

Visibility & Vulnerability: Supporting LGBTQI Students in Study Abroad

In recent years, universities across Canada and the United States have seen a surge in participation in study abroad programs (SAPs), as well as an increase in the number of SAPs available. SAPs offer a unique opportunity, granting participants firsthand access to encounters with their targets of study, long thought to facilitate the development of “cross-cultural” skills (Burn et al., 1990) and language gains (Freed, 1998). However, not all students benefit from the same level of access to these opportunities. Students who identify as LGBTQI face difficult decisions regarding their ability to participate, as many destinations can be described as dangerous for them, lacking the capacity to receive and support these needs; in fact, the participant demographics are only marginally more diverse than the decade prior (Chow & Bhandari, 2011). This is troubling given its effect on those students and their learning outcomes. Studies have shown that an immersion environment (i.e. living in the target language) combined with formal methods of instruction (e.g. classroom learning) is the most successful model for achieving advanced proficiency of an additional language (Freed, 1998). A lack of access to immersion opportunities, then, is a hindrance to the success of L2 students. Additionally, if members of these groups “have not had an opportunity to study abroad, they will find themselves at a disadvantage in a labor market that increasingly values international experience and global competence” (Herrin, Dadzie & MacDonald, 2007). This presentation outlines the challenges faced LGBTQI students, as well as the challenges for home institutions in compensating and supporting these students from a policy perspective, advocating for the development of strategies to support their personal wellness and academic success while abroad.

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