) offered suggestions for how the university could help international students be safe. The majority of responses (67%) suggested that more information be provided. Suggestions for dissemination included providing pre-arrival brochures in other languages, offering orientations and classes, providing more literature on campus in various languages, publishing a safety handbook for students, showing safety videos in class, and class visits by public safety officers. One individual suggested making safety the topic of a content-based course within the program. Fifteen percent of the respondents suggested that there be more public safety officers, specifically, bilingual officers. A smaller percentage (11%) suggested that support groups and international clubs deal with safety issues. A few students made suggestions unrelated to the dissemination of information, asking for such concrete actions as “Offer escort service more frequently at night, because there are many night classes.”

Personal experiences

Thirty individuals (36%) responded to the open-ended question “Have you had any experiences in the United States when you felt unsafe? Briefly describe the situation(s) below if you are comfortable doing so.” Nine of the respondents (seven males and two females) wrote “No” or “None” and six (four females and two males) individuals began their comments with “Yes.” Only two (female) students wrote of instances involving physical contact or harm. One stated that her uncle had been hit by a heavy metal object and the other wrote, “I wore a short skirt that day and the gross guy touched my legs unexpectedly.” In addition to the students who answered “Yes” or “No,” 19 respondents, 12 of whom were females, reflected feelings of being apprehensive about their situation, often indicating that they were not sure if they had actually been in danger. Examples of the 19 responses include the following.

1. “Maybe I wasn’t unsafe, but the situation was uncomfortable.”
2. “At night when I go to the downtown, some bagger required money. At that time, I didn’t know what to do.”
3. “They [homeless beggars] try to approach me and want me to give them money. Although they didn’t do anything to me, I still felt afraid and unsafe.”
4. “When I see many of teenagers are making loud noise and talking roughly in slangs.”

The majority (63%) of these 19 responses revolved around being approached and/or followed by beggars or strangers who were perhaps drunk or on drugs (12 responses), whereas six of the responses (32%) dealt with situations at night on campus or on the streets.

Finally, this open-ended question yielded a few positive and insightful comments. One individual cautioned us to provide a balanced perspective:

Every country is as unsafe as the U.S. I guess we worry too much about safety (of course we need to worry about it, but too much just because we are in the U.S.), because we have been exposed to the violent U.S. movies, some unidentified horrible stories and TV news which most of the time is sensational. I think the info about safe and unsafe places and so on should be balanced. It may give false impression to international students that people in certain areas or from certain ethnic groups are dangerous.

Discussion

Several themes emerge from the survey data. First, international students surveyed were interested in learning more about how to be safe while in the United States and these issues seem equally important to males and females. Second, no particular method of delivering information about safety seemed to be clearly preferred by the respondents.

A third theme emerging from the data, particularly from the open-ended questions, is that international students may be unaware of what services are available on campus and may have unrealistic expectations about what a university can do to help them be safe. Universities often provide such services as an escort service on campus and within a limited area near campus, free self defense classes, showings of safety videos and group discussions, guest speakers, safety brochures and literature, safety programs in the dormitories, articles with safety tips in the campus newspaper, and support groups for individuals who have been victims of crimes. Several responses to the question "What can the university do to help international students be safe?" suggest that some students were not aware of services on campus. For example, one student suggested an escort service, which in fact is already available. Also, students may not be aware that they should call the campus police in certain situations (e.g., a purse or books are stolen, a suspicious person is on campus). Therefore, by informing students of available services, we may be able to improve their safety. For example, one student wrote "I lost some pencils, bookcase, and some writing materials; but I don't know I left them or was theft them. I want the university to know if someone find other's writing materials, they need to submit them to the university." Does this student know that lost items are often

turned in to the campus police or that he should report any theft on campus? Does the student know what precautions he can take to reduce theft?

In addition to informing students about services and precautions they can take, we need to help students have realistic expectations about what a campus security force can do. For example, does the student quoted above have unrealistic expectations of what the campus police can do to prevent theft? Moreover, students need to be aware that the location of the university as well as budget considerations may constrain campus improvements. Several students suggested that the university provide free taxi/cab service, but is this request realistic? Thus, in designing orientations and course materials, we need to include information about existing services and help students develop realistic expectations. Inviting campus security officers to orientation classes or small group discussions is beneficial in conveying this information. In addition, often international students are afraid of police, and by having campus security officers talk with them, they may realize that the officers are approachable and can be helpful.

Finally, a fourth theme that emerges from the data, again particularly from answers to the open-ended questions, is that students may unknowingly put themselves into risky situations, may not be able to judge what a dangerous situation is, and may not know how to get out of uncomfortable situations. This may be especially true for females as 12 out of the 19 responses about being in uncomfortable situations were from female students. For example, several responses dealt with beggars and being followed. One student handled a situation well. She wrote, "One of those men who lay on the street smoking pot all the time followed my friend and I, trying to tell us something he just kept talking while following us. Finally we entered into a store 'til he left." Others did not know how to handle precarious situations. They spoke of being out late at night in an area where they did not feel safe. A female wrote, "One time I was on a disco and when the clock passed 2:00, I was totally on my own. I didn't find a cab so I started to walk and I felt very unsafe." Or another student said, "At night when I went to the downtown, some bagger required money. At that time, I didn't know how to do." These and other responses point out that a discussion of safety issues should include the following: (1) how to deal with strangers asking for money (2) how to get rid of people, (3) when and where it is safe to go alone and (4) how to call a cab.

In making generalizations from the data, one should consider three limitations of the study: the number of respondents ($N = 58$), the location of the university (West Coast small urban university), and the predominance of Asian respondents (74%). A larger sample might yield different responses, and issues important in our setting may not be relevant elsewhere (e.g., learning how to deal with strangers asking for money may not be important at universities in cities with few homeless people). In addition, individuals from different countries and ethnic groups not represented in our sample

may have particular concerns (e.g., participants from cultures where males and females are routinely separated in school settings may prefer to discuss safety issues in single-sex groups).

Conclusion

The data from this study provide us with the beginnings of some answers to questions about how international students in the U.S. perceive their safety, and what they would like their institutions to do to educate and protect them. The data indicate that international students want information about how to be safe and want their campuses to take a proactive stance on safety. They need and want information in a variety of formats, whether as part of pre-departure information, orientation sessions, regular class work, or written materials while on campus. Students may also be telling us that they want information, but they don't want to be frightened needlessly; a balanced approach is needed.

We, as international educators in the U.S. or any other host country, can help students be informed, alert, and therefore safer. Helping international students feel and be safe is an ongoing process that can begin before their arrival with EFL faculty helping students have realistic views of the host country and its dangers. In our classrooms and institutions, we can educate students to be safety conscious, reduce their risk of harm, and help them fully enjoy and benefit from their time studying in a faraway place.

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APPENDIX

Safety Issues For International Students in the U.S.

I. General Information

Nationality: _____

Gender: ___ Female ___ Male

Marital Status: ___ single ___ married
 ___ divorced ___ widowed

If married, is your spouse here with you? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you have children? ___ Yes ___ No

If you have children, are your children in the U.S. with you? ___ Yes ___ No

Your Age: ___ 18–21 year ___ 22–25 years ___ 26–29 years
 ___ 30 or older

Type of student: ___ IEP/ESL only ___ undergraduate ___ graduate

Where are you living while in the U.S.?

___ on-campus ___ off campus with relatives

___ off campus with new friends ___ off campus alone

___ off campus with friends from my country

How long have you been in the U.S.?

___ less than 1 month ___ 1–6 months

___ 7 months - 1 year ___ from 1–5 years

___ over 5 years

How many times have you traveled to the U.S. before?

___ never ___ 1–3 times

___ 4–6 times ___ more than 6 times

II. *Read each of the following statements and indicate how important you think this information is for you and your safety. For each statement, circle the phrase that is most descriptive: "very important," "important," "not very important," or "not important at all." Circle only one answer for each statement.*

1. Knowing what areas are safe and what areas are less safe in San Francisco.

very important important not very important not important at all

2. Knowing how to use public transportation and be safe.

very important important not very important not important at all

3. Knowing how to be safe when using a car.

very important important not very important not important at all

4. Knowing what to do in an emergency (e.g., fire, earthquake).

very important important not very important not important at all

5. Knowing how to be safe in your home (e.g., dormitory room, apartment, house).

very important important not very important not important at all

6. Knowing how to be safe when in the presence of drugs and alcohol.

very important important not very important not important at all

7. Knowing how to tell what is a dangerous situation

very important important not very important not important at all

8. Knowing how to get help if you think you are in a dangerous situation.

very important important not very important not important at all

9. Knowing if someone is trying to cheat you of your money.

very important important not very important not important at all

10. Knowing how to avoid being robbed or attacked.

very important important not very important not important at all

11. Knowing how to deal with members of the opposite sex.

very important important not very important not important at all

12. Knowing how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

very important important not very important not important at all

13. Knowing how to prevent sexual assault.

very important important not very important not important at all

14. Knowing how to report a crime.

very important important not very important not important at all

15. Other _____

very important important not very important not important at all

III. *Rank in order what you consider the best ways to learn how to stay safe. Number the top 3 ways with #1 being the best, #2 being the second best, and #3 the third best way.*

___ At an orientation led by faculty and advisors for international students, both males and females.

___ In small groups of students of the same sex, with a faculty member of the same sex.

___ In regular class with both males and females.

___ In small co-ed groups organized and led by other students.

___ In small single-sex groups organized and led by other students.

___ By handing out literature and information about safety issues, with no discussion.

___ Other _____

IV. *Please answer the following two questions. If you do not want to answer either one or both of these questions, leave the question blank.*

1. What other safety issues concern you?

2. What can the University do to help international students be safe?

3. Have you had any experiences in the United States when you felt unsafe? Briefly describe the situation(s) below if you are comfortable doing so. (Answer on the back of this sheet).