

By [Scott O'Connell](#)

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Colleges, students in Central Mass. undaunted by terror attacks overseas

Europe is home to some of the world's finest museums, most esteemed universities and, in the last year, worst terror attacks.

But the sudden tumult in the region has not deterred hundreds of college students in Central Massachusetts from traveling there to study, forcing local colleges to step up efforts to ensure their safety from an unpredictable threat.

"It's a really complicated issue for a lot of schools," said Clark University's director of study-abroad and away programs, Adriane van Gils-Pierce.

Ms. van Gils-Pierce, as well as officials at other colleges in the area, maintained that terrorism is just one of several risks inherent to international travel, and that it doesn't change their basic approach to sending students abroad. None of the institutions reached by the Telegram & Gazette said they're dropping any programs or destinations in Europe in response to the recent attacks, for example, nor are they placing stricter restrictions on the intercountry travels of their students overseas.

Most said they are taking extra precautions by enhancing communication and coordination with students and third-party travel providers abroad, and increasing pretrip training and orientation.

According to the latest data, more students are traveling abroad than ever before. Last fall's "Open Doors" report, put out each year by the Institute of International Education, for example, found more than 300,000 American students studied outside the country in 2013-14, a record high and 5 percent increase from the year before. College officials in the area see no reason to discourage that trend.

"If we stop sending our students abroad, we'll be even less able to deal with issues like terrorism," said Eloise Knowlton, Assumption College's dean of undergraduate studies, who argued exposure to other cultures is critical to helping this generation of students understand global politics.

Eric Fleury, a political science professor at Holy Cross, said it's also important to keep the recent events in Europe in context.

"There is no dismissing the headlines," he said. "But statistically, the degree of fear will almost always be vastly out of proportion with the actual risk."

Sending students into the current climate across the Atlantic is still a hard sell to families, however, several study-abroad directors said. There's no denying a risk of being hurt or even killed overseas, in areas that traditionally have not been considered dangerous; a University of California Berkeley student was among those killed in the Bastille Day attack in Nice, France, earlier this month, for instance, while a California State University - Long Beach student was one of the hundred murdered in last November's massacre in Paris. Both were studying abroad at the time.

"There's more often anxiety from the parents rather than the students," said Jude Gonsalvez, associate dean of justice and social sciences at Anna Maria College in Paxton.

Mr. Gonsalvez said four students recently dropped out of Anna Maria's study-abroad program in Rome for the upcoming year, for example - "they didn't see it as an issue, but they cited their parents, who were very anxious about it." The college has had to cancel a trip to Morocco as well because too many students backed out, he said.

Clark University also experienced a decline in participation in its international studies programs for this fall, Ms. van Gils-Pierce said. She speculated that part of the reason only 35 students will be going abroad, about half the usual number, is that the Bataclan theater attack in Paris happened just before last fall's signup deadline.

But the likely fear aroused by the incident was apparently short-lived, she added; 95 students have since committed to studying abroad during the spring semester, nearly two-thirds of whom will be going to Europe.

Other colleges in the region reported no change at all from last year in their study-abroad numbers, including Worcester State University, Assumption College and Becker College, whose study-abroad coordinator, Dan Chapman, said there's even been an increase in student signups.

Officials at those schools said there's really no financial reason to cut down on international travel programming. Several said they investigated their school's liability in light of the recent increase in overseas terror attacks, and found their insurance costs, as well as their students', have barely changed.

"I was kind of surprised by that," said Ms. Knowlton, who added Assumption, like many colleges in the area, requires students to take out special travel insurance before studying abroad.

Representatives at GeoBlue, a travel insurance company whose parent corporation, Highway to Health, insures Clark's study abroad students, said while it's still just a small part of their overall portfolio, the cost of covering for terror attacks has gone up in recent years. Around seven years ago, for instance, GeoBlue introduced political evacuation coverage, which is now a staple in all new higher education clients' insurance plans.



Clark University Director of Study Abroad and Away Programs Adriane van Gils-Pierce, left, and Associate Director Constance Whitehead Hanks. Photo/Chris Christo

“Schools have a very low tolerance for risks these days,” said Elaine Del Rossi, the company’s client experience officer, who added it’s the expectation now that GeoBlue orchestrates an immediate system of communication with clients during crises to provide up-to-date information and instructions, as well as provide follow-up services like mental-health counseling for traumatized students.

Colleges, too, are devoting more time and resources to preparing and keeping tabs on their study-abroad students. Most institutions contacted reported students are required to take extensive orientation before their departure, much of which focuses on safety. WPI students must take a seven-week course, for example, that prepares them to live and work in their study-abroad location.

“We talk frankly about political and social unrest in affected countries and the risk of terrorist attacks or other violence, and we review emergency response plans,” Anne Ogilvie, the university’s director of global operations, said.

Students are also expected to check in regularly with program coordinators, and let them know whenever they are traveling outside their study site, several colleges said.

“There’s more advanced information gathering and sharing” as well, said Mr. Gonsalvez, which becomes especially critical when a potential threat emerges.

At Assumption College, students overseas are encouraged to use the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or STEP, a service of the U.S. State Department that informs Americans abroad about safety conditions in locations they plan to visit, as well as enables their families, friends and the U.S. Embassy to contact them during an emergency. Based on what STEP is saying about a particular destination, Assumption might tell students studying abroad to stay away, according to Ms. Knowlton.

“We’ll try to find them an alternative at a different place,” she said. “It’s just not worth it.”

Assumption has even discontinued entire study-abroad trips to some locations in the world because of recent turmoil in those nations. Ms. Knowlton said the college won’t send students to Egypt and Turkey, for example, and has also stayed away from Israel.

The perils of visiting one of those countries are well known to Worcester Polytechnic Institute graduate student Samantha Ervin, who took part in an entrepreneurship program in Israel for 10 days last spring. There, she visited Jaffa, a popular destination in Tel Aviv, days before an American student with another study-abroad group was fatally stabbed by a terrorist there.

“It was a little bit scary, obviously,” she said, describing how WPI responded by changing her group’s itinerary for the following few days and assigning them a bodyguard. “And it hit close to home, that this is what people there had to deal with on a daily basis.”

But Ms. Ervin, who also studied abroad in Morocco and South Africa as an undergraduate at WPI, said the hazards around the world ultimately shouldn’t overshadow the benefits of international travel.

“There’s so much more to the places that have the dangers you hear on the news,” the Princeton resident said. “You don’t hear about the amazing family in Morocco who will host a student on the weekend - that’s not a news headline.”

Monica Hall of Sutton, who had an even closer brush with terror in March when she was at the Brussels airport in Belgium during the bombings there, holds a similar outlook. While she said the experience has stayed with her - she is more aware of her surroundings when in crowded places, for example - the Quinnipiac University student “would go abroad again in a heartbeat.”

“To me, if you don’t live your life because you are constantly afraid of something happening to you, then you aren’t really enjoying life,” she said, calling her semester abroad the “greatest experience of my life.”

“These places that have been attacked have so much to offer students culturally that I think it would be sad to let these incidents discourage colleges from letting their students study there.”

Scott O’Connell can be reached at Scott.O’Connell@telegram.com. Follow him on Twitter @ScottOConnellTG