

Scenario

Professor Johnson is leading a group of undergraduate students from her home institution on a three-week marine biology study abroad program in Australia. Of the 15 students on the program, 12 are white and three identify as students of color. As part of the program, she has arranged for her students to work in small groups with students from a local Australian university in collecting and analyzing water samples and then presenting what they have learned at the end of the three weeks.

About half-way through the program, one of the white students, Connor, asks to speak with Prof. Johnson and shares a concern that one of his fellow group members--James, an African-American student from his home university--doesn't seem interested in learning about Australian culture and Connor is worried that James is offending their Australian teammates.

Prof. Johnson decides to speak with James one-on-one and ask him how things are going with his group project. He says that things are going fine with the research and that he would prefer to focus on science and not talk about all of this 'culture stuff.' Prof. Johnson reminds James that, while the focus of the program is marine biology, a key goal of any study abroad experience is to develop a deeper understanding of the host culture and to gain greater skill in interacting across cultures.

A day later, Prof. Johnson happens to walk by the room where James and Connor's group is meeting and she overhears the students engaged in a conversation about racism in Australia and the United States, respectfully sharing different viewpoints. One of the Australian students, who identifies as white, comments to James that he hasn't said much during the conversation and that he would like to hear his perspective. James responds by saying, "I don't know what you want me to say." To lighten the mood, the Australian student says, "Bloody Yanks, always so serious!"

Prof. Johnson is pleased that the group members were having this important conversation and she is concerned about the way in which James was interacting with the other students. She is frustrated that she can't seem to "get through to" James and she comes to you for advice.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What would you identify as the problem(s) to be addressed in this scenario?
- 2) What recommendations would you have for the professor in thinking about and responding to this situation?
- 3) What questions are you left with?