Managing Off Campus Risk through Faculty Training

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Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) has long embraced a project-based curriculum that now extends around the globe. WPI is committed to providing students and faculty with a safe and healthy experience off-campus making sure educators have the skills to help students succeed educationally as well as cope with safety, social, and behavioral issues. This paper will discuss our Global Perspective Program, philosophy with regard to risk management, health and safety issues in study abroad and describe a model for training as we equip faculty to handle unconventional roles beyond the classroom.

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Introduction

Imagine that you are a faculty member responsible for an academic residential experience far from your home campus. Would you know what to do in each of the situations described?

- At 3:00 Sunday morning four students bang on your door to report that a fifth student refused to return to the housing with them after a night of clubbing. Instead, she left with three men that she had met that evening with no cell phone or money.

- Your colleague and faculty co-advisor of the group violates the institution's policy regarding a particular forbidden activity at a specific site.

- While on site, you are informed, confidentially by another student that a local pub owner has accosted one of the female students where the students frequently go to socialize.

- While on site, one of the students approaches you with some very personal information. He tells you that his younger brother was recently sexually assaulted by his boss. The student is wondering what to do since all of this has just occurred and he feels that he should be back in the U.S. to lend his support to his brother.

Each of these cases presents unique challenges for a faculty member responsible for students on an academic experience off-campus. How can anyone possibly be prepared to handle situations as diverse and complex as these? In fact, with a commitment to thoughtful training design, implementation, and with appropriate support from the home university staff, faculty can be prepared to face most any circumstances while off-campus.

Background

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) has established residential programs in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, the South Pacific, and the US, providing opportunities for undergraduates to complete meaningful, academic off-campus experiences. Through these and similar programs, WPI offers students the opportunity to complete degree required projects away from campus in a professional experience environment and under the direct supervision of WPI faculty, an experience that is unrivaled by traditional international study abroad. In 2008-09 academic year WPI sent more than 500 students to one of our off-campus residential Project Centers as part of the Global Perspective Program.

WPI's Global Perspective Program (GPP) was designed upon established learning principles that support learning by doing, challenging students with open-ended ambiguous problems, overcoming segmented thinking by working outside of the major discipline, and exposing learners to cultural, social, and intellectual diversity. It has its roots in a university-wide curriculum reform that began in 1970.[1]

The Interdisciplinary and Global Studies Division (IGSD) administers all program aspects of the GPP including student selection, advisor training, site and project development, risk management, re-entry programs, and overall academic quality. Typically 24 students travel to a site for a 2-month period to work full-time to complete the projects. Two faculty advisors accompany each group. A different WPI faculty member serves as project center director — responsible for setting up projects, handling general academic issues, and overseeing center operation. A local coordinator, who is a permanent resident at the site, assists the center director particularly with housing and logistical concerns. Student preparation for the experience includes formal coursework taught by WPI faculty, and orientation/cultural preparation taught by WPI professional staff. The same specialized staff handles health and travel issues, risk management, and re-entry issues.[2]

Risk Management Philosophy

For the past twelve years, WPI has paid close attention to issues of risk management. It only took one perceived crisis in the making to bring the right players together to form a team that worries about the risk associated with sending students away to complete projects. We believe that effective risk management is a combination of methodologies. The philosophical approach aims to identify, analyze, and manage risks, while WPI tailors a practical approach to each site. We are also intentional about how we choose to mitigate perceived risks. The ultimate goal of this combination is to protect the students, the advisors, the program and the institution.

Part of the process of working towards managing the risks the WPI risk management team saw the institution being exposed to was defining what "risk management," meant to the University. The risk management team identified various exposures and measured them against WPI's willingness and ability to withstand potential losses resulting from those exposures.

A guiding philosophy for the training is based upon the work of Gerald Wilde. We have adopted his approach to risk management by adopting the "three Es": Engineering, Education and Enforcement. [3]

At sites where there are potential risks identified, WPI purposely structures the program to avoid such risks. An example is our recent re-engineering of the experience in Namibia after a student suffered a broken limb when ATVing on the sand dunes. This injury occurred on a weekend excursion where activities of this type were available to students, even if not condoned by the university. Working with the faculty center director, we altered the program so that the students are no longer brought to that location; instead, the excursion involves a different location that offers more appropriate activities that the local population might participate in.

WPI educates students about the risks involved in activities that may seem appealing and that are definitely not part of the program. For example, an activity that many students pursued at the end of the WPI program in South Africa was cage diving with sharks. Since this occurred outside of the dates of the program, we could not prohibit this activity but we could influence their decision to pursue it. We did this by sharing with the group a number of media stories regarding the environmental impact that this activity has on the shark population. By sharing this information to enlighten the students our hope is that they will a more informed decision.

Lastly, there are times when we do find ourselves in the position of having to enforce or legislate through policies to forbid certain activities. Because of the known risks associated with white water rafting in Costa Rica during the rainy season, we have a policy the explicitly forbids that activity during the program dates. We provide that policy in writing in handbooks and we post it on the website. Faculty or students who choose to violate that policy do so at their own risk.

Working with the faculty directors for each site, the risk management team determines how to implement policies and practices to best control identified risks with appropriate procedures. The procedures are either a change to the program (engineering), an attempt to enlighten participants through education or by developing a policy that enforces appropriate measures. We review these policies and procedures each year and make appropriate adjustments as necessary. A crucial part of managing to control identified risks is the training that WPI provides faculty advisors.

Resources Developed for Faculty Advisors

WPI has developed an operational handbook as a resource provided to all Resident Faculty Advisors who are on-site with the students. In addition to all of the information included in the students' site-specific handbook, the faculty are provided with more information that they may need while in residence. Included is the Crisis Management Plan that contains a detailed description of what to do and who to contact in the event of an emergency. Emergencies that are anticipated include such events as natural disasters, crimes that may be committed against a student, crimes that may be committed by a student, a student's disappearance, sexual harassment, and violations of the WPI's Code of Conduct. Faculty advisors are provided with an extensive list of names and contact numbers for the WPI Crisis Management Team on campus

Resident Advisor Training and Preparation

Each year, faculty members apply from across the campus to participate as residential project advisors at the various sites. Those chosen travel with the students and reside on site during the entire off campus project period. Responsibilities of the advisors include not only the typical academic issues that arise, but also issues that take place due to living on site and off-campus.

Because there are special issues that arise from being away from campus for all participants – students and faculty alike – training has been developed specifically for advisors at off-campus locations. A conscientious approach to risk management has necessitated preparing advisors for worst-case scenarios, while also providing the less experienced off-campus advisors with an opportunity to learn from their colleagues who have been away often. Areas of concern that are addressed during these training sessions include: sexual harassment, transportation, drugs and alcohol,

recognizing and responding to students at risk, health and safety issues, housing concerns, students' behavior, social and personal growth, and helping students get the most of the cultural experience. All of these areas are deemed to be out of the purview of regular project advising and therefore get special attention.

Structure of the training

The comprehensive training described here has evolved over time. Until ten years ago, faculty advisors planning to travel off campus with students convened annually for a lunch meeting. At this luncheon, different issues were shared as war stories and anecdotes of past experiences. Although program staff had developed handbooks and resources for students, clear guidelines and expectations for the departing faculty had never been articulated.

A crucial part of our risk management practice at WPI is the expectation that faculty advisors will attend an annual full day of training prior to their departure for a project center. The comprehensive training described here has evolved over time. It began with convening a group of experienced faculty and professional staff in the IGSD to develop a list of the outcomes WPI wanted off-campus faculty advisors to take away with them at the end of a one-day training session. The three general areas that all outcomes fit into were academic, interpersonal and operational. Specific outcomes identified that did not fall within the academic realm included cross cultural issues, group dynamics, risk management, policies, time management, conflict management, self awareness of own cultural issues and a category defined as "whole student advising." In reviewing this list it was apparent that we needed to engage others with expertise in these areas to help us develop training.

That first year the director of counseling services, dean of student life, the university risk manager, the diversity officer, the director of academic resources - all experts in these areas - helped develop the training needed to target the identified outcomes. By using actual cases based on recent WPI experience, we introduced the advisors preparing to embark on an off-campus experience to circumstances and the proper way to handle them. We designed the cases to exemplify issues previously identified as being very important to a successful experience. The discussions purposely engaged all participants in small group work as they struggled with solutions. The panel of experts (made up of WPI professionals who deal with these issues while students are on campus) responded to each of the cases and the solutions proposed. The design of that training provided opportunities for collaboration and mentoring among all of the constituencies – two key activities identified early in the planning stages as critical to the success of the advisors.

The model has continued to be one of collaboration and interaction, although the themes each year have shifted to accommodate newly identified and evolving areas of concern. For example in 2007 our theme was developing a holistic approach to an off-campus experience where participants had the opportunity to think about the cultural aspects of going off campus and being more intentional about students' growth throughout and beyond the experience. In 2008 discussion and interaction was focused on preparing advisors and students to deal with issues of different culture, racism, bigotry, poverty and perceptions of personal safety and comfort in a new place, whether it be Boston or Bangkok, Worcester or Windhoek. The theme of the 2009 Retreat was *Keeping Things in Perspective: Issues of Health and Safety While Off Campus*, as data gathered over the last few years dictated the need for a focus on these critical issues. (These links will provide you with the agenda, resources, and feedback for the 2007, 2008 and the 2009 Annual Advisor Retreat respectively: http://www.wpi.edu/academics/Depts/IGSD/Advisors/adviso253.html; http://www.wpi.edu/academics/Depts/IGSD/Advisors/AdvisorRetreat2008.html; http://www.wpi.edu/academics/Depts/IGSD/Advisors/AdvisorRetreat2007.html) Collaboration with offices across campus continues as we struggle with how to best prepare advisors for situations they may never have had to deal with on campus.

Another strategy that has worked very well has been to invite experts from outside the university to participate in the training. Bringing in people with expertise in cross-cultural training, medical training and safety training has added to the value of the training. We identify these experts through professional contacts and they have been contracted at very reasonable rates. The value added to the training has always been worth the investment.

Conclusion

While WPI has a unique model of study abroad, the institution is committed to providing students and faculty with a safe and healthy experience. These efforts were recognized in 2003 when TIAA-CREF Hesburgh bestowed their Certificate of Excellence on WPI for equipping our faculty to handle unconventional roles beyond the classroom necessitated by the global program, making sure educators have the skills to help students succeed educationally as well as cope with safety, social, and behavioral issues.

From what we have learned in developing our own training, we offer the following advice:

- Anyone looking to develop such training needs to collaborate with those on their own campus that

have the professional expertise to guide the preparation of faculty.

- It is critical to involve faculty who have experience at off-campus locations. Identifying past incidences that they have encountered and using these incidences as case studies is a way to capture the attention of those preparing to go off-campus.

- Identify issues that have arisen in the past and look to trends on campus that may travel off campus with students.

- Gather feedback from your faculty advisors about what their needs are and what they found useful in a training session.

By collaborating with other professionals, drawing on your own institutional experiences, being anticipatory in dealing with issues that can arise, and by evaluating the training being provided, great strides will be made in preparing your faculty to handle unconventional roles beyond the classroom.

References

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