Recognizing and Assisting Students in Distress

for Study Abroad Program Leaders

As a faculty or staff member you may often have close, ongoing relationships with students. When traveling abroad your role as course leader may require more intensive involvement in helping your students. As a result, you might sometimes learn that a student feels overwhelmed or seems in distress. In your special role it can be hard to be the main source of support for a student. It is important to know your own limitations in providing assistance and to understand when to seek more intensive help.

When you are concerned about the health, welfare or safety of a student you should call or email UWT International Programs at 253-692-4426 or uwtintl@uw.edu to discuss the situation. Once they are aware of the circumstances they may call the Student Counseling Center, Department of Student Services, or other offices, to consult.

Not sure if you should call to consult? Look for these signs of distress. . .

**Academic Problems:** drop in grades; difficulty concentrating; missed assignments; unorganized or erratic performance; continual seeking of special accommodation; essays of creative work that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage or despair; inability to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage.

**Concerning Behaviors:** tearfulness; agitation or anger; expression of worthlessness or hopelessness; expression of concern by classmates; direct statements indicating distress; statements suggesting family problems; acting markedly more withdrawn or animated than usual; self-injurious behaviors (e.g., cutting self, hiding cuts); bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate (e.g., talking to something or someone that is not present).

**Physical Signs:** deterioration in physical appearance; visible changes in weight; lack of personal hygiene; impaired speech or disjointed thoughts; coming to class hung over or smelling of alcohol; listlessness; frequently falling asleep in class.

**Alcohol or Drug Abuse:** coming to class or a meeting when obviously intoxicated or high; can indicate serious substance abuse problem and may place a person at higher risk of harm to self or others.

**Statements Suggesting Suicidal Feelings:** written note or verbal statement that has a sense of finality, suggests “going away for a long time,” or that directly mentions suicide; “jokes” about wanting to die; essays that focus on despair, suicide or death.

**Responding to a Potentially Suicidal Student:** Ask directly about their thoughts, plans and means. “Have you been thinking about killing yourself?” “Do you think you might try to hurt yourself today?” “Have you been thinking about ways you might hurt yourself?” “Do you have any (pills/weapons – whatever they mention as a possible means) in your backpack/purse/apartment/house?” (It is NOT true that asking about suicide causes people to consider suicide if they weren’t already considering it.)
If you are unsure about whether or how to intervene with a student who appears to be distressed, ask yourself the following questions:

Is this student’s behavior markedly out of the ordinary?
Is this beyond my skill level?
Is the behavior getting worse?
Does the behavior place anyone at immediate risk?
Am I feeling like I want to talk with someone about my observations and concerns?

If you answer “Yes” to any of these questions, it is time to consult.

Who to call for assistance:

If you think you or someone else is in imminent danger call the local police or local “911” number.

For other overseas emergencies contact the UW International Emergency Phone Line: 001-206-632-0153.

If you have questions or would like to discuss a specific situation, please call UWT International Programs during normal business hours, at 253-692-4426. They will help you determine the best course of action or refer you to other resources for assistance.

For additional assistance with overseas problems or questions call Travel Security & Information Manager (TSIM) Brent Barker at 206-601-7292 or send email to: barker@uw.edu.