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## Curating Flipboard Magazine International Safe Zone to support international LGBT students

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# Curating Flipboard Magazine International Safe Zone to Support International LGBT Students

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International LGBT students face issues with internalized homophobia, fear of persecution upon repatriation, coming out decisions, and finding a supportive social and cultural community, in addition to the commonly identified challenges among international students (e.g., a profound sense of loss, communication, education and immigration difficulties, dietary restrictions, and financial stress). This would be particularly true for international students from countries where non-heterosexual identities are less accepted or even persecuted. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA, 2016) lists 73 countries where sexual activity by LGBT people is considered a crime, which means approximately 38 percent (2.8 billion people) of the total population (7.4 billion) live in countries where being gay is a crime. The death penalty can be imposed for same-sex intimacy in 13 of them, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and in parts of Nigeria and Somalia. Hate crimes (e.g., killing, torturing, incarceration) targeting LGBT individuals are still prevalent in many international communities. Therefore, the unique needs and challenges international LGBT students face should be acknowledged and understood by student affairs professionals and educators in higher education.

## **Within-Group Diversity Among International LGBT Students**

There is great diversity among international students. The challenges and needs students from countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Spain have, where same-sex marriage is recognized and legally protected, differ greatly from those who come from countries where basic LGBT human rights are neither recognized nor protected. For instance, international LGBT students may be in different developmental stages in terms of how they identify themselves as LGBT. For some international students, coming to the United States and learning about diverse sexual orientations could be the first time they question and explore their own sexual identity; on the other hand, some international students decide to come to the United States in order to feel safe and comfortable with their own sexual identity or be more active within LGBT communities.

## **The Importance of Belonging**

Being both international and LGBT creates difficulty to find a sense of home with either co-national students or domestic LGBT students. For most international students, a community with co-national students can provide great support in the transition to a new culture and campus life. Yet, it can be difficult for LGBT international students to come out or explore who they are due to a fear of exposing any unwanted information, sometimes via social media, to friends and families back in home countries. As a result, international LGBT students often remain invisible. It is rare to find a support group for international LGBT students where both general LGBT topics and the unique challenges and needs of international students are discussed. Due to privacy, safety, saving face, or fear of discrimination or punishment, international LGBT students often utilize online communities rather than face-to-face support systems. Many international LGBT students feel uncomfortable to share very intimate topics or culturally taboo topics with their counselors or advisors, which may bring intense shame and humiliation.

One of the key characteristics of international students is mobility. Frequent use of social media and messaging apps is a part of students' daily lives, as it provides a way to connect with friends and families in their home countries. However, international LGBT students are often not comfortable or just plain scared to speak out openly on social media about their personal lives and issues that matter to them. Therefore, finding safe places and ways to share experiences, and have access to information and resources offers tremendous support to this population.

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## International Safe Zone Flipboard Magazine as a Virtual Community

Flipboard gives people a single place to follow all of their interests and is a popular mobile application. It also allows users to make their own magazines by compiling articles from around the Web. International Safe Zone is a Flipboard Magazine that offers a resource guide for student affairs professionals and educators who support international LGBTQ students. Moreover, the magazine is a virtual space where readers can comment on articles and have conversations with the curators or each other, without having to reveal their identity. The magazine is available on the Web at <http://flip.it/ISZ> (or <http://www.internationalsafe-zone.org>) and inside the free Flipboard app by searching for the title.

Educators and student affairs professionals use the magazine to collect and share relevant information with students such as news about LGBT rights and activism in Uganda, Russia, Korea and other countries, as well as coming out stories from LGBT people all over the world. The magazine is a central element in our International Safe Zone workshop that addresses the unique challenges and needs faced by international LGBT students and provides culturally sensitive approaches that student affairs professionals can use to create a safe space.

\* If you have any questions, please contact us via International Safe Zone Flipboard Magazine (<http://flip.it/ISZ>), Twitter (@ISZnow), or website (<http://www.internationalsafe-zone.org>).

