

Learning From Recent Challenges in Education Abroad Crisis Management

WITH REGARD TO NATURAL DISASTERS ALONE, the last three years have presented an unprecedented challenge to the education abroad community. Consider the following events that have occurred since 2008: earthquakes in China, Italy, Haiti, Chile, and New Zealand; flooding in Australia and Brazil; forest fires in Russia; volcanic eruptions in Chile and Iceland; and the horrific earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear disaster in Japan.

These incidents, coupled with civil unrest, revolutions, and regime transitions in North Africa and the Middle East, have likely exposed some vulnerabilities and deficiencies in our crisis management plans.

Hope Is Not a Plan

Laura Angelone, director of scholastic programs at International SOS, emphasizes the importance of drafting even the most basic crisis management principles to guide your response. The most important elements of a crisis management plan reflect distinct phases: awareness, assessment, communication, decision, action, resolution, and return to normal. Education abroad offices need not start from scratch in developing such plans. Institutions of all sizes likely have a general campus-based emergency plan that can be adapted to the education abroad context. Insurance carriers, brokers, and consultants may also be able to assist with this process. The key is to have a plan that is adaptable and responsive to a variety of scenarios, not one that anticipates every possible emergency. It is also important to frequently review and revise the plan, especially after an incident, in order to strengthen its effectiveness.

Practice Makes Perfect

Many institutions spend hours creating excellent crisis management plans, only to see those plans gather dust on an office bookshelf. The plan that goes untested is as good as useless. Joseph L. Brockington, PhD, associate provost for international programs at Kalamazoo College, is a 20-year veteran of crisis management in education abroad. In every workshop, webinar, or article you will hear the same sage

advice: “Drill the plan.” Brockington, known for putting his staff through the paces at least three times a year, does not use any prepackaged products or services. He also does not schedule the drills in advance. Instead, he takes his cues from real-world events. “When there’s some juicy international event where my staff can go out on the Web and get information to craft a response, I create a drill.” Brockington cited an example of a drill in which a frantic parent had called about their student who may have been in the vicinity of a volcanic eruption during his education abroad program. In each drill, Brockington assigns different first responders, so that all the members of his staff get some experience. “Last time,” he recalled, “I decided that all the senior staff was at a conference and assigned the response to a program assistant.” The drills are not complex, day-long affairs. Instead, they last about two hours. The first responder is also required to document the experience so the learning moments can be shared with other staff members.

Students Have Minds of Their Own—The Noncompliance Problem

An effective crisis management plan must also acknowledge that there will be students who refuse to act in accordance with your directives. Michigan State University (MSU) faced a difficult situation when it decided to evacuate students from Egypt last February. One of the students who had been interviewed by her hometown media seeking firsthand observations of the uprising became their “unofficial” correspondent. Her newfound celebrity inhibited her ability to appropriately assess her risks. MSU was unprepared



IN JULY 2011, The Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) partnered with ConocoPhillips to host a conference on best practices for contingency planning and evacuation, attended by more than 250 representatives from the U.S. private sector (including businesses, colleges and universities, faith-based institutions, and nongovernmental organizations). In November 2011, OSAC released a white paper summarizing the firsthand experiences, advice, and lessons learned that were shared during the conference. This report can be accessed on the OSAC Web site under the “OSAC Publication” report type. You must be a member of OSAC to access this report, but OSAC membership is free to U.S. entities with legitimate commercial, educational, or humanitarian activities abroad. See <http://www.osac.gov> for more information.

to manage the student who refused to leave once the evacuation plan was in place. To make matters worse, her parents supported her decision. Ultimately, the student recognized the danger of the situation and asked to be evacuated; however, by this time it was too late and she lost the benefit. She then threatened to report to the media that she had been abandoned by the institution. Eventually, MSU was able to transfer her to another program in the region. Following this event, MSU produced clearly defined, written consequences for noncompliance to such directives.

Communication

Without a communications plan, a crisis management plan is wholly ineffective. “Once a potential crisis breaks,” says Salvatore N. Moschella, vice president and chief operating officer for Semester at Sea and Institute for Shipboard Education, “we are assessing real and perceived impacts as well as reviewing contingencies.” Particularly important for Japan was the expert advice obtained from staff at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the International Atomic Energy Commission. “Having this authoritative information was key in our decisions and our communications.”

Technology has contributed to a sense of complacency regarding the collection of complete program itineraries that include landline phone numbers, fax numbers, and street addresses. Linda Langin, senior vice president, Cultural Insurance Services International (CISI), states that this is the most important step an institution can take to facilitate an efficient evacuation. Nonetheless, the real-time communication provided by cell phones is invaluable—when the cell phones work. “If I could wish for anything it would be for institutions to require all students to carry a cell phone [with international coverage].”

At the same time, your communications plan must be adaptable to a variety of contingencies. Inés DeRomaña, principal analyst, health, safety, and emergency response with the University of Califor-

nia Education Abroad Systemwide Office, reports that 60 UC students and two UC employees were impacted by the Chilean earthquake in 2010. She explained that damage to their facilities on site prevented the faculty director from contacting the California office, so the onsite program assistant established a satellite office in her home to centralize communications. “And then we used everything—landlines, cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, etc., in order to obtain and disseminate information.”

Managing Disgruntled Constituents

A crisis management plan must also include communication tips for managing disgruntled constituents. Barbara Lindeman, director of study abroad and assistant director of the international center at the University of Missouri, reflects that MU’s protocols for evacuating students in cases of epidemics or political unrest have worked well. “However, not all of the students who we evacuate are grateful and some are angry—even if they were terrified beforehand. It’s important to know that you and your institution are doing the right thing for students because sometimes crisis management can be a thankless job.”

The Japan Center for Michigan Universities (JCMU) experienced both ends of this spectrum following its decision to end the semester early after the reported malfunctions at the Fukushima nuclear plant. Even though the program’s location was far from the nuclear reactors damaged in the earthquake and tsunami, making it unlikely that the students were in danger of exposure to nuclear radiation, many parents expressed appreciation to the university for taking this precaution. Despite this, some parents expressed anger and confusion over the decision given that their students were in no apparent danger. So as to maintain a level of operational efficiency in the office, JCMU staff had to prepare responses to complaints as well as compliments. To streamline communications, Kate Simon, program coordinator with JCMU, reported that it was helpful to have morning and afternoon briefings with the staff, and to provide regu-

lar, written summaries of the situation that are also shared with staff unable to attend the meeting—especially those on site.

Another lesson shared by Simon was that once an organization makes a decision, less information is more. “If you start to give out a lot of information justifying the decision, then you give people more to argue with or to pick apart. You don’t need people questioning the decision and trying to find fault with it. If you are not firm, you can give the impression that the decision is reversible, and a lot of time is wasted hearing appeals.” In other words, once a decision is made, be clear and concise, but also unwavering.



Insurance Coverage

A comprehensive crisis management plan ought to mirror or at least complement your insurance coverage. While providing education abroad participants with a comprehensive medical treatment and medical evacuation plan is fairly common, plans that offer broader evacuation benefits like political/security evacuation may exclude coverage for natural disasters. Furthermore, even if your coverage provides political/security evacuation coverage, it may do so only if triggered by a U.S. State Department (DOS) Travel Warning. Yet waiting for DOS to issue a warning before your institution recommends leaving a country will likely make your departure problematic. If your institution is risk-averse, you should tend toward leaving

a potentially volatile location before transportation options become limited. Insurance carriers that offer evacuation services may be able to respond quicker than the DOS with regard to organizing departures. “Because we are a private company we can be more proactive. We don’t have the political pressures to stand down,” states CISI’s Langin, adding, “In my opinion, [the] State [Department] was 24 hours too late in issuing the Travel Warning to Egypt.” Langin further described how CISI personnel went into Cairo’s neighborhoods and located every one of their clients’ students, then arranged their transportation to the airport, and shepherded them through security and eventually onto a flight to Europe. Once there, they worked with the students and the institutions to fly them home or to another university abroad where they had arranged to transfer.

No crisis management plan should rely solely on the U.S. government for evacuation as there is no guarantee of service. U.S. government-sponsored flights out of a foreign country are arranged at the discretion of the DOS, and usually only when capacity is lacking in the private sector or commercial carriers have ceased operations in the affected locations. It’s also important to remember that the DOS has specific departure classifications pertaining only to its employees. An ordered departure, which requires nonemergency personnel and eligible family members, coincides with the issuance of a Travel Warning, which for many U.S. colleges and universities triggers evacuation proceedings.

Complicating matters, U.S. citizens using DOS services are responsible for getting themselves to the airport. Tickets are also issued based on priority according to the following criteria: U.S. citizenship, tour/study groups, and permanent residents with clear ties to the United States. Efforts are made to keep non-U.S. citizens traveling with a group together, but no guarantees can be made. Third-country nationals will be offered seats on a space-available basis, and dual passport holders are subject to the directives of their own governments. Travelers will also be required to sign a promissory note for an undisclosed amount of money

New Terms Replace U.S. Department of State “Warden Messages”

The U.S. Department of State is no longer using the term “Warden Message.” The term “Warden Message” has been replaced by two new classifications described below, “Message for U.S. Citizens” and “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens.”

- Embassies or Consulates will use a “Message for U.S. Citizens” to disseminate information about routine topics such as voter registration, income tax season, new passport procedures, and other non-security issues of interest to the local U.S. citizen community.
- Embassies or Consulates will use an “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens” to inform U.S. citizens about events or threats that can affect their personal security. This includes demonstrations, civil disturbances, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and other breaking events. Whenever the Department of State revises the Worldwide Caution or issues a Travel Alert or Travel Warning for a country or region, posts (embassies or consulates) will also disseminate it with an Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens.
- The definitions for Travel Alerts and Travel Warnings have not changed and can be found on their respective Web sites.
- Travel Alerts: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_1766.html
- Travel Warnings: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_1764.html
- Visit www.travel.state.gov for more about safety and security for traveling U.S. citizens.

but are told that the cost will be equivalent to a one-way ticket to that destination on commercial air. Such transport is also only to the nearest safe haven, not “home.”

Search and Rescue

Another important service that can be provided by an insurance provider is enhanced search and rescue coverage. This was critical in Haiti after a 7.0 magnitude devastated the capital, Port-au-Prince, in January 2010. While the affected government is generally responsible for directing search and rescue efforts, authorized assistance from other entities is permitted particularly when the affected government is underprepared for a large-scale, long-term rescue operation (as it was in Haiti). One of Langlin’s client institutions had 14 students in Haiti at the time of the disaster. Six were determined to be in a hotel that collapsed. Langlin summarized their resolve in such situations.

“Regardless of what the policy detail wording says regarding search and rescue, we are going to do the right thing. Search and rescue operations were supposed to cease after seven days. We stayed for 32—until everyone was found.”

Self-care

A comprehensive crisis management plan also promotes emotional and physical self-care for responders. MSU’s Office of Study Abroad provided support to JCMU after the March 2011 earthquake. Several days into its response, an MSU employee turned to Simon in a meeting to ask how she was coping. She replied quietly, “I used to live north of Sendai. I have no idea if anyone I know is okay.” Stunned by this unknown detail, she chided herself for not asking the question sooner. Simon, like hundreds of our education abroad colleagues around the world—especially in Japan—put the

needs of her students before her own. Senior staff needs to be as explicit as possible in caring for their colleagues as much as their students because when an individual or an office goes into crisis management mode, it is common to defer self-care. But an ongoing crisis requires a staffing contingency plan, so people can be allowed to rest, reflect, grieve, and nourish their bodies. “Our colleagues from Eastern Michigan University sent us a fruit basket, which was so thoughtful, and now we talk about how great it would be on bad days to have a fruit basket,” joked Simon.

Debrief

The final element to a successful plan is reviewing how it actually responded to the crisis your institution just endured, and revising the plan if deficiencies are found. Within a week after the crisis is over, or as soon as practicable, bring all responders together to review key events and actions taken, and how the plan responded. In planning the meeting, take steps to ensure that the tone of the meeting is not accusatory. Make clear at the outset that the exercise is not to criticize or cast blame, but to share in a constructive way what went well and what didn’t. Discussion may be heated and even emotional, but if everyone understands that the goal is to improve the institution’s response to the next crisis and better protect students, faculty, and others, participation and open collaboration are ensured.

Of course, no matter how much experience you have, managing a crisis will always be stressful, but taking steps to review and improve your plans will lessen your anxiety and improve your performance. **IE**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Bill Powell, area executive vice president, Gallagher Higher Education Practice, Arthur J. Gallagher Risk Management Services, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, who contributed to this article.

JULIE FRIEND is a licensed attorney and associate director for international safety and security at Northwestern University. Her last article for IE was “Danger Ahead!” in the health and insurance supplement published with the November/December 2011 issue.