

I'm Nonbinary and I use They/Them Pronouns: Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Partnerships; Personnel Management; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

At College USA, a private, single-gendered, liberal arts college efforts are made to make diverse students feel welcome and supported. These efforts are generally emulated across campus including the education abroad office. In the education abroad office these efforts include, but are not limited to, “identity” resources on the education abroad website, offering a peer-to-peer mentoring program between returned and prospective education abroad students, and making sure that diverse students’ stories are included throughout all facets of the education abroad experience, especially during the pre-departure orientation and conversations. Due to staffing shortages in the education abroad office, the focus is primarily on students pursuing semester education abroad opportunities; minimal support is made available to students pursuing summer education abroad.

Program Provider ABC offers popular semester and summer field-based programs in an English-speaking country in the southern hemisphere. The program was originally designed by faculty both in the U.S. and in the host country. Only recently has the program started to recognize the importance of learning about and trying to follow best practices within the field of education abroad. At the moment, there is no information on ABC’s website providing resources for diverse students.

After a student had completed one of ABC’s summer programs, they wrote to the College USA education abroad office to report the following.

Case

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Dylan identifies as nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns, which they notified Program Provider ABC of before their departure. During the 6-week summer program, Dylan reported that the instructors rarely used the correct pronouns when referring to them. Additionally, Dylan reported that the most inappropriate incident took place with the person who was cooking for the program (who was also the mother of the onsite program director). This person approached Dylan one morning and told them that their identity was "anti-Christian" and that if they were staying for the semester, the students at the host university would have a hard time with their pronouns. Obviously upset by the statements, Dylan reported the incident to the ABC program staff. ABC's TA was supportive and kind, but the rest of the instructors never apologized or even checked in with Dylan about the incident. Dylan repeatedly requested to have a conversation with the instructors, which they pushed off until the program had ended. On Dylan's last day in the country, they had a Skype meeting with the U.S.-based program director, one of the instructors, and the TA. Dylan reported that the meeting was not very satisfying - the instructor continued to misgender Dylan and was ultimately asked to leave the meeting. No other instructors were present for the meeting and it was unclear to Dylan what steps, if any, ABC planned to take to address these issues for future students. As a result, Dylan continued to be frustrated that the instructors were unequipped to welcome and keep transgender students safe in their program and provide an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Upon receiving the report from Dylan, College USA's education abroad assistant director contacted ABC's U.S.-based program director to get more information as they were concerned that ABC wasn't providing adequate support for diverse students. ABC's U.S.-based program director apologized profusely and agreed that the onsite staff did an unacceptable job misgendering Dylan and not providing an effective learning environment for them. The director mentioned that up until now the program had only had transgender students who identified as male/female, so they had felt over confident in their ability and preparation to support their first non-binary student on the program.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are the identity intersections that are coming into play with this case study? What are ways to balance expectations around identity and identity expression from Dylan's home country with those of the host country?
- What are ways that education abroad professionals can help students mitigate the phenomena of experiencing microaggressions/macroaggressions? In what ways can home universities collaborate with education abroad partners onsite to raise awareness of the diversity of U.S. students in order to be prepared to support them?
- What are ways that program providers can help maximize effective learning environments for diverse on their programs? What might you recommend to Program Provider ABC as next steps?
- Many U.S. campuses are engaging with non-gender normative students to identify safer spaces. Discuss if this is something that education abroad programs/host institutions should also be providing to education abroad students.
- As an education abroad administrator (at the home institution or as the program provider) how would you help Dylan navigate this situation in the moment? What would you have done differently prior to departure?

- Using a post-structuralism approach (assuming that diverse students face structural and cultural barriers that impede their success thus placing the onus on institutions to change campus structures and practices rather than simply blaming the student for their inability to succeed¹), what needs to be deconstructed (i.e., who has benefited from the current model and/or are there structures that limit opportunities for certain populations) and reconstructed to best support non-binary identifying students?

¹ Quaye, S. J., & Harper, S. R. (Eds.). *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations* (2nd ed.), 2014. Routledge.

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