



## Safe Zones

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## *POLICY AND PRAXIS*

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# Safe Zones: Creating LGBT Safe Space Ally Programs

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**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses model LGBT Safe Space Ally programs. These programs, often called “Safe Zones,” include self selected students, faculty, and employees who publicly show support by displaying stickers, signs, and other identifiable items. Issues covered in the article include history, development, training, membership, assessment, and political considerations. doi:10.1300/J524v05n01\_10 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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**KEYWORDS.** Allies, educational interventions, gay and lesbian programming, higher education; training heterosexual allies, safe space, Safe Zone

Heterosexual people are often asked to be advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students.<sup>1</sup> Yet, these willing allies have few skills or resources available to them and no personal experiences to guide their development as LGBT advocates. Nonetheless, with adequate resources and training, heterosexual staff, faculty, and students can have a significant effect on creating a positive culture on a college campus.

Washington and Evans (1991, p. 195) define an ally as “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.” Allies, including racial/ethnic minorities, are instrumental in affecting positive change in the dominant culture.

Educational policy makers and program planners have recently recognized the potential of developing heterosexual allies in making the university culture more accepting towards LGBT people (Bullard, 2004). However, young adults are likely to believe that their peers hold negative attitudes about LGBT people, resulting in adjustment of behavior to emulate this misperception (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). Heterosexual males, in particular, often feel the need to fit in and be accepted by others that hold negative attitudes about LGBT people thus emulating their peers (Franklin, 1998). The public identification of heterosexual allies through a LGBT Safe Space Ally Program can help to alleviate previously held misperceptions, encourage affirming group identification, and encourage others to participate hence creating a more accepting campus.

A number of colleges and universities have developed LGBT Safe Space Ally programs (Evans, 2002; Henquinet, Phibbs, &, Skoglund, 2000; Hothem & Keen, 1998; Poynter & Barnett, n.d.; Poynter & Schroer, 1999; Poynter & Wang, 2003; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002; Tubbs, 2003; Tubbs, Bliss, Cook, Poynter, & Viento, 2000). The names for these programs vary (Safe Zone, Safe Space, Safe Harbor, SAFE on Campus, Allies) but their goals include improving the campus climate, increasing awareness, enhancing conversations around LGBT issues, providing safe space, educating and providing skills to members

to confront homophobia, transphobia, biphobia or heterosexism. Although it is unclear where the “Safe” idea originated, the earliest reference found is the Ball State University program called SAFE On Campus (Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Student Association, 1992).

The hallmark of these “Safe” programs is the public identification of allies by placing a “Safe” symbol, usually incorporating a pink triangle or rainbow or the word “ally” or a combination of all three, on office doors or within living spaces. Typical components of these programs consist of a resource manual and sticker or sign. Many programs also require an orientation or training session(s) of varying lengths. Other components may include a listserv, advisory board/committee, web page resources, assessment, periodic socials, and identifying objects such as key chains, buttons, and pens.

Until recently there was no published information about these programs and what little is available was scattered throughout the Internet (Evans, 2002; Johnson, 2005). There still exists a lack of comprehensive information to inform others about how to implement, coordinate, facilitate training, and assess these programs. As a result, these programs can still be based on little shared knowledge or experience.

### ***ORGANIZING A LGBT SAFE SPACE ALLY PROGRAM***

When creating an LGBT Safe Space Ally program many strategic questions must be considered: Who will organize and administer the program? How will the campus administration respond? How will the campus LGBT community respond? What resources are available? Programs at different institutions are either coordinated by a professionally staffed campus LGBT services office (Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002), staff and faculty or by student organizations. Often an advisory board consisting of staff, faculty members, and students may have responsibility for coordination, recruitment, and training. Advantages of staff and faculty coordination include: continuity of organizers who remain many years on campus; knowledge and expertise of student affairs staff or faculty; resources of campus offices; and, legitimacy when supported by administration. There are, however, strengths of student coordination: energy of student organizers; student empowerment; and, university-recognized student organizations with access to more funding than departments.

Regardless of who coordinates the program, college administrators should not rely solely on students to provide services and education to the campus community. Including all potential stakeholders in the de-

velopment of the program—students, staff, faculty and administration—will help to provide legitimacy. Planners should invite influential campus leaders such as administration and student leaders to serve on an advisory board. Responsibilities of the advisory board should include assistance in identifying potential allies and providing a sounding board for ideas. Board members should be prepared to stand up for the program in public and agree to attend or facilitate training sessions. Meanwhile, many campus offices or academic departments may have an interest in helping to launch the program: women’s centers, cross-cultural centers, counseling centers, Greek advisors, residence life, health education, student activities or student unions, academic advisors, Women’s Studies departments, sexualities/LGBT studies departments and supportive student groups for assistance.

Organizers must also be cognizant of possible challenges by campus administration. Strategies for responding should be outlined before launching the program such as: turning to current literature on the needs of students “coming out”; using campus climate surveys to examine whether safe spaces are needed on campus; looking at student affairs mission statements and staff job duties to emphasize the right of every student to a safe learning environment.

Students or staff/faculty outside of a particular office who create Safe Space program must consider whether to seek official university recognition. Independent programs may have more freedom from administrative pressure. However, resources must be paid with donations and fundraisers, and meeting space may be difficult to find. The campus administration may also attempt to co-opt the program for political reasons, such as using its existence to defend against charges of a hostile campus climate.

### ***PROGRAM MODES: TRAINING vs. NO TRAINING***

Components of most LGBT Safe Space programs are similar across campuses. The major difference is whether training is or is not required before displaying a sign or symbol identifying membership. Some programs will not require training (Evans, 2002) in favor of distributing their safe space signs or symbols to a wider audience on the campus. Information may be provided with the sign or symbols explaining that anyone hanging the sign or symbol is expected to follow guidelines (Iowa State, 2004).

### ***Training Model***

The training may consist of a number of elements including: panels of LGBT students, staff, and employees; referral guidelines for counseling and harassment reporting; role plays; information about identity development; resources available on and off the campus; and general LGBT information. Each training program should be specific to the goals of their program and the assessed needs of the campus. At the conclusion of training, participants are then asked to sign a contract or values statement affirming their participation in the program.

The drawback to requiring training is that fewer people may participate in the program. However, since those in attendance have taken the extra step to attend, it is more likely that members are committed to the program's goals. In addition, people will self select whether or not participating as a member is right for them. Thus, the need to screen out those that cannot fulfill the goals of the program will be less likely. On rare occasions, people interested in participating in a program will want to "save" or help LGBT people through religious conversion therapy. Providing a required training insures that you know that the participants have seriously and critically considered what it will be like to be affirmative toward LGBT people.

### ***Training Justification***

A required training should be an integral part of a comprehensive LGBT Safe Space Ally Program. Assuming that all interested participants will be able to function and communicate, when in contact with LGBT people, does not take into consideration the impediments to this contact. Posting a "safe" sign or symbol is helpful in communicating nonverbal support but not all persons who post a sign or display a symbol are able to communicate effectively when conversation ensues. Training helps to alleviate conversational barriers.

One obstacle to contact with LGBT people and issues is anticipated discomfort about future interactions with LGBT people (Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000). The fear of unintentionally exhibiting homophobic or prejudiced behavior is also an impediment for future contact with LGBT people (Devine, Evett, & Vasques-Suson, 1996; Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000). Providing educational interventions, such as a required training, in a LGBT Safe Space Ally program that create interpersonal contact with LGBT people, demonstrate affirming

conversation techniques, and provide skills building activities can help reduce discomfort and fear *before* members post signs or stickers.

### ***Example Training Outline***

Each university group will design a training based on the specific needs of their campus. The most important elements that should be included, however, are:

*Introductions and Ground Rules.* Introductions as not only a way to get to know the participants but an avenue to learn. For example: Ask for name, affiliation (major/department) as well as a brief example or story that illustrates how and why they are affirming towards LGBT people. Ground rules should set the stage for a safe space that includes confidentiality, respect for opinions, and an open sharing dialogue.

*Campus and Local Resources.* A brief overview of resources available on campus and in the local community may include the campus counseling center, student groups, LGBT Office, harassment reporting, coffee shops, restaurants, bookstores, and local organizations. This information should be condensed into a document for later perusal.

*Terminology.* Provide for a discussion on common terms such as heterosexism, homophobia, transgender, various labels, queer and LGBT symbols. Solicit audience questions and provide a written vocabulary of definitions.

*LGBT and Ally Panel.* An interactive question and answer format with self-identified LGBT and heterosexual ally students, staff, and faculty who raise first-hand issues, concerns, and experiences on campus. Due to time constraints a moderator may need to limit the type of questions asked. Provide note cards for participants to write questions on and then choose a diverse set to use.

*LGBT Developmental Theory and Ally/Majority Developmental Theory.* Using sexual identity formation theory (e.g., Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), explain that LGBT people may have different needs and emphasize that people may be at different stages in various areas of their life (school v. job; v. family v. friends). Allow participants to examine their level of homophobia using the Riddle Homophobia Scale (Riddle, 1996) while using majority/ally identity theory (Broido, 1997; Sullivan, 1998; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002) to explain that heterosexual people have different needs as well. Use panelist stories to illustrate.

*Role Plays/Case Study Exercises/Digital Video Scenarios and Discussion.* Ask participants to act out various pre-written scenarios and re-

spond to video scenarios. These help prepare future allies for verbal and nonverbal communication with LGBT and heterosexual people.

*Sign Contract/Values Statement/Provide Sign, Sticker.* The contract is an agreement to provide a “safe zone” for anyone dealing with sexual orientation or gender identity issues. It emphasizes that an ally is meant for support & referral and is not a professional counselor (UC Riverside Allies Contract, n.d.). Signing the contract is required before anyone can hang or use the sign or identifiable resources of the program. It helps staff, faculty, and students consider whether they can meet the responsibilities of being a member. One challenge some people of faith must consider is whether they can be affirming when they hold religious beliefs contrary to being supportive of LGBT people. In these cases, potential allies can be asked if they would be able to refrain from challenging someone based on their religious beliefs, and if they could refer visitors to another ally or to a campus resource that will be supportive in spiritual matters. Many potential allies recognize a duty to be supportive of others, especially if they are staff or faculty seeking to create a safe learning environment, regardless of their religious beliefs. However, even those who cannot make this commitment have gained knowledge and resources; sometimes they choose to join at a later time when they can sign the contract and make the commitment with sincerity.

### ***POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS***

There may be some resistance to posting a sign/sticker that is only for LGBT people. Some people, mainly faculty or staff, may say this is a “special” program and should include all people in a “safe” space. Some may question whether racial and ethnic minorities are or should be part of your “safe” program. Others may refuse to participate because it is only for LGBT people. Still, some may counter: Are we going to have a sticker for every group of people on this campus? Why isn’t a sign already posted in an office/department decrying racism or sexism and advocating inclusion in the office if it is such a large issue?

The reality is that not all people on campus are supportive, knowledgeable, or understanding of LGBT people. Some persons on campus are homophobic or heterosexist. And, there is a difference between posting a “safe” sign that conveys a strong message of support *for* LGBT people as opposed to posting a blanket statement *against* discrimination already included in campus policy. Some schools, such as Indiana University, have avoided this issue altogether by designing a



program that is inclusive of everyone on campus. All participants in such programs should agree to be supportive and affirming of all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Additionally, many schools do not have professionally staffed LGBT offices or dedicated resources for LGBT students. In times of financial crisis, when budgets are thin, these programs are an inexpensive and temporary way to help alleviate a lack of dedicated resources. However, a recognized LGBT student organization, whether it receives student activities funding or not, is an inadequate response to providing dedicated resources to provide support, education, advocacy, and climate change on campus.

Many LGBTQ people will assume a space is not safe until shown otherwise. Prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity often times goes unchallenged and because a person may not be recognizable as LGBT, she or he may hear heterosexist or homophobic comments from people who are not aware of whom they offend. Furthermore, potential LGBT mentors may be hidden within a hostile climate.

### **MEMBERSHIP**

No one should be pressured to become a member of a LGBT Safe Space Ally program. Despite such fears from some administrators or faculty, an assessment at Duke University found that “members did not join the program because they were required or pressured” (Poynter & Lewis, 2003, p. 1). Membership, too, varies from campus to campus. Not all allies to the LGBT community are members of their program. Many potential members of the program—individuals supportive of the LGBT community on a daily basis who may have great knowledge of issues and resources—never participate. They may not have the opportunity to attend a training session or feel unsafe participating in the program for professional reasons. Characteristics of those that are affirming toward LGBT people and, thus, may get involved include women, people with previous interpersonal contact with LGBT people, those with an advanced education, friends that have similar views and those with prior involvement in social justice activities for other traditionally under-represented groups (Herek & Capitanio, 1995; 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993).

At UC Riverside, 520 people signed contracts between 2000 and 2004 after attending a three-hour training session. Sixty percent were

women, 39 percent men, and less than 1 percent transgender. Undergraduates comprised seventy-one percent with the remainder being staff, faculty, and graduate students. At Duke University over 400 people have attended a four-hour training session; 365 people have joined since February of 2000. Seventy percent of the current membership was staff and faculty and thirty percent were undergraduate and graduate students. A third of the members were male.

### ***ONGOING ACTIVITIES AND EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS***

Most LGBT Safe Space Ally programs only require that members attend an initial training, display a sticker or sign, and provide a “safe” environment. While a mandatory training provides a strong foundation, ongoing educational opportunities are required to better understand and provide appropriate resources for a complex and diverse LGBT community. Some programs provide additional components or ongoing voluntary activities, including social events, focused educational workshops, brown-bag lunch discussions, train the trainer workshops, e-mail listserv, newspaper ads, and invitations to LGBT events. Some workshops, discussions or panels may also be open to the wider campus.

### ***ASSESSING THE PROGRAM***

LGBT Safe Space Ally programs make a difference. Anecdotal evidence is most often cited as support that these programs are meeting their stated goals. Assessment results, however, from two different institutions (Iowa State University and Duke University) found their programs increased visibility, improved the environment, improved conversations, and increased the comfort levels of program participants (Evans, 2002; Poynter & Lewis, 2003). However, some participants report that they did not have many interactions with people on campus as a result of participating in the program. Nevertheless, conversations increased for some and, as a result, campus awareness around LGBT issues is fostered. Other tangible benefits are apparent such as indirect interactions (LGBT people feeling an increased comfort level) and changing a perceived negative campus image (Evans, 2002).

Assessment of Safe programs is essential. A quality assessment will include a review of program goals/objectives that support the depart-

ment or university mission statement, an analysis of outcomes resulting from the program, and decisions and recommendations (Bresciani, 2003; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Items to assess in a LGBT Safe Space Ally program include trainings, workshops, campus culture change, number and type of member conversations, member comfort level change, and awareness of the program in the LGBT community. Evaluation methods can include training exit surveys, online surveys of membership and the LGBT community (Poynter & Lewis, 2003) and advisory board or focus group feedback.

### NOTE

1. It is important to note that LGBT people can also be allies but may choose not to be due to fear, discrimination, or harassment. Therefore, heterosexual and gender-normative allies hold much power to affect change that contributes to a more accepting campus climate.

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