



More Than an Assemblage of Queers: Queering Living-Learning Communities

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USING SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVES AS A RESEARCH TOOL,

we explored how the director of an LGBTQ+ living-learning program (LLP) created community within the constructs of an otherwise cis- and heteronormative residential environment. We reviewed the first author's reflections about community experiences and analyzed them for opportunities to upend assumptions, practices, and operations for more liberatory futures. Students participating in LLPs tend to have higher levels of engagement and belonging, but those with marginalized identities may benefit even more from this kind of involvement. The first author's personal narratives about serving as an LGBTQ+ LLP program director revealed that many of the residents appreciated the feelings of affinity and safety offered by this residential community, and they were uninterested in engaging in community in many of the expected ways (i.e., program attendance). Our exploration offers liberatory possibilities for queering institutional transformation, with the recognition that campus housing professionals should reconsider their expectations for all LLPs, and higher education institutions must make strong commitments to provide support that resists assumptions about queerness and community. The stability and growth of this LLP requires specific support that allows it to evolve into configurations that reflect the needs of its divergent communities while still being centered in queerness.

Editor's note: The authors have chosen to lowercase the word White, which would normally be capitalized according to APA guidelines, in an effort to de-center whiteness.

Alarming, since 2020, state and federal lawmakers have introduced more than 300 pieces of legislation seeking to ban gender-affirming care, equal access to public spaces, and name change processes (Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022). Although most have focused on P-12 youth, these attempts to diminish trans*ness and queerness create ripple effects that reach institutions of higher education (Catalano et al., 2021; Keenan & Nicolazzo, 2021). Lawmakers have also leveraged similar attacks on Critical Race Theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in higher education because these efforts seek to undermine regimes of normative power (Lange et al., 2019). In response to these legislative actions to subvert DEI efforts, social justice advocates must employ innovative approaches and participate in acts of resistance to transform higher education policies, practices, and structures (Stewart, 2018). In short, there are no simple solutions for creating and bolstering campus environments as places and spaces that welcome LGBTQ+ students, as campuses are already in a state of constant change (Jourian, 2017; Lange et al., 2019).

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Living on campus does not insulate students from broader cultural dynamics, as residence halls are micro-cultures where they experience the campus climate “most tangibly through the environments’ compositional diversity, perceived climate, and intergroup relations” (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2014, p. 124). The hostility that some students confront within collegiate spaces can diminish their sense of safety and impede their ability to grow, develop, and learn (Strange & Banning, 2015). Efforts by many colleges and universities to engender more LGBTQ+ inclusive campuses have resulted in expanding nondiscrimination policies to include issues of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, as well as in creating an LGBTQ+ center and/or LGBTQ+ focused housing options (Fine, 2012; Kortegast, 2017; Marine, 2011). Living-learning programs (LLPs) are an especially promising approach to building community for these students (Herbst & Malaney, 1999). Because perspectives from practitioners serving in LLP leadership roles are quite limited, this article explores the reflections of a program director (PD) for a new LGBTQ+ living-learning program through Scholarly Personal Narratives (SPNs). This kind of writing is a unique way for scholars to look inward, since it “puts the *self* of the scholar front and center. The best SPN ‘interview’ is the scholar’s self-interrogation” (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 4). In these two narratives, the first author shared her experiences with co-creating queer communities and managing responses to anti-queer threats; then both authors examined those SPNs for liberatory possibilities in a residential LGBTQ+ LLP.

THE VALUES AND BENEFITS OF LIVING-LEARNING PROGRAMS

Students who participate in LLPs are more likely to report higher levels of engagement and satisfaction with their collegiate experiences than do their non-participating peers, which provides important opportunities for them to explore and develop their identities, as well as to integrate learning beyond the classroom environment (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Involvement in LLPs for students with marginalized identities, in particular, may further improve their sense of belonging on campus in spite of historical, institutional, and structural mechanisms of exclusion (Fink & Hummel, 2015). For example, Black students at predominantly white institutions who enrolled in LLPs demonstrated higher levels of a sense of belonging as a result of the meaningful connections made between students, peers, and faculty (Strayhorn, 2023; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Students who perceive their residence hall as a safe place on campus are more likely to disclose their identities and participate comfortably in the residential community (Evans & Broido, 1999). However, college and university campuses continue to be sites of discrimination (Garvey et al., 2017; Linley & Nguyen, 2015) for LGBTQ+ student populations, despite growing rates of acceptance within the past decade. LGBTQ+ students are less likely to feel a sense of community and safety when they live

in residential environments with negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people (Fanucce & Taub, 2010); the goal of LGBTQ+ LLPs is to serve as places and spaces that diminish LGBTQ+ student exclusion by creating a greater sense of belonging in residential settings and promoting a more comprehensive knowledge of this population. The extant scholarship about LGBTQ+ LLPs includes several studies about the exclusion of trans students (e.g., Kortegast, 2017) and the tendency of campuses to have a singular focus on gender-inclusive housing (e.g., Smith & Tubbs, 2018). LGBTQ+ LLPs can offer these students respite from harassment that might occur in the broader campus environment (Herbst & Malaney, 1999). Though there have been some shifts towards policy decisions that embrace gender-inclusive housing, these efforts can not overcome the limitations of visibility (Marine et al., 2019), and there are few publications that explore the dynamics impacting trans and queer students within LGBTQ+ LLPs (e.g., Pryor & Hoffman, 2020).

LGBTQ+ LLPs can counteract institutional structures and practices that reify hetero- and cisnormativity, what Preston and Hoffman (2015) designate as traditionally heterogendered institutions (THIs). In the THI framework, higher education institutions offer services and programs that embody the perception that LGBTQ+ students are already vulnerable and lonely (a deficit perspective), and thereby LGBTQ+ LLPs are one of the only pathways for safe residential living (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). LGBTQ+ LLPs are a function of the institution in that they operate within existing frameworks that aim to bring trans*ness and queerness into alignment with the structures already within a department of housing and residential life. For instance, institutionalizing LGBTQ+ness within a residential community might result in an adherence to policies and practices that center palatability and assimilationist expectations (homo- and cisnormativity) and can result in isolating LGBTQ+ identities from other marginalized identities. The existence of an LGBTQ+ LLP does not necessarily transform a campus. Instead, it can act as a façade to signal inclusion efforts without ever calling into question their effects (Ahmed, 2012; Stewart, 2018).

Institutional change requires structural and functional modification of the institution (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Kezar, 2014). Stewart referred to this as transformational or second-order change that can help leaders identify “institutional structures, processes, and practices that are critical in working towards racial equity and justice” (2018, p. 2) and offered several proposals that can be instructive in thinking about how LGBTQ+ LLPs might also engage in inclusion efforts for students with marginalized genders and sexualities. Two of these proposals were especially inspiring,

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as they asserted the need to prioritize the safety of minoritized populations and reject traditional norms (Stewart, 2018). These assertions inspired how we co-developed prompts for the first author, which encouraged non-normative approaches and ideas of safety: *What were your hopes and ideas about what it means to be a program director of a new LGBTQ+ LLP? What, if anything, surprised you about the students and the dynamics in the community, and what did you anticipate that did not occur?*

METHODOLOGY

We analyzed data from the first author's narratives for what it might mean to liberate queerness in residential spaces. As Nash and Viray (2013) noted, the scholarly personal narrative methodology embraces an individual's narrative storytelling and then engages in an examination of those stories to make broader claims beyond the personal experience. They are a form of self-interrogation, followed by an analysis of text to reveal possible insights into broader issues. After the first author completed her initial reflections, we compressed them into two narratives that would be meaningful to those outside our institutional context. We then analyzed them, seeking insights into the liberatory potential that LGBTQ+ LLPs have in higher education. SPNs offer a queer approach to research by revealing "how destabilizing categories might challenge how we think about sexual orientation and gender identity-related activity" (Mayo, 2017, p. 531). Our approach frames queerness as a resistance to, and interruption of, cis- and heteronormativities (Warner, 1999). Following each of the first author's self-interrogations (Nash & Viray, 2013), we discuss those narratives and dream together about transforming LGBTQ+ LLPs from an assemblage of queer students into liberatory spaces.

Our research was conducted at a public research university with more than 25,000 undergraduate students in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The LGBTQ+ LLP is one of over 20 LLPs on campus. Most of these have connections to academic programs, but an LLP centered on an identity group has more ambiguous and complicated (read: uncertain) guidelines, unlike the more clearly structured academic-based LLPs. The emergence of the LGBTQ+ LLP was the result of advocacy from students, staff and administrators, and faculty, which led to the completion of the application process to demonstrate its need. It was after the LGBTQ+ LLP was approved and the resident assistant selected that the search for the program director began. The campus environment in this personal narrative includes an LGBTQ+ center that came into existence after 2010; the staff of this center serve on the LLP's advisory board.

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POSITIONALITIES

We approached this project as two white queer-identifying individuals with the salience of our queerness framing and influencing our approach to what it means to work in higher education and student affairs. We share a belief in plurality, in that there is no monolithic queer community; rather, there are queer communities. Additionally, we leaned on Shlasko's (2005) assertion that "queer is paradoxically not only an identity but also a political opposition to the stability and boundedness of identity" (p. 127). To further queer our research, we embraced our shared perspective of LGBTQ+ LLPs as sites of queer pedagogy whereby queer functions both as "a subject position and queer as a politic" (Shlasko, 2005, p. 124). Our goal is to inspire residential life professionals and LLP administrators to think queerly about communities and to resist normative ideas of best practices. We embraced how queer proclaims a resistance to norms as well as a fluidity of connections to communities and categories (Cohen, 1997). To queer means to grapple with feelings of connection and resistance to presumed kinship within LGBTQ+ communities. Queerness means recognizing how intersecting identities interrupt and evoke ideas of LGBTQ+ communities that respond to the variances over time in identity salience, context, awareness, and a host of other factors (Ferguson, 2019). At the same time, we recognize how our white racial identities insulate our awareness of racial injustice and may influence our perceptions and writing. Taken together, we use queerness as a means to disrupt normativities and to describe potential community affinity.

SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Question 1: What Does It Mean to Create a Queer Space?

During the inaugural year, the rather enigmatic LLP structure contributed to an absence of clarity on what it means to be in community. Even though the development process took a year and a half, the students involved were uncertain about what to expect when they joined the LLP. When I stepped into the PD role, I both appreciated that many choices about the LLP remained undecided and struggled with the divergent expectations that faculty, staff, and students brought to the LLP. The assumption was that students in this LLP would move in already extremely invested in learning everything queer-related, both inside and outside of the classroom. After meeting with the students, I quickly realized this was not the case for most of them.

During move-in, many students did not join the Welcome Weeks community-wide events. Community discussions and social events had attendance numbers that were incredibly low when compared to the large and visible events conducted by neighboring LLPs. When it came time for classes to start, more than half of the students had serious concerns about the course required for all members of the LLP, feeling that the material was too difficult for an introductory-level course and that readings revealed a perspective on queerness that was unfamiliar to many of them. Students wanted to live in community without any interest in

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an academic endeavor focused on unpacking the complexity of queerness beyond what they already experienced themselves; they only cared about the LLP as far as it served as a refuge from the local and campus environments.

Their disinterest caused me some distress. I spent the two months prior to move-in interrogating current PDs about requirements, leadership opportunities, and how they structured their programs. On the one hand, I wanted the students to build the environment they wanted. On the other hand, I felt responsible for holding them accountable to the cocurricular and academic expectations of being in an LLP. I tried to figure out what would serve these students the best, and I decided that the best way to engage them was to have them co-create norms and expectations for what it means to be in an LGBTQ+ LLP. In the months that followed, I created ample opportunities for students to tell me what they wanted and needed and invited them to step into leadership roles within the community. I kept them grounded and informed about the necessary requirements of an LLP, and as much as possible I allowed their feedback to guide decisions.

Eventually, the students and I found a system that worked for cocurricular engagement. I worked with those students who wanted additional social events or educational opportunities, and they became my sounding board to plan for the entire group. Slowly, students began to engage with the social and educational opportunities more and demonstrated an investment in the community. Despite the conflicts and challenges, I believe that the past year allowed us (myself, the faculty, and the students) to identify a clearer picture of what the LLP is and what membership means for the students involved.

Discussion of SPN 1

The challenges of building this LLP community were beautifully and frustratingly queer, as witnessed through student resistance to required learning about queerness, coupled with their desire to be in community without any expectations for participation. These seemingly contradictory dynamics required the first author to accept student resistance as a queering of the institutionally prescribed or charted course for community development. We must recognize the paradox: An LGBTQ+ LLP, even as it seeks to resist the dynamics of traditionally heterogendered institutions (Preston & Hoffman, 2015), still comports with normativities, for otherwise it would not receive institutional recognition and support. The institutionalization of queer life through the creation of an LGBTQ+ LLP is essentially an alignment (Ferguson, 2012). Within a traditionally heterogendered institution, LGBTQ+ students are outsiders—which was ostensibly the argument that supported the need for this LLP—who embraced (unconsciously or consciously) this status and rejected the institutional expectations of the community. We cannot help but wonder how to convey the need for LGBTQ+ LLPs while adequately considering anti-assimilationist perspectives (Warner, 1999), and we need to consider thinking about queering LGBTQ+ LLPs as a queer project through a

queer methodological description (Romero, 2009). What this means in practice is that we must examine assumptions and modes of operations for how they advance (and potentially interrupt) normative regimes of power. Put simply, what could queer liberation look like in the context of an LGBTQ+ LLP, and how might those in leadership positions celebrate the instability of that image?

Even when the content was ostensibly queer, students resisted the course as an imposition of normativity; they wanted affinity without LLP-structured engagement. Those in LGBTQ+ LLP leadership positions, formal and informal, might consider so-called typical community expectations as guideposts to consider, not a rulebook to follow. The surprise was substantial when the first author recognized that students had little interest in the scholarly and historical explorations that led to the existence of an LGBTQ+ LLP. Yet to embrace instability includes taking the queer position that the inaugural cohort's resistance to the associated course may not be indicative of the reactions of future residents. At the same time, the course requirement may consistently be a point of resistance because it forces an alignment between the LGBTQ+ LLP and other LLPs that requires a type of normative assimilation, or unqueering of a queer dynamic.

It's uncertain how to resolve the tensions between students' needs and the expectations that come from being part of a larger LLP institutional structure. The existence and persistence of the LGBTQ+ LLP means that queer identity functions as a "containment strategy" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 53), where the institution literally allows students to corral themselves. Yet the work of engagement with queerness and trans*ness—such as grappling with the instability and insufficiency of language, expanding ideas about identities, and engaging in other efforts that seek to question ideas of power and imagine liberatory futures—relies on the work of the program director and the course requirement, with which students were disinclined to engage (Cohen, 1997; Rubin, 1993). We worry that the success of the LLP is only evaluated to the extent that it satisfies institutional optics as a form of tick-box diversity (Ahmed, 2012). We dream of a future where its persistence results in a larger project of queering all LLPs, such as questioning what it means to build residential communities.

Question 2: What Surprised You About the Students and the Dynamics in the Community?

Offering an LGBTQ+ LLP residential space does not guarantee safety, which is a difficult fact to accept as a PD. I often hear others on campus call this LLP a safe space, which is not true; it is a residential floor in a building with floors of students not in the LLP, and even students within the LLP could cause harm to each other. Sure, we have safety measures in place, but

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none that differ from those of any of the other residence halls on campus. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, intentional spaces for minoritized populations became an automatic campus safe space, and this extended to the LGBTQ+ LLP.

When students began to move in alongside the rest of the general population and students in other LLPs in the building, I knew that it was only a matter of time before the community experienced some form of harassment. I decorated the floors with pride flags, and each of the resident assistants contributed their own decorative pride materials to the common spaces. I wrote welcome signs on the whiteboards and placed LLP-decorated door tags for each resident. To walk around this floor, it was clear that this was an LGBTQ+ LLP, and the visibility led to a group of LGBTQ+ targeted threats.

The first threat was slurs written on a whiteboard. What complicated this potential threat was that LGBTQ+ students tended to reclaim terms that were once used against their communities as a form of resistance to hetero- and cisnormativity. I reported what the students interpreted as slurs to the appropriate offices. Then students from other floors in the building began to ride the elevator to the LGBTQ+ LLP's floors—an endeavor that requires intention due to the location of the floors—and yelled out a slur before riding the elevator back down. One of the resident assistants informed me of this behavior, and I filed another report with the Title IX office. A few instances of non-LGBTQ+ LLP members walking through the hall, stealing items, and making residents uncomfortable occurred over the following week. Students in the LGBTQ+ LLP felt like animals being watched in a zoo. Some students admitted that they were used to worse things happening in their home towns or high schools, while others deeply felt the impact.

Being the PD, I felt guilty that I could not protect the students more and frustrated by the limited actions available to me within my purview. Handing off bias incidents to the appropriate teams felt insignificant, as if seeming to support the LLP without fully addressing how the manifestations of homophobia and transphobia marked a complicity with traditionally heterogendered institutions [Pryor, 2018; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020]. I felt I was not doing enough. I held space for students to process events, equipping them with phone numbers and forms to report instances as soon as they happened. I asked what they wanted as a response, tried to help them develop coping strategies, but I continued to feel that what I offered was insufficient. The available avenues for reporting felt like acquiescence to the inevitability of queer antagonism where redress would always seem inadequate. Even when students thanked me for taking the incidents seriously, I felt like I did the bare minimum because that is one of the responsibilities of my job. Eventually, the harassment stopped, students identified as perpetrators of harassment were held accountable, and the LGBTQ+ LLP students moved on. Yet, for me, I know this calmness is a façade, a temporary reprieve. There are really no material changes that can prevent acts of harassment that do not require undesirable isolation. It is likely that this will happen again, and I remain skeptical of the adequacy of our institutional responses.

Those involved in LGBTQ+ LLPs must consider what it means to anticipate harm without that perspective contributing to a deficit narrative about queer student lives. It requires a balancing of competing truths: Manifestations of oppression will occur, *and* queer joy is attainable.

Discussion of SPN 2

The first author's doubt caused us to pause and consider how the creation of the LGBTQ+ LLP was both an achievement and a non-achievement. As an achievement, the program marked intentional efforts to address the needs of LGBTQ+ students by providing a space for respite within a hetero- and cisnormative residential system of housing. Additionally, in the creation of an LGBTQ+ LLP, the institution ensconced minoritized populations within the fabric of an institutional program (LLPs). Yet when LGBTQ+ LLP students experienced trans and queer antagonism, the program failed to offer the protection it espoused. Instead, the LGBTQ+ LLP felt like a non-achievement, a kind of tick box diversity: "A tick box approach is when institutions can 'show' that they are following procedures but are not really 'behind' them (showing can be a way of *not* committing)" (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 113–114).

Put another way, the existence of this LLP demonstrated the institution's inclusion efforts, but institutional responses to mitigate harm demonstrated a shallow understanding of what it takes to engage in inclusivity. This raised a number of important questions: How might institutions engage in some measure of accountability that is not punitive? What options are available to queer conduct practices within the LLP that center restorative justice instead of retribution? Those involved in LGBTQ+ LLPs must consider what it means to anticipate harm without that perspective contributing to a deficit narrative about queer student lives. It requires a balancing of competing truths: Manifestations of oppression will occur, *and* queer joy is attainable.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In our explorations of queering LLPs, we gave attention to queering ideas of community and responding to anti-queer threats and offered perspectives on how queerness and thinking about LGBTQ+ LLPs as sites of queer pedagogy challenge staid approaches to community building and what it means to support LGBTQ+ student populations. We hope that practitioners and scholars imagine the potential of diverging from normative expectations of community in order to engage in queering residential systems and offering liberatory possibilities for all students. For us, this means finding ways to support the stability and growth of an LGBTQ+ LLP that does not require it to parallel other LLPs; this means giving it support to evolve into configurations that reflect the needs of its divergent communities, while still being centered in queerness. LGBTQ+ LLPs offer opportunities to reconsider expectations for all LLPs that might challenge our assumptions about how to expand, select, and support their existence.

What must inform the creation of opportunities for queer residential living are ideas about community engagement, including support necessary for responses to bias incidents and more capacious ideas about community building beyond traditional programs. We recommend having intentional conversations about how residential spaces build or foster communities and excavating embedded assumptions about communities that perpetuate dominant cultures and identities. The realization that students who desire to be within an LGBTQ+ LLP may lack interest in unpacking queerness caused us to question what unconscious and unquestioned notions about community building and affinity go uninterrupted in residential life and housing departments. We suspect that interrogations about community might help unsettle attachments to particular modes of being and doing in LLPs and open up liberatory possibilities for all residents. The experiences documented in these scholarly personal narratives should also make us question the salience of identity and challenge expectations of who wants to live (and learn) in queer spaces.

Finally, these SPNs should inspire questions about the function of LGBTQ+ LLPs, whether they exist within an LLP-specific office, residential life, or some other institutional structure. Those who seek to develop queer and trans residential spaces on campus must consider what institutional structures, if any, are available to support those working within and adjacent to the space. The creation of the LGBTQ+ LLP is a first step, but its sustainability depends on a commitment of institutional resources. How does institutional leadership imagine who is responsible for its support, care, and resilience? What does supervision look like for those tasked with leading these spaces, and how are student voices involved in how the space needs to exist for each year? We believe that LGBTQ+ LLPs require institutional commitments to provide support that resists assumptions about queerness and community and draws attention to unexamined hetero- and cisnormative approaches that fail to foster liberatory thinking for us all. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we effectively utilize living-learning programs (LLPs) and intentional spatial design to proactively foster students' strong sense of belonging and inclusion, ensuring a smooth transition throughout their residential experience?
2. In the context of LGBTQ+ LLPs facing targeted threats, how can institutions ensure accountability without punitive measures? What options exist for embracing restorative justice within LGBTQ+ LLPs?
3. How can student affairs professionals effectively cultivate safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students engaged in LLPs and incorporate student feedback in enhancing these programs?
4. How can residence life integrate a practice of queering into LGBTQ+ LLPs and navigate the challenges of institutional norms, student resistance, and fostering authentic community engagement?
5. How can we encourage effective facilitation within LGBTQ+ LLPs while ensuring a diverse leadership approach and avoiding exclusive reliance on LGBTQ+ students for facilitation?

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