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*Queer
International
Student
Guidebook*



Middlebury Institute of
International Studies at Monterey

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Introduction

This guide has been created in order to provide information, resources and tips for higher educational professionals and queer allies. This is based on our research that focuses on the identities, experiences and trajectories of queer international students.

The guide is prepared for those individuals who attended *Including Queer Students in International Education: From Research to Practice* at the NAFSA: Association of International Educators Conference in Washington, DC in May 2023. We encourage those in attendance to share this guide with others who may find it helpful.

Key Terms

- **LGBTQIA+:** This acronym stands for: Lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and represents all queer individuals who identify with minoritized sexual orientations and/or gender identities.
- **Queer:** This term refers to members of the LGBTQIA+ community and includes various gender identities as well as sexual orientations including, but not limited to - lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex, asexual and two-spirit. It's important to note that each identity is unique and flexible - meaning it can change over time and may look different depending on the culture and context. Our use of the term queer is a simplification of a complex collection of identities.
- **International Student:** For the sake of this guidebook international student refers to any student who is crossing a national border to study at a U.S. higher education institution.
- **Queer international Students (QIS):** In this guidebook the acronym "QIS" refers to queer international students. This definition applies to any individual who has at some point in their life identified as queer and left their home country to pursue higher education abroad. This group has an intersectionality of identities, faces unique challenges and requires extra support due to identifying with two marginalized groups.
- **Queer Erasure:** This term is defined as actions or comments that eliminate or disregard an individual's queerness. This is common for queer international students, who oftentimes have their international student identity highlighted in U.S. culture, which in turn disregards their queerness.

Positionality Statements

We include the authors' positionality statements to provide an overview of our identities, views, and backgrounds which we bring to this work.

Dr. Anne Campbell (she/her): I believe I have power as a cis-gendered, white, and heteronormative researcher and U.S. faculty member, and I hope to use this power to bring attention to social issues that affect me and people I care about. In this case, I care deeply about my current and former students, many of whom are international students and identify as queer. With this goal in mind, I wish to center others' stories, call attention to the findings

through writing and presentations, and advocate for policy change. I recognize that I am not a member of the international LGBTQIA+ community. I share this as I want to be transparent about my identity. In this project, I work with individuals to listen closely to their stories, experiences, and perceptions throughout this work. As the principal investigator for a larger research project, it is my responsibility to uphold trust by maintaining confidentiality and security of the individuals' identities and data, following a process that meets Middlebury's Internal Review Board (IRB) standards.

Quintessence Townsend (she/they): I define myself as a cisgender, Black woman whose identity is “under construction” (i.e. questioning). Currently, I define myself as “LGBTQ+ adjacent”. This means that while I do not see myself as a part of the community, I have many close friends—domestic and international—as well as family members and colleagues who are in the community that I could not imagine living my life without. Given this, I still acknowledge my privileges as a light-skinned, cisgendered woman with a heteronormative appearance as these privileges have allowed me to avoid discrimination, prejudice, and violence based on an externally perceived queer identity. My motivations for this project lie in the growing pushback against LGBTQ+ rights (esp. transgender rights) in the United States as well as a desire to understand LGBTQ+ rights outside of the U.S. context. As a graduate research assistant, my responsibility lies in working to uphold ethical values and practices in the course of this project. These values include maintaining respect for others, beneficence (do no harm), and justice and are underpinned by practices such as gaining and maintaining trust, maintaining participant confidentiality, gaining informed consent, minimizing participant risk, and being transparent about ourselves and the project.

Marissa Ruhno: I became a part of this research team because of my personal connection to the topic. As a lesbian, I am able to relate to many queer individuals in their journeys of self-acceptance, as well as their feelings of comfort and conflict. As a native English speaker, U.S. born citizen and white woman I recognize that I cannot understand the discrimination associated with the intersecting identities of queer international students. However, I am dedicated to bringing attention to the need for more support for this marginalized community. I am committed to bringing awareness to issues faced by queer international students, as well as advocating for change.

[Acknowledgements of Funding and Support](#)

Our team would first like to thank the individuals who have participated in this project by sharing their time, perspectives, and experiences with us. We would also like to recognize the generous support of the Kathryn Wasserman Davis Collaboration for Conflict Transformation, the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, and the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Study Abroad and International Student Special Interest Group for their financial support of this project.

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<https://tinyurl.com/qisguidebook>

Background: Understanding the population and policies

[About the queer international student population](#)

There is no comprehensive data on the number of queer international students in the United States, so the best we can do is estimate. Overtime, the number of people in the United States who identify as something other than heterosexual (one who chooses romantic partners of the opposite sex) and cis-gendered (one who identifies with the gender assigned at birth) is increasing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022). Current estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) note that approximately 12% of individuals who responded to their Household Pulse Survey identified as something other than straight. The Pew Research Center (2022) found that 1.6% of Americans identify as transgender or non-binary.

There is also some evidence that these figures are higher among younger people. In just one example, the number of incoming Harvard University students who identify as a group that is other than straight was polled at 29% (The Harvard Crimson, 2023). While we do not have a reliable number of international students who are LGBTQ+, we can estimate it is likely between 10-30% of the international student population.

[Diversity among the QIS population](#)

At many universities, international students are seen as a monolithic group, often clumped together into one category. However, as international educators know, there are significant differences within the international student population. It is challenging to find programming and opportunities that include this diverse range of international students. Scholars who conduct work in this area sometimes speak to the “double marginalization” of queer international students who do not fit within domestic queer communities, while also not being fully welcomed to international student activities.

In addition, a single individual has multiple identities that they work to negotiate, reconcile, and express. Being “queer” and being an “international student” are just two of those identities, among many. This understanding of identity is a result of the landmark work on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and its specific applications to understanding international students in the United States (Mwangi, Changamire & Mosselson, 2019) and at the intersection of queer international students (Herridge, García, & Leong, 2019).

[American, state, and local contexts](#)

It is essential to understand how national, state, and local contexts play a role in the QIS experience. This includes a specific university or college campus’s policies and protection for

queer students, the support and guidance for international students, and the programming available to include QIS.

In addition, national, state, and local laws and policies influence the well-being of QIS, including whether they are comfortable to be open about their queer identities, whether they feel safe, and how they present themselves. These must be taken into consideration when understanding the QIS experience on each campus, as it can vary significantly in different parts of the U.S.

Part 1: Common challenges faced by queer international students

Queer international students arriving at their U.S. universities are delving into a new culture with different norms. This section of the manual summarizes key challenges for QIS students and lists research and resources, where available, for future reading.

Challenges with Learning English and Cultural Adjustments

While English learning and comprehension can be a frequently-cited challenge for international students, QIS may face even more significant impacts. For example, lack of comfort in English may lead to social isolation, embarrassment from making mistakes, and frustrations from educators and/or peers. These factors impede their ability to integrate into the campus community.

QIS that struggle with the language barrier can experience feelings of isolation and conflict, which can be further heightened by heteronormativity in classrooms. Lack of inclusive language, such as providing examples only involving heterosexual couples or not acknowledging genders other than male and female, may prevent QIS from actively engaging in conversations and embracing their identities in a new social environment. Without addressing these issues, QIS are likely to feel excluded from the community.

Classroom structure also differs greatly from country to country. For example, in many Asian countries students are taught to listen to the teacher and absorb information, only responding when called upon. In the U.S. higher education system it is common for professors to ask students' opinions and engage in meaningful debates/conversations. Adjusting to this cultural difference can be very difficult, which is why queer international students need extra support.

Another major difference in culture is individualism versus collectivism, "Individualistic societies emphasize self-reliance, individual goal settings, and independence. Individualistic behavior focuses on personal goals. In contrast, collectivistic behavior emphasizes harmonious social groups where people think beyond personal lives and benefit the respective groups" (Mori, 2000, as cited by, Chennamsetti, 2020, p. 251). Queer international students are facing culture shock in two aspects because they are being introduced to U.S. culture, as well as queer culture in the U.S.

Intersectionality, Queer Erasure and Discrimination

There are many challenges for individuals who are navigating both an international student and queer identity. This intersectionality makes identity a difficult subject for many queer international students. On college campuses it is common to see support and resources for queer students and for international students. However, it's less common to see that same

support for queer international students, who have unique experiences based on the intersectionality of these identities. Oftentimes they sense that their international student identity is more significant than their queer identity, leading to “queer erasure”, which entails an acknowledgement of their international student identity, and in turn submerges their queer identity.

A number of QIS face discrimination on U.S. campuses. This includes instances of racism and homophobia. From being called slurs to being made fun of for having an accent, there are many harmful experiences that affect QIS. Intersectionality continues to impact queer international students, as they face discrimination for not only their queer identity, but their race and/or culture as well. This requires a unique form of support, which left unresolved may lead them to have a negative study abroad experience. In order to prevent these incidents and prevent more from occurring, as professionals in the field we need to fight for more inclusive practices and protection for QIS.

[Lack of Representation and Struggling with Self-Acceptance](#)

A lack of representation is a struggle emphasized in brochures, orientation materials and recruitment efforts that are not inclusive of queer international students. Although materials are catered to international students and queer students, the lack of acknowledgement regarding QIS intersectionality can make them more vulnerable to being double marginalized.

Many QIS have this idea that the U.S. is exactly like what they see on TV. However, for many, they don't realize the complexity of society. The representation of queer individuals in movies and on TV, does not represent the entirety of the queer population. Although more queer BIPOC individuals are being represented in media today, it has only been within the recent years.

Along with erasure, they often struggle with expressing their queer identity. Many QIS may be exploring their identities when they study abroad, so they are familiarizing themselves with how to live openly as a queer individuals. Self-acceptance is a personal journey, but QIS still need to be reminded that it's okay to be who they are, which is why more representation is crucial for QIS to see that they aren't alone.

[Hiding Queer Identity and Fear of Being Outed](#)

It's important to take into account that many QIS feel unsafe expressing their queer identity. Many QIS rely on financial assistance from their families, especially as they are not allowed to work off campus with an F-1 visa. Many QIS fear their families reaction and worry about being cut-off, which can lead to internalizing queerness and hiding in shame of their identity.

Aside from challenges faced upon arriving to the United States, queer international students have to navigate multiple communities and sometimes resort to code switching in order

to ensure their safety. They experience feelings of isolation from having to navigate their identities separately. This may include embracing their queerness with friends on a U.S. campus, while having to hide their queerness to engage with family and friends from their home country.

Many QIS receive support from their families back home and fear that coming out to their family will put them in a place of conflict. This in turn leads to worries about post-graduation trajectories and going home to less welcoming communities. Political climate, policies, and visa requirements are more barriers faced by QIS, which can lead to feelings of discouragement and fear, in turn affecting their mental health.

Queer International Students and Mental Health

Mental health services are crucial for QIS because of the challenges they face living in a new environment. However, the lack of resources and support for QIS is something that can be detrimental to their well-being. A wide variety of QIS come from societies that stigmatize mental health, so they may not reach out and ask for help when they are struggling. When QIS reach out for help, it can be a big step for them, and the lack of culturally-competent mental health professionals can negatively affect their first mental health experience, leading them to not seek services in the future.

It can be very difficult to schedule an appointment at the mental health center, with some students waiting three months to receive an appointment time. At many universities there is a limit to the amount of free sessions a student can receive. For students with long-term mental health issues this is not sustainable and financial restrictions may make continued care inaccessible.

Part 2: Tips for Inclusive Practices

There are many difficulties faced by QIS studying in the U.S, so the question now is: What can we do as professionals in the field to ensure that students are having a positive experience at our universities?

Tips for Allies

- Be a role model. Queer communities are comprised of both those who identify as queer and those who consider themselves allies. QIS need individuals to look up to and to guide them along their journey. Hearing students and directing them on the right path can make a positive difference in their experience in the U.S.
- Increase your cultural competence. It's normal to not have experience with different cultures, but it's important to stay educated and continue growing and learning.
- Share your pronouns. Normalizing this oftentimes makes queer students feel more comfortable. They feel less excluded if everyone is sharing their pronouns.
- Ask, "What can I do to support you?" Sometimes asking this question is exactly what a queer international student may need. Even if you can't help them directly, you may be able to point them in the right direction.
- Celebrate queer joy and attend queer activities. The goal is to make QIS feel like being queer is normal - which it is!
- Safe zone stickers. These are a great way to show students that they can feel comfortable speaking to you, without feeling singled out.
- Creating an inclusive google form, where students can share their gender identity, pronouns, and other personal information about themselves that they may not want to share in front of the class.
- Use inclusive language. When sharing examples in class, stray away from always assuming that couples are a man and woman, and be mindful of not using terms that assume there are only two genders.
- How to guide students to mental health and well-being services. Many QIS are unaware of the resources available to them, meaning that you can be a point of reference to assist them in reaching out for help.

Tips for Institutions

- Gender neutral bathrooms. There are people who do not feel comfortable using the women's or men's bathroom.
- Clear visa guidelines and assistance after graduation. There are queer international students who feel unsafe or uncomfortable returning to their home country after graduation. They would benefit from better guidance to prepare for their future trajectories.
- Accessible mental health resources. In some instances culture may affect students' likeliness to seek mental health services, so it's best to provide them with the information, as they may be apprehensive to seek help on their own.

- Intersectional student services and programming. It's important to provide a space for queer international students that recognizes both of their identities.
- Ensure student confidentiality, including name change, gender, and chosen pronouns, in accordance with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) guidance.

Part 3: Additional Resources

Below are additional resources associated with this guidebook, as well as resource highlights that could be modeled through or incorporated into one's practice.

[Queering International Education Glossary](#)

This glossary was created and designed by the research to assist with understanding common terminology used in the queer space and specifically within our research.

[Organization for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration \(ORAM\) Glossary](#)

The Organization for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration (ORAM) has a glossary of LGBTQIA+ terms available in Arabic, English, Farsi, French, and Turkish. The glossary both acceptable terms as well as unacceptable terms used in each language.

[Improving LGBTQIA+ Students' Experiences in International Education](#)

This blog post - submitted to the Institute of International Education's (IIE) Opening Minds blog - "synthesizes information sourced from 76 studies focusing on queer international students and shares concrete suggestions for universities and international educators and practitioners".

[NAFSA's Rainbow Special Interest Group \(SIG\)](#)

We highly recommend connecting with and getting involved in NAFSA's Rainbow SIG. The goals of this SIG are to "counsel international students and study abroad students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+); to support LGBTQ+ professionals in international education; and to combat homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia within NAFSA". They offer many services, including a newsletter, a Rainbow Scholarship for LGBTQ+ U.S. students going abroad, LGBTQ+ resources, and connecting with a network of professionals for advice on field-specific LGBTQ+ issues.

[International LGBTQIA Student Programming: University of Minnesota's Gender and Sexuality Center for Queer and Trans Life](#)

This is an example of what programming for international LGBTQIA+ students can look like. In addition to resources for international LGBTQIA+ students, one-on-one mentoring, student support groups, and cross-cultural discussion groups are offered.

[International LGBTQ Student Support and Advising: University of Wisconsin, Madison's International Student Services](#)

The University of Wisconsin, Madison offers both resources and visa and immigration advising for international LGBTQ students. Topics include advising for those with unmarried partners, study abroad, asylum, and more.

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Appendices: Case Studies

The following cases are not a single person's story, and they go beyond a composite of multiple individuals' lived experiences. Instead, these three cases are inspired by research conducted with queer international students in the U.S. and in other countries. They have been designed to make them as realistic as possible for the current environment and climate in the U.S. and other countries mentioned in the cases.

Case study 1: Mohammed

Mohammed (he/him) is in his final year of a two-year master's degree in chemical engineering at your university. An international student from Bangladesh, Mohammed came to your university on a F-1 visa. He is sponsored by a large, international chemical company and has signed a contract with the company to return to his home country of Bangladesh and work for the national corporate office when he finishes his degree in May.

Mohammed has been a star student during his studies. He is earning a high GPA, has been an international student ambassador for your office, and is the secretary of the university's South Asian Students Organization. Mohammed has also developed a relationship with an American classmate, Steven. While you consider yourself friendly with Mohammed, you were not aware of Mohammed's sexual orientation. Moreover, it seems to you that Mohammed and Steven have kept their relationship fairly private.

One day in March – two months before Mohammed's intended graduation date – he comes to an appointment with you and shares that he'd like advice on how to stay in the United States after graduation. He says he's been applying for U.S. jobs and has had a few interviews with two different companies in the area. He intends to pay his company back for the price of his scholarship over time. He begins by asking for visa advice on what to expect if he does not get employment before graduation.

As you talk, you realize that Mohammed is also concerned about what will happen to his relationship with Steven if he returns home to Bangladesh. He confides that he has never spoken with his parents about his queer identity. Moreover, while he has told his parents that he's in a relationship with an American, he has not given Steven's name or specified Steven's gender. He admits that he's uncertain how his parents will react when he shares that he is in a same-sex relationship.

He also confides that he has been researching his chances of getting married in the U.S. He said he's heard from another international student about a Supreme Court case (Obergefell vs. Hodges) which recognizes same sex marriages. He is wondering if he could marry Steven and stay in the U.S. He believes that if he proposed, Steven would say yes and want a big wedding.

Mohammed is worried about whether he will be able to invite his family or other members of the South Asian diaspora community in your university's city, how he will inform his family about the marriage, and how he will manage this information about his wedding on social media.

He said that he's thought about whether he and Steven could move together to Bangladesh. He noted that it's likely not possible for him and Steven to be in a public relationship in Bangladesh given the government's lack of recognition or protection of LGBTQ+ rights. Mohammed recalls a time in Bangladesh in 2016 during the Bengali New Year, when four members of the LGBTQ+ community were arrested due to participating in a pride celebration. Their request for this celebration had been previously denied by local authorities and resulted in all participants being arrested, although they were later released¹. Homosexuality is a crime that can lead to a maximum life term in prison, and Mohammed isn't sure he wants to go back and risk his chance of living openly queer with his partner.

Note: Case study 1 has recently been published in Case Studies in International Education, Volume 4, Issue 1. Please see the full case at <http://csiepub.org/index.php/csie/article/view/135>

Case study 2: Chima

Chima (he/they) is a second year international student from Kenya, who is studying a B.A. in economics at your small private liberal arts college, Elmwood College in Georgia. It is early September – the second week of classes – and this is Chima's second year. Chima comes into your office and asks for advice on transferring their credits to a nearby community college which has a highly regarded and accredited nursing program. They tell you they have decided they would prefer to pursue a nursing degree, which is not available at your college, and plan to begin classes immediately on October 1.

Chima had appeared to be fitting in well at Elmwood, having many friends and doing well academically. Chima was also on Freshman Year Council and had joined the international student club. Last time you spoke to Chima, you recommended that Chima consider leading the International Student Club. Now you are surprised to hear that they want to transfer. You agree that they are welcome to transfer, if that is what they want, but your curiosity gets the better of you. You politely ask: "Can I learn more about why you wish to leave Elmwood? To me, it seems you have really thrived here!"

Chima admits that while they've learned a great deal at your college, but they can't afford the high tuition costs any longer. Chima tells you that over the summer Chima's family threatened to cut off financial support. Chima was hoping to earn enough over the summer working in an

¹ "Four revelers held after Bangladesh bans 'rainbow rally'", Daily Mail, 14 April 2016.

internship so they didn't have to rely on their parents, but now the tuition bill is due (after one extension has already been granted) and Chima does not have the money. Chima wants to continue studying and believes they can fund the year at the community college with part-time work on campus.

Chima continues that their uncle, who is a business leader in Kenya and funding Chima's degree, is likely to cut the funding because Chima appeared to be dressing "like a woman" and posting pictures on social media. A coworker of Chima's uncle noticed Chima in make-up and with painted nails on Instagram and asked Chima's uncle about this. The family set up an Instagram account to see Chima's photos, which included several where Chima was out with a trans friend at a club. Over the summer Chima's uncle told them that either Chima should come home immediately, or that Chima would be cut off financially. Chima's parents, who know he is queer, have not brought up the issue to Chima, and Chima hasn't mentioned it to them.

Chima did not want to return home, especially as they had just heard the news about Edwin Chiloba, the high profile activist and fashion designer who had just been killed in Eldoret, Kenya.² Chima also doesn't want to embarrass or disappoint their parents. Instead, Chima thought they could find the funding for tuition through work or other means, but they have not been able to do so. Based on some advice from other Kenyan students they know at other institutions, Chima was informed that they could stay in the U.S. as a student if they transferred to another institution. Moreover, if they change studies to a STEM-related field, Chima would be eligible for three years of optional practical training (OPT).

You ask Chima about their plans for the nursing degree, and Chima reports that they hope to use the degree to influence public health policy in Kenya. They are really motivated by one study that they learned about last year in their freshman health and economics course, which reports that U.S. health insurance companies support gender-reassignment surgery and hormone-replacement therapy because it is often less expensive than healthcare services for a transgender person who does not transition; plus, their quality of life is higher and they are overall in better health.³ Chima reports that after the nursing degree, they hope to pursue a Master's in Public Health before returning to Kenya.

Chima says that several people suggested your name as a person who is compassionate and reasonable for LGBTQIA+ international students and you're hoping that you can help them.

² If you wish to learn more about Edwin Chiloba, please see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Chiloba.

³ Reference to this study is <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2015/study-paying-for-transgender-health-care-cost-effective>.

Case study 3: Mi-Rae

Mi-Rae (she/her) is a student from South Korea who is pursuing an MBA at your institution, a large public institution located in southern California. She is very interested in corporate social responsibility and you know she's been volunteering with a local church to prepare meals for low-income Los Angeles area residents. She comes into your office the last week of November and says she's planning to go home for the winter break and not return. She has already started packing her bags and saying her goodbyes. She said she cannot continue her studies now but may try to continue her degree, or transfer, in a year or two and doesn't want to make any decision that will compromise her ability to return to the U.S.

You affirm to Mi-Rae that you want to do the best to support her and are happy to provide her advice. However, you are curious as to why she is making this decision so soon after she started her MBA. She states that it is too risky to be in the U.S. any longer, and she doesn't want her family to find out she's been on a few dates with a woman.

Mi-Rae tells you the story: A male elder at the Korean Christian church said he saw Mi-Rae on a date, holding hands with a woman, in a local park. The man said that he would hate for this information to get back to Mi-Rae's home church in Seoul. After the elder admitted this, Mi-Rae felt differently at the U.S. church, like they were no longer her "family" in the U.S. After the man said something to her, no one has invited her to their homes or for other social events. She asked a close friend at church if she was imagining it, and the friend said that she had also heard rumors about Mi-Rae but didn't believe them.

Because of the pressure she felt at church, Mi-Rae broke off the relationship with the white American student. She tried to explain to her girlfriend why it was important to pass as cis-gendered and heterosexual in her conservative church community, as this church community had been like family to her since she arrived in the Los Angeles area. Members of the church had provided her a place to stay for the first three weeks before she could find housing, and one member loaned her a car when she needed it. Another family had invited her to spend the weekend with them at Disneyland in Anaheim. Moreover, Mi-Rae's cousin was a senior member of a similar church in Seoul, so the church community was both figuratively – and literally -- family.

But the girlfriend wasn't interested in the details. She told Mi-Rae that she couldn't be with someone who wasn't proud of who she was. The girlfriend said that Mi-Rae should not "go back into the closet" because of her religion. She also told Mi-Rae that she would take down the photos she had posted of them on Instagram. Mi-Rae started crying as she explained that she never gave her girlfriend permission to share photos, so this had upset her greatly, and she wondered if this also contributed to some of the cold shoulders she was receiving at church.

Mi-Rae tells you she cannot focus on her studies. She is worried that unless she goes back to Seoul and talks to her parents that they will find out about her girlfriend and acting inappropriately within the church community. She is not so concerned about her parents thinking

she is interested in women – she says she thinks that they already suspect this – but is more worried about the reputation for the family. She is especially worried about rumors spreading in her home church and tarnishing her cousin's leadership role. Mi-Rae said that she feels it's important to “get back to normal” at home and will worry about finishing her degree at a later time.