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Navigating the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Disconnect

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Abstract in English

Europe remains the top destination for U.S. university students seeking a global academic experience with over 64% choosing European programs. Despite surface-level cultural similarities, U.S. students often face challenges navigating the deeper sociocultural dynamics and differing approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within European societies. This manuscript explores the "DEI disconnect" between U.S. students and European education-abroad programs, where U.S. students arrive with DEI attitudes shaped by U.S. philosophies, only to encounter local frameworks that may not align with their expectations. Through an examination of DEI in both U.S. and European contexts, alongside data from Diversity Abroad's student survey and case studies from professional practice, this paper provides a foundation for understanding these challenges. We offer actionable recommendations to integrate DEI considerations into the education-abroad lifecycle and encourage further exploration of DEI in global education.

Abstract in Spanish

Europa continúa siendo el destino preferido de los estudiantes universitarios estadounidenses que buscan una experiencia académica internacional, con más del 64% optando por programas europeos. Aunque a primera vista existen similitudes culturales, los estudiantes norteamericanos suelen encontrarse con retos al enfrentarse a dinámicas socioculturales más complejas y a distintas perspectivas sobre diversidad, equidad e inclusión (DEI) en las sociedades europeas. Este artículo analiza la "brecha DEI" que existe entre los estudiantes estadounidenses y los programas educativos europeos: los estudiantes llegan con una visión de DEI formada por la filosofía estadounidense y se encuentran con marcos locales que no siempre

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corresponden a sus expectativas. Mediante un análisis de DEI tanto en el contexto estadounidense como en el europeo, junto con datos de la encuesta estudiantil de Diversity Abroad y casos prácticos profesionales, este trabajo establece las bases para entender estos retos. Proponemos recomendaciones concretas para incorporar aspectos de DEI en el ciclo completo de la educación internacional y animamos a seguir explorando el papel de DEI en la educación global.

Keywords

DEI; diversity; Europe; inclusion; study abroad

1. Introduction

Europe is the top destination for U.S. university students who seek a global academic experience, with seven of the top ten education-abroad destinations being European countries: Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Ireland, Germany, and Greece (Institute of International Education, 2024b). In fact, 64% of U.S. study-abroad students chose Europe as their host destination during the 2022-2023 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2024a). Upon arrival, especially in Western Europe, students often encounter surface-level familiarity. Local youth look and dress similarly, use the same mobile apps, and stream the same music, shows, and movies. However, these visible similarities obscure the complex sociocultural dynamics and differing approaches to identity, power, and marginalization that shape European societies.

U.S. university students may begin their education-abroad experiences with DEI knowledge shaped by their home institutions' approaches, where initiatives are typically embedded into academic and campus life through various programs, trainings, and university-wide initiatives that are both meant to support the success of students from historically under-supported backgrounds and encourage students to critically examine how identity affects power, privilege, and positionality in their lives. Since the overturning of race-conscious admission programs (i.e., affirmative action) at U.S. colleges and universities (Totenberg, 2023), a number of states have passed legislation that restricts funding for activities—from staffing to cultural centers and training—that are deemed to promote DEI (Betts, 2024). In addition, the incoming Trump administration may continue with its policies at the federal level that restrict federal agencies from engaging in certain DEI-related programming (Agathocleous et al., 2024). These state and federal actions not only impact how institutions may engage in initiatives to support all students participating in education abroad but may also create a chilling effect on the effectiveness of such

initiatives in the United States as well as Europe. Such resistance to DEI efforts (Lange & Lee, 2024; Marris, 2024) underscores the ongoing challenges facing these initiatives and highlights potential limitations for future students' experiences.

When U.S. students arrive on European education abroad programs, they encounter different cultural perspectives on DEI, creating a "DEI disconnect." European institutions implement diversity and inclusion initiatives through frameworks shaped by distinct national histories, colonial legacies, current legislation, and political contexts, which differ from the approach to DEI in the United States. These frameworks reflect Europe's varied sociopolitical and cultural landscapes—underscoring that Europe is not a monolith. As a result, DEI practices in Europe may diverge from U.S. students' expectations in different ways in different European locations, potentially leaving the students feeling unsupported or struggling to navigate issues of identity and marginalization in their host countries. These challenges also intersect with broader conversations around cross-cultural understanding, academic freedom, and how to best support students abroad.

We begin with a foundational examination of DEI in U.S. and European contexts, grounded in an evidence-based approach informed by expertise and research. Since DEI has myriad layers ranging from the macro to micro level, this examination is intended to serve as a point of departure, not a comprehensive analysis. We continue with an examination of data from Diversity Abroad's student survey and case studies rooted in our professional experiences. We conclude with a discussion on the DEI disconnect and actionable recommendations that can be immediately integrated into the education-abroad lifecycle.

This manuscript is intended for readers just starting to explore the DEI disconnect between U.S. students and European education-abroad programs. We encourage readers looking for more advanced engagement with DEI topics to explore certification programs offered by Diversity Abroad (n.d.) and The Forum on Education Abroad (n.d.).

2. Literature Review

This review examines how DEI is approached differently in U.S. and European contexts, exploring definitional variations, key historical influences, and institutional adaptations. Through analysis of support strategies for students with invisible disabilities and neurodivergence, alongside Diversity Abroad survey data, we illustrate the challenges U.S. students face navigating their identities abroad.

2.1. Conceptualizations of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Heterogeneous U.S. and European Contexts

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are foundational to global education initiatives, yet these concepts are defined and understood differently in U.S. and European contexts. U.S. institutions often frame diversity as encompassing a broad spectrum of social identities. For example, according to the University of Michigan (n.d.), *diversity* “is expressed in myriad forms, including race and ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language, culture, national origin, religious commitments, age, (dis)ability status and political perspective.” Conversely, European institutions generally prioritize diversity in life experiences and cultural contributions rather than focusing heavily on demographic categories like race or ethnicity. For example, ETH Zürich (n.d.) defines diversity as encompassing “people from various disciplines and cultural or religious backgrounds, with different genders and sexual orientation, people with limited temporal and spatial availability due to other responsibilities, such as caregiving, high-level competitive sports or rehabilitation after an illness, people of different age and people with or without physical and cognitive impairments.”

Equity and *inclusion* also vary significantly across these contexts reflecting distinct cultural and institutional priorities. While U.S. institutions focus on creating opportunities for historically marginalized groups, European institutions interpret equity in ways shaped by national policies and sociopolitical priorities. Some institutions, like the University of Antwerp (n.d.), frame equity as “the principle that people are of equal value, regardless of their differences,” adding that “it is the conviction that everyone deserves equal opportunities.” However, this represents just one approach within Europe's varied higher education landscape; for example, where some French institutions emphasize a universalist model that avoids identity categorization, some UK universities actively address racial equity and colonial legacies.

These divergent frameworks underscore that DEI is not monolithic, even within the United States or Europe. These distinct conceptualizations reflect broader societal and historical differences. In the U.S., diversity efforts often emerge from the legacy of systemic racism and the civil rights movements, with initiatives aimed at redressing historical inequities. European institutions, however, emphasize inclusion based on demographic shifts, immigration patterns, and regional priorities. These varying institutional definitions can create challenges for U.S. students studying abroad, who may need to navigate DEI frameworks that differ from those they are accustomed to. Understanding these differences is essential for students and professionals alike to bridge the DEI disconnect in education abroad.

2.2. Key Historical Moments in the United States

The DEI disconnect in education abroad is rooted in the differing definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion between U.S. institutions and their counterparts abroad. To better understand this disconnect, it is helpful to understand how DEI practices in the United States evolved, particularly as a product of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

During the middle of the 20th century, U.S. universities began confronting their history of racism and institutionalized discrimination (Charles, 2023). A significant turning point came in 1961 when President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925, which sought to ensure equal treatment for applicants, regardless of race, color, religion, or national origin. This legislation, known as affirmative action, gradually extended to include race-conscious admissions, though it faced challenges culminating in its overturning by the Supreme Court in 2023 (Totenberg, 2023).

The 1970s marked the rise of gender equality initiatives in higher education, driven by Title IX, which prohibited gender discrimination in federally funded educational programs. Initially focused on expanding women's participation in college athletics, Title IX's influence grew throughout the 1990s, when sexual harassment was legally recognized as a form of gender discrimination (Powell, 2022). Today, Title IX intersects with broader DEI efforts, highlighting the evolving nature of gender equity in higher education.

LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts also emerged in the late 1960s, gaining momentum after the Stonewall Riots. By the 1980s, institutions like the City College of San Francisco were creating LGBT departments to recognize and support this community, especially during a time when the Reagan administration largely ignored the AIDS crisis (Insight Into Diversity, 2023). These efforts laid the groundwork for the inclusive policies many U.S. universities now implement for LGBTQ+ students.

Disability rights have similarly shaped DEI frameworks. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a precursor to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in federally funded programs. While the ADA initially focused on physical accessibility, it has evolved to incorporate universal design principles, addressing visible and invisible disabilities (Insight Into Diversity, 2023).

In the context of education abroad, these key moments in U.S. history have led to targeted initiatives aimed at increasing access for marginalized students. Education-abroad offices have responded by offering scholarships, financial aid, and resources tailored to diverse populations (Esmieu et al., 2016).

Partnerships with institutions and organizations have further expanded program accessibility. However, while progress has been made, ongoing faculty and staff training is necessary to effectively support students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, neurodivergent students, and those from underrepresented cultural identities (Özkan-Haller, 2021). For these students, the cultural norms and societal expectations of European host countries can pose unique challenges, highlighting the need for thoughtful preparation and support.

These historical moments have shaped the landscape of U.S. higher education and education abroad. However, recent developments suggest potential changes ahead. Since the overturning of race-conscious admissions (Totenberg, 2023), several states have enacted legislation restricting DEI activities in higher education, from staffing to programming (Betts, 2024). Additionally, the incoming Trump administration may reinstate policies limiting federal agencies' engagement in DEI-related programming (Agathocleous et al., 2024). This ongoing resistance to DEI efforts (Lange & Lee, 2024; Marris, 2024) could affect both domestic and international education initiatives, potentially impacting how U.S. students engage with DEI concepts abroad.

2.3. Regional Implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Across Europe

The European approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) reflects the continent's vast sociopolitical and historical diversity. Each country adopts unique strategies influenced by its national history, demographic trends, and cultural norms. France, for instance, champions universalist principles rooted in Republican ideals, actively avoiding categorizing individuals by race or ethnicity (Marliere, 2023). In contrast, the United Kingdom emphasizes racial equity, shaped by its colonial history, and implements frameworks like the Race Equality Charter (University College London, n.d.). Germany's post-war legacy has led to strict data protection laws and an emphasis on integration over identity-based initiatives (Waxman, 2018).

Meanwhile, Southern European countries, such as Spain and Italy, prioritize immigrant inclusion and regional identity, reflecting their transitions from emigration to immigration hubs (European Commission, 2016). Programs such as U4Refugees in Italy promote intercultural dialogue, and Spanish universities such as Universidad de Murcia, Universidad de Sevilla, and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid emphasize regional identity and disability rights through participation in the EUni4All project (León Sánchez et al., 2023). Northern European countries, particularly Finland, present yet another perspective, focusing on socioeconomic inclusion and educational access (Claeys-

Kulik et al., 2019). Finnish institutions have embraced universal design principles and digital inclusion strategies to expand access to education.

This regional diversity in approaches is further evidenced by cross-regional collaborations, such as the University of Helsinki and Università di Bologna's co-leadership of the Diversity Council of Una Europa (2022), which provides practical recommendations for promoting diversity in teaching, research, and work environments. However, even with such initiatives, an overarching European approach to DEI remains elusive. The European Commission (2021b) acknowledges this complexity, noting that while many European countries pursue inclusivity, the rules and regulations governing DEI vary widely.

Guided by the European Union, the Bologna Process, initiated in 1999, aimed to create greater parity and coherence across European higher education systems by fostering collaboration and alignment in areas such as degree structures, credit systems, and quality assurance (European Commission, n.d.). However, a European University Association survey through the INVITED project underscores that significant differences remain in how institutions implement DEI principles based on their societal, legislative, and institutional contexts (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019).

2.4. An Example of the DEI Disconnect: Invisible Disabilities and Neurodivergence

The differences in how DEI is approached in the United States and Europe become particularly evident in the varied ways invisible disabilities and neurodivergence are supported. U.S. students accustomed to robust DEI frameworks may find European support structures unfamiliar, especially when navigating invisible disabilities and neurodivergent conditions.

In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) serves as the legal foundation, ensuring that students with disabilities, including those with invisible disabilities, receive necessary accommodations. Although the ADA does not extend beyond U.S. borders (Stoltz, 2019), U.S. institutions are responsible for working with overseas partners to ensure students can access similar accommodations. In contrast, disability support across Europe reflects the broader regional variations in DEI approaches discussed earlier.

A report initiated by the European Commission's Erasmus+ Program emphasizes this point, noting that students with disabilities face significant barriers to mobility, often because the support services they rely on are inconsistent or absent (Van Hees & Montagnese, 2020). Furthermore, some European universities adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to disability

accommodations, which may not sufficiently address the unique needs of individuals with invisible disabilities or neurodivergence. To address these gaps, Van Hees and Montagnese (2020) recommended that institutions adopt more proactive strategies, such as leveraging platforms like [InclusiveMobility.EU](#), which provides information (albeit incomplete) on disability inclusion across European higher education institutions. U.S. advisors can also use resources like [MIUSA](#) and feedback from former participants with disabilities to provide realistic and valuable mentoring to students who wish to study abroad (Holben & Özel, 2015).

The concept of neurodivergence, which refers to individuals whose brains function differently from what is defined as typical, particularly highlights these regional differences. In the United States, the ADA Amendment Act of 2008 explicitly includes invisible disabilities, encompassing not only neurodivergent conditions but also mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Davis, 2005, as cited in Hefiela, 2024). European approaches to disability support vary significantly. While the European Commission provides broad frameworks through UN conventions and disability rights strategies, implementation differs across institutions and countries (Lecerf, 2023). These variations particularly affect students with invisible disabilities and neurodivergence, who may find support structures differ substantially from U.S. models.

These differences create challenges in education-abroad contexts, where invisible disabilities and neurodivergence can remain hidden unless students choose to disclose them. As Masterson-Algar et al. (2020) emphasize, thorough pre-departure planning is imperative, including discussions about cultural expectations and mental health support. The absence of familiar support structures can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration, exemplifying how the broader DEI disconnect manifests in students' daily experiences abroad.

2.5. Student Data Connected to the DEI Disconnect

The lived experiences of U.S. education-abroad students provide critical insights into how the previously discussed regional variations in DEI approaches affect students' experiences. In 2022, Diversity Abroad administered the Global Education Experience Survey to explore how students' identities are shared and perceived throughout the global education process, including the pre-departure, on-site, and re-entry stages (Kasravi et al., 2023). The survey, conducted between September 6 and December 1, 2022, was distributed through popular channels in the international education community, such as the SECUSS-L mailing list, NAFSA regional newsletters, and the Forum on Education Abroad LinkedIn group. In total, 943 students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions participated in

the confidential and anonymous survey. These respondents, representing 200 institutions worldwide, in over 37 countries—15 of which are in Europe—reported diverse racial/ethnic identities, sexual orientations, and disability identifications.

The survey's key findings revealed a complex picture of how students navigate varying European approaches to DEI. While the majority of students had access to pre-departure resources about identity and felt supported by on-site faculty and staff, over half of the respondents reported feeling stereotyped and isolated. Notably, these experiences varied across regions: students in countries with more explicit DEI frameworks, such as the United Kingdom, reported different challenges than those in countries with universalist approaches, like France. Additionally, 33.9% of students reported experiencing microaggressions, and 29.3% noted incidents of verbal harassment (Kasravi et al., 2023). These experiences often reflected the regional variations in how identity, particularly racial and ethnic identity, is understood and addressed across European institutions.

Students with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions reported challenges navigating the varying support structures discussed in the previous section. Their experiences underscore how institutional approaches to accessibility and accommodation—from Northern Europe's emphasis on digital inclusion to Southern Europe's focus on physical accessibility—directly impact students' sense of belonging and academic success.

As the diversity of the U.S. undergraduate population continues to grow, this DEI disconnect can potentially exacerbate feelings of exclusion, isolation, and even hostility in education-abroad settings. The survey respondents expressed a need for more robust support networks and community spaces to help them process their discomfort and challenges, particularly in contexts where local DEI frameworks differ significantly from U.S. approaches. These findings provide important context for understanding the critical incidents that follow, illustrating how theoretical differences in DEI approaches manifest in students' actual experiences abroad.

3. Critical Incidents

As presented in the literature review, U.S. and European approaches to DEI vary because of unique historical, societal, and cultural influences. This DEI disconnect can affect a U.S. student's education-abroad experiences in Europe. This section presents three anonymized accounts of real student and international educator experiences. While the details have been adjusted to protect the students' and educators' privacy, the scenarios reflect genuine challenges related to identity and inclusion that U.S. students and European-based international educators may face abroad. The accompanying reflection

questions help practitioners analyze how cultural, historical, and institutional contexts shape student experiences and support needs.

3.1. Critical Incident 1

Hannah was an undergraduate student from a medium-sized private university in the United States. She participated in a six-week program in London, England, managed by an education abroad provider, which included an optional five-day tour of Scotland before starting the academic program. Several months before her arrival, Hannah informed the program staff that she identified as an Orthodox Jew, but she did not self-report her neurodivergence or mobility challenges. Although the U.S. and U.K.-based staff worked closely with Hannah to build a plan for her observance of Shabbat, they were unaware that Hannah needed additional support for her cognitive and physical needs.

3.1.1. The Student's Perspective

Hannah's frustrations with her program began immediately. After missing her connecting flight from London to Edinburgh, she did not benefit from the program's airport pick-up service. Unable to navigate the unfamiliar environment on her own, she struggled to find her way from the airport to her accommodation. A local family, noticing her distress, offered to drive her from the airport to her residence. When she arrived, Hannah could not locate her room in a large, unfamiliar building.

Additionally, Hannah's luggage did not arrive. When she received wheelchair support at London's Heathrow Airport, the staff assured her that her luggage would be transferred to Edinburgh. She also discovered that her U.S. bank card did not work, and she could not participate in two program activities due to the timing of Shabbat. While the other students enjoyed cultural visits, Hannah got lost in Edinburgh on her way to a synagogue. She called the national emergency services line, but they refused to help.

Hannah hoped for a fresh start in London, but she continued to face adversity. The campus felt confusing, and she needed help finding her classroom. She was also surprised to learn that she had to meet her professors in new places around London for class. Two hospitalizations in the first two weeks compounded her difficulties.

After meeting with her resident director, she agreed to drop her literature course and concentrate on her theater course. When she called her mother, Hannah explained that this made the situation more manageable, but she questioned the overall support on site. Unlike at her home university, she felt that the program required too much independence from students and did not provide sufficient accommodations for her needs.

3.1.2. The International Educators' Perspectives

Hannah's resident director viewed her logistical difficulties in Scotland as typical early-stage adjustments for an education-abroad student. When her bank card did not work, he issued an emergency loan and helped her resolve the issue. When Hannah needed help finding a grocery store with kosher food, the resident director accompanied her in his free time. He was also confident that the multi-day orientation in London would provide a strong foundation. The campus tour would familiarize Hannah with her surroundings, and the group scavenger hunt would help her understand public transportation and connect with her peers.

However, he grew concerned when Hannah could not locate her classroom on campus, and her professors reported that she was late to the site-based curricular activities. The program staff were surprised to learn that Hannah required the use of a walking crutch or wheelchair and struggled to navigate places independently. Although Hannah's resident director was aware of her spiritual identity and academic accommodations, Hannah did not communicate her cognitive and physical challenges.

Hannah was also hospitalized twice during her first two weeks in London, once for neurodivergence-related issues and again after falling on her way to a synagogue. The resident director and the education abroad provider's director of health and safety connected with the director of disability services at Hannah's home university. The director of disability services was complimentary of the education abroad provider, but she characterized the London program as "the perfect storm" for Hannah. She added, "I know Hannah well enough to know that she can't do this program." Hannah's home university supported her decision to continue with the program. For the on-site staff, this meant providing an extremely high level of support that detracted from the support that they could provide to other students.

The situation underscores the complex interplay of student preparedness, communication, and support in education-abroad programs. While the on-site staff addressed Hannah's challenges as they arose, the lack of pre-departure disclosure regarding her physical and cognitive needs limited their ability to provide proactive accommodations. The incident highlights the importance of fostering an environment where students feel comfortable disclosing all relevant needs. Furthermore, the case emphasizes the necessity of realistic program matching, where students' individual capacities and support requirements are carefully evaluated against the demands of specific programs.

3.2. Critical Incident 2

In a study abroad program in Spain, two Black students from the United States, Anabel and Maritza, were affected when a White student read a passage

containing the N-word aloud in their anthropology class. This incident occurred in a country where, shaped by the Franco dictatorship's suppression of academic freedom, approaches to racial discourse differ significantly from both U.S. and other European contexts (León Sánchez et al., 2023). The professor did not intervene or offer a trigger warning, reflecting local academic norms that would be considered problematic in U.S. contexts. Later, another Black student, Kim, experienced a Spanish professor using the N-word multiple times while trying to explain its cultural context. These incidents occurred against a backdrop of recent hate crimes in the United States. The program administrators organized meetings to address the situation, including a student and faculty assembly. While some students called for the professors' dismissal, Paloma, the program's Spain-based, U.S.-raised resident director, proposed initiatives like a diversity task force and faculty training. Spanish faculty expressed concerns about potential censorship and anxiety about committing cultural missteps. The case raises questions about cross-cultural understanding, academic freedom, and supporting students abroad.

3.2.1. The Students' Perspective

The students in this case, particularly Anabel, Maritza, and Kim, experienced significant distress and discomfort due to the repeated use of the N-word in their academic environment. As Black students studying abroad, they expected to face some cultural differences, but not to encounter such a sensitive and historically loaded term used in their classes in a way that seemed casual to some.

The students expressed shock and disappointment upon hearing the N-word used multiple times in various contexts. They felt uncomfortable speaking up in class, mainly because they were unsure how to navigate this situation in a foreign academic setting. This discomfort was compounded by the fact that neither the professors nor the other students intervened in the moment or acknowledged the problematic nature of the word.

The students reported these incidents to the resident director hoping for a resolution. However, the repeated occurrences, especially the incident with the Spanish professor attempting to explain the word's cultural context, left them feeling frustrated and betrayed by the institution. They stated that foreign professors teaching U.S. students should be aware of racial issues and taboo words. The broader context of recent hate crimes in the United States added another layer of vulnerability to their experience, and it made the perceived casual use of the N-word even more distressing.

During the assembly organized by the on-site staff to address the incident, some students expressed the need for allies to speak up, indicating a desire for

support from their peers and the broader academic community. Some students called for the professors' dismissal; however, to demonstrate their commitment to improving the situation and hope for positive change in the program, they accepted the administration's offer to participate in the newly formed diversity task force.

3.2.2. The International Educators' Perspectives

The on-site staff, especially Paloma, the resident director, found themselves navigating a complex and unfamiliar situation that bridged differences in historical and cultural contexts, academic practices, and student welfare. Their immediate response aimed to demonstrate a commitment to addressing the issue seriously. Paloma offered to support the affected students and quickly escalated the matter to higher administration in the United States. Furthermore, the assembly for students and faculty was meant to indicate a desire for transparency and open dialogue.

However, the staff faced significant challenges in managing this situation and balancing the expectations and experiences of U.S. students with the cultural and academic norms of Spanish faculty. The staff were unsure how to navigate an unfamiliar situation that they feared could jeopardize their job security if they got it "wrong." The Spanish professors' reaction, expressing concern about censorship and anxiety about potential missteps, highlights the cultural gap that international educators must bridge. While faculty and staff want their students to feel welcome, some had difficulty understanding and accepting that certain words are off-limits in an academic setting due to the impact of Spain's Franco dictatorship. Others decided to eliminate potentially controversial material from their bibliography to "avoid problems." Implementing new initiatives, such as the diversity task force and additional training, demonstrated the staff's commitment to long-term solutions. However, some educators felt that students, faculty, and staff had missed an opportunity to engage in a robust intercultural discussion.

The situation highlights the complex intersection of U.S. racial discourse norms with European academic traditions and historical contexts. While the on-site staff attempted to bridge this cultural divide through initiatives like the diversity task force, the case demonstrates the need for proactive cross-cultural training for participants, local faculty, and staff, alongside clear and transparent protocols for addressing sensitive incidents. The experience emphasizes how different historical contexts (like Franco's influence on academic freedom in Spain) can create misalignments between U.S. student expectations and local educational norms. Furthermore, it illustrates the importance of developing institutional frameworks that can both respect local academic traditions while supporting students' wellbeing needs.

3.3. Critical Incident 3

Mary attended a small liberal arts college in the United States. She majored in French studies and planned to study abroad in France for the academic year in a faculty-led program run by her school. After receiving her acceptance notification to the program, Mary disclosed that she had a visual impairment and that she would need disability support abroad.

3.3.1. The International Educators' Perspective

Upon receiving Mary's disability support request, the education abroad administrator began attempting to identify what type of support Mary would need. In a one-on-one meeting, the education abroad administrator asked Mary about her strategies for navigating campus and whether she had traveled independently, either within the United States or abroad. Mary responded that she had not traveled alone in the past. Additionally, she tries to return to her dorm before dark, but otherwise, she can see well enough during the day. Mary also disclosed that she did not have experience taking public transportation on her own. She also shared that the disability accommodations at her home campus included having a note-taker and being allowed to record lectures and sit in the front row of the classroom. Mary was very interested in ensuring her academic accommodations would be met and felt that as long as she had access to elevators, she could get around in Paris.

With this information, the education abroad administrator contacted the on-site directors in Paris, including the faculty member who would direct the program the year Mary would participate. The on-site directors contacted the host university in Paris to inquire about the process for requesting disability accommodations. The office of disability services at the host university explained that the student would need an in-person medical exam to assess the level of accommodation required to obtain accommodations. Additionally, a healthcare professional would only perform this medical exam once the student was formally registered with the university and had enrolled in classes.

In addition to exploring whether academic accommodations would be provided, the on-site directors expressed concern about Mary's lack of experience with independent travel and navigating cities such as Paris. There are uneven surfaces with cobblestones, no consistent curb cutouts or auditory crosswalk signals, and elevators in the accessible subway stations are often not functional. The on-site directors suggested the student work with a local organization in Paris that provides tutorials and training to help people learn to navigate the city.

3.3.2. The Student's Perspective

With the information from the university and the suggestion to work with the local organization, the education abroad administrator contacted Mary, who was unhappy to learn that she would not have confirmation of receiving her academic accommodations until after she had arrived in Paris. She was also unhappy about the physical exam requirement, mainly because a specialist in the United States has managed her condition, and she did not know what kind of doctor she would be seeing in Paris that could attest to her disability support needs. Despite this frustration, Mary reluctantly agreed to connect with the local association to learn more about what support it offered.

During the first meeting between Mary and the local association, Mary was asked to complete an assessment to determine the level of support and training she would need. Mary was reluctant to complete and submit the evaluation without knowing if she would receive academic accommodations. As a result, the on-site directors were reluctant to pursue the academic accommodation process on Mary's behalf (i.e., trying to schedule an appointment with the physician shortly after she arrived in Paris) without knowing if Mary could get to and from class. Ultimately, the lack of confirmation regarding her academic accommodations prior to her departure led Mary to decide against studying away in France.

While the U.S. system typically provides pre-approved accommodations based on existing documentation, the French system requires in-person medical evaluation post-arrival, creating uncertainty for the student. The situation also highlights accessibility considerations that extend beyond academic support, and which are beyond the program's control. Furthermore, the case demonstrates how the circular nature of the accommodation process (needing mobility training to attend classes but needing class enrollment to receive accommodations) can create administrative deadlocks that ultimately prevent participation. This highlights the need for international education offices to develop flexible, anticipatory frameworks that can bridge systematic differences in disability support approaches across contexts. The reflection questions presented below may help practitioners analyze how cultural, historical, and institutional contexts can shape student experiences and support needs. The reflection questions presented below may help practitioners analyze how cultural, historical, and institutional contexts can shape student experiences and support needs.

3.4. Reflection Questions

1. In what ways did U.S. and European understandings of DEI differ in these critical incidents?

2. In what ways might the differing DEI priorities between U.S. students and European staff create challenges in managing education-abroad programs? How can these challenges be mitigated?
3. What considerations arise from the critical incidents regarding creating equitable access to education abroad for all students?
4. What strategies can education abroad practitioners employ to better anticipate and address students' intersecting identities and range of needs in the context of education abroad? How can these strategies include other offices on campus and the staff affiliated with the provider and/or host university throughout the education abroad lifecycle?
5. What other groups of students or social identities may be challenged in different cultural contexts in an education-abroad program? How can these students be supported before, during, and after their experiences abroad?

4. Discussion

Students from U.S. institutions studying abroad in Europe will likely encounter differences in how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are approached. These differences—rooted in distinct historical, cultural, and institutional factors—create a DEI disconnect between the expectations that U.S. students bring and the realities they face in European contexts. Understanding these contextual variations is critical, as they shape students' academic, social, and cultural experiences abroad.

4.1. Different Types of Education Abroad Opportunities

The DEI disconnect manifests differently depending on the type of education abroad program and its location within Europe's varied DEI landscape. Students may study with a U.S.-based provider program, participate in a U.S. institution's local program, or directly enroll in a European university. Each of these program types presents distinct challenges in bridging U.S. and European approaches to DEI, as illustrated by our critical incidents. Local practitioners in Europe may be expected to navigate between U.S. DEI expectations and their own country's cultural and legal norms. Below, we examine how these three common program models illustrate the DEI disconnect through practical examples.

Studying with a U.S.-based Provider: Programs offered by education abroad providers tend to implement U.S.-centric approaches to DEI tailored to student participants' concerns and priorities. These programs usually have the infrastructure to support underrepresented groups, offering scholarships and resources to LGBTQIA+ students, students of color, students with disabilities, and

first-generation students. Providers may also offer extensive pre-departure programming that includes DEI considerations relevant to students' identities, and on-site support staff familiar with U.S. DEI norms assist students in navigating local cultural contexts. However, in the case of Critical Incident 1, providers may struggle when students' needs are not fully disclosed. Some providers also offer re-entry support to help students process their experiences upon returning to the United States.

U.S. Institution's Local Program Office: U.S. institutions operating local programs abroad generally use a hybrid approach to DEI, blending U.S. priorities with the host country's cultural context. Students may experience familiar DEI practices adapted to the local environment, with local staff—like those in Critical Incident 2—serving as cultural intermediaries who help students understand diversity and inclusion in the host country. These programs may include DEI-focused excursions or events within the local context. As with provider programs, U.S. institutions offer recruitment, pre-departure, and re-entry support. However, challenges still arise when local norms differ significantly from U.S. expectations, as seen in the handling of racial slurs in Spain.

Direct Enrollment in a Local University: Direct enrollment challenges students to adapt to the host university's academic and social structures, offering an unfiltered experience of local educational and cultural norms. Unlike programs offered by education-abroad providers or U.S. universities, where DEI frameworks may feel familiar, students must independently navigate an unfamiliar system of support structures and resources. This immersion allows students to engage deeply with the local community and confront new ways of thinking about inclusion and equity, fostering resilience, adaptability, and a broader global perspective.

4.2. Key Differences Students May Encounter

In addition to the type of program, students studying abroad may encounter other significant differences in how DEI is framed and practiced, including terminology, legal frameworks, historical contexts, and data collection practices. Each of these four potential differences is briefly explored below

Terminology: DEI language reflects distinct cultural and linguistic contexts, creating potential misunderstandings even between English-speaking countries. While U.K. universities increasingly engage with the concept of "equity," many still emphasize "equality" in their frameworks (University of London, 2024), aligning more closely with broader European approaches. Similarly, "inclusion" carries different meanings. For example, U.K. institutions frame it through structured frameworks like the Race Equality Charter (Brooks, 2019), while French institutions interpret it through egalitarian principles that

emphasize equal treatment rather than differential support (Marliere, 2023). These variations in how fundamental DEI terms are understood and implemented directly impact how U.S. students experience support abroad.

Legal Framework: European countries operate under distinct laws and policies regarding discrimination and inclusion, influencing institutional approaches to DEI. For example, France's strict secularism laws affecting religious expression in educational settings illustrate how legal frameworks shape institutional DEI approaches (Marliere, 2023). In contrast to France's focus on secularism, Germany's post-war data protection policies significantly influence how institutions track and support diverse student populations (Waxman, 2018).

Historical Context: In Europe, DEI conversations are shaped by a range of historical and societal factors, such as immigration, European Union integration, and the continent's legacy of wars, colonialism, and genocide (European Centre for Economic and Policy Analysis and Affairs, 2024). For instance, Germany's approach to diversity is heavily influenced by its efforts to address the atrocities of the Holocaust, leading to robust anti-discrimination laws and education campaigns. In contrast, France emphasizes a universalist model of equality that avoids categorizing individuals by race or ethnicity, a legacy of its Republican ideals and colonial history. These frameworks differ from those in the United States, where DEI discussions frequently center around the legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and the civil rights movements (Charles, 2023).

Data Collection: European approaches to demographic data collection vary significantly by country, shaped by distinct histories and legal frameworks. While U.K. institutions maintain extensive data collection (Brooks, 2019), France prohibits racial/ethnic data collection (JP Morgan Chase & Co., 2023), and Germany restricts demographic categorization due to post-war sensitivities (Waxman, 2018). These variations affect how institutions track and address DEI issues (European Commission, 2021a).

4.3. Important Considerations

U.S. students and institutions engaging with DEI issues in the context of European education abroad should consider several key points, as these points highlight the challenge of navigating differing historical, sociocultural, and institutional contexts. By recognizing these complexities, students and institutions can better prepare for the DEI landscapes in Europe, making the experience both enriching and manageable.

Differing Historical and Sociocultural Contexts: Students from U.S. universities may struggle with differing attitudes toward DEI in Europe,

especially in countries where immigration and integration issues dominate diversity conversations. Critical Incident 3 highlights how students with disabilities may face challenges at European universities, where accessibility may be approached differently than at U.S. institutions, which have been shaped by the ADA.

Variations in Institutional Support: Education-abroad students may encounter different levels of DEI infrastructure at European institutions, which often reflect local priorities rather than U.S.-style frameworks. For example, while Università di Bologna emphasizes cultural diversity and immigrant inclusion (European Commission, 2016), these approaches may differ from the comprehensive support systems U.S. students expect. This variation can create challenges for students seeking specific resources or accommodations

Potential for Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings: U.S. students may face situations where their expectations around DEI clash with local norms or practices, potentially leading to misunderstandings. Host practitioners may also struggle to understand and address student frustrations when their expectations are unmet.

Need for Tailored Support: Students' needs depend on their identities and the host country's sociocultural context. For example, LGBTQ+ students may require additional resources in countries where LGBTQ+ rights are less established.

Supporting Voluntary Disclosures: Legal frameworks in the United States, particularly the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504, protect students' rights to educational opportunities, including study abroad. These protections explicitly prohibit institutions from denying participation based on disability status; instead, eligibility decisions must rely on objective criteria such as academic standing or disciplinary records. While institutions should create clear pathways for students to voluntarily disclose their needs, they cannot legally require such disclosure. This creates a complex balance between respecting student privacy and ensuring access to necessary support resources. Rather than implementing approval mechanisms—which could violate these legal protections—institutions should focus on developing robust support systems that empower students to make informed decisions about their participation and accommodation needs abroad.

Importance of Pre-Departure Preparation: U.S. institutions and education-abroad providers play a critical role in preparing students for the distinct DEI landscapes they will encounter abroad. Many providers offer pre-departure resources to address these differences. However, the depth and

accuracy of this preparation may vary, and the level of collaboration with sending institutions may also vary.

Opportunity for New Perspectives: While navigating a different DEI landscape can be challenging, it also provides U.S. students valuable opportunities to expand their global understanding of DEI issues. However, such immersion often requires additional support to help students interpret and navigate these differences.

Opportunity for Institutional Learning: As U.S. institutions and providers continue to encounter diverse DEI contexts abroad, they can evolve their support systems to meet the needs of students more effectively in navigating these challenges.

4.4. Discussion Summary

Studying abroad in Europe presents students from U.S. institutions with unique challenges and opportunities to engage with DEI. The differences in historical legacies, legal frameworks, and institutional practices across European contexts can significantly shape students' experiences, whether they study with U.S. providers, institutional offices, or directly with European universities. While these differences may create gaps in support and potential for cross-cultural misunderstandings, they also offer valuable opportunities for students to expand their perspectives on global DEI issues. With adequate pre-departure preparation, ongoing support, and openness to learning, students from U.S. institutions can transform these challenges into meaningful personal and academic growth, contributing to a deeper understanding of DEI in a global context. Furthermore, U.S. institutions and providers stand to benefit from evolving their approaches to better address the complexities of DEI in international settings, ultimately enhancing the education abroad experience for future students.

5. Recommendations for Practice

The DEI disconnect creates challenges for U.S. students studying abroad in Europe, potentially limiting their academic, personal, and professional growth. As education abroad programs increasingly serve diverse student populations, it is necessary to implement targeted practices and policies to address this disconnect and ensure student success. The following actionable recommendations are not exhaustive but are a starting point. They are listed in order of three key phases of the education abroad process: pre-departure, on-site, and re-entry. This approach will assist professionals supporting education abroad in assessing which areas of their operational purview can be enhanced

to effectively support U.S. students with DEI expectations that differ from the local contexts of marginalization of their chosen European study destination.

5.1. Pre-Departure Recommendations

A critical aspect of the education abroad process is the pre-departure phase, which sending and receiving institutions must leverage jointly to prepare students for practical and transactional elements of travel and the cultural experience. This phase presents a unique opportunity to engage students on diversity, equity, and inclusion through a lens of support and cultural exploration. Thus, the recommendations listed below are meant to help students set realistic DEI expectations and facilitate deeper DEI learning in a new cultural context.

5.1.1. Cultural Competency Training

Inclusion means fostering and honoring diversity while fully engaging all voices and worldviews in our community. It requires challenging traditions and assumptions that reinforce paradigms of privilege and power that contribute to oppression. “Inclusion necessitates empowering [students] to ask critical questions and foster awareness-raising dialogue to ensure that all members feel welcomed and valued and have equitable opportunities to thrive” (Dickinson College, n.d.).

Intercultural competence training should be considered as part of campuses’ DEI strategies, especially in the context of global education. This work should maximize students’ “ability to communicate and act appropriately and effectively across cultural differences. Effectively means we achieve our aims. Appropriately means we do so in such a way that any other parties involved feel respected” (Harvey, n.d., p. 3). While intercultural competence alone does not directly address structural and systemic oppression (Abrams & Moio, 2009, as cited in Green & Chaudhary, 2023), when intercultural competence training is part of the education-abroad experience, participants are better equipped to unpack critical incidents, mainly when these occur outside their frames of reference.

This training often takes a holistic approach to preparing students for effective, culturally appropriate, and meaningful involvement in environments outside their comfort zone, such as those presented in the case studies. Intercultural competence training provides students with the information and skills they need for their education-abroad experience surrounding cultural awareness, cultural differences, communication preferences, ethics and values, conflict resolution, and cultural transition strategies (UC Merced, n.d.). Diversity Abroad (2019) recommends adding identity awareness abroad to pre-departure intercultural preparedness.

Dickinson College's (2021) Center for Global Study & Engagement (CGSE) 2017-20 Impact Report stated that all students preparing to study off-campus for at least a semester were required to participate in a series of workshops. These intercultural workshops, designed by the CGSE, were aimed at familiarizing the students with their identities and positionalities to prepare them for how these may be perceived, challenged, or otherwise impacted abroad. Returning education-abroad students participate in these workshops to help contextualize the exercises (Dickinson College, 2021).

U.S. institutions that offer their own education abroad programs should provide intercultural competence training to their on-site directors and staff. This training would allow the directors and staff to offer comprehensive workshops that address the historical and cultural contexts of the host country, focusing on how local views on race, gender, disability, and other salient identity categories might differ from U.S. perspectives. It is worth acknowledging that while some policies and laws in the host country may not seem as progressive as in the United States, most likely, there are areas where the host country has made more significant strides in addressing historical injustices (i.e., DEI policies) compared to the United States. Moreover, no one country has "achieved DEI" as it were. By comparing and contrasting DEI efforts in the United States with those of the host country, cultural competency training promotes a deeper understanding and preparation. It reinforces the idea that, like the United States, the host country is on its distinct journey to address inequity and representation within its own context.

5.1.2. Expectation Management

To lessen the impact of the DEI disconnect, education abroad professionals—at sending and receiving institutions and within provider organizations—can support students in managing their expectations of how their identity may manifest itself differently and the climate of diversity may be distinct from their home context. By emphasizing how differences in language, cultural norms, and legal frameworks impact the local DEI climate, educators can help students appreciate that they will enter a new landscape of how their identity will be interpreted and how it may shift in Europe. Here, again, is an opportunity for students to learn and reflect on identity through the cultural lens of their host country and compare this to what they have come to expect in the United States, adjusting their expectations along the way.

When helping students set expectations, it is important to note that, similar to how the United States struggles with advancing DEI, the host country likely faces similar challenges. While a student should expect the host institution to provide effective inclusive support, it would ironically be 'imperialistic' for students to impose a U.S. DEI standard—one that is also imperfect—onto their host

culture. This reality should not, however, allow staff or faculty to disregard or diminish a student's concerns about navigating their identity in a new cultural context. Nor does it absolve provider organizations and host institutions from the ongoing work of improving and enhancing inclusive advising and support. Thus, as international educators grapple with what it means to serve an increasingly diverse student population, education abroad professionals must set realistic expectations for students, their families, and home institutions about what support they can or cannot provide.

5.1.3. Access to Targeted Resources

Sending institutions and provider organizations should equip students with a combination of resources, such as country guides, local DEI advocacy groups, and networks of students with similar identities; however, these networks may be challenging when there are few students in the cohort with minoritized identities. Alternatively, a mentorship program can be developed to connect historically excluded students with mentors who identify similarly and have studied abroad. While such targeted resources are often made available to students during the pre-departure phase, the focus of the resources should also cover on-site and re-entry. This facilitates students' access to inclusive support resources at each phase of the education abroad journey. Targeted resources should be easily accessible, reviewed, and updated periodically to ensure the content remains relevant to new cohorts of students whose views on identity may differ from prior cohorts. Providing students with high-quality resources can empower them to explore the local DEI climate further and assess how this new landscape may impact their experience abroad.

5.2. On-Site Recommendations

During the on-site phase, staff and faculty from providers or local institutions play a pivotal role in delivering an educationally rich experience and inclusive support. To effectively assist students who may experience a DEI disconnect, local professionals should stay informed about DEI trends in the United States. However, students also need to develop an understanding of the host country's own DEI context. Encouraging students to actively engage with local customs, histories, and perspectives can foster deeper learning and adaptation. By promoting reciprocal cultural understanding, both students and staff benefit from a more collaborative and meaningful experience. Local professionals can practice cultural humility, are encouraged to familiarize themselves with U.S. DEI trends, engage in professional development, and offer scenario-based learning, while students are encouraged to learn about and navigate the local DEI landscape. This two-way learning enriches the educational experience and better positions both parties to engage inclusively. Organizations such as the European Association for Study Abroad, Diversity Abroad, the Forum

for Education Abroad, the European Association for Study Abroad, and country-based associations (e.g. Association des Programmes Universitaires Américains en France, Asociación de Programas Universitarios Norteamericanos en España, or Association of American College and University Programs in Italy) offer resources for staff to navigate these dynamics.

5.2.1. Ongoing Support and Monitoring

Regular check-ins and group debriefs allow education-abroad professionals to monitor student experiences and integration into local DEI contexts. These structured discussions provide space for students to voice concerns and share successes while generating feedback to enhance support for future cohorts.

5.2.2. Local DEI Engagement

On-site teams should develop curricular and co-curricular opportunities (e.g., events, visits to local organizations) for students that center local historically marginalized communities. Care should be taken not to engage such communities through a deficit lens but through a spirit of reciprocal knowledge-sharing while highlighting the contributions such communities bring to the overall host culture. Local DEI engagement does more than enrich students' academic experience; it roots them in the community and exposes them to the multifaceted nature of DEI beyond the context of the United States. This adds value for all students, not only those navigating the effects of DEI disconnect. By participating in local events and programming featuring stories and voices from diverse local communities, students can find mentors and peers who share similar identities and experiences, thereby building a more authentic sense of belonging that can support their personal and academic growth during their time abroad.

5.2.3. Crisis Management Preparedness

Provider organizations and host institutions should develop a crisis management plan for DEI-related incidents. It is not realistic to expect a provider organization or host institution to completely shield students from the discrimination they may face from the host community or within their cohort. For many students, if they faced such situations at their home institutions, there would be specific offices or professionals who help them navigate the impact of a discriminatory or bias-related incident. Students, reasonably or not, may expect similar support on-site. Helping students set realistic expectations, as noted above, and developing a crisis management plan will position on-site staff to support students during these inherently sensitive and challenging moments. A crisis management plan focused on DEI may include how to respond to and report incidents of discrimination, harassment, prejudice, or bias, as well as

specific legal rights students hold in the host country. It is necessary to note the legal complexity with respect to the rights U.S. students hold in this regard. Crisis management plans related to bias incidents that center U.S. policy and citizen rights—for example, Title VI or IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—no matter how well-intended, can be received as inapplicable, at best, and hegemonic, at worst, on-site. Thus, building crisis management takes collaboration from on-site and home campus professionals, recognizing that there may not be alignment among laws and rights.

5.3. Re-Entry Recommendations

Re-entry presents continued avenues for learning. This phase is an opportunity for students to reflect on their experience abroad and consider how they will leverage their experience with their future academic, civic, and professional aspirations. For professionals at local and host institutions and provider organizations, re-entry is a time to further assess the effectiveness of their student support apparatus and to refine practices and policies to meet the needs of future cohorts more effectively. Activities during this phase can be related to information and resources that were delivered in the pre-departure phase and thus seen as a continuation of the learning process.

5.3.1. Debriefing Sessions

Upon returning, students should be given the platform to share their experiences, the impact of their time abroad, and how their understanding of identity and inclusion may have changed. These debriefing sessions not only allow students to reflect on and process their experiences but also provide invaluable insights to program coordinators aiming to improve the support structures for future cohorts. By focusing on the transformations students undergo abroad, these sessions contribute to a broader understanding of the nuanced impact of international education on personal and identity development. It is recommended that more than one instance of a debrief session be offered, as students may not be ready to debrief immediately upon return. Oftentimes, allowing some time to pass provides time and space for students to begin to recognize the changes and transformations that have occurred. Additionally, guiding students with intercultural frameworks, such as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, may help them make sense of their experiences abroad and process their surrounding thoughts and feelings.

5.3.2. Integration of Experience into Academic Learning

Encouraging students to integrate their overseas experiences into their ongoing academic work and local community engagement bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Faculty or staff can guide students in identifying opportunities to reflect on their time abroad and

the DEI climate of their host communities. This reflection may inspire further coursework, research projects, and local community engagement. Education abroad professionals on the home campus may consider sending a list of students to faculty in the academic department where the student is majoring. This can alert the faculty to the fact that the student will likely have new ideas to contribute to the class. Additionally, encourage students to participate in campus presentations that highlight the co-curricular aspect of the undergraduate experience. This would provide yet another opportunity for the student to reflect on the experience as a whole.

5.3.3. Data Collection and Research

Upon their return, students should be engaged in structured data collection and research initiatives to evaluate their programmatic experiences, especially concerning how their identity may have impacted their experience. These efforts may involve both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to capture a broad spectrum of student experiences, including academic performance, personal growth, cultural adaptation, and identity development. Institutions and organizations may administer their own surveys and/or participate in more extensive surveys, like Diversity Abroad's Global Education Experience Survey, which allows for data aggregation across institution types.

Another opportunity to gather data is by inviting returned education abroad students to participate in “talk back” sessions with prospective students. The topics of the “talk back” session can and should be DEI-focused. Listening to the students talk about their experience in this way provides the education abroad professional with an opportunity to gather data organically.

6. Limitations

Our manuscript has three primary limitations. First, it does not follow the traditional structure of a research study. We do not include a methodology section, as we did not collect new data. Still, we meet some of the criteria of quality inquiry defined by Jones et al. (2014), such as establishing a solid foundation on the topic and producing a final product that is accessible to a wide range of readers.

Second, the Diversity Abroad data (Kasravi et al., 2023) we featured in our literature review has limitations. Of the 934 participants who completed Diversity Abroad's instrument, 64.5% identified as White, and 73.7% identified as women. Although these figures parallel the larger population of U.S. education-abroad students (i.e., 66.4% White and 67.2% women; Institute of International Education, 2024c), the statistics are not representative of the undergraduate student population in the United States (i.e., 47.0% White and 58.0% women; U.S.

Department of Education, 2024). Despite this limitation, the participants in the study overwhelmingly selected Europe as an education-abroad destination, as nine out of the top ten most popular countries were in Europe.

Third, we appreciate that critical incidents are specific to particular contexts, which means they cannot be generalized to broader populations or settings. Additionally, critical incidents are often based on subjective interpretations. We attempted to show the international educators' and the students' perspectives on the incidents. We crafted reflection questions that readers may also be applied to the analysis of critical incidents in their own contexts.

7. Suggestions for Future Research

Considering the dearth of research on the DEI disconnect, we offer the following suggestions for future research. More advanced work needs to be done to understand the essence of this disconnect better, and phenomenological research lends itself to this examination. Scholars could collect and compare qualitative data from Europe and U.S.-based international educators. Additionally, more data could be collected from underrepresented U.S. students participating in education abroad programs in Europe. Researchers could consider one-on-one interviews, focus groups, journaling, document analysis, and/or photo elicitation. Various theoretical perspectives (e.g., critical race theory, LatCrit, TribalCrit, queer theory) could inform the design of this research. Additionally, it would be interesting to move the conversation beyond the United States and Europe. We encourage researchers to explore DEI in other cultural contexts.

8. Conclusion

The DEI disconnect that U.S. students encounter in European education-abroad programs reflects deeper divergences in cultural norms, historical contexts, and institutional structures. Although this disconnect may pose challenges, such as limited support for underrepresented students and difficulties navigating intersecting identities, it also underscores the critical need for nuanced and thoughtful engagement. Higher education professionals must adopt a balanced approach that respects local European contexts while maintaining commitments to equity and inclusivity.

By addressing these challenges with a collaborative and culturally informed mindset, international educators can reframe the DEI disconnect into a transformative learning opportunity. There is potential for U.S. students to develop intercultural competence, critical thinking skills, and a more nuanced understanding of DEI in global contexts. These experiences not only enrich

students personally and academically but also prepare them to contribute to a more interconnected world. As institutions continue to evolve their practices, they have the potential to enhance the education-abroad experience for all.

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