

Don't Take it Personally:

Supporting Diverse Students Abroad

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Internationalization and Global Learning; Partnerships; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

Kayla is a third-year undergraduate student at a private university in the U.S. She is an Anthropology major and has a special interest in pre-Colombian civilizations. She decided to spend a semester studying abroad in Mexico City, and applied to an exchange program at a local university that is known for its unique fieldwork opportunities. Kayla identifies as a cisgender female and African-American, and is an active member of her home university's Black Student Association. She has not traveled outside of the U.S. before and took two years of Spanish in high school. Kayla has read several books and watched some documentaries about Mexico's Mayan and Aztec cultures in order to prepare for her time abroad. Her home university also provided her with basic information about health and safety, academic expectations and travel logistics during her pre-departure orientation.

The Mexican university hosting the program has a longstanding partnership with Kayla's home institution. The two universities have an active bilateral exchange agreement; both send and receive approximately 30-40 students each year. In recent years, the Mexican university has also run a short-term custom program, which has significantly increased the number of the U.S. university's students studying there. They have been in partnership for 10 years.

During the exchange program, students take most courses with local students, along with a language and culture class designed for international students. There is no language requirement, as the university offers several courses taught in English. Students live with host families and are supported by staff in the International Office, who have been working with exchange students for many years. Upon arrival in Mexico City, students receive an orientation from the International Office staff, which covers campus resources, academic requirements, safety guidelines and rules for living with a host family.

Case

Kayla had a difficult start to her exchange program; she experienced several incidents that made her uncomfortable. When she would walk down the street, many people would stare and point at her. She sometimes heard people call her “negrita,” which she knew meant “Black girl” in Spanish. This seemed to be particularly frequent when she passed by men; sometimes they also made kissing noises. When she was with other students from the U.S., she noticed that this did not happen as much to them. Being the only African-American exchange student on her program, she did not feel she could really talk to the other students about these issues. She started to limit her outings and take Uber more often to commute to class in order to minimize these encounters. This became costly and affected her personal budget for her semester.

Kayla also had some issues at her homestay. Her host family was primarily speaking with her in Spanish, and Kayla sometimes struggled to communicate. Her 18-year-old host sister would often touch her hair without asking permission and ask if it was real. Kayla politely asked her not to, but she continued to do so. Kayla wondered if her limited Spanish was part of the problem. Additionally, her host mother would make comments about her weight and her clothes, telling her she wasn’t eating enough or asking if she was sure she wanted to wear that outfit to class. She also called her “negrita” from time to time. Kayla tried ignoring these comments, but they continued to bother her. She started to spend more time in her bedroom, only coming out for mealtimes.

After a month of such encounters, Kayla brought up these issues to the local International Office staff. The student coordinator, María, explained that these behaviors are part of the culture and many students experience some adjustment. When asking about interactions on the street, Maria said men often make comments to women to express their admiration. When Kayla mentioned this doesn’t seem to be happening to her White peers, María explained that Mexicans don’t see many Black people in person, so they likely find her exotic and interesting. When she brought up her host mother and sister’s behavior, she was told her family means well and they are not intending to offend her. María told her to just ignore this behavior and to not take it personally.

Kayla tried to follow María’s advice over the next few weeks, but things seemed to be getting worse. She tried changing her style of clothing to appear less noticeable on the street, but that didn’t seem to make a difference. She spent even more time in her room at home and stopped hanging out with her friends outside of class. She only took Uber to and from campus, and started skipping lunch in order to have enough money for rides. Some days, she didn’t have the energy to go to class at all. She felt like something was wrong with her and she wasn’t meant to study abroad; she started thinking of returning home.

The International Office began to suspect something may be wrong when several of Kayla’s professors reached out about her frequent absences and dropping grades. María asked Kayla to come into the office to talk and gave her a warning, reminding her about the program’s rules regarding fulfilling academic requirements. Kayla

responded angrily, saying it wasn't her fault that all Mexicans were racist and made her feel uncomfortable just going to class. She said she would rather go home than waste more time there and demanded that she be reimbursed for all the Uber rides she was forced to take to go to class. María was shocked and reported the situation to her director, Ana, informing her that Kayla wished to return home.

When the local staff contacted Kayla's home university to let them know what happened, the Director of Study Abroad, Alice, was surprised; this was the first time she had heard there were any issues with Kayla. Kayla had signed a release during her application that allowed the university to share information with her parents, so Alice called Kayla's parents to inform them of the situation. Her parents knew that Kayla was having trouble with sticking to her budget, but they were not aware of the academic issues or any other problems.

Alice explained that if Kayla returned home at this point in the semester, she would not receive any refund of program expenses and she would risk not earning any credit for the semester. Her parents did not want Kayla to return; they had paid a lot of money for her to study abroad and they did not want her to lose a semester of school. They said it was the local staff's job to support her and help her figure things out. Alice spoke with Ana, the International Office Director in Mexico, to discuss how they could best support Kayla, but Ana believed that Kayla should return home.

Alice is unsure what to do. She does not want to pressure the local staff for fear of damaging their long-standing partnership. They exchange many students between the two institutions, and the custom program is a successful revenue generator, which is important to university leadership. However, she is worried about the adequacy of the support Kayla is receiving. There have not been many African-American students who have studied on this program before and she is concerned about the local staff's understanding of Kayla's needs. She must decide how to proceed.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How would you explain Kayla's behavior? What factors led to her most recent reaction?
- Discuss the perspective of Kayla's parents. What considerations led them to react as they did, and to what extent should the Director of Study Abroad factor their response into her decision making process?
- Discuss the response of the local staff. Should they agree to keep Kayla on the program?
- How should the program staff address the financial issues raised and Kayla's demands for reimbursement?
- How could the two universities have better supported Kayla before and throughout her study abroad experience? What could they have done to prepare Kayla for the challenges she faced?
- How should the home university Director of Study Abroad, Alice, proceed?
- In what ways can the home university ensure that their partner universities are aware of the diversity of U.S. students and be prepared to support them?
- What other groups of students or social identities may be challenged in different cultural contexts on a study abroad program? How can these students be supported before, during, and after their experiences abroad?