

BEST PRACTICES FOR INCIDENT REPORTING

The University of Texas at Austin relies on a two-page report form to record all health and safety incidents that occur during study abroad programs, ranging from illness and injury to aggravated assault and robbery. The data not only ensures that the university supports students during and immediately following any incidents, but it helps with long-term program planning, too. Take the example of a popular program offered in a specific region each year by UT Austin.

“We noticed through collected reports that sexual harassment was more prevalent than we had anticipated,” says Jessica Miller, Director of Global Risk & Safety in the International Office at the University of Texas at Austin. “We used the data we received to change the very specialized pre-departure orientation to increase awareness and stress the importance of reporting any incidents. We also talked about basic mitigation measures, coping strategies and support resources available.” Miller says that data collected in the past year suggests that these changes to orientation education have helped improve the students’ experiences.

A PROACTIVE APPROACH
TO REPORTING HELPS
STUDENTS AND
UNIVERSITIES DURING
AND FOLLOWING
INCIDENTS ABROAD.



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THE BENEFITS OF REPORTING



All universities hope that study abroad programs are positive, transformative experiences for students. Unfortunately, issues sometimes arise—just as they do on campus. Having a system for incident reporting helps make sure the necessary steps are taken to aid students and faculty on site and improve future programming. “Ultimately, we want to best support the students,” says Ann Hubbard, Director of Academic Assessment for AIFS Study Abroad. “It’s really about trying to extend campus services to the international location.”

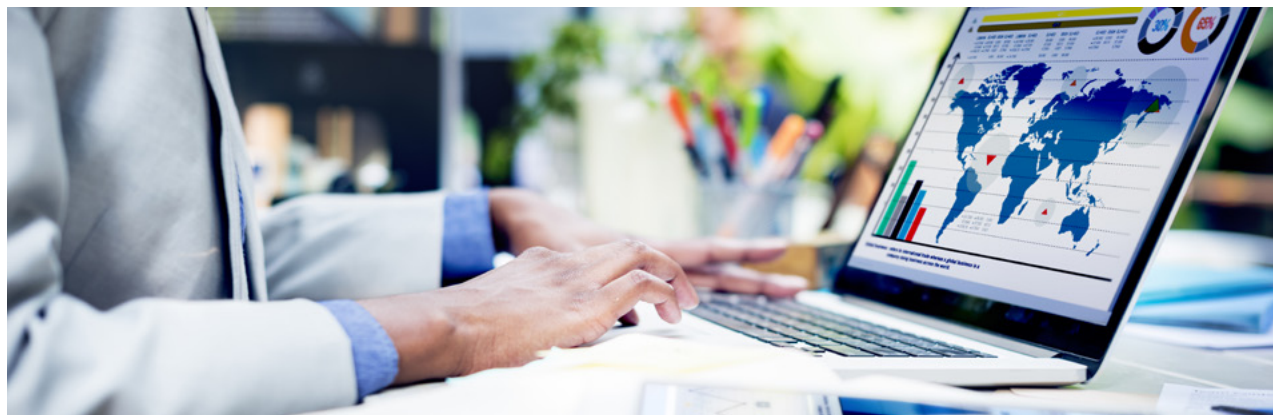
As a third-party provider, AIFS reports “anything that involves the student’s health and safety,” says Hubbard. But she admits there are different degrees of incidents, and universities vary on what requires immediate notification. “Most campuses don’t want to hear about a student with a sinus infection,” she says. “But there are some that do if a doctor’s visit was required.” AIFS requires its resident directors to record all incidents, then the organization lets its university partners take the lead on when and how they receive information.

UT Austin’s study abroad incident report form guides users through the reporting process. The template provides contact information for those on campus who must be notified. It includes areas to record information on the individuals involved in the incident

and a running log of the details and actions taken. “The information is first used to help us better manage the incidents and emergency situations,” says Miller. “Afterward, the information is logged, and the university uses it to track data and trends over time.”

Having accurate data specific to UT Austin programs is beneficial, she adds. “It helps separate perception from reality,” says Miller. “Whereas the news spends a lot of time focusing on ‘lone wolf’ terrorist attacks, our data shows us that the most likely thing to impact our travelers abroad will be minor and mid-level health issues.” If the university finds disturbing trends in a particular program or region—such as elevated sexual harassment incidents cited earlier—then the school can take steps to rectify the situation.

Information from incident reports also is essential for conducting risk assessment. “If we’re going to open up a new program in a region, one of the things we look at is what’s been the success of other programs in that region,” says Erin Wolf, International Risk & Insurance Analyst for The University of Texas System, which represents 14 institutions across the state. “You can look back at incidents that have occurred in that region, then use that data to create programming built around the safety and security of those students.”



BEST PRACTICES

FOR REPORTING

Part of what makes incident reporting challenging is there's "no rule to look to – no set law," says Natalie Mello, Vice President for Member Services and Training at The Forum on Education Abroad. "For the sake of the education abroad field, the ideal would be if everyone shared information with a large database so we could have a comprehensive idea of exactly what our students are dealing with when they go off campus," she says.

That's the goal of The Forum on Education Abroad's Critical Incident Database (CID), which was launched several years ago and is currently being revamped. Mello says the CID should be up-and-running by the end of the year. "The whole purpose behind the CID is to have an authoritative source to go to when schools are looking to see what's going on in the world of off-campus study," says Mello.

As you develop or hone your own incident reporting strategy—or prepare to contribute to a larger database, such as CID—consider these best practices:

- **Communicate clearly** – "Make sure you have a clear communication strategy in place so that those who are handling the reports know who the key players are during incident management and what the key steps are to responding to an emergency or crisis abroad," says Wolf.



- **Keep the reporting template simple** – "Sometimes you want to gather all kinds of details, but if it's not really simple for the person to fill out quickly on the spot in a moment of crisis, then they may become overwhelmed and paralyzed," says Wolf. "You're not trying to disable the crisis manager; you're trying to enable them." UT Austin simplifies the process for crisis managers by including email templates for circulating incident reports within the body of its incident report form.

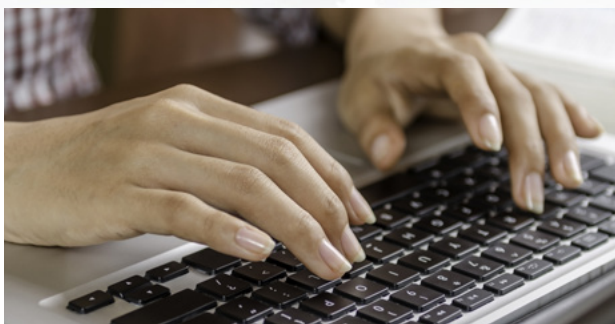
- **Distinguish between the severity of incidents**
 - Serious incidents necessitate an immediate call to the university. In its report form, UT Austin asks the crisis manager to indicate if the incident is a "significant event" and includes a list of those events (hospitalization, death, serious injury, arrest, evacuation, etc.). If the event is significant, the crisis manager is mandated to call Miller immediately at the phone number provided on the reporting form.





- **Include resources in the reporting template** – Add the names and contact information for whomever needs to be contacted, such as the university chancellor, college president, campus police, study abroad office, etc. Don't add links that require crisis managers to work to find the information. "In an emergency, your brain turns to mush," says Wolf. "Make sure the information is right there in front of them."

- **Maintain confidentiality standards** – "While you want to have the tools to track incidents, make sure you have parameters set so confidentiality is taken into account," says Hubbard. "Who really needs to see the information in order to do their job?" Universities should decide who the primary and secondary notification contacts are. Later, when using trend data for long-term planning and pre-departure education, make sure incident examples don't include student names or other identifiers that would reveal information about those involved and potentially sensitive details of the incident.



- **Write reports in the third person** – "Even though it's awkward writing in the third person, over time it's impossible to figure out who said what if reports are in the first person," says Miller. Consistency and clarity make the incident reports more useful over time.

Overall, a well thought out incident reporting strategy—tailored to your university—will aid your students, faculty and administration. "Your institution is a microcosm of your place in the states. When your students go abroad, they bring a whole special set of risks that will be different from other institutions," says Wolf. "The information you get from the data you collect will accommodate all the nuances of your own programming."



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