Chapter 6
At the Intersection:
Supporting Queer International Students

Nicole Ianieri
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

W. Patrick Bingham
Wake Forest University, USA

ABSTRACT

LGBTQIA+ international students in the U.S. have been considerably understudied, only recently gaining attention from scholars, indicating large knowledge gaps exist surrounding students studying beyond their home countries and holding multiple intersecting identities (Herridge et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2017; Quach et al., 2013). Practitioners have limited awareness and guidance when supporting this population of students. In this chapter, the authors identify critical areas of intervention, investigating specifically those international students originating from non-Western locations, with particular emphasis on the MENA region and Muslim-majority countries, and who also identify within the broad spectrum of LGBTQIA+ identities. This chapter details specific frameworks for student support and concludes with tailored recommendations focused on individuality, collaboration across campus departments, and adopting a position of non-assumption when working directly with international students in a higher education setting.

INTRODUCTION

Global student mobility has long been a critical part of the higher education landscape in the United States (Akanwa, 2015). Despite this presence, research centered on the experiences of international students within U.S. higher education is lacking (Bista, 2019). Though researchers have demonstrated considerable interest in the roles of culture and student transition at the intersection of international student identities (Kim, 2012), there is still a lack of adequate, relevant campus support across multiple areas, notably academic, social, and personal (Duran & Thach, 2019).

   This gap in both research and support structures is present especially with regard to the U.S. lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) college student community (McGill & Joslin, 2021). It is unsurprising, then, that literature regarding the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ international students is particularly scant (Herridge et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2017). What is demonstrated within this limited scholarship is that this group is markedly vulnerable to both implicit and overt bias, systemic oppression, and, at worst, physical and mental harm (Alessi et al., 2018; Starr-Glass, 2019). This dearth of research and tailored support is painfully noticeable as it pertains to queer international students from non-Western countries and cultures. These students are frequently people of color, may come from marginalized backgrounds including but not limited to lower socio-economic status, and often speak English as an additional language, in addition to other factors that mark them as "other" in the U.S. campus milieu.

   Though the queer international student community is a diverse group of individuals from various and often intersecting social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, it is important to recognize the particular difficulties that students from non-Western-aligned areas encounter. Queer international students from non-European, non-native English-speaking backgrounds experience disproportionately higher levels of acculturative stress than others within the group. This reality serves as an example of how students from intersecting marginalized backgrounds face unique threats (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Queer students are therefore at an even greater risk of discriminatory treatment, even by members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Alessi et al., 2018; Duran & Thach, 2019).

   The paucity of research on the queer international student community has resulted in a greater lack of awareness of and support for LGBTQIA+ international students on campus as compared even to international students in general (Duran & Thach, 2019) and of U.S.-born LGBTQIA+ students. Even when campus support mechanisms are present, these can be "insufficient, insensitive, or inflexible" in ways that work to harm, not help, students of intersecting marginalities such as LGBTQIA+ international students (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2017, p. 535). Campus "safe zones", including campus LGBTQIA+ centers, provide support, essential services, and advocacy to LGBTQIA+ students (Gilbert et al., 2020). Despite such spaces being intended for security and support, many inadvertently offer inadequate resources for students of intersecting marginalities (Means, 2017). Even within the context of purported safe spaces on campus and supposedly affirming affinity groups, LGBTQIA+ international students have experienced stereotyping and racism (Alessi et al., 2018; Duran & Thach, 2019; Strayhorn, 2018). This experience of alienation and isolation, even while seeking sanctuary within spaces widely touted as inclusionary, is referred to as the "double barrier" (Valosik, 2015), a fitting term to describe the "othering" effect of being both international and queer on U.S. campuses.

   Although one chapter will certainly not be enough to adequately address every issue impacting the queer international student community, we hope to draw some needed attention to the unique needs of and systemic barriers faced by this group of students. As part of this effort, we seek to critically examine the roles of campus LGBTQIA+ centers and affinity groups in the lives of queer international students. We wish to raise awareness among student-facing campus constituencies of mental health issues that uniquely impact LGBTQIA+ international students, while also challenging the common assumption that parental and family involvement is necessarily intrusive or otherwise hinders college student autonomy and agency (Sharkin, 2012; Wieland & Kucirka, 2019). Additionally, we seek to highlight the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ international students who identify as religious minorities.

   We stress that this is a very brief overview of the issues impacting queer international students, but we firmly believe that it is a worthwhile effort. All too often, even within campus groups serving the

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