Beyond Borders: Study Abroad Brings

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE TO SAFETY EDUCATION

By Cindy Medford, Michael Adamczyk and Rona Smeak

Global awareness is no longer a "nice to have" in safety education—it is a necessity. As safety professionals increasingly support multinational operations and diverse workforces, understanding how safety culture, risk tolerance and operational practices differ around the world helps to build adaptable and thoughtful leaders.

Helping students appreciate the global context of workplace safety has been an enduring challenge. The safety management bachelor's program at Slippery Rock University (SRU) embraced this challenge by launching a study abroad initiative that takes undergraduate students beyond the classroom and across borders.

Interested students apply for the study abroad experience during the fall semester, and 20 are selected each year. These students are accompanied by two SRU safety management faculty members. In May 2024, the study abroad experience traveled to Italy. In May 2025, students traveled to Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Students toured world-class automotive and motorcycle manufacturers such as Lamborghini, Ferrari and Ducati in Italy and BMW, Porsche and Mercedes-Benz in Germany, while also experiencing European cultures and contemporary safety practices.

Students submit their reflections and a PowerPoint presentation regarding the experience. While tied closely to their coursework, students consistently describe the trips as life-changing. They speak of increased cultural humility, a broadened perspective and a deeper sense of purpose as future safety leaders. This article presents highlights, takeaways and student reflections from these trips, categorized by the academic learning objectives from the curriculum: transportation safety, contemporary aspects of safety, and insurance and risk.

Transportation Safety: Roads, Rails & Risk Tolerance

Students observed striking differences between European and U.S. approaches to transportation safety, from infrastructure to culture to regulation. One student noted how rail systems in Germany incorporated innovative engineering controls:

> In Innsbruck there was a short wall on the edge of the platform that rose while people waited for the train. When the train arrived, the walls lowered. It's a simple, effective way to prevent falls onto the tracks.

Another reflected on how driving practices reveal cultural attitudes toward risk:

> In Italy, the cars and bikes share narrow streets, weaving around pedestrians. At first, it felt chaotic. But when I looked up the data, Italy actually has less than half the road fatalities per capita compared to the U.S. That was eye-opening.

Regulatory differences were also noticed:

> In Europe, truck drivers are limited to 9 hours a day with a mandatory 45-minute break every 4.5 hours—much stricter than U.S. rules. It really prioritizes rest and safety.

Contemporary Safety: Automation & Sustainability

At Mercedes-Benz, students observed crash testing conducted on-site with market-ready vehicles, reinforcing the company's commitment to real-world safety validation. Elevated walkways kept visitors safely above production lines, and autonomous robots navigated the floor with precision.

However, students also noted inconsistencies. "We didn't see as much PPE as we expected—no hard hats where you'd expect them, and little signage," wrote one. Another observed a worker using a pallet jack as a scooter in the Munich airport, and a man working under a suspended load held by a single chain. "It seems that day-to-day safety practices in Germany are more relaxed than in the U.S.," a student reflected.

Beyond the factory walls, sustainability was another recurring theme. One student observed:

> It felt like almost every roof had solar panels, and wind turbines dotted the landscape. It showed how serious they are about renewable energy—and the safety challenges that come with maintaining it.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDY

- **Integrate global perspectives.** Encourage students to compare international safety practices such as transportation systems, regulatory standards and cultural risk tolerance to deepen their understanding of diverse safety environments.
- **Leverage real-world observation.** Use site visits and field reflections to help students connect classroom concepts to practical safety applications such as automation, ergonomics and industrial hygiene.
- **Highlight cultural influences on safety.** Guide learners to examine how cultural norms such as attitudes toward PPE, smoking or alcohol shape workplace policies and risk behaviors in different countries.
- **Analyze regulatory contrasts.** Incorporate structured comparisons of U.S. and European regulations (e.g., trucking hours, rail safety engineering) to build critical thinking around policy design and enforcement.
- **Emphasize automation's safety impact.** Show how robotics, artificial intelligence-assisted tools and autonomous systems reduce exposure to ergonomic and chemical hazards, and discuss how these innovations translate to U.S. operations.
- **Promote reflective practice.** Require students to document insights, cultural experiences and safety observations to build self-awareness, cultural humility and professional identity.

Insurance & Risk Management

For students studying risk management, the trips highlighted how insurance principles apply in different cultural contexts. A student observed:

> The factories were spotless and highly automated—you could tell they were reducing comp claims through ergonomics and robotics.

Some noticed everyday liability risks such as pallet jacks operated recklessly in airports, construction sites lacking adequate barricades or shoring, and distracted driving near pedestrian-heavy areas. One student reflected on the observation:

> Even though they tolerate more risk on the streets—pedestrians and bikes weaving in traffic—it made me think about how liability is handled differently.

Another student noted that Mercedes-Benz required the group's own bus driver to navigate the factory site, raising questions about liability exposure in the event of an incident.

Industrial Hygiene & Occupational Health

The integration of robotics in the European car manufacturing industry has significantly reduced workers' exposure to occupational health hazards, particularly in high-risk tasks such as welding, painting and heavy lifting. Welding, for example, produces hazardous fumes containing metal particles and gases that can be harmful when inhaled. By automating welding processes using precision robots, manufacturers not only improve consistency and efficiency but also remove workers from close contact with toxic fumes, creating a safer work environment.

Similarly, robotic systems have revolutionized the painting process in automotive production. Paint application and epoxy application often involves exposure to volatile organic compounds, which can cause respiratory problems and other long-term health issues. Advanced paint robots can apply coatings uniformly in enclosed and ventilated environments, significantly minimizing human exposure to harmful substances. This shift also ensures a higher-quality finish, reducing the need for manual touch-ups and further limiting risk.

Ergonomic issues, such as repetitive strain injuries and musculoskeletal disorders, have also been addressed through the deployment of robotics. Tasks involving repetitive motions, awkward postures, or the handling of heavy components can now be performed by collaborative robots (cobots) or fully automated systems. These robots work alongside human operators or independently to manage physically demanding tasks, thus reducing the likelihood of injury and fatigue among workers. As a result, European car manufacturers not only boost worker safety but also enhance productivity and job satisfaction through more ergonomic work environments.

Many students were fascinated by European manufacturers' heavy investments in ergonomics and automation to reduce risk. As one student noted:

> Lamborghini's artificial intelligence carts and lifts made sure workers didn't have to bend or reach awkwardly. Robots even helped lift and move heavy tires. You could see how it reduced injuries.

Another student added:

> At Ducati, their self-driving machines stopped when they sensed people nearby, reducing ergonomic strain and improving safety. The automated assembly arms impressed me with their precision and how they minimized repetitive-motion injuries.

Beyond the Curriculum: Cultural Observations Impacting Policy, Awareness & Professional Growth

The SRU safety management students also made interesting observations pertaining to American versus European automaker policies. Students noted that some European automotive manufacturers maintain more relaxed rules regarding smoking and alcohol consumption compared to their American counterparts. In certain European facilities, it was observed that workers were permitted to smoke in designated areas inside the factory buildings and breakrooms on company premises, and in rare instances, even allowed to consume one beer during their shift. These practices, often rooted in long-standing cultural norms and collective bargaining agreements, reflect a more lenient approach to workplace behavior, especially in countries where moderate alcohol consumption is more socially accepted.

In contrast, American automobile manufacturers typically enforce stricter workplace policies that prohibit smoking inside buildings and strictly ban alcohol consumption during work hours. These rules are shaped by stringent occupational safety regulations, corporate liability concerns and a strong emphasis on maintaining a controlled, substance-free work environment. The American approach prioritizes minimizing distractions, preventing potential safety hazards and promoting employee health through comprehensive no-smoking and no-alcohol policies. This divergence highlights differing regional perspectives on workplace culture and employee autonomy despite a shared commitment to overall safety and productivity.

ASSP's Slippery Rock University Student Section officers at Neuschwanstein Castle, Germany, in May 2025.

Students share reflections that look beyond the core curriculum of the study abroad program as well. One student reflected on a new perspective regarding work and the world around them:

> This trip showed me there's more to life than work—and more to safety than just rules on paper. It made me want to work even harder to protect others while appreciating the world around me.

Others reflect on their new confidence navigating unfamiliar situations and cultures:

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RONA SMEAK

Slippery Rock University safety management undergraduate study abroad program students in Innsbruck, Austria, in May 2025.

> Stepping out of our American shoes really made me notice the little things that are different—and appreciate how much history and pride other cultures bring to their work and safety practices.

One student shared how the view from the Nordkette mountain in Innsbruck "rewired my brain to enjoy what life is about and not to stress about the silly little things." Another reflected on the friendships formed with fellow safety management students, saying, "So many of the other students on this trip became close friends of mine that I wish I met sooner."

Conclusion

By bringing safety students into real-world, international environments, we help them connect theory to practice and expand their vision of what safety and their future careers can look like. "This was the greatest experience of my life so far, and it changed how I see the world and my role in it," one student wrote.

SRU is already planning the next safety management study abroad trips and hopes that more industry partners join in building these transformative experiences for students. Working together, safety faculty, professionals and industry partners can help prepare future safety professionals who are not only technically competent, but globally conscious, culturally aware and ready to lead. **PSJ**

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