

Candor and Consequences: Evaluating Roles and Responsibilities

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Internationalization and Global Learning; Partnerships; Personnel Management; Professional Training; Student Services

Setting

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Kim recently received her undergraduate degree in international relations. Eager to put her skills into practice, Kim accepted a position as a Study Abroad Coordinator at Collegio College, a small liberal arts institution located in Washington D.C. The position is a new one, and Kim has spent the first few months actively orienting and supporting Collegio undergraduate students who are studying abroad for the fall semester. Collegio has gained a strong reputation for its many excellent study abroad programs, and approximately 60% of Collegio students spend at least one semester studying at one of the College's partner universities.

Collegio College is regionally accredited by the American Accreditation Association (AAA). It received its initial accreditation in 1992, and the College undergoes an extensive re-accreditation visit every 10 years. Its third re-accreditation review is in progress, and Collegio recently hosted a visiting team of eight peer reviewers. The visiting team was on-site for four days to conduct interviews and focus groups to validate Collegio College's Self-Study, to assess the College's compliance with the accreditation standards determined by AAA, and to understand and support the College's strategic priorities.

Case

Kim is enjoying her job as a Study Abroad Coordinator at Collegio College. She assumed her role this past July and over the past few months she has worked hard to create systems and structures to support the College's students participating in the study abroad program. Kim's supervisor, Daniel, is pleased with Kim's performance, and he indicated this in a recent performance review where he praised Kim for her work to date.

One of the structures Kim created is a semi-monthly meeting, held virtually, with the students from each program destination. These meetings are facilitated by Kim, and she has used them as opportunities to check in with each student to ensure that the program is meeting their needs and to support the students in the program. Kim finds that these meetings offer her an opportunity to identify any students who may be struggling, either academically or socially.

Recently, Kim conducted one of these meetings with seven students studying in Paris. She left the meeting feeling concerned about the general morale of the group and one student in particular. The session began with students sharing a series of complaints directed at the administration of the College's partner, Paris University, but then the conversation evolved into the students sharing significant personal challenges. Several students mentioned feeling homesick and another said she has been having more bad days than good days. Alarmed, Kim reminded the students that they can access the health center at Paris University. She considered sharing the experiences of these students with her supervisor, Daniel, but she determined that that would be a violation of the students' privacy. Instead, she made a note to herself to see how the students were doing during the next check in conversation. If they were still feeling depressed, then she would figure out next steps at that time.

Kim was sitting in a focus group meeting with Daniel, the other members of the study abroad department at Collegio College, and three members of the accreditation visiting team. Kim had never participated in an accreditation meeting before, and she was excited to share her experiences with the review team. One of the reviewers asked the study abroad department members to identify what resources are in place to support the health and wellbeing of the students that are studying abroad. Daniel spoke first and mentioned that study abroad students were able to access the health centers of the partner universities. He also mentioned the orientation program that Kim designed and specifically highlighted that Kim talks to the students about their challenges while studying abroad, including culture shock, homesickness, and language barriers. Daniel then asked Kim to elaborate on the resources that she provides to the students. Kim responded by sharing some additional information about the orientation session and then she described the virtual check in meetings she conducts. Still feeling uncomfortable about the recent check in meeting, she mentioned, somewhat off-handedly, that while the students can access the partner university's health center, Kim feels that more could be done at Collegio to support the study abroad students. She suggested that perhaps Collegio should consider adding a counselor who could work with all of the study abroad students, which would address their reluctance to seek local counseling due to language concerns, cost, access, or other potential barriers. After her comment Kim noticed that Daniel looked a bit surprised and was shaking his head, a sign she interpreted as a lack of agreement for her suggestion about a Collegio counselor. Kim expected Daniel to pull her aside after the meeting to talk about her suggestion, but Daniel never said anything to Kim about the meeting.

It is now May and Kim is finishing up the final month of her job before the summer break. She is looking forward to starting her second year working at Collegio. One morning Daniel pulls Kim aside and tells her he has some difficult news for her. He tells Kim that the re-accreditation report arrived and one of the major recommendations (which Collegio is required to address) is to hire a licensed counselor specifically to support the study abroad students. Daniel says that there is no money available for an additional position and the College President has asked Daniel to cut \$30,000 from his department budget in order to provide the funding for the new position. Daniel tells Kim that he is sorry, but his hands are tied and he has no choice but to eliminate the Study Abroad Coordinator position. Kim will be expected to finish out this school year, but she won't have a job for next year.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What should Kim have done after she learned of the challenges experienced by the students in the Paris program? What responsibility did Kim have for sharing the experiences of the study abroad students? How might privacy guidelines regarding students' mental health factor into her decision? How did Kim interpret or misinterpret her role to "support" the students in the program?
- Assess the nature and relative priority of Kim's various areas of responsibility including to her supervisor, to Collegio College, to the study abroad students, and to the accreditation review team. Does Kim understand these areas of responsibility? How might study abroad coordinators and their supervisors ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities?
- This case has several outcomes: the recommendation in the accreditation report, the decision to eliminate the Study Abroad Coordinator position, and the fact that Kim will soon be unemployed. For each outcome, consider who is responsible, whether other outcomes were possible, and what factors might have altered the outcome? Consider job descriptions, professional roles and responsibilities, personal and professional boundaries, communication expectations and patterns, and the accreditation process and its purpose.