

Evaluation of an LGBTQIA+ Safe Zone Training at a Southern HBCU

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Abstract

The LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, plus) community encompasses people who identify with a growing diversity of categories within the broader area of sexual identity, including sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and biological genders. In Florida, it is estimated that almost one million individuals identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, making it vitally important that LGBTQIA+ competency training be presented to social work students before they move into Florida's professional social work arena. Safe Zone training attempts to increase people's knowledge of the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as self-awareness regarding biases and prejudices toward members of this community. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a Safe Zone training when implemented in an undergraduate classroom setting in the Department of Social Work at a southern historically Black university. Findings suggest that the classroom setting may be an effective way to reach these students.

Keywords: Safe Zone, LGBTQ, evaluation, African American, Black, HBCU

Introduction

The LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, plus) community encompasses people who identify with a growing diversity of categories within the broader area of sexual identity, including sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and biological genders. The Movement Advancement Project (MAP; 2020) estimated that 4.6% of Florida's adult population identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). With a population of almost 22 million (Population USA, 2020), that means there are approximately one million people in Florida who identify as members of the LGBTQ community.

Social workers provide a wide range of services to LGBTQIA+ children, adolescents, adults, and elderly clients in a variety of settings, including schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, mental health facilities, prisons, juvenile detention centers, nursing homes, and hospice care. The large number of individuals in Florida who identify as LGBTQIA+ becomes a crucial concern for social workers when we consider two facts. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that the 1964 Civil Rights Act protects gay, lesbian, and transgender employees from discrimination in the workplace, a "landmark ruling" that will "extend protections to millions of workers nationwide" (deVogue & Cole, 2020, para. 2). According to Florida state law, however, "it is legal to fire someone, evict them from housing, or deny them service at a restaurant just because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer" (Equality Florida Action, Inc., 2020a, para. 1). The Florida Senate has thus far failed to pass the Florida Competitive Workforce Act, introduced in 2009, that would prohibit discrimination against the LGBTQ community (Equality Florida

Action, Inc., 2020b; Florida Senate, 2020). Wilson and Gross (2020) point out that the Supreme Court ruling “settled the employment part of the proposal...but not the housing or public accommodations” (para. 12), and according to Nadine Smith, the Executive Director of Equality Florida Action, Inc., “the court’s ruling only adds to the urgency to pass the bill” (para. 13).

Second is the large number of hate crimes and incidents of bullying and harassment that are reported by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. According to Florida’s Attorney General Ashley Moody’s report (2018), *Hate Crimes in Florida 2018*, 29.2% of the hate crime offenses reported were identified as having sexual orientation as the motivation. Hate crime was defined in this report as a crime in which “the perpetrator intentionally selects the victim based on one of the following characteristics: race, color, religion, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, sexual orientation, homeless status, advanced age, or mental/physical disability” (p. 6).

In addition to being victims of hate crimes, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly adolescents and young adults, experience many difficulties related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC; 2012) completed a nationwide survey of more than 10,000 LGBT youth, aged 13–17. Their report, *Growing Up LGBT in America*, reports some disturbing statistics with regard to these youth:

- Non-LGBT youth are nearly twice as likely as LGBT youth to say they are happy (67% versus 37%; HRC, 2012, p. 6).
- LGBT youth are more than twice as likely as non-LGBT youth to experiment with alcohol and drugs (52% versus 22%; HRC, 2012, p. 6).
- 42% of LGBT youth say the community in which they live is not accepting of LGBT people (p. 10). 35% of LGBT youth say their own church or place of worship is not accepting of their LGBT identity (HRC, 2012, p. 12).
- Only half (49%) of LGBT youth say there is an adult in their family they can turn to if they need help. 46% list their home and family as the place they are most likely to hear negative things about their LGBT identity (HRC, 2012, p. 14).
- LGBT youth are more than twice as likely as non-LGBT youth to say they have been verbally harassed and called names involving anti-gay slurs at school (HRC, 2012, p. 16).
- LGBT youth are twice as likely as their peers to report they have been physically assaulted, kicked, or shoved at school. 17% of LGBT youth say they have been physically attacked at school often (HRC, 2012, p. 14).

The Trevor Project’s (2019) *National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health* surveyed 34,000 LGBTQ youth across the United States, making it the most extensive survey on mental health issues among LGBTQ youth ever conducted. Some of the key findings state:

- 39% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months, with over 50% of transgender and non-binary youth having considered suicide.
- 71% have felt sad and hopeless for at least 2 weeks during the past 12 months.
- Fewer than half were out to an adult at school.
- 71% reported experiencing discrimination due to either their sexual orientation or gender identity (The Trevor Project, 2019, p. 1).

These data provide “a sobering look at how far we still have to go to protect LGBTQ young lives” (The Trevor Project, 2019, p. 2).

With continuing and legal discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community in Florida and LGBTQIA+ youth experiencing critical problems, such as discrimination, depression, bullying, assault, and developmental and identity concerns, it is imperative that we train our future social workers to provide sensitive and competent social work services to Florida's LGBTQIA+ population. One way of providing this necessary education is through Safe Zone training within the social work curriculum.

Safe Zone Training

Safe Zone training is a competency training that attempts to increase people's knowledge of the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as self-awareness regarding their own biases and prejudices with regard to people who are different from them. Safe Zone training is a "predominantly university-based diversity training program designed to increase awareness and knowledge of, and sensitivity to, important issues affecting LGBT students, faculty, and staff" (Finkel et al., 2003, p. 555). Currently hundreds of universities, community mental health centers, and businesses offer Safe Zone trainings, and curriculum materials are widely available on the Internet (see, for example, <http://sga.fsu.edu/safezone.shtml>; <https://outalliance.org/education-safezone/>; <https://safezone.sdes.ucf.edu/>). In addition to offering Safe Zone trainings, these sites offer forms, slide presentations, videos, and many interactive activities that can be used when developing Safe Zone training sessions. Safe Zone participants receive a symbol, such as a sticker, button, or sign, to visibly demonstrate their acceptance of members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and their willingness to provide a safe place for these individuals to discuss their concerns, worries, or questions (Evans, 2002).

Unfortunately, there has been little empirical research supporting the effectiveness of Safe Zone trainings. Evans (2002) states, "Because many institutions are devoting financial and human resources to develop Safe Zone programs, it is important that their efficacy in contributing to a positive campus climate be demonstrated" (p. 522). In her 2002 qualitative study, Evans evaluated the impact of a Safe Zone project on the climate of the campus at Iowa State University. Safe Zone stickers were distributed to any faculty, staff, or student that requested one, with no special training required. While some have criticized the use of the stickers without the attached requirement of LGBTQIA+ competency training, Evans stated that the goals of the projects were "(a) increased visibility for LGBT people and concerns, (b) increased support for LGBT people, and (c) increased awareness of the issues facing LGBT people" (p. 525), and she felt the visibility of the stickers on campus could provide this increased awareness and feelings of support. A total of 2,109 stickers were distributed to faculty (44%), staff (26%), students (23%), and other organizations associated with the university (7%; p. 527). The demographics of the school were, at the time, predominately male, rural, and White, with the dominant majors being in STEM fields. Results indicated tangible outcomes associated with raising awareness of LGBT issues; fostering more supportive spaces for LGBT students, faculty, and staff; and increasing the acceptance of diversity throughout the campus. The LGBT students, faculty, and staff reported feeling more secure and more affirmed, and heterosexual individuals that displayed the Safe Zone stickers reported that they had become much more aware of LGBT issues as a result of taking part in the project.

Finkel et al. (2003) conducted an exploratory study in which they assessed the effectiveness of Safe Zone trainings implemented in the graduate psychology department at the University of Denver. The sample included 66 graduate students and two administrative staff members, and the evaluation focused on behavioral and attitudinal changes reported by the participants after the training, as well as satisfaction with the training. Although the *Riddle Homophobia Scale* (Wall, 1995), used to measure attitudes toward the LGBT population, did not show statistically significant positive attitudinal change, they point out that 40% of the students indicated that they

had experienced a positive change in attitude after the training. Since the majority of participants had rated themselves in the positive range of attitudes toward LGBT individuals before the training, the authors suggest that the scale may not have fully captured the change due to a possible ceiling effect. A ceiling effect refers to the situation in which participants in a research study score near perfect on the pretest, so any intervention effect cannot be identified on the posttest evaluation since there is little or no room for improvement (Statistics How To, 2020).

Ballard et al. (2008) surveyed 41 students to determine how ally trainings and Safe Zone stickers affected their campus climate and the program participants. LGBTQ students reported they felt more comfortable and expected to be treated more fairly in classes in which the faculty had participated in the training and displayed a Safe Zone sticker. In addition, students felt these faculty members were more aware of LGBTQ issues, and reported they were more likely to come out to faculty and staff who displayed the stickers.

A 2016 study by Katz et al. investigated student perception of campus climate for LGBTQ+ students after a brief exposure to a Safe Zone symbol. Students were randomly assigned to read an excerpt from a fictitious course syllabus that either did or did not display a Safe Zone symbol. Students who viewed the Safe Zone symbol reported a more positive campus climate for LGBTQ+ students than students who did not see the Safe Zone symbol displayed. These data suggest that displaying the Safe Zone symbol on campus may promote a more inclusive, accepting perception by students on college campuses.

While presence of Safe Zone competency training is still very much alive in universities and agencies across the country, there is still little empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of the trainings. In addition, the few evaluations that have been conducted are from predominantly White universities. Before turning to the methods and outcome of the current study, it is important to take a look at the presence of the LGBTQIA+ community on the campuses of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

LGBTQIA+ Community on HBCU Campuses

Historically, the acceptance and support of minority students has been at the heart of the mission and goals of HBCUs across the nation. Harper and Gasman (2008) pointed out, however, that the overall acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals on HBCU campuses has been stifled due to many of the institutions being deeply rooted in conservative and religious origins, with these religious convictions helping sustain homophobic attitudes. Campus Pride (2020), a website with the goal of providing up-to-date information regarding LGBTQ inclusion policies and practices on university campuses states, “In the last two decades Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been varied in their implementation of policy, programs, and practices for LGBTQ inclusion” (para. 1).

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), an HBCU in Tallahassee, Florida, and the site of this study, has been working over the past few years to implement policies to support the LGBTQIA+ community on campus. The 2011 hazing death of Robert Champion, a gay 26-year-old FAMU marching band drum major, has forced this school and other HBCUs to look at the environment being offered to LGBTQIA+ students. FAMU now has an active LGBT Student Pride Union and participates in a week of activities during FAMU Pride Week every year. They have developed an LGBTQIA+ Resource Room for students to study, socialize, and hold meetings, and there is a Lavender Graduation Program held every semester in which LGBTQIA+ students participate in a special graduation ceremony. Probably the most positive gain FAMU has made in recent years regarding its LGBTQIA+ community is that in 2014, the FAMU Board of Trustees added sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to its non-discrimination policy (Equality Florida Action, Inc., 2014).

While positive gains similar to these are occurring on some HBCU campuses, there is still a long way to go. In 2014, the executive director and chief executive officer for the National Black Justice Coalition, Sharon Lettman-Hicks, challenged HBCU presidents to be more proactive in their efforts to eliminate bias and prejudice toward the LGBT community on their campuses. One unnamed HBCU dean was quoted as saying, “To be quite frank—and I know this is not the politically correct thing to say—this is not a topic that our faculty, staff or Board of Trustees want to talk about. For all sorts of reasons, including the obvious issue of religion, I don’t suspect that you will see a major campaign among HBCUs to tackle this issue head-on” (Watson, 2014, para. 8).

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC, 2020a) was established in 1980 and, with 300 million members and supporters worldwide, is the largest national lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer civil rights organization. In an effort to increase knowledge and affect positive change on HBCU campuses concerning LGBTQ issues, HRC has produced a series of programs aligned with their vision of “a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are ensured equality and embraced as full members of society at home, at work and in every community” (para. 2). Diversity and inclusion trainings specifically tailored to HBCUs include topics such as supporting transgender students, the importance of making investments in LGBTQ diversity and inclusion, HIV and HBCUs, and LGBTQ health and wellness. These trainings “offer an overview of LGBTQ inclusion practices and policies to further promote equality on college campuses and communities for students, faculty/staff, and administration... reinforcing the importance of moral, social and political responsibility for many campuses, establishing diversity and inclusion for all” (HRC, 2020b, para. 7). The HRC has done an impressive job of establishing relationships with over 30 HBCUs across the country in order to provide support to LGBTQ students and faculty. These relationships include many allies who share their vision of LGBTQ inclusion on HBCU campuses.

While there have been positive movements on HBCU campuses toward encouraging inclusion and reducing negative effects of bias and discrimination on LGBTQIA+ students, there is still a wide range of attitudes toward the acceptance and support of this population. There is still further work to be done to make college campuses a safe place for all students, faculty, and staff, as well as to train professionals to affect positive change in the future. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Safe Zone training presented to undergraduate social work students at FAMU as part of the course requirements for their human diversity course. It is extremely important that this information be presented effectively to social work students before they move into the professional social work arena. There has been very little evaluation research done with the Safe Zone trainings across the U.S. college campuses, and studies that have looked at LGBTQIA+ issues on campuses have had a significant lack of ethnic and racial diversity, with the majority of the participants being Caucasian (Black et al., 2012). The current study will give feedback as to the effectiveness of the Safe Zone training at altering student attitudes and increasing their knowledge of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Method

Study Site

This study was carried out over three semesters in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program in the Department of Social Work at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) located in Tallahassee, Florida. FAMU was established as The State Normal College for Colored Students in 1887 with 13 students and two instructors. The University demonstrates its value for diversity by enrolling nearly 10,000 students from across the United States and from more than 70 countries, including several countries on the continent of Africa, the Bahamas, Brazil,

Indonesia, China, and the United Arab Emirates. The University currently offers 54 bachelor's degrees, 29 master's degrees, three professional degrees, and 12 doctoral programs in a wide range of academic areas (FAMU, 2020).

FAMU's Department of Social Work has approximately 185 students currently enrolled in the BSW program, and all students completing their BSW must satisfactorily pass the cultural diversity class, Self-Awareness and Human Diversity. Looking at the diverse populations within the LGBTQIA+ community has always been an important part of the content of this course. It is important to note that research has shown that teachers who present information to students about sexuality often have little knowledge or training regarding sexuality. They fail to understand the issues faced by LGBTQIA+ youth and have, at times, contributed to the heterosexism in schools rather than helping eliminate it (Clark, 2010). In the current study, the first author has been the professor assigned to teach this course at FAMU for the past 13 years, and has completed the Safe Zone Train the Trainer Certification Program in 2016 at Out Alliance in Buffalo, New York, as well as Florida State University's Safe Zone Train the Facilitator in 2019. She has facilitated numerous Safe Zone trainings with faculty, staff, and students across the FAMU campus, and has incorporated various Safe Zone training modules into the curriculum of the BSW diversity class. This study was approved by FAMU's Institutional Review Board.

Outcome Measure

The *Safe Zone Evaluation Instrument* is a 3-page instrument that was developed as the outcome measure for this study. It includes:

1. Demographics (results shown in Table 3)
2. Knowledge subscale: Students match 13 terms related to the LGBTQIA+ community to their definitions and one question where students are asked to list and describe five components of human sexual identity (anatomical sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and romantic attraction; Killerman, 2017)
3. Comfort subscale: Eight questions relating to the students' comfort level around different LGBTQIA+ individuals and behaviors (see Figure 1 for example questions)

Figure 1. *Example Questions from the Comfort Subscale*

How comfortable are you interacting in person with the following people?		
1=Very Comfortable	2=Somewhat Comfortable	3=Neutral
4=Somewhat Uncomfortable	5=Very Uncomfortable	6=N/A
_____	Lesbian women (women who are emotionally and sexually attracted to other women)	
_____	Gay men (men who are emotionally and sexually attracted to other men)	
_____	Bisexual women (women who are emotionally and sexually attracted to both men and women)	
_____	Bisexual men (men who are emotionally and sexually attracted to both men and women)	

4. Attitudes and Values subscale: Seventeen questions regarding the students' attitudes and values toward the LGBTQIA+ community (see Figure 2 for example questions)

Figure 2. *Example Questions from the Attitudes and Values Subscale*

<p>Please select the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and intersexual (LGBTI) people.</p>			
	1=Strongly Agree	2=Agree	3=Disagree
	4=Strongly Disagree	5=I don't know	
_____	LGBT people's sexual acts or gender expressions are against what God intended.		
_____	LGBT people are unnatural.		
_____	LGBT people are mentally sick or never grew up to be mature heterosexual people.		

Portions of this evaluation instrument were incorporated with permission from the CSUN Attitudes Survey, a survey that was developed for a pilot study (Masequesmay, 2017) from the Queer Studies class at California State University at Northridge (CSUN). Students who agreed to participate in the current study completed a pretest of the *Safe Zone Evaluation Instrument* the week before the first session and completed a posttest the week following the second session. A copy of the instrument is available from the corresponding author.

Participants

A total of 83 students over three semesters at FAMU (Spring 2018, Fall 2018, and Spring 2019) completed the pretest and posttest of the *Safe Zone Evaluation Instrument*, participated in two in-class Safe Zone sessions, and completed several out-of-class homework assignments. The students were all enrolled in the course, Self-Awareness and Human Diversity, a required course in the BSW curriculum. The mean age was 24.38 years ($SD = 6.86$), ranging from 20 to 52 years. See additional demographics in Table 1.

Table 1. *Sample Demographics (n = 83)*

		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Race/ethnicity	African American/Black	77	92.5
	Latino/Latina	2	2.5
	White	0	0.0
	Other	4	5.0
Gender assigned at birth	Female	77	93.0
	Male	6	7.0
	Intersex	0	0.0
Sexual orientation	Straight	74	89.0
	Gay/lesbian	2	2.5
	Bisexual	7	8.5
	Queer	0	0.0
	Pansexual/Omnisexual	0	0.0
	Asexual	0	0.0
	Other	0	0.0

Table 1. (Continued)

		<i>n</i>	%
Gender identity	Cisgender	83	100.0
	Transgender	0	0.0
	Genderqueer	0	0.0
	Other	0	0.0
Religious Orientation	Christian	74	89.0
	Agnostic	2	2.5
	Buddhist	1	1.0
	Other	4	5.0
	Did not respond	2	2.5
Political Orientation	Democrat	73	88.0
	Republican	0	0.0
	Independent	5	6.0
	Other	5	6.0

Intervention

The Safe Zone training included two 75-minute in-class periods. The first session consisted of a lecture, titled *Culturally Sensitive Practice with the LGBTQIA+ Population*, and a video, titled *Transgender Basics* (LGBTCenterNYC, 2009), both describing the components of human sexual identity. The instructor emphasized that each of these components is not binary, but is instead a continuum of an almost infinite number of points at which individuals can define themselves. This makes the identification of one's sexual identity a very complex and multi-faceted process.

Students also viewed a video featuring Ash Beckham, titled *Coming out of the Closet* (Tedx Talks, 2013), that considers the issue of coming out as a more global phenomenon than the way the coming out process is usually defined. This video helps almost everyone relate to the concept of "coming out" by broadening the definition to refer to any hard conversation one has to face with a loved one (i.e., sexual orientation, gender identity, illness, infidelity, financial problems, divorce, etc.).

Between the first and second in-class periods, students were required to view two videos. The first, titled *Living a Transgender Childhood* (DocumFeed, 2014), describes a young girl, Josie, who was assigned male at birth but has always felt like she was a girl. It shows the struggles of Josie as she nears puberty, and the challenges her parents faced with allowing her to express as a female at home and school, as well as the difficult medical decisions that had to be made. The second video, titled *Out as Intersex and Non-Binary/Genderqueer* (Viloria, 1999) is about a young adult, Hida Viloria, who was born intersex, identifies as a woman, and has decided not to medically alter her intersex condition. Students participated in a discussion board with their classmates in which they answered questions and discussed issues related to these two films.

During the second in-class period, we discussed the difference between one's gender assigned at birth (male, female, or intersex) versus their gender identity, including cisgender, transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary. Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, while transgender is used to describe people who feel strongly aligned with the binary gender (male or female) they were not assigned at birth. Genderqueer and non-binary people may live in a place between traditional male and female roles, or may reject

the idea of binary gender altogether (Angello, 2017). Students then played a vocabulary game involving 50 LGBTQIA+ terms in which they worked together to match the words with their definitions. After this class, students read an article that looked at culturally competent social work practice with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender clients (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). They watched a video, titled *Transgender Love Story: Life after Surgery* (Truly, 2013), about the relationship between two young teenagers, one a young transgender woman, the other a young transgender man. Students then participated in a discussion board with their classmates in which they discussed their own biases and prejudices regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The week before the first in-class period, students completed and signed a voluntary consent form agreeing to participate in the research study. Those who agreed to participate (all of the students in my classes) also completed a pretest *Safe Zone Evaluation Instrument*. The week following the second in-class period, they completed the posttest evaluation. Although it did not happen, if a student had chosen not to participate in the study, they would have completed all of the in-class activities and homework assignments as part of the course requirements, but would not have completed the pretest or posttest evaluations.

Data Analysis

Dependent-sample *t*-tests were calculated to compare the pretest and posttest scores on the three sections of the *Safe Zone Evaluation Instrument* (i.e., Knowledge, Comfort Level, and Attitudes and Values). All statistical analyses were completed using Microsoft Office Excel 2013.

Research Questions

The current study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Do students at a Southern HBCU show improvement on knowledge of the LGBTQIA+ community after completing a Safe Zone training within a human diversity class?
2. Do students at a Southern HBCU show improvement in comfort level toward the LGBTQIA+ community after completing a Safe Zone training within a human diversity class?
3. Do students at a Southern HBCU show improvement on attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community after completing a Safe Zone training within a human diversity class?

Results

Students' knowledge of concepts and terms regarding the LGBTQIA+ population increased significantly from pretest to posttest ($t_{(82)} = -14.95, p < .001$) with a mean of 37.71 ($SD = 21.37$) on the Knowledge subscale pretest and a mean of 77.16 ($SD = 23.1$) on the posttest. The students also showed a statistically significant improvement ($t_{(82)} = -2.4, p = .009$) on the Comfort Level subscale from pretest ($M = 3.99, SD = 0.99$) to posttest ($M = 4.2, SD = 0.77$). The mean of the Attitudes subscale from pretest ($M = 3.0, SD = 0.53$) to posttest ($M = 3.01, SD = 0.49$) did not show a statistically significant change ($t_{(82)} = -0.25, p = .40$).

Discussion

The results show an improvement in knowledge regarding the LGBTQIA+ community as well as an improvement in students' reported comfort level around LGBTQIA+ individuals and behaviors. The attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ population, however, changed very little. The ceiling effect, mentioned earlier as it related to the Finkel et al. (2003) study, may also have been in effect in the current study. The participants were all upper division social work students, and already rated themselves as having fairly positive attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community

when they completed the pretest. Therefore, it may be difficult to show a substantial improvement after a short training. It is interesting that while their attitudes did not show an improvement, students did report greater comfort in being around LGBTQIA+ individuals and behaviors. Possibly, because this portion of the evaluation instrument identified specific populations and behaviors, students were able to identify their biases more clearly and thus show improvement after the training. It is very encouraging that their knowledge regarding the components of sexual identity and vocabulary related to LGBTQIA+ populations increased substantially. The hope is that increased knowledge will help these future social workers relate more openly and more effectively with their LGBTQIA+ clients with regard to their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sexual behaviors, as well as to the biological factors that led to their gender assignment at birth.

Limitations of the Study

Although these results suggest that the Safe Zone training implemented in the classroom setting had a positive impact, there are limitations to this study. First, since there was no control group, it is impossible to rule out threats to internal validity. Probably the biggest threat is the students' exposure to LGBTQIA+ students and issues in other courses and activities within the BSW program and curriculum. While no other courses scheduled during the same semester as the diversity class specifically address LGBTQIA+ issues, there is no way to gauge if students experienced LGBTQIA+ students and their concerns in other classes or through out-of-classroom activities. Since the pretest and posttest evaluation instruments had to be matched for each participant, the completed instruments were not anonymous. It is therefore possible that students may have answered in such a way as to please or impress the first author, who was the instructor of the class. In future evaluations, it would be useful to have someone other than the author score and input the completed evaluations. Finally, because the student population in the social work program is predominantly female, the sample was disproportionately female compared to FAMU's overall student population. Research with a more diverse sample, including gender, race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and gender identity, will help us determine if Safe Zone training in the classroom setting may be effective with a more diverse student population.

Future Directions

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's *National School Climate Survey* (Kosciw et al., 2010) reports that the majority of LGBTQIA+ students do not feel safe on high school and college campuses. It is time for all HBCUs to provide diversity training for faculty, staff, and students so that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, as well as their race, religion, political orientation, among others, feels safe in their educational environment. LGBTQIA+ competency trainings, more specifically Safe Zone trainings, need to be developed, carried out, and evaluated across campuses. In addition to evaluating the impact of these trainings on the participants, research must also evaluate how LGBTQIA+ individuals on these campuses perceive changes in the climate after the trainings become an integral part of campus life.

Because of the conservative religious orientations on many HBCU campuses, particularly in the South, a focus on providing these trainings to foster acceptance and support of LGBTQIA+ individuals on these campuses is even more critical. Lee (2015) points out that, "many see diversity as something that HBCUs are exempt from addressing because they have never excluded students on the basis of race or gender...an overarching problem is that race and ethnicity have consistently been the sole prism by which the courts—and HBCUs—have traditionally approached the term *diversity* in these institutions" (p. 18). Within the human services, such as social work, criminal justice, nursing, and education, it is vital that we provide

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students at HBCUs with a more comprehensive diversity training so they can move from the educational setting to their professional setting with a commitment to acceptance and open-mindedness of all human beings. This study suggests that providing social work students this training within the social work curriculum may be an effective way to ensure that our students will help create a safe and supportive future for the LGBTQIA+ community.

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