

# Results of the University of Arizona Safe Zone Program Impact Evaluation

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## BACKGROUND

According to the University of Arizona (UA) Campus Health Services' Health and Wellness Survey data released in December 2010, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community members experience harassment, bullying, and discrimination on campus far more than their non-LGBTQ counterparts (University of Arizona Campus Health Service, 2010). Harassment and a hostile campus environment can contribute to a host of negative health outcomes for LGBTQ community members including increased levels of fear and anxiety. To combat the negative environment suggested in this data the UA LGBTQ Affairs Office administers a Safe Zone program.

The overarching goal of the Safe Zone program is to prepare members of the campus community to be effective allies to the LGBTQ population in order to facilitate the long-term impact of an improved campus climate (University of Arizona Office of LGBTQ Affairs Website). At the UA, Safe Zone was begun in 1995 out of the Residence Life department by a group of community directors. Today, a General Education training and an Ally Development training are offered as a two-part series for students, staff and faculty by which participants receive the Safe Zone "markers" that identify them as allies to the LGTBQ community. Safe Zone markers include a button (Figure 1, below) received after completing the 2.5 hour General Education workshop and a placard (Figure 2, below) that participants receive after completing both the General Education and 2 hour Ally Development workshop.

**Figure 1: Safe Zone button**



**Figure 2: Safe Zone placard**



The current General Education workshop is designed to introduce participants to the experiences of LGBTQ people through definitions, dispelling myths, information about the "coming out" process, and resources available at the university, local, and national levels. After completing the General Education workshop, participants can then complete the Ally Development workshop designed to provide participants with more detailed information to help them become advocates for LGBTQ members of our campus community. At the completion of

the Ally Development workshop participants are invited to sign a Safe Zone Ally agreement indicating that they are an identifiable source of support for members of the LGBTQ community.

## **OBJECTIVE**

This research project was an evaluation of the impact of the Safe Zone program on the UA campus LGBTQ community as well as Safe Zone allies who have participated in Safe Zone trainings. Impact of the Safe Zone program was measured by looking at three main categories: (1) LGBTQ community awareness of and interactions with Safe Zone, (2) impact of Safe Zone on the LGBTQ community, and (3) impact of Safe Zone on Safe Zone allies.

## **METHODS**

An online survey was administered to two UA study populations: a) LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty who indicated that they identify as LGBTQ and had not completed a Safe Zone workshop and b) the Safe Zone ally community that included all UA students, staff, and faculty who had completed the Ally Development Safe Zone workshop and/or General Education Safe Zone workshop, regardless of their identifying/or not with the LGBTQ community. Through LGBTQ Affairs listservs we were able to recruit 146 Safe Zone allies and 70 LGBTQ community members.

The majority of the 146 Safe Zone ally respondents had completed both the Ally Development and General Education workshops (71%) and had done their Safe Zone training within the last two years (76%). Safe Zone ally respondents were also most likely to be staff members (49%), women (61%), white (78%), and heterosexual (50%). The 70 LGBTQ community members were similarly mostly white (71%), and women (59%) but unlike Safe Zone allies were more likely to be undergraduate students (45%) and were fairly evenly split between gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer (37%, 30%, 20%, 19% respectively).

## **RESULTS**

### **LGTBQ Awareness of and Interactions with Safe Zone**

Participants in the LGBTQ Community Survey indicated that Safe Zone is a largely visible program with 76% of LGBTQ students, staff, faculty, and administrators reporting having seen Safe Zone markers around campus. Respondents were most likely to become aware of the Safe Zone program within the past two years (45%) or more than five years ago (26%) and to become aware from a Safe Zone marker (42%) or an Office of LGBTQ Affairs program/event (19%).

Ninety-four percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Safe Zone marker indicates a safe person to talk to about LGBTQ issues and concerns, indicating awareness of the goals and meaning of the Safe Zone program.

Of the 53 respondents who were aware of the Safe Zone program, nearly half of them had spoken with someone who was displaying a Safe Zone marker (49%). This number is comparable to the awareness and usage rates of other LGBTQ programs at the UA and in the community, where awareness is high but usage remains below half. When LGBTQ respondents did approach Safe Zone allies, they report discussing LGBTQ issues and concerns as well as 'work related issues.' Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that the overall experience with the Safe Zone allies was positive, 85% agreed or strongly agreed that the Safe Zone allies were helpful and that the information provided by the allies was beneficial. Respondents also reported that, when applicable, Safe Zone allies followed up on their initial conversations, were knowledgeable of resources, and were able to refer them to someone else. Only one respondent indicated that the Safe Zone ally was unable to refer them to someone else.

Although there was high visibility among our survey respondents many noted that they were perhaps more involved in the LGBTQ community than others who may be less aware.

*I found out about the center for LGBTQ affairs by intentionally seeking it out. I find out a lot of information just from being on the listservs that I signed up for. I'm not sure, though, that I would have "visibly" noticed anything related to these resources if I'd not sought them out -- but the listservs are fantastic!!*

It is also of note, that most LGBTQ community respondents were most likely to become aware of the Safe Zone program from a Safe Zone marker (42%) but Safe Zone allies were most likely to become aware from a staff or faculty member (34%). These results speak to the importance of continuing to provide a very visible program interface as well as training staff and faculty who are vocal proponents of the program.

### **Impact of Safe Zone on LGBTQ Community**

For those who reported being aware of the Safe Zone program 57% agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more comfortable talking with a stranger who has posted a Safe Zone marker than one who has not posted a Safe Zone marker. Additionally, the Safe Zone marker had an impact on perceptions of campus climate where 74% agreed or strongly agreed that Safe Zone markers make them feel safer on campus, and 91% agreed or strongly agreed that Safe

Zone markers make them feel better about the campus climate at the UA. See Table 1 for full impact data.

**Table 1: Impact of Safe Zone on LGBTQ Community**

<b>I am more comfortable talking with someone I don't already know who has posted a Safe Zone placard or is wearing a Safe Zone button than someone without the Safe Zone marker.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	2	3.77%
disagree	5	9.43%
<b>neither disagree nor agree</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>30.19%</b>
agree	15	28.30%
strongly agree	15	28.30%
<b>Seeing Safe Zone markers helps me to feel safer on campus.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	0	0.00%
disagree	2	3.77%
neither disagree nor agree	12	22.64%
agree	18	33.96%
<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>39.62%</b>
<b>Seeing Safe Zone markers on campus helps me to feel better about the campus climate toward LGBTQ people.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	1	1.89%
disagree	2	3.77%
neither disagree nor agree	2	3.77%
agree	20	37.74%
<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>52.83%</b>

While both LGBTQ community members and Safe Zone allies report very few interactions on account of Safe Zone markers, the impact of Safe Zone on the community is still demonstrated in the data. LGBTQ community respondents report feeling both safer on campus and better about the campus climate in general because of the visible presence of the Safe Zone program. A majority of respondents also said they would feel more comfortable talking with a stranger who had posted a Safe Zone marker. One Safe Zone ally respondent told the story of a student who was in their office:

*A student was describing a recent breakup, avoiding gender pronouns. Then he pointed at my SafeZone sign and said "Well, it's obviously ok to talk about it in here" and then mentioned he was in a relationship with another man.*

However, a large proportion of respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with feeling more comfortable talking to a stranger with a Safe Zone marker. Matthew Bruno who conducted a similar study of Safe Zone at George Mason University postulates that perhaps LGBTQ people would not necessarily be comfortable talking to any stranger about sexual diversity whether they had a Safe Zone marker or not, or that perhaps they already have “specific allies dedicated to talking about these issues” (Bruno, 2008). Whatever the explanation, the sentiment is summed up by this respondent who stated “though I never utilized people within the Safe Zone program, it made me feel better to know that certain people were trained in and open to dealing with LGBT issues.”

### **Impact of Safe Zone Program on Safe Zone Allies**

Participants in the Safe Zone Ally Survey rated the program highly, reported some language and behavior change as a result of the program, and had successful interactions with persons asking about their Safe Zone markers. One respondent stated:

*I consider the U of A Safe Zone workshops to be the best, most directly applicable workshops I have ever attended on the U of A campus. LGBTQ leadership is outstanding here at the U, and a source of great pride for me and many of my classmates.*

Ninety percent of allies rated the Safe Zone program ‘high’ or ‘very high’ overall. Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that Safe Zone trained them to respond more effectively to LGBTQ people, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that Safe Zone provided resources to work with LGBTQ populations, and 90% had an increased awareness of LGBTQ issues and concerns at the UA. See Table 2 for complete rating results.

**Table 2: Safe Zone Allies Rating of the Safe Zone Program**

<b>The Safe Zone Program trained me to respond more effectively to LGBTQ people.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	0	0.00%
disagree	3	2.05%
neither disagree nor agree	9	6.16%
<b>agree</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>58.22%</b>
strongly agree	49	33.56%
<b>The Safe Zone Program provided resources for me to adequately work with the LGBTQ population.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	0	0.00%
disagree	3	2.05%
neither disagree nor agree	15	10.27%
<b>agree</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>49.32%</b>
strongly agree	56	38.36%
<b>The Safe Zone Program increased my awareness of LGBTQ issues and concerns on The University of Arizona campus.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	0	0.00%
disagree	3	2.05%
neither disagree nor agree	12	8.22%
<b>agree</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>51.37%</b>
strongly agree	56	38.36%
<b>How would you rate the quality of the Safe Zone program overall.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
very low	1	0.69%
low	3	2.07%
average	10	6.90%
<b>high</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>48.28%</b>
very high	61	42.07%

Safe Zone allies also indicated some language and behavior change as a result of the Safe Zone workshops. While 40% of respondents agreed that they had changed their behavior because of the program, a comparable 38% neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement. Similarly, 43% of respondents agreed that they had changed their language because of the program and 24% neither disagreed or agreed with the statement. Allies reported making a greater effort with: avoiding generalizations and stereotypes, using inclusive language on campus and in everyday conversations with friends, educating themselves about LGBTQ issues, and increasing their comfort discussing those issues (see Table 3 for the most frequently indicated behavior changes). Of note, many respondents reported to not have changed their behavior or language as a result of the training because they felt that they had already been



exhibiting positive behavior and language. As one respondent noted *“I learned a lot but I don’t think my behavior has changed; it just reinforced what I already thought, and how I try to live my life.”*

**Table 3: Safe Zone Ally Change of Language & Behaviors**

<b>I have changed my behaviors because of the information provided through the Safe Zone program.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	3	2.05%
disagree	7	4.79%
neither disagree nor agree	56	38.36%
<b>agree</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>39.73%</b>
strongly agree	22	15.07%
<b>I have changed my language because of the information provided through the Safe Zone program.</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
strongly disagree	3	2.05%
disagree	12	8.22%
neither disagree nor agree	35	23.97%
<b>agree</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>43.15%</b>
strongly agree	33	22.60%
<b>I have made a greater effort to: (check all that apply)</b>		
<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Increase my comfort in discussing LGBTQ issues	107	73.29%
Educate myself about LGBTQ issues	104	71.23%
<b>Avoid generalizations or stereotypes</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>78.08%</b>
Use inclusive language in every day conversations with friends	110	75.34%
Use inclusive language on campus toward the people with whom I have contact (i.e., in a classroom, in an office, in a department)	110	75.34%

Part of creating an active presence for the program is displaying the Safe Zone markers allies receive in the workshops in places that are visible to the community. Many staff and faculty reported similar sentiments to this respondent:

*I display my plaque on my office door and make sure that I provide an open, welcoming space for all students in my work environment. I challenge people when they use language or actions that are not inclusive.*

Eighty-seven percent of participants had posted their Safe Zone markers in visible areas, most frequently on their office door or window (53%), on their backpacks (7%), or in other specified areas (26%). When participants indicated other specified areas where they posted

their placards and/or buttons they were most frequently speaking of other areas of their office such as their desk or bulletin board (27 respondents), areas of their homes or dorms (9 respondents), and on their purse, backpack, or binder (4 respondents). Combined with the original data showing where allies were displaying their Safe Zone markers this means about 80% of visible markers are displayed in offices and 11% on a backpack, purse or binders.

About three-quarters of allies (74%) report never having been approached by anyone in regards to their Safe Zone markers. However, 97% of allies who were approached agreed or strongly agreed that the experience with the person was positive, and that they handled the situation well.

*I have a SafeZone placard on my wall, and in my position working and mentoring graduate and undergrad students I have had clear and open communication with GLTBQ students regarding their personal struggles and relationships. I think the placard was the key that let the students know they could open up to me about all of the challenges they were facing in their lives.*

## CONCLUSION

The results of this evaluation provided a sizable amount of data regarding the impact that Safe Zone is having on the UA campus. The stated goal of Safe Zone is to provide a “visible presence of student and adult allies who can help to shape a school culture that is accepting of all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or any other difference,” and the data supports that the UA Safe Zone program is visible to the LGTBQ community that it serves (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2003).

Whether reinforcing positive ally behaviors or helping participants to make a conscious behavior change, it appears that Safe Zone is producing allies that are actively combatting the negativity of homophobia and heterosexism on campus. According to the survey data from this study, Safe Zone allies are actively interrupting homophobic jokes, educating themselves about LGBTQ issues, using inclusive language, and avoiding generalizations and stereotypes. Such an active resistance has the potential to be a catalyst for the long-term impact of positively influencing campus climate.

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