

WHEN A Student Dies Abroad

Preparing for the Ultimate Tragedy





BY JULIE ANNE FRIEND

If you are faced with responding to a student death abroad, it will likely be the most emotionally challenging moment of your career as an education abroad professional. Needless to say, it is not a time for improvisation or “winging it.”

The trauma of the experience will test the skills of even the most seasoned professional. To be prepared to respond appropriately, it's important to have written, well-rehearsed emergency response procedures as well as a checklist to guide your actions. This article is designed to help you develop such a plan and prepare you to respond to an event you hopefully will never encounter.

General International Emergency Preparedness

The death of a student abroad requires a unified, consistent response from every member of the institution. Although the education abroad office may take the lead role in responding to the crisis, it cannot and should not act alone. Other key units, including the offices of the president/provost, student affairs, student health services/counseling center, media relations, and the campus police should work together with education abroad to provide a coordinated response. If your institution doesn't already have a detailed, written plan for responding to a student death abroad, you need to develop one. Such a plan can be part of an overall emergency response plan for international incidents involving students, faculty, or staff. The good news is that you don't have to start from scratch. Most universities already have

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PRIOR TO SENDING STUDENTS ABROAD

- ☑ Develop general international emergency response plan
- ☑ Obtain international medical insurance coverage that includes: repatriation services; and bedside benefit (funds to cover family travel)
- ☑ Identify a first responder for high profile international emergencies
- ☑ Create an international crisis management team (ICMT)
- ☑ Develop a crisis communication plan
- ☑ Maintain an international emergencies campus unit stakeholders listserv
- ☑ Familiarize yourself with on-campus death protocols
- ☑ Set aside contingency funds for staff travel or other financial needs
- ☑ Receive training on managing the media

established protocols for responding to a student death on campus, and these can be adapted to reflect the overseas context. To reduce miscommunication and error, it is critical that the plan identifies the roles and responsibilities of the various individuals involved in responding to the crisis.

The International Crisis Management Team

Another important preparatory step is the identification of a dedicated, trained first responder and the establishment of an international crisis management team (ICMT). The international first responder is generally an education abroad or risk management staff member who is tasked with after-hours responsibilities. The ICMT is a small group of five to six individuals (with identified back-ups) who are trained to communicate or meet at a moment's notice and who lead the response to a critical incident abroad, such as a student death. It's important to keep the group small for ease of meeting, communication, and action, but identify and consult with additional relevant units or individuals as required.

Communications Plan

A good emergency plan also includes a good communication plan. Relevant organizational stakeholders need to be identified in advance to ensure timely reporting. Some of these stakeholders will likely be members of your international crisis management team; others may not play a direct role in the crisis response, but they will all need to be quickly informed of the event (preferably before the media) and the institution's ongoing response. Remember, too, that even though your emergency plan may only need updating every few years, your communications plan will likely need a quarterly or biannual review due to staff turnover.

Adequate Insurance

Prior to the crisis verify that all your international travelers are covered by a comprehensive international insurance plan that includes emergency travel assistance services such as repatriation of mortal remains. Comprehensive repatriation services include collection of the remains and preparation for transport, either by cremation or embalming; communication with funeral homes; transport of the remains to the airport abroad; transoceanic transport; and finally, all customs and death certificate paperwork required by the governments involved. A limited life insurance benefit of \$10,000 or more, payable to the deceased's survivors, is also a common feature of international insurance plans and can help pay for miscellaneous costs incurred by the family.

Access to Funds

Every education abroad office should have an emergency fund that covers contingencies for emergency travel. (In some cases the emergency travel assistance provider can advance such funds.) If a student dies while on a direct enrollment or provider program, it's likely that necessary on-site support services exist or can be arranged quickly by local staff. However, if the student dies on a faculty-led program, you may need to send a staff member to assist

in the pastoral care of the remaining students and the return of the deceased student's possessions.

Some parents also may wish to travel to the program location where their son or daughter died. Many insurance plans cover the cost of only one traveler, so your organization or institution should be prepared to cover the cost for an additional spouse, companion, or family member (as well as their accommodations). How these funds can be accessed or authorized, particularly on short notice and perhaps over a weekend, should also be part of the plan. Parents should be met by local staff at the airport and be taken to the student's residence or location of death as soon as possible. Be sure to have counseling or student affairs staff present. Attention to every detail is critical during this very emotional time for the parents and survivors.

Funds should also be available to send at least one administrator and a few students to the deceased's funeral as well as cover the costs of a campus-based memorial service. If possible, consider offering to cover the cost of the parents' travel to campus for the service, and for lodging and meals while there, whether or not they would be able to pay for it themselves. Gestures like this can go a long way toward maintaining goodwill between the institution and the surviving family members.

Death Notification

There are generally three groups that require separate types of death notification: families, faculty or staff, and students (abroad and on the home campus). Care must be taken in how each group is notified of a student's death overseas.

The most common causes of a student death abroad are traffic accidents and drowning. Regardless of the cause, it's important to involve the U.S. embassy as soon as possible so they can assist in parental notifications. In addition, your international emergency assistance provider should be involved in every step of the response, from notification to repatriation of the student's remains. Ideally, your crisis management team can delegate communication assignments internally and make notifications simultaneously.

Diplomatic protocol requires that when a foreigner dies abroad, a representative of the relevant embassy notify the next-of-kin. U.S. consulate staff is specifically trained to deliver such news. Providing a thoughtful, compassionate death notification is everyone's first priority. A common parental response to such shocking news is denial, so consular staff will require all the evidence used to confirm the identity of the deceased and be prepared to disclose all information available about the cause of death. Assuming that your international insurance plan covers repatriation, be sure consular staff is aware of this so that the family does not think they need to raise funds to bring the body home. Explain to the consular officer that you (or an associate) will be following up with the family soon to express the institution's condolences and explain the support services you will provide.

Unfortunately, diplomatic protocol is not always followed by local law enforcement overseas. Instead, local police, upon finding information on the body that leads them to ascertain the identity of the deceased's parents, may notify them directly. This approach can unfortunately lead to serious miscommunication if the informing officer does not speak English well, or does not have enough information

International Crisis Management Team Represented Offices

- Education Abroad
- Risk Management
- General Counsel
- Student Affairs
- Counseling Center
- Media Relations

Your Office Should Consult with the Following:

- President/provost
- Dean/chair of the deceased student's department
- Country-specific faculty experts
- Campus police/security

Communications With Campus Unit Stakeholders

- President
- Board of Trustees
- Provost
- Undergraduate academic deans
- Academic adviser(s)
- Graduate/professional deans
- Education Abroad Office
- International Student Office
- Student Affairs
- Greek Life
- Health Services
- Counseling Center
- Registrar
- General Counsel
- Risk Management
- Campus Security
- Religious Life

about what the deceased was doing at the time of death. It is especially confusing to the family if the student is studying in one country but dies in another (and didn't inform the parents about the extracurricular travel). Other times, local police contact law enforcement in the student's home jurisdiction, and the hometown police inform the family or campus police if institutional ties are evident. This underscores the importance of communicating with campus police as soon as possible after a student death.

In some cases, the institution's first responder may be the one to share the news with the family that their son or daughter has died abroad. This may occur when the family is contacted by law enforcement (local or overseas) and then calls the institution before consulate officers can follow up. Therefore, it's important for the ICMT and others on campus to receive training by law enforcement and counseling staff on how to talk to the family in such cases before the need arises.

In the most unfortunate circumstances, parents may learn of the student's death via traditional or social media.

This is a horrific way for a family to receive word of such a tragedy, so if faculty or staff are present at the time of the incident, all efforts must be made by them to ask witnesses to refrain from posting information on social media sites or talking to the press until the victim's family can be notified. Such acts are not about shielding an institution from publicity or liability, but about allowing for the most compassionate form of notification. Be prepared to accept, however, that despite your best efforts, it's impossible to control the media. The ultimate goal is to balance the pressures to provide information and limit rumor and gossip, while showing deference and respect to the student's friends and family.

Pastoral Care to Students, Families, and the Campus Community

Family

Nothing can compare to the shock that comes when a parent learns that their son or daughter has died tragically

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abroad. The shock and trauma can last weeks, months, or even years. It's important that the family know that you are there to provide any support or information they require. Their only responsibility—indeed, sometimes the only thing they *can do*—is to grieve. They should not have to worry about the cost or return of remains, the return of the student's personal possessions, or support for their lost student's friends abroad and on campus.

Upon first contact with the family, express sincere condolences on behalf of yourself, your office, and the institution. Do not dismiss the emotional intensity of the moment, and allow yourself to grieve, even cry, with the family. Once the initial shock has subsided, explain to the family that you are there to provide all the support they require. Give the parents your cell phone number and invite them to call you at any time they have a question—day or night, and on weekends. Tell them that you will need to work with them on the repatriation of the student's remains and that a few important decisions will need to be made in the next few days, but not right away. Be sure to inquire, however, about

any important religious customs that they wish to be honored with regard to the remains. Also, ask them to decide whether they should work with you on these decisions or if they would like to appoint a single family member, such as an aunt, uncle, or sibling to work with you. Finally, depending on whether or not there were witnesses to the death, the family may be quickly confronted by media representatives. Again, suggest that the family identify someone who can speak to the press, even if only to say "no comment."

If there were no witnesses, a timeline for notification to the campus community and, most importantly, the students on-site as well as the deceased's friends, needs to be set. While the first reaction of parents may be to forbid any disclosure, they will usually come around once they understand that their son's or daughter's friends are going to want to know what happened, and that the institution is also obligated to provide support to students, faculty, and staff affected by the tragedy.

After a day or two, the family will need to decide whether or not they want the remains embalmed or cremated. They



will also need to identify a local funeral home in their town to receive the student's remains. Remind the family that your insurance provider will work with funeral homes in both countries as well as relevant authorities and airlines to make sure all the paperwork is in place for the transport of remains. Sometimes it can take several weeks to bring the deceased home. Since families will always want their student returned as quickly as possible, it's important to establish the expectation in advance that the process can take a long time. If there is any question as to the cause of death, the ensuing investigation will only add additional time to the preparation of the body for transport home. Be prepared to encounter justifiable impatience on the part of the family.

Students

Expect that a wide variety of students touched by the tragedy will require information and be in need of support services. Every effort must be made to identify and communicate with peer groups before a general institution announcement is issued. There is nothing more heartbreaking than for a student to learn of a friend's death through a university-wide announcement, no matter how carefully crafted. For example, if the deceased student was a member of student government, the Greek system, an athletic team, or a special academic program, try to meet with the student group and its advisers before the campus-wide announcement is made.



IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AFTER AN INCIDENT

- Collect all relevant details pertaining to the death(s).
 - Name, title, and phone number of the caller as well as their relationship to the program
 - Name(s) and citizenship of the deceased as well as: time, location, and manner of death, whether or not an autopsy is required.
- Name of the program title or sponsor (host institution, U.S. institution, or third-party provider) and location.
 - Names, titles, and contact information for others involved in the response (consular officers, local authorities, home/host institution staff or faculty, etc.)
 - Whether or not the following have been notified already: a parent/guardian; local embassy or consulate; international medical assistance provider; other individuals or entities.
 - Names of any witnesses or ill/injured victims
- Whether other program participants are at risk. If yes, work quickly to provide a timely warning to affected students. This is often best done by text message, social media, and e-mail. Consult with campus police/security for assistance.
- If family contact has not yet been made, coordinate notification with local consular staff. (OSAC* members can call the (571) 345-2000 or after hours at (212) 309-5056).
- Once consular staff has made the notification, determine who will follow-up with the family on behalf of the institution.
 - Express condolences, personal and institutional
 - Explain your pastoral care and advocacy role
 - Inform that repatriation services and costs will be covered

* OSAC is a division of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security in the U.S. Department of State. Its mission is to provide security and risk information to U.S. businesses, institutions of higher education, faith-based organizations, and nongovernmental organizations abroad. These services are free. For more information, go to <http://www.osac.gov>.

Aside from obvious peer groups, also inquire with the student's adviser, family members, or other mentors to identify other organizations in which the student may have been active. Work with representatives of such groups on more specific, personal notifications, which could occur in-person or by e-mail, and see that they happen before any general institutional notification is issued.

Peers of the deceased abroad require notification in the most thoughtful and compassionate manner. Ideally, on-site notification should be made in person by calling an emergency meeting to inform students of the death of a peer/classmate. Be as forthcoming as possible



about what is known, or not known, about the cause of death. Students will need to know if they are in danger or at risk. Explain when and how the parents were notified and what the institution is doing to support them.

- Begin discussions of the need and timeline for notification to peers and the campus community
- Inquire whether or not family wants contact information released in the notifications (for students and others to express condolences)
- Ask if they would like to appoint a family member to work with you
- Inform them of the need to discuss details of repatriation in a few days
- Inquire about any religious customs they would like to honor with regard to the remains
- ☑ While family contact is being made, notify by phone (do not e-mail) the following members of your international crisis management team and propose the earliest possible meeting date and time:
 - Provost or associate provost
 - Director of study abroad
 - Dean of students
 - Chief general counsel
 - Director of risk management
 - Media/university relations
 - University police/security
- ☑ If the student is a guest student on your program, but is a full-time student at another institution, work with the deceased student's home campus education abroad director, adviser, or other appropriate individual to make notification to his or her counterpart.
- ☑ Inform education abroad office staff members.
- ☑ Inform the chairman of the deceased student's major department and/or academic adviser.
- ☑ Discuss timeline with the media/university relations office regarding:
 - institution-wide notification e-mail
 - relevant web posting
 - who addresses media inquiries
- ☑ Follow up with family members to inquire:
 - If they want the remains embalmed or cremated
 - The name of a funeral home to collect the student's remains
 - Whether or not they want their contact information released (so members of the university community can express condolences)
- ☑ Compose an e-mail to your international emergencies campus unit stakeholders informing them of the incident and response.
- ☑ Arrange notification meetings or direct appropriate individuals to compose e-mails to the deceased student's peer group:
 - bystanders/witnesses/co-victims
 - other students onsite
 - students in the city/region/country (on other programs)
 - academic peers, such as the honors program
 - social/organizational peers, such as fraternities or sororities
 - participation in student government, athletics, or registered student organizations
 - all students on the home campus (plus faculty and staff)



IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE INCIDENT

- ☑ Check daily with your insurance assistance provider on the status of the return of the deceased student's remains
- ☑ Send flowers, cards, or engage in other appropriate displays of sympathy
- ☑ Make plans to attend the deceased student's funeral
- ☑ Identify a faculty member to collect the deceased student's academic work for the family
- ☑ Contribute to planning/execution of a memorial service
- ☑ Maintain communications with affected students/faculty/staff abroad
- ☑ For faculty or staff that were abroad during the incident, provide information about employee support services/benefits
- ☑ Discourage promises of named scholarships, but make plans to investigate the possibilities with development officers at a later time
- ☑ Contact the registrar to see if the deceased student qualifies for a posthumous degree
- ☑ Ensure the deceased student is removed from university records so the family does not receive bills or enrollment notification (such as from the registrar, student accounts, technology support, etc.)
- ☑ Regularly update website, if necessary
- ☑ Make any changes to program status in the database and/or post an incident summary in the individual deceased student's record in the database
- ☑ Ensure all the deceased student's possessions are packed up and returned from abroad
- ☑ Maintain contact with the family as appropriate
- ☑ Take time for self-care

Also explain how students can access grief counseling or other support services. If possible, bring trained therapists to the meeting.

Caring for Self and the Community

Remember that faculty and administrators who may have been particularly close to the student will experience grief as well. Some may surface right away and ask to be involved in the response. A good role for a prominent faculty or staff member is to collect all of the student's academic work for presentation to the family. Others may be tasked to work with religious life and Student Affairs to plan a memorial service. Even little things like preserving the student's email may be extremely important to the family.

If the student died on a faculty-led program, the faculty leader likely played a significant role in the response. He or she may have even witness the death if it was accidental or spend significant amounts of time with the student during the hospitalization prior to death. As a result, the faculty leader may experience significant trauma and require information about various support services specifically geared towards employees.

Responding to the needs of the family, students, and the community can take several weeks. It is likely the first responder will work every day for at least a month or more to ensure the family receives optimal service and that no step or detail is neglected. Working at such a high level of emotional intensity for weeks on end can take its toll on even the most experienced education abroad professional. Self-care is critical to maintaining a healthy mind and body, so don't be afraid to ask colleagues for help as well.

Follow-up Care

As the initial shock of the student's death subsides, other administrative tasks must be kept in mind to ensure there is appropriate follow-up and closure.

Be wary of well-meaning faculty or staff who want to establish a scholarship in the name of the student. It takes significant funds to endow a scholarship, and unless there is a clearly identified donor, no one should make promises the institution cannot keep. Don't reject the idea—just put it on hold until it can be discussed in a less emotionally charged time. There are parents still waiting for institutions to create scholarships in the name of their students decades after their students' death.

Also, resist making any promises to the family about awarding their son or daughter a posthumous degree. Each institution has specific requirements for such a degree and it is up to the registrar to determine eligibility. Quietly ask him or her to check, but don't mention it to the family unless you are sure it will be granted.

Finally, make sure that the student is removed from all campus records so that the family no longer receives mail, especially tuition or other bills, enrollment notifications, alumni event invitations, or education abroad reunion invitations. This type of clerical oversight can quickly undo all of the goodwill you and others have expended trying to care for the family in the days following the tragedy.

A Compassionate Approach

Sadly and surprisingly, several existing education abroad emergency plans advise institutions to distance themselves from the parents or family members of a student who has died on their watch. They advise that parent communications be delegated to media relations personnel

or campus attorneys. Such an approach is outdated and dispassionate, to say the least. Instead, every effort should be made to engage with and reach out to the family as often as they desire. This is not a time to be concerned about blame or potential lawsuits. It's a time to show compassion and grief, and to take advantage of the expertise and resources on your campus to serve the family and the wider campus community.

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