



**"ISEP: We Have a Problem."**

**Responding to the Unplanned Emergency**

**Saturday, November 4, 2006, 2:30-3:45 PM**

**Session Chair: Janis Halpern, Indiana State University, USA**

**Presenter(s): Debbie Danna, Loyola University New Orleans, USA**

**François Henry, Université de Rennes 2-Haute-Bretagne,**

**France**

**Jennifer Sasselli, ISEP, USA**

**Session Description from Printed Program**

Guidelines are helpful, but what happens when the unexpected occurs such as a hurricane, a student strike or even student complaints about housing? Take part in this roundtable discussion and come away with best practices on how to respond to the unplanned, who should be contacted, and how to keep the emergency from becoming a crisis. This session will provide a perfect opportunity for both U.S. and International Coordinators to share their expertise and confirm that we are part of a very helpful network.

**Highlights**

Before a productive question-and-answer discussion session, the three presenters provided background about their respective unplanned emergencies, how they handled them, and what they learned from them.

**I. Military Coup in Thailand**

Jennifer Sasselli described the military coup in Bangkok, Thailand, on September 19, 2006, and how ISEP and ISEP coordinators responded to it. Jennifer concluded several important points about how to deal with unplanned emergencies within the ISEP network based on her experience with what ended up as a peaceful military coup:

- Knowing who to call is important
  - Students should contact their host ISEP Coordinator immediately.
  - Host ISEP Coordinators should contact ISEP-Central and provide information about the situation as well as confirm that all ISEP students are safe and accounted for.
  - The US State Department's webpage (or the webpage for your home country's foreign affairs agency in that country) should be monitored regularly for information and advice.
- News travels quickly and is perceived/received/reacted on differently within different cultural contexts: reading the news media for information is important, but getting up-to-date information from coordinators on-site is very valuable as the media often sensationalizes events and doesn't highlight the overall picture. This helps provide Home Coordinators and parents with useful, accurate knowledge. It also closes the informational gap between the cultural perspectives on an unplanned event.
- ISEP is a reliable network. In the case of Thailand, ISEP-Central relied on coordinators to receive and disseminate timely, accurate information.

**II. Student strikes in France**

François Henry detailed the background and events surrounding the French student strikes during the spring of 2006. Although he thought the strike would only last a few weeks, it actually extended on for almost 3 months. From his experience of handling students' concerns about losing out on their academic experience to regularly informing ISEP-Central



of the situation, François provided several important points on how to successfully manage an unplanned emergency:

- Always keep students' contact information handy (keep emergency files at home and at the office and obtain their mobile phone numbers and other emergency contact information).
- Give students easy access to contacting coordinators by providing home and mobile numbers.
- Give timely feedback to ISEP-Central so they can provide Home Coordinators and parents with information and perspectives not found in the media.
- Arrange adaptable alternatives for students if the emergency makes it so they miss courses; encourage them to contact professors beforehand.
- Have regular meetings with students to hear their concerns and provide them with strategies to initiate and take part in alternative options.
- Always think of the worse-case scenario, but think positively.
- ISEP students genuinely want an enriched educational experience abroad. Although many students are concerned about academic credit and progress within their degree programs, they tend to be more concerned about the quality of their coursework and overall experience than credits and grades.
- ISEP is more about quality than quantity. The network and teamwork between ISEP-Central and coordinators is essential to successful management of unplanned emergencies.

### **III. Hurricane Katrina**

Debbie Danna discussed the situation and reactions to Hurricane Katrina, the manmade disaster that hit the city of New Orleans in September 2005. Being its first semester as an active ISEP member, Loyola faced an incredibly difficult situation with respect to its new international students.

Hurricane Katrina struck several days after ISEP students arrived on campus. Due to the strength of the storm, all communications systems collapsed; however, students were evacuated in time to Baton Rouge. While Debbie helped the students evacuate according to Loyola University's Hurricane Plan, she was unable to communicate directly with students. Luckily, however, Debbie posted a message on Loyola's emergency blog site from her mother's house. From that site, Jennifer Precht, from ISEP-Central, found Debbie's message and contacted her. Through a tremendous collaborative effort among Debbie, ISEP-Central, and several US and international universities, ISEP students escaped the situation unharmed and were able to be placed elsewhere in the US to continue their exchanges.

Debbie listed the following as the main lessons learned from Katrina:

- Knowing your university's disaster plan is incredibly important.
- Even more importantly, you should make sure that your university's disaster plan includes international students.
- Have a laptop with your student's records and other information so you can carry information in the case of an evacuation. A laptop will also provide you with a way of communicating with the outside world if other communications means are unavailable.
- Be flexible and remember that you cannot plan for everything.



In short, the session showed how the ISEP network is advantageous in times of unplanned emergencies. The network allows for timely, effective, and sensitive solutions to be found for problems. It also allows for accurate information sharing and collaboration that could not be done on an individual level. It was suggested that the information from this session as well as any contributions from member institutions about how to handle emergency situations should be put on the ISEP website for all to share and learn from.

### **Handouts**

Handouts provided by all of the presenters:

- Responding to the "unplanned" emergency: Hypothetical situations for discussion

- Guidelines on preparing for an "unplanned" emergency

- Suggested Best practices during a political uprising or civil unrest