

When to Pull the Alarm if it's Not Your Fire: Managing Gray Space in Faculty-led Programming

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Tags

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Setting

A study abroad office within a U.S. public university is tasked with ensuring that institutional policies and best practices within the field of international education are applied to programming involving student mobility. Approximately 75% of student mobility abroad is conducted on the faculty-led program model. The office was recently launched with a goal of centralization and a small staff to navigate a series of long-established study abroad programs within certain colleges of the university. Heritage practices, varying interpretations of policy, and a spirit of independence among key faculty and administrators present unclear authority and oversight — notably in the realm of program budget which remains decentralized and housed within respective host colleges.

Case

Over the course of two or three program cycles, the nascent study abroad office has developed a series of institution-wide policies associated with student health and safety guidelines, insurance requirements, and pre-departure preparations for all programs. These domains were clearly defined within the scope of the office and proved to be the most compelling because of the impact on student safety. Areas of contractual negotiation involving third-party providers and the subsequent budgets built off these contracts represented domains in which the study abroad team played a large role for newer programming but were often only peripherally involved

when it came to the long-standing, heritage programs. This was often due to the decentralization of the accounts associated with these programs.

A highly independent and senior faculty member of one of these long-standing programs has continued to retain authority over their respective program, enabled by extensive turnover within the Dean's Office of their home college. The study abroad team navigated challenging relationships with this faculty member and about a half dozen others from the following perspective: Do what we absolutely must to ensure student health, safety, and preparation; any collaboration beyond that is a bonus.

The third-party provider used by this independent faculty member was contracted regularly by several other faculty-led programs throughout the campus. However, the involvement of the study abroad office again has varied based on the personalities involved. While the relationship between the provider and the study abroad office has been amicable, there was increasingly a strong sense that a parallel dialogue was occurring with this key faculty member regarding programming details, inclusions, negotiations, and renegotiations. While the study abroad team has had access to the contract itself, the ability to understand the full mechanics of the budget remained opaque. This faculty member regularly had access to a centrally funded pool of money for programming that demonstrates broad and lasting impacts for student success. This funding was applied for by the faculty member in question and granted directly to the faculty member for disbursement within the broad category of use for student costs.

While at one time successful, this faculty-led program has struggled for the past two or three enrollment cycles to recruit students and to meet sustainable enrollment numbers. Nonetheless, at least two faculty members still participated annually as co-leaders on this program. The program continued to operate despite perceptions from the study abroad office that the program was grossly under-enrolled and did not support the budget of the provider. This was due to pressure to support as much student mobility as possible, even though they were distanced from the financial details and lacked the ability to assert their role in budgetary management. The study abroad team continued to facilitate this program despite growing questions about the solvency of this program.

The office of internal auditing approached the study abroad office to investigate the budgets from this program. They found that the faculty member had been misusing the funds intended for student success and, through the third-party provider, indirectly covering the costs of the additional faculty members' travel and accommodations on the program. While the study abroad team was not directly indicted by the audit, questions about their oversight were raised, and awkward answers about territory and politics were given. The findings that resulted from this audit led to a policy that inserted the central study abroad office more clearly between faculty, budgets, and providers, but without additional staffing for the new duties.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In what ways could the study abroad office be held at fault for not raising an alarm in this situation? Keep in mind that they had very little hard evidence until the audit and the faculty member involved was a well-established and senior academic.

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- In what ways was the study abroad office disincentivized from raising an alarm? What risks were involved?
- What role does pressure for increased mobility numbers have on circumstances like this?
- When is it appropriate or not appropriate to run programming at a deficit?
- What can be learned from this scenario regarding the role that institutional politics and culture play in the balance between “getting along” and “doing what is right”?
- Is it “good”, “bad” or “neutral” that the authority of the study abroad office in budgetary oversight for these programs was increased as a result of the internal audit? Why?