

HEALTH AND SAFETY REFERENCE POINTS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTION

Institutions organize a wide range of student services and social and cultural activities that offer international students the support that they need during their sojourn in Canada and a chance to learn more about Canada and the Canadian lifestyle. These activities range from advising and orientation to skating, bus trips and backpacking. The health and safety of the participants is an important part of the planning of these services and events. The following is a list of the Health and Safety Reference Points developed to assist institutions to plan and deliver international student services and activities that, at a minimum meet reasonable standards, and at their best offer students excellence in program support.

REFERENCE POINTS

Program Planning

1. *Plan all activities with the health and safety of participants in mind.*

The time to think about health and safety matters is during the planning phase of the activity. Quality support services and programs require time and resources to be implemented. Last minute initiatives may be creative but risky.

When the overall services and programs are being developed or reviewed, establishing guidelines for health and safety is essential. Introducing a health and safety aspect into the policy, procedures and resource allocation of the international office/centre from the outset will affect the approach taken to staff training, activity development and delivery, and participant education.

For special events or activities, when carrying out the initial planning it is recommended that a site visit be made so that safety issues and emergency support services can be identified.

2. *Avoid offering activities that involve high risk to the participants.*

Activities like downhill skiing, scuba diving and caving are considered high risk sports and involve additional risk and responsibility for the institution if they are carried out as part of the student program. Students can arrange these activities with private companies that are set up to deliver these programs with trained professionals. It is recommended that students join down hill ski and outdoors clubs if they wish to take part in these sports. Given that student clubs are also part of the university, how do their operations conform to your recommendations? In addition, insurance coverage through the institution for covering extreme sports may be limited.

3. *Use waivers with care and with an eye to documenting informed consent by the participants.*

If you are considering the use of a waiver to avoid liability in case of an accident, this may be a good indication that the activity should not be offered through the institution. Waivers can protect the institution, but only if stringent requirements are met. In general, if Canadian students participating in a similar activity would not be asked to sign a waiver, then

international students would not necessarily need to sign one. However, if the activity is one that the international students are not accustomed to participating in at home, then the institution would be expected to prepare the students adequately through briefings and written documentation in order to familiarize them with the activity and emphasize any safety precautions. In order for a waiver to be effective, factors such as thorough briefings, use of languages other than English, and customized wording may need to be considered.

4. *Review all promotional literature and advertisements to determine if they are accurate since these documents may form the basis of a contract with the international students.*

Printed and web site information that advertises programs at your institution in such a way to attract new students must depict the situation accurately. Should the student find that the course of study outlined in their letter of admission or its supporting documentation is no longer available, the institution may incur liability.

References to residence accommodation, sponsored events and support services must also be clear and accurate.

Service and Activity Development and Delivery

5. *Inform the participants about health and safety matters well before an activity takes place.*

Timing is important. Inform participants about travel and immigration details before they depart from their home country as this will enable them to carry the appropriate identification and documentation and to travel with care. Provide information regarding their orientation program before they arrive, so that they will plan their travel schedule to enable them to attend. When they are registering for an activity, inform them about the details of the event so that they will arrive well-prepared for the activity. In all cases the institution must ensure that all participants have been informed in advance of the health and safety aspects of any activity.

Information should be available to students admitted into the institution regarding the details of the academic program and the process of arriving at the institution to take up that offer. Pre-arrival and orientation materials in print or on the web, document the care that the institution takes in orienting and briefing its students.

Information sheets on scheduled activities should be given to all participants at the time of registering for the event outlining:

- ◆ details about the activity
- ◆ clothing and other items to bring for a healthy and safe time e.g. hat and sunscreen, proper boots
- ◆ time and location (with map) of departure, emergency and information numbers, the coordinator cell phone number and information in what to do in case of emergency.
- ◆ on campus outlets for specialized equipment that is recommended for use e.g. helmets for hockey and skating lessons
- ◆ essential documents to carry i.e. identification and medical insurance card
- ◆ participant responsibility (in the case of out-of-town trips) to return in time for the departure of the bus i.e. if they miss the bus they are responsible for their own return transportation.

6. *Use activity registration and pre-activity briefings to augment or replace waivers for documenting informed consent.*

Immediately preceding the activity a briefing should be given outlining the possible risks to the participant while involved with the activity, reminding them of the safety rules, and indicating good practices to follow e.g. for a skating lesson, information on how to get up off the ice after having fallen down. This briefing session should be advertised on the event registration list and recommended as an essential part of the activity.

At the time of the briefing, students should sign-in indicating that they attended the session for the activity. In the case of an accident, the registration list, the sign-in sheet for the briefing and the actual information contained in the briefing will help to document that the institution has taken care to carry out its responsibilities.

If the activity exposes the participant to risks other than those related directly to the activity, a warning should be given e.g. if a body of water is present during a hike the participants should be warned that "Swimming is not recommended. There will be no trained lifeguard present. Swimming will be at their own risk".

7. *Add a disclaimer to academic course and activity literature or web site information.*

The unexpected plays a role in the delivery of academic programs and scheduled activities. For example, activities should be cancelled if conditions change radically and the safety of the group is uncertain e.g. weather conditions are extreme enough to make the activity hazardous. The use of disclaimers is advisable to indicate that the academic courses or the trip or activity can be cancelled by the institution at any time without notice and for a wide range of reasons including health and safety reasons.

8. *Provide communication support at the site of the activity in case of emergency.*

A cell phone should be carried by the supervising staff member. Similarly the bus should be equipped with a telephone or CB radio. These numbers should be made available to all participants for their use.

9. *Review transportation contracts to ensure that the transportation arranged for the activity is safe and secure.*

Transportation should be provided by a reputable company with well-maintained buses, trained drivers and industry-standard insurance. Buses should have their own telephones and first aid kits. Staff driven mini-vans should be avoided unless the driver is licensed for that purpose, the institution's insurance covers this type of trip and the role is part of the staff member's job description. Also transportation should be available for the participants throughout the activity in case of an accident or early return.

Staffing

10. *Staff all services and activities with trained staff members.*

Advisors are for advising; certified counsellors are for counselling. The International Student Advisor's training should prepare them to know when they must contact a qualified colleague to assist in counselling matters.

Orientation sessions that impart information on subjects like Canadian laws, immigration and income tax regulations should be offered by trained staff members or qualified guest speakers.

Activities organized by the institution that are without a trained staff person are very risky for the institution and present a significant liability to the institution if an accident happens e.g. if there is more than one bus departing for an excursion a trained volunteer or staff member should accompany each bus.

11. *Train staff members to do their job effectively.*

A staff member who is responsible for the activity must be trained to meet the demands of the role especially in case of emergency. For example, for all activities at least one staff member or trained volunteer should be trained in first aid. When personnel are hired for the specific purposes they must be properly certified for the task e.g. when participants will be around water, a trained lifeguard should be present.

If participants are learning to play hockey or toboggan a briefing outlining basic safety points should be presented. These should be delivered by a member of staff who normally participates in these activities and who is prepared to brief a group of participants who may have never heard of the sport or who may require frequent repetition to grasp the information due to language differences.

International Student Advisors should be trained to recognize problems and to know when they are permitted to intervene e.g. intervention in the negative behaviour that might appear on an excursion because of alcohol consumption, harassment, or mental disorder.

12. *Orient host families and the students placed in their homes as to their responsibilities for making the experience healthy and safe.*

While host family programs may be best left to professional agencies set up to do the job, if your institution runs a host family program ensure that both parties are well briefed as to their responsibilities. Host parents require orientation and training. A contract stipulating their responsibilities should be available. An international student briefed in the hours following arrival may need to be briefed again after jet lag has passed. In all cases a designated staff support person should be available and a dispute mechanism outlined in the literature.