

GROWING NEED:

Expanding **Mental Health Support** for Study Abroad Students



TERRADOTTA

A young woman with voluminous curly hair is sitting on a wide set of stone steps. She is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt over a white t-shirt, black pants, and dark sneakers with white soles. She is holding a smartphone to her ear with her left hand and has her right hand resting on her knee. The background shows the continuation of the stone steps and a blurred building facade. A semi-transparent white box containing a table of contents is overlaid on the lower left portion of the image.

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Preface



ANYBODY ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS today knows this: As students have grappled with the isolation, uncertainty and upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are struggling with their mental health—even now.

At the start of the spring 2022 semester, a survey from **TimelyMD**, a telehealth company focused on higher education, found that:

88% of students surveyed said college and **universities are experiencing a mental health crisis.**

70% of students said they are **experiencing emotional distress or anxiety** because of the global health crisis.

75% college students said they are **feeling the same or even more stressed and anxious than they were a year ago**, even as mask mandates and other COVID safety measures are relaxed.

TimelyMed, of course, is far from the only organization flagging the issue. A January 2022 **Yale University review** of 16 studies that evaluated college students between January 2020 and July 2021 confirms what's been clear since March 2020—**college students are feeling more anxious, depressed, fatigued and distressed.**

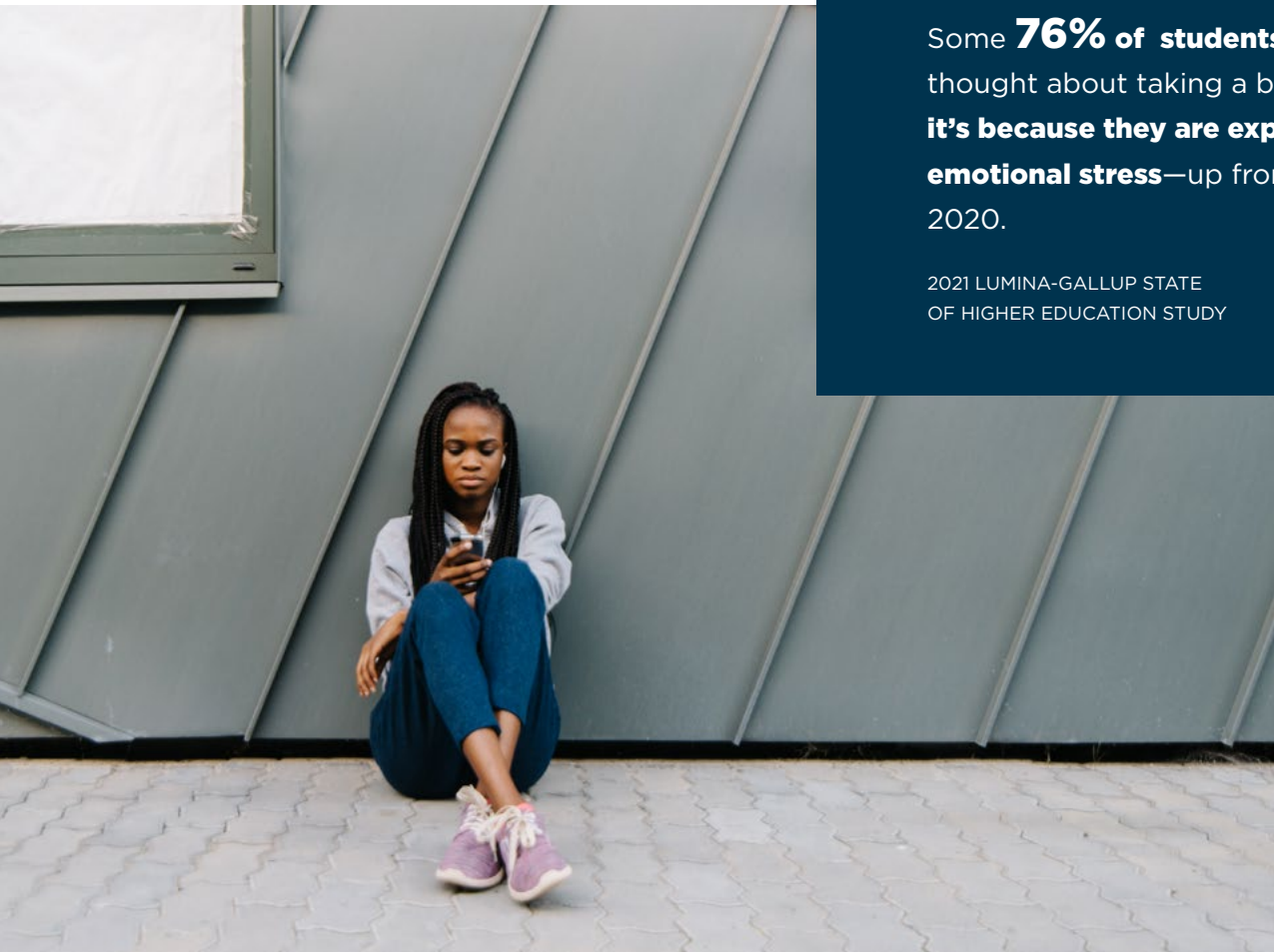
As travel resumes and work returns to a “new normal” for campus study abroad offices, it's critical for global education leaders to remember that many of **today's study abroad travelers may need more support than ever before.**

DROPPING OUT

In 2021, **32% of undergraduate students said they have considered dropping out of school** for a semester or more in the past six months. The biggest reason: Their mental health.

Some **76% of students** who have thought about taking a break **say it's because they are experiencing emotional stress**—up from **42%** in 2020.

2021 LUMINA-GALLUP STATE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDY



The usual stressors remain—uncertainty while attempting to live and learn in an unfamiliar place and obstacles in a culture where a student may face bias and discrimination because of their race, religion or sexual orientation. But **others have emerged, including concerns about being diagnosed with COVID-19 abroad or discomfort being in big crowds or enclosed spaces like an airplane.** And as campuses work to diversify their study abroad students, these new populations of travelers will bring their own set of needs to the table.

And, while a student may be doing well when they embark on their trip, the **stress of traveling abroad amid all of this disruption could prompt or worsen mental health conditions.** And that could trigger mental health emergencies for students, far away from their familiar support systems at home.



None of this is easy, of course. Regular communication, delicate conversations and comprehensive mental health services are necessary to head off crises and ensure students know that they aren't alone—and there is support.

As you wade back into full-fledged study abroad programs, **here are nine ways to help students cope.** →

9 WAYS TO HELP STUDENTS COPE

1

Promote campus counseling services

Regularly promote your campus' counseling services via a variety of channels. Link to the resources on the study abroad website; mention them, along with other campus services, during one-on-one sessions with prospective study abroad students; include discussions about them in your pre-departure orientation; and pepper mentions in emails and newsletters to send to students while abroad.

2

Work hand-in-hand with the counseling center

Let campus counseling centers know which students plan to travel overseas, so therapists can offer support to any students they are treating. They won't be able to tell you which of their patients will be traveling abroad, but they can open up the conversation with the student and possibly encourage them to seek additional guidance from their study abroad advisor.



3

Be mindful of triggers

Holidays or big events at their home campus can prompt feelings of homesickness, isolation, anxiety or depression. During potential trigger periods, send emails to students with information about counseling resources, schedule video check-ins with them and remind parents to watch for signs that their student may be struggling.



TIP: For students of color and from other underrepresented populations, a stressor could include being among the only people who look like them in the country they're visiting. At Tennessee State University, an historically black university, administrators are mindful that their students likely won't run into familiar faces when they travel to certain countries. They have worked to offer programs in countries where students will find a community that they can relate to.

"When I first went to China years ago, and I had braids in my hair, people were looking at me like, 'Why does she have those things hanging off of her head?'" said Dr. Jewell Winn, executive director for international programs and senior international officer at Tennessee State. "They wanted to come up and touch me. Our students, mentally, are not ready for things like that. ... We just need to be very conscious of the places that we are trying to get our students to go to. They need to go somewhere where they are not going to feel worse than they already were, from what they're dealing with on their campuses in the United States."



4 Encourage early self-disclosure

In your meetings with students, share broad information about general issues they may face while traveling. Let them know it may be difficult to obtain specific medications or mental health services in another country and provide them with contact information for local American consulates and American medical centers with on-site staff who speak English and can help. And ask open-ended questions about issues that they are generally concerned about. Find out what parts of the trip might be causing them some anxiety and talk about their options.

TIP: Tennessee State does a lot of listening to students to understand their fears and concerns and offers baby steps toward a big trip abroad, such as educational opportunities in other states or cities.

“We do story circles. We get people to talk about what is it that you fear about studying abroad? What is it that you fear about going on an airplane? ... The main thing is getting them even used to talking about study abroad.

—DR. JEWELL WINN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS AND
SENIOR INTERNATIONAL OFFICER AT TENNESSEE STATE

5

Help students help themselves

Uncertainty can be a stressor for anybody. Make it easy for students to find the information they need on their own—on campus and while traveling abroad—and to connect with their study abroad advisor when they have questions.

TIP: Bucknell University relies on Terra Dotta's AlertTraveler to provide its students with up-to-date country, city, and even neighborhood intelligence, with quick access to emergency service numbers and a variety of other resources so that students can proactively find what they need.

6

Build relationships overseas

Cultivate relationships with onsite staff at the institutions where you're sending your students. They often are the first people to see signs of mental health struggles, such as students not showing up for class and activities and plummeting grades.



7

Be mindful of underrepresented students

Some students may face particular challenges as they travel abroad because of their race, religion or sexual orientation. Set them up for success and less stress by providing a broad set of location-based resources to all students that cover everything from hair salons catering to Black people, the location of the local LGBTQ+ center, public transportation stops that can accommodate wheelchairs and places of worship for a variety of religions where they're traveling.

TIP: Terra Dotta's AlertTraveler City and Neighborhood Scorecards, powered by Geosure, provides real-time support for students abroad with city and neighborhood ratings that pull in factors such as LGBTQ+ and women's safety, the location of LGBTQ+ clinics and other indicators to ensure students can find supportive spaces, based on their needs, wherever they are.

8

Consider a third-party option

A growing market of third-party mental health apps offer support to far-flung students and ensure they have the resources they need. With the counseling center and other appropriate campus departments, consider their deployment.

9

Provide post-trip support

In a survey of college students, Diversity Abroad found that students are eager to travel again. But, given the growing numbers of mental health issues, they said they needed more support from their home campuses, not only during the trip, but after, to decompress from the experience, said Wagaye Johannes, then director of operations and organizational development for Diversity Abroad, when she participated in a recent Terra Dotta webinar.



“

As students are beginning to travel, and they are sort of pioneers, how are we supporting them through this uncertain time that we're all living through? Mental health is a key thing to continue to look out for.

—WAGAYE JOHANNES
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT FOR DIVERSITY ABROAD

FOMO

A NEW STUDY ABROAD STRESSOR

AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY, students look forward to the fall football season and a big spring event that brings together the entire campus—and their experiences are blared across social media. It's hard for any student, including those abroad, to not see the posts. That fear of missing out, AKA FOMO, is keeping some Baylor students from studying abroad, said Jeff Hamilton, vice provost for global engagement. In some cases, they're actually traveling together with friends, so at least they're missing out on campus traditions together.



But FOMO isn't just a hashtag. It's linked to a **decline in productivity and worsened mental health outcomes**, studies show. Baylor offers an optional course for study abroad students to take when they get back to help them unpack their experiences. On their return, it's not uncommon, Hamilton said, for students to say they're having trouble reconnecting with their friends and that it makes them sad to hear about the events they missed while abroad.



COVID-19

BE AWARE: **COVID COGNITIVE DISSONANCE**

WITH UNCERTAINTY around the COVID-19 pandemic, students, particularly underrepresented ones, are facing plenty of cognitive dissonance, said Elisabet Raquel García, a global education consultant for Access Equitable Education. They may be eager to travel, but paranoid about contaminating themselves or those around them. The thought of an extended quarantine abroad may cause anxiety. And, for those visiting countries with little access to vaccines and robust medical facilities, some may worry that they'll have a negative impact on their host communities.

“I just came back from Mexico after doing a special program with the Mexican government, and a common concern that a lot of the participants had was, yes, we're vaccinated, but we're going to go to small regions where people don't even have access to vaccines yet. So these students are wondering about the impact they're going to have when it comes to spreading COVID.

—ELISABET RAQUEL GARCÍA
GLOBAL EDUCATION CONSULTANT,
ACCESS EQUITABLE EDUCATION



CONCLUSION

PLENTY OF STUDENTS are eager to return to life as we knew it back in 2019. They are ready to jump back into the college experience they dreamed of—including a study abroad trip to the destination of their dreams. But, as students excitedly make plans to travel to Spain or Australia or Argentina, study abroad leaders must be ready to address, with compassion and resources, the mental health struggles that they might bring along with them too.



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