

Anti-Asian Sentiment in Study Abroad Post-COVID

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Education Abroad; Partnerships; University/Higher Education

Setting

Hillside College is a private, liberal arts college in California, USA. At Hillside College, strong efforts are made to make all students feel welcome, regardless of their race, religion, gender, or citizenship status. Although Hillside is a small college, a large percentage of students are Pell Grant recipients and the campus is widely considered to be diverse and accepting. Demographics at Hillside College are as follows: 40% White, 16% International Students, 15% Asian, 11% Hispanic, 6% Multiethnic, 5% Unknown, 5% Black, 2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

This welcoming sentiment is felt by faculty, staff, and leadership at Hillside College. Recently, the President of Hillside increased funding for the Counseling and Psychological Services department to provide support for all students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study abroad department was also given a recent alumni donation

in which they were able to start a peer-to-peer mentoring program, revamp their pre-and post-departure orientations, and hire a new program manager.

Historically, the university has had a strong relationship with a third-party provider in Scandinavia and has sent many students on their programs. One student who participated in a study abroad program with this provider wrote the following:

“My experience was quite transformative and impactful on me, both as a student and as a person. Through my stay, I was able to discover Europe, retrace my heritage to Scandinavia, and engage in much-needed introspection. I learned the language and gained a newfound understanding of the world around me. I am grateful for the partnership between the university and my Scandinavian program. I would recommend this program to all students interested.”

Although many students have had positive experiences with this program, a recently returned student's experience revealed several unaddressed issues.

Case

Ali is a third-year urban studies student who has dreamed of studying abroad ever since she set foot on Hillside's campus. She is Japanese American and is heavily involved in Hillside's multicultural group. Her college offers several short-term programs led by faculty, but these only last for three weeks during the summer. Ali wants to immerse herself in a culture for a whole semester. She speaks only English and has an interest in city planning. She works closely with her study abroad office and decides to go on the third-party provider's program in a large city in Scandinavia.

After a year and a half of online courses from her residence hall due to COVID-19, Ali is incredibly excited to travel to a new country. The third-party provider helps her find a flat with other American students in the city near where her classes will be held. She has the option to take a course at the local university alongside her courses at her program center and decides to enroll in a furniture design course taught in English.

Although Ali enjoys the subjects taught in her classes, she notices several comments made about Asian people that make her feel uncomfortable. These microaggressions come from other students at the university and occasionally from the professors at the university and at the program center. Since Ali is the only Asian student in her program, she feels nervous speaking to the on-site staff about these issues.

One day, Ali is walking to the supermarket after class when a local man runs right into her, knocking her bag to the ground. At first, she believes it was an accident, but then the man spits at her and yells, “Go back to where you came from, we don't need your virus here” in English.

Ali is shocked and stands frozen for a second before grabbing her bag and speed-walking home in the other direction. After her classmates' and professors' comments as well as this incident, she decides that she needs to talk to someone and report her experiences to her program provider. Although there are no staff members of color that work at the on-site office, Ali was told during orientation that the director of her program offers 24/7 support and has an open-door policy for student needs and concerns. The director is very kind and apologizes for the incidents but does not offer any advice going forward.

Unsatisfied with this response, Ali reaches out to her study abroad advisor at Hillside College and is told to “contact the director of her on-site program, and we can discuss this when you return.” Due to this response from both her study abroad office and on-site program, Ali withdraws from many social activities and only leaves her flat for classes and to eat. She doesn't feel comfortable going outside and engaging with the host culture as it feels very unwelcoming. At the end of her program, it doesn't feel as though she has gained anything from her experience abroad. Her experience was much different than what she anticipated.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Whose responsibility is it to help Ali through this tough situation? Why?
- How can we, as educators, tailor our support to targeted groups during an incident like this?
- Do you think that Ali's situation may have been different if there had been diverse staff members for her to talk to at her on-site center? Do you believe it is important for program providers to hire diverse staff members? Why?
- How do you, as an educator, explain to students the difference between discrimination and culture shock?
- What is the role of the third-party provider versus the home school during each stage of a student's study abroad journey (pre-departure, on-site, re-entry)?
- As an educator, how do you ensure that students on third-party provider programs are adequately supported? How do you as a university study abroad administrator discuss with the third-party provider that their practices need to be inclusive of the students they may host?
- How might Ali find value in her experience as time passes?