

Study Abroad in a Time of Terror; U.S. Student Experiences in Brussels

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On the morning of March 22, 2016, two men pushed luggage trolleys containing suitcases laden with nail bombs into the departure hall of the Brussels airport and detonated them. About an hour later, a third suicide bomber detonated a nail bomb in a subway train at the Maelbeek metro station near central Brussels. These attacks claimed the lives of 32 victims plus three suicide bombers and caused over 300 injuries, many severe. My 17 U.S. students and I were in Brussels that day, about halfway through our three-month semester abroad program that I lead each year. As we left our apartments near the Maelbeek metro station and took our daily walk through the city to the Belgian university with whom we partner, we were unaware of the tragic events taking place close by.

Only when my students, upon arriving at the university, opened their computers to check the morning's social media updates – and officially to resume work on their assignment – was it apparent something was going on. I began to hear, “What the heck...??” and similar exclamations from the students, as the reporting of events unfolded. The initial response was incredulity that something like this could be happening so near to us, but soon we heard helicopters and sirens, and the word came through the school to shelter in place. We gathered in the school cafeteria with the Belgian students and their professors, everyone looking at everyone else and shaking their heads in disbelief that such terror could happen in the laid-back atmosphere of Belgium. I emailed my university to report that our 17 students were safe, and our university president announced the fact to the campus. My students notified their parents. One of the students had contacts at a hometown television station and did a Skype interview for the local market, to say that we were all safe. The next day the Brussels university as well as many shops and offices were closed; we remained in our apartments or close by, and except for the helicopters and sirens the city was quiet as the tally of the dead and injured began to mount.

The attacks brutally affected several hundred people in the airport departure hall and in the subway station. But the consequences immediately spread to thousands of people elsewhere in the airport and throughout the Brussels transit system, both of which immediately shut down. Ramifications then spread to hundreds of thousands of persons affected by disrupted travel throughout Europe, and then, I believe it safe to say, to millions of persons who learned of the events through the media. The *New York Times* reported, for example, that “the bombings paralyzed Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union and NATO, prompted international travel warnings to avoid Belgium, and reverberated across the Atlantic to the United States, where New York and other major cities raised terrorism threat levels. Anxieties intensified about the inability to prevent mass killings at relatively unprotected places.”

Another faculty member from my university who also leads study-abroad programs happened to be in the Brussels airport at the time of the bombing, and our local newspaper reported his experience with the headline, “We just had to get out’...Professor describes aftermath of Brussels airport bombing.” The headline implied that my colleague was running from fire, in a manner depicted in action films. But in reading the article one would discover that he was in the boarding gate area when the attacks occurred, far away from the departure hall, and he told the reporter, “I didn’t hear anything. I couldn’t hear an explosion.” He described the instructions of authorities, as they evacuated the airport, as “Nobody told us anything. We just had to get out.” He left the airport and arranged for overnight accommodations until he could leave Belgium. This article in our local paper caused concern at our university not only because of the images conjured up by the headline, but also because the reporter noted that my colleague was re-examining the worth of the study-abroad program. “Are the benefits – which he says are many for the students – enough to outweigh the security concerns?” My colleague was quoted as saying, “I’ve got to seriously rethink bringing students here now. I mean, everybody knew terrorism was an issue.”

Although my students and I had been safe from the attacks, we were well aware of the intense international press coverage of the events, including my colleague’s comments in our hometown newspaper. For my part, I had quickly consulted with officials at our partner university in Brussels, scoured the local newspapers for updates on the situation in the city, and tried to get a sense of imminent future threats. From this I concluded that uncertainty was everywhere, and that leaving the city offered no better solution than staying. But did my students, to my knowledge the only group of U.S. students participating in a faculty-led study abroad program in Brussels as the attacks occurred, feel afraid in Brussels? How were they coping with an event so close to them and so tragic that they never would have imagined it could happen? To gain greater insight into these questions, two days after the attacks I gathered my students together in a Brussels café and asked them to write down their thoughts. What were their reactions to the attacks, and what were their feelings about being in Brussels when pressure was evident for us to leave? What did they think of my colleague’s re-examination of study abroad as reported in our hometown newspaper? I also asked them to write down what they had done the previous day – the day after the attacks, a day that had begun with a certain feeling of numbness in the air, as the city began to emerge from lockdown, as the extent of the damage became clear, and later as thousands gathered in the city center to mourn the victims. My instructions to the students were open-ended; I wanted them to record what they believed to be important in their own minds, with their own emotions, and in their own words. I told them this was not an assignment to be graded, but that I was sincerely interested in what they wished to say. Only after the semester ended and we had returned to the United States, did I realize that their thoughts might be valuable for a larger audience, and I asked the students if I might include their comments anonymously in an article. All of the students readily agreed.

Below I have summarized the reactions to the attacks as reported by my 17 students, supplemented by my own observations. Though the group was small for quantitative purposes, I believe their responses are significant in helping to understand student reactions to a catastrophic event in such close proximity. The students were adults, 22-24 years old, had already traveled extensively throughout Europe, and were capable, in my view, of understanding their situation and of lending insights that could be useful in discussions of an appropriate future for study abroad programs that were certain to follow from the Brussels attacks.

Student comments below are organized into several themes; from their first reactions upon learning of the attacks and assuring concerned family members that they were safe, through the next two days in coping with what had taken place, to internalizing their proximity to events that had captured international attention, to understanding how different their perspective was from that presented in media reports, and to their conclusions regarding their own situation. The final student comments offer their reflections on the bombings given about five weeks later after returning to their home university and fielding many questions about their experiences. Finally, I offer an analysis of the students' experiences as reflected in their essays, and I offer some insights on how we might prepare students for such unexpected, traumatic events and how we might best support them in the aftermath.

I have made some editorial judgments in organizing and abridging the comments and in deleting references by which the individual students could be identified, but the students' language otherwise remains in its original state, because their voices are most powerful as expressed during the tense days in Brussels immediately following the terrorist bombings. Student comments are in *italics*. Though the students wrote much more than could be included, I should note that no comments contradicting the points of view expressed here were edited out. There were no such comments.

Students' immediate responses to the attacks at the Brussels Airport and Maelbeek metro station

When the bombings occurred, my students were not far away from the Maelbeek metro station, walking through the city to the university in Brussels. Yet they were sufficiently distant to be unaware of the explosions. Among the comments they wrote during our gathering at the café, many recorded how they first heard the news of the attacks, and their emotional responses.

I reach my spot on the desks and pull out my computer, when all of a sudden somebody says did you hear that someone bombed the airport. The shock that blew over the room was enormous; everyone was quiet and listened to the news from one of our fellow classmates reading it. At that point everyone proceeded to change over to some sort of news and read what was going on. In a couple minutes after hearing about the airport attack, the second one happened and again I saw in the face of my classmates the shock and helpless terror that so much of us had that day.

I first heard of the tragedy from an employee at the school when I asked him "how are you?" "Not good, did you hear of the bombing?" he asked me. I was immediately confused and did not think much of it; surely it could not be something too big. My pace up the stairs was more brisk than usual, eager to check what the media had to say of the event, and when I got back to my computer it was already apparent that my classmates had heard the news too. Everyone was glued to their computer screens and had live broadcasts playing as the death toll started rising every minute.

When everything started to unfold it was hitting me more that I was in a place where terrorists were also. It felt strange because I have never been so close to something like this where it would affect me and my daily activities. It also made me very thankful because the day before at the exact same time I was at the airport and metro station with my boyfriend. Thankfully he left when he did, otherwise that could have been us in the accident.

It is hard to believe that I was in a city during an event that would shake the foundation of so many cities and countries around the globe. I still don't think it has hit me how close I was to an act of terrorism, and being in the places where these bombs were set off.

As can be expected, the first reactions were confusion and disbelief, followed by the unfathomable realization that a major terrorist event had taken place in close proximity. An aura of near-death experience was evident among the students as the events unfolded. In their essays, several students recounted how they mentally retraced their steps to remember where they were at the exact moments of the explosions, or how close they came to actually being part of the events. Many immediately thought of parents and friends. *I heard a few people talk about how a friend or loved one was in the airport within 24 hours of these attacks. I think that is what hits me the hardest.* Some students also placed their individual situations into the context of the events and contemplated what challenges the next days would pose. *My first thoughts were with my parents, as they were scheduled to fly into that very airport in five short days.* Almost immediately the students realized that they had to inform others of their safety.

Getting the word out that we were safe

Though the students suffered no harm in the bombings, it quickly became clear that only the students knew this, and that the news disseminated to the rest of the world about the attacks' severity caused great concern about their safety. As soon as the students realized the extent of the attacks, they began to contact friends and family to report that they were safe. At the same time, they began receiving email and Facebook inquiries, and the intensity of the concerns appeared to take the students aback.

On the table next to me my phone lit up with a Facebook notification: "It looks like you are nearby Brussels Explosions - Are you safe"? I confirmed, thinking that at most my parents would see it and their minds would be at ease. They weren't even awake yet, anyway. I sent them a quick message to reassure them that we were all alright at the school. Within a few hours, our friends and families began to wake up and messages poured in. Phones rang and social media notified us throughout the day with reactions ranging from relief to tears as they heard the news. My dad later told me that he was thankful to have checked Facebook first, as my 'safe' status was the first thing he saw. Had he checked his usual news sites and seen the articles first he would have really freaked out.

Messages started flooding my inbox from friends, relatives, and even people I had not spoken to in years. It was a weird feeling seeing this outpouring of concern from people when I did not feel any different sitting at my table at school so close to the attack.

As the day went on more and more messages came pouring in over Facebook asking "where are you?" or "you're not in Brussels today right?" I spent the better part of the day switching between watching for the latest updates and responding to concerned friends and family. It was at least a bit of a comfort to know that our entire group was all safe together. It brings up old memories of 9/11 and all that happened that day. Though we were all very young and far away from the destruction, we somehow remember that day vividly. We may not have been able to fully comprehend what had happened but we could sense from the adults around us that things were not right. Now, we are no longer blissfully unaware little second graders. This is the closest I have been to such an event and I think that memories of that day will stick with me in much the same way.

Several students expressed relief that they had been together as a group and in an environment where they felt physically secure as they learned of what had transpired. And the students seemed shaken that others were so deeply concerned about their safety, even though most people at home would still be sleeping. *The rest of the world seemed to think that we were in mortal danger.* Several thought of their parents as the persons they must reassure immediately. *The last thing I wanted was for my mother to wake up, see the news, and check her phone to see that she had not heard from her son yet.* Facebook Safety Check, a feature prompting people in the proximity of a disaster to notify others that they are safe, was activated for the fourth time in its history for the Brussels attacks and proved invaluable for our students in letting others know they were unharmed. *The number of likes about my safety status was surprising to me and was really reassuring that so many people back home were thinking of us.*

Emotional responses after the attacks

My students followed the news much of the day as the extent of the attacks and the increasing toll of victims appeared in the media. From the original reaction of confusion and disbelief, the emotional responses among the students became more nuanced as the day progressed. The students generally exhibited a surprising level of calm.

The initial shock was intense. I mostly kept my composure in the classroom, but horrible thoughts were swirling around in my head. I wondered if the attacks would continue and reach even closer to where we were working. I wondered if somehow the terrorists had found out that we were U.S. students living in the city and would be targeted. I wondered how my parents would feel as they woke up to this horrible news. I wondered how we were going to get back home. Thankfully, the thoughts were short-lived as reason took over. There was no indication that the attacks would come close to us. There was also no indication that the terrorists knew that we were in the city. At this point all we could do was sit there and watch as the events unfolded. It was nice to see, however, that nobody was freaking out.

I didn't feel scared, but I felt anxious. I am sure I am safe, but with a terrorist being on the loose and an unknown number of accomplices still out there I can't help but think there will be another attack and can never know where or when. That is the only scary part. I am not scared for myself but rather that it still has potential to happen. Again, this could have happened at the capitol building of my state, 5 blocks from the house I grew up in, but it happened here.

This may not be my home country, but it's been my home for the last two months and I have grown to know this place as a home. To see and know of each of these places that have been bombed, hits me differently than any other terrorist attack. All terrorist attacks that I can remember have not been close enough to even know what the place is like. Twin towers, Boston Marathon, and the Paris attacks are all attacks that I remember but had never been to these places before it happened. When those attacks happened I just went on with my day because I knew I was far away and probably in a safe place. Whereas when it happened in Brussels I was close to it all and there could have been another bomb somewhere close to me that could have killed me.

As the immediacy of the morning's attacks receded during the afternoon, the students could increasingly reflect upon their situation. *The room filled with many emotions, but terror wasn't one of them.* A stark juxtaposition between their personal, sequestered situation and everything happening beyond also became evident. One student captured the juxtaposition by writing *I can't speak French or Dutch. I can't understand what the King says when he addresses the nation. And yet people in the states are asking what it is*

like, what is happening and even trying to get me on the largest radio program in the state. Another student made his parents cancel their plans to come to Brussels to visit him over spring break. And students expressed a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming events. During the aftermath there was an immediate reaction on social media by citizens of Brussels, willing to give a hand, help people, give blood, etc. I felt a great guilt that I didn't do anything or even offer to help the people that have been my host for 2 months. It's not that I was unwilling or unable, I just didn't know how.

Observations of Brussels on the evening after the attacks

The Brussels attacks occurred between 8 and 9 o'clock on a Tuesday morning. After a day sheltering in place, students had to leave school and return to their apartments, not knowing what to expect. Some of the lengthiest comments in the students' essays recorded the atmosphere they observed in Brussels when they walked through the city that evening.

Walking on the street back to the apartments on Tuesday after the attacks, I felt a pressure in the streets. It wasn't of fear or the overshadowing military presence. It was a hollow pressure; it was sad, not in the manner of wanting to make me cry, but that the illusion of safety was destroyed. People were walking on the streets, shops were open, cars drove by, but there was no music playing, conversations were muted, no horns were blaring and the pace of life clearly had been slowed down. I knew every person I walked by had one thing on their mind.

When it happened, we didn't really know, there wasn't any screaming, any loud explosions heard. It became quiet, as if mourning happened immediately. But that doesn't mean that people weren't obviously aware of the situation. Parents watched their kids with hawk eyes, looking around for questionable characters in an animalistic kind of way. People walked with fast pace and purpose. There was a heavy feeling in the city; people looked more aware than ever of things going on around them.

There were still people out and about doing their business. I will say, however, that there was a certain tension in the air. You could feel it; you knew something bad had happened. It was almost too quiet, but people kept trucking along. It was honestly admirable the resolve of these people. Nothing was going to deter their spirits. I thought to myself that if the Belgian people weren't going to let this affect them, I wouldn't let it affect me either. I was alive and well; I wasn't going to let what these horrible people did take my emotions and thoughts.

The only sense of normalcy was stopping for groceries on the way back to the apartments where it seemed as though nothing had happened. People still shopped and the cashier still took the money no different than any other day. We commented on how quiet the city was that afternoon. Few people were on the sidewalks, cars still drove about but there was no beeping from the horns of impatient drivers, no trams to watch for at the crossing, and not a lot of speaking. All I could think of was how thankful I was that we had all been kept safe and how broken a time we are living in.

Only upon leaving the university did the students begin to personally experience the depth of grief enveloping Brussels and directly sense the emotional toll taken by the attacks that morning. Students wrote about four qualities they encountered. First, they found a city that was physically subdued, as in *people were still on the streets, cars were still driving, and the world was carrying on. The only visible difference was the trams were shut down, so there were no familiar bells ringing to warn people of an incoming tram crossing.* Second, though a security presence on the streets resulting from Paris attacks the previous November had been noted by the students when they first arrived in Belgium, security now

appeared to blanket Brussels more intensely than ever before. *We walked back to the apartment like a normal day; I did not feel too unsafe. As we were walking we saw cops walking up the street stopping any car they wanted for a random search.* Third, casual acquaintances and even strangers found sudden bonds. *I continued to get more and more people reaching out to me, people I talk to frequently to people I hadn't talked to in a very long time.* Fourth, our students, though guests in the city, found themselves to be part of a sudden emotional fabric that they could not have imagined the day before. *The ray of hope is how the Belgians have responded with warmth, wit, and humor. The worst of times often bring out the best in people it seems.*

Going to the memorial gathering in city center

On the day after the bombings, the university and many shops and businesses were closed. I told the students we would not meet that day. By then the immediacy of the drama had begun to recede, perpetrators were identified, and the period of recovery began. That evening, a huge crowd of people gathered in the center of Brussels, on the plaza in front of the old stock exchange, to express grief and resolve. My students heard about the gathering and decided to go.

A classmate was adamant in going down to the memorial at the center of the city. I too wanted to see this part of history and so we gathered up anyone who wanted to go and some that didn't. It was a long and quiet walk through the streets of Brussels. The sidewalks were empty and we could feel a tension. I could sense a judgement by those we passed that such a group of seven students shouldn't be out at this time. By the Central Station we started to hear a murmur off in the distance. It sounded of chanting that rose and fell as the buildings blocked its path to us. At the town center there was a newscast being made by a woman with a British accent. Continuing on we found ourselves at the old stock exchange building. We first noticed that this was the location of the memorial by looking down at our feet to see that we trod on chalk messages. While trying not to step on them as one would a grave we quickly realized that we had no other option. Around the corner was the memorial, quiet at the moment. Candles burned in heart arrangements and lit up the messages that lay around them. People milled about with news crews skirting the edges. We stayed a while, slightly frightened of the tension, but determined to stay. As time wore on a group of emotionally intoxicated youths started defiant chants. Others were slow to join in, but in time the space was filled with yelling. This was one of the times I wish that I knew French. We worried about losing members of the group and so we sought out the others. Once all were accounted for we moved to the side. Some found chalk and added to the messages. And then we left, slightly shocked and full of the need to reflect on what we had seen, though this trailed off soon. I noticed that the walk seemed longer, but didn't really care.

We saw thousands of tiny candles lit by hundreds of people; there was a large collection at the bottom of the steps with a variety of flags in a group, with messages of peace written on them in the corresponding language, and on top of each flag were small round white candles. People were walking around, taking photos, laughing, drinking beer and eating frites, but you could tell the conversation was not too funny and was polite, kind of like in the room after a wake where you speak with relatives you haven't seen, and want to share the joy of having the family together, but also keeping in mind why you are there. There was a small group of people sitting on the steps, smoking and playing guitar. At one point they began to sing the song 'Hallelujah.' I am not a very emotional person, but I teared up at that point.

Atrocities such as the Brussels attacks of course garner international media attention. *There were camera crews from what seemed like all over the world filming people lighting candles, yelling things in French, and mourning.* But experiencing something via television can impose an emotional distance from the

actual events. *Maybe the media was just making it seem more gravitating and significant than it actually is. It was not until later that night that my feelings changed completely.* The students' participating that night in an unscripted event evoked probably the strongest emotional responses of any experience related to the bombings. *I found it amazing how so many people from so many backgrounds can come together and unite as one.... Seeing it on television and the internet can give you an idea of what these memorials are like, but being in the midst of it is something completely different.*

One student wrote emotionally that *the candles were the same as Paris, the signs were the same as Boston, and the tears were the same as Newtown.* Yet, even though I felt like I had seen all of this before, I felt something in the air that cannot be transmitted over the internet or over television. *I felt strength. The power of people coming together to look after each other and become determined to move on and become better is something that is indescribable.*

Students express resolve about their study abroad experience

One reason for asking the students to write about their feelings two days after the terrorist attacks was to help me better understand their emotional state; were they afraid to remain in Brussels, and what actions should I, as their instructor and term abroad leader, consider taking in the face of great uncertainty? As it turned out, the extent to which many of the students expressed a resolve that the terrorist bombings would not deter their study abroad experience was an unexpected outcome. No student expressed fear of remaining in Brussels for the duration of our term abroad.

If I were asked if I would still study abroad knowing that events of this nature would take place, I can honestly say I would still partake in a heartbeat. Once again whether my parents would support my attendance is another story, but no part of me is regretting or questioning the past two months in Europe or the next month to come.

What has happened will not stop me. I plan to travel and experience everything that I still can. I am not afraid to be in a place with terrorists. They do not have the right to make me feel afraid or not let me go on with my life, because that is exactly what they want us to be. There is also no reason for me to be afraid while I am here, because it is just as likely for this to happen at home. There are terrorists all over the United States (and the world) that could set something off just as easily.

It saddens me to be so close to this and know that there are people who lost their lives or their families and friends. From this point on I truly know that I cannot take any moment of life for granted, because this can happen so easily. I will live each day of my life to its fullest with a smile on my face and being aware of my surroundings. I also hope that because of what has happened it will not stop future students from going on this trip, because it is a one in a lifetime experience that is worth every penny.

Listening to NPR while in class I was surprised to be in the epicenter of such an international event. Questions like "What is life like now in Brussels?" and the responses showed me how misleading news reports can be. Those who were reporting could have no idea what life was like here. I don't deny that things may have seemed dire at the targeted locations, but in our university it could have been another normal day. Yes, some may be left with terrible scars, both physical and mental, from the events that unfolded, but for the vast majority of those being labeled as in the "city on edge" things carried on and so did we. This Europe trip has been quite memorable and filled with challenges. I can easily say that I have been more worried while on a night train by myself, trying to unite with other group members than I have been these last few days.

Despite the circumstances, students expressed appreciation for having had the opportunity to experience a term abroad. *This trip has awarded numerous opportunities to see something out of the ordinary, and I'm grateful to even have that option*, though some concern was revealed about how their parents would respond. *These events have in no way changed the study abroad experience for me; my parents maybe, but not for me*. Several students expressed a renewed determination to experience everything they could. *Travel is the definition of dangerous, it's leaving familiarity in favor of seeing the different, the dangerous. If I wanted to stay in my safe bubble I would never leave home, but this isn't how life is experienced*. And some of them even expressed a defiance that intensified their commitment to continue on their path. *This is an amazing thing that I will never get to experience again and I am so grateful that I can. Bad things happen. It's inevitable. There are disgusting people in this world that do atrocious acts. What happened in Brussels is horrible and will never be forgotten, but it cannot stop us from living*. The strength of these responses may well have resulted from the students having shared the experience as a group, and they do not provide insight into how an individual student, studying alone in a foreign city, might respond to a similar event; but no student expressed a desire – either in these essays or in private conversation with me – to abandon the term abroad. In fact, one student wrote, *I remain resolved to stay in Europe. I will not change my plans of travel based on one unfortunate day. If anything at times I feel a stronger urge to stand by the people who have allowed me to live in their city this semester. I will not abandon those who need support. Leaving now would only confirm the success of the attacks to those who support it*.

Sending a message to the world

Although the student essays were intended to help them express their own emotional reactions and to assist me, their instructor, in deciding how best to proceed regarding the study abroad semester, some students included a societal statement that extended well beyond expressing their personal experiences.

Familiarity is often a vessel of comfort. Things that are familiar make people feel safe. However, what happens when tragedy is becoming the new familiar? We no longer feel safe. Tragedy is a hard thing to describe since it affects people in completely different ways. We live in a changing world, and terrorist attacks like the one that rocked Brussels are becoming far too common. This new familiarity needs to stop. Terrorists can try all they want to destroy what we have built as a society, but they will never stop the strength of people.

Hate can make people do unspeakable things. It drives fellow humans to harm one another. Some say that it's just part of human nature, but I believe that this is bullshit. It is a construct that we have made because we are afraid of differences. We see someone who is different than us and automatically think that they are unfit or they want to harm us. We, as a world community, need to evolve past this fear to realize that everyone is different from one another. Everyone has different thoughts, beliefs, physical appearance, and histories. We need to support each other and love not hate. Fear is what makes hate. I, for one, will not be afraid.

Students' reflections upon return to the United States

Five weeks after the Brussels attacks, our semester abroad ended as scheduled, and we returned to our home university to present the academic work we had accomplished in Brussels and to finish

final assignments. I asked the students to reflect again on their overall experience. As might be expected, the Brussels attacks were still paramount in the students' minds.

This trip has been one of a lifetime and there are in no way any regrets in going despite the incident that happened in Brussels. If anything, it concerned my family and friends more than it did me. Yeah, I was looking over my shoulder a little more frequently after it happened, but that is to be expected. There has been talk about whether study abroad is worth "the risk" with all the unrest throughout the world and specifically Europe. The world is a huge place, and yes, it is filled with tragedies and terrible things going on every day. However, I don't believe that that is any reason to stay cooped up in your house or even the USA for that matter. The world is filled with so much more beauty and good than bad, and it is an absolute tragedy that people let the bad interfere with their life choices.

Some people at the university have been bringing into question the merit and safety of the study abroad program. To that I would like to say that this is an invaluable experience that should not be hindered by what happened while we were there. Things like this happen, they've happened on US soil too, but we tried to keep life as normal as possible afterwards. The experiences we had the opportunity to take part in have benefitted my education immensely; taking that away from future classes would hurt the university's program and hinder its students.

This semester taught me a lot about dealing with the unexpected. The biggest unexpected thing this semester was the attacks on Brussels. None of us had been exposed to something like this in close proximity. This was midway through the semester and, at least to me, Brussels had begun to feel something like a home. It was an unnerving feeling to have that happen so close but, despite the attitudes of some people back home, I never felt compelled to leave. It was frustrating to hear talk of changes or possible cancellation of the study abroad program in the future. "But why put your lives at risk like that? It's not safe there." The exact same arguments could be said for Paris, London, Berlin, or any other European city. Terrorism is effective when it drives people from their homes but not when a population stands strong. I don't regret any part of studying abroad and I would go back again.

The bombing will be an event that I will always remember. I will never forget where I was when the bombs went off. But there is a great deal of truth in the words that time and distance have a huge effect on how a crisis is viewed. Now that I am in the States I relate the bombing closer to something that I would see on the news in a distant country that has no effect on me. But while I was in Europe the bombings were an earth-shattering event. The mood of the city, the weight on your shoulders. The most powerful experience in my entire life was attending a candle-light vigil at the old stock exchange of Brussels.

Had such attacks occurred before they left for Brussels, students might have reconsidered their intent to participate. But as one student noted, *after actually being there for the attack and seeing how the country responded to it, I don't ever want to see someone sacrifice their study abroad experience because of terrorists. That is how much I think studying abroad is important.* Students realized that their most salient memory, and certainly the eternal question regarding their three-month term abroad experience, would be what happened in Brussels on March 22, 2016. *As different as it was during the attacks and how I felt, one thing that only started setting in shortly afterwards was I am going to be tied to those attacks forever.* And a common theme was the importance of study abroad in their lives. *Studying abroad has given me more experience and knowledge than the previous four years of school have. I am forever grateful for my experience.* Finally, the student who told his parents to cancel their trip to visit him in Brussels noted, *I have seen first-hand regret from my parents not coming over and seeing me while I was in Belgium.*

Conclusions to be drawn from the student experiences

On one hand, the terrorist attacks in Brussels and my students' proximity to them represented a unique event, and conclusions from unique events are difficult. On the other hand and more generally, the students found themselves in close proximity to a totally unexpected and terrifying event that drew international attention and profoundly affected their emotional complacency. We were lucky to have been all together, but greater challenges would have arisen had we been in scattered locations as the attacks occurred. Below I offer some observations that may assist other faculty leaders to cope with traumatic events while leading students in foreign locations.

How might one best support students during a mass trauma event?

- Be there and exhibit calm. Reflecting upon the jumbled hours immediately following the Brussels attacks and the uncertain days following, I conclude that the most significant measure of support for students in this traumatic time was the presence of the study abroad leader, a trusted faculty member who could remain outwardly calm and provide the students with emotional support and practical guidance.
- Assure that the students can communicate with each other, with their study abroad leader, with family and friends, and with their home institution, even if the group is not physically together. To this end Facebook seems to have become the universal means of communication, but a cell phone can prove invaluable for immediate communication.
- Enable students to share the experience with each other and with local residents, in order to relieve their sense of isolation and to experience the emotions of others. In our case, students participating in the memorial event in the city center, in the company of thousands of grieving Belgians, helped the students understand the trauma of the attacks and experience the common humanity with people of other ethnicities, languages, and religions.
- Finally, allow the students an opportunity to express their feelings, as in the essays they prepared in the Brussels coffee shop that I have excerpted here, and follow up on them as necessary. Every student later told me that I could use their comments in writing about their experience.

How might pre-departure programming prepare students for the unexpected?

- A primary recommendation is to avoid platitudinal advice. Perhaps the worst culprits of well-meaning advice are the admonitions to "Be aware of your surroundings" and "Be vigilant," as so many well-wishers offered our students prior to departing for our study abroad in response to the Paris attacks that had occurred just two months earlier. The two perpetrators at the Brussels airport resembled innumerable other young male travelers, and they were pushing luggage carts that looked like everyone else's. Of what surroundings should one have been aware? In Paris, it would have been unreasonable to ask the concert-goers at the Bataclan theater to keep a wary eye on all the doors and on everyone in their proximity while trying to enjoy the music. Being intensely aware of one's surroundings is feasible in situations like traveling on overnight trains, where such vigilance is well rewarded.

- A review of past events and a warning of known scams can help students internalize the uncertainties they will face, though terrorist attacks may be categorized as beyond the horizon of anticipated uncertainties. Experienced travelers in Europe are aware of false petition canvassers, decoy street disturbances, and pickpockets. Instructions on how to avoid such scams can give students greater confidence as they explore unfamiliar environments. Sharing the experiences of previous students whose cameras were stolen on a train, for example, can help students be aware of their situation in risky places.
- Again, the most useful advice may be to provide students with a cell phone and prepaid SIM card to enable contact at all times with friends, family, and study abroad leaders. The ability to be in contact can relieve concerns about being stranded in an unfamiliar place where one does not speak the language, no matter what event may occur. I am reminded of a call to me at another time during our term abroad, unrelated to the Brussels attacks, that suggests the importance of communication in a time of uncertainty: I am supposed to be in Munich, but the sign in the train station says München. Where am I and what do I do?
- Impress upon the students a difference between the “unexpected” and “unfathomable.” A pickpocket attack is unexpected, but it can be imagined. A terrorist attack, however, resides in a wholly different realm. None of the terrorist attacks from 9/11 onward could have been imagined before they happened. At best, one can impress upon students during pre-departure programming that the world is now a most unsettled place, and should the unfathomable happen, the group should seek safety as a group with their study abroad leader to assess their situation and decide how best to proceed.

How can one help students negotiate discrepancies between their experiences of fear and safety, and the perceptions of their family, friends, university administrators, and others who are distant from the events?

- If an event occurs, the faculty leader should, as soon as possible, have the students actively communicate through email and social media about their situation. Receiving photos and messages of greater length than “I’m safe” can bring vital assurance to others, whereas the importance of sending such messages can become lost in the tumult of uncertainty following an event.
- Communicating to the home community can be challenging, but in our case the student who was interviewed via Skype on our local television station served well to placate many concerned persons at home. It is essential that those who gain media access report in a way that calms unwarranted fears and avoids exacerbating an already worrisome situation for those watching the events on television.
- Facebook’s Safety Check provides an outstanding service in time of need, but this must be initiated by Facebook, not by individual students.
- One insight gained from the Brussels experience is that friends, family, and those watching the students’ interviews on television saw our students as being “inside the story.” The students were there; the potential was great that they had suffered harm. But from the students’ own perspective, they remained “outside the story.” They were not in the airport departure hall or in the subway car when the bombs detonated; they were not physically harmed. Yet they were close witnesses. They shared the emotional aftermath in Brussels which, especially given the impromptu memorial attended by thousands in the city center,

offered a sense of comfort that could not be understood by far-off observers. It is important that students, in such a situation, be sensitive to the trauma that others, hearing about events through the news media or word of mouth, may be undergoing.

The attacks in Brussels were totally unforeseen and were sudden, tragic, and shocking. This particular group of students, though physically safe, found themselves in a city that was traumatized by an attack beyond anything they could have imagined. The students were suddenly in a position to observe the reactions of a populace, and they lived the consequences of the terrorist attacks just as did the people of Brussels. As a result, the writings by the students were spontaneous, heartfelt, and eloquent, and written in a tone that could not be reconstructed at a later time.

The question remains, should events such as the Brussels bombings cause universities to rethink study abroad? In this era of international conflict, parents and administrators will approach this question from their own perspectives, and directly addressing this question lies outside the scope of this essay. But to that discussion this paper contributes the voices of a group of U.S. students who were close to the Brussels bombings and who witnessed the response of the city and the world. In sum, perhaps the most salient theme emerging from the students' essays, both those written right after the bombings and those prepared after their return to the United States, was the unquestioned significance of a semester abroad, despite the attacks, and the students' universal resolve that the tragedy they witnessed would not diminish the importance of the study abroad experience. One student's reflection at the end of the semester perhaps best encapsulates the experience of all seventeen:

Since being home it is actually a little annoying when the first thing everyone asks me is about the attacks. I'm happy that people are glad I'm safe, but the attacks were a small part of the amazing trip that our group went on this semester. They are something that you cannot prepare yourself for, but they are something that shouldn't stop you from exploring. I don't think there should even be an issue with the term abroad program because of this. It is an amazing opportunity that we will never get again, and I have absolutely no regrets.

References

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