

Navigating Identity and Safety: Supporting LGBTQI International Students

Omobonike Odegbami, Ed.D

Director of International Student Services, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY, USA

Email: odegbam@hamilton.edu

Omoyanjuola Ogunfiditimi, MSW

Social Worker, The Neighborhood Center, Utica, NY

Email: yanjuola@gmail.com

Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Leadership and Strategy; Partnerships; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case study takes place at a mid-sized U.S. university known for diversity and inclusion, as well as extensive support structures for international students. The institution strives to create a safe, affirming environment for all students, particularly those from marginalized groups, yet faces typical resource limitations that challenge comprehensive, continuous support for international students outside campus grounds. Institutional policies generally promote inclusivity, and broader policy changes are under consideration to specifically address the unique needs of LGBTQI international students.

Case

Alex, an international student from a country where LGBTQI identities face severe legal restrictions and social stigmatization, arrives in the U.S. to study computer science. Over the course of their first semester, Alex begins exploring their gender identity, participating in campus LGBTQI events and connecting with supportive peers and counselors. Alex finds acceptance in this new environment, a stark contrast to the societal expectations in their home country. As winter break nears, however, Alex's anxiety about returning home grows, aware that being openly LGBTQI may place them at serious risk.

Jamie, a campus social worker specializing in LGBTQI student affairs, becomes aware of Alex's concerns. With Alex's permission, Jamie consults with you, a seasoned international educator, to develop a comprehensive plan that prioritizes Alex's safety and autonomy. Together, you coordinate resources such as mental health counseling, safe travel planning, and pre-departure cultural re-adjustment support. This includes preparing Alex for the psychological and emotional challenges they may face if they need to conceal their identity upon return. You also explore with Alex potential alternatives to going home, like on-campus or local housing options during the break. However, there are housing limitations and reduced staff availability on campus which present challenges for international students over academic breaks.

The collaboration between international education and social work underscores the complex, intersecting identities of students like Alex, who must navigate conflicting cultural expectations. Recognizing the challenges faced by LGBTQI international students, Jamie and the international office begin advocating for more formalized institutional policies to support such students, including measures like:

- **Designated Safe Spaces and Programs:** Initiating programs specifically tailored for LGBTQI international students to discuss cultural, social, and personal challenges with confidentiality.
- **Flexible Housing Policies:** Advocating for expanded housing availability during academic breaks, allowing international students facing unsafe home environments to remain on campus.

While the social worker and international educator work on policy advocacy and continue to offer individual support, Alex contemplates their upcoming choices.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What strategies can be implemented to ensure that Alex feels supported both emotionally and practically during their transition back home?
- What are the long-term implications for Alex's mental health and academic performance if they choose to suppress their identity upon returning home, and how can the university prepare to support them upon their return?
- What are the ethical considerations involved in potentially advising a student to conceal aspects of their identity for their safety? How should these be navigated?
- How can educators balance respect for a student's cultural background with the imperative to support their individual identity exploration and expression?
- How can institutions foster a supportive environment that can extend beyond the campus to international students returning to potentially hostile environments?
- In what ways can collaboration between different support services on campus be improved to address the unique needs of international LGBTQI students?