

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.



YALE UNIVERSITY

Genesis and Evolution of Programs and Services

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.

“LGBT 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-

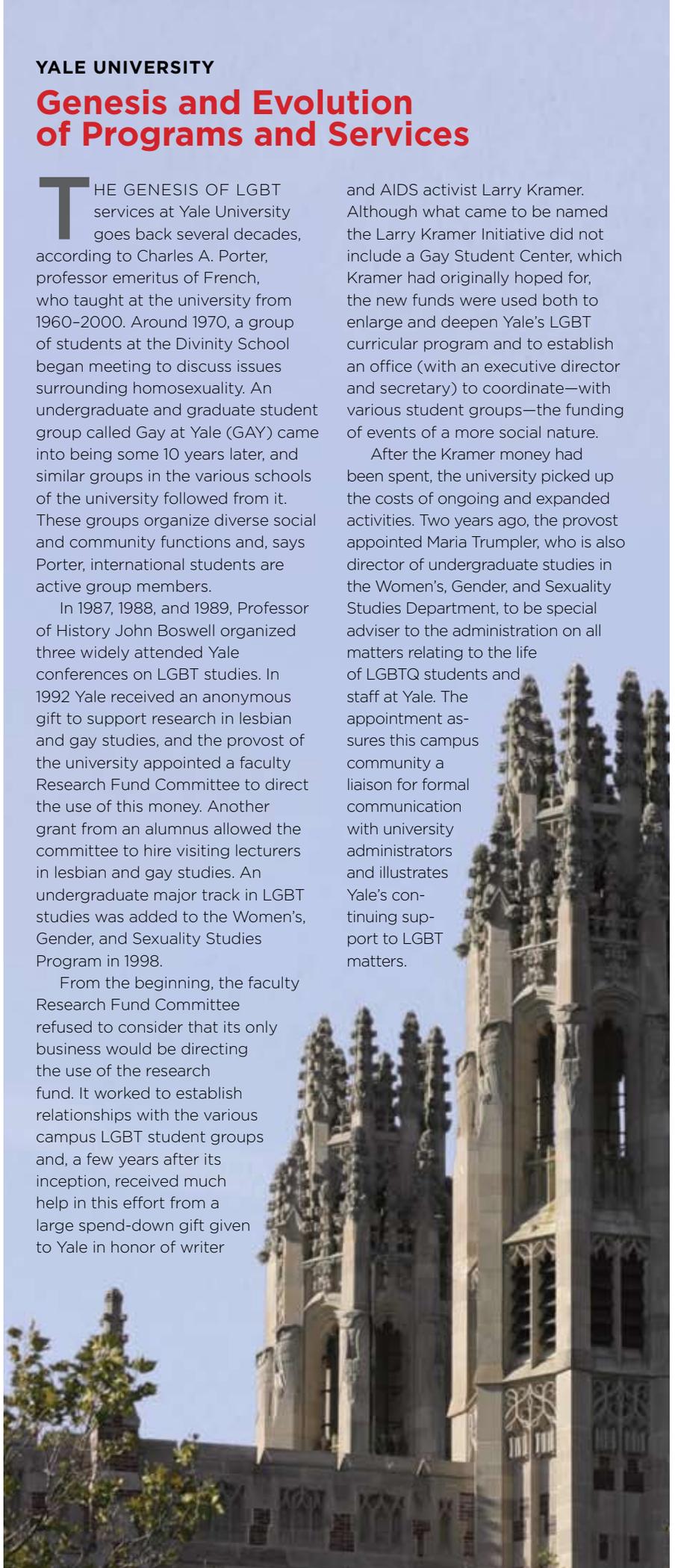
THE GENESIS OF LGBT services at Yale University goes back several decades, according to Charles A. Porter, professor emeritus of French, who taught at the university from 1960–2000. Around 1970, a group of students at the Divinity School began meeting to discuss issues surrounding homosexuality. An undergraduate and graduate student group called Gay at Yale (GAY) came into being some 10 years later, and similar groups in the various schools of the university followed from it. These groups organize diverse social and community functions and, says Porter, international students are active group members.

In 1987, 1988, and 1989, Professor of History John Boswell organized three widely attended Yale conferences on LGBT studies. In 1992 Yale received an anonymous gift to support research in lesbian and gay studies, and the provost of the university appointed a faculty Research Fund Committee to direct the use of this money. Another grant from an alumnus allowed the committee to hire visiting lecturers in lesbian and gay studies. An undergraduate major track in LGBT studies was added to the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program in 1998.

From the beginning, the faculty Research Fund Committee refused to consider that its only business would be directing the use of the research fund. It worked to establish relationships with the various campus LGBT student groups and, a few years after its inception, received much help in this effort from a large spend-down gift given to Yale in honor of writer

and AIDS activist Larry Kramer. Although what came to be named the Larry Kramer Initiative did not include a Gay Student Center, which Kramer had originally hoped for, the new funds were used both to enlarge and deepen Yale’s LGBT curricular program and to establish an office (with an executive director and secretary) to coordinate—with various student groups—the funding of events of a more social nature.

After the Kramer money had been spent, the university picked up the costs of ongoing and expanded activities. Two years ago, the provost appointed Maria Trumpler, who is also director of undergraduate studies in the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department, to be special adviser to the administration on all matters relating to the life of LGBTQ students and staff at Yale. The appointment assures this campus community a liaison for formal communication with university administrators and illustrates Yale’s continuing support to LGBT matters.



“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 differ-

ent—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.

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 LGBTQA Student Resource Center at Pennsylvania State



THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA-TWIN CITIES

Expanding Existing Programs and Services

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

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 Web site (www.iss.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&A 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 GLBT services as a regular part of its funded operations.

Since the fall of 2007, the university has been offering a minor in GLBT 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.

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THE RAINBOW SIG is comprised of diverse members of NAFSA whose goals are to counsel international students and study abroad students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered; to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered professionals in international education; and to combat homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia in international education.



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.

Communications

- Review all institutional communications to make sure they contain welcoming language. Involve a wide-range of campus and community representatives in the review.
- Include information on your institution's Web site, with links to campus and community resources and activities.
- Explore setting up a message board, to allow LGBT students to communicate electronically and confidentially, if they wish.

Orientation

- Include LGBT issues in your general, mandatory orientation. Non-LGBT international students may have many interactions with LGBT people during their stay on campus and while in the United States (their professor, roommate, classmate may be a member of these communities). This helps all students understand terminology and cultural differences and clarifies their

understanding of norms and expectations on campus, in the surrounding community, and other parts of the country.

- When discussing dating practices, be sure to include same sex as well as opposite sex issues. Avoid assumptions about either ignorance or sophistication.
- Include LGBT information in your general orientation folder.
- Make LGBT handout materials available for students to pick up.

Events and activities

- Enlist experts in organizing them and explore including at least one self-identified LGBT student and/or faculty member.
- Panels, perhaps as part of a series on understanding life and customs in the United States
- Workshops on sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, for all students (perhaps jointly with student health services)

■ Films from around the world that introduce LGBT themes

- Internships for international students with LGBT organizations
- Community tours

LGBT matters are best understood and approached in the broader context of diversity. Duane Rohovit reminds international advisers that a student who, for example, is black, lesbian, and South African could be facing multiple minority challenges in this country. Or, as Allison Fort Subasic puts it, diversity does not just mean addressing the needs of individuals who are African-American, Asian Pacific Islander, or Middle Eastern. "LGBT," she says, "is part of a bigger picture." **IE**

EVE KATZ is a freelance writer/editor based in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "International Students in U.S. Boarding Schools" in September/October 2008.

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