

# When It Just Keeps Coming: Managing A Multi-Layered Crisis Abroad

**Kira Espiritu, PhD**

San Diego, California, United States

Email: kiraespiritu@gmail.com

## Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Management and Operations; Program Design; Student Services; University/Higher Education

## Setting

A private, liberal arts university runs a three-week program abroad specifically designed for second-year students as part of a retention and engagement strategy. Students select from two locations, and this program, while facilitated by the International Center, is part of a partnership with the Division of Student Affairs. In light of the fact that this is a program for second-year students, the university made a decision to provide opportunities for non-International Center staff to participate in this program to provide additional structure and support as well as to serve as mentors for students to help them build on, establish, and reflect on their intercultural development and community engagement. Annually, approximately 100 students participate in each of the two locations, and five staff members travel with each group for the three-week program. In each location, one staff member is a returning staff member who is familiar with this integrated and immersive program abroad as well as the city and surrounding areas. Additional staff members are typically from the following departments on campus: residential life, wellness, career development, academic advising and student support services.

While abroad, students attend classes taught by university faculty, visit course-related sites, and participate in cultural excursions. Students and staff live in program housing, and when there are no scheduled activities, students and staff have free time to explore the city and surrounding areas. Prior to the program departure, students and staff members attend three pre-departure meetings throughout the semester. Staff also receive specialized health and safety/risk management training. The university provides comprehensive international CSIE cases are offered as professional development for readers and are not meant to focus on specific individuals or organizations. Names and other identifying details within the cases have been changed. In some instances, cases may have been amalgamated.

Article reuse guidelines: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

insurance for all program participants. This insurance is secondary to personal insurance carried by each student and staff member per institutional policy.

## Case

A group of 100 sophomore students, five faculty and six staff traveled to New Zealand for a three-week program. The staff team consisted of the university's International Center Director, Angela, one returning staff member from the prior year, Leo, and four other staff members from the university who had not previously been to New Zealand. On the first free weekend of the program, Angela took students and three staff on an optional excursion to the South Island while Leo remained on the North Island with one other staff member to be available to students who chose to remain on the North Island and not participate in the excursion.

Angela received a call from Leo while she was on the bus to the airport with the excursion group that was heading on the flight back to the North Island. Leo reported to Angela that he had just heard that a student (Jose) on the North Island was injured in a sky-diving accident and that he was on his way to the hospital to meet the student and his friend. After the short flight from the South Island to the North Island, as Angela was making her way back to the university housing complex, she received another call from Leo with an update about Jose's condition. Leo shared that Jose had been gravely injured. Angela immediately re-routed to the local hospital where she was met by Leo and escorted to a waiting room. Doctors informed Angela and Leo that Jose had multiple fractures in his back and that they were unsure of the damage and also unsure whether or not Jose was going to be paralyzed. Doctors had stabilized Jose and said that they would make a decision after a series of exams. Over the following days, Jose was heavily medicated and was not really able to communicate. Angela and Leo spent days and nights at the hospital while decisions were being made about a plan for Jose's treatment.

Angela worked with the hospital's social worker and main nurse on a plan for payment for Jose's treatment. The university's international insurance plan did not cover accidents related to extreme sports so it would not cover this sky-diving accident. As Jose began to stabilize, Angela and Leo were able to talk with him about the extent of his injuries, facilitate communication between Jose and his family, and discuss next steps. Jose's family did not speak English so Angela and another staff member had to translate and share sensitive health information with them. During these conversations, Jose revealed that his family had dropped him from their family health insurance plan in the early part of the fall semester because it was too expensive for them. Angela shared with the hospital team that Jose did not have insurance to cover his hospital stay or his treatment.

One week after the accident and after multiple exams from various specialists, doctors determined Jose would need an invasive surgery and would then remain hospitalized for at least one month. Angela and Leo were shocked by this news as the program was ending within one week of the surgery. They had to determine a plan for how to pay for Jose's care and help care for Jose as his parents were unable to travel to be with him as he recovered.

After consultation with the Vice President of Student Affairs, the University's wellness team and the University's Risk Manager, a decision was made to have Leo remain abroad with Jose during his recovery while the rest of the group returned to the US. When the local news found out that a university student from the United States had been injured in an accident, news officials as well as government officials appeared at the hospital

unannounced and began asking questions about the group, about Jose and about the program's purpose for being in New Zealand.

### **Discussion Questions**

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Who are the various stakeholder groups in this case and what support would each group need?
- Jose did not have health insurance despite the university's institutional policy that required all students to have their own health insurance. How could this have been prevented?
- Due to the extent of Jose's injuries and the inability of family members to be at his bedside, Angela and Leo took over 24-hour care for Jose. What things should the University have considered regarding the impact of this situation on Angela and Leo?
- What International Center procedures should be established for future programs to address the various factors within this case?
- How do you separate institutional responsibility from personal responsibility?