



Student-Athlete Knowledge Community

NO LONGER EXCLUDING, BUT INCLUDING LGBTQ STUDENT-ATHLETES

Rebecca Windover

*Graduate Student and Assistant Hall Director
Kent State University*

Jason L. Meriwether

*Vice Chancellor for Enrollment
Management & Student Affairs
Indiana University Southeast*

Student Learning and Development



College athletics provides a robust student experience with potential for teamwork, camaraderie, and leadership development. But Baird (2002) discusses the homo-negative and heterosexist climate that often exists among college athletic programs. Sports can lead to personal struggle, discrimination, and harassment (Griffin, 1998). In particular, bias and discrimination against gay and lesbian athletes have been found to occur through negative stereotypes, verbal comments, social isolation, homophobic harassment, discrimination in team selection, and negative media attention (Roper & Halloran, 2007). With the

coming out of athletes Michael Sam, Robbie Rogers, Abby Wambach, Brittney Griner, and Jason Collins, LGBTQ student-athletes today enjoy climates that are more receptive than ever. Rankin and Merson (2012) stated that “LGBT students today are more out and vocal than ever before, and those who are also athletes deserve to know which schools and which athletics programs will respect them for who they are” (p. 1). But amid this positive national shift, many challenges still exist for LGBTQ student-athletes.

Climate

Rankin and Merson (2012) discussed the impact of university climate on LGBTQ student-athletes' academic and athletic outcomes. A 2011 study by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that more than 25% of LGBTQ student-athletes reported experiencing harassment or some form of assault due to sexual orientation while playing on a school sports team. Rankin and Merson (2012) further explained that:

LGBTQ student-athletes generally experience a more negative climate than their heterosexual peers and although sexual identity is not a direct predictor of the outcomes, the way LGBTQ student-athletes experience the climate indirectly affects their academic success as well as their athletic identity. (p. 6)

To respond to these concerns, campus studies to assess the impact of climate on LGBTQ athletes—followed by strategic measures to mitigate factors that negatively impact academic outcomes or connectedness—would be helpful to students.

Inclusive Language

The use of inclusive language is important for the growth and well-being of all student-athletes, staff, and coaches. In the NCAA Champions of Respect resource guide, Griffin and Taylor (2013) noted that:

We must address LGBTQ issues in sports because some traditions long accepted in athletics do not promote or reflect a culture of inclusion, diversity, or respect. Practices such as LGBTQ or sexist name-calling as a way to taunt opponents or shame poorly performing team members, team hazing rituals . . . or older athletes bullying young team members all encourage student-athletes to view actions that promote humiliation and disrespect as part of the game rather than the divisive and destructive distractions that they are. (p. 4)

We should avoid using terminology that is degrading or has negative connotations, because that contributes to student-athletes withholding public disclosure of their sexual orientation. We should value the individualism of everyone within our campus communities and use language that demonstrates respect for myriad backgrounds.

Viable Development of Allies

Student Affairs Leadership

Roper (2005) noted that it is essential that all senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) demonstrate “that LGBT students, faculty, and staff are valued colleagues and community members” (p. 85). By supporting and attending Safe Zone or Ally Trainings, SSAOs move campus discussions about supporting LGBTQ students from simple tolerance to actioned approaches that embrace differences, uplift uniqueness, and demonstrate inclusivity.

Greek-letter Organizations

Meriwether and Hart (in press) encouraged the development and implementation of campus-wide ally trainings for fraternities and sororities that capture the climate and nuances of the individual campus. Within the context of this type of training, Worthen (2014) expounded on the value of utilizing trainings for fraternities to discuss issues of bias and stereotyping. Leveraging the influential nature of fraternities and sororities on the student experience is a viable area of ally development.

Student-athlete Allies

Worthen (2014) discussed opportunities for ally training among athletes. Elfman (2013) noted that male allies are less likely to face questions about their sexual orientation, while female allies often face accusations of being a lesbian, which creates barriers to partnerships and advocacy for female athletes. It is important for campus leadership to set a clear path for student-athlete allies to actively engage their peers by offering trainings that combat stereotypes and other negative themes.

Intentional Messaging

Indiana University Southeast, the University of Vermont, and the University of California, Los Angeles, among numerous other colleges and universities, have joined the You Can Play Project (youcanplayproject.org) and sent a deliberate message of support for LGBTQ student-athletes. These videos capture messages from athletes, athletic administrators, faculty, and other members of campus leadership to express a welcoming environment for LGBTQ student-athletes. Meriwether and Hart (in press) discuss the impact of messaging that shapes an environment for LGBT student-athletes to thrive when trying to mitigate the challenge of balancing academic demands and identity development.

Conclusion

Student-athletes who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity need a supportive environment where they can come to a healthy and comfortable identity for themselves without fear or external pressures. As noted by Rankin and Merson (2012), we must address the experiences of LGBTQ student-athletes by examining the impact of harassment and discrimination on their academic and athletic success. Coaches, teammates, and university administrators must develop an understanding of LGBTQ identity and how it is affected by athletic culture for the benefit of openly gay athletes and for those who have not yet publicly shared their sexual orientation. Supporting LGBTQ student-athletes can lead to increased success on their respective playing fields and throughout other campus communities. The role of allies in shifting climate and culture toward being safe, inclusive, and embracing of LGBTQ athletes is significant and should be encouraged on all campuses.

References

- Baird, J. (2002). Playing it straight: An analysis of current legal protections to combat homophobia and sexual orientation discrimination in intercollegiate athletics. *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, 7(1), 31–67.
- Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network. (2013). *The experiences of LGBT students in school athletics* (Research Brief). New York, NY: Author.
- Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong women, deep closets: Lesbians, homophobia and sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Griffin, P., & Taylor, H. (2013). *Champions of respect: Inclusion of LGBTQ student-athletes and staff in NCAA programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/CRLGBTQ.pdf>
- Elfman, L. (2013, April 25). Inclusiveness growing for LGBTQ athletes. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://diverseeducation.com/article/52922/>
- Meriwether, J. L., & Hart, A. J. (in press). Welcome to campus: Strategies to increase connectedness for LGBT students. In R. Shepherd & J. Breslin (Eds.), *ACPA Academic Support Monograph Series: 2014 Briefs on Academic Support in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: American College Personnel Association.
- Rankin, S., & Merson, D. (2012). LGBTQ national college athlete report. *Campus Pride*, 1–18.
- Roper, E., & Halloran, E. (2007). Attitudes toward gay men and lesbians among heterosexual male and female student-athletes. *Sex Roles*, 57, 919–928.
- Roper, L. D. (2005). The role of senior student affairs officers in supporting LGBT students: Exploring the landscape of one's life. In R. L. Sanlo (Ed.), *Special issue: Gender identity and sexual orientation: Research, policy, and personal perspectives* (New Directions for Student Services, No. 111, pp. 81–88). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Worthen, M. (2014). Blaming the jocks and the greeks? Exploring collegiate athletes' and fraternity/sorority members' attitudes toward LGBT individuals. *Journal of College Student Development*, 55(2), 168–194.