

Navigating Cross-Currents: Establishing a Crisis Management Protocol

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Education Policy; Leadership and Strategy; University/Higher Education

Setting

Like many education-abroad host countries, Cuba presents unique and sometimes obfuscatory challenges to resident directors and central office staff located in the U.S. Yet, it is Cuba's unique situation-having survived a 60-year-old embargo and maintaining its pride in its defiance-that is attractive to many U.S. students. For some people, Cuba's telecommunication lethargy such as weak Internet connections and inefficient cell phone infrastructure, its laissez-fair approach to life and the lack of U.S. commercial interests make Cuba an ideal location for education abroad programming that seeks to provide students with a truly immersive experience. Cuba's political and technological situation requires that resident directors will often have to develop protocols and policies and modify them frequently.

The case study below centers on six students, four males and two females, from five U.S. states studying abroad in Cuba through *Study and Explore*, a provider founded in 1980 who has designed programs in Europe, but recently decided to enter the "hot" Cuban market. Upon arrival in Cuba at the beginning of the semester, *Study and Explore's* resident director Michael provided students with an orientation and an introduction to Playa University, the Cuban university who only recently had begun accepting American students as study abroad participants. During the semester, the students often interacted with American students from another provider, *Estudios Caribeños*, a larger and more established program than *Study and Explore*. For the first three months of the program there were no incidents; it was only as the abroad experience approached its conclusion that an event occurred that exposed the frailties of communication, lack of process documentation, incomplete cross-cultural understanding and complexity of the Cuban legal system in a way that impacted everyone involved in making a study abroad program work.

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Case

Toward the end of the spring semester Michael visited his students and immediately noticed that something was wrong. After some prodding they explained that they had gone to the beach and had invited a Cuban male, Pablo, to join them. At the beach, one of the students, Mary, had become extremely intoxicated and was in the water with the Pablo. The other students said that it appeared that Pablo was having intercourse with her, but they could not be sure since their lower torsos were below the surface of the water. Mary had no recollection of the event. Once she and Pablo returned to shore the other students gathered around her and refused to let Pablo anywhere near her. He then left abruptly, and the students returned to their homestays. Upon learning of the situation, Michael took the student to the hospital. The medical staff at the hospital refused to examine Mary stating that since she said she had no recollection of the incident, this indicated that a criminal element might be involved, and that she must go to the police and report the assault before the doctors could examine her. Mary refused to go to the police and expressed her wish to take an emergency contraception pill. Upon leaving the hospital Mary began to become angry and lashed out at Michael, saying that she just wanted to go home and wanted no further action taken since the semester was almost over and she would be returning to the U.S. anyway.

The resident director approached the International Programs Office at the host university, Playa University. The university required that all incidents involving international students be reported to the International Programs Office. The staff at the office, Karla and Angela expressed mild concern and were unaware of what procedures to follow or who to consult. The host university did not have resources or personnel to assist victims of sexual assault. Michael contacted his colleague, Samantha, at *Estudios Caribeños*. When informed of the situation and the lack of access to an emergency contraception pill, Samantha suggested that Michael could create his own emergency contraception pill by watching a YouTube video which demonstrated how one could create a concoction equivalent to an emergency contraception pill by combining various medications.

Once Marcos Salazar, the dean of the university, learned of the assault he expressed full support to the resident director and the student and said that the university was prepared to act in support of her and to work with the police investigation.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How could the pre-departure and on-site orientation be strengthened to better prepare students? Who should be involved?
- Who should create the on-site emergency protocols for sexual assault of study abroad students? The host university or the program provider?
- What kind of cross-cultural communications strategies should the resident director employ when discussing the incident with the host university international programs staff?
- Which laws and policies should guide the director's actions?
- How can the resident director best support the student?

- How should the resident director respond to the “medical advice” given to him by a colleague in the field? Should this conversation be shared with anyone?
- What observations can we make about the individuals and organizations involved in this case study?
- How can we better train international educators for this type of situation?