

Tipping Points:

Managing Ethical Partnerships Amidst Student Complaints and Process Breakdowns

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Tags

Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Management and Operations; Partnerships; University/Higher Education

Setting

At a dentistry school in a large, public research university in the United States, the International Dental Service-Learning Program (IDSLP) is a summer program in which second-year dental students travel to a partner organization to complete a public service project. IDSLP partners are clinics in low and lower-middle income countries. The countries represented are Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Mozambique, Mali, and Bolivia. Average enrollment in IDSLP is six to ten students. Partners determine project topics and final placement offers. IDSLP has been on hiatus for two years, but partners are now hosting students again.

Student success support includes pre-departure orientation, weekly reflective journals, project assignments, individual check-ins with program staff and peers, and a post-IDSLP returnee retreat. Students pay tuition to their home university as well as expenses for travel, passports, immunizations, living expenses, meals, etc. Partners charge student support fees directly to the students (usually \$300-500). These fees are discussed in the program application and at orientation. Partners receive no other direct financial compensation for hosting IDSLP students. Participants are given a \$2,000 stipend to offset the additional in-country, out-of-pocket costs of IDSLP participation.

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IDSLP has experienced significant staff turnover, with three different teams overseeing the program in the last four years. The current program lead and coordinator are struggling to access information and are slow to communicate with participants. The IDSLP program lead is about to go on parental leave. The program coordinator will assume some of the lead's duties until their return.

The first post-hiatus cohort is about to return to the US. Soon they will gather for the post-IDSLP retreat to debrief in an intensive one-day seminar led by the program coordinator.

Simultaneously, throughout the dental school, there is growing, outspoken concern from students about high tuition and fees, and lack of transparency around student fees. The school has convened a committee to address these concerns. At the same time, the university is undergoing major transitions in financial systems. All financial transactions are significantly delayed or cannot be completed. IDSLP students did not receive their stipends until the week before they left home.

Case

Elaine (program lead) and Alex (program coordinator) are preparing for the returnee retreat that will take place in two weeks. They have reviewed the students' weekly reflective journals and mid-program check-in conversation notes. All students have demonstrated personal and professional growth. One student in Tanzania who identifies as Asian-American has discussed the racial discrimination he experienced in the community but tells Elaine that his onsite mentor is very supportive and that he does not feel he needs further support from the program. Students have expressed frustration at not having been able to accomplish as much as they had expected, but from Elaine and Alex's perspective, all students are making great progress.

Elaine is worried that onsite hosts may not overtly discuss the site's student support fees with the students, and students may leave before paying this fee. She asks Alex to send out an explicit reminder to pay these fees before the students depart, which he sends out that afternoon.

The following morning, Elaine and Alex receive a response from the three students in Tanzania, expressing an intense reaction to the fee reminder email. They state: that they received insufficient information and reminders of the student fees; that the out-of-pocket costs of the program are already high and another fee is unreasonable; and that the program should be responsible for paying the student fees on behalf of the student (given that home university tuition and fees are already so high). They state that their host has not explicitly asked the students to pay the student support fee, and they refuse to pay it proactively. The students say that their overall experience in IDSLP has been very poor, that they feel that Elaine and Alex have mismanaged the program, and that the fee reminder email was their "tipping point."

Elaine and Alex are surprised by this message. Neither feels that previous communication they've had with these students, or their reflection assignments, indicated significant problems. Elaine is hesitant to press the partner to push the students to pay this fee and reaches out to the partner to gather more information. The partner voluntarily offers to waive the fee, but Elaine feels uncomfortable with this, knowing that the students were given funds specifically for this purpose, and that the livelihood of onsite support staff can be significantly impacted by non-payment of this fee.

Elaine responds to the students. She reminds them that this information has already been given to them and that they have received stipend funds from the program specifically for paying these fees. She says that she

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understands their concerns about high tuition and fees, and explains why this particular fee is not included in the university's tuition and fees structure. She asks the students to pay the fee before they depart. She offers to meet virtually with the students to discuss the matter in further detail. The students respond to this with a reiteration of their original complaints and decline to meet.

Elaine and Alex alert their department director to the situation. The next day, Elaine begins her parental leave. Alex is now very worried about leading the post-IDSLP retreat on his own.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Do you think Elaine and Alex could have done anything differently to avoid this issue? If so, what?
- Was Elaine's response to the students' complaints appropriate? How would you have responded?
- What should Alex do to prepare for the upcoming post-program retreat?
- What external conditions in U.S. or international higher education may have impacted this case?
- In this specific case, do you think the students should pay the fee? Why or why not? Going forward, should the program consider a different funding structure?
- In programs that are dependent on institutional partnerships, how do participants impact that partnership? What responsibility do program participants have in maintaining institutional partnerships (if any)?
- What kind of ethical considerations arise when there is an immense resource and power imbalance between two partner organizations? How do those considerations relate to the events of this case?