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U.S.

# Some Study-Abroad Students Resist Calls to Come Home, Frustrating Parents and Colleges

While thousands of students returned home amid the pandemic, a few have embraced life in foreign lands



Greta Huber, a sophomore studying abroad in Germany, visits the Hercules monument in Kassel.

PHOTO: EMILY LOCY

By *Stu Woo*

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Greta Huber had known since middle school she wanted to study abroad in Germany. When she got to college and was accepted to a semester-long program in a German town with a castle, she bought her plane ticket eight months in advance.

So when her university told her to come home in March because of the pandemic, she didn't deliberate. She said no. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes over a year of planning," she said. "I couldn't do this again."

Via calls and text messages from Maryland, her parents gave her their perspective. "We wanted her to come home," Karl Huber said. "Your reaction as a parent, if something happens to your kid and she's over there, you can't do anything about it."

And in Pennsylvania, administrators of Millersville University, where Ms. Huber is a sophomore, were more blunt. “I truly wish that she had respected our communications with her and that she had returned,” said associate provost James Delle.

Dozens of American students have chosen to remain on study-abroad programs during the pandemic, vexing both parents and college administrators who worry about their ability to help if the worst happens.



Megan Reitz on March 20 unsuccessfully tried to persuade her daughter, Mimi Reitz, responses in blue, to come home from her study-abroad program in Paris.

PHOTO: MIMI REITZ

Some said their host countries felt safer than the U.S., where the virus was spreading rapidly. Others worried about getting infected while flying home. And few seemed inclined to cut short the adventure that might be their only chance to live abroad during college and perhaps their life.

After the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told colleges in March to consider ending study-abroad programs immediately, most did just that. They helped students book last-minute flights home, sometimes offering travel reimbursement.

Parents and college administrators worried about the quality of foreign health-care systems and the ability of students to navigate them. They feared travel restrictions could indefinitely strand students.



Mimi Reitz, who has chosen to stay in France during the pandemic, said, 'I feel the most myself when I'm here.'

PHOTO: MIMI REITZ

Colleges told students who wanted to stay abroad that they would be largely responsible for their own welfare, sometimes asking them to acknowledge that by signing waivers.

There is no comprehensive count of how many study-abroad students stayed behind. The University of California Education Abroad Program, which serves 10 campuses and is one of the country's biggest such programs, said suspending the spring season affected 1,600 students, of which 155 remain abroad.

American University, in Washington, D.C., said about 20 of 450 students chose to remain abroad, in places such as Britain, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Italy, Israel, Japan, Jordan and Taiwan. They include Mimi Reitz, in Paris.

As countries restricted travel in March, Ms. Reitz's mother, Megan, relayed a concern from Ms. Reitz's father, Charles, via text message: "He's worried you will be stuck in France for a long time."

Their daughter replied: "That's my dream."

The young Ms. Reitz said she has severe asthma and wanted to avoid airports and planes. She said she speaks enough French to navigate health services. But she said she decided to stay because of an "illogical, wishy-washy" feeling she developed when she spent a gap year in Paris before college as an au pair.

"I feel the most myself when I'm here," she said. She spends her days taking online classes from her French school, jogging and staging elaborate photo shoots with her fashion-student roommate in their apartment.

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In Westminister, Mass., her parents came around. “She wouldn’t be happy here,” said her mother, Megan Reitz. She did recently text her daughter to remind her of one consequence of forgoing the university’s offer to reimburse up to \$1,500 for emergency travel if students departed by March 22: “Remember that you’re buying your own ticket home.”

Parental approval was no problem for An Nguyen, whose family in Los Angeles felt Singapore was safer than the U.S. But she negotiated with the University of Arizona, which repeatedly asked her to return home. “I know that it is ultimately my decision and consequences that I may face,” she emailed her study-abroad coordinator on March 16.



An Nguyen, left, and Kaela Seiersen, pictured above in March, continue to study abroad in Singapore.

PHOTO: LISA WEBER

The two sides reached an understanding, and the university extended her international health insurance. “These students are adults, and ultimately the decision to stay or come home is theirs,” said vice provost Brent White.

Ms. Nguyen spends her time studying and scouring open-air markets for laksa, a noodle soup. She doesn’t regret her decision, but since new Singaporean restrictions largely confined her to a half-empty dormitory, she has realized that “it’s time to go home.” Ms. Nguyen plans to leave on May 6, after finishing finals.

From the heart of Pennsylvania's Amish country, the Millersville University associate provost Mr. Delle started monitoring the coronavirus in early February, when the school scrapped plans to send an instructor to a Chinese university 125 miles from Wuhan. He watched as the virus hit South Korea and Italy, countries where Millersville had students.

Responsible for the state university's study-abroad program, Mr. Delle and his colleagues agonized over pulling the plug. "Our students don't typically come from affluent backgrounds, and for many it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience to spend any time abroad," he said. After work, he paid unusually close attention to how Hamilton College, in New York, handled its study-abroad students in Paris. His daughter was one of them.



Millersville University administrator James Delle, right, with his daughter, Lily Delle-Levine, in February 2019, worried about her remaining in Paris.

PHOTO: MARY ANN LEVINE

The tipping point came when the CDC issued its guidance. On March 4, Millersville told its 17 students in Europe and Asia they had a week to come home. Besides health and travel-restriction concerns, Mr. Delle said Millersville could ensure these students could complete the semester. To his relief, his daughter returned after Hamilton took a similar approach.

The order didn't go over well in the German university town of Marburg, where Greta Huber had arrived only two weeks earlier. She and fellow study-abroad students made a pact to stay. Marburg felt safe, especially after she read about Americans hoarding toilet paper. "Everyone is so calm," said Ms. Huber, who continues taking online classes, hiking and sightseeing in Germany.

Her parents were conflicted. "It's kind of ridiculous for 19-, 20-year-olds to make this decision," said Karl Huber, a Baltimore school psychologist. But he never explicitly asked her to come home. "She's got to live her life," he said. "There were pros and cons, so I didn't think it was completely unreasonable."