

Lessons Learned from Running Study Abroad During COVID: Risk Considerations and Planning

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Context and Background

- Thailand had the first documented case outside of China of COVID-19
- Thailand went into lockdown, rural villages cut themselves off from the outside, extensive COVID control measures, including domestic travel restrictions
- Students were recalled home and we went online in March 2020 to finish the semester, cancelled all summer programs
- ISDSI Thailand staff had 20+ years of working in assessment and evaluation, including relevant training and experience in public health, epidemiology, and risk assessment, with long history working with NGOs and communities
- Long term partnership between ISDSI and Wheaton College -- students, site visits, hosted short term faculty programs, etc.
- Thailand has an excellent public health and village health volunteer system, and Thai people are on-board with efforts to control COVID, including masking, social distancing, etc., along with daily briefings

The Decision to Send Students

- Proactive, Experienced Staff
- Supportive Leadership Team
- Existing Partners & Capabilities
- COVID-19 and Other Risk Mitigation Factors
- Selective Requests with Continual Reviews
- Documentation: From program, internal/committees, from insurance & emergency assistance provider, from student, from parent
- We were able to keep limited pathways open, but ultimately the student's decision



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How to Get Students to Thailand

- Process challenges
 - Thai consulates not allowing in-person appointments or walk-ins, inaccessible over phone/email, Thailand closed 7 honorary consulates in the US
 - Conflicting information from different Thai consulates in the US about flights, visa requirements, and entry processes
 - Restricted flights, released for booking 2-4 weeks before travel
 - Unreliable access to COVID testing throughout the United States, results must be issued within 72 hours of departing flight
- Coordinating travel as a group allowed us to control the highest-risk variables (such as COVID testing) and make adjustments quickly when necessary
- ISDSI staff member in the United States traveled with the students to Thailand
- Considering if a student tests positive for COVID at any point in the process

Host Country & Modifying the Program

- Put most staff on furlough, and formed a core “reboot” team to prepare to reopen if possible, based on planning from 3 years ago about pandemic preparedness
- Immediately started working with Chiang Mai Public Health Office AND our local communities to see where we can go
- Track/Trace/Isolate policies, COVID safe classrooms, etc.
- Changed housing (no home stays in city, etc.) and activities while keeping core academic program going
- Staff with relevant experience in social science, epidemiology, public health, and risk management took the lead with planning and assessing risk
- Two staff on furlough worked on COVID-19 testing locally in Chiang Mai and learned the system and who the key players are

Key Lessons Learned

- Good institutional relationships -- with partner school, government authorities, NGOs, local communities
- On-the ground knowledge is critical -- cross checking with official and real world data
- Flexibility -- able to pivot to new plans and program changes quickly
- Planning in advance is important
- Continued to engage with and dialog with Public Health, NGOs, epidemiologists and our own assessments
- Increased orientation and extra communication with incoming students and partner schools
- Planning for Fall 2021 includes multiple scenarios with vaccinated students, increasing vaccinations in Thailand, challenge of controlling COVID in country, changes in sending school COVID policies, etc.



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