

FRAMING STUDENT COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS AT A TIME OF CRISIS¹

I. Introductory Points

A. Time-frame

There is no simple division into immediate and post-crisis communication. Immediate contact is essential, but many parents move through several stages in their reactions. This must be kept in mind as programs help students communicate effectively with their parents.

B. Goals of Communication towards Parents

- 1) To spare parents undue suffering resulting from lack of contact with or knowledge about their child.
- 2) To help parents understand the situation so as to reduce unwarranted fear and worry.
- 3) To help them progress positively through the stages of their reactions to avoid negative outcomes including adding to their child's stress and fear and/or insisting on their withdrawal from the program.

C. Who Communicates to Whom

Programs need to decide in what circumstances if any do they communicate directly with parents. Some in situ programs take the initiative of contacting parents at a number of moments. Other programs find it important to allow students the freedom to contact their parents as they see fit. In either approach, it is natural that students will spontaneously contact parents to let them know that they are safe, where they were at the time of any dangerous event, and so forth. Framing this ongoing communication by students with their parents is critical.

Programs may want to suggest to students that they encourage their parents, if worried or questioning the wisdom of continued participation in the program, to contact the program leadership directly.

NB: It is of utmost importance that programs treat their students fully as adults, making their own decisions. This is even more important in cases where a student may not be treated as such by parents or others. Program communication should be to each student directly.

II. Immediate Communication towards Parents

Part of the initial contact between program and student immediately following a violent event should include a strong encouragement to students to be in contact right away with their parents. If the event occurs in Europe in the morning when parents in the United States are sleeping, students should be encouraged to communicate at first by SMS or email to avoid unnecessary fear likely triggered by a phone call in the middle of the night. During the initial contact between program and student – if by telephone – program officials may want to ask students if they have already been in touch with home.

NB: In the very first round of communication to students after the initial check-in - which may go out before check-in is completed – it is essential to warn students against messages to their friends and entourage that in any way – even (especially!) for fun – add spice to accounts of their whereabouts, activities and impressions at the time of events. (“Here I am, dodging between CRS with their machine guns”; “wow, it seems like the city is going up in flames around me!”) They need to be made sensitive to the devastating effect such messages can have on people who do not understand what is taking place and are very far away.

¹ **Contacts APUAF:**

Timothy Carlson (IFE Paris): timothy.carlson@ife-edu.eu - 06 47 93 88 24 - 01 43 21 72 07

Thomas Roman (IFE Paris): thomas.roman@ife-edu.eu - 06 67 58 58 91 - 01 43 21 72 06

III. Subsequent Communication towards Parents

A. Introduction: channels of program-student communication

Some programs at a time of crisis convoke students to a mandatory meeting, which serves as a delivery point for e.g. a message about how to talk to parents. Programs that do not have this practice will likely use email messages, SMS contact groups, social media and the like to get important points across. Information or instructions of major importance should probably be the subject of more than one message by more than one channel, for reinforcement. (Even programs which call a student meeting will likely want to reinforce by various media.)

B. Students to parents: sensitivity

It is important from the beginning for students to become aware of how news from afar – even when accurate – gives an unduly dangerous impression of a place because news reporting at the moment is not focusing on daily life and how it goes on. A simple thought experiment may be effective: urge students to imagine what it is like in some highly-reported hot spot and then to remember that people there are going to work or walking in the streets, kids are in school, people are shopping in markets, and the like.

Secondly, **students need to be reminded that sensationalism is the constant undertow of for-profit media seeking to make waves.** It may be useful to recommend a simple exercise of watching US cable news coverage from the student's host country or city, once or twice, to understand what others may be receiving.

C. Students to parents: information

Students from early on should be encouraged to supply accurate information about what is really going on. This information is to be culled from local news sources and their own experience. Programs should provide suggestions of reliable sources of news and information. Students should be discouraged from dependence on US cable news, but a couple of visits – as above – will help them understand the gap between reality on one hand and impressions a long way away on the other. **Students should also describe their daily life to parents: “today everyone went back to work, and the streets were full of people”.**

NB: In certain situations it may prove useful for programs to draft a model message to parents for circulation to students as a template for what needs and does not need to be said.

D. Students to parents: knowledge

Students should be encouraged to share knowledge of their host culture which will help parents and loved ones understand a situation or an event better. If students have not garnered such knowledge in their coursework or contact with society, programs can hold “teach-ins” and issue background briefings. Programs can provide backup to student-parent communication by posting briefings and background reports to the Internet for students to point out to their parents. These can underlining salient points for someone far away with no knowledge of the society.

Students should be encouraged to participate in public events which will increase their understanding of what has happened, why, and what can be learned about their host society from citizens' reactions. For example, the huge march organized in the wake of the attacks of January 2015 in Paris was a strong teaching moment about *les valeurs républicains*, essential information for understanding events and their context.

NB: Experience shows that students who remain cloistered in the aftermath to violent events are more prey to fear and to thoughts of withdrawing and returning home. In this way, encouraging students to focus on and interact with their surroundings serves a double purpose: reducing their own as well as their parents level of fear.

E. Students to parents: frequency

Since fear is contagious and flourishes in the absence of facts and knowledge, both parents and students will benefit from students' efforts to limit the time they spend on the telephone or in contact by other media with family and entourage far away. Programs should encourage students to spend the bulk of their social time locally, with other students, with local contacts, focusing on their work and life. The confidence that such behavior engenders will help reassure parents (as confidence can be contagious also). Conversely, an anxious parent can create an anxious student, given enough contact time.

F. Students to parents: advice

What is effective pre-departure communication can also serve well in times of crisis: **encouraging students to be parents to their parents**. Students can usefully be urged to offer advice to their parents. This might include suggesting some alternative sources of news and information (possibly suggested by the program for this purpose); reducing the amount of time they spend watching news coverage in general; reminding them (as above) that being far away can be much more frightening than being there; gently suggesting a limit to parent-student time on the phone; discouraging them from making anxious calls or emails to home university officials; taking the time to think through any ideas for drastic responses by themselves or their student's university; NOT coming to the student's study site for a visit, and so forth.

Overall students need to see that their role is to reassure their parents; in most cases where parents are tempted by drastic action (bringing a student home, going abroad to check on them and/or bring them home), they are acting to alleviate their own discomfort. If students and programs act from the beginning of crisis to reduce the level of parental discomfort, the percentage of parents who react drastically can be reduced.

IV. Summary and conclusion

In times of crisis and especially in the aftermath to crisis, the role of the education abroad program and its on-site director – once immediate concerns about whereabouts of students and safety of program operations have been met – is mainly to get on with the business of learning, including learning about local society from what is said and done during a post-crisis period. At the same time programs can support and encourage students as they reassure their loved ones, helping students bridge the gap between their own sense of well-being and their parents' likely worried state.

In all of the above it should be borne in mind that the **parent-student relationship at such times can be complex**, and that lack of clarity may characterize students' reactions including to program directives. Competing emotional loyalties – to parents, to self, to program, to classmates, and the like – may overshadow rational decision-making. When a program understands this, it is in a better position to offer constructive support to students, and even to help parents move towards a more rational thought process.

There will unfortunately be cases, despite all of the measures outlined above, where parents are insisting on a student's return home. As in the previous paragraph, students may feel several things: a little unsafe and ready to go home as parental feelings transfer; wanting to stay, alongside friends; fear of academic difficulties; the urge of filial duty, and so forth. At this point, the program is not master of the student's fate, but can strongly encourage parents to be in touch to discuss the matter. This invitation can be gotten across by the student and also in many cases by the home university with which the parent is doubtlessly in touch and which will in most cases be very glad of another – and local – interlocutor with parents.