

Effective Crisis Management

IT IS A LAMENTABLE SIGN OF THE TIMES that crisis management has become such a boom industry, that a Google search on the term returns more than 12 million hits. Thankfully, adding “education abroad” or “higher education” reduces the number to a manageable several hundred thousand. There are, of course, those who argue that the term *crisis management* is meaningless—you can no more manage a crisis than you can lasso the wind! Indeed literature about crisis management in international education has collected a number of interesting terms and work-arounds, often using terms such as “response,” “crisis response,” “emergency response,” or “critical incident response.” In the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, “emergency management” as a term and an operational approach has acquired a whole range of connotations ripe for a “Top 10 list” on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. But it’s not the terminology that counts in a crisis situation—what matters is how you manage it.

Crisis: An Emergency without a Plan

Typically a crisis is a set of external circumstances or events over which you have no control. What you do have control over and that which you must manage is the response to those circumstances or events. The key to a successful response to a crisis is a well-developed, coordinated, rehearsed, and flexible response plan. As the crisis team gathered on our campus a number of years ago in response to violent deaths of two students on campus, the then dean of students began the meeting with “turn to tab four.” There was a plan. Roles and responsibilities had been pre-assigned. Tasks had been laid out in advance. Now it was time to put the plan into action.

Operating as we do with a response plan, I prefer using the term emergency rather than crisis, if only because emergency connotes a lower state of emotion and anxiety than “crisis.” Moreover, our document is entitled: “emergency procedures,” indicating that we have a course of action that we will follow in response to the events that are unfolding. Emergency response (or crisis management if you will) requires a solid plan that is practiced at regular intervals and is regularly reevaluated and updated.

Some NAFSA publications such as *Crisis Management in a Cross-Cultural Setting* (2001) and “Maximizing Safety and Minimizing Risk,” chapter

THE CRISIS TEST

Count yourself fortunate, if you haven’t had the experience, but then add a “yet” to each of these:

- ▶ The call that there has been a student suicide in a campus dorm.
- ▶ The call that there has been a coup in country where a study abroad program is located.
- ▶ The call that two students have been killed in an automobile accident on their way to campus.
- ▶ The call that one of the faculty has collapsed while exercising and could not be revived.
- ▶ The call from Thailand that two students had survived the tsunami wave, but little is known about the rest of the group who are on break and traveling.
- ▶ The call from abroad that a student’s cancer, thought to have been in remission, has returned and the prognosis is not good.
- ▶ The call that one of the international students had a very public “meltdown” in class yesterday.
- ▶ The call that a small group of students at an overseas program held a drunken party in the hotel, causing the entire group to be evicted and putting the continuation of the program in jeopardy.

STAYING ALERT ON TRAVEL ADVISORIES

RESPONSIBLE EDUCATION ABROAD PROGRAMMING requires that advisers stay abreast of U.S. State Department travel advisories regarding the safety of potential destination countries and the advisability of U.S. citizens of going there. Two key reasons make this of paramount importance for international educators: (1) some places are dangerous and should be avoided and (2) some insurance carriers (both personal injury and institutional/personal liability) refuse to provide coverage to individual or institutions in countries under travel warning.

U.S. citizens, of course, are free to travel almost anywhere in the world whether or not their destination is under travel warning. Today although such countries as Kenya, the Philippines, Israel, and Colombia join Iraq, Afghanistan and more than 20 others on the travel warning list, they continue to receive U.S. business travelers, tourists and students. Multinational businesses continue to operate in many of those countries; U.S. citizens work, live and function normally there.

The existence of U.S. citizens living successful lives in countries under a travel warning, and of U.S. government offices (embassies, consulates, etc.) also functioning effectively there sometimes gives rise to challenging questions for international educators. Sometimes we are asked, "Why is the university unwilling to permit students to study in (or employees to travel to) Country X just because there's a travel warning?" We are frequently reminded that with regard to Country X: there's no war going on; the threat of terrorism against U.S. citizens appears to be no greater

than in the United States; its own universities are open and functioning normally; friends have been there recently and returned safely. Critics are quick to let us know their opinion that travel warnings aren't based on real facts, or that as "informed citizens of a free country" they and their students may do as they please.

It is our job to remember that none of these arguments changes anything. Institutional policies on international activity have to satisfy the needs of people to teach and to learn about the world by becoming involved in it. They must also respond to the responsibilities of risk managers and legal advisors to provide practical advice to those institutional leaders charged with taking final decisions. The people responsible for international programs must assure that their institutional policies are being followed.

During the past few years, some institutions have developed policies that, following the assurance of informed consent, place responsibility for the decision to travel, work or study in a country under travel warning in the hands of the traveler(s)—and, sometimes, their parents—not in the hands of the travelers' home college or university. It will likely require an incident and resolution of legal cases resulting from it to test the efficacy of these signed waivers or petitions.

Meanwhile, if an institution's policies preclude it from sponsoring programs or supporting travel in countries under travel warning, people who object should work to alter those policies rather than arguing with the professionals charged with enforcing them.

Useful U.S. Department of State Publications

Note: All of these documents are available online at <http://travel.state.gov>.

General Information

Country Background Notes information on every country in the world (these, plus information in the *CIA Factbook*, are among the essential documents for pre-program reading).

Tips for Traveling Abroad, a brochure that contains useful general information.

Consular Information Sheets are updated on a regular basis and contain a specific section on safety/security on each country.

Information Issued as Necessary

Public Announcements are issued when there is a specific threat in a country or world region that cannot

be countered. These tend to deal with terrorist threats, domestic unrest, and major natural disasters.

Travel Warnings are recommendations from the State Department that U.S. citizens avoid traveling to a certain country.

Additional Resources

U.S. State Department Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC)

There is no fee for U.S. colleges and universities to join OSAC. Membership makes available advisory information and the services of OSAC's professional security analysts who can respond to specific security-related questions. Other members are U.S.-based international and multinational

businesses that share safety and security information among themselves and with the State Department about conditions throughout the world. Visit <http://www.osac.state.gov> for more information.

NAFSA has a number of resources on health, safety and security on its Web site. The online document "Institutional Policies with Regard to U.S. State Department Travel Warnings" addresses campuses' approaches to study in Israel illustrates how difficult decision-making can be when countries under travel warning are involved (www.nafsa.org/warnings). Additional online documents on broader issues of health, safety, and security can be found at www.nafsa.org/HealthandSafety.

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eight of NAFSA's *Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* (2005) emphasize the necessity of planning in advance of any emergency. If you are campus-based, your institution no doubt already has an emergency response plan that can form the basis for the one you will develop for your area of international education, be it for an entire operation, or for one segment such as education abroad, international students and scholars, community-based activities, etc. Both publications have sample plans and there are several other examples on the Web. Here are some things to think about as you develop your emergency response plan.

1. Start by Restating the Guiding Principles of the Response

These are both the end results that you will aim at in your response as well as the overall operational principles that underlie the various components and actions of the plan. Corporations will often state that their goal is to safeguard stockholder interests as well as the image and financial health of the company. In higher education we tend to phrase things differently using terminology like:

- Concern for the health, safety and well-being of students and staff
- Limiting the institution's legal liabilities
- Conforming to the standards of ethical practice for education abroad as described in the Code of Ethics of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.
- Deciding how and with whom to share information
- Indicating when and with whom the response will be coordinated, and so forth

2. Define What You Mean by "Emergency"

When we are talking with students (and parents) about health and safety issues during our study abroad orientations, we have a quiz on our definition of emergency (something "that poses a genuine and sometimes immediate risk to, or that have already disturbed, the health, safety, and well-being of participants"). The quiz: What is a lost passport? Not an emergency—an inconvenience. The same goes for a lost ticket or stolen wallet. A broken leg is an emergency. Include examples with your definition to guide your team as they work through the plan when responding to the report of an emergency.

Many response plans also include in their definitions a means of distinguishing between "real" and "perceived" emergencies. Arising out of a number of things, including the sensationalized reporting of an event abroad, the distortion of information provided by a participant in a telephone call or letter home, or simply out of the nervousness of a family member or student with little or no international experience, perceived emergencies will sometimes affect family members and others in the U.S. more strongly than will real emergencies, even though there is no real or credible threat to health or safety.

Responding to a perceived emergency often requires more staff time and equally as much patience and tact as responding to real

emergencies. While the health and safety of a student or staff member may not be at stake here, the reputation of the office and the institution certainly could be. In these days of "helicopter parents" (they hover), we must take care to formulate a response that will assuage the anxiety and reassure, without inviting constant follow-up telephone calls to one's office and then to the provost or even the college president. Even though the earthquake was several hundred miles from the program site, calling the program director before returning the call to the parents can do wonders to quiet their nervousness.

3. Determine How You Will Respond to an Emergency

Every emergency, both real and perceived, requires a response. In this section of your plan, you will outline and assign tasks. Some plans use a scenario approach, with detailed responses for events such as the death of a student or staff member, serious injury or illness, assault (sexual and/or physical), disappearance, civil unrest, natural disaster, strikes, etc. Others take a broader approach that can be adapted to any eventuality. All plans typically deal with the following questions:

- Who needs to be informed and when?
- Who has the ultimate authority to make decisions?
- Who will carry out which aspects of the response?



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DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

IDEALLY A POLICY AND PROTOCOL FOR COMMUNICATING with the media will be part of the institutional emergency plan. Thus, whenever possible, leave talking to the media to your institution's office of communication or public relations. But if you do find yourself facing the media, here are some helpful suggestions.

When a Reporter Calls

- ▶ Take control; don't answer questions until you're ready
- ▶ Note the reporter's name, affiliation, and phone number
- ▶ Ask what the story is about
- ▶ Find out the reporter's deadline
- ▶ Define the role you'll play in the story
- ▶ Suggest other sources
- ▶ Set ground rules for the interview: subject area, time, place, duration
- ▶ Pick an interview site that is convenient and comfortable for you
- ▶ Call your university news service for assistance
- ▶ Regard the interview as an opportunity to tell your story or to make your points
- ▶ Remember your audience is the public, not the reporter
- ▶ Decide what you want the public to understand about the subject
- ▶ Pick one or two points you want to make
- ▶ Keep your language simple, as though you were explaining to a neighbor
- ▶ Avoid jargon
- ▶ Prepare relevant examples and analogies
- ▶ Make notes for easy reference
- ▶ Prepare a list of probable questions and short, concise answers
- ▶ Collect material that will help the reporter understand the story
- ▶ Rehearse with someone you trust
- ▶ If possible, tape the interview so you can catch your own errors before they're part of the permanent print or broadcast record
- ▶ If a reporter asks you to comment off the record, decline. Assume everything you say in an interview will appear in the story
- ▶ Don't wait for the reporter to ask the "right question." Make your main point early and often
- ▶ Be concise; you will be less likely to be quoted out of context if you are clear and concise
- ▶ Make sure you understand each question
- ▶ If a question contains erroneous information, don't let it slide. Correct it
- ▶ Don't evade questions. If you don't know the answer, say no
- ▶ Never lie
- ▶ Beware of hypothetical questions; don't be pressured into speculating
- ▶ Don't ask or expect to approve the story before it is printed or broadcast
- ▶ Review your tape; if you misspoke, call the reporter with corrections or clarifications
- ▶ Be available for follow up; encourage the reporter to call back with other questions or for clarifications
- ▶ Ask others what they thought of the story
- ▶ If the story has major errors, don't let anger or embarrassment rule your response
- ▶ Call the reporter to correct errors in the story; uncorrected errors get repeated as fact in follow up stories
- ▶ If other reporters call you, use the new contact as an opportunity to correct any errors or misperceptions

Special Note: Public universities are accountable to the citizens of their state, who have a right to know how their tax dollars are spent. Most written communications within a university are in the public domain and must be shared with the public and news organizations, if requested. However, state and federal laws balance the public's right to know and the student's or employee's right to privacy. Your university news service usually works closely with your university attorney to ensure that balance by handling all requests for information covered under the state data practices act and applicable federal laws.

— **Mickey Slind** is a consultant with the Anglo American Educational Services of London. "When a Reporter Calls" (1997) is reprinted with permission.

- What support services will be needed?
- At what point should the institution's crisis team be convened and who makes that decision?

When it comes to delineating tasks, you may find it helpful to use checklists to guide the response. It is also a good practice to always have two people assigned to lead the response; one to work through the steps of the plan and the other to serve as a monitor, making sure that nothing is overlooked. In every emergency response, real

or perceived, it is vitally important that every action is documented (what was done, by whom, and at what time). These contemporaneous notes will be needed when debriefing the actions of the response and writing the final report. Moreover, they can prove to be invaluable in the event a lawsuit results from the emergency.

4. Coordinate Your Response

Once you have finished a draft of your plan, have it vetted by your institution's crisis co-

Resources for Crisis Planning in Education Abroad

Crisis Management in a Cross-Cultural Setting

Patricia A. Burak and William W. Hoffa, editors

A compendium of experience and expertise from many professionals in the field of international educational exchange, this essential sourcebook is designed to prepare international educators to respond appropriately, expeditiously, and comprehensively to crises that befall students and scholars living and learning a long way from where they call 'home.'

NAFSA's Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators, Third Edition

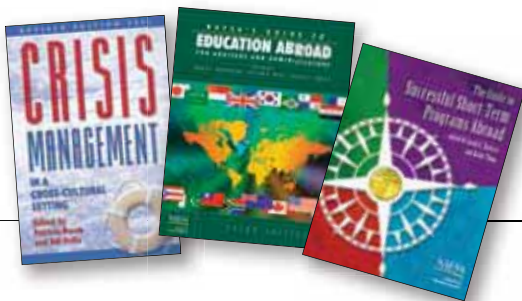
Joseph L. Brockington, Patricia C. Martin, and William W. Hoffa, editors

This new edition of the *Guide* has notably enhanced a book that was already regarded as indispensable by education abroad professionals. Extensive new chapters on such topics as short-term programs, intercultural learning, underrepresented constituencies, and community colleges have been added. A significant new section of three chapters deals with issues specific to overseas program direction. An extensive chapter on safety, security and risk deals with issues of emergency planning and more.

The Guide to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad

Sarah Spencer and Kathy Tuma, editors

A practical guide for practitioners who direct and administer short-term programs, the book was edited by two experts with considerable experience in the field, Sarah Spencer, from the University of St. Thomas, and Kathy Tuma, from St. Olaf College. Readers can use the tools provided in the book to build successful short-term programs tailored to their own institutions. A very useful chapter on "Safeguards for Short-Term Programs" covers everything from insurance issues to student health to crisis situations and more.



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ordinator and ask that your plan be included in the institution's master emergency plan. Moreover, if the international office is not represented on that team, ask for a seat and participate in all team meetings. It should not be a surprise that with the Internet, instant messaging, cell phones, and text messaging, campus emergencies are quickly reported to students and faculty overseas and vice versa. An emergency that affects one group directly will affect everyone indirectly so it requires a response. Natural disasters or sudden or violent death at home have a profound effect on study abroad students. Your plan should include a means to provide appropriate communication and, if necessary, support services for students and staff abroad.

If your institution sponsors education abroad programs, you should be sure that your resident directors or faculty leaders are familiar with the emergency plan and the role that they are expected to play. (Specific guidance and examples can be found in *Crisis Management in a Cross-Cultural Setting*, *NAFSA's Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* and in *The Guide*

to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad) Identifying resources in advance and establishing avenues of communication are two essential elements of emergency plans for overseas programs.

5. Take Care of the People Working on the Plan

Responding to an emergency quickly depletes one's reserves of physical, mental, and spiritual energy. Keep an eye on your team. Make sure that everyone eats and sleeps at regular intervals. If the response looks as though it will last for more than a few hours, create a duty roster and assign shifts. Send the second shift home to rest now, so they will be fresh when they come on duty. Don't forget that these same dictums apply to you as the team leader (or to whoever that person is). Being the leader doesn't make you immune from stress.

Depending on the nature of the emergency, you may find that you or members of your team need further support following the conclusion of the emergency. In addition to counseling and psychotherapy, Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is an-

other technique to help teams of responders and those who have been touched by the events work through the aftermath of a particularly difficult emergency. (Further information can be found on the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation Web site: www.icisf.org/).

6. Debrief and Evaluate—Revise the Plan

When the plan has been carried out and the emergency response concluded, it is essential that those who participated in the response meet to debrief the event and their response. Using the contemporaneous notes, walk through the plan and your responses. What worked as anticipated? What didn't? Why? What needs to be revised? Be sure to make the changes to the plan immediately. Don't shelve them for six months to a year waiting for time to get to it. Change the plan and get the new changes circulated.

Finally, there remains the most important aspect of crisis management: it is essential that it should be first and last in everyone's emergency plan.

7. Practice the New Plan

An emergency response plan does no one any good if those who are to use it have not practiced it and practiced it often with different leaders and monitors. The vagaries of crisis events do not allow us to choose who might be in the office when the call comes. Everyone needs to be able to find and work the plan. Because much of the work in our office is with education abroad, we build our practice exercises around actual events. That way there is plenty of real information available in the media, on the Web, and through other sources for our drills.

The best indicator of an institution or program that is prepared to respond to an emergency is one that has a well-thought out plan and that's been well rehearsed by a well-trained response team. If you are among the prepared, if something unexpected happens, it doesn't have to a crisis, because you've got a plan. **IE**

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