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LGBTQ+ Safe Zone Ally Workshop

Rocio CHAVELA GUERRA
Rowan University, United States of America, chavelaguerra@rowan.edu

Stephanie FARRELL
Rowan University, United States of America, farrell@rowan.edu

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R.C. Chavela Guerra [1]
Rowan University
Glassboro, New Jersey, USA
ORCID: 0009-0003-6633-1531

S. Farrell
Rowan University
Glassboro, New Jersey, USA
ORCID: 0000-0001-5580-0839

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals have historically faced harassment, exclusionary behavior, and discrimination in many aspects of their lives, including in educational settings. This workshop will equip participants with the knowledge and tools to (1) recognize the negative impact of bias and heterosexual/cisgender privilege on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals; (2) recognize challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in STEM fields; (3) identify strategies for creating an inclusive and affirming environment; and (4) formulate a plan to become an ally for LGBTQ+ individuals. The workshop is open to students, faculty, and the professional community in STEM fields and assumes a basic understanding of LGBTQ+ concepts and terminology. By becoming Safe Zone allies, STEM professionals can help create a more diverse and talented engineering workforce and promote diversity and inclusion within the field.

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[1] *Corresponding Author*
R.C. Chavela Guerra
chavelaguerra@rowan.edu

1 MOTIVATION AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Despite significant progress in LGBTQ+ rights and representation in recent years, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ still face discrimination and marginalization in many areas of society, including in educational settings. In higher education, studies have shown that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience harassment, exclusion, and a hostile campus climate than their heterosexual peers (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer 2010). Research also indicates that a negative campus climate can impact the academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of all students, particularly those from marginalized groups (Greathouse et al. 2018). Therefore, creating an inclusive and supportive campus climate is essential for the success of all students.

As STEM fields have historically been male-dominated and heteronormative, LGBTQ+ individuals in these fields often face unique challenges and barriers to achieving equality. Thus, our abbreviated Safe Zone workshop aims to address the following learning outcomes:

1. Recognize the negative impact of bias and heterosexual/cisgender privilege on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals.
2. Recognize challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in STEM fields and recognize how engineering culture can act as a barrier to inclusion and equality.
3. Identify strategies for creating an inclusive and affirming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals on college campuses.
4. Formulate a plan to become an ally for LGBTQ+ individuals.

2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The concept of Safe Zone workshops can be traced back to the 1980s and the LGBTQ+ community's fight for equal rights and recognition. During this time, some universities and colleges began establishing LGBTQ+ resource centers to provide support and resources for LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff. However, these centers were often insufficient to create a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals on campus.

The Safe Zone program, which originated in the 1990s, has been successful in creating an inclusive campus environment for LGBTQ+ individuals by training faculty, staff, and students to be allies and advocates for the LGBTQ+ community. The program has since been adopted by numerous institutions, with Safe Zone ally training and institutional policy changes affecting a gradual positive change in climate for LGBTQ+ individuals (Mack 2014).

Despite these initiatives, progress in STEM departments has been slower than in other disciplines (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019). Research has shown that aspects of STEM culture serve as impediments to advancing LGBTQ+ equality in our disciplines, which translates into a chillier climate for LGBTQ+ individuals in STEM (Cech 2013, 2015; Cech & Waidzunas 2011).

Therefore, there is a pressing need to create more Safe Zone allies in STEM who can recognize and mitigate the barriers faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in these fields. Our proposed workshop aims to equip participants with strategies for creating a more inclusive and affirming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals in STEM departments and beyond.

3 WORKSHOP DESIGN

This workshop is designed using best practices (LGBT Resource Professionals) to achieve changes in attitudes, knowledge and supportive behaviours of STEM professionals toward LGBTQ+ students and colleagues. The one-hour agenda includes topics related to:

1. Heteronormativity, bias, and heterosexual/cisgender privilege
2. Aspects of engineering culture that serve as a barrier to inclusion and equality for LGBTQ+ individuals
3. Strategies for creating an inclusive and equitable environment for LGBTQ+ students and professionals
4. Formulating a plan to become an LGBTQ+ ally

Prior to the workshop, participants will receive a primer on basic LGBTQ+ concepts and terminology. Workshop activities will promote understanding and empathy and provide opportunities to practice responding to bias. At the end of the workshop, participants will use what they have learned in the workshop to formulate a plan to become an active supporter of LGBTQ+ students and colleagues.

4 SIGNIFICANCE FOR ENGINEERING EDUCATION AND ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE WORKSHOP TOPIC

Safe Zone ally training can help create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff. Like many other STEM fields, engineering has historically been less welcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals, and they may face challenges such as discrimination, harassment, and marginalization. Consequently, LGBTQ+ students and professionals are more likely to leave STEM than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Cech & Waidzunas 2021; Hughes 2018).

By participating in this workshop, engineering educators can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that LGBTQ+ individuals may face in their academic and professional careers and learn strategies to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. The workshop will help practitioners to identify and challenge their own biases and assumptions and provide them with the tools to create a welcoming and affirming environment on campus.

Achieving a critical mass of Safe Zone-trained professionals can help engineering schools and departments send a message that they are committed to promoting diversity and inclusion within the field. This can positively impact the recruitment and retention of LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff and contribute to creating a more diverse and talented engineering workforce.

5 TARGET AUDIENCE & PARTICIPANT KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

This abbreviated Safe Zone Ally Training is an interactive, research-informed workshop for students, faculty, and the professional community. The workshop content and materials have been developed and refined by a community of STEM professionals specifically for a STEM audience. The workshop assumes a basic understanding of LGBTQ+ concepts and terminology around sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Participants will be provided with a resource in advance of the workshop to review these concepts.

6 ENHANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND DIALOGUE ON THE WORKSHOP TOPIC.

Safe Zone workshops are interactive training sessions intended to raise awareness for LGBTQ+ inclusion in STEM and create a visible network of allies to foster a supportive atmosphere for LGBTQ+ individuals. Our abbreviated Safe Zone workshop will provide participants with an awareness of biases and assumptions that may affect interactions with LGBTQ+ individuals. Participants will also learn how to recognize discrimination and privilege and the impact they have on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. In addition, the workshop will explore the specific aspects of engineering culture that can act as barriers to LGBTQ+ equality in STEM fields.

Through interactive activities and discussions, participants will develop empathy and understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences and learn tangible strategies for creating a more inclusive and affirming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals in STEM departments and beyond. By becoming Safe Zone allies, participants can contribute to a campus culture that values diversity, fosters inclusivity, and supports all students' intellectual and social development. A post-workshop survey will be sent to capture participants’ insights and feedback.

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