

Controlling the Message

How to Manage Communications During Emergencies Abroad

GREG MALVEAUX, an English professor and the collegewide coordinator of study abroad at Montgomery College in Maryland, remembers getting the news: A major earthquake in New Zealand had demolished the campus where a Montgomery County student was studying.

But thanks to the omnipresence of mobile phones and the college's policy of assigning an in-country adviser to all education abroad students, "I communicated with the foreign adviser and administrators, and quickly learned that [the student] was safe," Malveaux says. "Then we all worked together to figure out where he could be relocated to complete his study abroad. The communication between the three of us immediately after the disaster allowed us to create a new arrangement that we were all comfortable with, and the student was able to complete his studies about 100 miles away, at another institution."

With proper planning and leveraging 24/7 communication tools, college administrators are proactively and effectively minimizing panic and collaborating to ensure the safety of students during emergencies.

Managing the Message

"The ubiquity of information about events around the world is certainly a double-edged sword," says Geoffrey Bradshaw, director of international education at Madison Area Technical College in Wisconsin. "On the one hand, the ability of study abroad staff to monitor locations remotely is vastly improved. We are now able to get breaking reports around the globe for nearly any location where we are running programs. We have a better day-to-day picture of what our students are doing abroad, and we can get safety updates from them in an emergency. But it also ramps up expectations regarding the speed with which we are expected to know about and intervene in any situation."

Bradshaw says that a good emergency plan or set of procedures can't be just a static document. "It needs to



be constantly reviewed and adapted.” For Bradshaw, this means that even though his institution just had an external review that gave it high marks for its emergency procedures, “I am currently working with our risk management and insurance providers to think about improvements and ways that can speed our ability to respond in the wake of an emergency situation. We are also exploring the multitude of online tools now available to track and communicate with students.”

According to Malveaux, “A few years ago we did not have an organized team for risk assessment or for emergency situations. But times have changed, and there is a far greater need now. For breaking situations, Jonathon D. Zinger, assistant director of the office of global safety and security at Northwestern University, advises, “Verify your sources, and only use reputable outlets, especially if your main source of intel is from open-source channels. Use tools like social media to gain an advantage for on-the-ground information. For example, following local police departments on Twitter allows you to receive fast and credible information.” He adds, “Social media can also be used to contact your travelers, and to keep external groups informed.”

Implications for Faculty Training

“When training faculty to serve as leaders for study abroad programs, we used to simply tell them to refer all media inquiries to our media relations office for any official statement,” says Bradshaw. “Today, for every official media relations office statement there could be dozens of social media posts. In our training with faculty program leaders, we now discuss what content is appropriate for official college Facebook or YouTube channels, but we also discuss individual student social media. And while often there are important issues of confidentiality, having a group debriefing for any situation abroad in which all program participants are provided with good information is often the best way to ensure that rumors and misinformation don’t become the dominant message online.”

While the ease and ubiquity of global communication makes it impossible to “control” the message in the way it once was, it can also help increase transparency and foster positive communication and support when needed, Malveaux says. “I want students to be able to be transparent in their communication with parents and friends. Of course, I want them to speak with me as well about their concerns.” ■

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Voices from the Field: Practical Advice

“When you are notified about a potential incident, try to gather information from multiple reputable sources before sending out a communitywide announcement. Once you have a basic understanding of what may be happening on the ground, an initial ‘informational’ alert can be sent to essential stakeholders. This should state a brief overview of the situation, the number of travelers in the area, the number of organization-owned buildings in the area, and actions taken so far by your team. Not only will this provide an assessment of the incident to the organization, it also allows for the risk/security department to control the internal flow of information.”

—Jonathon D. Zinger, assistant director, office of global safety and security, Northwestern University

“In addition to training on college procedures and other tools for emergency response, we are now adding case studies to our training for prospective program leaders, where they discuss ways to manage both formal and informal communications following a hypothetical incident.”

—Geoffrey Bradshaw, director of international education, Madison Area Technical College

“Many students are not going to leave their smartphones at home. So we had better figure how to communicate with them on their terms; that way, we have a better chance to figure out how to manage the flow of information. We use social media (Twitter, Facebook, and so forth) to our advantage: Program leaders and a risk assessment team member can communicate on a daily basis to avert risks, report on the welfare of group members, and relay other pertinent information to college administrators back home.”

—Greg Malveaux, coordinator of study abroad, Montgomery College