

When Things Get Broken:

Student Alcohol Use While Abroad

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Management and Operations; University/Higher Education

Setting

A large state university regularly approves study abroad faculty-led programs which feature on-campus classes connected to short-term international excursions of 10-14 days. Faculty members lead groups of students through international travel to strengthen the in-class learning with an experiential learning opportunity. While abroad, students get to experience sites, communities, companies, and people that they learned about in the classroom and reconcile the veracity of their class content to real-life examples.

These short-term travel programs usually navigate through multiple countries and are very often active and on the go, staying only one or two nights at each location. While students have a schedule organized by faculty leaders, students do have several opportunities to explore on their own. Faculty-led programs include program fees which allow faculty leaders to organize a majority of transportation, lodging, company/university visits, cultural visits, health and emergency insurance, and some meals.

Faculty leaders of these programs must attend mandatory leadership training before taking students abroad. Trained faculty members are expected to provide travel preparation and clear expectations for student conduct on these travel programs. A majority of these faculty-led programs have student groups between 7-30 people. The ratio of faculty leaders to student participants is mandated by the university.

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Case

A group of 14 third and fourth-year undergraduate students and 2 faculty members embarked on a travel program designed for 10 days to Europe. This exact program had run successfully over the past 4 years. The faculty leaders were accustomed to multiple countries, lodging locations, and other places on the itinerary from past experience. This year's group of students were prepared for travel through conversations about health, safety, risk, money, phones, appropriate dress/packing needs, alcohol-use, conduct, culture shock, etc., as all previous groups were.

Over the first eight days, the program ran smoothly according to the itinerary as it had in past programs. Overall, students got along with each other and their faculty leaders. Satisfied with the program, students seemed to enjoy their free-time and enjoyed going out at each location they travelled through. Several students would drink alcohol while going out, but no problems emerged.

However, in the last two days of the program, some students seemed to imbibe in alcohol more heavily. On the last night, students went out for the evening and a couple of them were inebriated when returning to the hotel. One of the students passed out in the bathroom after breaking a porcelain sink. Water and broken porcelain were everywhere. The faculty were woken up by frustrated and angry hotel staff. Luckily, the student was not in need of medical care.

The hotel demanded payment for the broken sink and damage before the group was allowed to leave the premises. The repair and clean-up costs were several hundred dollars. The student, who was still not fully alert, indicated that they had no funds available to pay for the cost of the damage. All student flights were rapidly approaching and faculty members needed to get students to the airport within a few hours.

After consultation with international educators at the main campus, it was decided that the faculty would pay for the costs of repairs/damages so they could get all students to the airport to return to the U.S. as planned. The student responsible for the damages was notified before the faculty paid the repair/damage costs that the university would charge the cost to the student's account and place a hold on the student account until the university was reimbursed.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Given that student preparation training included topics on alcohol use and student conduct, what else may have been done to help prevent this type of behavior?
- Was it an appropriate decision to have faculty pay the repair/damage costs on-site? Why or why not?
- What are other ways that faculty could have reacted?
- How might this incident have played out differently if the local police had been called?
- Speculate how the faculty determined the student was "not in need of medical care"? How do you think it should be determined in this type of case?

- How do you think this incident may have played out differently if the student had been injured and in need of medical care?
- What do you imagine is the long-term impact of being able to book with the same lodging vendor again?