Research Article

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Queering Study Abroad: Web-Based Outreach to LGBTQ+ University Students by Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

Effective outreach to queer/LGBTQ+ students is an important part of higher educational efforts to encourage their participation in study abroad opportunities. To explore the prevalence and nature of online outreach to queer students, we quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed the study abroad program webpages of 38 higher educational institutions with distinguished reputations in international studies. Outreach to queer status was one of the most common types, along with outreach to ethnicity and disability status. Queer outreach varied as a function of institution type, occurring twice as often by public than by private universities, and seven times as often by secular than by religiously-affiliated universities. Using thematic analysis, we found that a majority of queer outreach content was generated by organizations external to the study abroad office, and in-house generated content was a combination of cautionary and inviting. We discuss ways to improve study abroad outreach to queer students in higher education.

Keywords:

Study abroad, LGBTQ+, Queer theory, Diversity outreach, Higher education, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, International studies

Introduction

There are countless benefits to be derived from the study abroad experience, from improved language skills, to expanded worldviews, to better career prospects (Eby, 2005; Mapp, McFarland, & Newell, 2007; Potts, 2015). In general, efforts to recruit students to study abroad are often met with resistance from students due to their concerns over planning and logistics, homesickness, culture and reentry shock, and intercultural miscommunications (Themudo, Page, & Benander, 2007; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Young, 2014). As Dessoff (2006) has explained, many students are in need of much more extensive information, resources, and support in order to fuel their interest in the possibility of educational experiences abroad. Recruiting for demographic diversity in the study abroad population can be an even greater challenge due to student concerns about negotiating marginalized status while abroad.

Demographic homogeneity in USA student populations who study abroad has become a topic of increasing concern in higher education (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011). Relying on normative assumptions, study abroad programs and their representatives can appear indifferent to the concerns and challenges of non-typical students, leading them to miss this valuable educational experience (Apperson, 2015; Bishop, 2013; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Hulstrand, 2006). Students of color may have apprehensions about stereotyping (Ladika, 2009). Women students may fear gender role restrictions or sexual violence (Jessup-Anger, 2008; Kimble, Flack, & Burbridge, 2013). Students with disabilities may have to negotiate accommodations (Kelley, Prohn, & Westling, 2016; Link, 2016). First generation and lower income students may feel they have inadequate mentoring or financial support (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

A variety of causal factors have been identified that influence student resistance to study abroad participation, including many that are quite complicated to address: educational and financial background of the student's family, the student's location of residence while at college, their current major and future educational plans, their relationship and employment commitments, and their current financial status (Salisbury, Umbach, & Paulsen, 2009; Stroud, 2009). Although financial and logistic support have been the go-to recruitment strategy, Salisbury et al (2009) argued that, "increasing study abroad participation among all types of students may require different approaches" (p 20).

An important place to start is with outreach efforts. Student's initial point of contact with study abroad programming is through outreach materials, as Zemach-Bersin (2010) noted:

> Most students subconsciously learn from advertisements long before international educators have the opportunity to frame study abroad.

> Advertisements are the medium through which many students are first introduced to specific program providers and study abroad destinations… [by] literally shopping for their study abroad experience by reading through brochures and catalogues" (p. 340)

Stroud (2009) has emphasized that study abroad advocates need to "focus more of their time and energy on reaching out to underrepresented populations" (p.505). Dessoff (2006) has similarly argued that outreach efforts as "critical" to effectively recruiting "a broader range of students" (p. 27). Regretfully, outreach materials can further alienate students. A recent study by Gathogo and Horton (2018) examined online outreach materials found a "disturbingly conspicuous absence" of diversity in imagery. Although outreach efforts can easily be tailored with information relevant to a wider range of participants, such as exposing them to role models from their own social backgrounds and addressing their unique needs, subtle normative biases in generic outreach materials may inadvertently favor dominant groups' experiences.

In this paper, we focus on study abroad outreach efforts directed to students in the queer community, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and sexuality minorities. While the primary reasons queer students may choose to study abroad are no different than those of other students, there are some unique benefits for queer students. Queer exchange students can help to contribute to transnational queer solidarity through the friendships and connections they make abroad. Their international experiences may also help to expand their own and others' understanding of the global social construction of gender and sexuality (Jessup-Anger, 2008). Nonetheless, queer students may face legitimate anxiety about their safety and legal protections in the study abroad context (Pope, 2007). Once abroad, queer students may forfeit the inclusive and proactive "safe space" protections they have come to take for granted on progressive university campuses across the USA (Fine, 2012; Harvey & Steiner, 2005; Hyers, Cochran, & Schaeffer, 2011). In 1997, a Chronicle of Higher Education article proclaimed "Some Study-Abroad Programs Start to Consider Needs of Gay Students: They need warnings about some countries, and may face difficult transitions returning from others" (Rubin, 1997). In a poll more than two decades later, a majority of LGBTQ+ study abroad students reported receiving no assistance from their program with queer related issues (Nett, 2018). It is critical that programs engage in outreach and support to address the experiences of queer students in order to achieve more multiculturally competent educational programming (Callaghan, 2012; Liu Wong & York, 2014).

In this study, we focus on queer outreach. Our approach was informed by critical queer theory, which aims to deconstruct and ultimately reject power dynamics behind privilege embedded in everyday institutions (Halperin, 2003;

Nelson, 2012). The act of "queering" an institution is the act of questioning assumptions and normative representations within it, especially with regard to gender and sexuality (Ford, 2004). Our questions focus on the extent and nature of higher educational institutions efforts at queering their programs through their promotional outreach materials online, including all efforts to increase visibility, inclusivity, and attention to the needs of queer students in the study abroad programming. We focused on web based materials because they are the primary means for students to explore study abroad opportunities (Gathogo & Horton, 2018; Özturgut, 2013; Zemach-Bersin, 2010). Adequate diversity outreach is a sign of a strong educational institutions, so we selected the top rated study abroad institutions as a sample of what should be the best-practices. To locate such institutions, we selected from the top of the list of universities listed on US News and World Report Rankings, a reliable measure of program quality and an important influence on institutional reputation and consumer choice (Hazelkorn, 2015). We coded for outreach content across various marginalized status categories identified by Hays (2008) as important in shaping individual identity and experience: age, developmental disabilities, acquired disabilities, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, indigenous group membership, nationality, and gender to queer status relative to other marginalized statuses of age, disability, religion, ethnicity/race, social class, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender.

We address three research questions. First, we explored the relative prevalence of outreach to queer status versus outreach to other marginalized status groups. With no past research on which to base expectations, we did not make specific predictions about relative outreach across groups. Second, we explored queer outreach as a function of institution type. We expected queer outreach to be more likely at public than in private institutions, because public institutions are subject to greater local, state, and federal regulations and initiatives that may protect queer students (Fine, 2012). We also expected queer outreach to be more likely at secular than at religiously affiliated institutions, because religiously affiliated universities are more likely to view the queer community as non-normative and at odds with traditional religious conventions (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Third, we conducted a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) of the content of the queer outreach. Using inductive coding, we coded for patterns and identified illustrative examples to provide a qualitative description of the nature of queer outreach.

Method

Sample

We selected the first 38 (top 2.5%) of about 1,500 institutions listed on the *US News and World Report* (2015) rankings of Best Colleges for Study Abroad Programming. University officials, presidents, academic officers, and deans can nominate up to ten institutions with "stellar" academic study abroad programs. Our sample was evenly split between private 53% (n = 20) versus public 47% (n = 18) institutions, and religiously affiliated 45% (*n* = 17) versus secular 55% (n = 21) institutions.

Coding

Two coders thoroughly reviewed each university's study abroad program homepage and secondary webpages using history-cleared, privacy-enabled browsing. In a multiphase process informed by the thematic analysis method and content analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), coders classified the visual and textual content of the selected webpages. Phase one involved separately and independently scanning each webpage for instances of outreach to each of the nine categories of diversity identified in the Hays (2008) model, recording either 0 (no outreach) or 1 (at least one or more instances of outreach). Diversity outreach was operationally defined any image or text that implicitly or explicitly targets a specific group: age (e.g. images of older study abroad students), disability (e.g. information on accommodations), religion (e.g. images of students wearing religious garments/information on religious tolerance in destination countries), ethnicity/race (e.g. images of students of color/information on minority scholarships), queer (e.g. images of a queer couple/information on LGBTQ+ issues of concern), social class (e.g. testimonials of low income or first generation college students), indigenous heritage (e.g. images of indigenous Americans), national origin (e.g. discussion of sensitive passport and visa issues), and gender (e.g. discussion of sexual assault safety). After coders independently recorded their 342 codes (38 institutions x 9 diversity categories), they met to calculate inter-rater agreement, which was 84% (n = 287). The 16% (n = 55) of codes that were discrepant were resolved to agreement by discussion while revisiting the website. In the final phase of coding, the coders worked together on a thematic analysis, revisiting only the websites of institutions already coded as having at least one or more instances of queer outreach. Through an iterative process of "open coding," the coders perused the instances of queer outreach, discussed the content, and developed a classification scheme to best describe the queer outreach content. We identified initial patterns, then revisited websites again to code and refine our

organizing themes, in an effort to best characterize the data. This method is used in thematic analysis as well as content analyses (Vaismoradi et al, 2013).

Results

Diversity Outreach to Queer and Other Status Groups

First, we explore outreach to diversity, comparing the prevalence of outreach to queer status relative to outreach to other marginalized status groups (see Table 1). Overall, outreach to at least one diverse identity group was evident in more than half of the websites we sampled, and outreach to queer status relatively high. In order of frequency, most common types of diversity outreach were to disability status, queer status, ethnicity/race, gender, and religion. These were followed, at much lower frequencies, by outreach to social class, national origin, age, and indigenous heritage.

Table 1. Diversity Outreach of Study Abroad Programs by Marginal Status Group.

Marginal Status Group	Program Outreach % (n)
Age	2.3% (1)
Disability	58.1% (25)
Religion	20.9% (9)
Ethnicity/Race	41.9% (18)
Social Class	7.0% (3)
Queer/LGBTQ+	48.8% (21)
Indigenous Heritage	2.3% (1)
National Origin	7.0 % (3)
Gender	37.2% (16)
Institutions Outreaching to at Least One Diversity Category	58.0% (25)

Note. Percentages are non-cumulative.

Queer Outreach by Type of Institution

Second, we examined whether queer outreach varied as a function of institution type. We found support for our predictions that queer outreach to be more likely at public institutions and at secular institutions (see Table 2). Using the Chi Square goodness of fit statistic, we found statistically significant differences in queer outreach as a function of type of program. Public programs were more likely to outreach to queer students than were private programs, X^2 (n = 38, df = 1) = 5.26, p < .05. Secular programs were more likely to outreach to queer students than were religiously-affiliated programs, X^2 (n = 38, df = 1) = 20.61, p < .05.

Table 2. Queer Outreach of Study Abroad Programs by Type of Institution

Program Group	Queer Outreach % (n)
Public	72% (13/18)
Private	35% (7/20)

Secular	86% (18/21)
Religiously Affiliated	12% (2/17)

Qualitative Description of the Nature of Queer Outreach

To describe the nature of the queer content, we returned to the n = 21 institutions that had at least one instance of queer outreach. We revisited their webpages to look for all instances of queer outreach for qualitative coding, identifying a total of n = 57, averaging $\bar{X}$ = 1.25 per institution with a range of one to eight. We reviewed each to code for themes that would characterized the content of this queer outreach. We most obvious pattern we noticed involved the source of the content. Some of the queer outreach content involved links to information from external organizations, and some of the content was generated in house. We describe the nature of these two types of content separately.

Queer Outreach Content from External Sources

Links to content generated by external organizations made up 70% (n = 40) of the queer outreach content. These links let to three types of sources. First, there were links leading to other divisions at the home institution. These included university diversity mission statements, student resource centers, or affiliated majors with a queer focus. They were relevant to the home campus of the student, however the content was not necessarily about study abroad.

Second, there were links to off-campus, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that had a queer focus, such as the Human Rights Campaign and The International Gay and Lesbian Association. These organizations had content devoted to queer travel and international politics, but their intended audience was not expressly college students or study abroad. One exception amongst these NGO links was to the Rainbow Special Interest Group (Rainbow SIG) of the NAFSA Association of International Educators One of main goals of Rainbow SIG is to counsel study abroad students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

or queer. Rainbow SIG and the other NGO's lack ability to address to the unique local context of the student's home institution.

The third and final source of external links was to governmental agencies and offices. These websites were likely provided as queer outreach because they addressed queer issues related to travel, but they did not expressly address student study abroad travelers. For example, the LGBTQ+ travelers' advisory from the USA Bureau of Consular Affairs cautioned queer travelers about differences in laws and customs. However, only a small amount of attention was devoted to queer issues on these governmental webpages and none of it was directly about the unique concerns of a queer college student forming relationships on studying abroad. Overall, the pattern across these external sources of queer outreach was that each provided good supplemental information, but none alone could speak to the localized needs and concerns of a queer study abroad student in the context of their home institution.

Queer Content Generated in House by the Study Abroad Program Website

Queer outreach content developed in house by the institution's study abroad program staff made up 30% ($n = 17$) of the queer outreach content. There were two major types of content, both focused on social adjustment and was clearly targeting a college student audience. First there was cautioning theme. There were mild cautions, reminding students that there are "different levels of acceptance in different countries" and there were extreme warnings that in some countries queer lifestyles are "illegal" and even "punishable by the death penalty." So as not to dissuade skeptical queer students, these cautions were often framed as an opportunity for thoughtful reflection, leading students to adopt an impartial, sociological lens of non-judgment. Students were encouraged to consider how their queer identity could affect their relationships abroad and their cultural adjustment. This safety-related content tended to implicitly problematize queer identity.

Second, there was a theme of invitation. Some websites offered students curated lists of queer relevant inspirational readings and testimonials to encourage their own study abroad exploration. Some websites even offered the exciting prospect that the student's time abroad could be liberating and "include experimenting with and expressing alternate identities, both sexual and non-sexual." One program even welcomed queer students to come in and talk to a study abroad advisor about "any aspect of the study abroad experience" that might be "related to your sexual orientation."

Whether cautionary or enticing, the queer outreach generated in house by the local study abroad offices gave the impression that the staff are allies,

wise to the issues of the larger queer community. Yet, unless it was a student testimonial, there was not explicit authorship indicated, which made the voice someone anonymous and less personal.

Discussion

In our sample of websites from top-rated university study abroad programs, we found evidence of diversity outreach, including outreach to queer students, but we also identified areas for improvement. Diversity outreach efforts were not universal across all institutions nor were they consistent for all marginalized groups. Outreach to queer students was one of the most common types of diversity outreach, yet it was still neglected by half of the program websites, especially those of private institutions and those of religiously-affiliated institutions. Moreover, much of the queer outreach content on the study abroad websites was generated by external organizations rather than from within the home institution's own study abroad division.

Institutions with or without queer outreach can easily work toward expanding their web content. Those with none can begin by exploring other study abroad programs websites, recruiting diversity consultants to evaluate their web materials, and surveying stakeholders in the campus community. Staff might explore what helps attract prospective queer students to programs and what program staff support helps make for the best educational experience. Those already engaged in diversity outreach can regularly reassess their efforts and look for new ways to update and expand their content. Queer outreach content occasionally contained dated language, so regular updating is key staying in sync with changing climate for diversity. It does seem helpful for outreach content to include a mix of both caution and enthusiasm, being careful not to send exclusively discouraging messages.

It is likely that outreach efforts were more likely at public universities due to their greater diversity and very much more likely at secular due to their lesser reliance on traditional religious values that run counter to queer advocacy efforts (Hyers, 2010; Fine, 2010; Kane, 2013; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Peterson, 2019). For the long term, changes in cultural norms and broadening of protective legislation may begin to level the playing field across the board in higher education, but in the short run, immediate coordinated efforts are needed by study abroad staff (Brux & Fry, 2009). Because so much of the queer outreach content originated on the websites of external organizations of varying relevance, the unique concerns of queer study abroad student travelers within any particular program were not being directly addressed. Certainly, redirecting students to other divisions made sense given the "siloing" of academia. With segmented and highly specialized responsibilities of different departments and divisions, efforts are often taken not to duplicate efforts of one

office with another. Nonetheless, at the risk of duplication, there is a need to better integrate diversity efforts within sub-divisions in the academe, so that individual departments become more culturally competent in-house. For a more thorough and holistic approach, emphasizing systemic diversity competence incorporated at all levels has been a movement in higher education for some time (Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005; Williams, 2008).

For future research, an experimental study of interest and intent in study abroad as a function of the representativeness of outreach materials would help to establish experimentally whether implicit normative bias in outreach materials inhibits student interest. Another important future step would be to examine some of the more nuanced variation in LGBTQ+ subgroups' interests and concerns with study abroad. Even though the queer community shares many similar concerns, a variety of identities and needs exist under the queer umbrella. For example, study abroad outreach to gay men might be different than to transgender individuals. Furthermore, the intersections of queer status with other marginalized identities of the Hays (2008) model may uniquely impact the extent to which students feel represented or supported in a study abroad experience (Warner & Shields, 2013). It is also important to emphasize that identity is not static. There is a possibility that a student will experience a change in sexuality, gender identity, mental health status, physical disability, or other statuses while abroad, so support and outreach need to take such possibilities into account.

Studying abroad has the potential to be a life-changing experience, and there are simple, actionable ways for universities to better support students throughout the process. In order to provide the most comprehensive support for study abroad students, educational institutions must work to provide outreach that spans across a variety of identities, particularly those that may be underrepresented in mainstream study abroad materials. With the growing attention to diversity in our student populations, it is imperative that institutions of higher education shift their outreach and resources toward a more inclusive, culturally aware perspective.

Author Biographies

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