

Best Practices for Open Water Activities

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INTRODUCTION:

Texas A&M University at Galveston recognizes that open water activities provide high impact learning opportunities and therefore should be supported. However, they also incur a risk and must thus follow a prescribed process to help increase the safety of our students, faculty, and staff. Prior to course or trip approval by the study abroad office or the Academic Advisory Council (AAC), the below process must be followed for University-sponsored activities that include open water swimming and snorkeling activities, or other open water activities that involve inherent risk. Many water-craft related activities and aquatic sports are regulated by governing bodies or national agencies. This process does not apply to events or activities that are regulated by a national governing body.

DEFINITIONS:

The United States Lifeguarding Association generally defines “open water” as: *An outdoor, unrestricted body of water that is subject to natural conditions.*

“Open water activities” are separated into and defined as:

1. In water activities:
 - a. Wading: walking in water that is less than or equal to mid-thigh depth for the participant.
 - b. Dipping: sitting, dunking, and splashing in water that is less than or equal to mid-thigh depth for the participant.
 - c. Swimming: entering water that is deeper than mid-thigh.
 - d. Snorkeling: entering water that is deeper than mid-thigh, with mask, fins, and snorkel.
2. Watercraft-related activities (kayaking, sailing, boating, etc.)
3. Aquatic sports (fishing, SCUBA diving, surfing, stand up paddle board (SUP), etc.)

Process for open water risk mitigation:

1. If a trip leader (faculty, staff, student leaders, etc.) anticipates that the planned course or activity will include open water conditions, a thorough assessment must be done with

regard to the viability of achieving the educational outcomes while managing the risk of the activity. The trip leader must consider whether the activity will occur more than 2 hours from definitive care, which could require increased safety precautions. The trip leader must consult with the Outdoor Coordinator to discuss the educational outcomes and risk management particular to their trip, prior to student commitment to the trip. If the Outdoor Coordinator is not familiar with the activity proposed, he/she will consult with another expert in order to fully understand the risks and suggest appropriate safety precautions.

2. The trip leader must submit to his/her department head the risk assessment and mitigation plan for the open water activities, with applicable qualifications of the trip leader and recommendations from the Outdoor Coordinator or other qualified expert.
3. Swimming can be a risky activity, hence the trip leader must use caution when allowing a group to swim in open water, and be conservative in judgment.

In water activities require EITHER:

- a. A lifeguard on duty with a ratio of 1:20 swimmers, or
 - b. Wearing a USCG-approved Personal Floatation Device (PFD), or
 - c. An appropriate screening test of swimming ability AND the trip leader's current certification in CPR/1st Aid/AED.
4. Open water swimming, snorkeling, and playing in the surf will be at the discretion of the trip leader after she/he evaluates the environmental, water, and participant conditions. When conditions are deemed appropriate, the following procedures are required:
 - a. Everyone swims with a buddy
 - b. A trip leader (preferably a certified lifeguard) must monitor swimmers from shore. This person should have and know how to use a throw rope
 - c. At a public beach with a lifeguard on duty, swimming may be allowed as indicated by the beach and lifeguard (without a PFD)
 5. The following activities water-related activities are NOT allowed:
 - a. Swimming, dipping, or wading at night.
 - b. Swimming alone, without a buddy
 - c. Swimming in water colder than 60F without an appropriate wetsuit.
 - d. Diving head-first into water.

Resource:

[Inventory of Open Water Activities](#)