

Communication in the Digital Age: Holistic Student Support Abroad when Emails Go Unanswered

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Tags

Education Abroad; Experiential Education; Management and Operations; Partnerships; Student Learning and Development; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case takes place at a medium-sized, private, four-year college in the United States, as well as on-site at a semester-long study abroad provider program in Sydney, Australia. Courses on this program are solely taught at the provider's own study center. At this college, there is only one study abroad advisor, who has been advising students there for over three years. Students are not required to submit medical information with their application to prevent concerns of discrimination or bias. Instead, students submit their Medical Form after their acceptance, but prior to studying abroad.

Case

Hannah, a senior Marketing major, is very excited when she meets with her study abroad advisor, Molly, for the first time in September about studying abroad in Australia. The program she's interested in is perfect for her; it offers her the courses she needs for her final semester of college, the courses are all taught in English, and the program will even place her at a local business for a part-time academic internship in her field of study. In their

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first meeting, Molly reminds Hannah that she must pass all of her classes while abroad in order to graduate in May.

As Molly works with Hannah, she can see that Hannah needs a little more support than other students. Hannah is very nervous about doing something wrong, and she ends up submitting her provider's application at the very last minute since she wanted to make sure it was all done correctly. At one point, her program provider even has to reach out to Molly directly to get Hannah to submit an overdue form.

After Hannah has been accepted to her program, she sends Molly a frantic email stating that her family ran into financial issues and that they are no longer financially supporting her semester abroad. Molly sends Hannah some information about scholarships and other funding options. She doesn't hear anything back from Hannah about the situation, even when Molly reaches out to ask how she's doing.

At the end of November, Molly is pleasantly surprised to see Hannah RSVP for and attend pre-departure orientation. At the end of the workshop, Molly reminds everyone to submit their acceptance letters, Medical Forms, and flight itineraries to her as soon as possible. As other students are leaving, Molly gets a chance to speak with Hannah privately, and Hannah tells her that she's still waiting to hear back about some scholarships and she's not sure what her plans are at this point. Molly asks her to keep her informed of the situation.

A week later, Molly sends out reminder emails to all students with outstanding materials, including Hannah. Molly has her acceptance letter, but Hannah still hasn't sent her Medical Form or flight itinerary. With finals approaching, Molly knows that some students will wait until the last minute to take care of these things, and she's not surprised at all when Hannah still hasn't submitted these materials to her when winter break starts. Molly reaches out again at the beginning of January and still doesn't hear back. At this point, she doesn't even know if Hannah still plans to study abroad.

The day after Hannah's program starts in Australia in early January, Molly receives an email from her on-site advisor letting her know that Hannah arrived and is doing well. Molly lets out a sigh of relief. While she wishes she had heard from Hannah directly, she's glad to know that she has arrived safely. Molly knows that the program provider has their own medical paperwork for students, so she doesn't contact her further about the college's Medical Form, which she still hasn't received from Hannah.

In early February, Molly sends all students abroad a check-in email to see how they are doing and to remind them of coping strategies they discussed during pre-departure orientation to manage their cultural transitions. She hears from Hannah a week later, when she asks Molly about the academic consequences of dropping her internship course. Hannah states that she is unhappy in her placement and that her supervisor doesn't communicate with her well or often. Hannah doesn't need the internship to graduate, so Molly advises her that she would be okay to drop it from the college's perspective, but that she should speak to her on-site advisor about her options.

Hannah does not respond to Molly's email, though her on-site advisor sends several updates to Molly on the situation over the next few weeks. On-site staff have spoken with Hannah and have given her some tools and resources to better interact with her supervisor, and she has said that she will try to continue the internship. Molly reaches out again in early March to see if there's anything she can do for Hannah but is not surprised when she doesn't receive a response.

A month later, in early April and two weeks prior to the end of the program, Hannah's on-site advisor contacts Molly to tell her that Hannah is not attending classes and is at risk of failing her classes for the semester. Molly's supervisor, the Director of Study Abroad, emails Hannah directly and insists that she meet with her on-site staff and start attending classes again so as not to jeopardize her upcoming graduation. Hannah actually replies to the Director, saying that she has been having issues with anxiety lately, but she has dealt with it at home before. She says she has spoken with her on-site advisor and is now back on track for the remainder of the semester. This is the first time that Hannah has disclosed any mental health concerns to anyone at her home college.

The on-site advisor updates Molly about Hannah's plan to pass her courses and also lets her know that Hannah mentioned being stressed out about completing her graduation requirements from abroad. Molly reaches out to Hannah once more to offer her support and to answer any questions Hannah may have about her graduation requirements back on campus, but once again, Hannah doesn't respond. The next day, however, the on-site advisor lets Molly know that Hannah has agreed to speak to a therapist to help deal with the mental health issues that she disclosed to the on-site advisor.

When Molly receives Hannah's transcript from abroad a week prior to commencement, she discovers that Hannah did indeed withdraw from the internship course, despite originally indicating otherwise. She also received a D in another class, but she passed her remaining three courses. Luckily, Hannah only needed nine credits of electives—three courses—in order to graduate, which she does two weeks after returning to the United States.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are some strategies for working with students like Hannah who either do not read or do not respond to emails from the study abroad office?
- How can students best be supported regarding mental health needs if they choose not to disclose that information to their advisors?
- How can the home study abroad office and the on-site staff more effectively collaborate to help students like Hannah? What are the ethics of sharing information about a student's academic progress and mental health between the home study abroad advisor and the on-site staff?
- What sort of policy or procedural changes could be put in place to better support students like Hannah in the future, either at the home school or at the provider's center abroad?
- What resources are you aware of that could help Molly, Hannah, or Hannah's on-site advisor in this situation? Think about technology, professional development opportunities, local resources, and other campus departments.