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Who's in the Know: Communication and Procedure in a Crisis

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Education Policy; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Management and Operations; Partnerships; Program Assessment; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

At a small, private university, the Office of Global Education (OGE) is responsible for all outbound study abroad programs (semester abroad, exchange, faculty-led travel courses) and incoming exchange. The OGE Director, Sheryl, has been in the position for a month after the sudden departure of the former Director. Previously, Sheryl was the Associate Director and focused almost entirely on semester exchange programs. The Travel Course Manager, Hannah, reports directly to the OGE Director. At the end of every faculty-led travel course, she distributes and evaluates participant surveys for feedback on program logistics.

There is no formal crisis management procedure in the Office of Global Education. Faculty leaders receive an emergency procedure packet that contains OGE phone numbers and basic guidelines of what to do in different situations.

For over 20 years, Professor Cunningham has served as faculty leader on a travel course every January to a meditation retreat center in the United States. Students take classes throughout the week about meditation and mindfulness. The classes are led by the center instructors who are not affiliated with the university. Professor Cunningham, as the faculty leader, also attends these activities and facilitates debriefing sessions with his students throughout the week.

Case

Once Professor Cunningham's Travel Course has ended, Hannah reviews the results of the participant survey for any red flags before processing and evaluating the data. Hannah sees a comment describing an incident in which a female student of color was called up to the front of a group by a center instructor then he proceeded to sing a racist and sexual song to her. The comment mentions that they could see in the student's body language how uncomfortable she was and that the other students in the group didn't know how to intervene or react. The comment also mentions the center instructor by name and calls for him to be removed. According to this student, the university faculty did not intervene but may not have seen it. The surveys are anonymous, and no comments appear to come directly from the student in question.

Immediately, Hannah brings the report to Sheryl. In response, Sheryl forwards the full survey report to the Title IX Coordinator at the university for guidance without including any other staff on the email. The Title IX Coordinator opens an investigation, and Sheryl tells Hannah that she will handle all communication with the Title IX Coordinator.

A few weeks later, Hannah begins to reach out to the January faculty to debrief them about their survey results and recommendations. Not for the first time, Hannah reaches out to Sheryl to ask for any relevant updates to the investigation to be appropriately prepared for what she can and cannot discuss with Professor Cunningham during the debrief. Sheryl decides it is okay to mention the student's comment and that the OGE has forwarded the concern to the appropriate authorities. In the meeting, Professor Cunningham says that he was not there for the incident itself and learned about it from the group the next day. He appears to brush the incident off and downplays the situation.

After months, Hannah has not received any updates from Sheryl or the Title IX Coordinator about the investigation, but Professor Cunningham is already planning the course for the following January. Given the sensitive nature of this issue and that she is only receiving limited updates herself, Sheryl does not think Hannah should receive updates. Hannah, however, feels that not having any information or communication guidelines is negatively impacting her ability to do her job, especially as she continues working directly with the center on next year's program. Without any guidance, Hannah continues working on the program as usual. She feels uncomfortable when communicating with the provider and faculty, knowing the program could be canceled depending on the results of the investigation. Hannah tries to explain her concern to Sheryl but doesn't feel that Sheryl understands her role and the travel course process.

The day before all January programs open for recruitment, Sheryl tells Hannah that the investigation is complete and the program is okay to run for future terms. The meditation center issues a general statement about the incident to their contacts at the OGE that states that the staff member in question is no longer an instructor at the center and that their instructors will receive additional training on appropriate behavior. They do not share this with students.

In December, the student-run news organization on campus runs a story about the incident, the university's perceived insufficient response, and the reaction of participants set to go in January who were not made aware of the incident beforehand. Students from the course last year were interviewed, including anonymous audio clips from the victim, expressing surprise that the course would be offered again and dismay that their voices

were not heard. The university's President and Provost get involved and one week before the program is set to begin in January, they cancel the travel course.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- As the faculty leader/OGE Director/Travel Course Manager, how would you support the students in this program without breaking confidentiality or spotlighting the victim?
- What are some ways to improve communication between stakeholders within the same office (OGE)?
- Was canceling the travel course an acceptable response from the university's senior administration? What other alternatives may have been appropriate responses to this situation?
- Should faculty training be required for all travel course faculty leaders, and what topics should be covered? How would you implement this, and what limitations exist with only one staff member working on travel courses full-time?
- If the faculty wants to run this course at the same center in the future, who should be involved in that decision, and what would be required to mitigate liability and ensure student safety?
- What stakeholders should be involved in developing a formal emergency procedure and policy for OGE staff and faculty leaders? What information and resources should the emergency response include?