

Mexican Night: Whose Job is it to Educate?

Lisa Johnson

Assistant Dean for International Study, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA

Email: ldjohnson@smith.edu

Tags

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Setting

At College USA, a private, liberal arts college that would be considered a PWI (predominantly white institution), efforts are made to make diverse students feel welcome and supported. These efforts are generally emulated across campus including in the education abroad office. In the education abroad office these efforts include, but are not limited to, providing “identity” resources on the study abroad website, offering a peer-to-peer mentoring program between returned and prospective study abroad students, making sure that diverse students’ stories are included throughout all facets of the study abroad experience, especially during the predeparture orientation and conversations.

Program Provider ABC offers its study abroad programs in Western Europe. As with many program providers ABC directs prospective students to their location-specific diversity resources which include topic-specific information (i.e., LGBTQIA+, race and ethnicity, dietary concerns, etc.) as well as student stories from a wide variety of social identities. On site, ABC offers a “diverse student club” that is intended to encourage students to gather, share stories and experiences, and contribute to a community about the topic of diversity.

About a month after arrival to their study abroad program, a student from College USA sends an email to the education abroad advisor describing the following incident.

Case

Josie chose to live in student dorms whose purpose, according to Program Provider ABC, is to provide international students an opportunity to meet locals, interact with local students and get a sense of the social life in the predominantly homogenous Western European host country. Shortly after arrival, Josie sensed that the housing space was not for them. There were about sixty students in total, only three of whom identified as persons of color - right away, Josie felt uncomfortable. Josie decided to meet with the housing advisor who encouraged them to try to get involved; the advisor also explained that what Josie was experiencing was just a part of the study abroad process. Josie followed the advisor's advice and attended dinners, events, and parties; although Josie began to feel a bit better about their living space they never felt 100% comfortable or a part of the community.

Then, one Saturday there was a big party in one of the student dorms. Each dorm had created a theme and students would move from dorm to dorm throughout the night. The dorm, where Josie was living, theme was Mexican Night. When students entered the dorm, there was a built cardboard wall that people had to climb over to step into the living space. Students then proceeded to wear sombreros and one even put on a Trump mask and said "go back to where you belong".

Following this party, Josie had to depart for a class trip so they were not at their house for the following three nights. While they were away, Josie's roommate (a host national) texted Josie asking how they felt about the themed party and what Josie thought they should do. Josie was honestly upset about the party's theme - especially because they are Mexican and the party's insensitivity hit close to home for them. However, at the time of the party Josie was intoxicated and decided it was not the time for them to say anything since everyone else had been drinking as well. The roommate proceeded to tell Josie that they wanted to have a talk with both the American students and the host national students living in the dorm. Josie expressed to their roommate that it is not their responsibility to educate people and that they would not feel comfortable talking to the other students about the party's theme. Josie was worried that, since it was their culture, it would open up a big can of worms that would affect their mental health and would compromise their housing experience. Josie proceeded to express to the roommate that they were free to talk to the other students, but that they wanted nothing to do with the conversation nor did they want to be involved or mentioned.

Following the talk, Josie's roommate told them that everyone was receptive and not defensive - which Josie was glad to hear. However, as soon as Josie arrived back to their dorm after the class trip, they could already feel the repercussions of the talk. One American student told Josie, "I understand why you wanted your roommate to talk to us. They handled it great and I think it was good of them to bring it up for you" automatically assuming that the talk was Josie's idea. Furthermore, a host national student messaged the roommate to say that they and a lot of other host national students feel that it should have been Josie who talked to everyone and that the roommate should not have been talking on Josie's behalf. A lot of comments were made in response and Josie felt embarrassed, targeted, and very upset about the situation.

The talk was never Josie's idea yet they were feeling the repercussions. They felt singled out and outnumbered since they were the only Latinx student in the dorm. Josie knew coming to the host country was going to be a huge shift and that the host country was quite homogenous - but they were not expecting to deal with something like this. Josie reached out to the housing advisor to set up an appointment; but they had been told that Program Provider ABC refuses to move students to another housing location unless there was an emergency.

The meeting with the housing advisor did not go quite as well as Josie had hoped. Josie advocated for herself and told the housing staff that they cannot continue living in the assigned dorm; they also emphasized that the situation was not a simplistic issue involving the commute, food, or the communal living space. The housing advisor said they understood, was very apologetic and sympathized with Josie. However, what Josie did not like was that the housing advisor constantly emphasized that this was a learning opportunity for them. To the housing advisor, it seemed like an opportunity for Josie to speak to the housing staff in the dorm and make it a learning experience for all the students there and for them to learn why their actions were inappropriate and unacceptable. Josie expressed that they did not mind speaking to the dorm housing staff, but that they did not want to remain in the dorm. The housing manager's argument against moving Josie to a location was based on the fact that they would have to get readjusted, reacquainted, and that this probably would not be the only discriminating action they would face while in the host country. The housing manager also constantly expressed that the host country is not as aware as the USA, and is why people of color have to educate others, insinuating that Josie should do the same.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- As a study abroad administrator (at the home institution or as an employee of the program provider) how would you help Josie navigate this situation? Could more have been done during the pre-departure preparation phase?
- As the College USA study abroad administrator, how would you approach the conversation with Program Provider ABC about Josie's experience?
- As a study abroad administrator working for Program Provider ABC, how would you approach the conversation with the dorm administrators about Josie's experience?
- Assuming that College USA and/or Program Provider ABC will be evaluating their policies in order to help future students avoid situations like Josie's – which policy/policies should be considered first?
- What are ways that education abroad professionals can help students mitigate the phenomena of experiencing microaggressions/macroaggressions and being told "it's all part of cultural adjustment"?
 - Whose job is it to take on the emotional labor of helping students when they find themselves in a situation like Josie's?
- What are ways to balance expectations around identity and identity expression from Josie's home country with those of the host country?
 - Whose responsibility is it to educate host nationals that may or may not be directly employed by the program provider?
 - Assuming the program provider offers training to faculty and staff, who else should have/could have benefitted from training?