

Living Spaces: Housing Considerations for LGBT Students Abroad

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Tags

Education Abroad; Education Policy; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Management and Operations; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

A medium-sized study abroad program in Italy offers American university students the opportunity to study art and Italian each semester. Students live together in apartments that are no more than a 20-minute walk from campus. In a typical semester, men stay in three apartments while women stay in the other eight. Housing has always been gender segregated, despite a brief push last semester for co-ed housing.

In response, staff updated the housing application to address the housing concerns of LGBT students. Two new sections were added. One section allowed LGBT students to self-disclose their sexual or gender identity. The other asked students to indicate if they were comfortable living with an LGBT individual. The application is only sent to deposited students in an attempt to mitigate potential student fears of discrimination. It is approved and sent out for the next semester.

Case

Two-thirds of the way through the semester, a cisgender man complains to student services about his living situation. He is uncomfortable sharing an apartment with a transgender student, who also identifies as a man. Afterwards, the housing coordinator and another staff member question the other housemates of the students in question in order to gauge their comfort level. Next, the staff checked each student's housing application. They

had all indicated being comfortable with living with an LGBT student. The transgender student, however, had not disclosed his status. The staff email him to request a meeting the next day.

The next day, the transgender student explains that all of his legal documents say that he is male and felt uncomfortable trusting the staff with medical information “for no reason.” He does not know how the cisgender student discovered he was a transgender in the first place. He seems resigned to being outed, because his housemates had confronted and questioned him the night before. When he leaves, he agrees to a facilitated meeting with his housemate later that afternoon.

In the meantime, the staff brainstorm potential solutions in case the students cannot be reconciled. They debate whether to relocate the transgender student to another male apartment, an all-female apartment that aligns his assumed birth sex, or somewhere else entirely. One staff member recommends moving the cisgender student, but she is cut off by the program director, who feels it is unjust to relocate a student who “hasn’t done anything wrong.” When no final agreement seems imminent, they agree to wait until the facilitated meeting.

Later, the facilitated meeting is a success. The two students are agitated, but speak frankly with one another. The housing coordinator feels unprepared to facilitate on LGBT topics, and neither student agrees to relocate willingly. Eventually, the students agree to continue living together for the remainder of the program. The staff are relieved and vow to make plans to address these unforeseen circumstances in the future.

A week later, the housing coordinator checks in with the transgender student. She learns that the two students are not on speaking terms, but his other housemates are being supportive. The transgender student shrugs off the conflict saying, “it could have been worse.” He does, however, wonder bitterly why the school “only asks us if we’re comfortable with LGBT people or smokers” and no one else. The coordinator thanks him for his feedback and invites him to reach out if his situation changes.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How might the staff have prepared for potential conflicts like the one described above?
- What policies does your organization have in place regarding LGBT students? Who and what was involved in the planning process?
- In this scenario, what might you or your organization have done in response?
- What would you recommend as next steps for the program staff?
- Does your organization have a housing application? If so, what information do you ask from students? Is there anything you would like to revise or add?
- How might cultural differences effect how staff interact in onsite programs?