

**State of the Profession:
 International Safety & Security in Higher Education**

White Paper by Joseph Levy
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This white paper was commissioned by Pulse International, the association and network for International Safety & Security (ISS) professionals in higher education. It was written independently by Joseph Levy of Levy Global Support, a certified Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR), who oversaw ISS at Harvard University from 2010 to 2016.

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Abstract

This paper considers the reasons why ISS has developed into a critical function with dedicated resources and a specialized knowledge base, and analyzes the responsibilities and skills of ISS professionals. It then offers guidance on successful ISS structures (duties, authorities, scope, reporting lines) in use today at higher education institutions, and how those structures develop over time to meet emerging needs of students, faculty, and staff. Finally, this paper summarizes hiring considerations, including professional backgrounds and preferred qualifications, and proposes principles for determining job levels, titles, and resource needs.

Data in this paper is from the April 2024 survey of Pulse members, unless otherwise indicated. Pulse membership is limited to roles primarily focused on ISS in higher education, including universities, colleges, and education-abroad program providers.

A Note on Nomenclature

This paper uses “ISS” as shorthand for “international safety and security”, the phrase used in Pulse’s mission statement and by a small plurality (16%) of surveyed members’ titles. “Global safety” also appears as a synonym for ISS. A variety of other terms are in use within the field but are practically synonymous. (For example, the ISO 31030 standard, which covers ISS work, is titled “Travel Risk Management”.¹)

This paper also uses “ISS professional” for anyone whose primary focus is on safety abroad, “ISS team” for the ISS function as a whole, and “ISS head” for the lead member on any ISS team—even if that “team” is just the one person. “Pulse” and “ISS” are used interchangeably when referring to survey respondents. “University” is used generically for any degree-granting post-secondary institution. “Organization” and “institution” are used interchangeably to refer to both universities and program providers.

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Introduction

In the past 25 years, International Safety & Security (ISS) in higher education has evolved from a priority to a specialization to a profession.

Once seen as an ancillary responsibility of trip leaders and Education Abroad offices, ISS is now recognized as a critical function requiring dedicated personnel, specialty resources, and a professional knowledge base—all available 24/7/365 anywhere in the world. The development of ISS has roots in the rise of international medical evacuation services in the 1960s² and in corporate, diplomatic, and NGO responses to terrorism, including major security reforms in the 1980s and 1990s.³ When higher education faced its own tragedies, it drew on these innovations and decades of educational travel experience, adapting the global safety paradigm to contemporary student expectations and the special challenges of teaching and research.⁴

The number of universities with dedicated ISS positions has grown from 11 in 2010 to more than 100 today.⁵ Post-pandemic, many ISS professionals report more urgency around global safety and increased leadership support. New US federal guidance on *research security* and related grant requirements have also spurred institutions to expand ISS or to require what was once merely encouraged.

Research security is the umbrella term for measures to safeguard research against threats to national or economic security and against interference by foreign governments. Research security encompasses cybersecurity, export controls, “foreign influence”, sanctions, and travel security, and it also has significant overlap with research integrity.⁶

This paper examines what it means to be a higher ed ISS professional in 2024, and provides guidance on organizational structures, protocols, and resources.

Why a Dedicated ISS Role?

The ISS profession has grown rapidly alongside several trends. First, the focus of globalization in higher education has expanded from traditional study abroad to a panoply of global programs and independent travel—internships, co-ops, research projects, performance tours, and student organization trips, among others. These assorted programs do not necessarily have faculty leaders on-site to handle emergencies. Second, it is easier than ever before for students and faculty to reach remote or unfamiliar locations with varied risk profiles and (often) limited medical infrastructure—without necessarily understanding the full range of risks. Third, campus resources for mental health, well-being, and inclusion have increased, and students expect similar supports abroad. Fourth, global communication has become instant and ubiquitous, creating a presumption that universities can and should react to any life-threatening situation, anywhere in the world. A nascent fifth trend comes from research-security rules and other grantor and regulatory requirements, which may codify some ISS practices and apply certain rules to faculty that had, at some institutions, applied only to students.⁷ Together, these developments mean increased safety, reputational, and legal risks—but also new opportunities for mitigation.

Twenty years ago, many institutions did not prepare for international emergencies outside their core faculty-led programs, and some expected that on-site faculty could manage nearly any issue or incident on their own.⁸ Today, that narrow mindset is out of the question. With a broader mandate come several challenges:

1. **Coordination.** Multiple departments send students abroad, but the institution needs a consistent approach to risk assessment and a unified emergency response that accounts for all travelers. Trip leaders also need a single point of contact for an array of resources—addressing medical, mental health, security, and other issues before they become incidents.
2. **Governance & policies.** It can be difficult to set baseline requirements that align to institutional risk appetite across disparate international programs. High-risk trips, in particular, can raise novel questions about what an institution should permit and how it sees its responsibilities and duty of care.
3. **Tracking.** With independent travelers in so many places, a “phone tree” model for incident communication no longer works. Institutions need a central travel registry to track itineraries and contact information, both for emergencies and to identify high-risk travelers before they depart. Travel tracking may also be necessary for research security compliance, export controls, sanctions, and IT security.
4. **Expertise.** Travelers and trip leaders can no longer be expected to know their destination intimately and rely solely on their own resourcefulness. Instead, the ISS discipline has developed standard practices for assessing hazards, selecting mitigation (such as transportation guidelines, health preparations, or security measures), handling medical and security evacuations, and processing a firehose of worldwide alerts. Doing this well requires extensive knowledge of disparate locations, environments, and incident types.
5. **Worldwide resources.** Institutions need medical, security, and intelligence monitoring capabilities even in countries where they lack established programs. Today, nearly every institution has a *global assistance provider*, and most have insurance for incidents abroad. To use these resources effectively and cost-efficiently, they must be integrated with the organization’s in-house protocols for international travel and emergency response.

A **global assistance provider** provides 24/7/365 worldwide incident management, including a call center, medical team, security intelligence team, and evacuation capabilities. Some examples are Crisis24, Healix, International SOS, and On Call International. (No endorsement implied.)
6. **Bandwidth & span of control.** Education Abroad offices typically have the economy of scale to manage program safety and develop some internal expertise *for their own programs*. Now a larger share of international travel—including high-risk travel—occurs outside Education Abroad, in departments with insufficient bandwidth to manage safety on their own. Who supports these odds and ends? An institution-wide role is essential.

Indicators of Need

ISS professionals serve different needs at different institutions. Look for one or more of these signs that a dedicated ISS role may be needed:

- International programs run out of disparate offices, without a single point-person
- Growth in independent travel abroad sponsored by the institution
- Routine travel to high-risk locations
- No shared understanding of who does what for an incident abroad, or whom to call at 3AM
- Limited awareness or utilization of the global assistance provider
- Limited training for trip leaders on mental health, first aid, security, and emergencies
- Inconsistent safety assessment of programs and travel outside the US, due to limited bandwidth or dependence on trip leaders’ local knowledge
- Monitoring international incidents depends on reloading CNN, because no one is connected to security intelligence networks

As these indicators show, ISS professionals do more than emergency response. They provide crucial coordination, safety information, and access to resources. And they do this for all kinds of incidents, from minor illnesses to earthquakes.

There is a common misconception that ISS is mainly concerned with exotic destinations and risks. In fact, wherever travelers go, the great majority of ISS incidents involve routine medical issues, mental health, or property crime—similar to incidents on campus.⁹ ISS resources and expertise allow organizations to respond effectively to these familiar issues in an unfamiliar environment. Even in Western Europe, local responders may not speak English, hospitals may require advance payment, and standard responses to mental health crises or gender-based violence may transgress US norms.

Institutions of all sizes have ISS needs. However, at present most Pulse members are large doctoral universities: “R1” and “R2” in the Carnegie basic classification. Overall, 72% of private “R1” universities, 43% of public “R1” universities, and 13% of all “R2” universities have a Pulse position (including vacancies).¹⁰ In addition, about 90% of surveyed university Pulse teams serve at least 1,000 travelers per year.

These data suggest that smaller institutions may have significant unmet needs. Any organization that runs its own programs abroad or funds significant independent travel should review its global safety practices. If proactive safety responsibilities are unclear, emergency plans are incomplete, or staff are overwhelmed, those are critical risks. Consider, too, whether the organization already spends at least 1 FTE (full-time equivalent) on non-specialist support for global safety; consolidating that work in one ISS professional may streamline processes while adding expertise.

What Is the ISS Function?

ISS roles are multi-faceted, encompassing elements of emergency response, risk management, and education for travelers *abroad*, and sometimes for individuals based abroad. (38% of ISS teams cover expatriate staff and 26% cover host-country nationals based abroad.)

For US institutions, **abroad** commonly means outside the 50 states and the District of Columbia. (67% of university ISS teams do cover travel to US territories, but fewer than 10% have even limited routine responsibilities within the 50 states.)

Responsibilities

Nearly all higher ed institutions invest ISS with three core responsibilities:

- ❖ **24/7/365 Emergency Management.** Real-time incident management for medical, security, and natural disaster emergencies and crises abroad. Developing, maintaining, and training on a general international emergency plan and supplementary plans for certain locations and incident types. Depending on the incident, ISS may be the primary contact for travelers and sometimes for parents and other family members.
- ❖ **Risk Assessment.** Nearly all ISS functions review travel to *high-risk* locations (typically 5% to 10% of trips) as well as major programs outside high-risk zones, in order to advise on mitigation measures and enforce policies. Though these are often desk-

The definition of **high-risk** varies by institution. The objective is to give extra scrutiny to whichever locations are relatively risky compared to the institution’s typical destinations.

based reviews using intelligence data and ISS professional networks, 81% of ISS teams also participate in on-site reviews of certain programs or locations.

- ❖ **Traveler Preparation.** Content development and delivery for pre-travel safety orientations and trip leader training. Often, additional training on topics such as mental health and wellness, gender and identity considerations, natural disaster preparation, conflict zones, and wilderness first aid.

Underpinning these core areas are a variety of collateral responsibilities. Most ISS teams manage these responsibilities directly, but some depend on other offices for certain functions.

- **Intelligence analysis.** Every ISS team, including solo practitioners, is constantly monitoring events and incidents around the world—wherever students, faculty, or staff travel—and evaluating the general risk picture as well as program-specific threat vectors. This intel informs risk assessments, orientations, mitigation measures, and emergency planning and response.
- **Trip registration.** ISS effectiveness depends upon knowing when and where travelers go, and how to reach them (and their program leaders) in an emergency. It is now standard practice for universities to have a travel registry that covers all university-sponsored international trips by students, faculty, and staff.¹¹
- **Policies.** Institutional travel risk policies typically set parameters and requirements for trip registration, high-risk travel reviews, and eligibility for emergency support and other services.
- **Vendor management.** All ISS teams depend on vendors for worldwide intelligence, emergency capabilities, and insurance coverage.¹² ISS may manage these vendors directly, or may partner with other offices such as Risk Management. ISS teams typically manage a global assistance provider (74%), the travel registry (74%), and/or the evacuation insurance program (60%). In 50% of organizations, ISS manages all three.
- **Private security:** Major facilities, high-risk locations, and VIP travel may require security from private firms (e.g. guards, perimeter controls, secure transport). Although less than half of organizations use private security abroad, 10% of ISS teams lead this function, and another 23% assist other units.

Finally, ISS often assists other offices with their core functions, especially compliance. About 74% of ISS teams help track reportable incidents under the Clery Act¹³, and 77% support Title IX and related cases abroad. Most university ISS teams also support compliance with research security requirements—such as export controls, NSPM-33, and the CHIPS and Science Act¹⁴—by sharing trip information or providing consulting support to research administrators.

Skills

ISS professionals bring a unique combination of skills.

The most important skill is **collaboration-building** on a broad scale, establishing two-way communication with all corners of the organization. ISS success depends on hearing about travel plans and local threats. Thus, ISS serves as a hub for information exchange, and this same network allows for streamlined communication in an emergency. ISS also organizes the external vendors that travelers depend on for information, guidance, and emergency services. ISS professionals are skilled at communicating with all kinds of people, from students to faculty to

security professionals, at all levels of the organization. (99% of Pulse members identify communication as a critical skill for their work, more than any other attribute.)

ISS professionals also have **specific expertise** in intelligence analysis, threat mitigation, medical evacuation, security, and other disciplines that are uncommon in most institutions. ISS professionals understand safety risks and potential mitigations, and how these vary across countries and environments. Events that would require immediate action in one location are routine in another, and an ISS professional distinguishes the two through exposure to daily alerts, interaction with travelers, and experience seeing incidents develop over time. This discernment also applies to program and itinerary assessments; ISS professionals identify which safety concerns actually present critical risk appetite questions and frame them for leadership.

Finally, ISS professionals are **prepared**. Like all emergency managers, they think through response plans for numerous scenarios—hospitalizations, sexual assaults, coups, natural disasters, deaths abroad, and many others—to be ready to act whenever (and wherever) trouble occurs. Moreover, when plans are not enough, their experience traveling and living abroad has honed their insight and instinct. They maintain situational awareness—focusing on “what if” in any environment—anticipating and managing common stresses and challenges of travel, and they teach these crucial skills to travelers. And when facing circumstances no action plan could foresee, their instincts allow them to make decisions calmly and judiciously.

A well-designed ISS role provides the structure to leverage these skills to meet the challenges listed above. As outlined in the following pages, successful ISS roles have **organization-wide scope**, providing a point-person for disparate programs and travelers, enabling consistent systems and policies, and ensuring unified emergency response. These roles add **bandwidth and resources** to serve departments that lack their own ISS capacity. They also have appropriate **status and authority** to act decisively to protect life and limb.

Structuring an ISS Function

Organizations hiring their first ISS professional should carefully consider the structure of the position. There are three major components: the profile of the position, its scope, and its placement within the organization.

Profile

There are two common profiles for ISS practitioners. The first is fully accountable for ISS and acts independently within broad parameters; the latter manages ISS operations under the direct oversight of another official, who leads ISS in role if not in name. For solo practitioners (an organization’s first full-time ISS hire), common profiles are:

- ❖ **Accountable (Solo)**. Leads organization-wide international emergency management (planning and response) and risk assessment. Leads or contributes to traveler preparation. Constantly monitors intelligence and trip registrations. Develops policies, with oversight from others. Has full authority for most routine decisions, though some decisions (e.g. high-risk travel reviews) may be made by committee on recommendation of the Accountable practitioner. Rare, impactful decisions, such as evacuations or program closures, typically require approval from senior officials, but the Accountable practitioner is influential.

- ❖ **Supervised (Solo).** Manages emergency-response logistics and prepares emergency plans, with oversight from others. Leads or contributes to traveler preparation. Constantly monitors intelligence and trip registrations. Consults on policy development. Has limited decision-making authority, but makes expert recommendations that are influential.

(Note: The profiles overlap on travel preparation. About half of solo ISS roles manage pre-travel orientations, and the rest contribute general and country-specific safety information to orientations run by other offices, but this difference is not related to the authority of the ISS professional.)

Universities¹⁵ with solo ISS practitioners are about evenly split between each profile, though there is a trend toward the Accountable profile for those with more established ISS functions.¹⁶ Two related factors determine which profile is more suitable: (1) the degree of oversight available, and (2) the degree of autonomy desired for ISS. A Supervised position is suitable for institutions that already have some ISS expertise and coordinating structures (such as an emergency team) in place, but need the additional bandwidth and support provided by a full-time ISS professional. In contrast, the Accountable profile is preferable for institutions that need an experienced professional to design and manage the ISS program as a whole. Also, an Accountable position can enable the existing ISS point-person to step back from day-to-day involvement in global safety, whereas a Supervised position cannot.

Scope

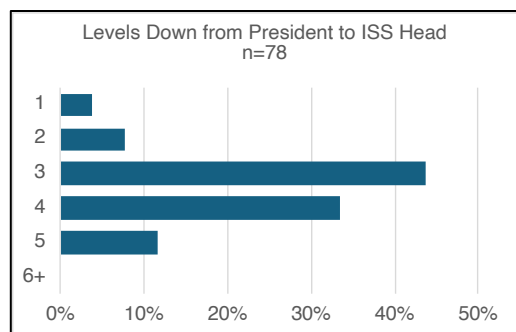
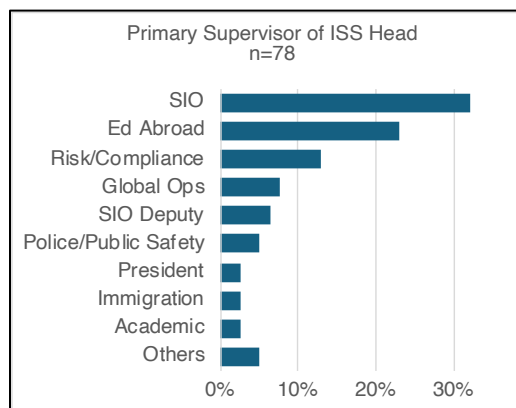
Most ISS functions have responsibility for an entire university or program provider, which allows for cohesive services across all eligible students, faculty, and staff. A few have system-wide (multi-university) responsibilities, which is workable if emergency decision-making is well-coordinated across the system and the ISS head has direct contact with leadership at each campus, or with system leadership.¹⁷

In contrast, carving up ISS responsibilities to multiple teams within one organization is unwise, creating discontinuity and confusion when a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or other mass incident affects multiple groups. Certainly, it may be prudent or even necessary for some large global programs to have their own ISS professionals, but those individuals should functionally report to an organization-wide (or system-wide) ISS head who coordinates emergency response and oversees risk assessment criteria.

Nevertheless, there *are* limits to ISS professionals' scope within the institution. Every university and provider sets boundaries for which specific programs and traveler types are covered by ISS services. Specific rules can be set once the ISS professional is in place. (For a detailed discussion of eligibility factors for ISS services, see Jamieson and Morgan, "Building an Institutional International Travel Policy".)

Placement

A solo ISS function can successfully report to various offices. Reporting to the Senior International Officer (SIO)¹⁸ is most common (32%), but solo ISS professionals also report to Education Abroad, Risk Management/Compliance, Global Operations Support, Police/Public Safety, or other areas.



There is one clear best practice: wherever the ISS function sits, the ISS head should report to a senior official or department head with institution-wide scope. 55% of ISS heads are three or fewer levels down from the President (or equivalent), and 88% are four or fewer levels down. There is a positive correlation between reporting to a senior official or department head and having the authority needed to act quickly and decisively in a crisis. For example, most ISS heads have the authority to guarantee hospital payments, even if they otherwise do not have budget responsibilities. ISS heads with lower-ranking supervisors are less likely to have that authority, creating bureaucratic hurdles to emergency response.

Other considerations are different for Accountable practitioners than for Supervised. Because Accountable Solo positions have overall ISS responsibility but no team of their own, they depend on colleagues to be available for on-call duties and emergency response; they should report to a supervisor with the right span of control to arrange that

support. Supervised Solo positions, lacking authority to make crucial decisions on their own, depend on 24/7 access to a supervisor with appropriate expertise and authority. (Supervised solo practitioners are somewhat more likely to report to an SIO or Director of Education Abroad.)

About one-quarter of ISS heads have a second “dotted-line” supervisor. The most common scenario is for ISS heads in administrative departments to have a dotted line to the SIO or another academic leader. In other cases, an ISS head in an academic department may have a dotted line to Risk Management or similar.

Expansion and Growth

Most organizations begin with a solo ISS practitioner and expand slowly. ISS functions less than two years old are largely still solo, but by five years, one quarter have added a second ISS staffer; by 10 years, nearly 90% have done so. As one might expect, this expansion occurs faster in organizations with the most extensive travel—especially those with at least 5,000 international travelers or 6,000 international trips annually (approximately the top quartile of surveyed organizations) or with at least 10% of trips requiring high-risk review.

Growth is driven by three primary vectors:

- **Expanding services**, to show better value for stakeholders
- **Consolidating ISS functions and authority**, to reduce dependence on other offices
- **Improving capacity**, to enhance resiliency and avoid burnout

Services. ISS is most effective when it develops iteratively through experimentation, adapting its tools and messaging to the needs, expectations, and prior knowledge of different constituencies within the organization. Done right, this creates a virtuous cycle: ISS learns from observation and from faculty, staff, and student input, and then makes adaptations that show value to those

stakeholders. Often, these will be pilot projects, to limit the bandwidth committed to untested ideas; when an experiment proves valuable, it can be rolled out organization-wide. This generates demand for more ISS help, and as more stakeholders work with ISS, they drive further improvement—and often enable a broader array of international travel overall, boosting the institution’s globalization efforts.

Eventually, a tipping point is reached where expanded services require enlarged bandwidth or new skills on the ISS team. However, it is wise to evaluate ISS staffing *before* reaching that point, because new ISS hires are most useful when they also enhance consolidation and core capacity.

Consolidation. All ISS professionals need collaboration, but solo practitioners depend on substantial support from supervisors and colleagues, even for core ISS functions. At first, this interconnection and dependence is clearly beneficial. Working hand-in-hand with incumbent colleagues gives the new ISS hire context on the organization and its culture, and their support on day-to-day functions gives ISS breathing room to experiment with innovative services. Also, because new ISS teams make many precedent-forming judgments (e.g. when to evacuate, or which trips are too dangerous for students or even faculty), a supervisor’s direct involvement gives comfort to leadership and ensures decisions are made with full context.

As time goes on, too much dependence creates obstacles that outweigh the benefits. First, an ISS professional will naturally develop an array of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various situations. It is difficult for colleagues outside the ISS team to keep up with SOP changes—much less with the constant churn of new travelers to new places, and the evolution of country-specific risks. Second, an ISS professional can roll out improvements more easily when they own collateral responsibilities such as the travel registry and evacuation insurance, and when they have full authority to manage emergencies. (Not to mention that requiring supervisory approval for routine decisions will slow response and hurt morale.)

Capacity. New services, consolidation of collateral functions under ISS, and increased demand: all put strain on ISS over time. Commensurate increases to capacity will guard against burnout and ensure that expanded obligations do not overwhelm ISS’s critical functions: 24/7/365 emergency management, assessing high-risk trips, and general traveler preparation.

Addressing capacity involves competing impulses of redundancy and specialization. Like any life-safety function, ISS needs redundant staffing to ensure that someone is always available for emergencies—even when the primary ISS professional has an unexpected absence or is in a cellular dead zone. Solo ISS professionals find backups in their supervisors and colleagues, but hiring a generalist as ISS #2 maximizes redundancy within the team. On the other hand, the sheer scope of the global safety field can be daunting—covering numerous programs, risks, traveler types, and geographies—and a team of specialists can provide more breadth and depth. For example, a second ISS professional might add experience with wilderness travel, conflict zones, humanitarian missions, or gender-based violence prevention and response.

ISS heads balance these factors in several ways. Savvy leaders with sufficient budgets hire deputies with skills and backgrounds that complement their own strengths, and assign them to a broad specialization; most common is a deputy who focuses on risk assessment and intelligence analysis, while the ISS head focuses more on planning and policy. However, some deputies are ISS professionals with other specializations, and a few are true generalists.

Other ISS hires are primarily clerical, with limited global-safety responsibilities. Their role is solely to provide capacity on data, processes, and customer service, in order to free the ISS head for more strategic work. However, they provide less redundancy and often do not relieve dependency on non-ISS colleagues for emergency response. (The Pulse survey is inconclusive on the prevalence of clerical positions, many held by non-Pulse members, but they may exist on half or more two-person ISS teams, especially those led by Supervised Leaders, outlined below.)

Leader Profiles

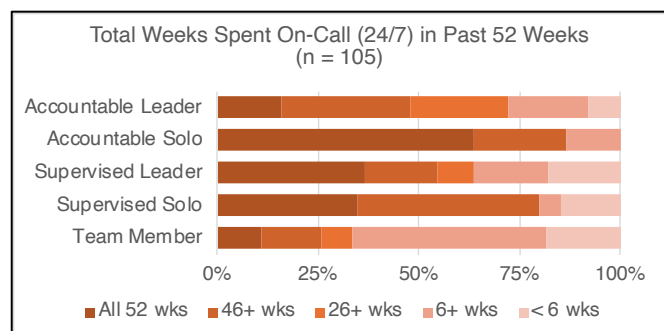
As the ISS function grows, so do ISS roles. In practice, it is more common for ISS heads with direct reports to absorb related functions than to increase their authority, but many ISS heads do both. In general, ISS heads with direct reports are more likely than solo practitioners to run the travel registry (84% vs. 65%), pre-travel orientations (79% vs. 48%), and site assessments (47% vs. 25%).

Other differences vary depending on the position profile. As with solo practitioners, there are two common profiles for ISS heads with direct reports:

- ❖ **Accountable Leader.** Oversees all aspects of ISS strategy and implementation, including emergency response, risk assessment, and traveler preparation. Gives greater attention to policies and procedures than Accountable Solo positions. Manages other ISS professionals who provide substantive support—especially on emergency management, traveler orientations, systems management, and clerical work, which Accountable Leaders devote less time to than Accountable Solo do. Almost 60% manage a budget. Typically has a wider range of authorities than Accountable Solo, though half of Accountable Leaders still require higher approval for security evacuations, and one-third for medical evacuations.
- ❖ **Supervised Leader.** Hands-on practitioner, who typically spends most of their time on emergency response and risk assessment. Like Supervised Solo, they typically have limited responsibility for policies and procedures but provide expertise. Delegates clerical and procedural work to direct reports, who also support emergency response but typically do not manage incidents. Has similar authority to Supervised Solo, also needing approval for many routine tasks.

The data make clear that the Accountable Leader model is preferred in general: it is utilized by almost every surveyed program provider, half of universities with two-person ISS teams, and 90% of universities with larger teams. However, that profile requires the resources to hire direct reports with substantial ISS experience, to whom the Accountable Leader can delegate incident management and other core responsibilities, freeing themselves for strategy, policy, and planning. 58% of Accountable Leaders use some form of on-call rotation—in which the primary person on-call varies depending on the day or week—compared to only 10% of Supervised Leaders.

Organizations with fewer resources may prefer a Supervised Leader, who remains hands-on for most incidents and can closely



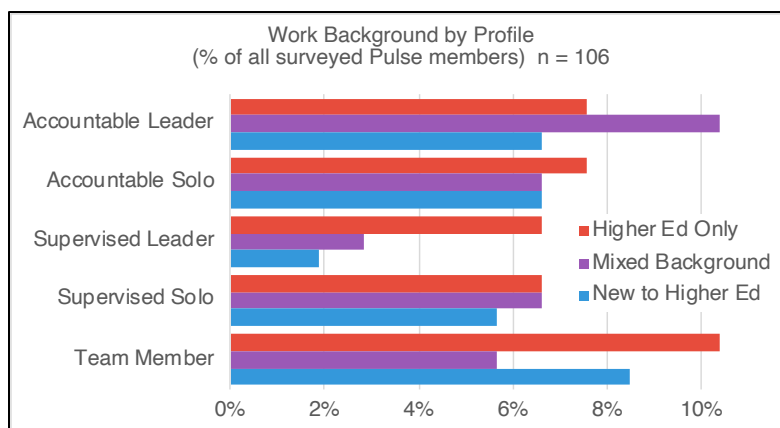
supervise direct reports with less ISS experience; those direct reports nonetheless provide a crucial backup when the leader is unavailable. But the tradeoffs are that the Supervised Leaders may be stretched thin, and certainly have less time for strategy and policy; they require tight integration into a larger department and depend on their supervisor for leadership-facing responsibilities.

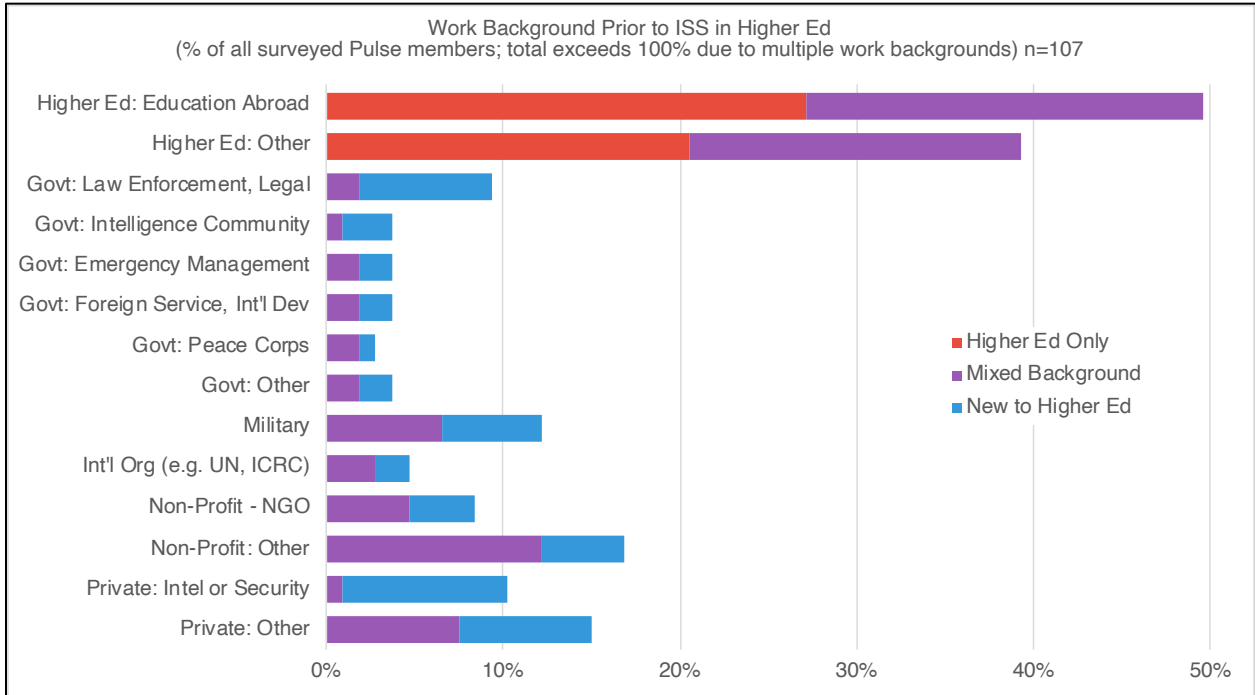
Hiring

Professional Background & Qualifications

Pulse members are well educated: 99% have a college degree, and 81% have an advanced degree, most commonly a Master’s. They come from a variety of professional backgrounds, which can be grouped into three clusters:

- ❖ **Higher education only.** 38% of surveyed members have only higher ed experience. About 70% of this cluster had Education Abroad experience before specializing in ISS, and for nearly half that is their only higher ed experience. Education Abroad and Risk Management are somewhat more likely to hire from this cluster; perhaps for this reason, ISS heads with only higher ed experience are less likely to have a Director title. At universities (but not program providers) this background is underrepresented in Accountable Leader roles.
- ❖ **New to higher education.** 29% of surveyed members had no higher ed background before ISS. This cluster includes a wide diversity of backgrounds: 42% have worked in civilian government or international organizations (including 26% in law enforcement or related roles), 32% in private intelligence or security, 26% in NGOs or other non-profits, and 19% have served in the military. Many have multi-sector backgrounds.
- ❖ **Mixed background.** 33% of surveyed members have prior experience in both higher education and at least one other sector. 49% of this cluster has worked in NGOs or other non-profits, 37% in civilian government or international organizations, 25% in the private sector (mainly non-security fields), and 20% have served in the military. For whatever reason, members in this cluster are more likely to have lived abroad for an extended period. SIOs are more likely to hire this cluster than either of the other two. The combination of higher ed and government experience, in particular, is over-represented in ISS heads with the most authority, and under-represented in less responsible positions.

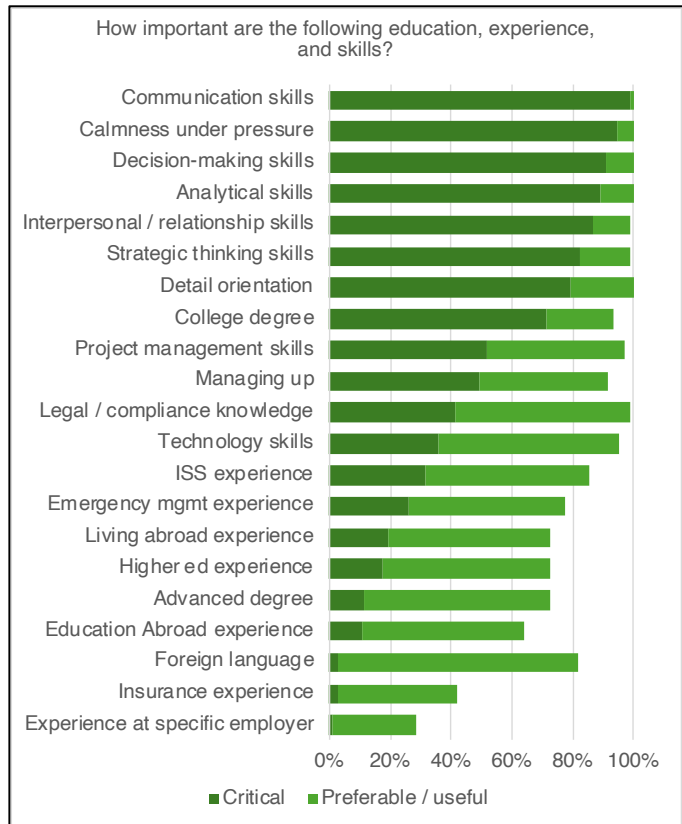




Two-thirds of surveyed members have lived outside the US at least one year; the median is about three years. Three-quarters have some proficiency in a language other than English; about 30% have a third language or more.

Even so, Pulse members themselves prioritize interpersonal and thinking skills over any particular experience. Over 80% of surveyed members rate the following skills as critical: communication, calmness under pressure, decision-making, analytical skills, interpersonal and relationship skills, and strategic thinking skills. In contrast, only 71% believe a college degree is critical—and only 12% for an advanced degree. Pulse members value a range of experience, and no specific type of experience was seen as critical by more than one-third of university members (ISS and emergency management experience rated highest); however, 67% of members at program providers believe education abroad experience is critical to their work.

45% of surveyed members reported having a certification relevant to their ISS work. The most common discipline was mental health (including suicide



prevention), reported by 39% of those reporting any certification. Others were emergency management (25%), security (16%), first aid (16%), and training (14%), as well as intelligence analysis, risk management, and education abroad.

Certifications - Selected Examples

- **Mental health:** Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)
- **Emergency management:** FEMA (various), Certified Emergency Manager (CEM)
- **Security:** Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT), Associate Protection Professional (APP)
- **First aid:** Wilderness First Responder (WFR)
- **Risk management:** Associate in Risk Management (ARM)

Leveling

ISS professionals are technical specialists with globe-spanning expertise and an outside impact on the organization as a whole. They frequently must make decisions without clear answers but with direct consequences for student and faculty lives and for institutional reputation. However, because these impacts fall within the narrow band of travel safety, it can be difficult to assess job levels for these positions—especially compared to roles which are less specialized but have a wider span of control.

Proper leveling is specific to organizational structure and culture. ISS should be compared to other professional positions that require specialized knowledge, complex decision-making, high impact, and university-wide scope, especially those with substantial life-safety responsibilities. For ISS heads, the corollaries may include heads of emergency management, risk management, Title IX, disability services, and research compliance.

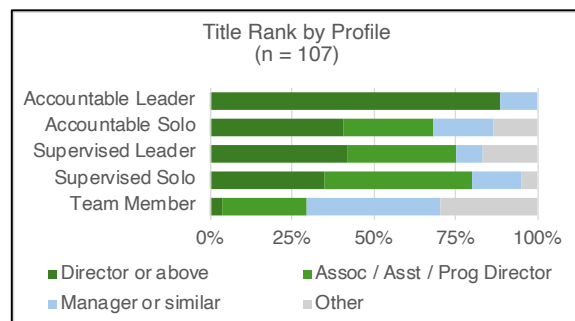
Other comparisons are tempting but inapt. Student-services positions are typically not a good match, because ISS positions typically require deeper technical knowledge, make more complex decisions, and work with a broader population of constituents. Moreover, like finance and IT, qualified ISS professionals are recruited from a wider marketplace, in which higher education must compete with government, NGOs, and private industry.

Likewise, do not under-level ISS individual contributors. Most organizations have senior specialists who lead critical functions but have no direct reports. Though they may not rank quite as high as heads of large teams, their level typically reflects their strategic responsibility and impact as much or more than their managerial span of control.

Titles

ISS titles should align with the individual’s job level and peers. In practice, this means that fully responsible ISS heads typically have a Director title. Overall, 55% of ISS heads have a Director title or above, including 88% of positions that fit the Accountable Leader profile, 42% for Supervised Leader, 41% for Accountable Solo, and 40% for Supervised Solo.

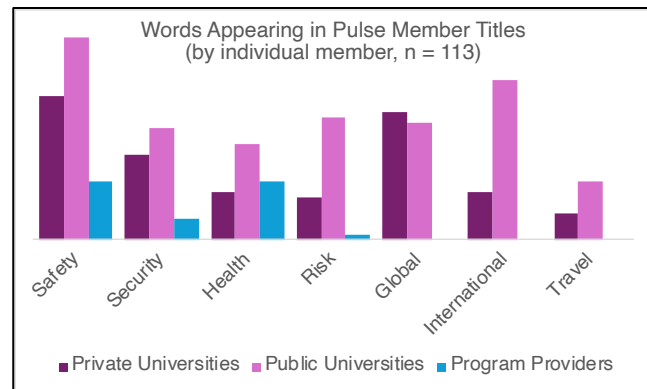
Other titles, such as Associate or Assistant Director, are appropriate when they properly reflect an ISS head’s level of responsibility and degree of oversight, or the titles of peers (see



Leveling, above). Ranks below full Director are more common for ISS professionals who transitioned from other higher ed roles, especially those still housed within an Education Abroad office.

Those reporting to an ISS head have a variety of titles depending on their responsibilities, with Coordinator (for clerical positions), Manager, and Assistant Director most common. Some specialized roles are called Analyst, Advisor, or Specialist, and the most responsible generalist deputies have the title Associate Director or Director. Example job descriptions, with suggested titles, can be found in the accompanying Resource Kit.

Finally, the descriptors for “ISS” vary considerably among institutions. Pulse members’ titles tend to use combinations of the words “safety” (68%), “security” (36%), “health” (34%), and “risk” (29%). “Safety & security” is increasingly preferred over “health & safety” because Pulse members’ role in medical response is operational rather than clinical or epidemiological. “Global” is ascendant over “international”. Ten years ago, “international” was much more common than “global” in Pulse members’ titles¹⁹; now “global” appears in 38% of titles at public universities and 57% at private universities. (Program providers tend to use neither word, since all their programs are global.)



Resource Needs

ISS professionals are subject-matter experts in a rapidly evolving field, one with variations for more than 200 countries and territories, where “best practices” can change overnight in response to an earthquake, a pandemic, or political unrest. Thus, ISS depends on both internal and external resources as a baseline requirement to do its job:

- ❖ **Internal support.** A cardinal rule of emergency response is that everyone needs a backup; another is that the response falters when the incident manager will not or cannot take a break. All but the largest ISS teams require support from non-ISS colleagues to ensure 24/7/365 emergency coverage. This is more than just another “hat”; these colleagues need training and acknowledgement from their home departments that part of their time belongs to ISS.
- ❖ **Key vendors.** Every organization with international travel needs a global assistance provider, travel registry platform, and insurance coverage for medical and security assistance (including evacuation). These services may be packaged together or procured separately. Costs vary considerably depending on the volume of travel and the scope of coverage. These programs may be managed by Risk Management, ISS, or another office, but ISS needs direct access to the vendors.
- ❖ **Tracking & communications.** The travel registry platform compiles itinerary and contact information from multiple sources (travel agencies, programs, direct entry by travelers), and should also include communication capabilities allowing ISS professionals to quickly

account for students, faculty, and staff in a crisis. In addition, ISS professionals need reliable, redundant mobile-phone and internet access, so that they can access the registry 24/7 from anywhere. Depending on the institution's travel profile and risk appetite, satellite phones or other tools may be needed, either for ISS staff or to lend to travelers.

- ❖ **Emergency funds.** Incident response often requires an immediate outlay of funds, e.g. a guarantee of payment (GOP) for hospital admission, pre-payment for air evacuation, a cash advance to students or faculty for a missing passport or medication. The global assistance provider often can facilitate payment, but it typically requires advance authorization from the university or program provider. ISS professionals need authority for emergency spending—or 24/7 instant access to someone who has that authority.
- ❖ **Professional networks.** Pulse members regularly exchange real-time tactical information during emergencies. As members innovate within their own teams, they also cross-pollinate through the network, leveraging its diversity of professional backgrounds and experiences beyond higher education. At least three quarters of surveyed members are

Alphabet Soup

- **OSAC:** Overseas Security Advisory Council, a public-private partnership of the US State Department
- **URMIA:** University Risk Management and Insurance Association
- **NAFSA:** Association of International Educators
- **ASIS International:** largest association of security professionals focused on the private sector
- **AIRIP:** Association of International Risk Intelligence Professionals
- **IAEM:** International Association of Emergency Managers

also active in other professional associations or networks. Most cited were OSAC (which is free to join) and the Forum on Education Abroad, followed by URMIA. Smaller numbers belong to NAFSA, Diversity Abroad, ASIS International, AIRIP, Analyst Roundtable, IAEM, and others.²⁰

- ❖ **Travel & professional development.** The median ISS professional travels about three weeks per year (including partial weeks), and 94% had at least one business trip during the previous year. Most travel is domestic, for conferences, professional development, and vendor evaluations. However, 64% also traveled internationally, and 40% made two or more site visits abroad—8% made five or more.²¹ These visits are crucial for ISS to assess safety practices, understand travelers' specific needs, and maintain credibility with globetrotting faculty and students. Note that multi-person ISS teams are more likely to travel internationally than solo practitioners, but all travel a similar amount within the US. Solo practitioners may depend even more on the benefits of travel for professional development and networking.

Other resource needs depend on the nature and scale of the organization's travel abroad:

- ❖ **Intelligence.** All ISS professionals depend on a constant stream of information on events, incidents, and threats from around the world. Some organizations rely exclusively on open-source intel (news sources, social media, etc.), no-cost intel from OSAC, and alerts from their global assistance provider. However, 39% of organizations purchase additional intel products for specialized coverage; that figure jumps to 65% of organizations in the top quartile of travel volume.²²

- ❖ **Consulting.** Security consultants can provide expertise on particular incident types (e.g. kidnap planning), environments (e.g. wilderness first-aid training), or locations (e.g. program-specific risk assessments). They also may provide additional security services or emergency response for certain high-risk programs. While most ISS teams do not use consultants, they were engaged by 41% of organizations in the top quartile of travel volume.
- ❖ **Other.** Some ISS teams also have budgets to produce online training for travelers, design or update websites, or provide safety equipment and supplies.

Disclaimer

This paper includes general guidance on global safety and operations, which does not apply to every country or situation, and which is subject to change at any time. Levy Global Support (LGS) has based this guidance on common practice, as reflected in the survey of Pulse members as well as LGS's experience and observations. However, a detailed, fact-specific analysis should be undertaken for each institution and situation.

LGS does not render legal, accounting, or tax advice, and this guidance is not a substitute for formal advice from suitable legal counsel or other professionals.

Survey Methodology

The Pulse State of the Profession 2024 survey was conducted online, from April 11 to 28, 2024, using SurveyMonkey. Levy Global Support LLC (LGS) emailed survey invitations to all 157 Pulse members on the active roster. Of 154 deliverable invitations, there were 113 substantive responses²³, a 73% response rate. Some questions, regarding the ISS team as a whole, were only addressed to the ISS head (including solo Pulse members); there were 78 substantive responses meeting these criteria. Substantive responses came from 85 organizations in total, as follows:

- 43 US public universities²⁴, comprising 58 individual responses
- 32 US private universities, comprising 42 individual responses
- 1 non-US university, comprising 1 individual response
- 9 program providers, comprising 12 individual responses

Not all respondents answered all questions. Questions referenced in this paper have at least 100 responses (for individual questions) or 74 responses (for team questions), *except* for questions about the volume of “high-risk” travel, members’ professional certifications and professional associations, and the importance of certain skills for ISS work. Where this paper indicates that certain data is based on a subset of responses (e.g. certain institution types, only the “Accountable Solo” profile), the relevant sample size is naturally smaller, but never less than seven individuals.

Due to limited data from program providers and non-US universities, the survey may not accurately represent those groups.

Respondents identified their institution by name; however, in accordance with the survey’s privacy policy, this information is available only to LGS (including, as needed, its service providers). Only aggregate data will be published or shared with Pulse or other parties. For US universities, LGS determined institutional characteristics such as control (public/private), Carnegie classification, and student body size from the US Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary

Education Data System (IPEDS), using the 2022-2023 data collection.²⁵ LGS also analyzed some characteristics from other sources, such as athletic conference data from the NCAA as of August 2024.²⁶ These characteristics are not available for program providers nor for non-US universities.

Data reported in this paper are summarized from the survey results, with the text indicating whether a data point represents all respondents or a subset. This paper does not necessarily reproduce the exact question asked; the complete text of survey questions is available upon request at joe@levyglobalsupport.com. Percentages in this paper use as denominator the number of substantive responses to the specific question. Data were validated for logical consistency and were imputed in limited cases when necessary; open-ended responses were interpreted and categorized by LGS. Data on particular ISS profiles (e.g. Accountable Solo) are based on a qualitative assessment by LGS, considering multiple factors including direct reports, authorities, and workload.

About the Author

Joseph Levy is a global operations consultant for the higher education and NGO sectors. He has worked in-house and in partnership with many world-class institutions, public and private, to support programs spanning 50+ countries and seven continents. He is a past member of the professional network that became Pulse International, having joined while redesigning Harvard University's global safety program. In 2011, he founded Harvard's Global Support Services and built it into a premier center of excellence for global operations and global safety, supporting thousands of faculty, staff, and students. He has also served as chief HR officer of the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI), an international NGO, leading transformations in compensation and benefits equity, cross-cultural training and development, safeguarding, and workplace ethics.

At [Levy Global Support](#), founded in 2016, Joe partners with clients to improve their business processes, risk management, and employment practices for international activities and staff abroad. He also provides tailored guidance on particular challenges, with a focus on global HR, safety, operational support, and cross-functional compliance.

Joe is a certified Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR) and a member of the international committee of the University Risk Management and Insurance Association (URMIA). He is a frequent presenter on global compliance and global safety at higher education conferences. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Notes

¹ International Organization for Standardization, *ISO 31030*.

² Europ Assistance began in 1963 and the original International SOS Assistance in 1966. By 1985, International SOS claimed "there is no place in the world they cannot get to you." Generali, "Europ Assistance"; Ward, "Coming Home"; "SOS Inc."

³ Various terrorist attacks spurred the creation of the executive protection industry, the reorganization of the US Diplomatic Security Service, and the creation of the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) within the Bureau of Diplomatic Security; OSAC has become an incubator of global safety ideas within and across sectors including higher education. The UN and NGO sector made their own reforms in the 1990s, with the NGO community highlighting the social and cultural context for security measures. See Moorehead, *Hostages*, 259-270; Davidson, "Fifty Years"; US Dept. of State, *DSS Then and Now*, 66-68; UNDSS, "History"; People In Aid, "Introduction", 3; Van Brabant, *Mainstreaming*, 5-11, 25-27.

⁴ Several late-1990s incidents on education abroad programs—including a deadly bus crash on the Semester at Sea program, murders and rapes on several programs, and at least one claim of permanent injuries from inadequate medical care—spurred the Interorganizational Task Force on Safety and Responsibility in Study Abroad. In 1998, the Task Force drafted the first edition of “Responsible Study Abroad: Health and Safety Guidelines”. Since then, other major incidents have catalyzed ISS, including war in Lebanon (2006), the Arab Spring (beginning in 2010), a major earthquake and tsunami in Japan (2011), and the Covid-19 outbreak, as well as localized tragedies on particular programs. Jacobson, “Studying in Safety”; Hoye and Rhodes, “Ounce of Prevention”, 151-152; Weeks, *Managing Liability*, 84-91; NAFSA, “Promoting Health and Safety”; Rubin, “Safety”.

⁵ Email message to author, Apr. 28, 2010; Pulse roster, Apr. 10, 2024.

⁶ Adapted from NSTC, *Guidance for Implementing NSPM-33*, 18, 24.

⁷ For example, NSPM-33, issued in January 2021, calls for special requirements—including trip registration and safety training for international travelers—for institutions that receive at least \$50 million in federal funds. NSTC, *Guidance for Implementing NSPM-33*, 18-21.

⁸ The third edition (2021) of NAFSA’s safety standards for education abroad recognized that, since the previous edition in 2002, there has been “an expanded view of education abroad to include study, internships, service learning, and research abroad”. NAFSA et al., “Responsible Education Abroad”.

⁹ The Forum on Education Abroad collected 2023 incident data from nine provider organizations serving 56,125 students. Out of 1,140 incidents reported, the most common types were property loss (46%), physical health (19%) and mental health distress (10%). Dietrich, *Student Risk Report*, 21. CIEE also published its own incident data for 2016–2021, showing 12,445 incidents reported by about 76,000 participants. Nearly 80% of these were physical or mental health cases (“nearly 10,000 health cases”), 88% of which were routine; the majority of non-health cases were minor crimes or disruptive behavior. CIEE, *Data Report*, 16, 18, 27-28, 41-42.

¹⁰ These percentages are based on Pulse membership lists, regardless of survey participation, using the 2021 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (the most recent as of this writing). In the 2021 basic classification, there are 146 “R1” and 133 “R2” universities overall. ACE, “Carnegie Classification”.

¹¹ Trip registration will also be required at certain institutions, under research security rules being developed by the US Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP); see NSTC, *Guidance for Implementing NSPM-33*, 18.

¹² Some institutions require certain travelers to purchase their own insurance in lieu of institutional coverage. This practice requires ISS capacity to monitor compliance with the insurance requirement.

¹³ The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act is a set of amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965, with implementing regulations at 34 CFR 668.46 *inter alia*; see REMS TA Center, “Clery”.

¹⁴ National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) 33, titled “Presidential Memorandum on United States Government-Supported Research and Development National Security Policy”, was issued on January 14, 2021; see NSTC, *Guidance for Implementing NSPM-33*, vii. The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 is the unofficial title of Public Law 117-167.

¹⁵ None of the program providers surveyed have an ISS head with no direct reports. See the section “Developing the ISS Function” for information about heads of multi-person ISS teams.

¹⁶ 43% of solo ISS functions less than five years old fit the Accountable model, compared to 58% of solo ISS functions at least five years old.

¹⁷ About one-fifth of ISS heads in public university systems have system-wide scope, even if they organizationally report to the flagship campus rather than the system.

¹⁸ For a definition of Senior International Officer (SIO), see AIEA, “What is an SIO?”

¹⁹ On the Pulse roster dated Aug. 20, 2014, out of 41 members, 7% had “global” titles and 61% had “international” titles.

²⁰ This survey question was open-response with no examples and received 86 responses (including 1 “none” response) out of 108 members completing that section of the survey. It is likely that the open-response question undercounted the number of Pulse members belonging to some professional associations, but impossible to determine whether the undercount might vary by professional association. Of the 86 responses to this question, 56% cited the Forum, 53% OSAC, 30% URMIA, and 23% NAFSA; the others listed were cited by multiple respondents but less than 10%.

²¹ Sites were counted as separate visits if they were not easily visitable on the same day (more than about six hours’ travel time apart), so a single trip abroad might include multiple site visits.

²² That is, at least 5,000 international travelers or 6,000 international trips annually.

²³ A response was considered “substantive” if it provided information about ISS. A non-substantive response only included institutional profile information.

²⁴ Includes two system-level offices, counted separately from individual campuses within those systems.

²⁵ US Dept. of Ed., “IPEDS”.

²⁶ NCAA, “Directory”.