

*Teaching Caselette*

## Teaching Notes

# FAIR ACCOMODATION

Ming Jiu Li

Drivers for a summer civic engagement program are unhappy with their hotel accommodations and ask the on-site coordinator for better rooms. Housing hotel guests and the drivers of these guests in equal accommodations is not the cultural norm in the host country. The coordinator must decide how to respond to the drivers' demands, and to the hotel management, who are incredulous that she is making such a request.

This case illustrates the ethical dilemmas coordinators and students face as they negotiate differences in cultural norms between those of the sending and host country in civic engagement programs.

Please refer to the "Ethics of Engagement" overview at the end of these teaching notes to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework that this case is used to illustrate.

The case and teaching notes for this teaching caselette were completed under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Dunning, the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

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Issue: The on-site coordinator of a summer civic engagement program has to decide whether to insist on better accommodations at a hotel for the two drivers hired by the group, and hence set a precedent against a well-established local cultural norm. The following questions below are designed to facilitate class discussion.

1. *What are the challenges to acting ethically in this case? Think through the personal, organizational, and systemic challenges.*

This case reflects a number of Right-Right Dilemmas, most notably the dilemma of individual versus community, and draws out the larger question of how civically-engaged individuals working in a foreign environment should interact with local cultural norms: when should foreign workers impose their own set of personal values and beliefs on the local community, if at all?

Personal, organizational, and systemic challenges:

- Personal: Elizabeth wants to address the needs of the drivers, but does not want to inconvenience the hotel staff, and potentially even anger other hotel guests or the other drivers staying in the separate quarters.
  - Organizational: Elizabeth's individual act of kindness may undermine the group's image in the eyes of the locals, and even affect the reputation of the program in the region. At the same time, if Elizabeth gives in to the demands of the drivers, what long-term implications are there for the transportation services industry in general? How will other drivers in the industry react to the preferential treatment that potentially comes with working for foreign clients? Will this set up a relationship of dependence between elite foreign clients and drivers?
  - Systemic: Local cultural norms; societal class divisions. Students should recognize that what drives these dilemmas is an underlying difference between the structures of different societies. In the region where the program is placed, there are clear class divisions, and the cultural norm has been to accept these societal divides and not challenge them. When students deem local cultural practices to be unjust, they have to realize that their judgments are based on a different, not necessarily superior, set of values and beliefs. Even if they wish to work with locals who express an organic desire to address these class divisions, they are constrained by the time they are spending in the country.
2. *What dilemmas does Elizabeth face? What steps would you take to resolve these? What principles do you draw from? What are the consequences?*
- Individual versus Community:

In this case, "individual" and "community" can take on multiple meanings. The individual can refer not only to Elizabeth, who has to make the final decision, but also to the entire group involved with the civic engagement project, of which Elizabeth is the representative, and that can be easily labeled as Elizabeth's support base. "Community," on the other hand, can also refer to the same civic engagement team, since all members on the team may not have a uniform response to the issue. In a larger sense, "community" can also refer to the community of guests staying at the hotel, the collective union of drivers and transportation service providers, and locals in general. Recognizing that various diverse groups can be affected by Elizabeth's decision, students need to think critically about how to achieve the individual goal of helping the drivers without incurring the negative backlash of larger communal groups.

- Short-term versus Long-term:

Acceding to the requests of the drivers can improve their living conditions in the short-term, but the long-term influence on relationships in the community, and the relationship between the community and the civic engagement program, may be damaged.

When deciding between possible resolutions to the dilemmas Elizabeth faces, students should not be quick to decide against benefitting the drivers for reasons of convenience and fear of the backlash they might face from outside groups. While the rich-poor divide is a symptom of the local society, it can be veritably seen as a form of injustice. In attempting to address these injustices, however, foreigners should strive to support the organic efforts of locals, which is again difficult given the often short periods of time they are spending in these communities.

## Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

The cases are based on actual student experiences in the field. They set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the “Right-Right Dilemmas” paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder’s book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face “Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas” in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three “Resolution Principles,” which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

*Utilitarianism* - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

*Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism)* - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

*Care-Based* - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.