

Turmoil in Egypt disrupts study-abroad programs

Many U.S. students get first-hand look at history before being forced to flee

By Tanya Mohn

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The violence and political turmoil in Cairo over the past week that prompted the evacuation of thousands of tourists have also disrupted the studies of American students in Egypt, many who have been forced to flee the country.

“I only became seriously concerned for my safety when the rumors of the police using live ammunition started going around,” said Matthew C. Davis, 20, in an e-mail interview from Istanbul this morning. “Before then, I endured tear gas and saw lots of burning police vans and was fine. Shaken, but not seriously worried. I had some Pepsi with me to stop the burning from the gas and I kept my distance from the burning cars. You just have to keep calm and prepare yourself for what's going to happen and you'll be fine.”

Davis, a junior majoring in Near East Languages and Civilization & Linguistics at the University of Washington in Seattle, was studying at The American University in Cairo since the fall semester. He was evacuated from Cairo earlier this week on a U.S. State Department flight.

“I had seen protests over specific issues such as fair wages, but never one calling for the total collapse of the government. Nor had I smelled tear gas or watched cars being burnt. It was all very surreal. I didn't think it was really happening.”

The American University in Cairo runs one of the largest study-abroad programs in the city, and has about 500 international students registered for the current semester, most of whom are American, said Morgan Roth, director of communications for North America for the university. So far, she said, about half have left the country.

A number of students, she said, feel that the current political turmoil in Egypt is one of the most significant learning experiences of their higher education. “They are sitting in the front row of something so historic and watching the process play out.” But others, she said, were frightened. “We've seen every possible reaction.”

On the frontlines of history

Debby Fisher's 21-year-old daughter, Brooke, was a student at The American University in Cairo for about a week before protests over President Hosni Mubarak's government began.

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“Her first e-mail to us said ‘I’m right in the middle of history. This is just incredible and I don’t want to go home,’ ” Fisher said.

“She understands the history and the culture,” Fisher said of her daughter, a junior at New York University majoring in Middle Eastern studies, who has since left Egypt and is currently staying with friends in Paris. “But we told her she needed to make a good, thoughtful decision.”

Some students, such as Brooke, are considering a return to Cairo if the university reopens and the situation stabilizes. NYU has also said she can come back for the semester, even though classes have already started, and Sen. John Kerry’s office in Washington has offered to help her find an internship, Fisher said.

The exact number of American students in Egypt when the crisis emerged is unknown, but several years ago the number was close to 2,000. A recent survey indicates those numbers may be even higher now, according

to the nonprofit Institute of International Education.

The U.S. State Department has ordered the departure of all non-emergency U.S. government personnel from Egypt and recommends that U.S. citizens avoid travel to Egypt at this time.

Students at greater risk

“By their nature, students are generally a higher risk group than tourists,” said Gary Rhodes, director of the Center for Global Education at the University of California at Los Angeles’s Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

“They tend to think they will live forever, and often travel and do things off the beaten path ‘for the experience,’ ” he said. “One may try to tell them to stay away from the protest, but they may go straight to them, even if it is unsafe.”

Slideshow: Egyptians call for regime change (on this page)

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(SAFETI) Clearinghouse, an online source of health and safety information used to assist college officials for study abroad students, just issued a booklet in response to the crisis in Egypt, with information on financial and logistical issues, and re-entry challenges like the importance of providing mental health counseling.

Rhodes said many study abroad providers and universities are currently working with students to find alternate placements for the semester, such as other programs abroad or making arrangements for them to return to their home campuses.

The University of Washington arranged for four students studying at The American University in Cairo to attend classes at Bogazici University in Istanbul, one of the university's exchange partners, said Brent Barker, travel security and information manager in the Office of Global Affairs.

Davis, who flew to Istanbul earlier this week, is considering the program, as well as another one in Fes, Morocco. "My study abroad adviser had already told me via phone that it was unlikely that I would be able to transfer credit from The American University in Cairo when the country has a travel warning. I essentially had nothing left of the life I had built in Cairo, and so I left."

Successful evacuation

The U.S. State Department does not yet know how many students have been evacuated, but said that most study abroad programs in Egypt have coordinated the safe departure of their American students.

A number of colleges are working with emergency-assistance and insurance providers.

In the immediate wake of the uprising, "calls started pouring in from colleges, with people asking, 'Do you know what's happening? Should we call our crisis management team together?'" said Patrick Deroose, group general manager for the corporate assistance department of International SOS, a health care, medical and security assistance company that provides emergency response. "But with violence erupting now, there seems to be a surge," in calls, Deroose said.

International SOS said about 30 colleges and universities have contacted its offices regarding their students in Egypt. Colleges' risk management teams and study abroad offices communicated directly with the company to make evacuation plans, said Laura Angelone, director of scholastic programs. On Wednesday, International SOS evacuated more than 800 people, including students, via seven flights. Additional missions are currently being planned and carried out.

Video: Trapped in Cairo, woman irked at embassy (on this page)

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will move 85 students from the country.

“These evacuations have been complicated because of the limited number of appropriate resources such as airplanes and armored cars; there are also traffic issues and safety concerns such as checkpoint and roadblocks that need to be dealt with,” the company said in an e-mail, adding that the curfew limitations and airport availability complicate matters further. “In one situation, HTH had to enlist an Egyptian military escort to get students safety to the airport.”

‘What if’

Safety experts strongly recommend that students planning to study abroad obtain an emergency assistance/insurance policy that covers political unrest. Such plans typically include 24/7 telephone hotlines.

Some universities have that kind of coverage and crisis plan in place, but others do not, said Rhodes of The Center for Global Education.

Experts also say it is critical that students provide up-to-date contact information — including new cell phone numbers and addresses — so that in the event of an emergency, college officials can locate and communicate with them. Registering at the nearest U.S. embassy, or through the Smart Travelers Enrollment Program (STEP) is also advised.

“In light of the rapidly changing world events, interest in learning more about the region is likely to remain high, and even to increase in the coming years,” Allan E. Goodman, president and chief executive of the Institute of International Education, said in an e-mail statement. “Once the situation stabilizes and the situation is deemed to be secure, past experience has shown that study abroad

programs can be reinstated relatively quickly and student enrollments can resume or even surpass previous levels.”

Fisher, the mother of Brooke, who was evacuated earlier this week, said having a passport ready and knowing a university's crisis contingency plan is essential. “We never thought to do that.”

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