

Health and Safety Abroad: NAU Care-A-Van

Results from a pilot program in Costa Rica

Mikaela Terry, Study Abroad Advisor, Sr, Center for International Education & Melissa Griffin, Director, Health Promotion



Abstract

Research indicates a significant need to help promote health and safety among students who choose to study abroad. Many students increase risk taking behaviors, such as binge drinking, while abroad, which puts them at additional risk for sexual assault, crime victimization, physical harm and mental health issues. This pilot project aimed to create a program that supports the health and safety of students abroad by creating a culture of caring. Outcomes suggest that the program was useful in helping to mitigate high risk behaviors in students who studied abroad in Costa Rica during summer 2018.

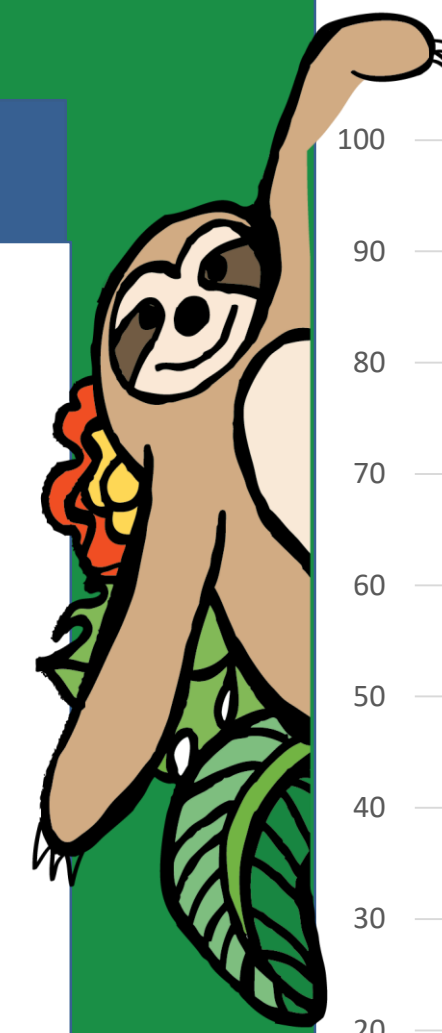


Introduction

College students are participating in study abroad programs at increasing rates. At the same time, research suggests that those students may engage in more high risk behaviors while abroad. Additionally, there continues to be an increase in the number of students who experience mental health issues that could become a crisis while abroad.

This pilot program was designed to better equip both students and staff with skills and information necessary for maintaining health and safety abroad. The pilot program was a collaboration between Health Promotion and Center for International Education and had several aims:

1. Increase peer to peer helping/bystander behaviors among students.
2. Increase knowledge, of both students and program staff, around key health issues: alcohol, sexual violence and mental health.
3. Improve knowledge of health and safety resources available to students abroad.
4. Increase staff knowledge of response and reporting requirements.
5. Reduce number of critical incidents experienced during the program.



Methods and Materials

1. Pre-departure training for students: 1) bystander strategies 2) alcohol 3) mental health 4) resources 5) mental health screening and consultation
2. Abroad meeting with students: reinforcing key concepts, "care – a – van"
3. Student resource card: abroad wellness resources and social norms information
4. Response protocol flip book: outlining appropriate staff response for 1) mental health 2) alcohol abuse 3) sexual assault
5. Marketing materials
6. Staff training (all translated into Spanish)
7. Host family training (all translated into Spanish)



Discussion

Although student knowledge around alcohol, mental health and sexual violence increased, many still engaged in high risk drinking. However, it seems that many students were willing to help a peer and serve as an active bystander, which likely mitigated potential negative consequences. Though there is no year over year comparison data, there were no critical incidents for the program during this time period. It is also worth noting the lack of understanding staff had around the issues of alcohol, mental health and sexual violence making the trainings and materials for staff incredibly important.

Results

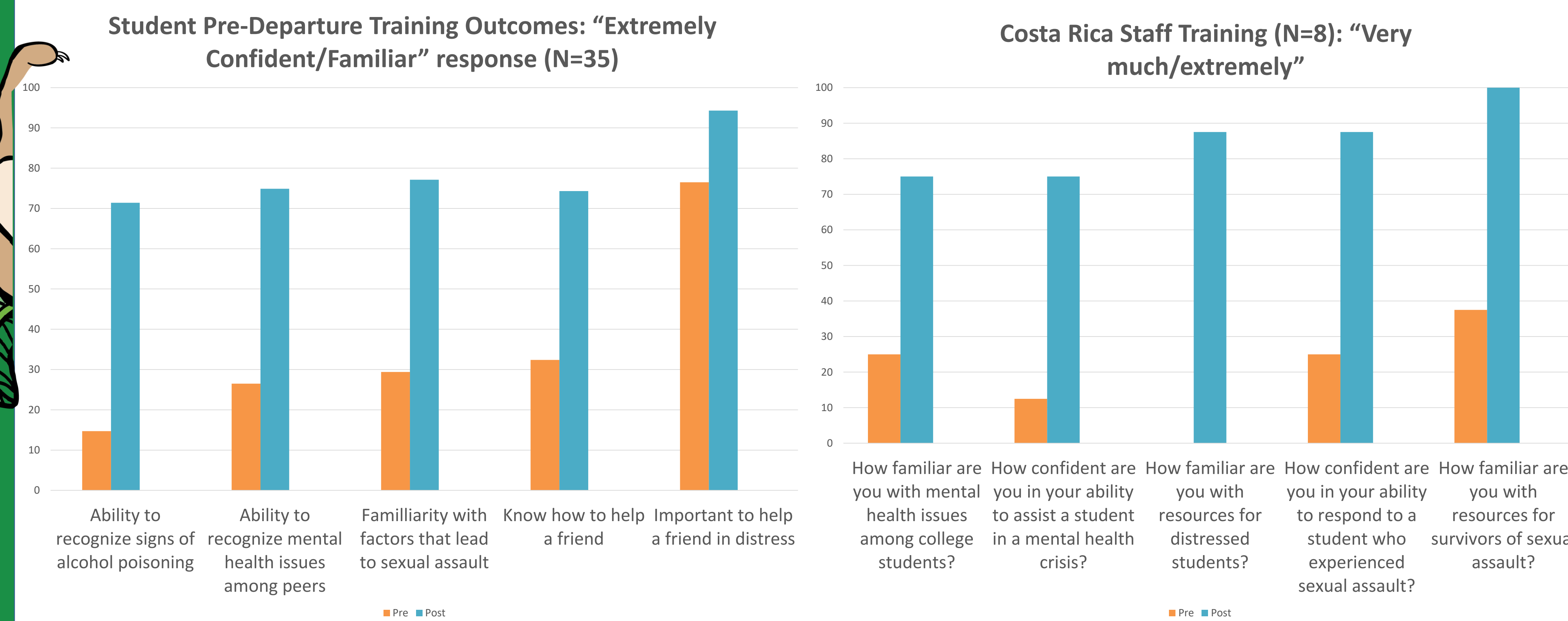


Table 1. Student Follow Up Risk Reduction Behaviors Data (N=25)

Never left friends alone	88%
Made a plan before going out	80%
Moderated my alcohol use	76%
Offered assistance to a friend/peer who needed help	72%

Table 2. Student Follow Up Data: Experience (N= 25)

Reported program staff in Costa Rica made them feel "very much or a lot" supported	100%
Report using the information provided in pre-departure health and safety at least "a little"	96%
Consumed 5 or more standard drinks in one occasion (binge drinking)	68%
Experienced difficulty functioning due to mental health issues at least once while in Costa Rica	44%
Were concerned about a friend/peer's mental health at least once while in Costa Rica	64%
Experienced at least one situation that required an intervention to maintain someone's safety	52%

Conclusions

The hypothesis that students engage in high risk behaviors while abroad was supported. However, it seems that a focus on creating a culture of caring and encouraging students to take care of one another has the potential to greatly reduce the impacts of high risk behaviors during study abroad programs. It seems to also be important for study abroad programs to expand their training efforts on health and safety issues to staff, given the lack of baseline knowledge they had around key health and safety topics.

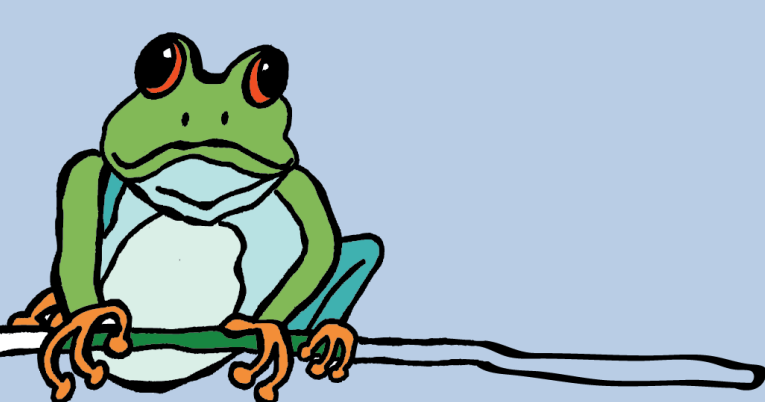
Recommendations

1. Replicate the pilot program and consider scaling it out to other study abroad programs
2. Improve abroad booster session content
3. Create a control group for better comparison data
4. Increase participation in student follow up survey



Contact Information

Mikaela.Terry@nau.edu
Melissa.Griffin@nau.edu



Comments & Feedback

100% of staff rated the training as very/extremely useful
 91% of Students rated the training as extremely useful
 Staff: "Excellent program. A need that was met. I congratulate you!"
 Student: "All presentations were relevant."

Acknowledgements

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