

## [Education Abroad Office Works Hard to Protect Global Students](#)

June 30, 2011 at 4:00 AM by [Gant Team](#) · [Leave a Comment](#)

***Rebekka Coakley, Penn State***

UNIVERSITY PARK – Five days before protesting began in Egypt, Penn State sophomore Chad Miller of Robesonia, Pa., landed in the Arabic country to study at the American University in Cairo. Making friends from the start, Miller had no idea political unrest would bring his semester abroad to a halt. But when violent demonstrations broke out, Penn State's Education Abroad office, with help from its travel insurance provider, retrieved Miller and his Penn State peers from Egypt before the risk of harm presented itself.

With Penn State students studying in up to 62 countries worldwide, and as many as 690 students abroad each semester, Penn State's Education Abroad office is busy. Staff members keep vigilant watch over the latest news in each of these countries. The spring semester of 2011 kept executive director Barbara Rowe, embedded programs manager Paul Shaffner and risk analyst Caroline Sheldon on their toes, beginning in January with Egypt's unrest and continuing through March, with Japan's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.

Miller, a dual major in history and international politics with a minor in Middle Eastern studies, chose to study in Egypt to expand his Arabic language skills. Once there, warnings to American students of the possibility of demonstrations were issued. Miller went to Tahrir Square, the nucleus of the political unrest, to learn more about the issues affecting his new friends.

"I decided to go there to experience what the Egyptian people were fighting for," Miller said. "There wasn't much action then, but we did see police officers there with riot gear, preparing for the worst. After we left, protests picked up; people got violent."

Once the protests began, Miller figured Penn State's travel insurance company would pull students out for safety reasons. He was right. HTH Worldwide, the insurance company Penn State uses to protect its students abroad, pulled American students out of Egypt, while Rowe and other Penn State Division of Student Affairs representatives assured families of their students' safety.

HTH Worldwide is a traveler's insurance company Penn State contracts to cover its students studying abroad. The service includes medical coverage as well as evacuation assistance during political unrest and natural disasters.

The insurance company contracts with English-speaking doctors in areas where Penn State students study. They also keep medical records on file for students and their doctors.

"Two years ago a Penn State student in China nearly drowned," Rowe said. "HTH guaranteed payment to the hospital, monitored his situation and decided he needed a better hospital. They paid for his transport and sent a translator to help his parents speak with Chinese healthcare workers."

Sheldon subscribes to news alerts from U.S. intelligence agencies about each country where Penn State students are studying. Three email alerts she receives daily offer updated reports on monitored and unexpected emergency situations. In May, Sheldon received news alerts warning travelers that Osama Bin Laden had been killed and the threat level of terrorist attacks had increased.

When HTH began offering political unrest evacuation coverage, Penn State purchased it for study-abroad students. In July, HTH will begin offering natural disaster coverage, which Penn State also will purchase. Despite its unavailability during the March 11, 2011, earthquake and resulting tsunami in Japan, HTH still helped Penn State students return home safely.

On that day in March, Rowe awoke to a phone call at 5:30 a.m. with news of the earthquake. The severity of destruction was unclear, but concerned parents were still calling. Though most Penn State students studying in Japan were home for the semester break, four chose to spend the time in Japan. One student was in Sendai, the nearest major city to the earthquake's epicenter. After much effort, he was found safe in an emergency shelter. The three students in Tokyo also were safe. Within two days, HTH flew them all home.

Because of continuous nuclear reactor issues, students who were home for spring break or scheduled to study in Japan at the start of the next semester could not travel there. Penn State's Education Abroad officials also had to cancel summer and embedded programs there.

They often have to make swift decisions on the safety of a trip abroad, based on the information they have about each situation. Collaborating with other U.S. institutions help them decide.

Right now Education Abroad's Sheldon, Rowe and Shaffner (who helps coordinate insurance and scrutinizes alerts related to embedded study programs) are keeping their eyes on the E. coli outbreak in Europe and the cholera outbreak in Haiti. Continuing to stay informed about any potentially hazardous situations abroad makes a significant contribution to keeping global Penn State students safe.