

Supporting LGBT International Students

THE COLLEGE YEARS can be a time of personal exploration and growth for many young adults, including the exploration of one's gender and sexuality identities. A 2013 survey from Pew Research Center showed that the median age lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals "come out" is 20, an age that falls squarely within those college years. More and more colleges are providing services such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) resource centers in order to support these students and help them find community. According to the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, there are around 200 LGBT student centers nationwide, and the number is growing. For LGBT international students coming to the United States from cultures where exploration of one's sexuality or gender identity is discouraged or unsafe, this opportunity to develop and explore in a supportive environment can be revolutionary.

At the same time, LGBT international students face unique challenges and may not always know where to turn for support—or cultural stigmas around such issues may prevent them from doing so. Understanding these challenges is crucial to providing better services for all students.

The Double Barrier

Struby Struble, coordinator of the Missouri University LGBT Resource Center, says LGBT international students often experience what she calls a "double barrier" when trying to build a community on campus. "With their international student friends, they feel isolated because they're the LGBT one," she explains, "but then among the LGBT students on campus, they feel isolated because they're the international one." Saksham Rai, a Nepalese student who identifies as gay and graduated from the University of Minnesota in December 2014, agrees. "The one biggest challenge that LGBT international students face is finding a sense of home in a different country."

This can be true even for international students on campuses with large populations of students from their home countries, says George Kacenga, director of international enrollment management at the University of Colorado-Denver, which has a large Chinese student population. "A Chinese LGBT student might at first identify with that community of Chinese students because that aids in the transition to university life and everything that comes with that," he says. "But then they might find themselves almost feeling like they are at home again,

unable to come out because they might meet a friend or a family member or some connection. If they are just trying to experiment or test an identity or understand who they are, things happening on campus might show up on social media or get back home. On some campuses that's a real possibility."

At the same time, LGBT international students may find it difficult to relate to the struggles faced by LGBT domestic students. Struble gives the example of the cultural differences around disclosing one's sexuality to family members. "For our domestic 18–22-year-old students who come to our resource center, if they were to interact with an international student and they're all talking about coming out to their families, my students aren't going to understand the cultural differences," says Struble. "They might say, 'Oh, you just come out to them and be honest and tell them it's okay. You're still their kid.' But in certain cultures it's not that simple."

"The difference for some of our domestic U.S. students and international students," says Kacenga, "is that an international student could be coming from an environment where it is illegal or punishable by death. Having that weight of what it means to be 'out' back home definitely adds an additional layer of pressure."

Creating a Safe Space

For Kacenga, nurturing an environment where students feel free to discuss anything is the first step toward helping LGBT international students feel safe on campus.



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“University study should be a rewarding time for all of our students,” says Kacenga. “Studying in the U.S. should give students the equal opportunity to have access to education without the barriers of harassment and discrimination that these students are likely to be afraid of. We stress in our actions that students have the choice of whether or not they’re going to disclose their orientation or their identity. It may never come out and they may never disclose, but it is important that they know there is a safe place.”

Here some of the keys to creating a safe space:

■ **Use gender-neutral language.** “Instead of asking students if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend, ask if they have a significant other or a partner,” suggests Steve Willich, director of GLBT Student Services at The Auraria Campus, which serves Metropolitan State University of Denver, Community College of Denver, and University of Colorado-Denver. Using gender-neutral language can also include asking students what pronouns they prefer,

Willich adds. “With our trans students, they may not be presenting as the opposite gender yet, but they would like to go by the opposite gender and would prefer to use the pronoun of that gender.”

■ **Avoid assumptions.** “I think one of the biggest mistakes that professionals who work with international students make,” says Struble, “is to assume that if a student is coming from a country where there’s not a strong LGBT culture, the student matches that larger culture.” The opposite may often be true, she says, with some LGBT students choosing to study in the United States at least in part, because there is more acceptance here than in their home countries. “International students are such a larger thing than just coming from another country,” says Struble. “They are full humans so they have the full range of sexualities. By assuming that they’re anti-LGBT and matching our attitudes with that assumption, we’re reinforcing that they are not safe here.”

■ Incorporate LGBT issues into discussions of current events. When discussing U.S. current events with international students, be sure to include LGBT issues, such as same-sex marriage, suggests the UNC-Chapel Hill LGBT Center website. By making respectful discussion of such topics part of regular conversation, it sends the signal to students that these subjects are not taboo.

■ **Attend training.** Encourage international student advisers as well as faculty and other student-support staff to participate in LGBT awareness training in order to better understand and support LGBT students. The Safe Zone Project provides a free online LGBT awareness training curriculum. After completing the training, staff can display Safe Zone stickers, which, says Willich, are widely recognized in the United States and in some other countries. Willich also suggests reading *A Resource Guide to Coming Out*, which is available on the Human Rights Campaign's website. Even though it is geared toward helping LGBT individuals through the coming out process, it is useful to those wanting to better understand the struggles LGBT students face.

■ **Learn the vocabulary.** Willich also suggests taking a few minutes to become familiar with “the language that is being used currently in the LGBT community about the different types of identities that exist.” Although “LGBT” is the most commonly used term within the general population, other terms are becoming widely used as well. Willich says “LGBTQIA” is considered the most inclusive term because it also includes those who identify as queer, intersex, or asexual. “As more identities become known and organized,” he says, “we are realizing there are large populations around those different identities.” Willich stresses, however, that knowing the “correct” term is not nearly as important as “just showing students that you are inclusive and willing to talk about these issues.”

■ **Establish a relationship with LGBT groups and services on campus.** Inviting LGBT resource offices or LGBT student

groups to speak or distribute material at international student orientations is a great way to make students aware of available resources in a nonthreatening way. Building relationships with LGBT campus groups also opens the door for dialogue on how they can offer activities that are inclusive of students from all different cultures and backgrounds.

■ **Display affirming literature and visual cues.** Struble suggests displaying items in the international student and scholar services office that show inclusivity and acceptance of the LGBT community, such as Safe Zone stickers, rainbow flags, artwork, ally magazines, brochures for LGBT support hotlines, or flyers for gay-straight alliance student groups. “There’s going to be a lot of fear from the international student to talk to the professional about their sexuality because there are so many taboos in all different countries,” says Struble. “They might fear deportation or getting in trouble. They may wonder if their question is appropriate to ask. Displaying visual support and having that information readily available for international students so that they can ask questions provides a huge show of support and gives the student comfort to ask what resources are available.” Struble also points out that many students are afraid of being seen entering an LGBT resource center because of the assumptions that others will make. This is especially true for international students for whom these topics are stigmatized in their culture. Since many students will never approach any event or center that is labeled “LGBT,” says Struble, it is especially important that their literature or brochures be made available in other offices on campus so that students can still access these resources.

■ **Encourage campuswide changes.** Having gender-neutral housing options, restrooms, and recreational facilities on campus can be especially important to LGBT students, says Kacenga. For some transgender students, having access to gender-neutral health insurance is a priority. Kacenga also recommends getting involved



at the campus policy level to ensure that there are nondiscrimination statements and that gender-neutral language is used in university-wide communications.

Meeting Students Where They Are

The most important thing, says Willich, is to not be judgmental. “People are going through their own struggles and people have their own identities. It’s not for us as student affairs professionals or as college advisers to judge a student’s experience. It’s to support them through their journey—and to thank them. They have entrusted you with a very important piece of information. So it’s honoring that trust and then seeing what they need. What is the reason they told you?”

Kacenga agrees that students usually reveal this type of information for a reason—whether it’s because they are having a roommate conflict, they feel they have been discriminated against, they are seeking counseling, or they’re just looking for community—and it is important to make sure you direct them to the appropriate resource. If your campus doesn’t have an LGBT resource center, check to see if another university in your town does. Also, Struble recommends consulting with residence life staff, as they have usually been trained to deal with a variety of student issues and know how to access campus resources.

Going Home

While some LGBT international students coming from countries that afford greater rights to LGBT individuals than does the United States can face a difficult adjustment after arriving on campus, for a large number of LGBT international students, the most difficult period is toward the end of their program, says Kacenga. "For a lot of these students, identifying as LGBTQ in their home country could mean capital punishment, discrimination in employment, being unable to adopt children, or marry," says Kacenga. "Hate crimes are very real. Whether they've been here for their entire undergraduate degree or for two years for graduate school, at some point they may need to go home and return to that setting. And that can be really hard for a student who's come here and experienced freedoms we take for granted." Kacenga compares the grief that these students feel to that felt by

some female international students returning to conservative societies that will not afford them the same freedoms they have experienced in the United States.

For Nepalese student Rai, who hopes to remain in the United States for graduate school, returning home symbolizes the potential loss of who he has become. "I would say that if I had to go back home," he says, "I would have to throw my identity out the window. I would only be able to live in my country if I were able to live on my own to reduce my relationship with my family. Or I could choose to be with my family. It's like an ultimatum."

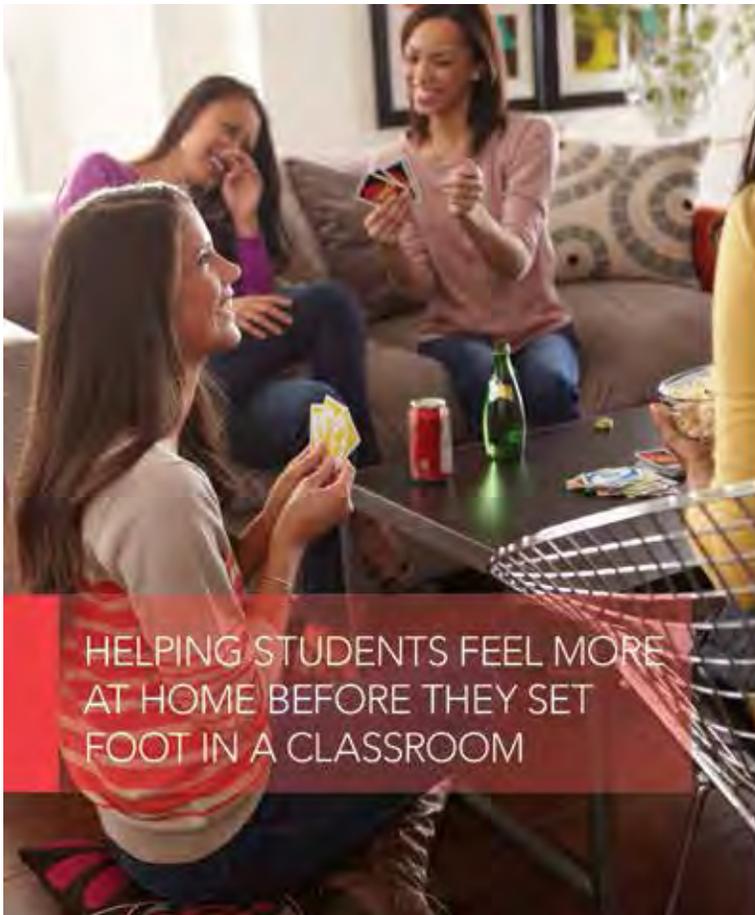
Struble recommends that for students returning home, especially to geographically isolated areas where they are unlikely to have a community that understands them, the Internet can be a great resource. Although she acknowledges that online communities and groups can never replace

personal contact, they can provide a way to "maintain a bit of access to their world" when students leave.

You Don't Have to Be an Expert to Help

"I think a lot of professionals are scared that if they're not an expert that they can't be of help," says Struble. "But you can. Just sending someone as a referral to an LGBT center, to a counselor you trust, or to a website... anything is enough to show support for that student. You don't have to be an expert. You don't have to understand the transition process for transgender students or have an in-depth knowledge of the LGBT community in order to be supportive of the student across the desk from you." **IE**

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