

Protection vs. Independence: Staff Dilemmas in Effort to Foster Student Safety

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; Personnel Management; Program Design; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

SAO is a small study abroad organization managing 20 academic programs across several countries. It is a U.S.-based organization collaborating with numerous colleges and universities across the U.S. The program locations include a variety of large capital cities and mid-size cities in Europe, Asia and Latin America. A main focus of the organization is to provide cultural immersion, encouraging students to interact with locals and the local culture in safe, thoughtful, and meaningful ways.

This case focuses on a program based in a large northern European city. The program staff (all locals of the city) is preparing for the arrival of a group of 40 U.S. undergraduate students, all between ages of 18-21, most under the legal drinking age in their U.S. home states. In the country where they will be studying for one or two semesters, the legal drinking age is 18 years, and light consumption of beer or wine is culturally common with evening meals, however, cases of overconsumption/purposely getting inebriated are very rare and frowned upon in the culture. These cultural points and expectations, along with the organization's code of conduct expectations, and consequences for breaking the code of conduct, are discussed in predeparture advising and during orientation when students arrive to the country.

Case

The SAO group of students arrives on a Saturday afternoon to their host city. They are met at the airport by program staff and escorted to a local hotel where they will spend one night before moving into their homestays or residence hall. The hotel is located in a busy, central neighborhood, allowing students to begin to acclimate to the city. The program staff takes the students on a short walking tour and to a group dinner together (where no alcohol is served). After dinner students are encouraged to return to the hotel, but about one-quarter of the students opt to continue exploring the city on their own. Within a 10-minute walking radius of the hotel, there are at least three bars where alcohol is served. Two of the three tend to attract mostly locals, while one markets primarily to international customers and tourists at nearby hotels, including international students.

In previous semesters, SAO students have reported tactics used by bars in the program city, including the international-focused one, to attract them as regular customers, including contacting them on social media before and after arrival, offering student discounts, and offering benefits to students if they recruit others as paying customers. In addition, over the course of several semesters, at least four female students have noted problems occurring at the bar, including having their personal belongings (money, phone) stolen and receiving unwanted aggressive attention from patrons and staff members of the bar. While multiple students reported incidents to the program staff, the students did not file a police report. Moreover, at least two students reported being assaulted at the establishment; however, neither student chose to file a police report. Two students consulted with the SAO staff in order to meet with a local mental health counselor.

The program staff was increasingly concerned about the safety of students. In a regularly scheduled student meeting (not specific to these incidents), the program staff discussed safety and wellness tips with the group. They discussed the risks of alcohol and drug use and pointed out some examples of student injuries and incidents from previous years. During the meeting, one staff member mentioned the name of the international bar as 'a place where students had gone in the past and where some had encountered problems such as lost possessions or physical incidents, and the potential dangers of overconsumption of alcohol.'

Within two weeks of the meeting, the program staff received an attorney's letter noting their use of the bar's name and threatening legal action for defamation. (It was later determined that a student on the program had brought this information to the attention of the bar and that the student was being compensated for undocumented work at the establishment.) The staff consulted their own legal counsel who suggested that SAO resolve the case by offering a minor settlement payment to the bar. Without police reports from the past students accusing assault or theft, there was no legal action that the organization could take against the bar, even if students admitted verbally that the incidents had taken place. The staff was frustrated and continued to warn students in future groups about potential risks and actions of this kind in various similar establishments around the city and country, without using their names.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How do the staff member's actions (warnings to students) reflect the organization's goal of encouraging 'safe, thoughtful and meaningful immersion'?
- Was it appropriate for staff to name the bar when warning students? Why or why not?
- What learning opportunities (for the staff members, students, and organization) do you see resulting from this experience?

- Would you suggest the staff and organization address/approach the issue of alcohol consumption and potential risks in the community/culture in a different way? How can the staff act to protect students from possible future problems of this nature?
- Is it a program's responsibility or role to guide or monitor students' behavior in students' free time or if they are not breaking local laws or cultural norms?
- Why do you think alcohol access and consumption remain a common issue with U.S. university students abroad? How can this issue be adequately addressed before and during the study abroad experience?