

East Carolina University

InclusivECU

Promoting Inclusivity, Understanding, and Education

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Signature Honors Project

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Abstract:

InclusivECU is a student-led group that has set a goal to increase understanding, diversity, and inclusivity for all students that are pursuing higher education. This problem was identified, and a solution developed through the Honors 2000/3000 curriculum. After extensive research, it was determined that while the atmosphere on college campuses, including East Carolina University, has become more welcoming for the LGBT+ population, there are still aspects where the system fell short. Through first-hand accounts and interviews with ECU students, it was found that the current housing policies prevented many students from having a safe and welcoming living space. This may have had numerous factors including individual students being intolerant or even the UNC System itself, namely UNC System Policy 700.8.1 that states all UNC System students must be housed according to their assigned sex. It was determined that a majority of LGBT+ students were uncomfortable in their housing arrangement or even faced harassment due to their sexual or gender identity. When examined further, statistical evidence was found that indicated suicide and depression rates of LGBT+ college students skyrocket when not provided gender-inclusive housing and bathrooms (Sutton, 2016). Another discovered issue was a lack of education on LGBT+ topics at ECU. To combat these issues, InclusivECU was proposed as ECU's first LGBT+ and Ally Living Learning Community. This provides LGBT+ students, including gender-nonconforming students, with a safe living space on campus. This also allows participating individuals access to LGBT+ educational events, classes, and a chance to advocate for social justice on and off-campus. Having had the opportunity to prototype the idea as a themed living community while preparing for the coming year, InclusivECU will roll out as a LLC for the fall of 2021 and is now tied with and supported

by not only the Honors College, but the Department of Sociology, the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, and the Dr. Jesse R. Peel at the LGBTQ center.

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Introduction:

The LGBT+ population has faced many adversities over the years and has made great strides in terms of equality. However, there are many challenges that are still being faced by LGBT+ students in the United States that go unseen or undiscussed. For instance, the State of North Carolina has many policies that are non inclusive or even go against the rights of LGBT+ individuals. In fact there are only two major cities with fully inclusive gender identity and sexual orientation policies at a local level. These harmful policies even bleed within the UNC School System where there are policies such as UNC System Policy 700.8.1 that prohibits the use of gender inclusive housing, housing that is safe and inclusive for gender nonconforming or trans individuals while staying on campus, for students that attend a UNC System School. Many of these policies unjustly and severely harm the mental health or endanger the physical health of our LGBT+ population. Through research, interviews and an opportunity to prototype the idea, InculsivECU was created as a Living Learning Community (LLC) on East Carolina University's campus to provide a safe environment for LGBT+ students, build a community, and promote outreach, education and reform within the UNC School System.

Background:

Within the United States, society has seemed to dive deeper into what "equality" actually means. Yet, we still seem to fall short of what equality is in many aspects of our day to day lives. One of the communities that is greatly impacted by this lack of freedom and equality is the LGBT+ population. There are several issues that these individuals face in day to day life that a heterosexual or cisgender identifying individual would never have to worry about; including being harassed for being true to themselves or having to be housed with someone who is unaccepting and creates an unsafe living environment. Upon research it was discovered that

North Carolina was unjust in treatment towards the LGBT+ population. Based on a policy scale created by the *Movement Advancement Project* North Carolina only received a 4.5 out of 38.5 on the equality profile (*Movement Advancement Project: State Profiles*). This marked the state as being one of the states with the lowest equality score and some of the most discriminatory Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation laws and policies. To further this, *USA Today* had published an article in 2020 listing the safest and least safe countries for LGBT+ Individuals in order, 1 being the safest, 50 being the most dangerous, based off of the number of listed hate crimes against LGBT+ individuals, discriminatory policies, and the LGBT+ population percentage. All of the states were weighted equally in this study and North Carolina came to be at 33 (Byrnes et al.). While this is not the worst ranking, it is still alarming that the state fell short in so many areas.

Upon interviews conducted in the beginning stages of the project, it was found that a big concern from the LGBT+ population around campus was the lack of understanding and education on LGBT+ related matters and the policies that inhibit gender inclusive housing. Students had come forward and testified with their own experiences of roommates being cruel or even being housed in the wrong dorms after transitioning. This prompted further research into the concept of Gender Inclusive housing on college campuses. Gender inclusive housing (GI housing) can be defined as, “On-campus housing that allows students of different sexes, genders, or gender identity to live together in the same residence hall room” (*Gender Inclusive Housing Plan*). However, the UNC System Schools do not allow this to be an option. In 2013, the UNC System Board passed policy 700.8.1 that inhibits students being housed according to gender identity and instead houses the students solely based on the sex assigned at birth (*UNC System Policy Manual*). This lead to the question, “How could this affect our gender-nonconforming

students?” Further research was done to conclude that this could have drastic effects on the mental health and wellbeing of our students. In a study, when students were reported to not have access to gender-inclusive facilities, suicide attempts among trans and gender non-conforming individuals jumped from 46.5% to 60.6% (Sutton 2016). Despite the 14.1% increase in suicide attempts listed in the absence of GI facilities, still only 39% of students reported have the opportunity to access GI facilities (Seelman 2014). This evidence presents a dire need for change, especially seeing that very few schools in North Carolina provide access to GI facilities, even outside the UNC System.

In addition to this, several LGBT+ students face harassment frequently. In one study it was found that 65.1% of LGBT+ identifying students have reported facing harassment due to their sexual orientation or gender identity while in school. This same study provided that 3 out of 4 LGBT+ students experienced sexual harassment since enrolling at their university (*Key Issues Impacting LGBTQ+ College Students*). In the interviews, some students have said they believe this to be caused by a lack of understanding or education on LGBT+ issues amongst the student body. As this was brought up several times with different individuals this was taken note of and solutions were hypothesized.

Purpose:

After observing that some of the main issues that LGBT+ students are facing are housing and educational limitations, different avenues were investigated. After extended research and debate, the possibility of a Living Learning Community at ECU was proposed. A living learning community is a residential living program on a college campus that are based around a central theme. They build community, involvement, and have central educational aspects that support common learning. The students in the LLC would take similar, if not the same, classes and attend

events or meetings outside of their class schedule. These students tend to become close and develop a sense of community with one another. Studies have also shown that LLC's or programs that are comparable, have aided in a smoother transition to college both socially and academically, critical thinking, applying knowledge, social and civic engagement, as well as decreasing the drop-out/withdrawal risk of participating students (Brower & Kurotsuchi Inkelas).

Interviews were conducted to see if students felt an LLC would be an effective approach and following the confirmation that students found this to be a step in the right direction and seeing that students were interested in participating, the LLC in progress was named InclusivECU. InclusivECU was formed to be an LLC specifically focused on LGBT+ students and Allies of all majors and years, allowing all students to have the opportunity to be a part of a welcoming community and further their education and advocacy. Following the guidelines for what an LLC includes, what makes them most effective (Brower & Kurotsuchi Inkelas), and what students were looking for, a sense of purpose and a mission was formed. InclusivECU would be there to promote inclusivity, education and understanding on ECU's campus. InclusivECU promotes inclusivity by advocating for fair treatment and respect for individuals regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Students are housed with understanding and supportive individuals; this in combination with team and community building events would create a safe and welcoming place for these students to live on campus. Education is enhanced by participating students taking classes that discuss topics including a LGBT+ perspective. A sense of understanding is promoted as InclusivECU will encourage students to support each other, approach discussions with an open mind, and advocate for themselves and others. Once InclusivECU is more established, it will be used as the ground work to advocate for reform

within the UNC System and the state, and to help establish policies and laws that are LGBT+ inclusive and supportive.

Approach:

Once a mission statement and purpose was identified, interviews and research were conducted to determine how InclusivECU would be established and identify the pathways for success. During interviews with Aaron Lucier, ECU's Director of Housing Operations, Mark Rasdorf, the Senior Associate Director of the Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ+ center, and Campus Living staff that oversee living communities¹, a better understanding of the journey ahead was established. It was made clear that there had been a previous attempt at a LGBT+ LLC at ECU, however, this idea failed to come to fruition as it was not able to gain traction and lacked support within the school as well as student interest. The concern with this was that in the past the LGBT+ LLC was supposed to almost be "hidden" in a way that would allow students to join discreetly. It was proposed as a social justice LLC instead but this did not seem to reach the target population and many were confused as to what the LLC was for. It also did not have full support of those on campus. After understanding the issues that had caused this approach to fail years prior, it was determined InclusivECU would proudly and outwardly be for the LGBT+ student population as the atmosphere around campus had become more supportive and open minded regarding LGBT+ matters. The idea was welcomed with open arms by the staff at ECU. The challenge would be meeting the requirements to form a functional and effective Living Learning Community.

During the meeting with the campus living staff, the possibility of a Themed Living Community (TLC) was introduced. A Themed Living Community is very similar to a Living Learning Community; both communities are centered around a common interest and build community, however a themed living community does not include the mandatory educational

¹ Campus Living Staff including: Mike Perry, Associate Director of Residence Life for Academic Initiatives, Esmeiling Cabral, Assistant Director of Residence Life for Learning/Thematic Communities, and William "Bill" McCartney, Associate Vice Chancellor for Campus Living

aspects. The opportunity to prototype the LLC with a Themed Living Community was offered for the next fall, this would help with outreach, marketing, and seeing the best course of action while running a living community. The next step was to start planning and developing the Themed Living Community for the Fall of 2020. The ensuing discussions determined that the admissions process would be focused more on recruitment and how InclusivECU would go about enacting that approach. As the main focus of InclusivECU is greatly impacted by the lack of GI facilities within UNC System Schools, it was decided that suite-style dorm rooms that have access to their own bathroom would align with the main objective. This would allow the students to have access to a bathroom with a more private setting, establishing more comfort and avoiding the issue of gendered bathrooms in the halls. Following this decision, the themed living community was allotted ten spaces in Gateway West (now Ballard Hall) on the fourth floor with five different suites. While LLC or TLC styled communities are normally targeted towards incoming freshmen and usually those with a specific major, the issue being targeted is not one that is specific to any age or area of study. This being established, it was decided that InclusivECU would involve students of any class level or majors; this would also set the TLC and future LLC apart as normally they are target to a specific group. After the student population and living arrangements were established, the next goals involved marketing and recruiting. Marketing was done by creating an Instagram and forming a following to expand the reach of InclusivECU's goals. The partnership that had been established with the Dr. Jesse Peel LGBTQ+ Center assisted in spreading the message as a flyer advertising the living community and what it offered was sent out.

While doing this, there was a search and need to establish partnerships with academic departments at East Carolina University. As previously mentioned, a Living Learning

Community has an academic tie involved, meaning that there it is required that each LLC have at least one academic partner and specific classes associated with it. During this search there were several debates as to what departments would align best with the overall goal and purpose that InclusivECU was looking to uphold. During this search, meetings were held with Dr. Melinda Kane, an associate professor of Sociology and the co-Director of the Gender Studies program, and Dr. Kate “KT” Harcourt-Medina, an associate professor of Human Development and Family Sciences. Both professors were extremely interested in what InclusivECU would provide and thought it to be a necessary addition to ECU’s campus. As they both taught classes that would align well with the LLC and were interested in being a part of it, Dr. Kane and Dr. Harcourt-Medina were established as InclusivECU’s academic partners. Both professors assisted in the marketing process by sending out the flyers through their departments and advertising it to their students. Through the recruitment and marketing done by advertising on instagram and with the help of the partnerships on campus, the Themed Living Community accumulated 10 members total for the Fall of 2021.

During the Spring Semester of 2020, East Carolina University made the decision to move to virtual classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, ECU was planned to operate as close to normal as possible the next fall, with allowing students the choice to remain virtual and stay at home, or to return to campus with hybrid, virtual, or in person classes. The InclusivECU Themed Living Community still planned to roll out in the fall. A schedule and plan for the operation of the community when in person was devised and adjusted as needed to comply with social distancing and COVID-19 protocols. The students moved in for the fall semester that August; 9 students were moved into the suites on the fourth floor of Gateway West, due to safety concerns one of the students had decided to stay home but was still involved in the events

virtually. During the first week, the themed living community hosted an event to allow the group to meet each other; the group met in one of ECU's ballrooms in the Student Center. All safety protocols were followed and each student got an opportunity to introduce themselves while participating in "ice breaker" activities. Unfortunately, within the next week ECU returned to virtual classes and a majority of the students in the themed living community moved back home. However, the group still planned to host as many virtual meetings and events as possible to assure that there was still a connection established between group members. The group also decided to open their events to any student that would like to participate as during this time many LGBT+ students may be stuck in an unsupportive home situation as well as the new feeling of isolation that was brought by the pandemic. This decision was made with the hope that the meetings could provide a safe and welcoming space to all students who were interested or were in need of it. These events would include check-ins, "viewing-parties" where the group could watch a documentary or other movie together via a streaming platform, game-nights to serve as a mental break, and mental-health check-ins. Throughout the year, after the meetings and events the participating students were asked to fill out a brief survey to gauge the interest and the outcome of the event. This made it possible to determine what events were more effective in engagement and educating the group, while still being of interest to the students. It was found the students liked the viewing parties and thought they were interesting, the game nights and mental health check ins were helpful in establishing a close connection with the group members and had more engagement.

While running the themed living community, the Living Learning Community was in development. After discussing with the established academic partners, the required classes for the LLC were set to be Introduction to Sociology (Soci 2110), Marriage and Family Relations

(HDFS 1103), and Introduction to Gender Studies (GENS 2400). These classes were chosen because they not only correlate with what InclusivECU hopes to establish and work towards, but they also fulfil general education requirements so a student can still get credit towards their degree regardless of their major. Meetings were also held to discuss the addition of a LGBT+ COAD class as ECU had once offered the course. Previously however, the course seemed to have a lack of interest, but this can also be attributed to the climate at the time as well as it not being easily accessible to those students who may be interested. After discussing with Karen Smith, ECU's director of COAD classes, and Mr. Lucier, who had previously taught the LGBT+ COAD class, it was determined that the COAD class was beneficial because it allowed students the opportunity to discuss important topics that affect their day to day lives, with the scope that includes the LGBT+ community. With this in mind, further meetings were held to try and re-establish the COAD class. It was later decided that the COAD 1000 Special Topics: LGBT+ class would be reinstated with Aaron Lucier and Mandy Messerili, associate director of the Office of Students Rights and Responsibilities, would be the professors for this class.

Whilst preparing for the roll out of the LLC, it was important to consider the financials and the events for the coming year. Typically, for an LLC to run it is required that the group supply at least \$1,000 to support the events and any other supplies for the LLC and Campus living would match this. However, with the pandemic shutting down ECU for an extended period, campus living informed their LLC's and partners that they would no longer be able to match any finances and they were no longer requiring LLCs to put forth the \$1,000. They are instead encouraging their partners to look into what can be done free on campus and any money that was collected could be used for anything extra. However, InclusivECU was hoping to be able to supply its members with free t-shirts, and any event that would be beneficial to their

learning and team building. While brainstorming what to do to accomplish this, the groups mentor, Dr. Tim Christensen, informed the group that there may be an opportunity for funding as the Dean of the honors college, Dean White, was interested in the idea. A proposal and overall budget was produced and sent out. The group was ecstatic to find out that the honors college would be making a generous donation of \$2,000 towards InclusivECU's efforts. Following this announcement, a budget needed to be finalized and planned to determine and plan where the money would be going. This budget would also allow the group and their academic partners to plan what events would be held. After discussing with Dr. Kane, Dr. Harcourt-Medina, Dr. Diane Majewski, Director of Programming and Special Projects within the honors college, and InclusivECU's Themed Living Community members, it was decided that a majority of the funding would be put towards apparel and food as that can motivate students to attend events. There is also a lot that InclusivECU could access and take advantage of without having to spend money. This would include guest speakers and events on campus through the LGBTQ+ center. Some trips were also planned and thought out such as attending the LGBT+ Center in Raleigh North Carolina as they host educational events as well as attending Durham Pride. The money would be put towards gas for the trip and the group would be allowed to use the vans that the honors college can provide. Overall, the \$2,000 donation would be put to good use for team and connection building, and educational events.

After the budgeting, class schedule, and housing arrangements were determined, the main focus to assure the LLC was prepared for the next year was recruitment and marketing. This posed a challenge as none of the normal recruiting events were able to run as normal on campus, making it more difficult to reach the target population. Knowing this, InclusivECU developed as much material as possible to be sent out through the tied programs and partners. A website was

developed, an LLC application for applying students created, an official ecu email address created, and a page on the Campus Living, Sociology, and Human Development and Family Sciences websites was made. The website would allow interested and prospective students a way to directly see what InclusivECU is working towards, what events are to come, and a direct way to contact the leaders. The links on each website would also allow students who may be interested to see that the LLC is an option on campus. In addition to this, InclusivECU was also reached out to by two different reporters with the *East Carolinian*, ECU's campus news, as they were doing a piece on LGBT+ activism on campus and one for LGBT+ History month. This allowed the group to expand their reach and get the word out about the efforts the group is working for. In addition to this, an officer from the Themed Living Community was selected as they have experience in social media. The student has allowed the reach of the group's social media to grow rapidly as well as reaching students who have since applied and accepted for the LLC. The group also presented at Research and Creative Achievement Week at ECU and this allowed the goals and hardwork InclusivECU has completed to be shown to the public. The group was also awarded the opportunity to present at the Global Issues Conference to represent ECU and present and hear from groups across the world working on similar efforts. This allowed for the LLC to expand its reach. A list is currently being compiled of students for the following year with a maximum of 16 students being allowed in the Living Learning Community.

Closure and Moving Forwards:

InclusivECU was created to allow LGBTQ+ identifying students a safe and welcoming environment while staying in the dorms on their college campus. This is obviously needed as there is a severe lack in gender inclusive facilities and the UNC System does not allow gender

non-conforming or transgender individuals to be housed according to their gender identity. This forces them into uncomfortable and sometimes even dangerous living situations. In addition to this LGBT+ students are more likely to face harassment while staying on campus or just throughout their college career. This can drastically impact their mental health and thus have negative consequences on their performance in school. A LGBT+ and Ally LLC can work to rectify this as an LLC is correlated with better adjustment to college life and continuing through college with improved grades and social connections. This LLC can also provide gender nonconforming students with a safe and understanding living environment in which their identity is respected without them being made to feel uncomfortable.

In the coming years, InclusivECU plans to continue to grow in size and alter their approach by evaluating what issues need to be addressed. For the Fall of 2021 it is planned for further discussions to take place to ensure the stability and perpetuation of the LLC. These discussions include the possibility of funding from the Sociology Department and the Dr. Jesse R Peele LGBTQ+ Center at ECU. It is also planned that students who have come out of the LLC and are interested, will assist in running the LLC for the future once the current founders and officers graduate.

Moving forward and when continuing to develop InclusivECU, the main goal is for UNC System schools to be more inclusive towards their LGBT+ students. It is hoped that by showing that students can thrive in an environment that is gender-inclusive and increased education on LGBT+ issues and topics that the UNC System policymakers and legislators will see that it is possible and has favourable outcomes. Reform is needed to support our students to the best of our abilities. Students should have the support and encouragement they need to continue their education regardless of sex, gender or sexual orientation.

Reflection:

The experience that I have had while working on my Signature Honors Project, InclusivECU, has been incredibly eye opening. Initially, as a group we were unsure of where this would take us; we remained determined and after doing our research and interviews we knew that we were going to fight for this and do what we could to make this a reality. It was obvious that ECU, like other UNC System Schools, needs a program like this. We were met with enthusiasm from ECU Faculty and that further inspired us to keep striving for success.

Once we started actually working towards setting up a Themed Living Community, the whole process progressed rather quickly. With students actually becoming involved it made it even clearer that we were working towards a bigger picture. The Living Learning Community was approved quickly and we began working on the details as to how it would be run immediately. We have grown a lot as far as publicity and connections go, and we also have students and faculty backing our journey. We have been interviewed by the East Carolinian twice on different topics having to do with ECU's progress towards inclusivity. We have also been able to grow our social media presence and gain new incoming ECU pirates as members.

We were also given the opportunity to present our work at the Global Issues Conference and Research & Creative Achievement Week at ECU. During the Global Issues Conference we presented to groups representing two different universities in Pakistan. This was an incredible experience as it allowed us to see through a different world view and we were able to hear their feedback on our research. We also found out that gender nonconforming individuals and people of the LGBT+ population still face harsh backlash in other countries even if their university and living style is different. However, this showed us that our ideas can be applied to a broader

population and issue. During RCAW we received a lot of encouraging feedback from those at ECU.

Overall, while creating the LLC we learned a lot about how to approach and handle difficult problems and how to face challenges head on. We surprised ourselves with our determination, hardwork and commitment. We want to continue to improve our campus, and other universities as well to ensure that each student has an equal and fair opportunity to continue their education and pursue their dreams. InclusivECU will continue to work and strive for a better version of what our project is and will be to see that eventually our goal is met.

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