

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

in Overseas Education

Susan A. Bird

Webster's New World Dictionary defines a crisis as "a time of great danger or trouble, whose outcome decides whether possible bad consequences will follow."

All directors of offices of international education in the U.S. and field directors of overseas programs fervently hope that things will run smoothly. But even in the best-organized overseas programs, serious problems are bound to arise from time to time.

Thus, the best defense is to structure the program overseas as carefully as possible and to make every effort to head off possible problems before they occur.

Medical Emergencies

Most schools today require that students fill out forms giving permission for emergency treatment if the student is overseas and requires emergency care, and most offices of international education require that students show proof of up-to-date immunizations and medical insurance coverage which includes provision for emergency medical evacuation.

If your school does not require these items, I strongly recommend that your office institute such a policy.

Illnesses requiring emergency medical evacuation will differ depending on where students are studying and the quality of local medical care.

A simple bone fracture is not a likely cause for returning home. However, in a country where medical hygiene is questionable, a compound fracture (where the bone has pierced the skin) may well require a return.

A lot depends, too, on the level of anxiety of both student and family. A student in China with a serious intestinal ailment elected to remain there and to undergo treatment using Chinese herbal medicine, after consulting with the program director, our office, and his family.

Another student, who was studying in France, was brought home abruptly by her mother for consultation with a U.S. surgeon when the student developed an ovarian cyst. What was important in both cases was that our office and the program director were completely involved in the discussion of possible options and were fully informed of all decisions taken.

Forewarned is...

Students increasingly are studying in countries whose cultural values are quite different from western norms. Your students should be impressed with the need to bone up on local customs and laws in order not to unwittingly offend their hosts and/or wind up in a local jail.

In order to avoid running afoul of local laws, the organization International SOS Assistance suggests several tips for students studying abroad.

These include: reviewing information beforehand from booklets provided by the State Department Bureau of Consular Affairs; keeping prescription drugs in their original container with the generic name clearly marked on the label; making two copies of airline tickets, passport, and other documents, and leaving the second copy with your office; knowing laws for alcohol-related offenses, such as drunk driving; understanding laws pertaining to sexual relations; and obtaining an international driver's license if they plan on driving while abroad. Common sense suggests never carrying packages for strangers, steering clear of drugs, and seeking immediate legal representation if arrested.

Setting Clear Policies

In attempting to deal with numerous crises that can befall individual students or an entire group, perhaps the best advice is to anticipate: to create "what if" scenarios to cover potential problems, and to be certain that all staff members know the established procedures.

Discussions with office staff over the difference between a problem and a crisis are essential.

A lost passport or wallet is a problem and may be a serious one, but under ordinary circumstances this is not a crisis. If a student is seriously ill, injured, missing, or arrested, or a program is stranded overseas because of a travel agency's negligence, this is a much graver situation demanding an immediate response.

If a college or university employs a resident director for an overseas program, it is prudent to ask the director to establish contact with the U.S. Embassy and attempt to create a friendly working relationship with at least one embassy official who can be called directly if problems

arise. The time to do this is, obviously, when things are running smoothly. The overseas program and the students should be registered with the embassy as well. It's not certain that registering the program will result in preferential treatment in case of a crisis, but it is added indication that the sponsoring university or college has taken measures to minimize risk.

Our overseas directors, our office staff, university administrators, and the Public Safety Office all have my home telephone number with instructions to call me immediately, no matter what the time of the day or night, if a crisis arises overseas. In the event that I can't be reached, our provost is next in line.

Our first concern is, of course, the safety and well-being of our students.

However, in today's litigious times, there are additional reasons for managing crises competently. Every action taken by the director of an international office or an overseas director may have unanticipated fall-out. Students may complain to parents, advisors, deans, and presidents if they feel that a situation has not been adequately handled or that they have not been dealt with fairly in what we have judged to be an emergency situation.

Parents may, in turn, complain to the campus provost, president, board of trustees, or state officials, particularly if the institution is a public one.

It is useful for the office sponsoring overseas programs to require all participants to sign a release or waiver of responsibility and to keep the document on file in the international education office with perhaps a copy forwarded to the overseas director. Most universities and state systems require such a waiver from all participants. However, I need to point out that such waivers really do not protect the school, the program, or the office in cases where a student decides to bring a lawsuit. If negligence can be proven, the student is likely to be successful.

All directors can benefit from creating specific policies to deal with serious problems, being certain that these policies are as congruent as possible with those affecting students on the home campus; having the policies checked out and approved by the university's legal council before they are finalized; and publicizing the policies affecting students before the students leave for overseas.

If, for example, a director wishes to establish procedures and policies for dealing with a student overseas who goes AWOL, it may be appropriate to create a policy which is somewhat different from that of the home campus, since a student who "drops out" of an overseas program is potentially exposed to greater danger than one who simply leaves the home campus for a week or two.

If a student appears to be missing, it will be useful to have a written policy in place as to what steps are to be

taken and the personnel to be contacted; to have checked with the university's legal adviser on the issue of involving the student's family; and to have included the policy in the overseas study manual distributed to students and possibly to parents during pre-departure orientation.

The wisdom of this advice was brought home to me when I received a phone call from a furious parent. A student at my university was enrolled in an overseas program. Three days after arriving at the study site, in one of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, the student walked away from the program. The first that the parent knew of this fact was when he received an announcement from the school's office of student accounts that a refund was forthcoming because his daughter was no longer enrolled!

Understandably upset, the parent phoned the sponsoring campus and received, according to his subsequent call to my office, vague and imprecise information about the entire situation, though what was clear was that no one knew exactly where the student was.

One can argue on both sides of the issue as to whether parents should be informed of such events, depending on a school's interpretation of the Family Privacy Act; whichever way the law is interpreted, it is wise to inform parents of your institution's policies.

Thorough documentation of how a problem has been handled, by all staff members concerned, is essential. Such documentation can lead to improved procedures and again offer substantiation of the efforts expended by the director and other staff members in attempting to deal with any crisis.

None of us can avoid dealing with crises in international education, but we can solve problems creatively and try to limit the danger to our students, our offices, and our institutions. □

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* See Sources of help on the next page