Ghana Fiasco Shows Risks of Faculty-Led Study Trips

By KARIN FISCHER

A University of Washington study-abroad program in Ghana that was cut short last summer after the medical evacuation of half of its participants highlights the potential hazards associated with programs led by individual faculty members who may lack the experience of seasoned study-abroad administrators.

Such risks are of increasing concern to colleges. Short-term, faculty-organized trips are proliferating, as colleges see them as a way to expand access to, and participation in, study abroad.

Risk-management experts and campus study-abroad administrators say the success of such programs often depends on the expertise of their faculty leaders and, particularly in developing countries, on the support of local partners, who provide educational opportunities, housing, or other services.

But they also say that risk can be greatly diminished through proper training of faculty members and careful vetting of overseas providers.

"If you're going to send faculty members to lead programs abroad, you've got to back that up with proper training," said Carl A. Herrin, an independent international-education consultant.

What went wrong on the five-week program, "Sustainable Development and Modes of Empowerment in Northern Ghana," is the subject of an independent, outside review, said Norm Arkans, a spokesman for the University of Washington.

Seventeen students enrolled in the for-credit program and traveled in August to a remote, rural village where they were to work with a local nongovernmental organization on projects like HIV-AIDS and malaria prevention, livestock management, and microfinance.

But students said the conditions in Ghana were not what they expected. They were living more than three miles away from the program's director, Linda L. Iltis, an academic counselor and lecturer with the university's Henry M. Jackson School of International Relations. And they said they often went hungry because of limited supplies of food.

"The amount of money they had to offer us wasn't enough to feed us," one student told The Daily, the University of Washington's student newspaper. "An average breakfast was small, maybe an 11-inch loaf of sugar bread split between 17 people and a small bit of peanut butter."

Students also complained that the academic component was not up to par and that their field experience was not integrated with lectures or readings.
For her part, Ms. Iltis said that the academic discussions intended to tie students' experience to course work done before they left for Ghana were supposed to occur in the program's final week, which was canceled when eight of the students were evacuated after they or their families had contacted university officials. (Mr. Arkans confirmed the students had caught "bugs" while abroad but said the university could not comment on their precise illnesses because of federal health-privacy laws.)

In an interview, Ms. Iltis placed much of the blame on the nongovernmental organization, which, she contended, demanded more money because of rising fuel costs, failed to provide her with transportation from the village where she was staying to the students' location, and did not abide by the terms of a written contract. The previous two times the program was offered, in 2003 and 2005, she noted, there were no problems.

A Rise in Faculty-Led Programs

About half of the students who study abroad at the University of Washington participate in faculty-led programs like the Ghana trip, Mr. Arkans said.

At other institutions, too, the number of short-term, faculty-organized programs has climbed sharply in recent years, as educators seek to rapidly increase the numbers of their students who go abroad. These trips, because they tend to occur during academic breaks and are less expensive for students than full-semester programs, can be appealing to students, particularly those who have not traditionally studied abroad, such as Hispanic students, black students, and those studying science, mathematics, and engineering. Colleges also are involving faculty members more heavily, so that they will see time abroad as a critical part of students' academic careers.

But relying on faculty members to initiate and organize such programs can add an extra challenge, experts agree. Faculty members usually do not have the management background or administrative expertise required to put those programs together, and unlike permanent, on-site staff members who coordinate other study-abroad programs, they typically arrange the trips from afar, juggling them with other teaching and research responsibilities.

What's more, when abroad, a single professor may be responsible for the well-being and academic experience of 15 to 20 students.

Some institutions, like the University of Saint Thomas, in Minnesota, are looking to lessen the responsibilities placed on an individual faculty member by moving to a system in which a second staff member goes on each trip, says Sarah E. Spencer, director of short-term programs at Saint Thomas.

She and officials at other institutions say they also prepare faculty members for leading trips abroad by offering training sessions and by carefully reviewing proposed overseas courses and programs.

The University of Missouri at Columbia and the University of Colorado at Boulder, for example, require interested faculty members to complete workshops on risk management and student health and safety. Both institutions provide the professors with detailed "field guides" of how to deal with potential emergencies. They also require all faculty-led programs to get a stamp of approval from a faculty advisory panel.

"It's really important faculty members understand they have responsibilities beyond those they have leading a course on campus," said Barbara Lindeman, director of study abroad at Missouri.

Tips From a Professional Group

This year the Forum on Education Abroad, an independent organization of study-abroad professionals, released a 13-page list of standards for study-abroad programs, including those led by faculty members. It
also includes guidance for evaluating provider organizations and partner institutions, including nongovernmental organizations, said Brian Whalen, the forum's president.

Working with providers in developing countries can be a particular challenge, said Mr. Herrin, the international-education consultant, because they may have widely differing expectations of what they must provide.

All faculty members who propose study-abroad programs at the University of Washington must receive approval from the Office of International Programs and Exchanges and must work closely with staff members there, Mr. Arkans said. Faculty members do not have to check in every day, he said, but international-programs staff members are in regular contact with them.

The review of the Ghana program, which is expected to be completed by the end of the academic quarter, will examine what happened and where a breakdown may have occurred, including in the agreement between the university and the nongovernmental organization, Mr. Arkans said. He said the university also hoped the investigation would yield information to help avoid future problems on such trips.

"We want to make sure we learn from this, to see what additional safeguards should be in place to make sure this doesn't happen again," he said.