

Field safety committee report and recommendations for the ESPM department

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Rationale

The committee was formed partially in response to the murder of IB graduate student Gabriel Trujillo. The committee's goal was to create a shared understanding of risks, hazards, and safety spanning natural and social sciences. The committee focused on gathering information on the current state of field safety in the department, on building relationships within ESPM, with other campus units, and with other institutions to learn about best practices, and on implementing a set of initial actions judged to be high-impact, low-effort, and low-cost. These efforts are intended to be a foundation for future more extensive and long-term efforts.

Actions taken

1. Developed and [analyzed](#) a survey on researchers' experiences of field safety (distributed to all faculty, staff, graduate students, and undergraduate student researchers in ESPM, ERG, IB, PMB)
2. Developed and [analyzed](#) a survey of undergraduate students' experiences of field safety in undergraduate classes
3. Developed a [template field safety plan](#) for use by ESPM research teams
4. Collated a set of [field safety resources](#) applicable to the natural and social sciences
5. Collated a set of [example field safety plans](#) (anonymized) for re-use
6. Created a public field safety page for the CNR website
7. Developed a field safety module for ESPM 201A
8. Held an expert-led half-day workshop (provided by [Field Futures](#)) on sexual harassment and assault prevention in field setting for RCNR
9. Held multiple discussions with IB field safety committee, VCR office, and Sara Souza (field safety office)
10. Liaised with broader field safety community at UC-wide field safety retreat
11. Initiated relationship with ESPM Graduate Diversity Council

Key findings

1. Campus context
 - a. There is limited or no campus oversight of field travel and safety planning. While mandatory policies exist for lab safety, and optional resources are available from the field safety office, no mandatory policies exist for field safety. Because many ESPM members experience hazards primarily through field travel rather than lab work, this represents a large structural risk.
 - b. In the last five years, UCSB, UCSC, UCB, and UCLA have all had fatalities in the field; UCB, UCD, and UCR have had serious injuries. At UCB, IB had a fatal accident in 2023 and ESPM had a fatal accident around 2011.
 - c. There is currently no departmental or campus monitoring the prevalence of other fieldwork-related injuries (e.g. sexual assault, bodily trauma).

2. Departmental context

- a. ESPM currently lacks a ‘safety culture’ in which clear policies, procedures, and values contribute to make field safety a priority.
- b. The survey of undergraduate experiences indicated that several ESPM classes were reported by students to consistently have experienced safety incidents and to have shared a limited or no field safety planning process. There is high risk of future incidents if no policy changes are made.
- c. The survey of researcher experiences indicated high variation in field safety planning processes, limited resources to support safety, and a higher prevalence of negative experiences for women and non-binary people. The survey also highlighted a greater distrust of tenured faculty supervisors.
- d. Multiple informal conversations reveal that ESPM male faculty were perceived to have lower engagement and concern for field safety than female faculty. For example, only one male faculty member out of 35+ attendees was present at the sexual assault prevention workshop.
- e. There is substantial interest among the ESPM graduate student community, and other campus units, in improving the overall situation.

3. Limitations to progress

- a. The primary limitation, identified by workshop and survey participants, was a lack of faculty engagement, participation, or leadership around field safety. Numerous respondents also indicated that their supervisors did not often or ever create or consult a safety plan for fieldwork. Nevertheless, some faculty members expressed to committee members that they thought their planning processes were sufficient, indicating a lack of common ground and expectations around field safety in our community.
- b. The secondary limitation identified by workshop and survey participants was a lack of both human and financial resources to improve field safety at departmental or research group level.
- c. The diversity of research methods and sites (social and natural science) makes it challenging to identify single policies or procedures that will apply equally well to all members of ESPM.

Recommendations

1. Governance

- a. The field safety committee should be renewed for at least two years.
 - i. Membership should include faculty (one per division) and graduate students, as well as the department manager, with options available for additional staff and undergraduate participation (if desired, recognizing the unpaid nature of this service).
 1. Nicole Lowy has volunteered to serve on this committee to provide continuity.
 - ii. The leadership of this committee should be consistent over at least a 1-year timeframe.

- iii. The committee should meet at least once per semester with the JEDI committee, recognizing the synergies between their challenges and goals.
 - iv. Tasks can include implementing the below recommendations and contributing broadly to awareness and pedagogy relating to field safety.
 - b. Faculty should have field safety planning be treated as a component of departmental merit in promotion decisions, if they do fieldwork.
 - i. For research, a merit question should be added: “If you do fieldwork, how do you ensure the safety of your research?”
 - ii. For teaching/mentoring, a merit question should be added: “If you do fieldwork, do you and your students consistently develop and use field safety plans?”
 - iii. Similar proposals are being considered currently in IB.
 - c. Faculty should be banned for 2 years from recruiting new students or teaching field classes if:
 - i. ...they do not consistently develop or use field safety plans with their students (under the assumption that a field safety planning process is adopted, and the faculty member does fieldwork; based on a majority vote of the ESPM council and the college field safety officer, if hired)
 - ii. ...they consistently experience substantial safety incidents or near-misses in their teaching or research, and those incidents/near-misses were avoidable (based on a majority vote of the ESPM council and the college field safety officer, if hired)
 - d. The department chair should formally advocate for the campus to mandate a travel authorization process by which all off-campus travel requires registration prior to departure. Expense reimbursement or travel advances for anyone (faculty, students, etc.) would be contingent upon campus travel approval being in place. A field safety plan would be a mandatory component of the travel authorization application if the traveler indicates that fieldwork will occur.
 - i. A template safety plan would be provided but would not be mandatory to use.
 - ii. PIs could opt out of the process by providing a short statement to the approver for why submitting a plan is unnecessary.
 - iii. Each travel authorization would be reviewed by a campus field safety officer (if hired) and failure to have a plan approved would result in denial of travel status and thus travel expenses.
 - iv. Similar oversight process is already in place at other peer institutions.
 - e. The department should provide a brief training to new faculty (at the time of onboarding) and to current faculty (once every 3 years) on the minimum expectations for fieldwork.
 - i. This training would identify the processes that a faculty member is expected to use when planning and carrying out off-campus fieldwork for teaching or research.
 - ii. This training would not provide detailed guidance on field safety content, but would orient faculty members to available resources.
 - iii. This training would be developed by the field safety committee and compliance would be ensured by the department manager.

2. Graduate program
 - a. Dissertation prospectuses should include a mandatory field safety plan component, if the student does fieldwork.
 - b. The department should approve the ‘know your rights’ document drafted by this committee for graduate students, Limited employees, and other trainees. This document outlines the minimum standard of care for fieldwork, and a specific protocol on what they can do if they are not met (e.g., who to contact if they feel their PI is not listening to them when they say they feel unsafe).
 - c. The graduate student annual review document should include a section for students to report whether they feel their field safety planning process is adequate.
 - d. The Graduate Diversity Council’s field safety working group should identify a ‘safety liaison’ who can provide advice and guidance to peers, and bring forward key issues to the departmental staff or committee.
3. Undergraduate and graduate teaching
 - a. Instructors of undergraduate or graduate classes with a field component should register their fieldwork and safety plan with the department prior to travel.
 - i. Instructors could opt out of the process by providing a short statement to the department for why it is unnecessary.
 - b. ESPM 201A, or an equivalent first-year graduate class, should include a field safety component, taught by faculty or staff.
 - i. An initial version of this training will be provided in 2024 on a volunteer basis by graduate students, but this is not an equitable long-term solution.
4. Institutional capacity
 - a. The campus or college should fund a field safety officer position responsible for tracking fieldwork, overseeing design and implementation of field safety plans, providing guidance and support, ensuring compliance with policies, and organizing trainings.
 - i. This position should be held by an expert staff member, not a graduate student researcher, in order to avoid power dynamics issues and ensure sufficient expertise is in place.
 - ii. The duties and costs of this position should be shared across campus. Advocating for the creation of this position should be a priority for the department chair.
 1. Similar positions already exist UC-wide for boating/diving safety, and a travel safety officer already exists at UC Davis.
5. Departmental resources
 - a. The department should provide transparency, via public annual reports, on compliance rates of faculty with field safety policies, as well as field injury rates.
 - b. The department should seek additional funding (e.g., Be Smart About Safety funds) for safety-related materials, such as first-aid kits and satellite communication devices, and revisit the status of these materials yearly
 - c. The department should budget annually to hold relevant in-person safety trainings for the community.
 - i. Topics could include ‘sexual assault prevention, bystander intervention, wilderness first aid, Safety I vs Safety II, etc.

- d. Faculty should be particularly incentivized to participate in field safety planning as it pertains to their research groups, e.g. through financial incentives and provision of consulting services.