

Balancing Health and Privacy: Crisis Management Considerations for Education Abroad

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

Xavier, a third-year university student in the U.S., applied to a semester-long education abroad program in Seoul, South Korea that was offered by his university. Although he was a pre-law major and hoped to one day enter the legal field, he was also interested in Korean culture and wanted to improve his Korean language skills. His application and letters of recommendation were stellar, and he was admitted to the program without delay. As per the program's policy, Xavier was placed with a Korean host family.

The program used rented office space and classrooms at a Korean university. The program was led by a Resident Director who was a U.S.-based faculty member on her first semester of a three-year assignment. The Resident Director oversaw Xavier's program and taught some of the courses in the program. Additional staff members were Korean nationals and based in the Seoul office. All faculty and staff were employees of the U.S. university and their contracts required that they abide by U.S. laws. The Resident Director reported to the U.S.-based Director of Education Abroad. At the time of this case, there was no crisis-management plan in place.

Case

Three weeks after the start of the program, the Resident Director received a middle of the night call from Xavier's home campus education abroad advisor about a possible emergency situation. Xavier's friend Rebecca, who was also participating in the program, had emailed the home campus advisor in a panic. "Xavier has been planning his suicide. He set a date – the end date of the program – and is counting down the days." Xavier had forbidden Rebecca from speaking of his suicide plans, but she felt it was her duty as a friend to confide in the advisor. Rebecca told the advisor, "he is not living with a host family; he is by himself. I'm very worried."

The Seoul office called the host family and explained the situation. The host family confirmed that Xavier was indeed still living with them – Rebecca had been mistaken about his living situation. However, by speaking with the host family about his health issues, the Seoul office had potentially violated Xavier's HIPAA rights. As a faculty-led program, there was no protocol for crisis management.

The Resident Director consulted with the Director of Education Abroad about how to approach Xavier and what options were possible to ensure his safety. They also considered the impact on other students in the program, impact on the host family, and the legal liability of the university. The Director of Education Abroad began to research whether it was legal to dismiss a student from the program on the grounds of mental illness. He was advised that this was considered discriminatory.

After some time, Xavier was called into the Resident Director's office. The Resident Director had no advising experience herself, but she had done thorough research into mental health resources in the host country, and suggested an English-speaking therapist for Xavier. The program would cover all charges. Xavier agreed to visit the therapist, and signed a waiver giving the Resident Director and Director of Education Abroad permission to speak with his parents on the subject if needed.

Several weeks later, Xavier appeared to be improving. However, Rebecca confided to the Resident Director that Xavier had lashed out at her for her "betrayal" and they were no longer friends. He also bragged to his fellow students about how he had tricked the Resident Director and his therapist, and he was still planning his suicide for the day the program ends. The Resident Director and Director of Education Abroad agreed that a call to the parents must be made, and Xavier may need to be sent home for his own protection.

The Director of Education Abroad called Xavier's mother. The mother was worried about how this would affect her son's future career. "Will this be on his record? How are his grades? He is trying to get into law school." She was reluctant to have Xavier sent home in the middle of the semester.

The Resident Director and Director of Education Abroad agreed to keep Xavier on the program for the remaining eight weeks and asked him to continue with the weekly therapist appointments.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Do you think the Seoul office's handling of the emergency situation was appropriate? Why or why not?
- What advising techniques would you use when speaking with Xavier?
- If you were the Director of Education Abroad, how would you proceed after the phone call with Xavier's mother? Would you insist on Xavier's dismissal from the program?

- How would you support Rebecca and the other students who may have been aware of Xavier's plans without disclosing his health issues?
- If, after this case, the office decides to develop a risk prevention and crisis management plan, what should be the components of those plans?
- Should international education programs have mandatory crisis management training for their faculty? If so, how would you implement a training program?