

Culture & Inclusion: Navigating Gender Identity Across Cultures

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Tags

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

Setting

Worldwide Study Abroad (WSA) is a medium sized U.S.-based study abroad provider organization. WSA runs semester and summer programs on six continents for several hundred students each term. These island programs are center based, where students live and study on WSA owned campuses. Each WSA campus is staffed with 20 people from cooks to faculty, with 15 host country national staff and 5 foreign staff. Campuses are run by a program director that acts as the primary liaison between the campus and headquarters in the United States. The student affairs coordinator, a U.S. hire, acts as a secondary liaison to the headquarters. The program director supervises and trains all onsite staff.

WSA values diverse perspectives on their programs and works to bring cohorts of students together that represent global diversity. Part of the organization's mission emphasizes the importance of diversity and inclusion, and its goal to create inclusive communities. In regards to gender identity, WSA offers resources for students to learn more about host country perspectives and strives to offer gender-neutral housing at all locations. Students receive additional information and resources from admissions counselors during the application process and during orientation before and after their arrival in the host country. Students self-report their gender on application materials. This information is shared with the program director and the student affairs coordinator.

This case will focus on the campus in Nicaragua. The program director, Manuel, is Nicaraguan, but has spent over ten years studying and working in the United States. The five foreign staff, including the student affairs coordinator, Emma, are all American. Outside of the program director and faculty, all other Nicaraguan staff do not speak English.

Case

One week before the start of the semester, staff at the WSA campus in Nicaragua are preparing for the arrival of 30 semester students. The demographic report lists that the group gender breakdown includes 26 cisgender students, 3 non-binary students, and 1 transgender student. Emma is responsible for making room assignments of groups of four, and notes that all but seven cisgendered females have indicated that they are comfortable with gender-neutral housing. In collaboration with Manuel, she decides to prioritize grouping students by gender and creates one gender-neutral room for the non-binary and transgender students.

Emma also meets with the program administrator, a local staff member, to go over program details. The administrator asks for a list of the students and their gender for paperwork to submit for an international trip later that semester, and asks for clarification regarding the non-binary students. “Is this student a he or she?” is asked repeatedly. Emma struggles responding, as Spanish does not have a widely accepted gender-neutral pronoun. Emma decides to compile a list of the student’s sex based on their passport and stops trying to explain non-binary identities to her coworker.

At a check-in with Manuel, Emma mentions the interaction with the program administrator and asks if there has ever been a staff discussion around gender identity, specifically with a U.S. perspective (the home country of the majority of program participants). Manuel responds that there has been no previous discussion and would love Emma to facilitate a training. Emma is new to the position, not confident in her Spanish, and feels uncomfortable explaining the American perspective on gender to a group of Nicaraguan staff that have been working with the program for years. Emma reaches out to headquarters for support and is notified that while they would love to have a training for local staff at all of the campuses, it is up to the program directors to manage and facilitate trainings.

One week into the program, a student comes to Emma expressing concerns that the one gender-neutral room housing the non-cisgender identifying students feels othering and does not support the inclusive community vision of WSA. They have also noticed that their peers and some of the staff consistently use the incorrect pronouns for a few members of the group and are not making an effort to correct themselves.

Emma brings the concerns to Manuel, who responds it is best to leave the housing assignments alone, as gender-based rooming is more acceptable for the Nicaraguan staff. Manuel also welcomes Emma to facilitate a conversation regarding identity with the students, would be happy to attend, but would be uncomfortable facilitating.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In what ways did Manuel’s actions regarding housing decisions, support or not support WSA’s goal to create inclusive housing?

- What responsibility does Emma have in developing understanding of gender identities with her colleagues?
- What strategies could be used to support students who don't use he/she pronouns, when the host country language doesn't have non-masculine/feminine pronouns?
- If you were Emma, how would you respond to the student's concerns around inclusiveness on the program?
- Should WSA's campuses provide identity training for its onsite staff? If yes, who should be responsible for these trainings?
- What training and resources do you provide for local staff around gender and other identity-based learning?