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## Bowling Green State University's All-Gender Housing and the Student Experience

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BGSU'S ALL-GENDER HOUSING AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College

At Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for graduation with

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## **Abstract**

All-gender housing has become a way for colleges and universities to create affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ students. As of 2022, only about 425 American schools have gender-neutral or all-gender housing programs out of the over 5,000 colleges in the United States. This lack of institutional support leads to trans and gender-nonconforming students reporting feeling less comfortable on their campuses. LGBTQ+ students report high rates of discrimination and harassment on college campuses. Studies about all-gender housing point to structural issues that cause students discomfort and feelings of instability. This study looks at Bowling Green State University's all-gender housing program in hopes of better understanding the experiences of students within the program. This project hopes to highlight areas in which the program is successful and bring attention to areas of improvement.

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## **Introduction**

My interest in exploring all-gender housing at BGSU stemmed from an ongoing conversation with a fantastic mentor I had while working with the Office of Residence Life at BGSU. Her endless passion for student success and belonging inspired me to better understand the ways that marginalized students must navigate far more than just the bureaucratic system that can make up higher education. Marginalized students frequently have to fight for the ability to even participate in higher education. For many trans and gender nonconforming students, finding housing is a major step in this process. Far too few colleges and universities offer a gender-neutral housing option. This mentor and I frequently discussed what the future of on-campus housing could look like at BGSU. Central to these conversations was the discussion of financial access and gender neutrality.

I had never lived in all-gender housing, so it was important to me to allow student voices to be uplifted in this research. As I began to develop my research questions, I wanted to dive deeper into how students currently enrolled in all-gender housing understand their housing experience. A few central questions began to take shape. What institutional barriers did students in all-gender housing face? What kinds of experiences did students in all-gender housing use to understand their experiences with Residence Life at BGSU? What do students in all-gender housing desire to be changed about their current living arrangement? These questions were at the forefront of my mind as I began this project.

## Literature Review

All-gender housing is a housing opportunity that BGSU provides to students who are seeking a housing experience that allows students to room with other students regardless of gender identity and legal sex. The Office of Residence Life at BGSU speaks to the creation of the program: “This housing option was created to foster an inclusive, safe and respectful community where students can live together with any student regardless of sex, gender, gender identity/expression or sexual orientation” (bgsu.edu). The current all-gender housing program at BGSU utilizes suite style living that provides students with a bathroom within the suite.

Wesleyan College was the first institution to introduce all-gender housing in the United States (Fjelstad). All-gender housing has existed as an option for students in Ohio since 2004, when Oberlin first introduced its program (Duthie). It wasn't until the Fall of 2013 that Bowling Green State University officially began its all-gender housing program (Office of Residence Life). At the time, the program was called gender-neutral housing and was a small selection of rooms in Founders Hall, the residence hall where the program is currently located in the 2021-2022 academic year. Later, in 2016, the program was expanded to include rooms in McDonald Hall, a residence hall that is community style living with a smaller price point. The program was later pulled out of McDonald Hall due to lack of interest. In 2016, 204 schools had some form of all-gender housing provided to students (Duthie). Currently, there are 425 colleges and universities in the United States that offer all-gender housing as an option to students (campuspride.org). With this many colleges offering all-gender housing, there is certainly room for differences in structure. Many scholars have examined what style of housing students prefer for all-gender housing. Krum, Davis, and Galupo studied which style of housing trans students prefer as well as how they would prefer to be grouped with roommates (Krum et al.). They found

that “participants indicated that they would be significantly more likely to attend an institution with apartment-style housing and self-contained single units” (Krum et al. 75). With a similar concern in mind, Taub, Johnson, and Reynolds examined how member institutions within ACHUHO-I – The Association of College and University Housing Officers, which BGSU is a part of – were implementing gender-neutral housing. In this study they examine many facets of how gender-inclusive housing was being implemented. They found that the most common arrangement for gender-neutral housing was suites and apartments located on the same floor or unit (Taub et al. 86). At the time of this study, BGSU currently uses exclusively suite-style rooms that share the same floor of a building. However, this is not the only way that BGSU has imagined all-gender housing since its inception on campus.

Before 2012, BGSU made accommodations for students that requested gender-neutral housing by offering them a single room, which as Taub et al. notes may or may not be a viable gender-neutral housing arrangement. In the years since all-gender housing was first conceptualized on BGSU’s campus, it has resided in several different buildings with changing living arrangements. *The Blade* reports that a trial of all-gender housing was begun in the fall of 2016 in McDonald Hall, a residence hall that has community style bathrooms (Rosenkrans). At the time, gender neutral housing was also offered in Founders Hall (Finnerty). The implementation of AGH within McDonald Hall was up in place to eliminate some of the cost barrier associated with living in a suite-style residence hall. Founders Hall is a mid-tier housing option on BGSU’s campus, where McDonald is a less expensive residence hall (Lyons). The news reports seem to indicate that the preliminary gender-neutral housing in Founders Hall was exclusive to returning students, and was not a full-fledged program, but rather an

accommodation that could be made for students (Finnerty). At the time of this project, all-gender housing exclusively resides in Founders Hall, a building with suite style rooms.

Outlined in the many news articles that inform the literature about all-gender housing at BGSU was the backlash that the university received for beginning an all-gender housing program. Finnerty quotes a member of the Office of Residence Life saying, “. . .the Office of Residence Life has received negative feedback through its Facebook and email . . .” (Finnerty). This backlash is not uncommon when universities attempt to implement all-gender housing programs. Taub et. al found that in their study – which has participants from every region within the United States – public relations concerns were one of the top three obstacles housing officials faced when trying to implement all-gender housing programs (85).

This backlash may carry beyond the internet and emails and into the lives of students that reside in all-gender housing programs. Kortegast explores LGBTQ+ student’s experience in residence halls in her work “‘But it’s Not the Space that I Would Need’: Narrative of LGBTQ Students’ Experiences in Campus Housing”. She observes, “LGBTQ students are more likely to report harassment and to be the target of derogatory remarks, as well as feel less comfortable with the campus climate than their heterosexual peers” (59). While Kortegast’s study does not narrow its focus to students within all-gender housing programs, it does an excellent job at nodding to the reasons why they are so important to LGBTQ+ students. Kortegast points to several ways in which LGBTQ+ students’ discomfort is experienced, but most important to this study is “[e]xperiencing direct and indirect harassment and lack of support from resident assistants, roommates, and peers were found to contribute to a hostile environment” (60). Abby Goldberg highlights the issues that trans and gender nonconforming students especially face on college campuses in “Transgender Students in Higher Education”. Speaking to the issues of



housing access, Goldberg draws on prior research about the importance of gender affirming spaces for trans students, “. . . Seelman (2016, using data from the NTDS, found that among students who had attended college, being denied access to restrooms or gender-appropriate housing during while in college was associated with a higher risk of suicidality” (6). The safety and security of trans students goes beyond creating environments free of harassment. It involves creating spaces that are affirming and also free of discrimination and harassment.

The safety and security of LGBTQ+ students on college campuses is a topic of inquiry that helps to inform studies about gender-neutral housing. Thompson, Shortreed, Moore, and Carey-Butler explore gender diverse student’s feelings about their current campus climate on a mid-size Midwestern campus in their 2019 study “Gender diverse college students’ perceptions of climate and discriminatory experiences.” Thompson et al. use the term “gender diverse” to capture anyone whose gender falls outside social norms in society (156). This study found that gender diverse students felt less comfortable on campus than their cisgender peers (168) and that gender diverse students felt the same levels of comfort everywhere on campus (169) – which is to say these students had no place they could retreat where they felt more comfortable. Some of the discriminatory behavior that was reported most by gender diverse students was “observing others staring, feeling deliberately ignored, and fearing for one’s physical safety” (Thompson et al. 170). 30.6% of gender diverse students surveyed said they feared for their physical safety whereas 8.3% of cisgender women and 3.3% of cisgender men said the same (Thompson et al. 167). This feeling of discomfort with the campus climate that is noted in Thompson et al.’s study is also reflected in the work done by Kotesgast emphasizing, furthering the importance of a campus culture that allows for LGBTQ+ students to feel safe.

The literature is clear that having an all-gender housing option is critical for trans and gender-nonconforming student success. Common challenges faced are a lack of suitable facilities, parent/family member concerns, and public relation concerns (Taub et al. 85). Public relations concerns were noted by reporters as a particular challenge faced by BGSU (Finnerty). Several different researchers noted that LGBTQ+ students report facing harassment far more often than their heterosexual peers, and that trans and gender nonconforming students felt significantly more uncomfortable on campus than cisgender students (Goldberg, Kortegast, Thompson et al.). Goldberg also highlights the necessity of gender-inclusive spaces in her work “Transgender Students in Higher Education”. The literature is clear that LGBTQ+ students desire and require spaces on campus that affirm their identities and allow them to live fully without the fear of harassment.

## **Methodology**

Bowling Green State University is a predominately white, medium-sized institution located within the Midwest. This research was conducted to better understand the experiences of students in the all-gender housing program, identify successful aspect of the program, and explore what negative experiences students may have encountered. This project was completed for an Honors project and Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies capstone project. For this project, I conducted one-on-one interviews with students currently living in BGSU's all-gender housing during the Spring 2022 semester. After receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, an email was sent to each student in the program through their Resident Assistant. Students were then able to email me requesting to be a part of the research. Four students indicated interest. Three students were interviewed. One student did not respond to the follow up email requesting to schedule a time. The number of student participants was constrained by the project timeline of 15 weeks, and then further by the necessity of approval by the university's Institutional Review Board. Textual analysis of research in the field was read diligently to support statements made by the students to add authority to their responses.

Each participant gave oral consent before proceeding with the interview. Questions were designed to ask the student to reflect on experiences that they have had during the academic year and allowed them to note changes they would like to see within the program. Questions 8 and 9 (see appendix) asked students to disclose if all-gender housing was an important part of their decision making for colleges to better understand the importance of the program to students. Students were allowed to refuse to answer any question they wished, or drop out of the interview entirely, no student chose either option. Interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choice, making sure to prioritize safety and comfort of the participant.

As someone who never lived in all-gender housing, my questions were formulated through research conducted at other universities and nationally about students in all-gender/gender-neutral housing programs. The textual analysis and areas for further explanation largely informed the questions posed during these interviews. With my status as an outsider apparent, I brought my pre-existing assumptions about the experiences students may have to the interviews and allowed them to be challenged. I chose to conduct interviews to allow students within the all-gender housing program to have their own voices and suggest changes they felt most pressing to their safety and security.

Textual sources were found through databases such as LGBTQ+ Source and JSTOR. Care was taken to include all the different terminology that all-gender housing may go by in my selection: all-gender, gender-neutral, gender-inclusive, and gender-affirming. News articles were found through an examination of BGSU's own student media websites. Finally, an official notice of BGSU's implementation of all-gender housing was obtained through the kindness of Rebecca Lyons. An informal interview was also had with a member of Residence Life staff to better understand how the program came to be and factors that influenced decision making about the housing program.

One limitation of this study was that all 3 students that agreed to be interviewed identified as trans. BGSU's all-gender housing is open to all students, regardless of gender identity and expression. By only have trans students share their experiences, the scope of this study is narrowed to their experiences as trans students within all-gender housing. While a limitation on the study, the specific experiences of trans students is vital to understanding the importance of this program since the program was conceptualized with trans and gender-nonconforming students in mind. My own position as a cisgender woman was reflected on

repeatedly through this process. When conducting interviews, I ensured that the participants were able to speak fully to their experiences, and were not expected to explain terminology to me as an outsider of the all-gender housing community. It also was apparent to me that as a member of the residence life staff for the building all-gender housing resides within, participants may already have reservations about disclosing certain information to me. Also, on the forefront of my mind is the negative experiences students may have had already when discussing issues that they may have encountered in all-gender housing.

The analysis is ordered first with a background of information about the all-gender housing program and its implementation at BGSU. Then each interview is analyzed, making sure to highlight the stories that these students have chosen to share. Finally, all the interviews are put into conversation with one other according to themes: safety, community, and barriers. Finally, suggestions from students on how to better the program are preserved in their entirety to amplify their voices.

## Analysis

Bowling Green State University's all-gender housing program began in 2013. In response to student initiation, an official notice circulated to campus community members from the then Director of Residence Life, Sarah Waters, indicated the program was owed its inception to student initiatives from the Resident Student Associate and the Undergraduate Student Government in the Fall of 2012, as well as student need (Lyons). The first name given to the program was Gender Neutral Housing Community (GNH), but today the program is named All Gender Housing (AGH). The change in language was never fully explained, however it can be inferred that the name of the program was changed to be more inclusive. The program was designated space in Founders Hall, a suite-style building with a mid-tier price range. This official notice also outlines policy for the program. The Office of Residence Life did not pair roommates that first year. Instead, students had to find someone to room with, although the same rule did not apply to suitemates. So anyone seeking housing without a roommate would be assigned to a more expensive single room. If a six-person suite could not be filled with students entirely within GNH, the Office of Residence Life reserved the right to assign those students to a single room. No student could be forced into a GNH suite. It was exclusively opt-in. No additional costs would be required of students wanting to live in the program. Finally, this program was open to returning students as well as incoming students who would reach out to the Office of Residence life individually since no application process existed for incoming students at the time.

In the years since, this program has grown substantially into the program that it is today. In the fall of 2016, the program expanded into McDonald Hall, a traditional community-style living residence hall, in hopes of offering a more cost-conscious option to students wishing to live in AGH (Lyons). However, the program did not reach a sustainable capacity in McDonald

Hall and returned to Founders Hall the next academic year (Lyons). Since 2013, the program has denied no student AGH, but has received more interest for the 2022-2023 academic year than any other year, resulting in a waitlist (Lyons). The students interviewed for this project found this to be of particular concern. Each student made mention of the stress it caused them and how others in AGH were pushed into decisions about living in non-affirming housing, moving off campus, or dropping out entirely. The increased interest in the program was directly connected to the application process with AGH being implemented within the housing application itself, rather than as an additional form that also must be completed (Lyons).

Much research has been done about where institutions are at in implementing all-gender housing across the nation, what kinds of housing trans students prefer, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in residence halls and on their campuses. My study hopes to narrow this lens further, looking at the experiences of students within all-gender housing, and how their identities inform the experiences they have. Further, listening to these students and their experiences allows university officials to understand where gaps in policy may lie, and where our policy is strong. By allowing these students to speak openly about the issues that are particular to the Bowling Green State University campus community, we can listen closely to where we as a university are succeeding, and where we still have changes to make.

### **Interviews**

Students interviewed indicated an overall positive outlook about the program. But, were able to identify key issues that needed to be addressed to improve the safety and belonging of the community. The students that agreed to participate in the study all identified themselves as trans, and that this identity was central to their desire for AGH.

## West

The first interviewee, West, indicated that his choice in college was influenced by which colleges had an AGH program. The only issue that West saw as a priority above this housing need was the availability of his desired major. West lives in a 6-person suite, which means that he has one direct roommate and 4 other suitemates. He mentioned that he was deeply disappointed to see that so many colleges still failed to have a gender inclusive housing options for their students. West indicated that he was pleased with his housing experience so far, and that the variety of students living on the floor has been one of the factors leading to his satisfaction. When asked if he could share some stories about living in AGH, West paused, then asked “Do you want good ones or bad ones?” Despite having an overall positive experience of AGH, West still had experiences within the program that created a negative experience in his mind. When I initiated him to share of any of his stories; West began by telling me that he had no specific good stories, but he was able recount a number of bad ones without pause:

One of [my friends] roommates didn’t understand what all-gender housing was and so she was saying [that] she’s very, like, homophobic and all this kind of stuff. She was saying to them how she didn’t know what all-gender was, even though it explains very clearly what all-gender housing is [on the application].

This experience highlights the reality of LGBTQ+ students navigating a space that is intended for them, but still is unable to be fully free from discrimination and discriminatory language. West was particularly upset about this occurrence since one must apply and be accepted into AGH in order to live there. West continues saying, “If that would have been my roommate? That would have (sigh), because I was told this was supposed to be a safe floor because this is all-



gender housing. Like that would not make me feel safe.” Safety was a reoccurring theme across all of the interviews and will be analyzed further later in this work.

When asked about the kinds of support West received from his Resident Assistant (RA) West’s face lit up. He was quick to tell me positive stories about the institutional support that he has had through his RA. West tells a story of his RA ensuring that students had their preferred names on their door decorations before they move in, and the RA going out of their way to ensure that students also were able to have a different nametag on the door for move in, in case the student had not disclosed to their guardians about a preferred name. When I made a comment about his RA being a source of happiness in the hallway, West had this to say: “[The RA] isn’t happy about the bad stuff that’s happened either.” This affirmed the critical service of AGH RAs who work together with these students in order to ensure their safety and build a strong community.

### **South**

The next person that agreed to be interviewed will be called South. South is also trans and identified this as the reason for living in AGH. South stated that if they did not have access to AGH, their safety would be at risk and that even in other parts of campus, they get “weird looks,” and they didn’t want to have to deal with this in their own living arrangement. South stated that they did get parental support for living in AGH and that their parents helped them to apply. This is their second time living in AGH. When ask if they were pleased with their experience so far, South look a long moment to think before speaking. When they delivered their answer, they thought carefully about how to frame the issues many individuals in AGH had been facing that week:

Before this week, I would have said yes. . . They sent out an email 2 days before our housing selection date that. . . people who have been on this floor for years have been put on a waiting list for all-gender housing. Which means we don't know if we're going to have safe housing on campus. And that puts us in a really horrible situation because then we have to live on campus in a place that is actively dangerous for us, find a place off-campus to live, which is very hard, especially this late, or go home.

South goes on to discuss the kinds of people that need AGH for their physical safety, and their worry that people who may not need it for their safety are taking away the rooms from students that need it as a safe alternative to gendered housing. When asked about stories South would be willing to share, the implicit nature that housing is gendered came to light. South shared with me that when going through roommate agreements one year, the question “are you okay with having people of the opposite sex using your bathroom” appears. South laughed while telling me this, gesturing while saying, “What! What does that even mean with this group of people”? This observation points to a large assumption about residential living on a college campus, that one will be living with someone of the same sex. South mentions that instances like this don't really hurt anyone, but in a way this presumption creates feelings of difference in an AGH suite. It also points to institutional unfamiliarity with inclusive language. Living in AGH is not the norm, and these documents further cement that idea. Finally, the theme of safety emerges again when asked if South felt that they had a unique experience in AGH. South had an extremely poignant answer that allowed me to understand my own biases as the interviewer and someone who is cisgender:

I mean, I've only ever lived with my parents and in all-gender housing. So, I don't really have a – it's definitely unique with my point of view, because you know there's one other thing to compare it to, but yeah, I think it's a pretty unique experience. Like for

a trans person, it is a unique experience to have a safe living space. Um, so yeah, that's . . .  
. I don't really know how to answer that question. Yes-ish. No-ish.

South's incredibly touching point helps to highlight the reality of trans people in the United States. Having a safe place to call home is a unique experience for trans and gender nonconforming people. BGSU's AGH creates this safe place for students and provides them a sense of safety in their living space. Being able to obtain a safe living space is a key theme of these interviews and will be discussed further when all participants voices are placed into conversation with each other.

### **North**

The final interview conducted was with North. This was her first year living in AGH. North came out during the summer of 2021 and said that housing was "the last thing on [her] mind". North was able to get into AGH by reaching out to the program director to request to live in AGH during the 2021-2022 academic year. Belonging was central to North's reasoning for wanting to live in AGH. North said she did not want to worry about "feeling out of place or being in a place [she] didn't belong in." North was also waitlisted for 2022-2023 AGH at the time of our interview, but the situation was beginning to be resolved as an email had been sent to each student confirming that they would have a room in AGH for the next academic year. Students were told that they must first select a room to get off the waitlist. Despite the situation being seemingly rectified, North was still asked to select a room for the upcoming academic year that would force her to live with her biological sex, even if she would not end up actually living within this room. North said that this was a "really hard experience and [she's] still kind of stressed out". North's feelings are perpetuated by the fact that she does have trust in the university, but the situation created tension with this feeling of trust. Students in AGH being

asked to select a room that aligns with their sex assigned at birth places the institution's bureaucracy over the lives of the students that the institution is meant to serve. This situation shows the disregard for the emotions that may be brought up when trans and gender nonconforming students are asked to align themselves with a sex they are not a part of.

### **Common Themes**

Common themes across these interviews were: safety, community, identity, and barriers. Each of these themes occurred in more than one interview and are critical to an understanding of how students view their experience in AGH, as well as the kinds of experiences they have encountered.

### **Safety**

Each student interviewed identified safety as one of their top reasons for wanting to live within AGH. Some students identified this by name, others made it clear that safety was a primary concern through language about belonging and the desire to live with people who understood, and celebrated, their identities. South identified this need very early in the interview, "I wanted to live in all-gender housing because I'm trans and there's, you know, like safety concerns of living in a non-trans housing space." Other students, like North, talk about the need for safety through terms like "security" and how not living in AGH is not a choice for her, "I think that it really sucked that I absolutely needed to rely on all-gender because even though it's meant to be a space for people to live without feeling bad about their gender". North furthers this point later in the interview when asked about how she feels about the community in her hallway, "at the very least, I feel like I can be secure." This feeling of security is contingent on the makeup of the hallway and the strength of the AGH community.

When the makeup of the hallway changes from people that “need” AGH by the interviewed student’s standard, to people who do need “need” AGH, the students begin to experience feelings of discomfort and lack of security. Both South and West told me a story about a group of fraternity brothers that were moved to the AGH floor of Founders Hall. These men were moved into the housing during the academic year due to other housing circumstances, not that they had applied to live in AGH and been accepted. West explains the story to me:

A group of frat boys got moved onto this floor when this is also all-gender housing. They shouldn’t be here. They should be in a different dorm somewhere else . . . there really hasn’t been any big situations with it so far. . . we’ve also heard random things about random people going to be moved into this floor. . . and we’re not comfortable with that. . . I feel like it could be just a little more strict about who comes. I get that it’s all-gender, you want to include everyone, but some people should just not be here.

Through this story, it becomes clear that students in AGH feels strongly about the makeup of their community and the validity of people’s reasons for desiring to live in AGH. At BGSU, every student is given an option to fill out an application to live in AGH. In the past, this form existed separately from the university housing application. For the 2022-2023 academic year, these two forms were merged, allowing students to fill out the AGH form alongside their university housing form. This increased access to applying for AGH, since students do not need to navigate to another webpage in order to request AGH. With this being said, in a casual conversation with the current staff member overseeing AGH I learned that BGSU has never turned a student away from AGH to date. This can be seen as both a positive and negative thing. Students are asked to answer three questions in the application:

1. Why are you interested in living in All-Gender Housing?

2. How will All-Gender Housing support your academic success?
3. How will All-Gender Housing support your social/emotional success?

These questions are not put in place as a barrier, but instead to better understand how students are benefiting from AGH. This system, while streamlined and easy for students to make a request, is clearly flawed in the eyes of trans students living in AGH. To these students, people are being admitted to AGH who fundamentally change the level of safety within the AGH community. Requests for more thorough screening of AGH residents were not uncommon and were made frequently in connection with conversations about safety, security, and community.

South had this to say about the situation, “If you’re just a frat boy, you shouldn’t be in all-gender housing, because that’s not for you. That’s not your safe space. You can be anywhere else on campus – literally anywhere else – and you would be safe.” South’s comment makes it clear that, in their understanding, AGH exists for students that do not have a safe space in many other places on campus. When a space has been created for students that are gender-nonconforming or trans, and then it is later used by everyone, regardless of need, trans students see their safety being marked nonessential. A question may even be raised if the goals of the AGH program are being compromised when the safety and security of students is invalidated.

### **Community**

Students in AGH indicated that they felt a strong sense of community in their hallways. Each student had a positive story to share with me about the bonds that they have been able to form during their time living in AGH. In each interview, students lauded the successes of their RAs in making the community the positive place it was. West in particular shared stories about how his RA worked to make the floor a place that students felt safe and that their voices could be heard. In total, each students shared that their RA worked ceaselessly to ensure that they were as

educated as possible on LGBTQ+ identities and issues. West says, “She is pretty amazing with all this kind of stuff.” North shares a story about her RA going out of the way to warn members of AGH of any anti-trans rhetoric happening on campus, “They were always going to reach out in the group chat and . . . offer a warning or . . . just talk about the situation.” South had less to say about the kinds of support their RA provides but was able to share that their RA sends out a weekly survey to better understand the current culture of their floor. South elaborates that, “I know a lot of other people use [the RA] a lot more. I just don’t really.” Overall, the RAs involved with AGH help to facilitate a strong sense of community on the floor. In an informal conversation with the director of AGH, it was shared with me that the RAs involved in AGH are specially selected and are not randomly assigned to AGH. This selection process is clearly making a difference in the lives of the students of AGH and ensures that they have a Residence Life staff member that can connect directly with them and foster a meaningful community.

While each students told me that they do feel a strong sense of community in their hallway, West especially appeared to understand the nuances about how this community has taken shape. West shared with me a story about how the two AGH RAs collaborated a make a floor-wide group chat that included all members of AGH, instead of half of the floor – floor group chats are traditionally made up of the residents of a single RA, this group chat had all residents of AGH. West said this group chat turned into a place where students were able to help one another and share extra snacks and goods that they had with one another. West smiled through the entirety of this question, making it clear to me that having these casual connections with one another allowed West to connect more deeply to his floor, and helped to foster a sense of belonging on campus.

North's sense of community occurs through the comradery that the students of AGH have with one another. When discussing the waitlist students of AGH had been placed on for the 2022-2023 academic year, North shared with me a story about how students of AGH came together to discuss what was happening: "One of them texted me and he said 'hey, we're going to be in the lounge and just talk, do you want to come?' And me and four other people showed up . . . We have each other's backs, even if we haven't talked before. I saw him one or twice, but we talk . . . I think just to feel that sense of strength around you is enough to make me feel really like it's a community and I feel a part of it." The solidarity of the students gives them a space to build strength and resilience.

### **Barriers**

Students made frequent references back to barriers that they felt had been put in the way of their accessing AGH. Most apparent in this was the waitlist students had been placed on while attempting to live in AGH for the 2022-2023 academic year. In discussing this waitlist, it is important to add context that I was able to receive later from the director of AGH: no student has ever been denied a room in AGH. This statement is made not to discount the very real fears and emotions that students who rely on AGH for housing experienced when being placed on a waitlist. It is made to understand how statements like this should be shared with students to assure them that they will receive a room, rather than giving them little-to-no information.

The Office of Residence Life received a far more interest in AGH this year than ever before, leading to a waitlist for students. Due to the timing of these interviews, two interviews took place after the waitlist, and one before it was made known to returning members of AGH that they would be placed on a waitlist for housing for the 2022-2023 academic year. South did



an excellent job explaining the timeline of events, and synthesizing their own critical analysis of the situation:

And that was a whole issue, within about a day and a half to two days they let us know ‘hey, everybody is currently on the waiting list, we’ll be given a spot [in AGH]’. But by then it was too late. A lot of people had already made housing decisions that were actively unsafe for them. My one friend is having to live with his really crappy family next year because of the situation that the school had put him in.

The issue at hand with the waitlist was not that students were asked to wait to select a room, it is that they were never told that they were guaranteed a room in AGH at all. Lack of communication with students created situations where students had to prioritize still being able to attend BGSU over their physical and emotional safety.

When discussing this waitlist with North, she made mention that she was asked to select a room with her sex assigned a birth to be removed from the AGH waitlist. As previously discussed, this step of action not only invalidates North’s identity, but it also shows a lack of understanding from the institution about the needs of trans and gender nonconforming students. It is inexcusable for the university to request that students make choices that force a student to confront a situation in which they could experience violence and harassment.

### **Feedback**

The final question of the interviews asked each student what feedback they had to improve AGH in the future. To truly give voice to these students and allow their voices to be heard, each response is included here as closely to original as possible, with minimal edits made for easier reading. These students had fantastic insights into what needs to change about the

program to keep its initial goal in mind, to provide a space for trans and gender non-conforming students to live on campus within a community of their own.

West: I think going back to maybe making it stricter on who can come into all-gender. I want it to be accepting as possible, but still it's meant to be a safe space. If they're just letting anyone come in that says they want to [that's not good]. I get that people can lie on the papers and whatnot, but I feel like it should be a bit more maybe in-depth or just like having stricter reason to be able to come in than just someone saying I want to. Figure something out and then like even after they come in, if there is an issue with someone like there was before, get rid of them. Don't make other people who aren't causing the problem have to move or do something. Get rid of someone that is the source of the issue.

South: I don't think that they read the applications to get into all-gender housing. They have [questions] like, how would this improve your learning experience? How would this improve your social and mental health experience? But then they still – and they even put on the entrance forms “don't use all-gender housing to just live with your significant other, that's not what this is for”, but people still get in if they're just going to live with their significant other. And that's frustrating, especially when it ends up with actual trans people who need it for safety on the waiting list. So, I think just like, prioritizing people who need it. I know they won't do this, but don't let people go into all-gender housing if they don't – if they don't have some level of safety that would be improved by it. Whether it's because they're trans or just another type of queer or just a really gender-nonconforming person that like – that would help them. But, like if you're just a frat boy, you shouldn't be in all-gender housing, because that's not for you. That's not your

safe space. You can be anywhere else on campus – literally anywhere else - and you would be safe. I don't care if you have a preference I don't care if you like Founders Hall, or if you want to live with your girlfriend who has social anxiety. That's not what this is for. That's an actual conversation in the floor wide group chat and some dude was like "oh well I wouldn't be safe if I didn't have – like didn't live with somebody who knew how to deal with my certain medical issues. And my girlfriend has social anxiety, so we need to live together" and I'm like no you don't need to live together. You can live off campus, you can apply for medical exemptions. You can apply for other things, and you have a documented medical thing where you can get it through disability services, you can get the same thing through other ways. We have no other options. This is our *only* option to be safe. So just like don't prioritize some random person who wants to live with their significant other over actual trans people who need this. Again, I know they probably won't do this, but don't let people in all-gender housing if they don't need all-gender housing. It feels kind of simple, but it seems so hard for [The Office of Residence Life] to comprehend.

North: Um, I think the main one is I think the process for all-gender is kind of kind of unnecessarily hard. It's first come, first serve and there is a limited number of spots. And I personally believe when you're dealing with people's safety and sense of security, it's always good to overestimate spots than underestimate spots. I feel like there's another issue that comes up from this, I heard a lot of people that took away all-gender housing spots were couples if they needed to live together or people of different genders who feel like they need each other. And I have no problem with you needing that, but I feel like all gender housing should separate itself from that because it's meant to be oriented and providing that sense of security [to people in the

LGBTQ+ community]. I feel like making that making all-gender housing either exclusively for people in the LGBTQ+ community or just creating a different, different like application or different marker for it. Because I know for a fact the application. . . last year you had to do something as a separate form. But this year it was on the [housing] portal. It's more accessible and more visible for people who may not understood what it was or for. People who are like, 'oh, I want to live with a person of a different gender, so that must be what it is for.' So just probably just being clearer about it . . . I think just overall, the fact that all-gender needs to be a thing available is kind of frustrating, but I know that they're not going to change their policy and say it's going to appeal to the most people. Make the process a little bit more geared towards why you need this housing. Do you need it for gender and security? Or do you need it because you need to live with someone else? And honestly, I think it should be available in some capacity in all dorms. [Having it only be an expensive dorm and a cheap dorm is very limiting]. It's still limiting because my friend who is talking with, he's disabled and he needs to have a bathroom to himself, he needs a better living situation like Founders. I think just putting it in only two dorms is kind of limiting again. I think just overall more awareness of what it is and that it's intended to be for the security of people of different gender expressions. Make a conscious effort to change your application process from the first come, first served basis, which again, I get this is kind of necessary is because of how it's been constructed, but it does end up limiting people that really, really need it.

Make students more aware of the process. I've had a largely positive experience outside of the application process. The only other thing I can think of, it's not directly related to this, but I heard there's also supposed to be a queer and trans student union on campus that I've only been briefly made aware of, and I heard it's like not really doing anything. I don't know how this

would look, but I think maybe we could link all-gender housing to like a learning community of sorts with LGBTQ+ students of some sort. It makes sense. I feel like trying to use all-gender housing to foster more of a learning community and kind of connecting it to like a queer student union. So, trying to take like create a whole learning community out of that with activities and stuff like that.

## **Conclusion**

In summation, students in AGH at BGSU have a strong sense of community with members of their hallway and are given institutional support through figured like their RAs. However, students regularly face barriers when requesting housing or navigating situations where students live in AGH that are detrimental to the community. To better understand how to develop AGH in the future it is essential to hear the voice of students that are currently living in AGH and critically engage with the challenged they have faced. Doing this allows administrators to understand the ways decisions made about the program impact the lives of the students they serve. Moving forward, it would serve administrators to listen to student voices and find ways to increase feelings of safety within AGH and reflect if decisions being made about the program are in line with the original intent of the program itself. All students deserve a residential student experience that allows them to grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Students are only able to thrive when they have a safe environment to live in. Students within AGH have ideas for how to develop the program further, it is the responsibility of staff to listen to these requests, understand that these students offer valuable insight, and make deliberate choices that further develop the program in a positive way.

## **Appendix A**

1. Could you tell me why and when you chose to live in all-gender housing?
2. Are you pleased with your experience in all-gender housing?
3. What is your current living situation like?
4. Do you have a sense of community in your hallway?
5. Are there any stories you could share with me about living in all-gender housing?
6. What kinds of support does your Resident Assistant provide?
7. Does all-gender housing provide you with a unique experience?
8. Were you interested in all-gender housing at other colleges?
9. Is it important for BGSU to have all gender housing?
10. What suggestions do you have to improve the all-gender housing experience for students?

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