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Struggling: The Struggles of Queer and Trans* Students in Higher Education

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Struggling: The Struggles of Queer
and Trans* Students in Higher Education
by Giavonna Ward
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Abstract

Queer and trans* students tend to struggle during their time at higher education institutions. They face struggles in various areas of their academic experience including their mental health struggles, in their social and academic integration, and in their experiences with housing and residence life. All these areas could lead to the lack of retention for queer and trans* students in higher education. This project aims to mitigate these struggles through the creation of an intentionally built living-learning community. The community, entitled Thrive, is designed specifically to acknowledge, and help diminish the struggles that queer and trans* students face according to the literature.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Queer and trans* students have historically faced an unwelcoming environment during their higher education experience and though there have been improvements in the recent past, these students still face a set of challenges that can negatively impact their undergraduate experience (Castro et al., 2017). The struggles queer and trans* students face can make their time on campus more difficult and can ultimately lead to lower retention rates (Duran et al., 2020). According to a 2018 study by the Association of American Universities, almost one-fifth of college students identified as being part of the LGBTQ+ community (Cantor et al., 2020). There is very limited data that aids in understanding just how many queer and trans* students are attending college and thus, the quantitative data available to understand queer and trans* students retention rates is limited. Queer and trans* students face several barriers to success on college campuses including mental health concerns, an inability to fully integrate socially and academically, and negative experiences within housing and residence life. Student affairs professionals should be concerned with the retention of queer and trans* students as they are a growing population of students that are exposed to unique challenges that may put them at a greater risk of leaving their institution.

Importance and Rationale of the Problem

Queer and trans* students experience greater mental health problems and psychological distress compared to their peers (Woodford et al., 2018). The mental health struggles queer and trans* students face are well documented, with about 5% of queer and 10% of trans* students having attempted suicide, compared to 0.6% to 1.3%, respectively, for other college students (Woodford et al., 2018). These mental health issues were only exacerbated by the COVID-19

pandemic, with 60% of queer and trans* students experiencing psychological distress, anxiety, and depression (Gonzales et al., 2020). These mental health issues are likely to continue for queer and trans* students according to Meyer's (1995) Minority Stress Theory. Meyer (1995) discusses the ways in which minoritized populations experience environments ruled by dominant ideology, and for queer and trans* students, engaging in a campus that boasts heterosexist ideologies can result in psychological stress. Examples of heterosexist ideologies in higher education include queer and trans* students experiencing microaggressions, unwelcoming housing assignments, and disallowing policies (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). Because heterosexist ideologies can be present on every college campus, identifying the areas that are particularly difficult to navigate for queer and trans* students can aid in understanding of the lived experiences they have at institutions of higher education. By understanding these experiences, professionals can work to create interventions that address the specific needs of queer and trans* students.

Background of the Project

The visibility of queer and trans* students has increased significantly over the past 50 years and in the early 1970s, LGBTQ+ student organizations began to take shape at universities across the country (Dilley, 2019). Early LGBTQ+ student organizations focused on two goals, the first was to provide a space where non-heterosexual students could "come out" and forge community with others, and the second, was to be activists focused on deconstructing the social and cultural order that created negative images of homosexuality (Dilley, 2019). These two goals have largely remained the same and present organizations are still spaces for queer and trans* students to find community with others (Dilley, 2019). A significant shift in national opinion happened with the legalization of gay marriage in 2015 as a result of Obergefell vs.

Hodges (Coley, 2020). However, even with this shift, queer and trans* students still will face negative attitudes based on these identities at institutions of higher education (Mollet et al., 2020). Today, queer and trans* students face struggles particularly within housing and residence life. Queer and trans* students can often face unwelcoming living environments due to the way that housing and residence life offices often operate around the gender binary (Mollet et al., 2020). This can lead queer and trans* students into experiencing varying levels of micro and macro aggressions which could impact their overall mental health (Woodford et al., 2018). Student affairs professionals have attempted to mitigate these negative experiences by creating gender-inclusive housing options. These options, however, can further alienate queer and trans* students, by making them go through possibly triggering processes in order to be allowed to live in the gender-inclusive housing options (Nicolazzo et al., 2018).

Objectives of the Project

The struggles queer and trans* students face continue to be an issue within higher education and could ultimately impact retention of queer and trans* students. With student well-being and retention being a top priority for institutions across the United States, student affairs professionals should design interventions that aid in student well-being and mitigate the issues that queer and trans* students face. The development of a Living Learning Community (LLC) is one possible intervention student affairs professionals can utilize to address this problem. This project is focused on the creation of an LLC intentionally designed for the queer and trans* student population. This LLC will be based upon best practices and will address the unique concerns for queer and trans* students. The creation of this LLC is meant to be replicable across various institution types. The goal is that by creating an intentional and replicable LLC, queer and trans* students will have a space that promotes community, allows students the ability to feel

safe in their housing experience, gives them access to faculty and staff that can promote relationship building, and helps to decrease the mental health issues they face.

Definition of Terms

Below are definitions of key terms used throughout this project:

- *Living-Learning Communities (LLCs)* are a high-impact opportunity in which a group of students sharing similar interests live in the same on-campus residential building (Inkelas et al., 2018).
- *Queer* refers to students that identify their sexuality as going against traditional heterosexual culture (Abes et al., 2019).
- *Retention* is defined as students continuing to enroll in a higher education institution through their college career (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).
- *Trans** refers to students that have moved away from the gender assigned at birth (Niccolazzo, 2016).

Scope of the Project

This project is designed to be implemented at any institution type. It focuses on how student affairs professionals can create and sustain a living-learning community designed specifically for queer and trans* students. The community, entitled Thrive, has been created to address academic integration, social integration, mental health issues, and unwelcoming experiences in housing and residence life for queer and trans* students that have been identified in recent literature. The project provides rationale for why certain components of the LLC are integral to its success and provides options for how student affairs professionals can implement these components with various resource allotments. The project also includes a plan for

assessment so that those working with the community are able to analyze its effectiveness and make adjustments as needed.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The struggles of queer and trans* students in higher education is a topic that has been researched across many different areas and includes struggles in areas like mental health, academic integration, housing and residence life, social integration and more. These areas can also play a role in overall campus climate. Research identifies a connection between campus climate and persistence for queer and trans* students (Blumenfeld et al., 2016). Blumenfeld et al. (2016) reported that a negative campus climate can lead queer and trans* students to feel discouraged, be less invested in their campus, and less comfortable. Students who experience heterosexist campus climates can be at an increased risk of mental health issues which can impact their overall attitude toward their campus (Blumenfeld et al., 2016). Additionally, all these areas of struggle can lead to the overall lack of retention for queer and trans* students on a college campus (Duran et al., 2020). The retention of queer and trans* students is still a topic that needs further research as there is lack of knowledge surrounding what data says about the retention of queer and trans* students (Duran et al., 2020). This lack of knowledge is, in part, because many colleges do not collect this information from students. This could be explained by the fact that these identities may change while a student is enrolled or that a student may be uncomfortable disclosing this information for various reasons (fear of being outed, comfortability in expressing their identities, etc.).

Using Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model as a lens for examining the struggles queer and trans* students face allows student affairs administrators to better understand these populations and how their time enrolled in a higher education institution can often be one that is unwelcoming to their identities. It is important to note that in this literature, the challenges that

queer and trans* students face are not monolithic and are shaped by numerous systems of oppression such as capitalism, heterosexism, ableism, racism, etc. (Duran et al., 2020). Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model and Meyer's (1995) Minority Stress Theory offer a theoretical framework that is used to guide the review of literature and development of an intervention to reduce struggles these students face. Next, the review of literature will include queer and trans* students' mental health struggles, their experience integrating on a college campus both academically and socially, and their experiences within housing and residence life.

Theoretical Framework

Student Integration Model

Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model asserts that first-year student experiences are marked by the passage of three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the separation stage, students must separate themselves from previous groups they were apart of prior to college including friends, communities, and schools. The next stage of this model is the transition stage, marked by students transitioning from their old communities and ways of life into their institution's culture, which may include finding new social groups, joining campus organizations, and attending institutional events. The final stage of integration is separated into two subcategories, academic and social integration. Academic integration refers to the ways in which students excel in the classroom through and intellectual development and performance. Social integration refers to the interaction between the student and the campus community, which could include peers, faculty, and staff (Aljohani, 2016). It can be defined on both an individual and institutional level. On the individual level, social integration refers to how students engage in social interaction with other members of the community. This can include co-curricular spaces like student organizations, residential spaces, or anywhere else that a

student may be in relation with others at the institution. On the institutional level, social integration refers to the idea that the institutional values to need align with the values of the student to feel socially integrated (Fine, 2016). Tinto (1975) explains that if these two areas are not integrated successfully by first-year students then they are at a higher risk of leaving their institution. This model is particularly helpful when looking at the struggles of queer and trans* students in higher education because these students often struggle with academic and social integration. Academically, queer and trans* students can struggle due to experiencing microaggressions, such as being misgendered in the classroom (Woodford et al., 2015). Socially, queer and trans* students might experience a campus climate that is overall unwelcoming (Blumenfeld et al., 2016). As previously stated, this model may also be valuable to helping understand retention of queer and trans* students given the limited research and data examining these trends.

There is limited research that centers the retention of queer and trans* students or explores direct contributions to the academic persistence of this population (Duran et al., 2020). Many high-impact practices within higher education such as first-year experience programs, living-learning communities, live-on requirements in housing and residence life, etc. are designed to help with overall retention of students. In discussion of the lack of research on retention for this population of students, it is important to understand that many of these high-impact practices are being designed without understanding what queer and trans* students experience in higher education and therefore may not be intentionally designed to assist in the needs that queer and trans* students have (Braxton et al., 2007).

Minority Stress Theory

Meyer (1995) described minority stress as “the juxtaposition of minority and dominant values and the resultant conflict with the social environment experienced by minority group members” (p. 2). According to this definition, queer and trans* students may experience minority stress through the navigation of heterosexist spaces on campus, such as housing and residence life, academic classes, and in social interactions with peers. Minority stress theory evolved as scholars attempted to understand why queer people, in general, tend to experience more mental health issues compared to their heterosexual counterparts outside of the higher education context (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). Queer students have reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, etc. than their heterosexual colleagues (Westefeld et al., 2001), as such, minority stress theory might help to better understand how queer and trans* students’ well-being is impacted by higher education institutions that may be traditionally structured around heteronormative ideas and unwelcoming to queer and trans* students. Microaggressions, disallowing policies, and unwelcoming housing assignments are examples of the ways queer and trans* students may experience the environment which can contribute to overall negative mental health (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). The literature points to many ways students experience the social environment negatively and much of the literature refers to minority stress theory and the impact this stress has on the mental health and well-being of queer and trans* students.

Review of Literature

The following literature will review the mental health struggles that queer and trans* students experience compared to their peers. Following this, literature that discusses how queer and trans* students socially and academically integrate to their institutions. Finally, the literature will highlight the way in which queer and trans* students experience housing and residence life.

Mental Health Struggles

Mental health struggles are prevalent for many college-aged students in their first year, as the transitional stage that Tinto (1975) mentions in his Student Integration Model is in full swing. Having to adjust to a new living environment, new friend groups, and more difficult academic classes can be a reason for this stress. However, research shows that mental health issues are even more prevalent amongst queer and trans* students compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Woodford et al., 2018). The mental health of queer and trans* people is an issue they confront during their time as students and after their education is complete. Mental health struggles for minoritized sexual and gender identities often arise while navigating heterosexist spaces. Students might encounter varied forms of covert and overt discrimination in many areas on a college campus (academic and social environments) which can be linked to overall stress for students (Woodford et al., 2018). Experiencing these mental health struggles could greatly impact the retention of queer and trans* students by making them feel isolated on their campus with limited social connections, which according to Tinto (1975) may lead to departure. Discrimination can appear in the academic space through use of incorrect pronouns and course content that disregards the lived experiences of queer and trans* people (Woodford et al., 2018). Discrimination could also appear in social spaces, by interacting with other students who hold negative attitudes toward minoritized sexual and gender identities, not having gender-inclusive housing options allowing students to live in a space that matches their identity, or not being able to easily update name or pronouns in institutional systems (Mollet et al., 2020).

Academic Struggles

As Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975) explains, academic integration is one of two main factors that can contribute to whether a student successfully integrates into their institution

or if they are at risk for dropping out. Academic integration is key to student success and can be accomplished by student involvement with the curriculum, engagement with educational values, and through relationships built with faculty and staff (Mayhew et al., 2016). However, academic spaces can be an unwelcoming space for queer and trans* students. Research has found a correlation between microaggressions towards queer and trans* students and a negative outcome in their academic success (Woodford et al., 2015). Other scholarship that supports this finding reported that microaggressions can lead to negative mental health outcomes for queer and trans* students and can significantly influence their overall feelings and retention at their institution (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). In scholarship that relates to trans* students specifically, findings show that feelings of marginalization in the classroom can lead to the ultimate suffering of the students' grades (Pryor et al., 2016).

Strong relationships built with faculty members can play an important role in academic integration of queer and trans* students (Mayhew et al., 2016). An area of improvement identified for trans* students in the academic space, that may also benefit queer students, is having more opportunities for trans* education in the classroom setting (Pryor et al., 2016). This could be accomplished by using queer and trans* authors in the curriculum or by offering more courses about the queer and trans* experiences.

Social Struggles

Social integration is the second of the two factors that contribute to whether a student will successfully integrate into their college campus or not (Tinto, 1975). The importance of social integration for queer and trans* students cannot be overstated. Research shows that queer and trans* students' perceptions of positive social adjustment into college are linked to achievement motivation, subjective well-being, and academic performance (Sotardi et al., 2021). In addition

to this, queer and trans* students are heavily influenced by college peer culture (Longerbeam et al., 2007). For instance, gay men are less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to socialize with friends from home, emphasizing the importance of connection with their college peers. In addition, loneliness, which may cause feelings of alienation, is pervasive in lesbian women and gay youth, making social interactions and the building of relationships and friendships extra important to combat the negative mental health concerns that come along with feelings of alienation (Longerbeam et al., 2007). Having successful social integration can help to greatly influence how queer and trans* students' process negative attitudes towards their institution and can help them deal with the experiences of heterosexism and homophobia on their college campus (Duran et al., 2020).

Housing and Residence Life

University housing can play a significant role in the student experience, especially for universities requiring students to live on campus. For example, students who live on campus reported more student-faculty interactions, collaborative learning, and discussion with diverse others, all of which point to a more positive social and academic integration (Graham et al., 2018). For queer and trans* students the ability to live on campus may aid in their queer development by allowing them to have positive interactions with other queer and trans* students as well as cis-hetero students (Mollet et al., 2020). However, the act of trying to navigate a housing and residence life space, often ones that enforce the gender binary, can be harmful to queer and trans* students and thus they can experience varying levels of micro and macro aggressions while trying to live in community with others (Mollet et al., 2020).

A way to allow room for queer and trans* students to build space of support with a diminished possibility of harm, is through the practice of gender-inclusive housing. Gender-

inclusive housing, in theory, is an excellent way to offer a safe space for queer and trans* students who are looking to be in community with others while also feeling safe, heard, and understood. However, many gender-inclusive housing processes, while good in intent, often force students to have to come “out” to prove the validity of their request (Nicolazzo et al., 2018). In addition, gender-inclusive housing options can sometimes be used for those who don’t request a gender-inclusive option but rather traditional housing spaces are full and thus students are placed in the gender-inclusive spaces. The policy for students signing up may also be unclear and so students think they are signing up to live on a co-ed floor rather than gender-inclusive housing. This can also create an unsafe space for students who intentionally selected gender-inclusive housing without guaranteeing a space to live that fits their needs (Nicolazzo et al., 2018).

Within the Housing and Residence Life functional area, there are ways to aid in the social and academic integration of students while also providing a gender-inclusive housing option for queer and trans* students. Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) could be of interest for institutions seeking to address the unique issues queer and trans* students face. LLCs are a high-impact practice in which a group of students sharing similar interests live in the same on-campus residential building (Inkelas et al., 2018, p.1). Inkelas et al. (2018) put forth a Best Practice Model (BPM) that, if followed, could address the struggles that queer and trans* students face through a singular intervention. The BPM is designed in tiers with multiple components that make up each tier (Inkelas et al., 2018) (see Appendix A). The BPM begins with a base tier of infrastructure which includes clear goals and objectives, adequate resources, and a strong collaboration between academic affairs and residential life. The BPM is then expanded in the next tier which address the academic environment and includes courses for credit, faculty

advising, and an academically and socially supportive climate. Next is the co-curricular tier which includes study groups, K-12 outreach, career workshops, visits to work settings, and theme-based activities. The final tier of the BPM is the pinnacle level, which is defined by having intentional integration between all components of the BPM (Inkelas et al, 2018, p.18). Through these varying levels, room is provided for students to deepen academic integration by building relationships with faculty and staff and social integration by being in community with others, hopefully yielding better experiences within housing and residence life. LLCs have been found to support student retention as well (cite), therefore, a gender-inclusive LLC may create a more supportive housing option for queer and trans students to be successful in and out of the classroom.

Summary

Queer and trans* students face many struggles that might hinder their ability to effectively integrate into college. Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model and Meyer's (1995) Minority Stress Theory are useful frameworks to consider the experiences of queer more holistically and trans* students with regard to their mental health, social and academic integration, and experiences within housing and residence life were reviewed. Empirical research showed that queer and trans* students can experience negative campus climates (Blumenfeld et al., 2016), more mental health struggles compared to their hetero-cisgender peers (Woodford et al., 2018), a difficult time integrating both socially and academically (Duran et al., 2020 and Woodford et al., 2015), and negative experiences within housing and residence life (Mollet et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The literature review identified a few key barriers that queer and trans* students face while attending higher education institutions. These struggles, which include mental health issues, adequate social and academic integration, and negative experiences with housing and residence life can contribute to queer and trans* students feeling out of place at their institution and could result in decreased retention. A gender-inclusive living learning community is a potential intervention that could help mitigate this problem.

Chapter 3: Project Description

Introduction

Literature reveals that queer and trans* college students face varying struggles that could affect their overall collegiate experience and retention at their institution. To address the challenges faced by queer and trans* students in higher education settings, I recommend the creation of a Living-Learning Community catered to the needs of queer and trans* students. LLCs are a high-impact practice in which a group of students sharing similar interests live in the same on-campus residential building (Inkelas et al., 2018). The LLC at hand is intended to address struggles queer and trans* students face on a college campus, providing opportunities for academic and social integration that can be beneficial inside and outside of the residence hall. The LLC created, entitled Thrive, will specifically cater to queer and trans* students by providing a gender-inclusive housing option that will aid in students' academic and social integration using linked courses and co-curricular opportunities. This chapter will outline the LLC using the relevant considerations of Inkelas' et.al. (2018) BPM for LLCs such as the resources needed to begin the community, the academic and social engagement plan, plan for assessment, and plan for implementation.

Project Components

The Thrive LLC is designed in consideration recommendations from *Living-Learning Communities That Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment* (Inkelas et al., 2018). As such, the following sections will address the basic level of infrastructure needed to begin the LLC, a plan for the academic environment, co-curricular activities, and will include financial considerations for the LLC. Thrive is designed using consideration for both small and large institutions and with some provisions, could be used at

almost any institution type. This project is meant to be a practical starting point for student affairs professionals in Housing and Residence Life (HRL), with backing from the Division of Student Affairs, and in partnership with academic departments.

Infrastructure

The first tier of the BPM is the infrastructure level. This level includes having clear goals and objectives, collaboration between student and academic affairs, and having adequate resources (Inkelas et al, 2018). The plan for Thrive uses goals and objectives that are intended to address the specific struggles that queer and trans* students face. The infrastructure plan also includes the resources needed for the LLC including staffing, which will address how student and academic affairs will work together, physical space, and financial resources necessary to implement and run Thrive.

Goals and Objectives

The first goal of the LLC is to provide gender-inclusive housing that is accessible and visible to the campus community. To obtain this goal, housing and residence life professionals should provide a sign-up process for interested students that does not force students to disclose identity information. They should also make sure that the intent of the LLC is clear, including specifically stating the population of students that the community is geared towards and clearly defining how gender-inclusive housing differs from other housing options. Lastly, they should locate the LLC in a residential building with adequate accommodations, including elevator access and handicap accessible rooms. The purpose of this goal is to mitigate some of the negative experiences queer and trans* students have in housing spaces as discussed in Nicolazzo et al. (2018) and Mollet et al. (2020). For instance, the words accessible and visible are used intentionally to address the fact that gender-inclusive housing options can require students to out

themselves or to provide rationale as to why they deserve to live in gender-inclusive housing, making it partly inaccessible to students who are hoping to live within the community but do not want to be subjected to that process (Nicolazzo et al., 2018).

The second goal of the LLC is to foster a sense of community through social opportunities and through a community of support. The LLC can accomplish this by having learning community assistants and resident assistants who are familiar with queer and trans* students and are familiar with the struggles that this student population might experience. These assistants can provide adequate opportunities for social interaction through LLC programming that encourages communication between all parties involved in the LLC. This goal is an important part of the learning community as social opportunities and communities of support are essential in having queer and trans* students feel socially integrated at their institution (Longerbeam et al., 2017)) Being that queer and trans* students' positive perception of social integration is tied to academic performance, overall well-being, and achievement motivation, it is important that this is a goal of the LLC (Sotardi et al, 2021).

The last goal of the LLC is to provide academic classes that fit within the theme of the LLC and help to increase the students' relationship with faculty and staff members. This goal can be accomplished by providing 1-3 courses through the academic year that the students in the LLC are required to take, having faculty members be familiar with queer and trans* students and the circumstances they face on a college campus, and by having faculty members ideally from a social science background that teach in programs such as Sociology, Women and Gender Studies, African American studies, Psychology, or other disciplines that are relevant to enhancing the LLC experience. This was picked as a goal for Thrive as queer and trans* students can sometimes feel disconnected from their classes and professors (Mayhew et al., 2016). This

addresses the need for academic integration by having classes that are intentionally picked for queer and trans* students and allow them to foster relationships with their professors. Having academic courses tied to the LLC is also a key component of an LLC that works well according to the BPM (Inkelas et al., 2018, p.49).

Resources

Having adequate resources for the Thrive will be crucial for sustaining longevity as well as for producing an environment that accomplishes its goals and objectives (Inkelas et al, 2018, p.39). In this case, resources can include physical spaces, personnel who are committed to the goals of the LLC, and financial resources that allow for the LLC to fulfill its goals and objectives.

Physical Space. An ideal physical space for this learning community would be in a residence hall that has suite-style rooms. This is important as there may be complexities introduced if other students live on the on the floor who are not a part of the LLC. For example, if the LLC were located in a residence hall that had community style bathrooms, it could take away from the feeling of security for queer and trans students if they had to use a bathroom space that was not inclusive of their gender identity. It is also important that the residence hall that the LLC resides in is either centrally located on campus or is within proximity to where most of the first-year student population resides. This is important because there is implicit messaging that happens when we put a space that is designed for an underserved student population away from their peers, which could be felt by students of the LLC as if they are being pushed out of that space or that there is no room for them there. By centrally locating the LLC, the second goal of the LLC, to foster a sense of community through social opportunities and through a community of support, can help to be accomplished by allowing queer and trans* students the ability to have

community within the LLC but also allow them to be in community with peers who are outside of their LLC.

Personnel. The amount of personnel needed for an LLC to be successful varies upon the institution, however, a key part of having a successful LLC is having support on every level, including administrative support which allows for adequate financial resources to be given to the program (Inkelas et al., 2018). To achieve a strong tie between academic and student affairs and to provide a strong community of support, it would be helpful to have a Faculty Director, Assistant/Associate Director of Housing and Residence Life, Hall Director, Resident Assistant(s), and a Learning Community Assistant. The Faculty Director would be responsible for the selection and staffing of required courses for the LLC that fit within the goals and objectives of the LLC. They would also work on recruitment efforts for the LLC, in partnership with the Associate/Assistant Director, including attending information days, creating promotional material, and working with campus partners. Lastly, they would be responsible for recruiting other faculty to work alongside the LLC and would help to provide co-curricular programming that fits within the goals and objectives of the LLC.

The Associate/Assistant Director of Housing and Residence Life would be responsible for accruing residence life space for LLC to be placed within and would work the assignments team to get students placed within the LCC. They would also work on the recruitment efforts with the Faculty Director and provide oversight for the other Housing and Residence Life staff including the Hall Director, a possible Learning Community Coordinator, and a possible Graduate Assistant. The Hall Director position would provide oversight of the residence hall that the LLC is located within, including working with the facilities team to maintain living spaces and providing conduct sanction when necessary. In collaboration with the Faculty Director and

Learning Community Assistant, the Hall Director would also assist in creating co-curricular programming that is intentionally created for queer and trans* students.

The Hall Director would provide oversight for the student-staff including the Resident Assistant(s) and Learning Community Assistant. The Resident Assistant for Thrive would have all the same duties as a regular Resident Assistant but it would be helpful for this student to be knowledgeable about the LLC and about the experiences of queer and trans* students. The Learning Community Assistant (LCA) is a student-staff position that would live on the same floor as the LLC. They would work with the Faculty Director and Hall Director to create co-curricular programming that intentionally created for queer and trans* students. This position would vary from a Resident Assistant as it does not serve in an on-call rotation or assist in any write-up or conduct processes. Like a Resident Assistant, the LCA would participate in crisis response training and be knowledgeable about the housing process. The LCA's main job would be knowledgeable on campus resources that might aid queer and trans* students, assist with general questions and provide support, and host regular study groups for the LLC participants. Depending on the size of the institution and the number of Learning Communities present on campus, the number of initial positions might fluctuate, but these positions would be the base number of positions required to produce a successful LLC when considering the goals for the community and the components that are needed to make it successful.

Lastly, all the positions should attempt to work closely with the campus' LGBT Center or Women and Gender Equity Center, if applicable. Collaboration with these offices can further provide a community of support for queer and trans* students and can aid in the creation of programming that is socially conscious for queer and trans* students.

Financial Resources. Institutions vary in the number of financial resources given to LLCs for things like programming and materials, however there is a positive correlation between the amount of funding an LLC is afforded and goal completion (Inkelas et al., 2018). There are a few considerations regarding finances when designing and implementing an LLC. First, the compensation of employees should be considered when creating the LLC, including faculty will workload and administrative roles. Consideration of housing and residence staff and how much time is dedicated towards maintaining LLCs. If Housing and Residence Life does not have the capacity or a dedicated person that works with LLCs, attempts should be made to add personnel.

Similarly, it is important to think through how student staff will be compensated, particularly Learning Community Assistants. Staff should consider compensating to LCAs with benefits like discounted housing and meal plans or a stipend. In addition, it is important to think through the money needed provide programs for the LLC. If there are limited financial resources available, the Hall Director and Faculty Director must consider ways to partner with other offices on campus, like an LGBT Resource Center or Women and Gender Equity Center to defray costs. The distribution of financial resources should be carefully considered by all involved parties as those involved will have to weigh the importance of compensation while also thinking about the money needed to provide social opportunities for students.

Academic Courses

Academic courses are a part of the second tier of the BPM which is the academic environment (Inkelas et al., 2018). Academic courses for credit are an important component for an LLC; these help to strengthen the connection between academic and student affairs and helps make progress towards strengthening the relationship between students and faculty (Inkelas et al., 2018). There are many different methods that can be used to make this academic connection.

The institutional size might influence the structure of the courses that are offered through the LLC, some structures include: courses specifically designed for the LLC to meet the goals and objectives of the LLC or seats in a course dedicated to participants of the LLC allowing for participants to still be together in courses (Inkelas et al., 2018).

For an LLC in its first year, it would not be ideal to create courses specifically for the program to work on increasing buy-in to ensure courses fill. Ideally, the institution would have included a first-year experience course students could partake in as a group enabling students to engage in community with each other while attending a course designed to acclimate first-year students to college. In the absence of a first-year experience course, it would be helpful for students engage in coursework that includes attendance at events on campus or in the local community to achieve course credit. This kind of course would allow students to acclimate to campus, aimed to help meet the second goal of the LLC, fostering a sense of community. Additional LLC courses could be related to several fields. Since this LLC will be identity-based, the students participating in this LLC would not be tied together by an academic major, so it is important the courses required place an emphasis on building community rather than a single academic discipline. It will be up to the Faculty Director and the Associate/Assistant Director to work together to create curriculum that is intentional for queer and trans* students.

Co-Curricular Environment

The third tier of the BPM is the co-curricular environment, which is important to establish once the infrastructure and academic environment are determined to aid in achieving the overall goals and objectives of the LLC (Inkelas et al, 2018). There are five general co-curricular activities that can be beneficial in an LLC setting and those activities are study groups, K-12 outreach, career workshops, visits to work settings, and theme-based activities (Inkelas et

al., 2018). At the outset of the LLC, focus should be on perfecting the offering of one or two of these five activities. Given limited cost, incorporating study groups would be helpful for a new LLC. For this LLC, the LCA will be responsible for conducting study group hours, though they will not function as a tutor, rather they will provide a structured space for academic engagement. This can be a space where the LCA is completing homework alongside the LLC students and can answer general questions that may come up or assist in providing the spaces where students can access resources.

Next, creating theme-based activities might also be most beneficial for this LLC to achieve its goals and objectives. Creating activities in collaboration with both faculty and staff aids in the need for queer and trans* students to integrate both socially and academically. For theme-based activities, there is much creativity that can be used to design programs that fit within the scope of what queer and trans* students might be interested in. Examples could include volunteering at a local LGBTQ+ center, participating in a queer prom, or requiring attendance at a certain number of events put on by the campus' LGBT Resource Center or Women and Gender Equity Center. For the sake of consistency, programs should be done on a frequent or scheduled basis so that there are opportunities throughout the semester for students to participate in.

Program Evaluation

Continual assessment should be conducted for the LLC to confirm that goals and objectives of the LLC are met. This assessment could be both formal and informal, however, it would be beneficial to acquire data from a first-year LLC so that the involved faculty and staff can gain understanding of areas of improvement or areas of strength. It would also be helpful to establish formal assessment to track the progress of the LLC from year to year to best understand

the progress that is being made. Informal assessment could be done by having the Hall Director, LCA, and Resident Assistant ask questions of the LLC participants pertaining to their classes, program, and living experience. In a formal assessment, given out at the end of an academic year, the faculty and staff can ask guided questions that are relevant to the goals and objectives set forth for the LLC. This could be done through a platform like Google Forms. This type of assessment allows for the same questions to be asked of every student participating in the LLC and would allow for deeper data analysis. The formal assessment could be given out at the end of the academic year, and it could be the job of a Graduate Assistant to analyze the data from year to year.

Project Conclusion

Through the analysis of research, a few major themes have been identified as areas of struggle for queer and trans* students. By identifying the areas of mental health, social integration, academic integration, and housing, the recommended intervention to mitigate these struggles is the creation of a Living-Learning Community. The community can address the struggles that queer and trans* students face by providing them a safe space to live, a community of support through social opportunities, and the ability to connect with faculty through intentionally chosen courses. With the correct personnel and financial resources, institutions can create a space that can aim to mitigate the struggles of queer and trans* students through a singular intervention. The clear goals of this community can be tracked for effectiveness through an assessment plan that is created to understand how the academic courses, co-curricular programs, and faculty and staff support are being perceived by students. The knowledge gained from this assessment can be used to continually improve the LLC and to prove its effectiveness to incoming parents and students, as well as, to the institution.

Plans for Implementation

To implement this learning community, there must student affairs professionals and faculty that passionate about making the community a space that welcomes queer and trans students. For institutions that already have learning community programming, adding Thrive to the list of offerings can only help the queer and trans* students at the institution and with an already existing program, the infrastructure is in place for the community to do well if those running the program consider the recommendations that are listed in this project. The implementation of this learning community may also be beneficial for institutions that are struggling with first-year retention and are looking for something to aid in that problem. A helpful strategy that institutions can employ to make an LLC more effective is communication and benchmarking with other institutions with similar learning community options. Finding out what works well at other institutions may help to tweak the current program to better fit the institution's needs. As mentioned previously, there are important considerations that need to be made related to personnel, funding and physical space needed. These considerations can be used by student affairs professionals to create a successful living-learning community that works to mitigate the struggles of queer and trans* students.

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Appendix A

Diagram of the Best Practice Model (BPM)

