

The LGBTQIA+ Supportive Campus

Developing Effective Policies, Programs & Practices

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SAMPLE

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Study Abroad

There are countless short term, semester and year-long study abroad programs available that can enhance students' academic careers and broaden their personal horizons. LGBTQIA+ students considering study abroad may have a host of questions and concerns, some related to their sexual orientation and gender identity, others not. Some LGBTQIA+ students may summarily dismiss the possibility of study abroad because they worry about their safety or other needs due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQIA+ students are generally believed to be underrepresented among students who study abroad, but there has been a lack of research exploring this subject.

LGBTQIA+ students, whether they are out, somewhat out, or not out at all, have additional issues to consider when it comes to living and learning abroad. Yet, with proper preparation, many LGBTQIA+ students who study abroad have rewarding and enriching experiences.

Each individual student has their own set of circumstances in terms of their LGBTQIA+ identity. In addition, every place in the world has different policies and cultural attitudes toward people who are or are perceived to be LGBTQIA+. It would be impossible to cover all of the issues that may arise, or to describe the climate around sexual orientation and gender identity and expression of each culture and country. Luckily, there are resources available that can help students, their advisors, and international programs offices find the answers.

“I realize now that I let a lot of concerns keep me from going abroad when I was an undergrad. I wish I had just spent a little more time getting answers to my questions instead of assuming it just wouldn't work for me as a sexual minority student!”

— From a grad student

LGBTQIA+ Study Abroad Resources

- ◆ U.S. State Department, “Students Abroad: For LGBT Travelers”: <http://1.usa.gov/1WlzPD7>
- ◆ U.S. State Department, “LGBTI Travel Information”: <http://1.usa.gov/278ZZfE>
- ◆ International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association: www.igta.org
- ◆ International LGBTI Association (ILGA): www.ilga.org
- ◆ The Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Map of World Laws: <http://bit.ly/1TOTWWc>

Questions to Consider

All students will have restrictions on when and where they can study abroad, based on their curricular and co-curricular needs and interests, as well as their financial situation. For LGBTQIA+ students, there are many other questions which may arise, and that should be carefully considered when choosing a host country or study abroad program, or before leaving for their destination.

Encourage students to discuss their questions and needs with staff in the international programs office

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and LGBTQ center (if the campus has one), and to think about how their LGBTQIA+ identity and needs may inform their choices and decisions about study abroad.

Some Questions to Consider When Making the Decision to Study Abroad

There are a variety of things to consider. Encourage students to think about how they would answer these questions as part of their decision-making process about study abroad. They do not need to share their answers with you, but the answers may lead them toward the programs and locales best suited to their interests and needs.

About the Student:

- How open will I be about my sexual orientation and gender identity with my teachers, peers, friends, host family, and others?
- How important is it to me to find other LGBTQIA+ students and friends while abroad? How will I make connections with other LGBTQIA+ students, local residents, or community organizations? How will I make connections with others, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, in my host country? What are my expectations about seeking and finding community?
- Will I need access to any medications, supplies, or services due to my transgender status? Are they available in my host country? If not, will I need any additional documentation to travel with my medication or supplies?
- What are my safety needs and perceptions, and how can they best be met? Is the program able to make accommodations for students who request single rooms, private baths, or specific roommates?
- What resources are available in my host country for LGBTQIA+ people?
- Are there any LGBTQIA+-friendly establishments nearby? How can I find them?

About Sexuality and Gender:

- What are the cultural attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity in my host country?
- What are considered typical male and female social behavior and customary gender relations and social patterns in the host country?
- What may make the coming out process different in the host country compared to the U.S.?
- What are the norms and behavioral expectations within LGBTQIA+ communities in my host country?
- What is the social perception of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in my host country? How are LGB people socially defined? What roles do transgender people play in the host culture?

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About the Law and Local Attitudes:

- Are there “public decency” laws? Or “public indecency” laws? Or any laws that criminalize same-sex sexual relationships, or ways men and women socially interact?
- What is the age of consent? Does it differ for heterosexual versus same-sex couples?
- Does the law require having “proper documentation” at all times?
- What is the general police attitude toward the local LGBTQIA+ community?
- Is the law applied the same to “upper class” and “working class” LGBTQIA+ people?
- Is the law applied the same in rural areas as in urban areas?

About Citizenship and LGBTQIA+ Perception:

- What is the attitude of local residents toward people from the U.S., people of other nationalities, “tourists,” and LGBTQIA+ “tourists”?
- What is the general police attitude toward local residents, people from the U.S., or people of other nationalities?
- What is the general police attitude toward LGBTQIA+ people who are visiting the country?

Helpful Tips for LGBTQIA+ Students

Most international program office professionals are familiar with tips that can help students have safe and positive travel and study abroad experiences. There are some additional tips that you need to know and share with LGBTQIA+ students. If you are unsure or have any questions about these tips, be sure to reach out to colleagues and LGBTQIA+ resource people on your campus or in your community.

Learn the laws of your host country regarding LGBTQIA+ issues, same-sex sexual behavior, and expressions of LGBTQIA+ identity and community. You are required to follow the law in your host country. Once outside the United States, you are no longer protected by U.S. laws. If same-sex sexual acts are illegal in your host country and you are caught engaging in them (or presumed to have engaged in them), you could be arrested and imprisoned in that country. In some countries, the penalties are very severe and can even include deportation, corporal punishments, and execution. In some countries, regions, and municipalities, you can be

Ambassadors

Encourage students to speak with LGBTQIA+ students or alumni who have returned from study abroad. If you have a campus LGBTQ center or LGBTQIA+ student group, they may help connect you with returning students interested in sharing their experiences and perceptions. Consider also the network of students, faculty, and staff on your campus who may serve as resources for LGBTQIA+ students, many of whom have lived, studied, or worked abroad themselves.

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legally detained or discriminated against if you are or are merely perceived to be LGBTQIA+. Be familiar with local laws and customs so you can make informed, safe choices about which destinations and programs would be the best fit for you and your needs.

Get to know your destination. Explore LGBTQIA+ travel guides and resources. Talk with other LGBTQIA+ and allied people about their experiences studying abroad to gather as much information as possible upon which to make your choices and decisions. Once in your host country, find out what local resources may be available—newspapers, magazines, groups, online spaces, and, of course, LGBTQ community centers.

Context is everything; similar expressions of behavior may have vastly different meanings in different places. Not all countries have LGBTQIA+-friendly spaces, and those that do may be unsafe for open expressions of your sexual orientation or gender identity outside of these distinct LGBTQIA+ “neighborhoods” or specific vacation or resort facilities. In some areas of the world, friendships may be expressed quite differently than among your U.S. peers and cause you to experience confusion or uncertainty about who may or may not be LGBTQIA+. Find out about attitudes and customs in your host country so you can better read the local “road map” of human interaction and expression.

Avoid potentially risky situations. Be aware of your environment, stay alert, and remain in control.

Seek the advice of your campus office of international programs, local police, or the nearest U.S. consulate if you encounter any difficulties.

Do not be lulled into a false sense of security. Be aware that criminals have been known to exploit the generally open and relaxed nature of gay “neighborhoods,” bars, beaches, and other venues, and like it or not, not all LGBTQIA+ people are trustworthy and kind. Do not leave belongings unattended and try not to carry large amounts of money around. Make good choices about your personal property and your personal trust.

No matter sexual orientation or gender identity, it is important to think about your sexual health before you leave for study abroad. Be prepared both mentally and physically. Some sexual health products, such as specific types and formulations of birth control pills or hormones, remedies for yeast infections or sexually transmitted infections, and various safer sex supplies like condoms and dental dams, are not as readily available abroad as they are in the United States, and quality and dosages can differ. Conversely, in some countries, you may be surprised by the easy and open manner in which people talk about and obtain information and supplies pertaining to sexual health. Always practice safer sex.

Source: Some tips adapted from the Suffolk University President’s Office of Diversity Services – “Studying Abroad as a GLBT Student.”

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A Word about Travel Documents

Trans and gender-nonconforming students may have identity documents that are not congruent with their lived experience. Driver's licenses or passports may list a legal name that is not the student's chosen name, or a gender marker that does not reflect their gender identity. And, due to different state or country requirements, students may have identity documents that are in conflict with each other—for instance, a driver's license with the correct gender marker, but a birth certificate from a state or country that will not update the gender marker, even if the student has socially or medically transitioned.

It is important for international program office staff, as well as trans students, to understand that plane tickets, visas, and many other travel documents are required by law to be issued in the name and gender of the student as it appears on their passport (or driver's license, if this is sufficient for their travel needs).

If your institution has a chosen name and pronoun policy, assure the student that your staff, and the staff and faculty at their study abroad location (if it is considered another campus location of your same institution), will use the student's chosen name and affirming pronouns, but that while in transit and when dealing with government offices at home and abroad (immigration, passport control, visa issuing offices and personnel, embassies, etc.), it is very likely that this will not be the case.

Trans students may also be subject to heightened scrutiny when passing through airline security and border control (both at home and abroad). They may be asked personal questions, or be required to undergo additional screening if their body differs from what personnel expect. This does not mean that trans students should be discouraged from studying abroad; it means that part of your role will be to prepare trans students to navigate these issues during their study abroad experience.

LGBTQIA+ Student Culture Shock

While studying abroad, most students experience what is known as culture shock. This consists of an initial period of exhilaration as a result of the new things they are experiencing, followed by a period of isolation and homesickness. Eventually, most students overcome this period and begin to adapt to a new way of life. An LGBTQIA+ student may especially feel isolated, if they do not know other LGBTQIA+ people who are studying abroad or in their host country. Encourage LGBTQIA+ students to spend some time before they leave to create a support network of friends and family, both at home and overseas, to whom they can turn. Let them know ahead of time about this anticipated period of loneliness and to ask people in their support network to help them in getting through it. Simply having someone to talk to can make a world of difference. International program offices should offer information to all students about culture shock and how they can best prepare for it.

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Hints from Current and Former Students Who Studied Abroad, in Their Own Words...

- “Be sure to research the culture and climate before you go (queer-wise)!”
- “For trans or genderqueer folks, consider ways to minimize the hassles when going through security checkpoints, what kinds of documents to keep with you in case you get stopped/harassed, etc.”
- “The language in my host country used a lot of gender-specific pronouns and endings on regular words and stuff, really different than the way we use language here. At first it freaked me out, not just because it was a lot to remember but because I am sometimes mistaken to be a different sex than I really am (both at home and abroad!). Then I noticed that my host family found a way to adapt—without even really talking about it directly, they kind of made up a new non-gendered ‘article word’ that they used for me (instead of the traditional choice of the male or the female article words). At the time it just happened, but now I realize it was so cool!”
- “Students should learn the laws specific to gay rights. Find out the proper and improper terminology for describing LGBT persons and relationships in the language. Is there a word that distinguishes a same-sex partner from a same-sex friend? What are the slang terms for LGBT persons? Are they appropriate to use? If so, when and with whom?”
- “Being in a new environment adds hardships to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation/gender. However, students who already experience hardships due to their demographics will feel even more outcast and out of place. Just take a deep breath and realize that everyone experiences this, regardless of who they are.”

In Practice

- ◆ Engage in regular professional development to stay up to date on LGBTQIA+ students and study abroad, including travel issues, updates on LGBTQIA+ legislation, public policy, and safety in various countries.
- ◆ If your college or university has satellite campuses in other countries, find out how and whether your LGBTQIA+-supportive domestic policies are upheld, which might include your nondiscrimination policy and practices, chosen name policy, gender identity and sexual orientation on forms and records, gender-inclusive housing and facilities, access to LGBTQIA+-informed medical and mental health care, and other policies, practices, and services.
- ◆ Have information available about how students are housed in the various study abroad programs that are offered. Trans students, and some non-trans LGBTQIA+ students, may have particular concerns about privacy in rooms, restrooms, and showers, and possibilities for being matched with LGBTQIA+-friendly roommates or host homes.

Restrooms and Title IX FAQ

How is Title IX applied to campus restrooms?

Title IX requires educational institutions to allow trans women (individuals assigned male at birth who identify as female) and trans men (individuals assigned female at birth who identify as male) to use women's and men's restrooms, respectively. They may choose to use a gender-inclusive restroom (a restroom available to people of all genders), but they cannot be required to do so. Institutions that do not comply are subject to sanctions from the Department of Education and lawsuits from the students who are denied access.

What restrooms should non-binary gender students use?

In the absence of gender-inclusive restrooms in an academic and administrative building and residence hall, non-binary students will typically use the gendered restrooms in which they feel safer and more comfortable. They have the right to use a restroom in which they are less likely to experience harassment and violence.

Does this mean that residence hall staff people, campus police officers, and other college officials should not question and cite any student for being in the “wrong” restroom?

No. There are times when students are using an inappropriate restroom because they are intoxicated or for the sake of convenience, and these incidents should be documented. A conversation should be had with a student if it seems apparent that they are in an inappropriate restroom.

Should college officials be having a conversation with all students who may be using a restroom different from their assigned gender?

No. If someone presents as gender nonconforming or expresses their gender in keeping with the gender of the restroom, then assume that they are using the appropriate restroom.

What if I am unsure of why someone is using a restroom and when I ask them in my capacity as a college official, they say that they are in the appropriate restroom because they are trans or gender nonconforming?

Take their word for it and do nothing further. It is very unlikely that someone would say that they are trans if they are not. Contrary to the fears expressed by people opposed to trans rights, there are not documented cases of men pretending to be women to gain access to women's restrooms. It is trans people, not cisgender women, who regularly face harassment and violence in restrooms.

Restrooms and Title IX FAQ

What if a student complains about another person using the “wrong” restroom?

Have a conversation with the person in question if it does not seem that the individual is trans. If you know or believe that the individual is trans, or if you have a conversation with the individual and they indicate that they are trans, then educate the student who complained that the individual has the right to use that restroom and dispel any stereotypes they may have about trans people. Keep in mind that the restroom that a student feels is most appropriate for them may change over time, as their gender identity changes or as they socially or medically transition.

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