

2015

# An Analysis of Contextual Conditions As First Year RAs Train In and Implement the Phase One Safe Zone Program

Cameron Carrara

*Eastern Illinois University*

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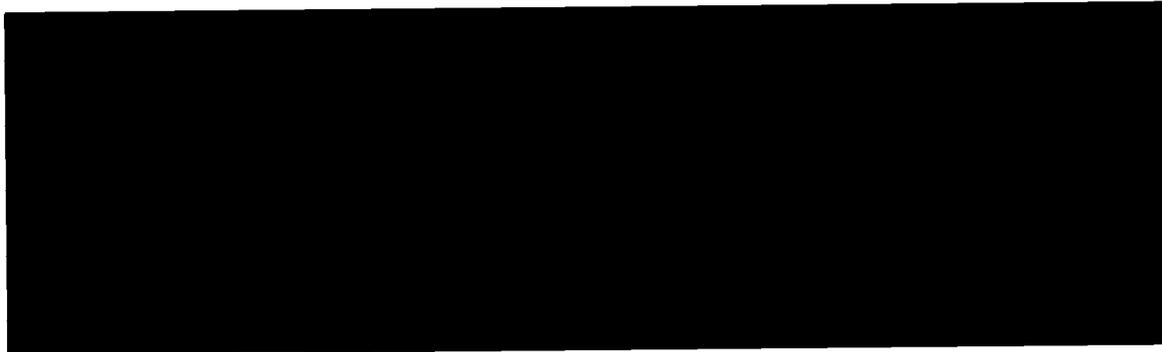
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An Analysis of Contextual Conditions As First Year RAs  
Train In and Implement the Phase One Safe Zone Program

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May 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee for their time and efforts throughout this entire process. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Richard Roberts, my thesis advisor, for the countless hours spent reading over my thesis and answering any questions I had along the way. Also, a thank you to Terri Fredrick for her willingness to act as a second opinion while deciphering my findings, and for going above and beyond in terms of suggestions for my final edits. And, to Jody Stone, thank you for providing your residential life expertise. It has been truly invaluable. I am very happy that the findings from my study have helped to reinforce your decision to require the Phase One Safe Zone training for all RAs. The three of you have helped to push this study to new heights, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Secondly, I would like to thank my parents, Gene and Sharon, as well as my sister, Taylor, for all of the emotional support they have provided throughout this process. Over the past two years, you all have been there for me, through both the peaks and the valleys. And you have kept me sane. Thank you for always pushing and motivating me to do my absolute best. I would not be where I am today, nor would I have accomplished all that I have, were it not for your love and support.

I would also like to thank my close friend Brant. While we haven't known each other long, you have been nothing but a positive force in my life. Your words of encouragement and support mean more than you know, and will never be forgotten. And to all my other friends, near and far, I want to thank you for believing in me and constantly reminding me that I could make it through this process.

Finally, I would like to give a quick shout out to my graduate assistantship supervisor, Lynette Drake. You have been, and continue to be, an inspiration to me as a student affairs professional. Thank you for constantly challenging me to see the bigger picture, and for always having my best interests at heart. Your support means the world. And I am extremely blessed to have you as a role model, a mentor, and, most importantly, a friend.

## ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, safe space initiatives, such as Safe Zone, have been developed on college campuses across the United States as a way of educating participants on LGBTQ-related issues and how to become a better ally/advocate for the LGBTQ community. While little qualitative research has been conducted on safe space initiatives to begin with, there is even less research on the perceptions participants have of these types of programs. Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone training among first year RAs in the residence halls. A secondary purpose was to examine how first year RAs perceive their ability to utilize training material in order to interact with LGBTQ students and implement programming within the context of the residence hall environment. Findings from the present qualitative study suggest that participants found the Phase One Safe Zone training to be educational and transformative, stating that it allowed them to see the bigger picture and become more aware of the privileges that they possess. The study's participants also felt that, while much of the active programming they attempted elicited a lackluster response, it allowed them to create a greater sense of awareness among their residents.

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## Chapter I

### **Introduction**

There is a misconception in society that anti-homosexual violence is a rare occurrence (Schiffman, Delucia-Waack, & Gerrity, 2006). However, according to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) biennial National School Climate Survey (2013), which surveys nearly 8,000 students, 65% heard homophobic remarks frequently or often, 30% missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and 85% were verbally harassed in the past year. In addition, according to this survey, 56% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students around the country have experienced discriminatory school policies and practices. Recent legislation has targeted issues such as hate crimes, anti-discrimination, and gay marriage in an attempt to create equal rights for LGBTQ citizens; however, attitudes within the general public appear slower to change (Schiffman et al., 2008), as is demonstrated by aforementioned statistics.

It is not surprising that societal attitudes of homophobia and heterosexism are also reflected on universities and college campuses. College campuses are often perceived to be a safe haven for students. However, based on the results of several studies, incidents of heterosexism and homophobia plague students who identify as LGBTQ every day. Individuals who identify as LGBTQ are five times more likely to miss school because they feel unsafe, 28% more likely to dropout of school entirely (Rankin, 2003), and four times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers (Jayakumar, 2009). According to Herek, Gillis, & Cogan (2009), issues of heterosexism can stifle the

potential of sexual minorities, limit the acknowledgment of LGBTQ perspectives, and undermine LGBTQ individuals' contributions to the greater society as well.

Negative experiences of stigma-related prejudice, discrimination, and victimization have also been linked to psychological distress amongst LGBTQ youth. In fact, the greater the young person's expectation for rejection, based on their sexual/gender identity, the more likely they were to report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Kelleher, 2009). In Wickens and Sandlin's (2010) study a link was also found between students' feelings of safety and educators' levels of inaction when dealing with issues of anti-gay harassment and prejudice. According to reports from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2007), 86.2% of middle- and high-school LGBTQ students experienced harassment at school within the past year, 60.8% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 32.7% skipped a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe. Three-fourths of all of the LGBTQ students surveyed (6209) also revealed that they heard homophobic or sexist remarks often or frequently at school. Despite these statistics, teachers rarely intervened in these situations. In fact, almost 40% of the students surveyed by the GLSEN (2007) reported never observing a teacher intervene when homophobic remarks were made in their presence. As a result of this inaction, many students are taught that the schools, and by extension society, condone such behavior, so students see no point in reporting the harassment that they experience (Wickens & Sandlin, 2010). Alternatively, in a study conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition (2004), when teachers did take action and intervene, students reported less harassment and increased feelings of safety in school.

In response to educator inaction, as well as the issues of heterosexism and homophobia and their link to psychological distress, Safe Zone programs and safe space initiatives emerged in high schools and on college campuses nationwide during the 1990s. These programs prepare participants to provide individual support to LGBTQ students through an introduction to basic LGBTQ-related terminology and discussions of heterosexual privilege, homophobia, and different types of activism. Safe space initiatives, such as the Safe Zone Project, have the potential to play a crucial role in the improvement of campus climate across the nation. However, documentation of the effectiveness and development of such programs is not extensive (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002). In this study, perceptions of the Safe Zone program, as they pertain to the particular midsize, Midwestern university I chose to utilize, were examined via interviews of first year resident assistants (RAs). I also examined contextual conditions as selected first year RAs implemented what they learned from the program to improve the overall climate in the residence halls on campus.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to analyze and assess the perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone training at a midsize, Midwestern university among first year RAs in the residence halls. In an exploratory study by Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer (2003) the effectiveness of a Safe Zone training program within a graduate school of professional psychology was assessed. Its effectiveness was assessed by self-reported behavioral and attitudinal changes and from participant evaluations. Training for participants surveyed in the Finkel et al. (2003) study was mandatory upon entrance into the graduate program in psychology in the academic year 2000. Similarly, Safe Zone

training is required for newly appointed RAs at the midsize, Midwestern university I chose to use for my study.

Another instrument used in the Finkel et al. (2003) study was the Riddle Homophobia Scale. This scale is currently used as part of the Phase 1 Safe Zone curriculum at the midsize, Midwestern university I used for my study. The Riddle Scale measures the self-rated homophobic attitudes of participants towards LGBTQ individuals. Between Phase 1 and Phase 2, in the Finkel et al. (2003) study, the percentage of participants within the negative range of the scale decreased significantly, and the percentage of participants within the positive range of the scale increased. It was concluded that those who attended both Phase 1 and Phase 2 trainings were much more likely to have achieved a greater level of acceptance and understanding of the LGBTQ community. According to Poynter & Tubbs (2007), participating in a training or workshop has the potential to provide a strong foundation for reaching acceptance and understanding of the LGBTQ population. However, ongoing educational opportunities should be made available to help participants and potential allies better understand and provide appropriate resources for LGBTQ individuals. These ongoing educational opportunities will, in turn, aid in helping said allies improve the campus climate in terms of eradicating heterosexist thought and minimizing homophobic actions.

Safe Zone Phase 2 training and other LGBTQA-related workshops are not required of first year RAs at the particular midsize, Midwestern university I chose to use for my study. However, the study done by Finkel et al. (2003), and the findings of Poynter & Tubbs (2007), demonstrated the effect that Safe Zone training can have on participants. In Finkel's (2003) study, in particular, feedback on the Safe Zone training

program was overwhelmingly positive and many of the participants indicated that they had experienced a positive change in attitude and would recommend the program to a colleague.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, I focused on first year RAs perceptions of Phase 1 Safe Zone training. However, I also attempted to ascertain how participants for this study utilized the tools and information that they gained from the Phase 1 Safe Zone training to better the climate within their residence halls on campus. By examining the contextual conditions in which these RAs implemented what they learned, we are able to understand their perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone program. This study, in concurrence with prior research, also allows student affairs professionals to better understand issues of heteronormative thought, homophobia, and their connection to the need for safe space initiatives, such as the Safe Zone Project, within higher education.

Although the Finkel et al. (2003) study utilized both qualitative and quantitative measures, it lacked the depth of qualitative analysis. Through the use of triangulation, I utilized qualitative information gained from the Phase 1 Safe Zone training survey, as well as information gained from one-on-one interviews with a purposive sample of first year RAs, to validate the data collected. I also looked at whether or not first year RAs felt as though they had an adequate amount of training to comfortably interact with LGBTQ students and implement programming that would better the residence hall environment for these gender and sexual minority students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed and were used to guide the study:

1. What are the perceptions of first year RAs as they are trained in the Phase 1 Safe Zone program?
2. What are the perceptions of first year RAs as they implement what they have learned from the Phase One Safe Zone training in their residence halls?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in the fact that there has been little qualitative analysis of Safe Zone training and perceptions of its implementation from the perspective of first year RAs. According to Draughn et al. (2002), much of the documentation that exists generally focuses on case presentations of individual campus programs or steps that individuals can take to become allies within the LGBTQ community. While this information is valuable to single programs and individuals, it fails to provide a more comprehensive assessment of Safe Zone programs. Without examining how those trained perceive the Safe Zone initiative, “knowledge about the missions, objectives, processes, and outcomes of these programs remain restricted to that shared from individual to individual, either anecdotally or through program presentation” (Draughn et al., 2002, p. 12). This study provided themes that illuminated contextual conditions surrounding perceptions of the Safe Zone program at the midsize, Midwestern university I chose to utilize. And the qualitative data collected may potentially be used for future accreditation purposes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are three main limitations of the study. The first limitation is that the study utilized data that is specific only to the university utilized. The procedures and methodology of the study may, however, be transferrable to other institutions of similar

size and demographic. The second limitation of the study is that the sample used to collect the data was purposive, consisting of only first year RAs on campus. And lastly, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the number of participants utilized was small; the participant pool was also not as diverse as it could have be.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. **Safe Zone Project.** “A predominantly university-based diversity training program designed to increase awareness and knowledge of, and sensitivity to, important issues affecting LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff” (Finkel et al., 2003).
2. **Safe Spaces.** “Small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in...[and are] spaces for like-minded people to meet and engage in dialogue” (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012).
3. **Heterosexism.** “A belief that heterosexuality is the norm and/or superior to all other forms of sexuality, whereas other sexualities may be considered abnormal, unnatural, or not considered at all” (Mulé, Ross, Deeprise, Jackson, Daley, Travers, & Moore, 2009).
4. **Homophobia.** Fear-based attitudes about, or actions against, LGBT individuals (Fanucce & Taub, 2010).
5. **Ally (A).** “A person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population” (Poynter & Tubbs, 2007)

6. **Queer (Q).** Designated by society as the “other...at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Toynton, 2006, p. 2). This otherness can be self-declared, externally imposed, or self-imposed.
7. **Preparedness.** In terms of this study, preparedness is assessed based on how well participants of Safe Zone training feel they were informed of LGBTQ-related issues and terminology and the degree to which first year RAs were able to implement what they learned to create a more inclusive environment within the residence halls on campus.

### **Summary**

Chapter one contained a detailed introduction to the study. In this section the significance and purpose of the study were discussed and a brief overview of some of the literature was given. The study examined the perceptions of Phase 1 Safe Zone training among first year RAs. The study also discussed in what ways these RAs implemented what they learned in the Safe Zone training to create a more inclusive environment in the residence halls on campus. Chapter two contains a detailed account of the literature that has been developed in regards to the Safe Zone project and other safe space initiatives, as well as the effect these programs can have when dealing with heterosexism and homophobia. Chapter three then outlines the methods and procedures that were used in the study.

## Chapter II

### **Review of Literature**

This chapter provides a detailed review of literature as it applies to the study. This review includes an examination of perceived campus climate and the needs of LGBTQ individuals, the benefits and limitations of safe space initiatives, and heterosexism and homophobia on the college campus. Little research has been done on the effectiveness of safe space initiatives. Thus, the following review of literature will stress the importance of such programs in a higher education setting, as well as the roles that allies (such as RAs) play when trying to create a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ students.

#### **Campus Climate and the Needs of LGBTQ Individuals**

One of the major topics addressed within the literature was campus climate and the needs of LGBTQ individuals on a college campus. Burleson (2010) studied prospective college students who are LGBTQ and what they look for when choosing a college. In the study, students were asked to rank a list of nine institutional factors in order of importance. The students surveyed rated attending a gay-friendly school fairly high on the list. In fact, sixty-seven percent of respondents rated attending a gay-friendly campus as fairly or very important. While this factor was not considered to be the most important factor in deciding where to attend college, it demonstrates that the majority of prospective students in the study were looking for a welcoming and inclusive campus environment. These students wanted to attend an institution where there is a visible and accepted population of students like themselves.

Having programs such as Safe Zone, which is designed to increase awareness and knowledge of the important issues affecting LGBTQ individuals, on a college campus is very important. According to Heck, Flentje, & Cochran (2013), making this type of program available has the potential to show prospective students that current students, faculty, staff, and administration at the institution are accepting of the LGBTQ community. According to Heck, et al., Safe Zone programs allow members of the LGBTQ community on campus to express their concerns without fear of losing the support of peers, faculty, and administration. Not only does Safe Zone help to increase awareness of LGBTQ-related issues on campus, but it also helps LGBTQ individuals to identify supportive peers, professors, and staff. Furthermore, programs like Safe Zone are shown to positively impact the academic achievement and experience of LGBTQ students (Heck et al., 2013).

A study by Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski (2003) demonstrated how experiences of stigma-related prejudice, discrimination, and victimization frequently characterize the lives of LGBTQ individuals. Such experiences have been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including psychological distress. LGBTQ youth are especially vulnerable to these negative outcomes, with many experiencing harassment and victimization in school, at home, at work, and in community settings (Lewis et al., 2003). Research also indicates that the greater the young person's expectation for rejection by peers based on their sexual/gender identity, the more likely that individual is to report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Kelleher, 2009). Safe space programs, such as the Safe Zone Project, not only benefit LGBTQ individuals, but

also help to inform allies of the struggles that these LGBTQ individuals go through on a daily basis and give allies the tools to support the LGBTQ community on campus.

In a mixed-method study by Craig (2011), implementation of a community needs assessment (CNA) was conducted with the intent of creating a system of care for LGBTQ individuals in an urban area. LGBTQ youth are considered a population at risk. Craig noticed a lack of programs that target the specific needs of LGBTQ youth and realized that there is a general lack of knowledge on such initiatives. For this reason, a community needs assessment was implemented. Widespread CNA's for LGBTQ youth have been limited in the past due to the challenges of obtaining funding for research and program development. However, the graduated CNA used in this particular study utilized both qualitative and quantitative approaches to elicit a significant amount of data about LGBTQ youth needs and available resources. Craig determined that needs were not being met by existing programs and that many of the needed programs didn't exist. Thus, new programs were created to meet the needs of the LGBTQ youth in Miami Dade County, where this study took place (Craig 2011). The ultimate goal of the CNA conducted in Craig's study was to help create a possible model for a system that was rooted in the needs of LGBTQ youth. The implementation of the suggested model and its success was not evaluated in this particular study.

A study by Drumheller & McQuay (2010) also reported that not only is it difficult to develop outreach services to the LGBTQ population in conservative urban/rural centers, but trying to market and raise funds adds another level of challenge. It is one thing for these organizations to exist; however, they cannot survive, much less thrive, without the necessary funding, something difficult in more conservative areas.

Drumheller & McQuay's (2010) study focused on one particular outreach organization in a conservative community and provided a case study of marketing challenges and recommendations. Through the use of focus groups, it was discovered that the main problem lies not with getting the necessary numbers for funding, but with getting possible financial backers to show up, donate, and commit to the cause. This apathy and the nature of the community where the study took place both impacted the pool of potential donors to fund the necessary LGBTQ outreach services (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). Research conducted in Drumheller and McQuay's (2010) study suggested that the LGBTQ community is looking for a safe environment with resources that will help create a clear identity for these outreach organizations. Creating a safe environment means educating the community-at-large in hopes of increasing tolerance. By expressing common ground and shared values, outreach centers and organizations can counteract the apathy and lack of commitment that is seen in so many of these conservative geographic areas (Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

According to Ciszek (2011), as a new generation of openly LGBTQ high school students arrive on college and university campuses, an increasing number of these institutions are seeking ways to serve and support this population of students in their personal and educational endeavors. These initiatives might take the form of LGBTQ-inclusive policies and programs, changes to the curriculum, and adjustments in housing and student life to better serve this new and growing population. According to Ciszek, print and online sources supporting LGBTQ issues and research have been found to be a very important source of information for LGBTQ individuals. In fact, the collections and services offered by academic libraries are often factored into research related to campus

climate. In order for LGBTQ students' information and research needs to be met, and as the population of LGBTQ students continues to grow, academic libraries must take positive steps to support and inform these students and their potential allies (Switzer, 2008).

Enhancement of heterosexual privilege is another issue found in the literature. This is an issue for LGBTQ students at the collegiate level especially. Information is still centered more on the needs of the heterosexual majority. Thus, there is a need for print and online sources that focus more on the needs of the gender and sexual minorities present on campus (Schaller 2011). Schaller's (2011) research alludes to the fact that these sources are not only greatly needed for LGBTQ students, but for potential allies as well. Sources that focus more on LGBTQ individuals will allow allies to learn more about the LGBTQ community and the culture that surrounds it. They will also become better equipped to deal with LGBTQ-related issues they may encounter.

### **Benefits and Limitations of Safe Space Initiatives**

The majority of research conducted on safe space initiatives and the Safe Zone project looks at the need for such programs and how they can influence the overall climate and inclusivity of high schools and college campuses. For example, Alvarez & Schneider (2008) stated "the inception of Project Safe Zone on any campus often comes from necessity" (p. 71). The primary goal of this project is to train a group of individuals from various departments and offices on campus, or within a high school, to provide safe havens for students, staff, or faculty if the need arises. This project is a way for a university or school to show their support and commitment to inclusion and fostering a healthy and open-minded campus community (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008).

In several studies (Mayberry, 2006; Mayberry, Chenneville, and Currie, 2013; Currie, Mayberry, and Chenneville, 2012), common themes emerged, such as the benefits and limitations to safe space initiatives in disrupting antigay school environments, silence from non-LGBTQ individuals, and school reform efforts. While all three studies look at safe space initiatives associated with Gay Straight Alliance (GSAs) at the high school level, several of the findings can be used to analyze other safe space initiatives such as the Safe Zone project. As stated by Mayberry et al. (2013), these GSAs “contribute to the school setting by offering LGBTQ students and their allies a sense of belonging to a community, promoting self-understand and acceptance, and decreasing antigay behaviors and harassment within the school environment” (p.312). Mayberry’s (2006) study reported that LGBTQ students who attend schools with GSAs and other safe space initiatives feel less isolated, exhibit a greater willingness to be involved in school and community activities, experience more positive relationships with peers and staff, and are more motivated academically.

While the benefits of these safe space programs are clear, discourse on said programs is built on the assumption that LGBTQ individuals and their allies need to be protected from a hostile school environment. And, as such, the heteronormative school climate that makes these initiatives necessary is glanced over (Currie et al., 2012). This limitation is more applicable in terms of high school GSAs where activities educating the school community on issues of heterosexism and homophobia are greatly regulated. However, when it comes to the Safe Zone project at the college and university level, these topics can be talked about more freely due to regulations of such topics being less strict at the collegiate level. Currie, et al. (2012) argue that in many safe space initiatives,

LGBTQ youth are unintentionally framed as the problem, an at-risk population. Currie, et al. (2012) discuss the importance of how LGBTQ youth are framed, and how, in order to combat heteronormative thought and homophobia, it is necessary to draw attention to such issues and look at ways in which to reform school policy.

A theme that emerged within the literature was silence. Silence is another reason why thoughts of heteronormativity and homophobia are still perpetuated today. The persistence of these antigay attitudes in schools emphasizes the importance of recognizing the benefits and limitations of these safe space initiatives/strategic interventions. As Mayberry (2006) stated, “violence, bias, and harassment directed at LGBTQ students continue to be the rule—not the exception—in America’s schools” (p. 262). And, silence is a primary contributor to these issues. So, while safe space schooling practices do offer support to LGBTQ students, they do not address this issue of silence and the mechanisms behind this particular population’s marginalization. Both Mayberry (2006) and Mayberry, et al. (2013) suggest systemic change is needed to combat these problems: “Systemic change involves efforts to transform antigay school cultures by addressing social justice and equity issues throughout the ‘entire ecosystem of the school’ and its surrounding community” (Mayberry, 2006, p. 263). This is further enforced by Rankin’s (2005) study, which proposes that a culture of silence reinforces the norm, and that to truly transform a college campus LGBTQ students must have increased visibility. Systemic interventions and increased visibility have a long-lasting effect and remain a part of the culture, even as administrators, staff, and students circulate in and out of a particular school.

**Heterosexism and Homophobia on Campus**

One of the most important ways of combatting heterosexism and homophobia on a college campus is to increase visibility of the LGBTQ population by having open discussions via LGBTQ panel presentations and Safe Zone trainings. According to Fox and Ore (2010), “Safe space initiatives aim to raise visibility and create educational programs for LGBTQ students that increase awareness of LGBTQ issues and address the presence of heterosexism and homophobia in campus culture” (p. 630). Fox & Ore (2010) recognized the value of these safe space programs, as they have been central to changing the campus climate for LGBTQ individuals for a few decades now. However, Fox & Ore argue that safe space initiatives are limited because these programs have been conceptualized to focus on eradicating heterosexism and homophobia. They state that “the problem with the discourse of safe space [is that] it has been decided that the social problem for LGBT people is relatively easy to identify—homophobia and heterosexism” (Fox & Ore, 2010, p. 632). Thus, on the surface, these spaces create a welcoming environment for all LGBTQ individuals and their allies, and yet when one takes a closer look, they obscure other oppressions or privileges that heterosexual individuals have. The focus on heterosexism and homophobia inadvertently “constructs ‘gayness’ as a primary identity and other identities as peripheral or marginal...this discourse further suggests that all gay people experience homophobia and heterosexism in similar ways” (Fox & Ore, 2010, p. 632). So, while these safe spaces have the potential to establish a certain solidarity that allows LGBTQ individuals to flourish in the context of a larger university, the concept of safety around which queer activism is organized must be questioned and challenged.

Macintosh (2007) discussed a session with one of her teacher education classes in which a young man studying to be a math teacher stated that he was “just a math teacher” (p.35) after a lecture Macintosh gave on heterosexism. This incident illustrates the reasoning behind Safe Zone programs and other safe space initiatives. As previously stated, we do need to reframe how we view the idea of safety and how these programs/initiatives are organized. However, this lecture on heterosexism was a fundamental level of intervention taken on by Macintosh, and this particular pre-service teacher was stuck in a train of thought where he believed math classrooms were exempt from LGBTQ-related social issues. This pre-service teacher, according to Macintosh, was not aware that his thought process was further perpetuating the invisibility of LGBTQ individuals and the issues that they face.

Macintosh saw an opportunity to educate her students within the classroom and through the study that she conducted. Much like a classroom, residence halls are a great place to educate students and profoundly affect their college experience in a positive way: “Given what an important educational impact residential living can have on students, it is important to understand how [LGBT] students fit into on-campus living settings and how they are influenced by the residential environment” (Fanucce & Taub 2010). In a campus climate survey conducted by Rankin (2003), 36% of LGBTQ respondents had experienced harassment within the past year, 20% feared for their physical safety, and 51% reported concealing their sexual orientation for fear of physical harm.

Rankin (2005) noted that the challenges and threats faced by LGBTQ college students can “prevent them from reaching their full academic potential or from

participating fully in campus communities” (p. 17). While more campuses are undertaking the task of creating more proactive programs to protect and provide support for LGBTQ students, many members of this population still fear for their safety on campuses across the nation. Thus, as a result, these individuals may remain closeted and less engaged in their college experience. According to Holland, Matthews, & Schott (2013), it is important to address homophobia on college campuses because college students often “come out” to peers, mentors, and family during the college years. Students want to feel as though the environment they are in is safe and inclusive enough to where they will not be ostracized or harassed for being LGBTQ. However, “climate cannot change quickly” (Lipka, 2011, p. 8). As gathered from a majority of the literature, the only way to truly create that safe and inclusive environment is to increase visibility, open up dialogue on these issues, and give it time.

In a study by Fanucce & Taub (2010), analysis of the data collected revealed that as levels of heterosexism and homonegativity increased, LGBTQ students’ perceptions of the residence hall climate became more negative. Homonegativity can affect everyone within the residence halls by creating layers of heterosexual privilege for non-LGBTQ individuals, inhibiting close relationships with members of the same sex, and compromising the integrity of individuals who are heterosexual, thus resulting in targeting, badgering, intimidating, and sometimes silencing those who are perceived to be LGBTQ (but may not be). Such behavior prevents the development of authentic self-identity for some LGBTQ individuals (Fanucce & Taub, 2010). Because heterosexism and acts of homonegativity can have such a major impact on LGBTQ students’ perceptions of residence hall climate, Safe Zone training and other diversity trainings are

usually strongly encouraged for RAs. These trainings give RAs the necessary tools for educating students in their halls about LGBTQ-related issues, and the effects of heterosexism and homonegativity can be developed and discussed. Using the resources and skills provided by Safe Zone training, RAs can better help LGBTQ students navigate the college experience (Fanucce & Taub 2010).

Although programs such as Safe Zone provide for much needed open discourse about certain LGBTQ issues, there are several other ways of combatting homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses. One example would be for professors to bring LGBTQ speakers and panels into their classrooms. These panels and speakers could also be utilized within various offices, departments, and residence halls across campus. Lance (2002), Lance (2008), and Rye & Meaney (2009) addressed this method of social contact theory, or the “contact hypothesis,” in their studies. Within this theory, greater contact with an unfavorable minority group is proposed as a way of reducing prejudices and fears by showing that myths, stereotypes, and fears are unfounded. However, this social contact can generate negative results if it is not organized to meet certain optimal conditions (Lance, 2002). According to Rye & Meaney (2009), these optimal conditions include “cooperation among disparate groups, [the] pursuit of common goals, interaction as peers, egalitarian social norms, and [an] opportunity for emotional involvement” (p. 32).

While the contact between heterosexual students and LGBTQ individuals found in many Safe Zone trainings and panel discussions is brief and not sufficient enough for the development of a friendship, it may create the positive emotional attachment that is required by the contact hypothesis (Rye & Meaney, 2009). According to a meta-analysis

by Pettigrew and Tropp (2000), contact with a variety of unfavorable minorities was effective in creating positive attitude change towards those groups, especially when the contact was face-to-face. Exactly how this emotional involvement and interaction/cooperation as peers may change individuals' attitudes is addressed by Epstein's (1994) cognitive-experiential theory of self. The theory proposes two types of learning: rational and experiential. The experiential system is more affectively, or emotionally, driven, and is more involved in making real-life decisions. According to Rye & Meaney (2009), "people often make decisions based on affective reactions...from past experiences rather than rational analysis...situations that emphasize emotional involvement, then, may lead to attitude change by activating the experiential system of learning" (p. 33). Thus, it is safe to say that contact with members of unfavorable minority groups changes attitudes by activating the experiential learning system.

### **Summary**

In this chapter a detailed review of the literature as it applies to the study was provided. The central issues of campus climate and the needs of LGBTQ students, benefits and limitations of safe space initiatives, and heterosexism and homophobia were addressed. These issues were evaluated in terms of the utilization of effective programming, such as the Safe Zone Project and social contact theory. The review of literature also demonstrated ways in which RAs can become better allies and create a more inclusive environment in the residence halls. By using what they have learned from Safe Zone training and other LGBTQ-related resources, RAs are better equipped to handle issues of heterosexism and homophobia and to educate their peers on LGBTQ-

related issues. Residence halls are a community and a place where RAs have a chance to make a major impact. Roper (2005) said it best when he stated:

Our leadership must be evidenced by support structures that can be seen, touched, and sensed by LGBT students. As community builders we must use the influence of our roles to remove obstacles, lessen challenges, interrupt threats, and dispel myths that restrict opportunities for success for LGBT students. Although community building is not advocacy, it is active ally work—we do not speak for LGBT students; instead we lead in ways that validate the words they speak and support the needs they express. As active allies we work to act on the needs of LGBT students. (p. 87)

This quote is the essence of what the Safe Zone program tries to demonstrate to participants, and really sums up how gaining more knowledge on the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ-related issues can help RAs build a more open and inclusive community within the residence halls.

### Chapter III

#### **Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that was used to conduct the study. This methodological framework allowed for a contextual analysis of first year RAs' perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone program and in what ways it prepared participants to help and support those of the LGBTQ community. I also looked at how the selected first year RAs utilized the knowledge gained from the training to create a more inclusive environment in the residence halls on campus.

#### **Design of the Study**

To examine perceptions of how well the Phase 1 Safe Zone program prepares participants to affect change within the residence halls, a qualitative approach was utilized. In the fall of 2014, four first year RAs were interviewed one-on-one after they had completed the mandatory Phase 1 Safe Zone training. I conducted two sets of interviews with the RAs selected, one within the first few weeks of the semester, and another a few months later to see how they had utilized the information from the training to help the overall environment in the residence halls. This qualitative approach provided me with a more contextual view of my research and allowed me to understand whether or not the RAs in my purposive sample felt better equipped to handle situations involving LGBTQ individuals after taking the training. In order to further validate the information collected from these interviews, I triangulated the data by looking at the answers that the four participants gave on the evaluation forms they filled out at the end of the Safe Zone training.

**Participants**

All first year RAs are required to complete Phase I Safe Zone training as part of their preparation for working in the residence halls. This mandatory training occurs every August before the start of the academic school year. Filling out an evaluation is mandatory upon completion of any Safe Zone training. As such, all first year RAs were asked to complete the Phase 1 evaluation.

Four first year RAs constituted the sample used in the study. Because of the purpose and significance of the study, the sample was categorized as purposive. The selected RAs were within the ages of 18–23 years old, all Caucasian, and all from various academic disciplines. One of the participants was male and three were female, all from either rural or suburban areas within Illinois. Four of the eleven residence halls on campus were represented by the selected first year RAs.

**Research Site**

The study took place at a predominantly White, mid-sized (9,000 students) comprehensive, teaching institution in a rural, Midwestern town. Evaluation forms were filled out by hand (pencil and paper) immediately after completion of the Phase 1 Safe Zone training. The training took place in a classroom on campus, which is also where the evaluations were administered. The interview portion of the study was conducted in the LGBTQA Resource Center a few weeks after the training took place, as well as a few months into the fall semester. Participants were notified, prior to completing the evaluation, that there would be an interview component to this study and that a select number of first year RAs would be chosen to create a purposive sample. Safe Zone trainers were instructed to inform all first year RAs that they were not required to

participate in this study. If they decided it was something they were interested in helping out with, they were then asked to read and sign a consent form that would allow them to participate. Participants were also made aware of when and where interviews would be completed.

### **Instrument**

The research study consisted of three separate components: the evaluation, first interview, and second interview. The data gathered from the initial evaluation forms allowed me to examine the selected first year RAs perceptions of how preparatory the Safe Zone program is, whereas the two interviews allowed me to code and examine themes that emerged as the selected first year RAs dealt with issues of diversity and students who identify as LGBTQ.

### **Data Collection**

Data from the evaluation forms was collected immediately following the Phase 1 Safe Zone training in August. The first set of interviews with the selected four first year RAs occurred one month after the training was completed. Then, halfway through the 2014 fall semester, towards the beginning of November, these RAs were contacted and scheduled for a second interview. During this second interview, the implementation of what these first year RAs had learned from the training was examined.

### **Treatment of Data**

After the two interview components of the study were completed, the data was then transcribed and coded. In order to help identify any themes among participants, answers from the Phase 1 Safe Zone training evaluation were also coded and utilized in the analysis of the data. Examining perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone training has

allowed for a better understanding of whether or not participants felt as though they were being provided with enough information that would prepare them to handle situations pertaining to LGBTQ individuals on campus (in this case, in the residence halls).

### **Data Analysis**

To gain access to my study sample, I attended the Phase 1 Safe Zone training for first year RAs on campus in August 2014. I also remained in contact with the selected first year RAs throughout the course of the fall semester of 2014 by way of two interview phases. Analysis of the data collected occurred after both the evaluation and interview phases had been completed. Through the use of transcription and coding, I was able to see how the perceptions of the selected first year RAs differed, as well as how they were similar. This is important, as it has given me greater insight into how well Safe Zone facilitators are preparing participants to know how to address issues that may arise with LGBTQ students on campus.

According to Yin (2010), most qualitative analysis appears to follow a general, five-phased cycle: compiling, disassembling, reassembling (and arraying), interpreting, and concluding. Yin also stated that it is possible to go back and forth between phases within this cycle. Thus, analysis may not necessarily be linear in fashion. Following this cycle, I first compiled all of the interview transcriptions into working order. Next, I disassembled and coded the data that I collected, breaking up each transcription into fragments or pieces that were then analyzed. Based on the themes that emerged from the coding/disassembling phase of my data, I then reassembled the fragments or pieces of my transcriptions into different groupings/lists as a way to reorganize my findings. Once the data I collected was reassembled, I then interpreted the significance of these new

groupings (Chapter IV). Lastly, I drew conclusions from all of the data that I had collected and made connections back to the other four phases of the cycle. In this conclusion phase (Chapter V), I used the reassembled/newly-interpreted data to support my claims that the Phase 1 Safe Zone training is accomplishing the goals that it purports.

## Chapter IV

### **Findings**

The primary purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone training at a midsize, Midwestern university among first year RAs in the residence halls. A secondary purpose was to examine how first year RAs perceive their ability to use training material to interact with LGBTQ students and implement programming within the context of the residence hall environment. This chapter presents emergent themes related to the two research questions that aided in the purpose of this study. These themes emerged through the analysis of Safe Zone Phase 1 evaluations as well as two sets of interviews conducted with four first year RAs at the institution. The participants all had various levels of previous exposure to the LGBTQ community and spanned a variety of academic disciplines and residence halls on campus. The research questions for this study are presented with themes that emerged from the analysis.

**Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of first year RAs as they are trained in the Phase 1 Safe Zone program?**

#### **Impact of Training**

First year RAs interviewed for this study all had varying levels of exposure to the LGBTQ community and shared their thoughts on the impact of the Safe Zone Phase 1 training, resulting in the emergence of the study's first theme. The following sub-themes will illuminate participants' perceptions of the training and how those perceptions impact their views of the LGBTQ community.

**Previous exposure.**

One thing that all four participants had in common was previous exposure to the LGBTQ community. For Daniel, Kate, and Ada this level of exposure was relatively high, as they all came from large high schools in more suburban areas. Ada alluded to the fact that the size of her high school, as well as her extracurricular involvement, had a strong impact on her level of exposure to the LGBTQ community:

It was a very open school. There were quite a few gay individuals, as well as people from all different races and ethnicities. It wasn't one of those high schools where you come from a small graduating class that has no variety whatsoever. My graduating class size was close to 600 students. And I had a few friends who identified as LGBTQ. I was also in the drama club, so there were lots of LGBTQ students, and I was really good friends with them. So, interacting with that population is nothing new whatsoever. I am definitely used to being in that environment.

Similarly, Kate cited her extracurricular involvement with the dance team and fashion club as having an impact on her exposure to the LGBTQ community. She also discussed how her high school was very open when it came to students of ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual minorities:

I knew people who identified as LGBTQ, and as far as I know there were never any major issues that they faced. At some schools you talk to people and you hear how they had students who committed suicide, who were constantly harassed and bullied, and other instances like that. Fortunately, we did not have anything like that occur.

While Daniel went to a Catholic high school, he also discussed having a very positive experience: “It was pretty accepting, I would say. I came out to friends and family my senior year and I didn’t really encounter any problems. They didn’t have any sort of Pride group at my school, or anything like that. However, I believe most people were pretty cool about it.”

Becca’s previous exposure to the LGBTQ community was not as high in relation to the other three participants. This difference in exposure was clear when she discussed the school and town environment that she grew up in:

Growing up I knew about the LGBTQ community, but I had experiences where parents didn’t inform their kids about gay people. We also didn’t have any openly gay kids in school since it was really small. My parents never hid anything from me per se; however, my mom and my stepdad aren’t really accepting of that lifestyle. Despite their personal opinions, they never tried to skew how I felt, which I am appreciative of.

#### **Training style and outcomes.**

Many of the participants found the Safe Zone training informative; it allowed them to feel more comfortable when dealing with LGBTQ-related issues and the LGBTQ community. In talking about the training, as a whole, Kate stated: “It was really well rounded. Instead of focusing on just one thing, you were immersed in a lot of various topics related to the LGTBQ community. So, it was kind of nice that we were able to get that background and be able to apply it. We were then able to take that information with us and do whatever we needed to do with it.” She reinforced her point by stating:

I really liked how the Safe Zone training wasn't forceful. The trainers mentioned that they understood how every individual is going to have their own opinions and beliefs, that everyone is at a different stage, and that they weren't there to force the information down our throats. They came at things from more of a place of understanding, helping to educate people and inform them. You had a choice. You were able to take a sticker and sign a statement of intent, or you could choose not to. That was up to you. However, they did stress how it was important not to put up a sticker and say you're available as a safe space for those students when you're really not. So, I thought that that was excellent. It made us all feel pretty relaxed and at ease.

Ada further supported Kate's claims by stating: "It wasn't shoving information down your throat. They really wanted us to feel comfortable with the subject matter, and if you didn't agree with the information you didn't have to sign the intent form. You don't have to do things this way or that. We just want you to be informed in your decisions. So, that was nice. "

During discussions, Becca mentioned how the training allowed her to be more intentional in how she addressed certain situations when dealing with residents in her hall:

I make it a goal to try not to make those situations feel more awkward and try to use more inclusive language. I had one resident who asked if I had to say things like that. And I said no I don't *have* to, but I don't want to not say it and assume everyone is attracted to the opposite sex when that may not be the case. And in my programming it is very much the same, making sure that I am sticking with

the correct terminology. Because someone may choose to come out to me in my time as an RA, and I want to make sure that I have done everything that I can in order to make sure that they are comfortable enough to come and talk to me, or to feel that way on our floor.

Being a part of the LGBTQ community himself, Daniel offered up a unique perspective in terms of the Safe Zone training and his feelings about the educational value of the curriculum utilized within the session:

I thought that the training was really good, and extremely helpful, especially for those who aren't that familiar with issues related to the LGBTQ community. For example, the LGBTQ Terminology worksheet that we did, I knew all of those terms and had been exposed to them before. However, I am positive that there were a lot of people who had never been exposed to some of them. So, in that respect, I think it was very educational and eye opening for some individuals. It got you to come to certain realizations, like when we talked about facts vs. myths within the community. So, again, overall it was very informative and helpful.

**Awareness of privilege and advocacy.**

All four participants expressed how the Safe Zone training encouraged them to think about the impact of heterosexual privilege on LGBTQ individuals and how they can be better allies and advocates for the LGBTQ community. In terms of heterosexual privilege, Ada stated:

It sucks to admit it, but I do have certain privileges just because I identify as a heterosexual female. I hate admitting that, but it's the truth, especially in certain settings. If I were a part of the LGBTQ community I would feel like I am missing

out on certain opportunities that those who are heterosexual take for granted. Most people don't even notice or think about those privileges. And going through the training forces you to become more aware of those things. I will admit that, before the training, I didn't even think about those privileges that I possess because I'm straight. And now it's sort of upsetting to think that for *a lot* of people it doesn't even cross their minds once. That's where the power of the Safe Zone training lies, in knowing what you should be grateful for and what things you didn't even think about.

Becca reinforced Ada's statement when she discussed how her newfound awareness from the training has helped her become a better advocate for residents on her floor:

I don't think that anyone should be privileged based on his or her sexual orientation. I feel like we should all be on the same level, that it should be an even playing field. It definitely makes me feel more aware. Holding hands with my boyfriend, walking down the street, I'm not going to get weird looks. But if two girls were to do the same thing they might get weird looks and someone might even say something to them. Even just being aware of what people say and how they talk can be extremely important. I know some people don't think about the way that they say things. However, with my floor I try to get them to change their language and be more conscientious. I think that it's important to be aware of the privilege I possess, but to also realize that I can combat those privileges and help the LGBTQ community. And if I'm not doing so, then I'm not doing my job.

Ada, Kate, and Becca touched on the fact that the training was a transformative experience that forced them to become more aware of the privileges they possess and how they can better advocate for the LGBTQ community, as demonstrated above. Becca put it best when she stated:

Before, I was supportive of the LGBTQ community, and just said, ‘Oh, yeah. That’s cool. I don’t care what you do in your personal life, you can love whoever you want.’ But now, I feel this sense of wanting, to step up and educate others. I’ve always been one of those people who, if someone says something negative about the community, would say, ‘Excuse me. That’s not okay.’ Basically, I would chop their head off. But now, I think more about educating people instead of barking at them or getting into it with them. I just don’t think everyone is as educated, especially depending on where you come from or what your family upbringing is. So, I think that the best thing we can do as allies is advocate and educate others.

During our discussion, Kate mentioned how she was planning to do a bulletin board about tolerance and acceptance of the LGBTQ community prior to going through the Safe Zone training. After the training, however, she realized that there is still quite a ways to go after reaching that acceptance stage:

I was coming from a place of acceptance before, not just tolerance, which was good. I just didn’t realize that there was more I could do past that point. So, it was motivating for me to make the realization that I could move towards celebrating the LGBTQ community. I want to do better. I want to help others realize that it’s not just about tolerating or accepting members of the LGBTQ

community. It's about celebrating all that they have to offer, who they are as people. I really care about members of the LGBTQ community, and believe that they deserve to be proud of who they are. Talking about the Riddle Homophobia Scale helped me to put things into perspective. I was able to see where I was at, and realized the level I wanted to reach.

Ada also discussed active ways of engaging with the LGBTQ community and displaying to others that you are an advocate:

My thought process changed after the training. You can believe in equal rights and equality, or you can actually act on it and show you're a supporter of the LGBTQ community and that you believe in the cause. So, that entails going to different LGBTQ-related events, stopping by Pride, showing off your buttons and Safe Zone sticker, and not just being passive about it.

While Daniel, who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community, was unable to think of an instance where heterosexual privilege has impacted him personally, he did believe the discussion of heterosexual privilege and advocacy to be an important one:

I can't really think of an instance where it's impacted me. However, I think that that has a lot to do with the fact that we are so used to living in a society where that's the norm. That's why I liked the heterosexual privilege activity. Because there were some things that even I had never really thought about. Coming to that realization was important and definitely helpful to talk about. Fortunately, I have never felt like I have been in a situation like that on campus.

**Seeing the bigger picture.**

Upon reflection, Kate expressed how the Safe Zone training allowed her and her fellow RAs the opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of someone who identifies as LGBTQ:

I really liked how interactive the training was, because it got you to put yourself in the place of someone who is part of that community. I can say that I understand where they are coming from, but really I don't know because I haven't lived it. I would love to be able to understand that, but it's hard. I don't want to necessarily relate it to my own experiences and belittle what they have gone through.

While discussing the coming out process, Becca expressed her realization that not everyone's coming out process is the same, that some people are exiled from their friends and family. She also expressed how there are individuals who are fully accepted by their friends and family, as well as those who fall somewhere in between. Walking through the coming out process allowed Becca to understand what LGBTQ individuals go through on an emotional level:

I feel like it would be incredibly stressful and scary to go through that process, not to mention frustrating. I would be worried because, while more and more people are becoming accepting of the LGBTQ community, there are still people out there who are very hateful towards those individuals. I can imagine being afraid of being in your own skin, not knowing whether or not you should express your true self. But I think that those individuals who say, 'Hey! This is who I am,' and are unapologetic about it, are extremely courageous.

Kate was also attuned to the emotional turmoil that LGBTQ individuals may go through while they are still discovering who they are:

I can't even imagine what it would be like to have to pretend to be someone I'm not 24 hours a day. I mean that's awful. Going to class, going out, just everything...and it affects you everywhere. It's great that there are safe spaces on campus because it allows those individuals safe places to go if they are having trouble. But that can't be said for everywhere. You never know what you could be walking into, wherever you go. You don't know who is going to be there or what they are capable of doing. I would be extremely sad if others were to bash or bully me for simply being who I am. I would hate that. Being LGBTQ is part of who you are, but it isn't all that you are. And you should take pride in who you are, not hide it away where no one can see the real you. And the fact that sometimes those individuals don't feel as though they can have that sense of pride is hard to swallow.

**Preparedness.**

The Safe Zone program seeks to prepare participants to interact and work with the LGBTQ community and to provide participants with the necessary resources to help members of that community, should they need them. Throughout my discussions with the participants, this feeling of preparedness was something that kept emerging. Ada stated:

I would like to believe that I am more prepared after the training. If a student came to me with any problems or questions, I now have resources on hand which I can utilize. So, if I'm not able to answer something, I at least have those

resources along with the online resources mentioned during the training. I know exactly where my handouts are, and they are easily accessible.

Daniel expressed his appreciation for the institution's Safe Zone program and discussed his thoughts on the real world applications of the training:

I thought that the training was helpful in terms of situations that RAs may have to handle on the job. For instance, if a student comes out to you, or, if you have a student who identifies as LGBTQ on your floor, how do you include them and make them feel comfortable. You begin to understand how that all looks and how you should, and shouldn't, act in that type of situation. You also realize some of the difficulties those students may encounter on a social, academic, and emotional level. I don't think a lot of people really know how they are supposed to act and what they are supposed to do. The scenario application part of the training spoke to things that could actually happen, so I thought it was good that it was included.

Kate's thoughts on the scenarios only further supported Daniel's claims: "It might be a completely different scenario than the ones we went over in the training. But, at least you have some common knowledge and background of how you would want to be treated in that situation. So, you are able to put yourself in those students' shoes." Becca also felt as though the application-based scenarios from the training were helpful: "It demonstrated that there are always multiple ways of handling certain situations. And I think that it was nice preparation if any of us actually encounter a similar scenario in the residence halls."

**Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of first year RAs as they implement what they have learned, from the Phase 1 Safe Zone program, in their residence halls?**

### **Context of Implementation**

The second theme that emerged centered around the participants' perceptions of the programming they implemented as a way of bettering the residence hall environment for students who identify as LGBTQ. Throughout the interviews, several sub-themes emerged which helped to create a much clearer picture of the context in which these various programming attempts took place.

#### **Success with programming.**

Both Daniel and Ada expressed that the active programming they did elicited a lackluster response. However, both also mentioned how they usually do not have a very good turnout for floor events. Both participants work mainly with upperclassmen, which they opined might be part of the problem. Ada felt somewhat discouraged by such a low turnout at the diversity event she held, and stated: "I don't have the greatest attendance and I think that it's because I do have more upperclassmen than some of the other RAs. And not as many freshmen who are willing to go out of their way and meet new people." Due to the low turnout, the residents who were in attendance felt awkward speaking and really engaging with others because the group was so small. When it came to the diversity program that Daniel held for his residents, he mentioned how he tried to get them to engage in conversation, but it just didn't seem to work:

I don't know. I feel like I was talking at them kind of. I tried to get them to have conversation about the cross the line activity that we did, but they didn't seem to

want to have one. Despite people not really talking a whole lot, they still seemed to enjoy the program. I did an icebreaker called, 'What Makes You Special,' before that, which allowed us to have a discussion about how we all have our strengths and weaknesses, the things that make us different and we are proud of.

And my residents were a bit more engaged during that activity.

Daniel and Ada relayed greater success with more passive programming, such as putting up bulletin boards on LGBTQ-related topics in their halls. Daniel stated:

I had a bulletin board for LGBTQA History Month. It was really cool. I printed out a bunch of infographics, and had the calendar of events up, as well as some parts of the Alphabet Soup Bulletin Board-to-Go from the LGBTQA Web Center. Some people said that they liked it a lot. And others said that it was very informative.

Kate further reinforced the success of more passive programming as she reflected on her experience with posting a bulletin board in her hall: "I also did an LGBTQA History Month bulletin board and things like that. It was kind of cool because some of my residents walked by and were like, 'Hey, Kate is doing this for us!' So, I thought that it was really nice to be able to put that out there and to have them appreciate the gesture."

Kate, unlike the other participants, also seemed to have a more positive experience with the active programming that she implemented and had relatively good turnout due to the demographic of the floor that she works with:

We did an activity where I wrote on butcher block various groups/communities of people, and had my residents go through and think of stereotypes, both good and bad, that are commonly associated with those groups of people. I know for the

LGBTQ community some of the things they wrote were positive, and some were negative. But, that was how most were across the board. It was really interesting for me to sit there and read what they had to say. I got pretty good feedback from them, which I thought was pretty nice. And they seemed to enjoy the activity. It allowed us to have a very open discussion about why some of the stereotypes they wrote down are bad and how we can help to combat them.

**Creating awareness.**

All of the participants emphasized the importance of educating their residents in terms of LGBTQ-related issues. Becca expressed a desire to bring these issues to the forefront:

I feel like when people think diversity, the LGBTQ community is sometimes left by the wayside. That's not a group that most people immediately think of as diverse. People think more about socio-economic status, the color of one's skin, those types of things that we have been taught to think of as diversity. So, I would love to put more emphasis on LGBTQ issues.

She further expressed a want to make her residents think twice about the way that they say or address certain things:

I think just stopping people when they say negative things can be a big deal, because then maybe they'll think twice the next time around. I know a lot of people say the phrase, 'Oh, that's so gay.' But they could use a different word, one that actually is used correctly. And so I think just stopping them and letting them know, 'Hey, that's not okay to say' is important. It forces them to think about the individuals that those words may hurt.

Kate further supported this idea when she discussed meeting students where they are at, rather than reprimanding them for their lack of knowledge when it comes to the LGBTQ community:

Obviously, if I hear comments or things like that I'm not going to let that be tolerated, especially not on my floor. However, I try not to necessarily yell or reprimand people, but help them understand. Everyone has different backgrounds and the most important thing I think we can do as RAs is to bring awareness to the resident who may have made a poor comment or acted a certain way. I try to get them to put themselves in those individuals' shoes and see how they would feel. Not everyone is at the same point in his or her development, and you have to work with that. So, you can't criticize them either, because then what good is that going to do? You want to help guide them towards understanding.

**Pre-existing environment.**

Last year, Ada roomed with someone who identifies as bisexual. While her roommate was not one of her residents, she discussed her roommate's feelings about the hall that she lived in. Ada stated: "My roommate last year as a freshman was bisexual. She always felt comfortable around the floor, talking with other residents etc. We talked a lot, and she never felt judged or anything of that nature." Daniel reinforced Ada's statement with a personal account of his own involving two residents he works with: "I have two gay students on my floor...well, LGBTQ students. And their sexuality has never been an issue. As far as I know, they feel comfortable interacting with others on the floor. And I believe they have been appreciative of the passive and active programming I have tried to do in relation to LGBTQ awareness."

There appears to be a level of openness among the participants' residents, which became clear throughout our discussions. Ada recounted overhearing a resident talking with her friend about having a son, and how she said, "I would have no problem if he ended up falling in love with a boy." She recounted another instance where one of her other residents stated: "I'm totally fine with it, as long as it's not overwhelming and in my face. But that goes with any public displays of affection."

Daniel cited how many of his residents are used to interacting with members of the LGBTQ community:

I've never had any issues and all of my residents, at least I think all of them, know that I'm gay. And it's never been an issue. Whenever I've told people or mentioned it in past conversations they've never been turned off by it. It seems like it's something that they are used to and okay with at this stage in their lives seeing as a lot of them have been in college for three to four years. They've met other students who are gay and have been exposed to these issues. A lot of them have realized that members of the LGBTQ community are normal and just like anyone else. That has been my own personal experience, however. I guarantee there are probably some who are not as comfortable with it.

Kate supported this idea of a lot of residents already being open to members of the LGBTQ community when she stated:

I think that there was already a sense of openness because, again, I touched on LGBTQ-related issues in the active programming that I did, and no one got all up in arms about it. It is entirely possible that they may not have been comfortable saying something if they did have issues, but I did not get that impression. And

they knew that I had been Safe Zone trained. So, yeah, I definitely think that there was a noticeable sense of openness already in place.

Becca discussed the openness of her residents as well, and addressed an interesting point in terms of residents who have strong religious beliefs:

My residents are very accepting of each other and of new things. Some of them have religious beliefs that conflict with the LGBTQ community. But we've talked about it, and some of those residents said, 'I'm not against them. Growing up, that's just not how I was raised to think.' And we've agreed that if there is someone who comes out on our floor that that won't change how they act towards that person. They are still going to treat them like a human being and as part of the residence hall community we have created. So, I would say a lot of them are open despite some of their belief systems being different. Even with those religious beliefs, they have said that, 'I have my own way of thinking, and they have theirs. I'm not going to make them feel uncomfortable.'

Both Daniel and Becca addressed how their floor dynamic shifted after their residents went through the diversity meeting they each were required to hold. Daniel stated: "Even though attendance may not have been the greatest for the other programming that I did, I feel like the diversity meeting really brought the floor closer together." Becca relayed much of the same:

After that meeting, our floor dynamic really changed. Everyone was just more open and willing to talk about things, and they met new people they hadn't really met before. So, I was really excited. Some of the girls on my floor expressed how LGBTQ-related issues were not something that they had ever talked about at

home, and how some of them didn't have openly gay students at their high schools, so they had never been exposed to topics like that. And they were just as excited to learn more about those issues, almost as much as I was to talk about them.

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the themes found during analysis of the participants' Safe Zone Phase 1 evaluations and interviews. The themes that emerged fell under 9 categories, which included previous exposure, training style and outcomes, awareness of privilege and advocacy, seeing the bigger picture, preparedness, success with programming, creating awareness amongst residents, and pre-existing environment. Chapter V will summarize previous chapters and suggest recommendations for future research based upon the experiences of the participants.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

The research study utilized a qualitative approach to examine perceptions of how well the Phase 1 Safe Zone program prepares participants to affect change within the residence halls. The primary purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of the Phase 1 Safe Zone training among first year RAs in the residence halls. A secondary purpose was to examine how first year RAs perceive their ability to utilize training material in order to interact with LGBTQ students and implement programming within the context of the residence hall environment. Therefore, the following research questions were asked: (1) What are the perceptions of first year RAs as they are trained in the Phase 1 Safe Zone program?; (2) What are the perceptions of first year RAs as they implement what they have learned, from the Phase 1 Safe Zone program, in their residence halls? This chapter will discuss the results of the study in relation to the literature reviewed, provide recommendations for professionals in the field, and suggest future areas of study on this topic.

### Significance of Findings

#### **LGBTQ exposure and interactions.**

It has been reported that LGBTQ students who attend schools with Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other safe space initiatives feel less isolated, exhibit a greater willingness to be involved in school and community activities, experience more positive relationships with peers and staff, and are more motivated academically (Mayberry 2006). Two of the participants, Kate and Ada, consider themselves allies to the LGBTQ community, and both attended larger high schools, in suburban areas, with GSA-type

groups. When speaking of her high school experience, Ada stated, “It was a very open school. There were quite a few gay individuals, as well as people from all different races and ethnicities.” Kate also expressed how, from her viewpoint, being a part of the LGBTQ community at her high school was not a big deal: “I knew people who identified as LGBTQ, and as far as I know there were never any major issues that they faced. At some schools...you hear how they had students...who were constantly harassed and bullied... Fortunately, we did not have anything like that occur.” While previous research purports students having better experiences at schools with GSAs, Daniel went to a Catholic high school without a GSA, and is still cited as having a very positive experience: “It was pretty accepting, I would say. I came out to friends and family my senior year and I didn’t really encounter any problems. They didn’t have any sort of Pride group at my school, or anything like that. However, I believe most people were pretty cool about it.”

Enhancement of heterosexual privilege is an issue that was found throughout the literature reviewed for this study. Many LGBTQ students still consider information to be centered on the needs of the heterosexual majority. Thus, there is a need for resources that focus more on the needs of the gender and sexual minorities present on campus. These sources are not only great for LGBTQ students, but for allies as well, because they will allow allies to learn more about the LGBTQ community and expose them to the culture that surrounds it (Schaller 2011). Reflecting on the Safe Zone training, Ada discussed her level of preparedness to interact with the LGBTQ community and handle LGBTQ-related issues through utilization of resources provided during training: “I would like to think that I am more prepared...[so that] if a student came to me with any

problems or questions, I [would] have resources on hand which I could utilize. So, if I'm not able to answer something, I at least have those [physical] resources along with the online resources mentioned during the training." Exposure to these various resources allowed Ada and the other participants from the study the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the LGBTQ community and apply the material in a real-world context.

Previous research has shown that levels of heterosexism and homophobia increased as LGBTQ students' perceptions of the residence hall climate became more negative (Fanucce & Taub 2010), and that LGBTQ individuals often feel as though they need to conceal their sexual identity and gender expression for fear of others reactions (Rankin 2003). The four first year RAs utilized in this study believe in the mission of the Safe Zone program, but have not personally experienced heterosexim/homophobia. Despite this fact, they feel as though the residence halls on campus are open and welcoming. Ada, while recounting living with her bisexual roommate freshman year, stated: "She always felt comfortable around the floor, talking with other residents etc. We talked a lot and she never felt judged or anything of that nature." Daniel reinforced this personal account with one of his own: "I have two gay students on my floor...well, LGBTQ students. And their sexuality has never been an issue. As far as I know they feel comfortable interacting with other on the floor." He further supported his claim by stating: "It seems like [interacting with LGBTQ] is something that [my residents] are used to and okay with at this stage in their lives, seeing as a lot of them have been in college for three to four years...[and have] met other students who are gay and have been exposed to these issues." On the flip side, Daniel did express that other students may not be as comfortable interacting with the LGBTQ community, especially younger students

who are new to the college environment or students who have had a certain type of upbringing. Some members of the LGBTQ community within the residence halls may also not feel as comfortable opening up to others on their floor. While this was not directly stated by any of the participants, it was alluded to in a comment made by Kate when she discussed the emotional turmoil LGBTQ individuals may go through while they are discovering who they are: “Being LGBTQ is part of who you are, but it isn’t all that you are. And you should take pride in who you are, not hide it away where no one can see the real you. And the fact that sometimes these individuals don’t feel as though they can have that sense of pride is hard to swallow.”

Within the literature, there was an emphasis on greater contact with a minority group as a way of reducing prejudices and fears by showing specific myths, stereotypes, and certain preconceived notions are unfounded (Lance 2002; Lance 2008; and Rye & Meaney 2009). This method of social contact theory is also known as the “contact hypothesis.” While the brief contact between participants and the LGBTQ community/LGBTQ-related issues found in Safe Zone training is not sufficient enough to develop a full comprehensive understanding, it has the potential to allow participants to see the bigger picture and create a certain level of investment (Rye & Meaney 2009). Upon reflection, Becca mentioned how the training allowed her to be more intentional in how she addressed certain situations, as well as more invested in her residents: “I want to make sure that I have done everything that I can in order to make sure that they are comfortable enough to come and talk to me, or to feel that way on our floor.” Kate also expressed how the training allowed her see the bigger picture and put herself in the shoes of someone who identifies as LGBTQ: “It got you to put yourself in the place of someone

who is part of that community...[and] I want to help others realize that it's not just about tolerating or accepting members of the LGBTQ community. It's about celebrating all that they have to offer, who they are as people. I really care about members of the LGBTQ community." Kate goes on to discuss how exposure to the various training activities, especially the Riddle Homophobia Scale, helped her to put things into perspective and motivated her to be an even better ally.

### **Impact and outcomes of safe zone training.**

Safe Zone aims to create a safer, more inclusive environment for LGBTQ students on campus. In order to do so, certain things need to occur. Mayberry (2006) talked about systemic change as a way of changing school culture by addressing social justice and equity issues throughout the entire "ecosystem" of the school and its surrounding community. And that systemic change all starts with challenging how one thinks about the population of LGBTQ students. Safe Zone training is open to anyone on campus, as well as individuals in the surrounding community; it was developed as a way to challenge those who are being trained as allies to the LGBTQ community in regards to their heterosexual privilege, their levels of homophobia, and their knowledge of basic LGBT-related issues. However, one thing that both Ada and Kate noted was that the Safe Zone training wasn't forceful, and that it didn't "shove information down your throat." Kate stated: "The trainers mentioned that they understood how every individual is going to have their own opinions and beliefs [and] that everyone is at a different stage... They came at things from more of a place of understanding, helping to educate people and inform them." Ada reinforced this thought by stating: "They really wanted us to feel comfortable with the subject matter, and if you didn't agree with the information

you didn't have to sign the intent form." Systemic change doesn't occur quickly. It takes time, and by giving Safe Zone participants the option of signing a statement of intent and becoming a safe zone this change can occur more naturally; it isn't forced.

In a study by Macintosh (2007), the story of a pre-service teacher who was stuck in a particular train of thought, where his classroom seemed exempt from LGBTQ-related issues because he only taught math, was discussed. He couldn't comprehend why talking about such issues mattered, and was not even aware that his thought process only further perpetuated the invisibility of LGBTQ individuals and the issues that they face. Ada put it best when she stated: "Most people don't even notice or think about those privileges. And going through the training forces you to become more aware of those things. I will admit that, before the training, I didn't even think about those privileges that I possess. And now, it's sort of upsetting to think [about]."

It is important to address the issues of homophobia and heterosexual privilege on college campuses because it is very common for college students to "come out" to peers, mentors, and family during their college years (Holland, Matthews, & Schott 2013). Daniel, personally, found the training to be very helpful in this regard, and discussed the real world application of information in this type of situation: "You begin to understand how [being inclusive of that individual] looks and how you should, and shouldn't, act in that type of situation. You also realize some of the difficulties those students may encounter on a social, academic, and emotional level." He further stated, "I don't think a lot of people really know how they are supposed to act and what they are supposed to do. [So] the scenario application part of the training spoke to things that could actually happen."

Macintosh (2007) utilized the experience with the pre-service math instructor as an opportunity to educate and challenge him to become more aware. Allies are in the greatest position, after being Safe Zone trained, to enact change and educate on a college campus, or, in the case of my study, within the residence halls. While reflecting about her training experience, Becca stated: “Before I was supportive of the LGBTQ community...But now, I feel this sense of wanting, to step up and educate others...I just don’t think everyone is as educated, especially depending on where you come from or what your family upbringing is. So, I think that the best thing we can do as allies is to advocate and educate others.” Ada further reinforced Becca’s sentiments when she communicated the following: “My thought process changed after the training. You can believe in equal rights and equality, or you can actually act on it and show you’re a supporter of the LGBTQ community and that you believe in the cause.” This shift in thought was echoed throughout all of the interviews conducted during this study, and all four participants thought educating others and actively showing support as an ally were vital to creating an impact on campus and in the residence halls. Similarly, Fox & Ore (2010) opined that safe space initiatives like Safe Zone aim to raise visibility and create educational programs that increase awareness of LGBTQ issues and address the presence of heterosexism and homophobia in campus culture.

### **Creating greater awareness and visibility.**

The idea of creating a safer environment means educating the community-at-large, and expressing common ground and shared values, in order to increase tolerance and promote greater awareness (Drumheller and McQuay 2010). This idea of increasing tolerance and promoting awareness all comes back to putting yourself in the shoes of

members of the LGBTQ community. When talking about her appreciation for the training, Kate stated: “It might be a completely different scenario than the ones we went over in the training. But, at least you have some common knowledge and background of how you would want to be treated in that situation. So, you are able to put yourself in those students’ shoes.” In similar light, Kate also addressed how the training taught her to meet her residents where they are at, rather than reprimanding them for their lack of knowledge when it comes to the LGBTQ community: “Everyone has different backgrounds and the most important thing I think we can do as RAs is to bring awareness to the resident who may have made a poor comment or acted a certain way. I try to get them to put themselves in those individuals’ shoes and see how they would feel... You want to help guide them towards understanding.”

Previous research has shown that drawing attention to LGBTQ-related issues is a great way of combatting heterosexual privilege and homophobia (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville 2012). While unintentional, Kate created a program for her residents that allowed them to draw connections between the stereotypes they came up with about the LGBTQ community and how that relates to heterosexual privilege and homophobia. For the activity, residents were asked to come up with stereotypes for a variety of different groups and communities of people. Kate noted that some of the stereotypes they wrote down were negative, but not all. Some were positive. Reflecting on the activity, she stated: “It allowed us to have a very open discussion about why some of the stereotypes they wrote down are bad and how we can help to combat them.”

Residential living can have a very important educational impact on students. And, it is important to understand how all students, including those who identify as

LGBTQ, fit into on-campus living settings and how they are influenced by the residential environment (Funucce & Taub 2010). While Kate was really the only study participant to have any substantial success with the active programming she did, the others relayed much greater success with passive programming that they implemented throughout the course of the fall semester. Throughout our discussions, Daniel and Kate mentioned how residents had gone out of their way to make comments that let them know they appreciated the passive programming they had implemented. Daniel stated, “I had a bulletin board for LGBTQ History Month...Some [residents] said they liked it a lot. And others said that it was very informative.” Kate also did a bulletin board for LGBTQ History Month, and stated: “It was kind of cool because some of my residents walked by and were like, ‘Hey, Kate is doing this for us!’ So, I thought that it was really nice to be able to put that out there and to have them appreciate the gesture.” While Daniel and Kate’s experiences were very similar, there was an obvious impact that their passive programming had, even on those who identify as LGBTQ.

A study conducted by Roper (2005) discussed how the act of community building in the residence halls is not advocacy but active ally work that allows RAs to lead in ways that validate the LGBTQ community and address the needs of LGBTQ students. Becca put it best, when she discussed how even just paying attention to the small things, like how you word/phrase something can make a huge difference in making LGBTQ residents feel more comfortable: “Even just being aware of what people say and how they talk can be extremely important. I know some people don’t think about the way that they say things. However, with my floor I try to get them to change their language and be more conscientious.” After making this statement, Becca said something that showed

tremendous growth and understanding. She stated, “I think that it’s important to be aware of the privilege I possess, but to also realize that I can combat those privileges and help the LGBTQ community.” Becca realized that there was strength in the privilege that she possesses, that that privilege could be the impetus to her becoming a better ally. In terms of building a community (a.k.a. active ally work), Becca discussed how important she thinks it is for all of her residents to feel comfortable talking and interacting with one another. So, she will have them frequently sit in the various lobbies of her hall to gain some valuable face-to-face interaction with one another: “It’s fine if they come to me with problems. However, I also want them to be able to deal with issues themselves, to be able to stand up to a fellow resident and say, ‘That’s not okay’ or ‘Why don’t you use this word instead’ etc. And, they really do a good job. It’s like our own little government. Everyone has their role, and understands that they need to learn to deal with issues in a calm, diplomatic way. So, it’s nice.” This sense of autonomy, and level of comfort with one another, is something every RA should aspire to foster within their residents.

### **Suggestions For Future Research**

If the study were to follow a similar format, my first suggestion would be to obtain a more representative pool of participants, preferably one RA from each hall on campus. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, only four participants were utilized this time around, each from different residence halls. If one participant were to be obtained for each residence hall, a research team would need to be assembled in order to transcribe and code all of the data that would potentially be gathered.

A second suggestion for future research is to conduct a *quantitative* study on the effectiveness of the Safe Zone program at the Midsize, Midwestern University chosen for this study. Due to the qualitative nature of the current study, effectiveness of the Safe Zone program could not be assessed. I would also suggest future researchers survey anyone who has participated in the Safe Zone Phase One program for that academic year. This broadens the scope of the pool of participants, but keeps it from becoming an unmanageable amount.

My third suggestion for future research would be to once again only have 4-6 participants as part of a qualitative study to analyze perceptions of the Safe Zone Phase 1 program. However, instead of limiting the participant pool to only first year RAs, future researchers could open the pool up to anyone who has participated in Safe Zone during that academic year.

A fourth suggestion would be to conduct a longitudinal study of the original four participants. This could provide interesting results, as it would allow the researcher to see how participants' viewpoints and perceptions of the training change over time. A longitudinal study would also create a greater opportunity for participants to implement more specific, LGBTQ-related programming. The researcher could then analyze the perceived effects said programming has on residents within the residence halls.

Lastly, while the participant pool was diverse in terms of residence hall and previous exposure to the LGBTQ community, it would be beneficial to establish a more diverse participant pool in regards to race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual preference, and gender identity. Achieving this level of diversity within the participant

pool is impossible with only 4 participants. Thus, this would need to be accomplished with a much larger participant pool.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach to better understand first year RAs perceptions of the Safe Zone Phase One training, as well as to examine how first year RAs utilize training material in order to interact with LGBTQ students and implement programming within the context of the residence hall environment. Chapter V consisted of a discussion of the results from the study. The results indicated that the first year RAs utilized for this study found the Safe Zone Phase One training to be helpful in terms of preparing them to interact with LGBTQ students and implement programming that is geared towards the LGBTQ community. While most of the participants wished they had had more time to implement more successful active programming, they had a positive experience with the passive programming they implemented in the residence halls. The results also indicated a greater sense of awareness and a motivation to educate their residents on LGBTQ issues. Suggestions for future research were also provided.

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APPENDIX A  
Safe Zone Phase 1 Program Evaluation

**Safe Zone Phase 1 Program Evaluation**

*To help us continue to improve these trainings, please give us a little feedback.*

1. Overall how would you rate the quality of the training?  
 Excellent       Satisfactory       Unsatisfactory       Poor
2. How did you hear about SafeZone?

**Please indicate the degree to which you agree/disagree with each statement below:**

(5) = Completely Agree, (4) = Agree, (3) = Neutral, (2) Disagree, (1) Strongly Disagree

3. After today's training, I have a greater awareness of terminology related to sexual orientation.	5	4	3	2	1
4. I have a better understanding of the diversity within the LGBTQQ community.	5	4	3	2	1
5. I feel better prepared to take advantage of opportunities to be an ally to LGBTQQ people.	5	4	3	2	1
6. I know more about the resources available for LGBTQQ people and their allies on EIU's campus.	5	4	3	2	1
7. The training was interactive enough.	5	4	3	2	1
8. The presenters were knowledgeable.	5	4	3	2	1
9. The presenters were well-prepared.	5	4	3	2	1
10. Overall, my time spent here was worthwhile.	5	4	3	2	1

**To help us improve our trainings, please share:**

11. Three things that I learned from this workshop were...
12. One question I still have after (or have because of) today's training is...
13. Would you be interested in taking SafeZone Level 2 training?

APPENDIX B  
Consent to Participate in Research



APPENDIX C  
Interview Protocol Part One

## Interview Protocol Part One

1. Background Questions
  - a. Where are you from? Describe the area.
  - b. What are you majoring in?
  - c. What was your high school like for LGBTQ students?
  - d. Describe your family background.
2. What was your favorite part about the training? What has stuck with you?
3. What was your least favorite part about the training?
4. What do you still have questions about, or wish you could have learned more about?
5. How comfortable are you with LGBTQ-related terminology and the coming out process?
6. When you think of the term heterosexual privilege, now, what are your thoughts? How would you say this impacts LGBTQ students?
7. What were your thoughts about the RA scenarios utilized in the training?
8. How have your thoughts and perceptions about what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ community changed as a result of this training?
9. Do you feel as though you have gained enough information to be an ally to these students?
10. What are some ways you feel like you can advocate for LGBTQ students?
11. Can you give me some ideas of ways you might be able to educate your residents about the LGBTQ community? What type of programming could you do?
12. Overall, what were your thoughts of the training? Was it interactive enough? Did the layout work?
13. If you could describe the training in five words or less, how would you describe it?
14. Do you have any suggestions of ways the training could be improved?

APPENDIX D  
Interview Protocol Part Two

## Interview Protocol Part Two

1. What types of programming did you implement within your residence hall, related to LGBTQ or diversity issues?
2. Did you find that most of your residents were pretty open to the LGBTQ community?
3. Can you describe the types of residents that you work with (year in school etc.)?
4. Do you feel as though your programming had an affect on the attitudes of your residents?
5. Did you meet any sort of resistance from your residents, in terms of the programming you implemented?
6. Assuming there are LGBTQ students on your floor, do you believe that they would feel safe within your residence hall? Are your residents aware that you are Safe Zone trained?
7. Is there anything you wish you had done differently with the programming that you were able to implement?
8. What were some concepts or issues from the Phase One training that influenced the programming you implemented? What stuck with you?
9. What types of programming would you like to implement in the future, in relation to LGBTQ issues?