

Case Study

International Education program, Risk Management Review

Summary

A serious incident occurred on a university travel program. A lawsuit looms. The International Education department underwent a Risk Management Review of select program elements, using a systems-based approach. Can you identify the systems factors that might contribute to helping prevent—or lead to—the next incident?



An Incident Raises the Question: Are We the Best We Can Be?

The travel program had been going smoothly, until the accident happened. Now the student was in the hospital, facing long-disability. The student's parents were threatening to sue the university that ran the program. And the parents demanded answers: Why happened? Why? Was the university going to review their program and make improvements?

The university's legal counsel brought in an independent reviewer to conduct a Risk Management Review. The accident had occurred during outdoor activities, so the review focused on safety for outdoor activities the university provided—internationally, close to home, and for any purpose— academics, recreation, team-building, research.

The university, located in a high-income country, organizes or supports trips to countries around the world. An International Education department serves as a coordinating body, providing

guidance, establishing policy, and giving final approval for international trips.

Strengths and Opportunities in International Education

The International Education staff has well-developed medical forms, briefing procedures, and pre-trip preparation activities. The Risk Management Review gave the International Education area high marks for screening, preparing, training and supervising students before and during trips.

No particular problems were noted with equipment, business administration matters, or transportation. However, international education staff acknowledged that their assessment of in-country subcontractors like trekking guides was not adequate, relying primarily on word of mouth rather than a thorough evaluation of vendor safety systems. The International Education Director noted it wasn't clear to the department even how to go about doing such an evaluation.

Staff to lead international programming were not brought on through a formalized process of matching prospective trip leader capacities with documented requirements meeting established standards. Instead, it could occur that an individual with personal connections to someone involved with international programming would be introduced for the Director, who'd invite the candidate for coffee and a discussion.

Selection and management of activities emerged in the Risk Management Review as a concern. The International Education team had a great knowledge of how to manage general overseas travel risks—for example using insurance, well-written liability waivers, and their country's disease control center and the national agency responsible for foreign affairs (including safety and security). But for outdoor activities in specific, they didn't know how to assess safety systems for trekking, climbing, rafting, and other outdoor adventures. And they didn't have or employ a resource that could inform them about outdoor safety standards, which could then be used to assess if activities were appropriate for travel groups.

The absence of standards and assessments to ensure vendor and staff capacities led to questions about resilience—a key component of systems-informed risk management. In a complex system, it's expected that one or more system elements (staff, equipment, etc.) will fail at some point. Resiliency engineering leads to the creation of back-up systems, so that when one systems element breaks down, a secondary element is in place to help ensure a serious incident doesn't occur.

A Question of Culture

But perhaps the most significant issue that came up in the Risk Management Review was one of

safety culture. What high-level university executives overseeing the top leadership of the International Education team prioritized safety, and so held the International Education staff to best practice safety standards? Which senior leaders valued risk management enough to ensure that International Education had funding sufficient to evaluate vendors, establish systems so staff would be appropriately trained and certified, develop standards-based assessments for looking at the safety aspects of proposed activities?

The International Education department knew they had safety deficits, and genuinely wanted to address them. But without senior University executives (for example, a Provost, Deputy Vice Chancellor, or Vice Provost) making safety a priority—by facilitating the establishment of safety requirements, fostering management systems to hold faculty and staff to those standards, and helping ensure the resources were available to meet the requirements—International Education staff felt they might never be where they wanted to be, where they felt they should be.

A Bright Future, Around the World

While the Risk Management Review recommended a number of changes, it also noted the popularity of the University's travel/outdoor programs, its relatively low incident rate over decades, and its deep roster of talented, experienced, and capable staff. The International Education staff were also recognized for creating and maintaining a high-functioning Advisory Board that provided essential risk management support. With a solid foundation, and clarity on opportunities for improvement, the International Education department is poised to enjoy a future of successful, well-regarded experiences around the world.

