

Teaching Caselette

FAIR ACCOMODATION

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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 that coordinators and students face as they negotiate differences in cultural norms between those of the sending and host country in civic engagement programs.

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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Elizabeth is the on-site coordinator for a summer civic engagement program abroad. She has hired two drivers and vans from a local car service company to provide for the transportation needs of the program. The drivers ferry students to and from service placement sites on weekdays, and they work on weekends when the group goes on longer trips to visit other parts of the country.

On one such weekend trip, the team has just moved into the hotel at their destination when the two drivers approach Elizabeth to demand better accommodations. They have been placed in separate quarters that are specifically set aside for drivers, but they are not happy with the conditions. They complain that there are no good places to sleep and that it is extremely hot and humid in the quarters. By then, these two drivers have been working with the group for a month, and have been treated reasonably well. The two have been served the same meals as the students, and these meals have been paid for by the program. This is considered atypical for hired drivers in the host country.

The group has developed a pleasant working relationship with the two drivers over the past month, and although Elizabeth is aware that she is acting contrary to local custom and may be raising the expectations of the drivers further, she asks the hotel front desk if a room can be arranged for them. Her request is met with incredulity. This request is one that the hotel has never handled before, and from the management's perspective, one which destroys the exclusive privileges other guests at the hotel enjoy.

Elizabeth is asked to reconsider her request. She now has to decide if setting this precedent against a well-established cultural norm is at all sustainable, and whether it would portray the group as naïve Americans who are trying to change local practices from their own higher moral pedestal. At the same time, Elizabeth needs to deal with the immediate problem of justifying this additional expense while also considering how the drivers will react based on whatever she ultimately decides.