

Let's Have More Difficult Discussions

NOWADAYS, most of our institutions include a course related to diversity in one way or another as a general education requirement. Many of these courses focus on—or at least include—conversations about difference and inequality, power and privilege. Study abroad, international education, and intercultural education are experiential learning avenues offered to students as a rich opportunity to fulfill this requirement while having a life-changing experience—even an experience that will allow them to help change the world, or at least prepare them for such work.

I thought of this recently while reviewing the Association for American Colleges & Universities' list of high-impact practices, which have been widely shown to be beneficial for college students of all backgrounds. Among these high-impact practices is "Diversity/Global Learning" and the exploration of "difficult differences," including "socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power."

The efficacy of having these difficult discussions has been known for years, and yet, even within the semi-protected sphere of higher education, they are very seldom heard. We seem to be too afraid to acknowledge the elephants in our rooms, pretending as if the beasts are not already fully awake.

To be sure, difficulties surround us, and we hear them resonate in exit polls and political debates, on televisions, and around dinner tables. However, these exchanges seem to come in only two flavors: in hushed tones quickly silenced by the fear of being offensive, or in shouting matches largely fueled by ignorance and fear of the unknown.

The irony is, given our era's global tensions and the unique context in which we work, our field is ideally set up to encourage more and better difficult discussions around these topics, out loud and without shouting, but without behaving like ostriches either. But most often we do not. Sometimes faculty feel it is not their place as visitors in a foreign country to point out such issues. Sometimes receiving staff abroad feel too pressured to sell the experience they are crafting to allow for a focus on such negative aspects. Frequently neither is prepared to guide such discussions. Often, we are all still too blind to the existence of these difficult

differences, particularly in our own communities, like fish in privileged water.

But with an eye toward constructively counteracting such challenges, here are some steps we can take as active leaders and practitioners in our field:

- 1. Continually develop our awareness** of our own privileges and disadvantages, as well as our role in the continuation of the systems that allow for them. Make an effort to improve our own understanding of the difficult differences in our communities that affect the lives of those around us in their historic context and present forms.
- 2. Include a focus on strengthening** students' intercultural competence and global-citizenship development, including socioeconomic and cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and measuring—or at least documenting—the impact the experience has in this regard. An academic trip may be about marine biology or Slovenian poetry, but by its nature it will also be a missed opportunity if students don't take advantage and spend time on developing their global competencies.
- 3. Inspire difficult discussions by providing students with guided first-hand interactions** and communication with local people abroad in everyday situations. Inform yourself about issues of inequality in the location where you are visiting and point them out when you see them. These interactions, observations, and information can be built into pre-travel preparation, as well as in-country itinerary. If we do not feel quite capable of straying out of a purely intellectual role or a topic-of-study track, work with local partners who can help provide