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In search of safety: A case study of LGBT+ college students' perception of safe spaces at a rural university

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The purpose of this study was to better understand how LGBT+ college students find a safe space on college and university campuses when there is not one already provided for them. Strange and Banning's (2015) four environments served as the theoretical framework. Data were collected through individual interviews with six college students who identify within the LGBT+ community and attend a mid-sized institution in South Georgia which does not have an established safe space. Students indicated locations like the library, front lawn, and individuals such as faculty, staff, and student organizations offered safe spaces. The results can better inform student affairs educators or any professional who works with LGBT+ populations on how to better support these students. It also supports the trend of colleges and universities establishing safe spaces for their LGBT+ students.

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Colleges and universities strive to create inclusive environments that foster academic success and honor the identities of their students. As college populations become more diverse over generations there are many challenges to ensure that all populations are protected. One specific population that has grown tremendously in terms of visibility are students that identify under the umbrella term of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT+) (Legg et al., 2020). LGBT+ students have had a long history of fighting for inclusion and safety on college campuses (Beemyn, 2019). Some college campuses have safe spaces on their campuses; physical places on campus that are specifically set aside for LGBT+ students and allies to be themselves and share their ideas and feelings without risk of being persecuted or judged for their beliefs or identities (Pitcher et al., 2018). Some administrators and student affairs educators criticize safe spaces, noting that they can shelter students from having tough conversations that would enhance academic growth (Brown & Mangan, 2016). Others argue that safe spaces increase the feeling of inclusion for college students with historically marginalized identities. Harpalani (2017) asserted that safe spaces aid to the educational benefits of diversity by becoming a marketplace of ideas. While many college campuses have established a safe space program, some do not have a set

space at their institution solely dedicated to LGBT+ students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explain how LGBT+ students create a community and form their own safe space on a college campus without one.

Background

When observing higher education environments today, it is apparent that institutions have become more inclusive of gender and sexuality diversity. Notably, there are now more than 250 colleges and universities with some form of a LGBT+ resource center in the United States (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2021) and many have an LGBT+ studies program (Younger, 2020). While there have been many advancements there is still more that can be done to improve the state of LGBT+ individuals on college and university campuses.

In a study of 11,362 students in 23 high schools indicated that LGBT+ students exhibited higher rates of depression and suicidal behavior in comparison to heterosexual and cis-gendered students (Espelage & Merrin, 2016). A separate study of 347 LGBT+ students across the United States found that 89% of participants indicated they had experienced low occurrences of physical bullying victimization related to their sexual orientation or gender identity and 1.4% had experience physical bullying victimization at

a high frequency (Moran et al., 2018). The same study also reported the highest frequencies of bullying came in the form of verbal bullying and they had the most support from their peers. These studies demonstrate while campus climates have improved for LGBT+ college students, there is still work that can be done to ensure college students are being cared for and safe.

The most recent national analysis of campus climates specifically for LGBT+ individuals was completed by Campus Pride in 2010 (Rankin et al., 2010). The report included 5,149 responses, 2,384 of which were from undergraduate students. Participants who identified as part of the LGBT+ community had all experienced high levels of harassment in comparison to their straight and cis-gender counterparts. In the report, students reported higher levels in comparison to the faculty and other participants. LGBT+ participants also reported lower levels of comfortability on campus and the comfort levels of Students of Color were even less so. Students of Color were also more likely to have witnessed and been harassed in comparison to their White peers (Rankin et al., 2010). The results of this study are alarming, and institutions of higher education need to take this report and their own campus climate reports into consideration when making decisions that affect the LGBT+ community on their campus. The report also

demonstrates that schools need to do a better job of protecting and ensuring their students, particularly their Students of Color, receive the support they need and that institutions are truly enforcing non-discrimination policies.

One reason that LGBT+ students may not feel as safe on campus is because of the practice and history of the Traditionally Heterogender Institution (THI). The THI is a concept that was developed from the notion of a Traditionally White Institution (TWI) (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). A TWI is an abstraction of Critical Race Theory applied to institutions of higher education to determine how students of color are being supported or undermined by institutions that have a long history of predominately serving White students (Iverson, 2007). Similarly, THI applies Queer Theory to higher education institutions. Preston and Hoffman (2015) explain how LGBT+ resource centers and safe spaces seek to provide students with emotional, mental, and health support while providing a space on campus for students to feel welcomed and comfortable but the goals may provide some disadvantages that continuously promote the idea of a THI. Resource centers perpetuate this negativity by focusing only on the support of students.

Preston and Hoffman (2015) argue that LGBT+ centers need to do a better job of promoting advocacy and social

transformation as a part of mission statements and goals. The language used by centers often 'others' LGBT+ students, making them feel less than heterosexual and cis-gender students because of the extra support they need. Preston and Hoffman (2015) recommend that instead of 'othering' LGBT+ students, centers should promote engagement in the larger institution and community by expanding their horizons by getting involved in other campus and community activities.

LGBT+ students have reported that just because an institution is LGBT+ friendly, it does not mean that LGBT+ students are immune from threats, acts of violence, or feelings discomfort while on campus. Through a visual and discourse study of an institution, Pryor (2018) conducted a study in which students illustrated locations on campus that evoked feelings of discomfort among LGBT+ college students. Almost all the participants had mentioned that Greek life, campus recreation, and athletics heightened feelings of self-consciousness and uneasiness. The reason the students state this is because of the heavily binary system of these functional areas. Pryor wrote: "These systems are historically situated along the gender binary, rooted in masculinist traditions, and perpetuated in residential life facilities, campus locker room facilities... or through Greek organizations that provide

narrow definitions of gender membership requirements" (2018, p. 40). To get away from the practices of a THI, institutions must include LGBT+ students in all-campus events and activities to prevent 'othering' LGBT+ students. Institutions should also investigate advocating for changes regarding residence halls, athletic facilities, and other locations so that transgender and non-binary students are able to participate without fear of feeling different and not welcomed.

Safe Spaces

Safe spaces have an unclear beginning but started off as community spaces for social movements such as the civil rights movement, the woman's movement, and others. Safe spaces serve as a way for marginalized communities to come together and escape their oppressors (Oglesby, 2019), to escape trauma or triggering events (Byron, 2017), and activism (Pasque & Vargas, 2014). Safe spaces on college campuses have been used by many different groups of students. Students seek out support and will try to find spaces that make them feel comfortable and free of harm.

While some colleges and universities have safe spaces as a resource for their students to use, others do not (Pitcher et al, 2018). On college campuses without designated safe spaces, students seek out other areas or people on campus that can become

a mentor or a safe person for them to talk to. Examples of this are evident through Wexelbaum's (2018) study of the correlation between library usage and LGBT student retention. Using "LGBT" (p. 31) as an umbrella term, Wexelbaum deduced that LGBT students will feel safe in the library because since a young age queer students have demonstrated an affinity for libraries. Libraries being a safe space may be even more evident on campus where there are no safe spaces because there is usually always a library on a college campus but not always a safe space.

Similarly, Southerland (2018) explored music classrooms as a safe space for "LGBTQ" (p. 40) students. Southerland asserted that music and the activities of music classrooms can reduce anxiety and stress for LGBTQ students. Southerland provided implications for music educators working with LGBTQ students, most notably the need to create a stress-reducing learning environment and to use inclusive language in their classrooms. Linley et al. (2016), furthered this in their study of faculty as sources of support for "LGBTQ" (p. 55). Using a subset of data from a national study on LGBTQ student success, the researchers determined ways in which faculty can support the population. Formal and informal interactions, both inside and outside of the classroom, developing non-heteronormative curricula, and making

themselves visible and known as member of, or ally to, the LGBTQ community (2016).

In higher education, safe spaces have been used to refer to areas on campus where students of marginalized identities would be at low risk of harm from both real and perceived, connect with fellow members of the identity groups. This has caused competing ideologies on what a safe space is meant for. Some see safe spaces to coddle students and not challenge them academically or socially. Others believe that safe spaces provide the comfortability of being open to sharing ideas and having an open conversation on a multitude of topics (Ali, 2007) Both arguments illustrate that students of historically marginalized identities do experience some form of harm or harassment. The latter viewpoint sees this as a reason to provide the spaces but the former imagines that the harm could offer a space for dialogue and discussion surrounding which could benefit all involved parties.

While safe spaces can detract from an educational moment for the students, the harm that the marginalized student may experience is not always considered in this school of thought which is inherently unjust and ascribes to the ideology of people in the position of power. To keep individuals safe, one must be free of real and perceived threats of violence. Fast (2018) furthers:

Safety entails a positive conception... worthy of safety and protection, and is valuable in creating the shared world. When marginalized groups are denied physical and psychological right to remittance from violence, they are also denied right to recognition and instead often suffer from misrecognition. (pp. 4-5)

Fast (2018) explicates how she creates a safer space in her classroom where she supports her students and allows them to share. She also does not alienate opinions that may be considered problematic because students are taught to question power structures and that power structures are dynamic and can be challenged and changed. Students with historically marginalized identities are also given the ability to respond or not respond; they do not have to be the spokesperson for their identity.

Theoretical Framework

A safe space is a space where LGBT+ students feel safe and comfortable enough to express themselves in terms of their gender and sexual identity. It is important to understand that this can be anywhere. The safe space is determined by the individual person and it is dictated by the individual person. The individual can decide a space is safe for a multitude of reasons such as the company the individual is with, the physical location,

and the lived experiences of the individual while they have been in this space.

Strange and Banning's (2015) four environments of colleges and universities served as the primary framework for this study. Those four environments are the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and the socially constructed. All play an important role in understanding how to best support college students and how college students view the environment around them.

The physical environment is one that comprises all the buildings, natural and designed landscapes, and human made objects and artifacts (Strange & Banning, 2015). This also encompasses how much the natural landscape of an institution's layout influences how a campus was originally planned and how it continues to grow. Examples of the physical environment are the buildings and pathways laid out by the institution, the types of trees or grass used to decorate the institutions more natural areas, sculptures that are displayed on campus, or trash not disposed of properly.

The human aggregate environment is dependent on the characteristics of the college or university community as a whole and the characteristics of the dominant group. These characteristics influence the institution's decision making and identity (Strange & Banning, 2015). Examples of the human aggregate at a higher education institution

can be seen greatly at a Historic Black College or University (HBCU) or a Minority Serving Institution (MSI). HBCUs and MSIs have an identity of having a strong commitment to uplifting and representing marginalized groups in society. They also place an emphasis on honoring the traditions and history of the pioneers of their identity group who has come before them.

The organizational environment is described as the environment in where power is held. This center of power can be different depending on which organization inside an institution one is looking at or when looking at an institution where the power lies at that specific institution (Strange & Banning, 2015). An example of an organizational environment can be seen in most housing and residence life departments. Many departments have a central office where most of the power is held in but residence hall directors, resident assistants, and other staff who work directly in the residence halls also hold some amount of power in their office space or living area.

The fourth environment is the socially constructed environment. Socially constructed environments can assist students in learning and growing during their collegiate years. The students' perception and definition of the environment around them direct an influence on their behavior in that space. The perception of the space and the

university by many individuals also informs the overall campus climate of the institution (Strange & Banning, 2015). If enough students feel safe and comfortable being on campus, then the campus climate report will say that the institution is very welcoming to individuals of various identities.

Strange and Banning's (2015) four environments are appropriate for this study because as will be revealed later, students define a safe space for them as when they are able to act in a way that does not contradict their gender or sexual identity. This also includes the people that they choose to include in their safe space. Since the students have decided the location is available as a safe space where they can express themselves freely. When students can make their safe space then the overall campus feels more accepting. This also means that if an individual feels they can freely express themselves all over campus, then the institution is completing its goal of creating a safe and welcoming environment for all individuals regardless of their identity. The theory also serves as a starting point to determine how the results can be impactful to the student affairs profession.

Methods

Valdosta State University students who identify as members of the LGBT+ community were asked about how they find safe spaces

on campus for themselves and their community. These questions were tailored to better understand the research question that guided this study: *How do VSU's LGBT+ students find safe spaces on campus?* These safe spaces were locations the students say are the most comfortable for them to be open about their sexuality and gender identities. This space is also where LGBT+ students share their ideas without risk of being harassed by fellow community members. Narrative inquiry served as the method of data collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). It was best suited for this study as the researcher wanted to examine the life experiences and hear the stories of participants (2019). Upon Institutional Review Board approval from VSU, the researcher collected data via Zoom interviews due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. One participant chose to share her perspective via email, due to concerns of being outed. The interviews were recorded and kept secure on the researcher's computer under password protection. The recordings were then transcribed and then the voice recordings were deleted. The researcher analyzed the data by coding and theming respondent's answers. Coding is a process which involves analyzing participants responses and picking out recurring topics over multiple interviews. When these themes are repeatedly appearing then these are the

codes that will develop into themes for the research (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019).

These codes were utilized to inform the researcher on the respondent's personal experiences. When themes were developed, they provide more validity to the experience of the LGBT+ students that attend the institution. Subthemes are also common occurrences found in participant's responses that be grouped together and then combined into a larger theme (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). The subthemes provided additional information that assisted the research in better understanding the collective stories of the group.

To ensure trustworthiness of these data, the researcher utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The goal of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to support the argument that the study's findings are "worth paying attention to" (1985, p. 290). To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in conversations with the research mentors about data collection and analysis. Further, the researcher member-checked data with participants; each participant had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts.

The researcher developed an interview guide of questions. Using this guide and a semi-structured interview format, participants were asked to share their personal

narratives. They were encouraged to share in depth so that the researcher was able to have a full, well-rounded view of the participants' experience in the different spaces. This also allowed for researcher to empathize and understand what their true

experiences were in the space they were discussing.

Participants

Table 1 provides relevant demographic information about each participant.

Table 1. Individual Interview Participant Profile Table

Participant	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Race	Classification	Sexual Orientation
Cam	Cisgender Female	She/Her	Hispanic	Senior	Bisexual
Walker	Cisgender Male	He/Him	Hispanic	Sophomore	Gay
Jay	Cisgender Female	She/Her	White	Sophomore	Bisexual
Tyler	Cisgender Male	He/Him	Black	Senior	Gay
Emily	Cisgender Female	She/Her	Not Provided	Not Provided	Bisexual
Sam	Gender Fluid	They/Them	White	Sophomore	Queer

The six participants in the study come from a variety of backgrounds. It was important for the researcher to be selective on who was included in the study to ensure there were a variety of backgrounds and identities represented. The participants were recruited through both convenience and snowball sampling methods. The researcher knew Cam, Walker, and Sam through their campus involvements and asked them to participate in the study. Walker referred the researcher to Jay. Tyler and Emily were recruited through a different means. The researcher obtained permission from the

Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) President to send a message in the organization's GroupMe which held all the GSAs members. Two members responded to the message; the researcher contacted them to confirm that they wanted to participate to which both agreed.

Emily had a unique situation in which she was not out to her family and was fearful of what their reaction would be to them finding out about her sexual identity. To provide the utmost safety, Emily completed a questionnaire rather than an interview. While Emily provided a great level of detail, the

modified format resulted in the researcher not being able to probe deeper into Emily's responses.

Results

Multiple themes emerged from the research. There were a few outliers that brought in a new perspective or gave deeper insight into the issues the researcher explored. These new insights and viewpoints can also be used as a springboard for future research on safe spaces for LGBT+ college students.

Safer On Campus

All participants noted that Valdosta State University was a safe space for them in comparison to off campus locations. Students felt that on campus they could more openly express their gender identity or sexual orientation on campus. This means that VSU, whether it be the students, the physical location, or the constructed spaces contribute positively to LGBT+ students' lives while they are on campus. This places a certain level of responsibility on VSU students, faculty, and most importantly administrators to ensure the campus continues to be a safe space for LGBT+ individuals and that we affirm and appreciate the LGBT+ community on campus.

The Library and Front Lawn

On campus, there is a specific location that many participants identified as a safe space:

the library. Students who mentioned the library as a specific safe space said it is because in the library everyone is focused on their own work. This means that there is less attention put on other individuals in the library, so people feel free to be themselves. One participant specifically theorizes that LGBT+ individuals feel safer in libraries because they are surrounded by books which may be a form of comfort for LGBT+ students from a young age.

Jay and Emily both mentioned that the front lawn, a major gathering place for students, as a safe space. Jay said, "It's like on the lawn and stuff. But I know, like, the last relationship I was in was with a woman and we would go out and hang out there and stuff it like, you know, just be cute and like, you know, no one was really weird about it". Emily noted, "[My safe space] was my room, before I left...I also liked being out on the lawn". Both students acknowledged this is because being outside allows them to be themselves with no one paying attention to them. They also gave similar reasoning for the front lawn to be a safe space as they did with the library. Both areas where students can be themselves while keeping to themselves.

When asked about a safe space on campus for them, Cam said, "For me, like a safe space on campus. For one, I love the library. That's where I practically like live. I

practically like live at the library because I don't live on campus" and Tyler furthered, "I want to go into the library more often to just to study. And I used the study rooms a lot just to like, you know, decompress with life sometimes. And I found myself a lot more as the year went on."

Faculty, Staff, and Student Organizations

Participants were also probed about who or what makes a safe space. This was because many students listed a specific location as their safe space but through further questioning it was revealed that the students, faculty, and staff that affirm their identities that truly make a safe space for them. Some participants mentioned that regardless of the exact location that they were in, if the people that were in the location accepted them, they truly felt like they were in a safe space. Jay explained when speaking about the Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) on campus that it "was kind of like the first time that I actually experienced, like, that much acceptance from people around me who all, like, knew how I identified and everything like openly".

The opposite is also true according to some participants. Some said that a space for them can be considered safe until someone who is not affirming of their identities enters the physical location. Sam summed up this experience by noting, "Location doesn't

mean anything if the people who are entering it are hateful". Sam further explained their feelings by stating, "I can walk into [my residence hall] and I'll see a group of people who I know have not been nice to me and I'll be like, oh, I'm out. I'll be like, I don't feel safe here anymore".

Furthermore, students were asked to list specific university faculty and administrators who provided a safe space for them. The most common participants were the staff in the Student Diversity and Inclusion office and the Housing and Residence Life Office. Students also listed specific professors who they have experienced during their time at VSU. Emily stated, "Most of my professors have made it clear that their classrooms are safe spaces". Jay also further explicated why one of her professors was very impactful on her. Jay stated: "And he was like a World Lit professor and he also like had us study a lot of like LGBTQ literature, which was really cool because, you know, I've never really had a class that like did that." The reason that these offices and professors offered a safe space for the participants was because the groups did not treat anyone differently because of their gender or sexual identity. Participants also shared that two organizations that shared these feelings were the GSA and the Student Government Association. These two organizations offered the same feelings for

the same reason as the offices and professors.

Unsafe Spaces

There are general locations on campus where some participants stated that in a larger crowds or areas with large amounts of foot traffic, they began feeling more uncomfortable. Participants mentioned when they are in an extremely public location, a lot more people will begin staring at them. Specific locations mentioned were the walkway in the center of campus and the student union. Participants mentioned that to combat feelings that other people may have negative attitudes towards them, the campus should make more educational opportunities available to all students to learn more about various sexuality and gender identities and social issues. One believed many students at their institution have not been exposed to queer identities or queer individuals. Therefore, they think it is imperative these are the students who attend the trainings and educational sessions. When asked what VSU could do to make the campus safer, Sam specifically said, "Education... Base knowledge like, hey, these people exist. They're like you and me. It's literally normal. It's not a special circumstance or anything like that. I'm a normal person and I don't know. I just feel like these people were more exposed to it". Cam also further explained

why being on campus feels safer than off campus by saying: "You know, because I was literally talking about this with someone the other day, the fact that education tends to breed, more open mindedness." These educational moments can help make them more comfortable with the topics that affect the LGBT+ community. It is the hope that educating around these issues will eventually lead to more acceptance from the overall VSU community.

Establishing a Safe Space on Campus

Finally, participants provided perspective on what they believe the benefits would be for creating an established safe space on campus. All participants were in support of having a safe space established for LGBT+ students, some mentioned faculty and staff being included in the safe space as well. There was only one participant, Walker, who was apprehensive about creating a safe space. They said that going to the space would automatically label someone as a member of LGBT+ community or an ally. This can be dangerous if there was to be a person that was looking to harm or target the LGBT+ community, but this fear could be counteracted if there was education and programming surrounding these topics.

Regardless, most participants feel that having a safe space would be overall beneficial and helpful to the LGBT+

community. When asked to describe what the space would look like, most students mentioned that it should be closed off but open enough for people to enter. For participants, this was important because although they wanted the space to be open to all, they also felt it necessary for it to be their own space, not shared with other affinity groups. Words used to describe the inside of the space were comfy, welcoming, accepting groups, artistic, and filled with music. Some students mentioned that there should be an administrator or faculty member that would be there to support students who may be in crisis and to address any issues that may arise while students are using the safe space.

These results are useful and provide insight into how LGBT+ students find safe spaces on college campuses. The results show that students are more inclined to have a safe space with individuals who are accepting of their identities. When students are alone they are more inclined to enjoy spaces such as a library as their safe space because there are fewer people paying attention to them and potentially judging them for their gender or sexual identity. Students also revealed through their answers that there are spaces on campus in which they do not feel safe. These locations are usually where there is a high population of students because LGBT+ students perceive there to be

more of a threat to them in these locations. Students also mentioned that there are certain faculty, staff, and student organizations that provide a safe space. These results are important how they apply to further research and student affairs practice will be discussed.

Discussion

Previous literature supports a great deal of the findings from the interviews. Specifically, libraries safe spaces for LGBT+ students are found in much of the literature. As Wexelbaum (2018) explains, "LGBT students may seek more alone time, seek the company of others to whom they need to explain nothing, or pursue their own interests independent from the classroom. For avid readers, this means learning in libraries" (p. 7). This is demonstrated by multiple students' responses. The library offers a space where they do not have a risk of someone targeting them or expecting anything from them. They are also allowed to do what they want within reason, and they will not be ridiculed for it. Cam's "love [for] the library" and Tyler's use of the library to "decompress with life" indicate they have found solace in the library and use it for more purposes than studying.

From this, it can be deduced that areas in which students feel like fewer people will pay attention to them, the safer the space is for the student to express their gender

identity and sexual orientation. By this logic, students need a support group around them of people that do not pose a threat of danger so that they can be able to fully explore their identity and continue to grow and develop. While Southerland's (2018) research focused on music classrooms, a connection can be made to several participants' perceptions of the VSU front lawn. Southerland found music classrooms to be a place where LGBTQ students can reduce stress and anxiety. Jay and Emily's time spent on the front lawn was similar; Jay said she felt comfortable spending time with her girlfriend "just be[ing] cute" and Emily noted she liked being outside and felt safe on the lawn. Whether it was Southerland's (2018) music classrooms or VSU's front lawn, the space was a place where students could be themselves and not feel anxiety.

Parallels to Fast's (2018) thoughts on classrooms as safe spaces and Linley et al.'s (2016) research on faculty serving as sources of support for LGBTQ students are also evident in this research. Both Emily and Jay commented on the faculty establishing their classrooms as safe spaces. Jay also noted a World Literature professor who incorporated LGBT+ literature into the class. This directly connects to Linley et al.'s (2016) assertion of the need for non-heteronormative curricula and demonstrates a way faculty

can serve as allies through the courses they teach.

Connection to Strange and Banning's Four Environments

The students' responses link very well with Strange and Banning's (2015) Four Environments. The themes indicate there is some correlation between physical space to place being safe for students. Students indicated places like the front lawn and the library as safe spaces for them due to the low attention they receive in these places. While one student did indicate that areas with a lot of foot traffic are not as safe of a place for them. Specifically mentioned areas are the walkway between all the academic buildings leading up to the library and the Student Union. Participants noted both places at certain times do have many students walking through, and the large number of students makes them uncomfortable because they are unsure of what all those students' thoughts are and how they will react to them and their identity.

Further analysis of the results also reveals that students create socially constructed environments to ensure a safe space for them. Students indicated they feel safer in environments that allow them to express themselves freely with no fear of judgment based on their gender identity or

sexuality. Students also noted that the physical location has little to no meaning without accounting for the individuals who are also in the space. This means that students utilize elements of the human aggregate and socially constructed environment when their safe spaces are only with specific people. This is also true when students cite a location where they began identifying within the LGBT+ community or began exploring those identities such as a residence hall. The residence halls provided a space for the individuals to not only explore their gender and sexual identity but also to have discussions with other students who are a part of their safe space unit.

Finally, students also at times utilized the organizational environment when discussing a safe space. This is seen through faculty, staff, and student organizations that they feel provide a safe space. These places also coincide with where LGBT+ students would be able to find resources specifically dedicated to LGBT+ students like the GSA, Student Diversity and Inclusion Office, and Housing and Residence Life Office. These organizations offer student support, so students recognize these spaces as safe spaces and feel comfortable when they are with people who are a part of these organizations or are associated with them.

VSU as a Safe Campus

VSU is fairly representative of a THI. From the results gathered from the students, there were rarely events hosted on campus that were focused on educating the campus community about topics related to LGBT+ identities. A THI usually has a focus on supporting LGBT+ students only when they are in crisis and much of the programming is centered on mental health issues for LGBT+ students (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). One student in particular, Sam, is a huge proponent of getting more educational events for students to learn about the LGBT+ community and the identities associated with it.

The results from the research do not verify all the research presented in the literature review. Specifically, no students indicated they had experienced any form of discrimination while attending VSU. This contradicts data that suggests that around half of LGBT+ students will experience high levels of harassment in comparison to their straight and cis-gender counterparts (Rankin et al., 2010). While data reported from students may not be representative of the entire population of LGBT+ students at VSU, it is to be noted that none of them had experienced any form of harassment. The participants also did not indicate any forms of feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in the recreational facilities or while attending athletic events on campus. This directly contradicts a study

conducted by Pryor (2018) which stated that participants in the study stated that Greek life, campus recreation, and athletics were among the locations or offices on campus that made students feel the most unsafe.

Implications for Student Affairs Practice

As student affairs educators who interact with a multitude of students, it is imperative that administrators have at least a base knowledge of cultural competency to ensure that students are supported and cared for. This is also true for working with students who identify within the LGBT+ community. Student affairs administrators have direct contact with students and should support them along their developmental journey. Given this, educators can help students find their safe spaces on campus. Since safe spaces are made up of students, staff, and faculty that support LGBT+ students' identities. Student affairs educators can connect students with resources and people that will become a safe space for them. More importantly, student affairs educators themselves need to be safe spaces for LGBT+ college students. LGBT+ students need support when times are hard, celebration when times are good, and development when that is needed as well. Student affairs administrators also must accept everyone's identity and be willing to learn more about the identity in depth so they can be knowledgeable on what

resources the student will need to be safe and successful in their higher education journey.

To ensure that LGBT+ students are getting the support, these data support starting a safe space on campus for LGBT+ students but administrators must also ensure that the individuals in the room agree to support everyone's identity. The data also supports more educational opportunities for students of all backgrounds to learn about issues that affect the LGBT+ community. Student affairs administrators can provide workshops and training that will lead to a better understanding of the identities associated with LGBT+. This can lead to more acceptance and will provide an overall safer space on campus for individuals. These programs may already be held by offices, but they may not publicize in a way that could attract the greatest number of students. Offices that already hold these sessions should investigate what could be done to possibly engage more student populations including offering a session on diverse identities during an orientation for new students so that all students receive the education as they enter their institution. Furthermore, student affairs educators need to participate in training to be able to support students who are a part of the LGBT+ community because, by virtue of their occupations, they are safe spaces for LGBT+ students.

Implications for Future Research

LGBT+ students have experienced overt forms of homophobia, transphobia, and persecution throughout their history but have also seen the institutions of higher education evolve, become more accepting, and begin to offer more resources. This study also reveals several future areas of research that could be very impactful to a better understanding of how LGBT+ college students grow and develop and how institutions of higher education can further support LGBT+ college students.

Further areas of research or projects that institutions can complete are if their student population would benefit from having a safe space at their institution. Researchers can also do more research into how safe spaces aid in the development of LGBT+ individuals and to what extent safe spaces help in an overall LGBT+ college students' journey through college. One final research project that could prove useful is how and why institutions as an entity provide an automatic safe space for college students and how much more supported do students feel once there is a safe space established on campus. Having an established safe space for LGBT+ college students may positively impact students who are in search of a safe space, but it also may negatively impact how LGBT+ students find a safe space because they may not feel comfortable going to a safe

space out of fear of being labeled by others or fear of being outed to their already established friend group.

Another area of future research could focus on how Gender Inclusive Housing options also aid a student in finding individuals to include in their safe space. Does having a location designated as Gender Inclusive become a safe space for the LGBT+ students or do they feel labeled and are at risk of being the victim of hate? This mindset can also be applied to other affinity groups such as for specific races and ethnicities or common interest groups. Furthermore, other historically marginalized identity groups should be studied to determine if they go through a similar process of finding safe spaces. Specifically, Students of Color, female-identifying students, low-income students, religiously diverse, and first-generation college students can be a fruitful area of research. Further research should also explore the role intersecting identities play in determining safe spaces. For example, do Black LGBT+ college students try to seek out other Black LGBT+ students for their safe spaces or do they make separate safe spaces for themselves in terms of one for their racial identity and a different one for their sexual or gender identity?

Geographic location and institution characteristics can also be insightful areas to explore. This study only focused on students

who attend a rural, mid-sized public institution in South Georgia. Results may vary for institutions located in an urban or suburban area, or of differing sizes. LGBT+ students who attend rural institutions in other regions of the country may have an entirely different experience than those in this study. This research has provided insight into one population and opened the door for research on many others.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine how LGBT+ students find a safe space on a college campus that does not formally provide them with one. Safe spaces can be defined as a place where students feel safe enough to be themselves and express their gender and sexual identity freely with no risk of being persecuted or becoming susceptible to hate (Moran, Chen, & Tryon, 2018; Rankin et al., 2010). Students find safe spaces in locations where they feel comfortable enough to be themselves. The researchers also explored what factors go into the decision-making process to determine if a place is a safe space for LGBT+ and what factors play the biggest role in determining a safe space.

This study revealed many insightful feelings and thoughts about safe spaces from six LGBT+ students on campus. The most important findings were that overall students felt safe on campus. The participants

stated that a safe space for them is one in which they can freely express themselves. This means that their gender and sexual identity would not be scrutinized by others. Some spaces that offered this to LGBT+ students are the library, front lawn, and residence halls. Another important finding was that students made a safe space with those around them that affirmed their identity. These results are important because they indicate an initiative for colleges and universities to best ensure their students feel safe and comfortable while they attend their institution. The results also give focus to student affairs educators making sure that they are aware that often they become a safe space for their students. This means that they need to be educated and stay aware of this added role to ensure that LGBT+ students feel safe and supported. Finally, students indicated largely that they would support a safe space being officially established on campus.

LGBT+ students are among a group of students that historically had gone unnoticed and underappreciated as indicated in the literature review. Institutions should be aware of their responsibility to ensure a safe space on all portions of campus for their students. These institutions should also be willing to hear from their LGBT+ students and determine what they can do to better support and celebrate their identity. For some institutions, this may mean establishing a safe

space or celebrating LGBT+ identities more publicly and openly. Institutions can also investigate other initiatives like Gender

Inclusive Housing and analyze policies to demonstrate that heterosexism is not an integrated part of their institutional identity.

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