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Crisis in the Wilderness

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All experiential education programs involve the potential for students to experience a crisis far from the secure environment of campus and home. Students engaging in these programs are therefore required to carry medical and travel insurance and to complete the waiver of liability forms particular to their college or university. Even as they gather this documentation, honors directors sending students to or leading such programs hold their breath and hope that they will never need to use the emergency contact information.

This has been our collective hope during the past four years that we have offered Partners in the Parks (PITP) experiential learning adventures. As University of Alaska Fairbanks physics professor and honors director Channon Price—coordinator of the latest expedition—gathered the documents, he was keenly aware that the remote Alaskan wilderness of Denali National Park and Preserve would be a difficult environment in which to manage a student crisis.

He packed the forms along with his first-aid kit and checked to make certain that Matt Nickerson and Todd Peterson, PITP program coordinators from Southern Utah University, were carrying a second kit. Then the ten students and three participating faculty members set off on the several-hour van ride to Denali park headquarters.

There we were greeted by the park's Education Coordinator along with the Ranger Kristen, the Education Specialist who would be the group's guide for the first segment of the camping trip. She spelled out some basic regulations for storing food in bear-proof lockers and for practicing safety along the trails that might be shared by wildlife—grizzly, black bear, moose, caribou, fox, and wolf. Her passion for the park, her generosity in bringing extra clothes and unanticipated snacks for the group, her soft voice and buoyant nature gave everyone the confidence to pitch tents in bear country and feel secure at the campsite.

That evening over dinner, Northeastern University student Ryan St. Pierre-Hetz mentioned his sore throat. He had come away with antibiotics and was nearing the end of the regimen but sensed that the infection was not clearing up. Botany student Reagan Lee from the University of Florida gathered rose hips and made some soothing tea. We suggested that Ryan drink as

much liquid as possible and get some rest. The journey had been fatiguing, so we still had reason to hope for the best.

By the second day Ryan was feeling worse. Our thoroughly prepared ranger took his temperature, found that he had a serious fever, and recommended that he go back to headquarters with her, see a physician at the local clinic, and get at least a day of bed rest. In her first discussion with our group at the start of our journey, she had already emphasized the need to be “forthcoming.” By definition wilderness has few amenities and only limited access to communication and transport; therefore, it is essential, she reminded students, to express as directly as possible their concerns, fears, and discomforts. In the current situation discomfort had already given way to a serious medical issue.

Putting theory into practice, Ranger Kristen called the group leaders together, laying out a plan for Ryan’s situation that involved:

1. having Ryan make his own choice about whether to stay with the group or return to park headquarters and seek medical assistance; and then
2. presenting Ryan’s decision to the group in order to alleviate their concerns.

Her direct approach was excellent. She called the group’s leaders together with Ryan for a quiet conversation. As a result, Ryan chose to leave and felt comfortable telling the group about his choice. The plan was for him to see a physician, rest in an apartment at headquarters, eat, sleep, and return accompanied by the ranger when he felt well enough to continue. The group expressed their care and concern, allowing Ryan to feel positive about his decision.

This intervention was a model of perfect crisis management. Ranger Kristen’s calm, decisive tone, her open involvement of the group leaders, and her clearly stated intention to help Ryan with every aspect of his recovery provided the most positive solution possible. Ryan left the group and went with her (by park bus) to get medical help. At headquarters he was able to contact his father, get financial assistance to cover this emergency and make a plan to keep the family apprised of his condition. Ryan was set up in a park facility. Ranger Kristen brought him food, liquids, and movies to entertain him during the period that he was alone. She looked in on him, sat with him at the clinic, helped him fill prescriptions, and also gave him the space necessary for healing. It turned out that Ryan did not simply have a throat infection. He was also severely dehydrated—a most serious condition—and required IV fluids.

Two days later Kristen and Ryan came back to camp. He was healthy and ready to resume the journey. Everyone called out, “welcome back, Ryan!” In an emotional reunion, the students filled him in on our adventures, and he related his own, emphasizing the deep bond he had forged with the park ranger who had become both his protector and family in a time of extreme need. From her perspective, “Ryan’s maturity, his parents’ participation, ability to communicate and to front end the finances, the students’ support for the decision which allowed Ryan to focus on his health and not feel pulled by allegiances to stay with the group,” as well as the collaboration of PITP leaders, were “equal measure ingredients for success” in this case.

During the four years that PITP has taken students on adventures in the national parks, rangers have played critical roles as mentors and guides. At the core of their commitment is a desire to facilitate both the agenda and the safety of groups visiting their parks. In Denali, ranger assistance escalated to a high level of involvement in the well-being of not only Ryan but the whole group. For all of us on the journey, this experience deepened our respect for and debt to the National Park Service. While all the group leaders had ideas about how to manage this student emergency, the resources of the NPS and the thoughtful strategy of an Education Specialist sensitive to student dynamics averted a major crisis and kept the trip whole.

What occurred at Denali involved a basic protocol that might serve well in other student crisis situations:

1. Be certain to carry all documents related to insurance and emergency.
2. Be “forthcoming.” Encourage students to express problems to group leaders.
3. Defer to on-site experts with the resources to manage an emergency and contain a crisis.
4. Be optimistic, and be thankful.

This crisis in the wilderness is not so different from those we experience closer to home. How often do students attend classes with high fevers? Nurse a sore throat believing it will simply clear up in time? Push themselves to override debilitating conditions in order to take an exam or finish a paper? Hide their problems so that they won’t be sent to an infirmary or hospital or home? As honors directors we need to create a context early in every student’s academic career in which to put crisis management on the table. Because we emphasized the importance of being open and forthcoming as a survival strategy at the outset of this wilderness trip, we opened a door that allowed Ryan to discuss his illness and seek help.

In various academic contexts we work to help honors students overcome the shyness and embarrassment that might have prevented Ryan from coming

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forward had the necessity to be forthcoming not been emphatically presented as a first principle of survival. Certainly in our honors program orientation activities and first-year experience courses we have the capacity to address survival strategies as applied to personal and medical crises. Encouraging students to be forthcoming and seek expert advice is a first step in helping them act maturely on their own behalf.

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