

Cyberbullying or Artistic Expression: Navigating an Institutional Response

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Management and Operations; Partnerships; Student Services; Technology; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case study unfolds on a semester-long program based at a family-run art and design school in Europe (SAC) which caters to predominantly U.S. study abroad students. Their staff of 15 have worked for the organization for years and are seasoned in their roles. Student conduct is part of the broad purview of the local executive director, Leonora. SAC is a small program, and students are housed in double-occupancy rooms in SAC-owned residential apartments with 3-5 other students per apartment.

A U.S. university has a large portfolio of offerings (including bilateral and multilateral exchanges, customized faculty-led programs, and affiliations with study abroad organizations based in the U.S. and abroad). SAC is one of the approved programs.

The university international education director, Jody, is responsible for managing the full spectrum of relationships with partners, as a one-person study abroad and international student services office. Her experiences have made her well-versed in norms of the field, including standards of communication between host and home institutions, navigating inconsistent codes of conduct and cultural differences, and managing incidents and risk. Jody knows her students well, typically working with them for over a year prior to departure as their recruiter, study abroad advisor, program manager, and instructor. She reviews their conduct records; facilitates the implementation of any behavioral contracts, learning or wellness accommodations; leads the

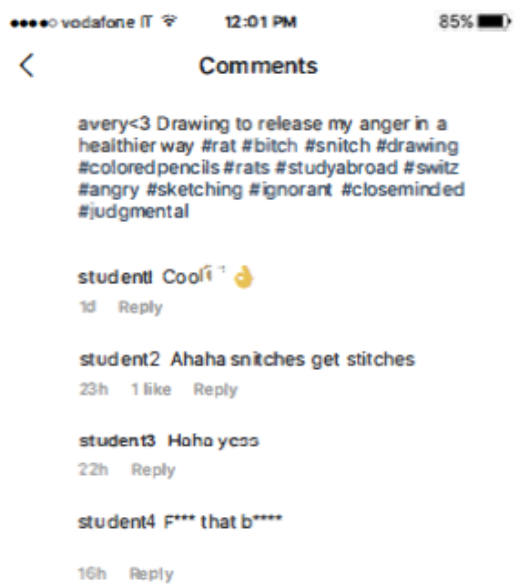
health and safety orientation; and serves as their contact for all questions, including

Case

Seven weeks into a 15-week long program, Jody receives her first e-mail from Leonora explaining a series of conflicts involving one of her students:

“We have not met yet, I’m the Director at SAC. A problem has come up this semester that involves one of your students, Avery. Last week, Gerry, one of Avery’s housemates came to my office to tell me that Avery had been smoking marijuana in the apartment. Gerry confronted Avery about it and asked that it stop, but it continued. This week, I called Avery into my office and said that this behavior would not be tolerated, with a consequence of being sent home if it happens again. Upon arriving at my office, Avery was angry and defensive, denying (of course) the accusation of drug use. It was clear by Avery’s behavior in the office that the accusations are true. However, I have no proof other than Gerry’s word and decided that a firm warning might be the best course of action.

This morning, the image below of Gerry was posted to Avery’s social media account using the hashtags you can see. The comments are aggressive, and Gerry said that one of the people that commented tried to add her on the site. Given the aggressive nature of the image and comments, Gerry is upset and has decided to stay with friends this week. I wanted to talk to you to get your perspective. I am considering sending Avery home as this cyber bullying is certainly in violation of the behavior contract. I don’t have any proof of drug use, other than Gerry’s word, and Gerry said the other house mates will not get involved. Please call me when you get this email.”



After replying briefly to Leonora to confirm receipt of the message and indicate that she will call as soon as possible, Jody reaches out to Avery to get additional information:

“Dear Avery: This morning, I learned of a situation in which you are involved, and I feel it is necessary to hear from you. What has been explained to me thus far implies a level of seriousness that, if true, is a violation of our Student Code of Conduct, so I will need more

information. In particular, I would like to hear from you regarding the attached image and related commentary. As my understanding is that the anger referenced resulted from a roommate conflict, I am also writing to give you the opportunity to explain things from your perspective.”

Avery responded over the course of the next morning (in her time zone, but Jody’s evening) with multiple back-to-back e-mails expressing a spectrum of reactions. She vacillated from dismissive and minimizing to defensive and questioning, in one moment absolving herself of responsibility and in the next expressing regret.

Excerpts from her e-mails illustrate this progression:

“I am sorry for you to hear about this drama.” “I think it is very silly to be mad at a drawing.” “Social media is a way people vent these days.” “I used my art to express my feelings as I always have.” “How can you even tell it’s her?” “There are just claims and words. Without proof I don’t see how I can get expelled.” “I used colored pencils and a pen in my sketchbook about a conflict in my home. I posted it and am not responsible for who commented on it. People felt my rage, but I did not say anything threatening.” “I’m sorry she had a bad reaction to my post. It was my personal social media account and I’ve since made it private. My goal was to self-express and get anger out in a healthy manner. I apologize again and I’ve taken the photo down.” “Maybe I made a mistake posting it online, I’ve never believed in censoring myself. I was taught at our university to express myself and stand up for what I believe in in my art.” “I did not mean to offend her I was just mad that she went to the director without coming to me first.”

Avery goes on to explain that she and Gerry have different lifestyles and she feels as though she is being targeted as a result. She also asks Jody to consult with art faculty, as “this is an art issue ... I know you aren’t an artist so I might seem like a bully but to me it’s just a form of self-expression.”

After reading the e-mails thoroughly, Jody is struggling to support Leonora’s recommendation for immediate dismissal and decides to connect with her to mutually define steps moving forward.

Discussion Questions

Imagine that you are Jody. As you consider this case, discuss:

- What is your reaction to Leonora’s e-mail? Does anything stand out? How would you respond to her?
- How would you respond to Avery’s messages?
- What would be your recommendations and next steps?
- Do you see this as a student conduct issue? If no, why not? If yes, which facts lead you to this conclusion, and what are the potential violations?
- Are cultural differences at play here? If so, what might they be?