

Student Gets Stuck During Political Unrest: Crisis Management and the Risk of Post-Program Personal Travel

Samuel Gras

MA in International Education Management

Email: samueljgras@outlook.com

Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; Program Design; University/Higher Education

Setting

A study abroad office at a large research university in the U.S. manages a short-term undergraduate program in Guatemala through a third-party provider. The university has a policy to restrict travel to high-risk destinations without a petition reviewed by the health and safety coordinator and approved by the travel committee.

Case

After finishing the study abroad program in Guatemala, an adventurous undergraduate student conducted personal travel to Honduras. The student had not reported any post-program travel plans to the study abroad office, so the itinerary was not entered into the travel registry. The student would not have been approved for travel to Honduras without a petition because the Department of State had issued a high-risk travel advisory for the country due to crime and gang violence. This made travel there a violation of the university's travel policy. The student was still covered by travel insurance though because of an established procedure to add a ten-day cushion to the end of each itinerary.

While the student was traveling across Honduras and visiting Mayan archeological sites, the cities and roads started to become sites of increasing political unrest related to Honduras's recent presidential election. Becoming concerned, the student contacted the study abroad advisor on a Friday evening from a hostel near the northern coast. The advisor then notified the university's health and safety coordinator, who established communication with the student through WhatsApp.

The student was trying to arrange a shuttle back to Guatemala to catch his scheduled flight, but the shuttle company notified him that the route was impassable due to roadblocks and burning tires. The health and safety coordinator told the student to remain at the hostel, made sure that the student had been in contact with his family, and sent contact information for the travel insurance service provider and US Embassy—which each student already receives in hard copy and digitally during pre-departure orientation.

The health and safety coordinator talked with the service provider, who requested to be contacted by the student, if possible. The coordinator requested that the provider start working on an evacuation plan and advised the student to contact the service provider. The student did so, and then updated the coordinator that all the service provider representative did was advise the traveler to avoid the protests but did nothing to identify a safer evacuation route or secure new flight tickets.

The health and safety coordinator contacted a colleague from a peer university with experience in Honduras. They discussed the location and alternate routes—identifying a potential sea route by ferry to the island of Roatán, which had an airport. Meanwhile, the Honduran government instituted a curfew from 6pm-6am. The coordinator updated the student about the possible alternate route, information about the curfew, and guidance to continue to shelter in place at the hostel.

The health and safety coordinator also notified the student that the service provider was unwilling to pay for a new flight ticket because the location wasn't part of the program, so either the student or parents would need to pay. The coordinator had been providing updates to the director of the study abroad office throughout the event.

The student sent the health and safety coordinator a message on WhatsApp at 5:10 a.m. on Saturday morning saying that the shuttle company had notified him that the roads had cleared. The student decided, against the coordinator and service provider's advice, to risk taking the shuttle back to Guatemala. By the time the coordinator received the message, the student had already departed the hostel. The coordinator then reassured the student that he would be there for support 24/7 throughout the full itinerary and checked again to make sure that the student was in contact with his parents. About thirty minutes later, the student sent the coordinator a photo of a protest with stacks of bricks and burning tires blocking the route and asked what to do—whether he should get out of the shuttle and try to walk around the protests to find another ride or stay with the shuttle.

The health and safety coordinator emphatically told the student not to set out alone or take any more photos of the protests but rather to stay with the shuttle to return to the hostel. Soon thereafter, the student notified the coordinator that the shuttle was again stuck by a protest roadblock on the way back to the hostel and was waiting for it to clear. Two hours later, the student sent an update that he was safe back at the hostel.

The seriousness of the experience had a noticeable impact on the student traveler, who was now ready to pursue the alternate route by ferry to Roatán. He was able to purchase a flight out from Roatán to Guatemala City with a connection in San Salvador. The student continued to provide updates to the coordinator, who emphasized advice to stay at the airport in Guatemala City for the outbound flight to Los Angeles, and not to go out in the city.

After finally returning to the United States, the student and his parents contacted the health and safety coordinator to express their appreciation. The study abroad director told the coordinator how glad he was to have a trusted, reliable, and skilled person at the position who was on-call after hours, weekends, and holidays. The coordinator and student met several times for coffee to discuss the event, and the coordinator provided the student with counseling resources in case he ever wanted to talk with anyone to help process the experience in a healthy manner.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can study abroad programs advise and communicate to students about safety and risk avoidance?
- To what extent does a program provider or university have a legal duty of care for a traveler after the end of the official program dates?
- What more could the health and safety coordinator have done to prevent the student from deciding to leave the hostel and take the shuttle?
- In addition to providing advice, what else could the service provider have done to assist with the evacuation?
- What other ways to communicate would have been possible if the student and health and safety coordinator didn't have WhatsApp or some other smartphone app?
- What if the situation had escalated and the student had been arrested, robbed, or worse? How would the media interpret and report the case? Who might get blamed? The university, study abroad office, program provider, and/or student?
- How could offices without a 24/7 health and safety coordinator position respond to such a case? Who would be responsible for afterhours incident response and crisis management support?
- How can the person in the health and safety coordinator position avoid burnout and anxiety from staying connected 24/7/365 while conducting numerous crisis management scenarios?