Working with LGBT International Students

CONTEMPLATING THE SEXUAL LANDSCAPE, and how our society has evolved in interacting with it, a college professor, openly gay himself, quipped—alluding to a conventional test format—“It used to be true or false; now it’s multiple choice.” Indeed, our society is, slowly, becoming more accepting of diversity in various aspects of life, including human sexuality. International advisers will likely come across international students who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and should know that dealing with LGBT students from other cultures can be different than dealing with domestic LGBT students exclusively.

A Short Discussion of Terminology

THE ADJECTIVE GAY has, for decades, been used in referring to homosexual men. Sometimes, as in “gay marriage,” it can refer to same-sex relationships, although some do not care for this usage because it seems to exclude bisexual and transgender people or suggest that homosexual women (lesbians) are a subset of men.

Many colleges and universities have adopted the term LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) or, reversing the first two, GLBT. “T” can signify transgender or transgender/transsexual. The word transgender is a fluid, umbrella term, applied to individuals whose self-identification does not match their identification as male or female on the basis of genetic sex. It does not necessarily imply a specific form of sexual orientation, which may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual. The term transsexual usually refers to individuals who have changed their bodies through procedures that often include hormones and surgery.

Sometimes the term LGBTQ is used, with “Q” signifying queer. This term, which used to be a derogatory description of homosexual and effeminate men, has taken on a broad sociopolitical meaning and embraces all those whose sexual orientation or activity place them outside the heterosexual mainstream. It is often considered an activist term. In LGBTQ, the “Q” may mean questioning and will occasionally be replaced by a question mark (?). Finally, one can see LGBTA, with “A” standing for Ally, that is, those who support the LGBT community and want to help end discrimination.
Special Needs of International LGBT Students

Most young people in college confront issues involving their sexuality. Any U.S. student who feels outside the mainstream sexual categories of heterosexual male and female will have special challenges to deal with. A tolerant environment and perhaps access to supportive programs and services can make a profound difference in their lives. The United States has made considerable progress in its acceptance of sexual diversity, as it has in racial and religious diversity. But some other countries are more progressive. For example, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, and Spain grant same-sex couples the right to marry. A number of countries recognize civil unions and registered partnerships on a national basis. On the other hand, there are countries in the Middle East, in Africa, in Asia, in South America where LGBT individuals lack even basic civil liberty protection.

“LBGT international students have special needs and face special challenges,” says Duane Rohovit, associate counselor in the office of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. An international LGBT student on a U.S. college campus will confront all the problems facing a domestic LGBT student plus others. If he or she comes from a Western European country, campus and community attitudes here may seem puzzlingly unaccepting. Indeed, in some U.S. communities the international LGBT student may encounter veiled or open hostility. Conversely, a student from Iran, or rural China, or Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan—although entering a generally more tolerant environment—may be extremely wary and even fearful. “In some countries, LGBT people face much discrimination, even persecution,” says Jay Ward, associate director in the Office of International Programs at San Francisco State University. There are cases where an international LGBT student will be more afraid of “coming out” in front of a compatriot than in front of a domestic stu-
When Duane Rohovit joined the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, in 2005, he became part of an institution with an established commitment to diversity and to providing an open, welcoming environment. The university already had GLBT groups for domestic students, who had access to campus counselors and to the vibrant GLBT culture of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

But Rohovit, who believes that GLBT international students have special needs and face special challenges, set to work. The first thing he did was to suggest that the international offices become GLBT-friendly by, for example, displaying such symbols as rainbow signs. He began serious networking, making the ISSS presence known to all existing domestic GLBT on-campus organizations, which lacked experience dealing with international students and were not attuned to their needs.

His office established a Web site for international students, providing contacts and general information about GLBT resources in the college and community, as well as at the state and national levels.

Not all efforts succeeded. The planned in-person conversation groups, for students to chat about international

Prevalence and Variety of LGBT Programs and Services

There are still many campuses with no formal outreach to LGBT students, either domestic or international. But research for this article indicated that where campus LGBT services do exist, they seek to include international students. "Several members of the GLBT Student Support Services here have come to us to find out how to create programs helpful for international students," says Domonic Potorti, international student adviser at Indiana University. Allison Fort Subasic, director of the LGBTA Student Resource Center at Pennsylvania State

THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA-TWIN CITIES

Expanding Existing Programs and Services

Some students are very comfortable with who they are. Some are very public; some are very private. Some want to compartmentalize.”

"Some students are very comfortable with who they are. Some are very public; some are very private. Some want to compartmentalize.”

dent for fear of consequences after returning home. “Some students from more conservative societies learn tolerance here. The flip side of this is that it may be very hard for them to return home and stay in touch with their sexuality,” says My Yarabinec, associate director in the Office of International Programs at San Francisco State University. He adds: “Some are not always prudent and feel they have to take advantage of the greater tolerance in the U.S. This may intrude on their studies and well-being.”

A major challenge for international student advisers in the United States is that every international LGBT student is different—psychologically and culturally. “Some students are very comfortable with who they are. Some are very public; some are very private. Some want to compartmentalize, that is, be out in one context (e.g., LGBT meetings) but not in another (an international student space),” observes Kevin Morrison, associate director and international student adviser at Meredith College. All those interviewed for this article pointed out that virtually every international LGBT student faces the prospect of re-entry into the home culture, however tolerant or hostile it may be. Very few succeed in receiving asylum in the United States on the basis of sexual persecution.

ARON BRAND/ SHUTTERSTOCK
University, conducts workshops for the staff in the international student services office. And at institutions with LGBT services, the international office almost always works cooperatively with it when reaching out to international LGBT students. In the last 25 years there has been a steady increase in the number of campus LGBT centers, according to The Consortium of Higher Education Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Professionals.

The Consortium’s list of LGBT centers—as they know—does not tell the whole story, however; many institutions have informal LGBT offices, clubs, and centers that are not institution-wide but that serve as resources for international student advisers reaching out to LGBT students. “Bryn Mawr College does not have a formal LGBT Center,” says Li-Chen Chin, formerly associate dean and director of International Programs there (now at Duke University), “but rather a Multicultural Center supervised by the Office of Intercultural Affairs; it works with all student affinity groups.” Yale University, with more than 3,500 international students and scholars from 110 countries, does not have a centralized LGBT office but Elisabeth Kennedy, assistant director/adviser, Office of International Students and Scholars, says that

GLBT concerns, proved to be too time-consuming for them and too public. A Chinese graduate student suggested a discussion message board, which would provide confidentiality, and this service is now in its first stage.

A GLBT international student at the university searching for information will find it easy. The first step is to go to the ISSS website (www.isss.umn.edu). By choosing “Resources and Useful Links,” the student will find a link “ISSS Welcomes GLBT,” and one more click will provide access to a wealth of material, preceded by this message: “International Students and Scholar Services welcomes all members of the International GLBT&AI Community and provides services including support, counseling, discussion groups and other activities.”

Once ISSS was providing services, it identified more people who wanted to be involved with the GLBT international community on campus. Two international students became graduate assistants in the campus-wide GLBTA office, the first time international students were involved there, bringing their interests and concerns with them.

The University of Minnesota appropriates money for the GLBTA office, a Queer Student Cultural Center, and ally training. The ISSS office includes GLBTA services as a regular part of its funded operations.

Since the fall of 2007, the university has been offering a minor in GLBTA studies, offered through the Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies. Rohovit and his colleagues have steadily expanded their focus to include international students, scholars, and faculty.
Yale works actively to include the LGBT population in everything it does. The Yale Handbook for International Students has a section on gay and lesbian life and makes clear that the institutional culture mandates full acceptance of all LGBTQ people on the part of all members of the university community. “We have an official and enforced nondiscrimination policy. On campus, it is likely that both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ couples will be seen displaying affection for one another,” the handbook says.

**Challenges in Reaching Out to International LGBT Students**

International student offices face three preponderate challenges in seeking to offer effective programs and services for international LGBT students:

- Being in an unfriendly administration in a conservative region of the country. “As of early this year, only 13 states and the District of Columbia ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender/identity expression. Seven more states have laws banning discrimination based only on sexual orientation,” says Nick Sakurai, program coordinator, GLBTA Resource Center, American University. In addition to these 20 states, about 100 municipalities in the 30 states without nondiscrimination laws have local nondiscrimination laws.

- Getting students to attend. They often hesitate, usually for cultural reasons. If they come from countries where the LGBT population is vilified or victimized, they are afraid. (They may fear the U.S. environment too; a campus in San Francisco, Manhattan, or Washington, D.C. is not like one in rural America.) If they come from LGBT-friendly countries, they may have little interest in participating.

- Having limited staff resources. International LGBT students are dealing with challenges of their own:

  - They may be struggling with their own sexual identity, be unclear about who they are, undecided about whether they should “come out,” and unsure about how to relate to others sexually.
  - They may want to know what is safe and what is not, both in terms of sexual practices and places in the community. What can they do? Where can they go? How should they act if they run into difficulties with others, on or off campus?
  - They may have home difficulties—families and future work environments that do not accept who they are. They struggle with whether and how to tell their family; where to live; what career to pursue (a diplomatic career, for example, could pose problems). How should they deal with marriage or with having children?
  - They may have legal problems. Some are upset by the fact that U.S. policies prevent their bringing a same-sex partner into the United States on their student visa. Some may be so afraid of returning home that they wish to seek asylum.

**Some Effective Outreach Strategies**

It would be a mistake for the international educator to feel the need to be an expert in LGBT issues. What is required is sensitivity, common sense, knowledge of resources, and the will to help.

Here are some tips on effective ways to reach out, culled from conversations with international educators who have experience in the area.

**Physical locale, personnel, and institutional links**

- Make the International Office LGBT-friendly. Display rainbow-themed and safe space signs.
- If possible, enlist LGBT or ally faculty and staff. Conduct ally training for people interested in working on LGBT issues and with LGBT students and colleagues throughout the institution.
- Involve upper-class international students—LGBT and straight.
- Establish strong links with any LGBT groups on campus.
- Establish links with the student health and campus counseling services, if available, so that, when needed, you can provide referrals to counseling. (Bear in mind the stigma counseling may have in some cultures and the fact that poor counseling can do much damage; try to make sure the counselor is a good one.)
- If the international office works with volunteer community hosts, seek to involve the LGBT community and include a discussion of diversity in the training. Emphasize that families come in all shapes and sizes.
Adjunct Faculty for the Chinese Institute

We seek experienced, academically qualified, bilingual professionals to teach in the MBA and MIS Programs offered in China. As an adjunct faculty in the MBA and MIS Programs, you’ll have the opportunity to travel to Nanjing, Shenyang, or Guangzhou, China to bring your expertise to the international classroom, giving students a practical appreciation of the subject matter.


To qualify for this opportunity, you must demonstrate excellent communication skills, cultural sensitivity, appreciation of the Chinese culture, the ability and experience to teach business professionals in an academic setting, and the ability to integrate theory with practical application. MBA, Master’s, or Doctoral degree from a regionally-accredited institution related to the disciplines previously noted required. 7-10 years of related work experience preferred. One year of prior teaching experience in the field of interest also preferred. Must complete classroom management software training (e.g., Blackboard and PeopleSoft) for online grading and related course management. Proficiency in Microsoft Office required. Must be willing to travel to China and able to commit to a minimum of 14 days. Verbal and written fluency in Mandarin desirable.

MUST HAVE PERMANENT LEGAL AUTHORITY TO WORK IN US.

Please submit your cover letter and resume to: Benedictine University, MBA Department, 5700 College Road, Lisle, IL 60532. Fax: 630.829.6034; E-mail: tsmallwood@ben.edu.

www.ben.edu

Benedictine University is an equal opportunity employer.