

# IUPUI *Safe Space?*

## An Ethics in Action Case Example

### **The Scenario:**

As part of a conference devoted to exploring ethics in global health volunteer experiences hosted by your university, student leaders representing several health professions schools and pre-professional programs host a lunch conversation with the conference's keynote speaker. The session is designed to support open discussion of:

- personal or peer experiences of clinical and/or pre-professional global health volunteer trips,
- stated and perceived motivations and gains from participation and,
- Positionality of student leaders within student-led programs, including their sense of comfort/discomfort with specific elements of their program experience and the responsibilities they shoulder within and across programs.
- Resources they'd like to have in order to increase their sense of efficacy when they are confronted with challenging situations.

The student groups organizing this session have agreed to allow you, and a couple of other faculty/staff involved in the conference, to sit-in on this session to gain a more robust understanding of student leaders' experiences and perspectives. The lead groups organizing the discussion are directly connected to and supported by your office.

At the onset of the meeting, the keynote speaker and students state that students don't need to worry about their frankness of their comments...it is a safe space. While most of the participating students are from university-recognized student-led volunteer and service-learning programs, the buzz about this event has been circulating through student peer networks. As a result, it happens that a 2<sup>nd</sup> year medical student, we'll call her Josie, has come to the event in the hope of recruiting additional students for an upcoming trip a group of fellow students are organizing to Nicaragua the following month to offer care in a temporary "clinic." This trip has been taking place for a few years. The more Josie shares about the experience, the more you realize it is not an approved international experience at your school. In addition, there are several dimensions of the experience that expose the students to risk.

As a paid employee of the university, you have a responsibility to share the possible implications with the student of operating without approval and uphold university policy, and yet you also understand the need to honor the safe space agreement everyone entered into for this discussion.

***Given what you know, what do you do?***

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### Questions to consider:

- What are the key ethical issues to consider here?
- What are some of the implications that Josie and her fellow sojourners may or may not be aware of? For themselves? For the university? For the community and the community project?
- What responsibilities do you have as both a mentor and a university employee?
- What responses offer a balance of your commitments/responsibilities in these roles?
- To what degree do the **core principles** offer your assistance in responding to this scenario?

### Some Tension Points:

- Scope - Expressed university authority may not lie in your hands or may be unclear
- Mentorship role – To what degree to respect the space to encourage students to ask for advice
- Guilt by association – Agencies, host communities, etc. may see the students as agents of the university even when they aren't sanctioned by the university to do so.

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## **One Resolution:**

As a mentor, it is important to respect the space in which the information was shared. Waiting for the student to step outside the meeting to start the conversation privately seemed to be the best approach. The most important point to share at that moment was information regarding an approved curricular program traveling to the same country; the program leaders cancelled due host travel restrictions recently passed to protect Nicaraguan citizen form unsanctioned programs.

Upon return to the office, I email the student to share specific policies and protocol put in place to ensure safety, reciprocity and appropriate university representation and reached out to organization that provided housing and service opportunities to also share this information.

- University international program approval policies regarding student group travels
- Departmental policy regarding student group international travel
- Misrepresentation of the university to host community
- Inability of the university to step in for safe return in case of an emergency for unapproved travel

In addition to the email of the risk and policies, I impressed upon here that in no way could they represent themselves in any way as IUSM students; and offered to meet with them to provide support for creating a sustainable volunteering experience or connecting with one that exists.

## ***How did your response compare to the one above?***

*This case example was adapted from: Price, M.F., Leslie, S., Brann, M., Mulholland, J., Christy, L., Custer, J., Brann, M., & Besing, K.L. (2018). Supporting university-wide institutional change in global health volunteerism: A case in progress. Global Service-Learning Summit 5, Notre Dame, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018*