BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR

The definition of ethics is deceivingly simple: moral principles that govern behavior. But what does that mean in practice, particularly as it relates to study abroad programs and their effect on host communities?

The Forum on Education Abroad includes ethics in its <u>Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad</u>, which aim to improve practices in study abroad so students' international education experiences are as rich and meaningful as possible. Standard 9 states, "The organization operates its programs in accordance with ethical principles and trains its staff and students in ethical decision-making and practices."

Adhering to ethical principles not only benefits students; it's essential to host communities, too. "It's important that we consider the impact and implications of our programs on host communities," says Jason Kinnear, Interim Associate Dean of Study Abroad at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "If we're looking for long-term, sustainable relationships with communities where we can send students frequently, then it's good practice to engage and interact with the people who are going to be most impacted by our students and their time abroad."

When ethics are ignored or disregarded, that interaction between students and host communities can go awry. One common complaint is throngs of students descending upon a foreign community and

PARTICIPANTS IN EDUCATION ABROAD PROGRAMS ARE OBLIGATED TO ENGAGE ETHICALLY WITH HOST COMMUNITIES. BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

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acting like stereotypical ugly Americans. "Groups of drunk students roaming around the town does not engender a lot of positive interaction with locals," says Kinnear.

Many years ago, Kinnear worked for another institution that had a small study center in a town outside Florence, Italy. The university received several complaints about disorderly, loud students. "We didn't do enough to prepare our students or reach out to the organization in this community to talk about how to improve the situation," admits Kinnear. "It's a two-way street."

Universities and partner organizations in host communities must work together to ensure ethical engagement among students and residents. "Together, you can continually

examine your programs to ensure that not only are they not doing harm, but are also ideally bringing reciprocal benefits," says Andrea Custodi, Ph.D., Director of Academic Affairs and Strategic Initiatives for CET Academic Programs, a third-party provider of study abroad programs.

3 AREAS OF IMPACT ON HOST COMMUNITIES

Custodi helped draft the Forum's <u>Code of Ethics for Study Abroad</u>, which complements its Standards of Good Practice. A section devoted to relationships with host societies encourages institutions and providers to "consider and prepare for the environmental, economic and social consequences" of study abroad programs. It's beneficial to examine the impact of programs on host communities in those three areas.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT | "We need to consider how our students consume energy, water and food, as well as how they contribute to pollution," says Kinnear. That may be as simple as encouraging students to carry reusable water bottles, air dry their clothes, use biodegradable soaps and walk to class and other sites.

"What we think about as an organization that develops programs on the ground is how our structure and setup can make careful, intentional use of finite resources through basic green measures," says Custodi. For instance, CET reuses office and kitchen supplies—from cloth towels to chopsticks—whenever possible. The company's application and pre-departure materials are also virtually paperless. "On every level," says Custodi, "we try to inculcate awareness of the environmental impacts of what we do."

ECONOMIC IMPACT | There are many potential issues surrounding the economic impact on host communities. "Our students are stereotypically wealthier than the people in the communities they visit, so there can be an unequal distribution of wealth," says Kinnear. "While they often spend a lot of money and support the local community, they can also displace local vendors and small businesses if, for example, they eat primarily at fast food chains."

In addition, host communities can become too reliant on income from study abroad groups. "If there are waves of students coming to the community, there can be boom and bust cycles—especially as we shift from semester-based programs to short faculty-led programs," says Kinnear. "That can dramatically change the economics of a community."

Custodi also cites the ethical conundrum of staffing. You want to pay local staff a level that is commensurate with their education and experience. However, do you adhere to U.S. pay scales or local pay scales? "On the one hand, you have an ethical obligation to not pay someone substantially less to work for a U.S. program than what their credentials would command in the U.S. market," says Custodi. "On the other hand, there can be very real differences in cost of living, and you don't want to skew the local pay scale in such a way that you develop two economies." It really comes down to carefully considering staff pay on a program-by-program basis with these considerations in mind, she says.

SOCIETAL IMPACT | Concerns surrounding the societal impact on host communities can range from poor student behavior to imposition of foreign cultural norms. "Students can be seen as either the ugly Americans or the white saviors, trying to impose American cultural norms on the local community," says Kinnear. "In addition, some U.S. students see locals as exotic, so they treat people as a display and go around taking pictures with little regard for those around them."

Custodi admits that respecting local cultural norms can be tricky. "In some cases, we can sparingly choose what we consider universal rights," she says. "Because we are an American organization, we can choose in some cases to unapologetically stand for certain ideals—for example, insisting that if you work with us or for us, then you can't treat women poorly or exclude members of a certain social group."

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Universities and third-party providers aim for sensitivity and respect for host communities. "A core ethical imperative underwrites everything we do," says Custodi. "We can't operate ethically as a field if we focus on the well-being of our students to the exclusion of the well-being of the communities where our programs are based."

To help ensure that a partnership between the university and host community is mutually beneficial, consider this advice:

■ **Work hand-in-hand with local organizations.** "It's important to find partners who can share knowledge and information about the community," says Kinnear. "Have conversations with these partners about how to best prepare students for their time abroad."

■ **Cover ethical engagement with communities.** "Even with short-term programs, there should be preparation for students—during pre-departure orientation and on site—to have a successful and positive interaction with local communities," says Kinnear.

■ **Establish long-term relationships.** "Try to avoid one-off programming when you can," says Custodi. "By definition, it's unsustainable and pragmatically is more work all around." It also creates less opportunities for reciprocal benefits between the institution and the community. So, for instance, if you choose a location for a studio arts program, make sure it could work for political science, history, literature or other programs, too.

■ **Coach your faculty.** "We not only have an ethical reason to prepare our students, but we need to do more to prepare our faculty when they lead programs abroad," says Kinnear. They are not immune to or exempt from ethical considerations about the environmental, economic and societal impact of their programs. If faculty are educated on the issues, they can better prepare students.

"The stereotype is that U.S. students go abroad and just take. We consume the knowledge, we consume the space, we consume the resources and we consume the culture," says Kinnear. "It's rare that we set up our students to give back to the host communities."

To be sure, ethical engagement with host communities is complex, but continual conversations around ethics are critical. "Whatever relationships with local universities, host families, faculty and staff we have, we all want to be able to say they are mutually beneficial and not consumeristic and exploitative," says Custodi.

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