

Risking Relationships: Navigating Tensions Between Student Religion and Local Context

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; Partnerships; Student Learning and Development; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

The Intensive Language Institute (ILI) is a US government-funded summer intensive language program for undergraduate and graduate students. The program requires applicants to demonstrate existing intercultural experience and competence, as well as specific academic or professional goals that require proficiency in the target language. ILI operates programs in a variety of cities around the world, partnering with local language schools for logistics, language instruction, excursions, host families and more. In addition to the permanent local staff, each cohort is accompanied by a Resident Director (RD) who is intimately familiar with US and local cultures, languages, and systems. The RD acts as the liaison between the local language school staff and the US-based ILI staff. While participants can be as young as 18, the program requires a certain level of maturity due to the intensive nature of the coursework and the immersive experience of living in a new city. Many

participants join with prior experience in the target language, but some join as complete beginners. Participants live in pairs with local host families.

This particular case takes place in northern India, where religious tensions run high. In the weeks leading up to the program there were reports of lynchings elsewhere in the state based on misunderstandings passed from town to town via WhatsApp. Religious violence, especially against Muslims, is regularly featured in the news. India also has a decades-long history of anti-conversion laws across various states, limiting missionaries to charity work (e.g. housing, food, healthcare) and barring them from proselytizing. Individuals working to convert locals to Christianity – or even perceived to be doing such work – have been violently attacked. Participants nervously discussed these current issues amongst themselves during Pre-Departure Orientation.

Case

About a week into ILI's program, one of the program participants asks the RD, Abhik, for a private conversation. The student, Sheena, says that her roommate, Kerry, seems very nice but has put Sheena in some uncomfortable situations. She says that Kerry is overly chatty with beggars, rickshaw drivers, and waiters, sharing too many personal details about where the young women are staying, the language school where they are studying, and more. On a ride home late one night, Kerry told the rickshaw driver all about their host family and language institute, as he asked prying questions as he drove them to their host families in the dark. The next day, taking a rickshaw home from class, Sheena saw Kerry quickly hand the driver a little card as they got out. Sheena asked her what it was, and Kerry replied that it was just a little thank-you card. All of this feels odd to Sheena, who thinks that Kerry is perhaps being naïve and putting the two in danger by oversharing with strange men, and so she has come to Abhik for advice on how to handle these situations with her roommate.

This all sounds only somewhat problematic to Abhik until Sheena mentions the "thank-you card." He has a feeling this was more than just a thank-you card. He calls a meeting with Kerry and the Indian language school's Director, Paritosh, and they discover that Kerry has a few religious texts in her backpack, along with a stack of small, glossy cards in Hindi describing Jesus Christ's grace and the name of the local branch of Kerry's Christian denomination. It turns out Kerry had planned on distributing these cards from the beginning, before leaving the US for the program. Paritosh is appalled that this could be happening in his school, and leaves the room to collect his thoughts. As an Indian American, Abhik knows that missionary language is especially offensive to many Indians, and Paritosh is likely trying to hide his personal feelings of offense in order to handle the situation as neutrally as possible. Although proselytization is not technically listed as prohibited in the program's policies, Abhik and Paritosh agree that it is disrespectful and potentially dangerous in the local context. The two staff reconvene to explain to Kerry that this activity is inappropriate, and that she can no longer carry these items around with her or distribute them in any way. She says she had no idea this would be a problem, and promises to do as they say.

The next day, Abhik shares this update with Sheena but asks that she not tell anyone else in the program about what happened. He says that this was a directive from the program office back in the US, which doesn't want other students to gossip, and doesn't want to offend or concern the language instructors or any other host families. Understanding the dangers involved in conducting missionary work, Sheena suddenly feels very uncomfortable with her living situation, knowing that multiple male drivers know where she and Kerry live.

Half-way through the program, the situation has not improved. Although Kerry had agreed to stop handing out conversion cards, an instructor sees some cards fall out of her backpack during class one day. The staff also notice that Kerry stops doing her homework and starts breaking curfew.

Abhik shares all of these developments with the US-based staff and advises that they send Kerry home to the US for violating program policies and putting the reputation of the entire program at risk. As a US government funded program, Abhik argues, ILI cannot risk being perceived to be supporting religious missionary work in a country actively hostile to missionary activity. The US-based staff issues Kerry two more warnings but decides not to send her home, citing that proselytization is not addressed in the student conduct handbook.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are some of the key ethical concerns in this case?
- What issues, stakeholders, or priorities might the US-based staff be considering in their decision not to send Kerry home?
- How do you think the power dynamics between US-based staff and local partners played a role in the decision-making process? What does this case say about the institutional partnership, and what could be done to ensure a more equitable relationship?
- What additional steps, if any, might Abhik have taken to manage the on-site situation?
- What kind of student support do you think should have been provided to Kerry, Sheena, and other students on the program?
- How might this situation affect ILI's relationship with the local language school and the surrounding community?
- What, if any, additional policies or procedures could be implemented to avoid a similar situation with future students? How should religion be discussed or addressed, in terms of program rules and student preparation?