

## Crisis Management Is Easier When You Have a Plan in Place

**D**URING THE PAST FOUR YEARS, Peter Briggs of Michigan State University has dealt with four separate incidents in which Chinese students were hit by cars while walking. Two of the students died, while the other two sustained serious injuries and required extended hospitalization and rehabilitation periods.

For each of these emergencies, Briggs and his staff juggled numerous concerns: Were the surviving students receiving proper care? Who should take charge of the situation? Who would notify the families? How could his office partner with local police and medical providers to overcome language barriers? Who would notify the insurance companies and sort out financial obligations? Along with that, Briggs says it was important for his staff to make sure the family and friends of the injured and deceased students received the support they needed.

“Any time you’re dealing with serious injury or death of a student, it’s so emotional—there’s no way around that,” says Briggs, who is director of MSU’s Office for International Students and Scholars. “Emergencies happen, and we’re almost in the role of being a parent to our international students while they’re here. We feel responsible for them.”

One of the injured students had two broken legs and required a transitional place to recuperate after her discharge from the hospital. She wouldn’t be able to resume classes right away, but she wanted to stay in the United States to continue receiving care from her medical team. Briggs worked closely with a social worker at the hospital, as well as the Chinese Consulate, to make that possible.

“Planning ahead for an emergency gives you an understanding of what to do when something happens,” says Briggs. “It’s also important to build relationships around campus and within the local community so we don’t have to do it all.”

### Care During Crisis

International advisers at colleges and universities across the United States are accustomed to dealing

with crises involving their international students and scholars. These incidents may encompass a wide range of circumstances, from accidental death or suicide to serious illness, mental breakdown, or sexual assault. Although virtually every college and university has a detailed, campus-wide threat assessment plan, it’s also important for international offices to have a plan for dealing with crises. And the best time to develop that plan is before a crisis occurs.

“It’s important for us to have our own plan for supporting our students during time of crisis because we have a code of care over our student and scholar populations,” says Teri Albrecht, director of International Student and Scholar Services at The University of Texas at Austin. “Their family members are usually not in the U.S., and we can act as an extension of their support network while they’re living here.”

Albrecht’s office has developed a crisis management plan that details step-by-step the actions to take for various emergency situations. It’s meant to complement the university-wide crisis response plan, she says.

Sara Kurtz Allaei, assistant vice president for international services at Indiana University and the executive director of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) International Affairs, points out that international offices have a special understanding of how to obtain proper immigration documents that students and families at the center of a crisis might need. International advisers can help make travel arrangements as needed or facilitate difficult conversations between family members and key players such as the local or campus police, mental health services staff, and medical providers. These gestures also may help to reassure families who are far away that their loved ones are being cared for.

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# Developing a Crisis Management Plan

**D**ON'T WAIT UNTIL A CRISIS BEFALLS your campus to plan your crisis response strategy. Creating a plan before a crisis happens means there will be less chance for panic and knee-jerk reactions.

"You don't have time to think when an emergency situation occurs," says Ellen Dussourd, assistant vice provost and director of international student and scholar services at the University at Buffalo. "You need to have protocols in place so you know what steps to take to manage the situation."

Here are some tips for getting started:

■ **Become familiar with the resources on your campus.** Don't stay cooped up in your office.

Take a walk across campus and get to know others who play key roles in a crisis—student affairs, campus police, media relations, or the student counseling office. "Meet with the people on campus who would need to be involved in times of crisis so that you're already creating a working relationship with them," says Teri Albrecht, director of international student and scholar services at The University of Texas, Austin.

■ **Plan responses for imagined scenarios.**

Accidental death. Suicide. Medical emergency. Mental breakdown. Sexual assault. Illness outbreak. There are countless possible crises that could occur. Create a checklist of actions to take during a crisis, from who gets notified to how you'll support students and their families. Keep the plan flexible and adaptable. "Our plan is very explicit and very granular," Albrecht says. "It's about making sure we're not missing anything, keeping all the information in one place and trying to have the best possible result in a terrible situation."

■ **Maintain an up-to-date contact list.**

Albrecht recommends thinking about which members of the campus community are the stakeholders in any particular crisis. Is it the dean of students? Does the student health care team or counseling center need to be involved? What about the academic department? Perhaps human resources for students or scholars employed on campus? Make sure anyone you'd need to call is listed.

■ **Decide who's in charge.** Who has the responsibility for making critical decisions?

Also, decide who will be the primary contact for family members, for the campus community. Who will keep in touch with health care providers or other community resources? "Your staff needs to be aware of who's on point when a crisis happens," says Peter Briggs, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at Michigan State University. "If you don't have someone designated to be in charge, people can trip all over each other trying to be helpful. And then you become inefficient. You need a leader who's calling the shots."

■ **Understand the role of media relations.**

In the event that the crisis draws media attention, your campus communications office will drive those messages and likely handle all interactions with reporters. After a graduate student from China was stabbed with a fork by her ex-boyfriend at The University of Texas, Austin, the incident was widely reported in regional media outlets. This coverage raised concerns about safety on campus. Albrecht partnered with the university's Office of Public Affairs, as well as legal counsel, to flesh out the issues and provide much-needed support to the student victim. "This incident became a campus-wide crisis because the crime occurred in an academic building," Albrecht

says. "The suspect was arrested, but there was heightened concern for a while. It's important to think about how to support our students when they're going through something so emotional."

■ **Evaluate and revise your plan.** Don't let your plan collect dust on a shelf. Look at it annually, and be sure to evaluate and revise after each crisis. "Think about what you could have done better," says Sara Kurtz Allaei, assistant vice president for international services at Indiana University and executive director of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) International Affairs. "You don't want it to be too scripted because every case is different, but the checklist helps to make sure you don't forget something. You have to use judgment in managing each case."

■ **Take care of your team.** Crises are emotionally charged happenings that can zap your energy. After the crisis has passed, take time as a staff to talk about the incident and the issues and concerns that came up for each person. Give everyone the opportunity to share. "This process always helps us to think through better ways of handling the situations and better ways to advocate for our students," Albrecht says.

■ **Practice for a crisis.** Take time to conduct mock crisis drills. That will prepare your team to respond appropriately when the pressure of a real emergency occurs. NAFSA offers workshops on crisis communications, which usually include group practice with mock scenarios. "These drills give participants a chance to work through and talk about how to respond to different situations," Albrecht says. "It allows folks to think about these issues and how we can continually improve our response."

“Our institutions look to us to be experts on cultural-related issues,” Allaei says. “This is a whole dynamic where the international office is in the strongest position to provide support because of our familiarity with the students and their cultures. But we’re also fortunate to have strong support from our campus, and we never have to do it alone.”

Ellen Dussourd has dealt with many medical emergencies involving international students in her role as assistant vice provost and director of international student and scholar services at the University at Buffalo. One of the most important elements of crisis readiness is becoming familiar with the institution’s medical insurance requirements for international students and understanding what the policies cover. Several years

to choose insurance providers that have proven results.”

Dealing with an accidental death or suicide is particularly heart wrenching for international advisers and their staff. A primary concern is deciding who notifies the family. Along with planning an appropriate university response, it’s important to understand state and federal laws governing these issues—as well as appropriate measures for returning the body back home.

Allaei recalls a situation several years ago when a Chinese graduate student at her institution drowned in the swimming pool of his apartment complex within a week of his arrival to the United States. Further complicating matters was the fact that his wife, also Chinese, was enrolled at another

## Finding Resources on Campus and Beyond

For international advisers who want to develop a crisis plan, Allaei recommends having a full understanding of the university’s organizational structure and the communications protocols already in place. Most universities have a threat assessment team—and possibly a risk management office—that can provide valuable assistance and advice.

“It’s a good idea to find out how things already are organized for domestic crises and how your office can tap into those resources, particularly the campus police, counseling center and communications office,” Allaei says. “That will illustrate where there are gaps to fill in for situations that involve international students or scholars.”

Ravi Shankar, director of Northwestern University’s International Office learned how valuable the NAFSA network could be several years ago, when a Korean scholar at his university was killed, along with his wife, as they drove through Montana. The couple’s two children, also in the car, survived. Shankar called on colleagues at the University of Montana to act as his liaison with the hospital where the children were being treated.

“We have a great network through NAFSA,” Shankar says. “We can create networks where we can help each other because our students are mobile and travel all over the U.S. while they’re here. If something happens far away from our institutions, it’s nice to be able to call on each other for help.”

Allaei adds that fellow NAFSA members can be great sources of ideas and information.

“Take a look at peer institutions with similar student bodies and organizational structures and use them as resources,” Allaei says. “Learn from what others are doing well, and bring that home to your institution. Be a positive force in moving the comprehensive crisis management structure forward at your own institution.” **IE**

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ago, for example, one of her undergraduate students from Taiwan was involved in a serious car crash (with two other Taiwanese students), sustaining injuries that left him paralyzed from the neck down. The process of arranging medical evacuation via air ambulance to Taiwan was simplified because of the SUNY system’s outstanding medical insurance provider, which made all of the arrangements to get the student home.

“The most important consideration when managing medical emergencies with international students is to have good health insurance,” says Dussourd, adding that the student was able to complete his degree in engineering and is now studying in law school in Taiwan with aspirations of specializing in legal services for people with disabilities. “If you’re working with the right insurance company, they can handle all these complex situations for you. That’s where people in my position at other universities have an important role to educate the decision makers at their institutions

U.S. university. As she worked on the case, Allaei learned that state law in Indiana required the coroner’s office to notify family members of a death.

Dealing with mental illness among international students also is a challenge for international offices. Recently, Briggs worked with a Moroccan student who had a mental breakdown and needed to go home. The student’s family couldn’t afford to come to the U.S. to pick up the student, and the student couldn’t be sent home alone. So as Briggs worked with the student’s health insurance company to make arrangements for him to go home, staff from the university’s counseling center stepped in to help. Ultimately, arrangements were made for someone to accompany him home.

“Assessing mental health across cultures is a challenge,” Briggs says. “The behavior of international students is so different anyway, and you’re not always sure if you’re dealing with a person who’s shy or if there’s a much more significant withdrawal from the world”