

Toeing the Line between Cultures: When Expectations for Faculty Behavior Differ

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Management and Operations; Personnel Management; University/Higher Education

Setting

The “PER” undergraduate student exchange program is the result of an agreement between a private, Midwestern U.S. university (CU) and a private university (KU) in a large capital city in a Southeast Asian nation popular with international students. KU is an institution which matriculates 20,000 local students and at least 1,500 international students each year. Each semester approximately 100 students are exchanged between the two institutions. KU also invites one CU faculty member to teach one course per semester. CU is responsible for paying the faculty member’s salary, under the purview of the CU Human Resources office.

To coordinate the PER program onsite, KU employs local staff including a Director (who is new to the position) and two supporting staff members, all local to the host culture and all of whom identify as female. Other than the one visiting U.S. faculty member, the several professors who teach for the program are local to the country or international faculty who have resided in the country long-term and therefore are familiar with the cultural expectations. To start each semester, the Director leads a comprehensive, two-day orientation with the U.S. students participating in the semester-long program, and a half-day orientation session with all faculty members including the visiting faculty member. Students sign a code of conduct referring to program and cultural expectations, while professors are not asked to sign one.

Case

Midway through the semester, one of the program staff members passes by the classroom door and hears the U.S. professor using profane language during a lesson. From the professor's tone of voice, the staff member assumes he is speaking as part of the lesson and not directly berating or addressing a student in the class. The staff member is taken aback by the offensive language, but does not want to disrupt class, so she does not enter the room. She reports the incident to the Director. In local culture, the language used is considered obscene and not appropriate for a professional or classroom setting.

Based on cultural norms dictating hierarchical respect for professors, and particularly for guest professors from another country, the staff member and Director hesitate to talk with the professor about the language incident. The Director contacts two U.S. colleagues for advice and is told that U.S. professors tend to act more casually than professors in other cultures, for example, allowing students to address them by their first name, or dressing more informally in the classroom context. On the other hand, punctuality in the host culture is not enforced; the U.S. professor has arrived late to class one time during the semester thus far, based on what the Director is aware of. As it was not a strict cultural expectation, the Director did not speak to the professor about punctuality or the one late arrival instance.

Mid-term course evaluations completed that week by students were generally positive; students reported they felt they were learning well and sufficiently challenged in the U.S. professor's course. There were no comments referring to the professor's language or behavior. All students attending the course are from the U.S.

On another occasion a few weeks later (one month before the end of the semester), a different staff member reports having seen the professor sitting at a neighborhood outdoor bar and drinking alcohol with several students from his class. Also present at the bar, which is close to campus, are program students who do not attend the U.S. professor's course and numerous local students. The incident took place during the evening, outside of class hours. The professor and students did not see the staff member who was walking by on a nearby sidewalk. The staff member did not stop to talk with the professor and students. The next day she reported the incident to the Director.

The Director is conflicted and unsure of the best way to react. When she asks her supervisor at the host university, she is informed that the professor has political influence and should be given full leeway without any repercussions.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What cultural differences emerge in this case?
- Should visiting faculty and students be expected to follow all local cultural norms in the host country, even if conflicting with their home culture?
- What questions does this situation raise about orientation, training, and setting expectations for staff, students, and faculty?

- What is the role (and what are the limits to the role) of staff in instances that some would consider outside of the program context (i.e. after work hours)? Does this differ for matters involving: a) students only, b) faculty only, c) students and faculty together?
- What choices do the Director and individual staff members have in the classroom incident and evening incident? If you were the Director, what would you do and why?
- Do you think gender plays a role in this case?
- Does time of the semester (i.e. midway; one month from end) influence the action taken, if any?
- Do you think the response/action taken would or should vary according to the cultural background of the staff member (i.e. if from the same culture as professor)?
- What does this situation represent regarding issues of “power” and “face” across cultures?
- How could financial circumstances surrounding the exchange agreement potentially influence decisions that the director makes in this scenario?