Transforming Perceptions of Difference:

YOUSSEF’S STORY

I was struck by a story shared with me by an international student from Morocco, and his transformation from an unintentional and unconscious homophobic mindset to accepting and ultimately advocating in a small way for the LGBTQ community. I share his story (written collaboratively and shared with permission, though he prefers not to have his name used) as a way of thinking about how we, as international educators, might be able to better tie insights from global learning and experiences with the “international Other” to understanding perceptions of the “Others” among us.

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I grew up in Morocco, a country that is over 99% Muslim, and an Islamic Constitutional Monarchy. The official state religion is Islam,
NAFSA 2015 SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Advisory Board Meeting
Tues. May 26th 10 – 11:00AM
IEM Networking Center (RM 254B)

Session: Enrolling the LGBTQ Community in IEP & Degree Programs Through Smart Marketing
Wed. May 27th 1:15 – 2:15PM

Rainbow SIG Open Meeting
Wed. May 27th 2:45 – 3:45PM

Rainbow SIG Reception
Wed. May 27th 8:00 – 10:00PM
Club Café, 209 Columbus Ave., Boston, MA 02116

Poster Fair: Rainbow Scholarship – A Case Study For LGBTQI Diversity in Study Abroad
Thurs. May 28th 2:00 – 3:30PM

Poster Fair: LGBT Student Programming Abroad
Thurs. May 28th 2:00 – 3:30PM

For exact locations, please refer to Registration Program.

Subscribe:
to the Rainbow SIG Listserv by completing the online form

Like:
Join the private Rainbow SIG Group on Facebook

Give:
Donate to the Rainbow Scholarship

Reach Out:
Email the listserv by sending your message to: rainbow-l@indiana.edu

Contribute:
Submit content for the Rainbow SIG website (Contact Web Content Managers: Page 6)

Represent:
Volunteer to become a NAFSA Rainbow SIG Regional Rep (multiple Reps per Region welcomed)

NAFSA INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR MAGAZINE HIGHLIGHTS

Be sure to also check out these highlights from the March/April 2015 NAFSA International Educator Magazine:

A Successful Rainbow Day of Giving, PG. 8
Supporting LGBT International Students, PG. 48

2015 - 2016 FEA SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

FEA is proud to announce the 2015-2016 scholarship winners. Be sure to click the FEA logo above to read about each of the 36 scholars selected this year, and wish them luck in their study abroad endeavors! Congrats to all, and remember that our Silver Lining recipient is anonymous.
Because I’m a gay man working in international education, students, parents and advisors often ask for my advice regarding LGBTQ study abroad students. Should we advise our gay students to stay in the closet while studying in less accepting places? Is it OK to tell anyone to hide an orientation or gender identity abroad? Here are my responses to those questions.

1. It helps to remind students that our definitions of sexual orientation and gender identity are American definitions, rooted in our culture. Different cultures approach these matters differently, just as they might approach marriage or gender roles differently. Some cultures might be more accepting; others might be less accepting. When I speak with strangers in China, for example, I sometimes respond to their usual questions about my family by telling them directly that I’m married to a man—something I’m not always comfortable doing in the US. The reaction is almost always one of friendly curiosity: “Oh! You foreigners are different from us Chinese!” We should advise students to explore these differences before traveling abroad, reminding them that learning about cultural differences is part of the overall study abroad experience.

2. For students studying in locations where homosexuality is illegal or LGBTQ identities are not welcomed, it’s OK to discourage students from coming out—in fact, it is essential to their safety. For students who have struggled to come out at home, who are proud to identify as LGBTQ, this can be difficult to accept. But there are real safety risks for LGBTQ students in certain regions of the world, including parts of the Middle East and Africa. Students who are not interested in heading back in the closet may want to consider alternative study abroad destinations. Even in locations where people are known to be accepting of LGBTQ identities, I often recommend that students who are unfamiliar with local culture proceed with caution. My advice? Don’t tell your local roommate or host family you identify as gay on your first day. Instead, take your time and learn about their views of LGBTQ matters—make sure you will be supported and accepted—before revealing this part of yourself to your hosts.
3. Finally, advisors who work with LGBTQ students should help them explore online resources before they head abroad. For example:

- NAFSA’s Rainbow Special Interest Group (SIG) advises international educators on LGBTQ concerns and offers resources.
- The US State Department recently began offering travel advice for LGBTQ travelers, and they are continually expanding and revising their country pages to include relevant health and safety information.
- Once in country, students can work with on-site staff to identify resource centers serving local LGBTQ communities.

Like all study abroad students, LGBTQ students can have amazing, transformational experiences overseas. I often encourage them to explore local LGBTQ communities in order to understand what’s different, what’s the same, and more broadly, how our cultures differ. And I like to remind them that their unique experience in the US—growing up different—may be the thing that helps connect them to local people and make new, lifelong friendships.

**Somewhere Over the Rainbow** is a conference on Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity in International Education that will convene on Friday, June 12 at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow will be an all-day gathering for professional development and discussion, focusing on LGBTQ-related issues and trends in international education through a series of presentations and workshops by professionals from across the field.

The Conference will coincide with the Washington, D.C. area Capital Pride weekend.

Anyone interested in attending the conference is encouraged to register at: [http://ter.ps/sotrtnx](http://ter.ps/sotrtnx)

To learn more, please visit the Somewhere Over the Rainbow Conference website: [http://ter.ps/sotr](http://ter.ps/sotr)

Questions can also be directed to the conference committee here: overtherainbow@umd.edu
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and we learned the Qu’ran in school and laws often reflected many Islamic beliefs. We never really learned anything in-depth about other religions—there were no multicultural celebrations in school, or opportunities to get to know people who came from other religious traditions on a deep or intimate level. I grew up surrounded by people whose belief system reinforced my own—the singularity of Islam as the only true, correct path. We weren’t taught to question religion or to accept the possibility of accepting others’ beliefs. I was able to respect people who thought differently, but respect was not the same as acceptance.

When I was 25, I moved to Italy for two years, to study at an Italian university. This experience—rather than make me feel more open to others’ beliefs, made me become more religious. The racism and discrimination that I faced as a Muslim and Arab made me feel unwelcomed and I associated both Europeans and Christianity—particularly Catholicism—with hatred towards Muslims. The humiliation of being stopped routinely on the street and asked for papers, singled out because of my ethnicity was hurtful and frustrating.

I wasn’t seen as a person; I was reduced to my ethnicity and religion, and immediately associated with negative stereotypes of that group. As a result, this experience made me want to spend more time with “my people” and strengthened my Muslim identity. Because that’s how I was seen in Italy— not as a person, but as part of a group or category of “bad Muslims.” I became more insular, less open, and more frustrated with the rest of the world. I felt misunderstood, and as if Italians (or “the West”) would never welcome me or understand me.

When I moved to the US to continue my education, things began to change. In my on-campus job, I began to meet—and become CLOSE—to people from different backgrounds and religions. And in my first position, working day after day with my co-workers, I learned that one of my coworkers was a lesbian.

I knew I wouldn’t treat her any differently than anyone else—I always respected, at least externally, people who were different. But my thoughts on the inside are things that I really feel uncomfortable about today. I’d be too ashamed to describe exactly what I thought about her, or about homosexuality in general.

Remember—I come from a place where we were truly ignorant about homosexuality. It’s not willful ignorance. We’ve not had a real Civil Rights movement, or a Gay Pride movement. If we want to learn about homosexuality, we have to break taboos and really look hard to seek out opportunities to learn.

But Lauren and I hit it off right away. As with others I worked with, we joked around often. I made fun of her constantly. And, after a few months of getting to know her as a person, I came to love her the same way I love my other friends. Her sexual orientation ceased to stand out as something that defined her or that puzzled me. She wasn’t “my lesbian coworker.” She was just Lauren.

It seems obvious, maybe, to people on the outside, but it hit me one day after working with Lauren for a few months. The stereotypes and the frustrations that I felt in Italy because of assumptions about who I am as a person based on my ethnicity and religion? There was no difference between that and the way many people or societies in the world would treat Lauren.

In reality, we were the same: good, hard-working, normal people who are struggling in a world that does not accept difference. Her sexual orientation has no impact on how I or other people live their lives. But it took me learning about her and getting to know her to see

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how similar our situations were and the importance of getting to know people who are different to break those stereotypes.

I don’t talk about this as much as I maybe should. I could probably do more as an advocate. But among my close Moroccan friends, both who are living here in the U.S. as well as those at home, I’ve received a new nickname: “Evolution,” for asking questions and challenging their beliefs about homosexuality, about science and religion, and about other ways they see the world. I haven’t changed their perspectives yet, but I love asking hard questions and making them think critically.

Maybe sometime those questions will lead to them drawing their own conclusions and changing their own mentalities. I don’t know. But I’m glad to have been able to get to know Lauren, and to see the similarities in our stories, and I hope that others will be able to use empathy from their own experiences and think about how they treat or see people who are different.

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What does Youssef’s story show us as international educators?

1. The importance of acceptance and creating spaces where students who may be prejudiced can feel accepted and integrated so that they can be more willing and open to think critically. In some ways, this echoes Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: in order to achieve self-actualization, the lower-level needs must first be met (physiological, safety, love, and self-esteem). When, for Youssef, these lower level needs were not met in Italy, he turned towards insularity, which made him less likely to be open to difference. As international educators, how are we intentionally ensuring these needs are met for our students—both international and not—before turning to discussion of Otherness?

2. The idea that mobility—study abroad, or having international students present—in and of itself is not enough, and can indeed be detrimental if programs lacking intentionality are in place. We need only turn to Allport’s Intergroup Theory for guidance as to what is necessary for positive effects of intergroup contact: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. It took time, feeling like he and Lauren were part of a team, and common goals for Youssef to come to the conclusions that he did and for him to be able to reflect empathetically. As international educators, how are we infusing intentionality in programming to go beyond the idea that the mere presence of difference is enough?

There are some questions without “easy” answers—and I’d challenge us as a community that is passionate about these issues to think about how to address this. How can we take the global learning or the building of intercultural competence that the field of international education focuses from the international to the personal or local? How can we take the learning that comes from students learning to accept the “Other” abroad—where it is relatively safer and more acceptable—and applying that knowledge to accepting the Other at home, whether we are talking race, gender, class, or sexual orientation/identity? How do we move from the international to the intercultural—and from a narrow definition of “culture” as being an ethno-national understanding to a more nuanced understanding of difference? While I don’t have the answers, I believe in the power of collective insight and hope to continue to see examples of initiatives and approaches that work from members of this SIG.

Katy Rosenbaum is Program Associate at the Association of International Education Administrators and a Masters of International Studies student at NC State University with a focus on International Program Administration. She spent five years in Morocco, first as a Peace Corps volunteer, then creating and facilitating short-term study abroad programs as Project Manager with Morocco Exchange. Katy continued to work in international education after returning to the U.S. with Melibee Global Education. Katy is passionate about international education because of the impact that facilitated cultural immersion can have on students’ personal development and paths to global citizenship; her research interests include ethical internationalization.
Each week at CISabroad we watch our students and faculty depart their hometowns and venture off to explore new locations. They ask us for our advice and we proudly give it to them, reminding them to pack light, try local foods, and stay patient when a train or bus is in fact late. We let them know to stay flexible, so that when plans shift (which they will do) they are calm under pressure and go with the flow. But there is one piece of advice we love to give more than others; "Live like a local".

For us encouraging our students to live like a local and respect their new "homes" abroad stems from our own community, headquartered in Western Massachusetts. We live and work in a small city we refer to as “Noho,” known to those outside of our area as Northampton, Massachusetts. For those who come to our New England community, they see a culture built on local farming, collegial opportunities (we are home to Smith College and in total have 5 colleges in our area) and LGBT activism.

Having the largest lesbian population in all of the U.S., the LGBT community is the core of our small town. We have community members and allies working in our office, consistently advocating for LGBT rights, and proudly march down Main Street in May during Gay Pride.

When Generation Study Abroad announced their plans to see institutions and providers double their enrollment we of course were up for the challenge, but simply doubling our numbers didn't sound very romantic to us. We wanted to take a piece of our own local culture and try and merge that with the field of study abroad. Focusing on LGBT programming and international opportunities for students, faculty and LGBT centers was voted on at our annual meeting without any hesitation.

Quickly CISabroad staff members started signing up for various roles they could play: develop LGBT programming overseas, increase and enhance our educational resources for LGBT students, and design a site visit geared towards the LGBT international education community. These are just a few.  
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RAINBOW SIG ELECTIONS

Nominations are open and elections will be held during the Annual Open Business Meeting on Wed. May 27th 2:45 – 3:45PM. Please see the NAFSA Program for exact locations. Open positions include: Co-Chair, Co-Newsletter Editor, Co-Web Content Manager, and Co-Scholarship Coordinator. These will be 2 year positions.

For a description of duties, please visit the Rainbow SIG Governance page of our website. Please submit nominations for open positions to the Chairs by May 18th, 2015. Self-nominees who will be absent should include a brief bio to be read before the Open Business Meeting.

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LGBT students are proud of their campus communities but often don’t go into their study abroad offices for fear their questions won't be answered. For a transgendered student, how will they be treated in customs or on a campus abroad? For a questioning student - what will it be like coming out overseas?

For a gay student – what homestays are gay-friendly? Our goal leading up to 2020 is to answer these questions, make it easy for our students to locate housing and campuses abroad with gender neutral facilities, and connect our US groups heading overseas with those incredible groups also advocating in their local communities. As a supporter each year of Rainbow SIG we are excited to announce our LGBT Initiative within Generation Study Abroad. Questions or interest in our plans and goals? Stop by and visit us in Boston at our booth in the expo hall or at the Rainbow SIG party!

Scott Tayloe is twice graduate of Jacksonville University earning a Bachelors Degree in Aviation Management and a Masters Degree in Business Administration. Scott earned his pilots license at the age of 16 and backpacked Europe after high school, both of which formed his love for travel. Over the past 10+ years he has worked with CISabroad in various capacities, now serving as the Director of Customized Faculty-Led Programs, and has enjoyed seeing more students and groups traveling abroad. Scott is finishing up his term on the NAFSA Region XI Team in Massachusetts and is a Trainer Corps member. Outside work Scott now calls Los Angeles, California home, where he and his husband recently relocated with their 1 year old son, Hayden.
“I wouldn’t know where to start with an international student who identifies as lesbian or gay…”
– International Student Advisor

“Hmmm… an L. G. B. and T. international student? I’ve never seen one of those before…”
– Director, International Student Scholar Services

“A gay international student would have to go to the Office of Multicultural Affairs since I don’t have the resources to help them…”
– International Student Advisor

“Most likely this student would have to go to ISSS since the services offered are for U.S. students.”
– Coordinator, LGBT Services

Concerning at all? The quotes above reflect actual excerpts from research that I have conducted.

As a gay international student who is conducting research on the LGBT international student population, and those who work with them, I have been very concerned with the reactions of administrators and student personnel when asked about their work with LGBT international students.

More troubling is the lack of academic literature that can be used to inform the practices of international educators and administrators. However, there are administrators and professionals who can admit that LGBT international students do actually exist. In many cases, misconceptions and biases get in the way of thinking beyond the international student classification. Based on my findings in previous research I have found that:

- International students, despite their cultural and linguistic diversities, are seen as a monolithic group of students by administrators and faculty members.

- Many international student personnel are mainly concerned with keeping international students “in-status.” Most of the offices tasked with working with international students are short-staffed and it is virtually impossible for personnel to intentionally focus on offering services that target the holistic identity development of international students.

- We are socialized to think along the lines of dominant narratives and teachings. We are taught:
  - Someone is always regarded as “straight” or heterosexual unless proven otherwise.
  - Likewise, if someone looks like a “girl” or “boy” then that person should be a “girl” or “boy” respectively. Meaning one’s biological sex should match their gender identity and gender expression.

Therefore, we do not always challenge the notions that we are socialized around, and as a result we may perpetuate this in the work that we do. In some cases, we have never been in a situation where we might have to challenge what we were taught growing up or our preconceived notions.

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around sexuality and gender. Therefore, at times we lack the ability to engage with others who fall outside those constructions.

These are only a few reasons why some administrators and personnel may only view international students in a singular dimension. However, there are some cases where international student personnel see the diversity within this population, and are unsure how to approach them based on each student’s cultural differences. International students can come from cultures and countries that are conservative with views on sexuality. In some countries homosexual acts are criminalized, where an individual can be imprisoned or face death penalties.

So, how can college personnel and campus leaders create a more welcoming environment for LGBT international students?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKING WITH LGBT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Conduct a self-evaluation to determine which professional development opportunities to attend. As seen above, our socialization and biases can inhibit the ways we think about programming and methods used to reach international students. Therefore, it is important to seek out opportunities that help us confront those biases.

Be transparent about campus incidents with all international students as they decide on an institution to attend. Although this information is available online, their research focuses on the quality of education that they might receive, unless some incidents are highly publicized.

Develop collaborative partnerships on campus between centers that serve minority groups that international students may identify with. If campuses lack the resources to serve the LGBT populations, partnerships can be formed between community organizations. Community partners provide an additional source of support if students are not comfortable seeking help on campus.

Campus policies should include nondiscrimination statements, which encompass gender-neutral language, and gender identity and expression. Also, newly created campus policies should target change at all levels of the campus through training and education, creation of gender inclusive spaces, health care and health insurance options, curriculum development, and partnerships.

Create more inclusive International Student Handbooks. Handbooks should include descriptions of the LGBT Communities with corresponding on and off campus resources. Courses that are offered at the institution that are associated with Queer and Sexuality studies are also helpful to provide. Depending on cultural background, students may not use the same language to describe how they identify as their domestic counterparts. For example, a Jamaican lesbian may refer to herself as gay.

Create a peer-mentoring program where LGBT and questioning international students can be matched with domestic students who can assist them with navigating the campus and seeking external resources. This provides additional support to international students at campuses where resources are limited, and international student advisors are unable to assist. Such an initiative
is challenging, since domestic peer mentors will need to go through training educating them about laws and cultural backgrounds that shape the ways that international students might engage with others or disclose their sexuality. Before signing up for a program, international students will need to have the necessary discussions about LGBT definitions in the U.S.

Develop comprehensive cultural competency trainings that target staff, faculty, and student leaders on campus. These trainings should take an intersectional and holistic view of identity and student development. Attendees of the trainings should also be introduced to transgender issues, terminologies, and strategies to be more inclusive.

It is great to empower lesbian, gay, queer and questioning international students as they embark on self-discovery and coming out. However, implications of this process look very different for international students versus domestic students. While the resulting issues associated to coming out are similar for domestic and international students, some have a greater impact on the lives of international students due to their visa statuses in the U.S. and immigration policies that govern their participation in American higher education. Coming Out Plans will help students decide if it is safe to disclose their orientations or preferred gender identity to family who play an essential role in students’ attendance to college.

Provide resources to transgender students who are traveling to and from the U.S. These resources can encompass statements on documentation needed to issue transgender students I-20 documents, what to expect at airports, updating records at the institution to preferred names so that Campus IDs can be reflective of students’ preferences.

Work with LGBT international students as they contemplate options after degree completion. Like coming out, a plan should be developed for returning to respective home countries. This plan should be individualized and reflect a students’ circumstances based on family, culture, laws in the home country, and attitudes toward LGBT people, just to name a few.

There isn’t an exhaustive list of best practices related to working with LGBT international students. Many administrators have attempted programs that work well, however many great initiatives and program ideas fail because LGBT and questioning international students hesitate to disclose or discuss their sexuality or transition process with college personnel. It is also important to note institutional and community contexts when creating office or institution-specific best practices. This can include advocating for the addition of items that measure attitudes toward LGBT people on campus through campus climate surveys.

Bryan Hubain is a Ph.D. candidate in Higher Education with a focus on Diversity and Higher Learning at the University of Denver. He is currently the Diversity Specialist at Metropolitan State University of Denver. His research interests include the experiences of LGBT international students, experiences of students of color in higher education preparation programs, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the intersections of sexuality and gender performance in the Caribbean.