

The Slippery Slopes of Discrimination: Advocating for Peers Outside of Campus

Beth Magyar

Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Monterey, CA, United States
bmagyar@middlebury.edu

Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Social Justice; Experiential Education; International Student and Scholar Services; Non-Formal Education; Partnerships; Program Design; Professional Training; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

In University X, incoming international students are paired with host students (international or domestic). The intention is that the new students will have a peer to help them adjust to the new setting, connect them to people and opportunities on campus and foster intercultural relationships.

The host students attending University X must apply to the partnership program to be a peer partner and meet a list of criteria. They are required to be full time students (domestic or international), have been attending University X for at least two semesters (upon starting the peer partnership), be in good academic standing, and be able to demonstrate strong interpersonal skills with people from a variety of backgrounds. International degree seeking students who intend to fulfill their entire degree and graduate from University X can start as an international student and then phase into the peer partner role (host student) by applying to the position once they have been on campus for two semesters.

Upon acceptance to the peer partner program, the host students go through 10 hours of training (prior to the arrival of the international students) in intercultural competency, creating welcoming spaces, team building and relevant information and resources on campus. The students are challenged on their perceptions of themselves, their campus and the United States in global context. The students will have two check-in group sessions during the semester (without their international student partners), write 3 self-reflections and fill out a survey at the close of the semester.

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University X draws students from a variety of countries across all continents of the globe. The students typically come to study languages, international relations, business, and environmental science. Prior to departure, international students receive whatever training and information that their home university provides. Upon arrival in the United States, University X welcomes them in with an orientation specific to international students. Some sessions are led by the host students in the peer partnering program. Both groups of students participate together in select activities throughout the week as well. The international students are briefed on the campus, their classes, resources, and University X culture. After their week of orientation, the international students and host students are matched. Each student is only paired with one other student. There are no groups.

Throughout the semester the pairs of peers are required to attend one check-in together, two social events hosted by the ISSS office and two weekend workshops where every student presents about themselves (their background, family, culture, traditions, etc.) and what their experiences have been like on campus. The pairs are highly encouraged to spend time together outside of the structured events. The international students are not required to submit the same self-reflections but are encouraged to participate. Presentations are required for everyone.

At the end of the semester, international students may fill out a survey to give feed-back on University X's program. Host students turn in the required reflections and fill out a survey. The ISSS office hosts a send-off ceremony for the International students. In the past, it has been difficult to get students to attend due to the time commitment of finals. However, the ISSS office also rewards the pairs that fulfilled all required assignments throughout the semester by paying for a weekend pass at the local ski resort. This weekend takes place once finals are finished and attendance is usually high.

Case

This Fall semester, the University hosted 25 international students. Of the 25 pairs, 17 pairs attended all required events, check-ins, and submitted their self-reflections. The ISSS Office funded passes for the weekend at the end of the semester. The students were not required to be strong skiers or snowboarders to participate. ISSS sees this as a valuable activity for the international students because snow sports are deeply ingrained in the culture at University X and the past peer pairs have highlighted how much they enjoyed it.

The ski resort is close to the University and it is frequented by many of the host students throughout the winter months. The resort gains substantial revenue through the students and faculty who purchase full season passes, their families who purchase passes when they visit, and the food they buy while on the slopes.

In return for the extensive business that University X provides the resort, the resort gives a free one-hour introduction lesson to any of the students from the peer partner program who have little to no experience. The students do not have to stay with their partner for the lesson, but they are required to check in with each other throughout the day.

This year, 8 students joined the beginners lesson (a mix of both international and host students). During the lesson, some of the students picked up on microaggressions made by the instructor who was guiding the lesson. The comments were directed at the international students who did not outwardly acknowledge what the instructor said. The host students who were from the United States picked up on the underlying messages but did not know how to handle the situation.

Later in the day while the students were eating food between rides, a guest reported a few stolen items. The staff from the resort specifically sought out the international students and questioned them about their gear, how they paid for it, and to see their receipts. They did not ask other guests to do the same. The domestic students that were present tried to navigate conversation with the staff but did not know what the proper procedure was. They also did not know how to unpack the situation with their international peers afterwards.

The feedback from the hosting students expressed the discomfort they saw and felt during these situations and asked to receive information and training in future trainings. Some of the international students noted the moments of discrimination in their surveys but did not emphasize it so as not to come off as rude.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Is it the University's responsibility to engage the ski resort in discussion about diversity, equity and inclusivity in the context of their students? Why or why not? How should they go about it?
- What are strategies you would use to train the host students on microaggressions and how to handle them in off-campus situations? (Keep in mind, some of the host students could be from other countries.) Are there other offices or resources on campus that could get involved in the peer partner program?
- How would you approach teaching the incoming international students about discrimination outside of the University setting? Who leads that discussion? Do you bring in a professional?
- What does allyship look like in the context of a program that partners international and host students? Should there be an expectation that hosting students are prepared to be allies? Why or why not?
- How would you approach talking about on campus discrimination and how it might link to discrimination off campus?