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Considering LGBTQ+ Students' Study Abroad Experiences Across Research and Practice

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Introduction

A 2019 Association of American Universities survey of undergraduate and graduate students found that almost 17% of respondents self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, questioning, or selected more than one identity. Additionally, the same survey found that 1.7% of respondents self-identified as transgender, non-binary/genderqueer, or gender questioning (Cantor et al., 2019). As these student populations grow in higher education institutions, it is important to understand not only the on-campus experiences of LGBTQ+ students but also the experiences of these student populations when they study abroad. The results of a 2015 study suggest that LGBTQ+ students are more likely than heterosexual and cisgender students to participate in study abroad opportunities in several areas (Bryant & Soria, 2015). Despite the number of LGBTQ+ students studying abroad, the research on their experiences is limited (Bingham et al., 2023; Brunsting, Chiles, et al., 2023). Existing research

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provides practitioners with insights on the challenges LGBTQ+ students may face, including homophobia and transphobia, navigating if and when to “come out” and to whom, and gendered language. However, existing research also shows that students built resilience and found connections to the global LGBTQ+ community. This brief will first examine the extant literature, highlighting the key findings and themes arising from 13 empirical articles that consider LGBTQ+ students and issues in a study abroad context (for background on the selection of these studies, see Brunsting, Dietrich, et al., in this issue). Based on these findings, the brief will provide practitioner feedback and interpretation to enhance the support study abroad offices and providers could consider when working directly with LGBTQ+ students.

Research Summary

Research on LGBTQ+ students is emerging. Bingham et al. (2023) identified 13 study abroad articles in a recently published systematic literature review; these studies have also been reviewed in the research component of this brief. From the empirical work considered in the research brief, Bryant and Soria (2015) identified that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to study abroad than their heterosexual peers. This scholarship either focuses on LGBTQ+ participants' experiences, or includes LGBTQ+ participants without explicit focus on them, or centers LGBTQ+ related content/issues (Apgar 2018; Diesel & Taliaferro, 2013) without discernible LGBTQ+ participation. The number of total study participants across the 13 articles is 1,209 ($n = 1,209$). Of the total study participants, gay and bisexual men accounted for just 0.3% ($n = 4$) of the included LGBTQ+ participants. Thus, the included research broadly accounts for women or women-identified experiences. LGBTQ+ student participants were found to have experienced homophobia/transphobia, community policing (intracommunal regulation, particularly around reinforcing communal norms and gender expression and presentation), and sexual assault and/or rape. Despite these challenges, many students reiterated they would study or travel abroad again (Bryant & Soria, 2015; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019; Mnouer, 2020; Paola & Lemmer, 2013; Willis, 2015) and subsequently became more proud of their LGBTQ+ identity upon their return home (Donahue & Wise, 2021).

Key Research Findings

Homophobia and transphobia, as well as LGBTQ+ acceptance/non-acceptance, were situations LGBTQ+ study abroad students faced (Brown, 2014; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019; Muszkat-Barkan & Grant, 2015; Paola & Lemmer, 2013; Willis, 2015). They faced these situations both from local citizens (Brown, 2014; Donahue & Wise, 2021; Michl et al., 2019; Willis, 2015) and from other study abroad students (Michl et al., 2019). Moreover, because of LGBTQ+ integration uncertainty within a host culture, some students remained closeted during their time abroad for fear of reprisal from their host families, their study abroad peers, or the local community, as well as for being in a country that criminalizes LGBTQ+ identities (Donahue & Wise, 2021; Mnouer, 2020). Gender expansive students (transgender, non-binary, gender-non-conforming) also experienced community policing, indicating their identities were challenged and not accepted within the local queer community and amongst their gay and bisexual peers (Michl et al., 2019). Examining the racial and ethnic breakdown of the total participants included in the 13 studies ($n = 1,209$) highlighted that while White LGBTQ+ students were overrepresented among the included research participants, African American, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Native American LGBTQ+ students were underrepresented. Queer space and history played a central role in one program (Apgar, 2018), allowing students of all backgrounds to understand how LGBTQ+ historical sites factor into city design, but also the role identity plays historically and contemporaneously. A critical finding arising from the 13 studies is that gay and bisexual men were severely underrepresented in study abroad research (Donahue & Wise, 2021; Mnouer, 2020), accounting for 0.3% of total study participants across the 13 studies.

A Practitioner's Interpretation of the Research

A key takeaway from the systemic review of the 13 study abroad articles identified by Bingham et al. (2023) is a deeper understanding of the participation rates of LGBTQ+ students in study abroad and which demographic groups were underrepresented in these studies. For study abroad practitioners, understanding these trends and gaps in the research is an important foundation for supporting LGBTQ+ students abroad. However, by looking beyond the demographic breakdowns and trends, this research also provides practitioners insight into some common issues and experiences LGBTQ+ students may face, which can provide guidance for establishing best practices in the field.

Anti-LGBTQ+ Sentiments and Coming Out While Abroad

The research demonstrates that homophobia, transphobia, and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments were issues students faced frequently while studying abroad. Hearing homophobic comments from those in the host community made some students conclude that they could not safely be out in the same way they were at home (Willis, 2015). Students' own assumptions about the host community's lack of acceptance may lead them to remain "closeted" while simultaneously being "out" to their study abroad peers, as was the experience for a student in Brown's study (2014).

Donahue and Wise (2021) highlighted the particular challenges that students faced when deciding if and when to share their identities with their host families. Students in this study reported that they not only considered their own safety, especially where homophobia was prevalent, but also considered their host families' "sensibilities" and their own comfort in maintaining a close relationship with them. Given the close bonds students often form with their host families, not revealing this aspect of their identity took an emotional toll, with one student reporting that she felt like she was lying to her host family (Donahue & Wise, 2021, p. 1426).

Assumptions of Identity and Impact of Gendered Languages

Although many students in the studies navigated if and when to come out, students whose identities were outside the normative expressions of gender or where the language included a gender binary, felt pressured to come out or share their identities before they may have chosen to on their own. Trans and gender expansive students reported feeling forced to come out because of the assumptions made by others, including their host families (Michl et al., 2019).

Gendered languages like Spanish also proved challenging for students, as they found that they may have to come out or share their gender identity. One trans student reported that his host family wanted to know his gender so they knew what forms of words they should use (Donahue & Wise, 2021).

Sense of Community

Students who identified as LGBTQ+ reported that finding community with peers and locals who also identified as LGBTQ+ allowed them to meet people in the host community and engage in deeper, authentic conversations. These connections provided students with a sense of community.

Understanding their connection to the broader international LGBTQ+ community also allowed some students to better understand their own privileges relative to LGBTQ+ people in other parts of the world (Donahue and Wise 2021).

Study abroad is an opportunity for personal growth for all participants. Much of the conversation around LGBTQ+ identity is framed as a “problem” that introduces barriers which students may overcome. While this is a reality in some cases, students in some situations found their LGBTQ+ identity to be an asset. Understanding their own identity allowed students to connect with others in the local LGBTQ+ community as well as other marginalized groups (Donahue & Wise, 2021).

Best Practices for Practitioners

Resources for LGBTQ+ Students

One of the first steps practitioners can take is providing resources for LGBTQ+ students, including specific information about their host countries and cultures. According to Michl et al. (2019), students who did little to no research about the LGBTQ+ communities before studying abroad expressed that they wished they had been more prepared. It is important for institutions to provide these resources to students while also encouraging them to do their own research. Existing resources have already been compiled by campus LGBTQ+ offices, Rainbow SIG, Diversity Abroad, and others in the field.

Supportive and Well-Prepared Faculty and Staff

Willis (2015) argues that institutions must be proactive in equipping faculty and staff to meet the needs of students, especially those navigating the complexities of their identities. Faculty and staff should be prepared to be self-reflective and willing to navigate complex issues of diversity, identity, microaggressions, and safety (both physical and emotional) amongst students. Pre-departure trainings should include equipping faculty and staff leading programs with tools and resources to support students. This preparation should go beyond LGBTQ+ students and include students’ intersectional identities.

Students often reported finding themselves navigating the extent to which they should challenge homophobic or transphobic behavior as well as heteronormative assumptions about themselves and others (Donahue & Wise 2021). Trusted and well-equipped faculty and staff can provide guidance and

support to students as they face these questions about their identity, self-expression, and safety.

Housing

As Michl et al. (2019) point out, living with a host family provides students with a rich cultural, social, and linguistic opportunity unlike other housing options. The bonds formed between students and their host families can also be profoundly gratifying and long-lasting (Michl et al., 2019, p. 45). However, practitioners should be aware of the concerns and potential risks students may face when living with a host family. Fear of rejection, concerns about whether or not to be “out”, and even the risk of violence are all considerations for institutions when selecting host families. Including questions about how inclusive and supportive families are to students with various identities will allow for better homestay placements.

Institutions must also consider all student housing options, especially for trans or gender expansive students, as some student apartments and dorms may be gender-segregated. Practitioners should consider alternatives, such as single rooms and/or bathrooms, while also being mindful of the social and emotional impact for students who may feel isolated from their peers if living in different housing.

Opportunities for Students to Reflect on Their Experiences

Offering an opportunity for self-reflection after students return from abroad can provide students with a chance for a critical analysis of their entire study abroad experience (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016). This is an important step for all returning students, but it can be particularly important to provide space for reflection and support for LGBTQ+ students upon their return, as re-entry may be just as difficult as preparing to study abroad (Bryant and Soria 2015).

Studies like Michl et al.’s (2019) allowed trans and gender expansive students an opportunity to process and reflect on their experiences through the lenses of their identities. Practitioners should consider providing students with the opportunity to reflect on the full spectrum of experience, including the positive, negative, and complex. Practitioners should additionally consider creating a space for LGBTQ+ students to reflect safely with others who may have shared experiences and identities.

Gaps in Current Practices and Research

Viewing LGBTQ+ Students as a Monolith

Although there may be common themes and experiences for LGBTQ+ students who study abroad, it is also important for practitioners not to assume these experiences are universal. Navigating anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and actions were common among the students in these studies. However, some students may in fact experience greater freedom while abroad. This may be due to legal protections or LGBTQ+ acceptance in their host country, especially when students come from a more conservative community themselves. Additionally, some students may choose to “try out” different aspects of their identities while they are abroad and in a new environment. Though these students may still experience discrimination and bias while abroad, their experiences and the support they need may differ from those of students studying in less accepting locations. Instead, these students may need more comprehensive support after their study abroad when they must return to their less accepting home community (Donahue & Wise 2021).

Unique Challenges for Trans, Non-binary, and Gender Nonconforming/Genderqueer Students

Unlike most other research discussed, Michl et al.’s study (2019) looks specifically at trans and gender expansive students. This study highlights one of the existing gaps in both the research and practice. Students in several studies discussed the choice of coming out. Some students may choose to alter their clothing or appearances to make their identity less visible (Brown, 2014). However, some students’ appearances made it difficult or impossible for them to make these choices on their own, as others made assumptions about them based on their appearance. Donahue and Wise (2021) demonstrate how the lack of gender inclusive restrooms and locker rooms forced a trans student in their study to determine which restroom seemed safest (p. 1432). These types of barriers for some trans and gender expansive students are not experienced by cisgender students or students whose identities allow them to “pass” as heteronormative. Practitioners should be cognizant of these types of barriers faced by certain students within the broader LGBTQ+ community and adapt their advice and support appropriately.

Lack of Research and Best Practices for Supporting Medical Need and Gender-Affirming Care

The existing research primarily focuses on the mental health and identity-based experiences of LGBTQ+ students. While an important part of understanding and supporting LGBTQ+ students abroad, this approach can leave out some of the practical needs and challenges students may encounter. Practitioners should be prepared to support students through the unique challenges they may experience when seeking medical care abroad. Some students may need gender-affirming care in locations where access is limited or non-existent. Practitioners should provide students with resources before they go abroad to ensure they are prepared with questions to ask their doctor at home and resources to research the availability of care in-country. When possible, practitioners can partner with their local medical partners and/or insurance providers to understand realities on the ground and set realistic expectations for students.

Identity-Related Factors Impacting Study Abroad Participation

Bryant and Soria (2015) highlight some of the gaps in existing research for LGBTQ+ participation in study abroad. There are studies to suggest that female students are significantly more likely than male students to pursue international opportunities (Twombly et al., 2012). Nonetheless, research on gender disparities beyond this binary is limited. More research should be done to better understand the study abroad participation rates for students with various gender-identities and what factors impact their participation in study abroad.

Despite what practitioners understand about how such identity-related factors as race, socio-economic status, and disability impact students' participation rates in study abroad, Bryant and Soria (2015) note that there is lack of research as to whether similar factors impact participation rates of LGBTQ+ students (p. 92).

Lack of Quantitative Studies

Although research on LGBTQ+ students abroad is growing, it remains limited. The lack of quantitative data is especially noticeable. The research reviewed in this brief is primarily qualitative, looking at individuals or small groups of participants on specific programs or under specific parameters. While these contributions are an invaluable addition to the field, especially for

practitioners seeking a better understanding of their students with similar experience, a more expansive quantitative analysis would provide insight on emerging trends.

Students may feel uncomfortable or unsafe disclosing aspects of their identities with their institutions or researchers, making the collection of quantitative data and conducting research can be challenging. Researchers should be mindful of these concerns and ensure students understand how this data will be used and how their privacy will be protected.

Conclusion

Practitioners seeking to support LGBTQ+ students would benefit from delving into the existing research. Understanding the challenges students face when navigating their identities abroad allows practitioners to create a more holistic support system for students before, during, and after their study abroad experiences. Providing students with access to resources and connecting them with other LGBTQ+ students who may have shared experiences can help students feel better equipped to explore their identity and safely navigate their host community.

Although it can be easier to discuss LGBTQ+ student experiences as a monolith, practitioners should remember that these experiences are not universal to all students who share these identities. Developing more quantitative studies is also necessary to fully understand the experiences and needs for LGBTQ+ students studying abroad. More research and best practices especially need to be developed to support trans and gender expansive students in particular.

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