

## Who is Responsible?

# Preparing Graduate Asian International Students for Discrimination in the Wake of COVID-19

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### Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Enrollment Management; International Student and Scholar Services; Management and Operations; Student Services

### Setting

Bonnie Chen was a new graduate student about to begin a program in International Education in Fall 2020. Growing up in Shanghai, she was educated in a homogeneous environment where Chinese is the dominant language, and she was immersed and influenced by Chinese culture and values. English, on the other hand, is only a required subject for Chinese students to learn in public schools. After four years of undergraduate study in China, and a previous international exchange experience, Bonnie was encouraged to apply for a master's

program in the US. She was looking forward to being immersed in a different social and cultural environment based on the valuable international experiences she had experienced previously.

In March of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic as outbreaks emerged in many countries. In China, the government initially mandated a national lockdown. Most international travel was suspended while offices and schools became virtual. Additionally, residents were required to stay home, which took a toll on many people including Bonnie.

In the US, the narrative around the origin of the virus paired with the political climate led to an increase in Anti-Asian hate, contributing to a spike in racially motivated attacks. For example, increasingly intense international relations fueled primarily by anti-immigrant politicians and racial conflicts relating to Stop Asian Hates and Black Lives Matter movements had impaired the experience and safety of international students.

## Case

After receiving her welcome letter and orientation packet online, Bonnie was contacted by a staff member in the school's International Student Office (ISO). This department was responsible for supporting international students to obtain their F1 international student visa for the U.S. Several of the topics covered during orientation for international students were transformed for virtual delivery due to the pandemic. Orientation provided coverage on a variety of logistics, such as the visa application process, academic support, housing, and on-campus resources. Social issues related to racism were ignored and avoided in orientations presented by ISO. As a result, Bonnie felt her study abroad journey would be full of uncertainties, many of which she felt unprepared and helpless to handle.

The Fall 2020 semester began and Bonnie started her new life in the U.S. Bonnie was eager to immerse herself in American culture and travel as much as possible. Although the negative news in the media reminded her of the safety concerning international students, especially those from Asia, the peers and friends she met were supportive and warm-hearted to her, which encouraged her to step out of her comfort zone to explore a new environment.

However, one afternoon on her way home from campus, Bonnie and her Asian friend Cindy were attacked by an African American man sitting in front of them on the Metro. Unexpectedly, the man intentionally started to use harmful speech toward them in an effort to catch their attention and incite a response. Bonnie and Cindy felt offended and shocked; however, out of fear they ignored him and pretended that nothing was happening. The man continued to stare at them, in hopes of making eye contact, when he suddenly started yelling at them using strong language and targeting their race. Stunned, Bonnie and Cindy tried to avoid eye contact and discreetly planned ways to get out of the situation. They were afraid that his irrational behavior would lead to a physical conflict due to his xenophobic and discriminatory language. Once the train arrived at the next station, they quickly jumped off the train and waited for the next one.

After Bonnie's experience with xenophobia and racism, she grew more reluctant to be involved in the environment around her. As a consequence, she began implementing measures to ensure her safety. Bonnie and her friends realized that the pre-departure orientations held by the ISO skipped one important process which is to prepare them to encounter negative experiences abroad. In a sense, social conflicts and issues pertaining

to race, politics, and the pandemic were hidden by the veil of welcoming and harmonious atmosphere emphasized by ISO. This approach put international students' safety and experience at risk by merely highlighting the positive sides and answering common questions. After this experience, Bonnie felt constantly insecure and depressed. Moreover, it was unclear what resources were available for students who might potentially be victims of racially motivated crimes. Subsequently, she was more concerned about her safety in the US and wondered whether she made the right choice to study abroad in the U.S.

### Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What types of issues did you notice in the case and how did those issues exacerbate the challenges faced by international students?
- What is the impact of this case, and others like it, on the university's internationalization efforts?
- Who are the stakeholders in this case? Who is responsible for preparing students like Bonnie to live in the U.S.? Does the duty only fall on the ISO, program staff and faculty, or students?
- In this case, how could ISO staff provide transparent information about Asian discrimination with incoming Asian students? What are some ways that the university can guide current faculty and students to decrease bias, and build a community with fairness and respect?
- How can university leadership and the ISO appropriately inform and help international students in orientations to know some social issues in terms of COVID, nationalism and other sensitive topics that they may potentially face in the U.S, while maintaining an inclusive and welcoming campus environment?
- What are the necessary qualities that faculty and staff should have to support international students to tackle racial and gender discrimination? What training should faculty and staff receive to better support students?