



Advising Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Student Athletes
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Pat Griffin, a pioneer of addressing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues in college athletics, described the shame, fear, and self-loathing that she felt as a closeted lesbian student athlete in the mid-1960s, as well as the fear of being discovered (2012). These feelings were shared by former football player Ed Gallagher, who in the 1970s attempted suicide because he could not see himself as a gay athlete (“Brief history of gay athletes,” 1998). Between the 1970s and the turn of the century, discussion on LGBTQ issues and rights created awareness and some acceptance of marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities, yet athletics—including those on college campuses—is “one of the last bastions of cultural and institutional homophobia in North America” (Anderson, 2005, p. 13). Student athletes who identify as LGBTQ face discrimination, isolation, and emotional turmoil (Griffin, 2012). This problem is deeply rooted and impacts the psychological, academic, and athletic development of student athletes. Many people will dismiss sexual orientation as a private matter, but a student-athlete’s inability to be open about who they are poses serious harm to their emotional and psychological well-being, as well as their athletic performance (Wolf-Wendel, Bajaj, & Spriggs, 2008).

Our field has addressed considerations for advising student athletes (e.g. Toogood & Gill, 2008; Menke, 2013) and LGBTQ students (e.g. Forrest, 2006; Joslin, 2007; Self, 2007). However, only one chapter addresses the cross-section of these two populations (Wolf-Wendel et al, 2008). Now more than ever, college athletes are coming out during college, and academic advisors need to be knowledgeable and equipped to help them deal with the challenges they face. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore issues surrounding homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in college athletics and to recommend strategies for academic advisors who work with athletes so they are able to create safe and welcoming environments that positively impact the development of college athletes.

[Note: The authors are using the acronym LGBTQ to represent not only lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities, but also other marginalized sexual and gender identities that are not listed in this article. Although queer has historically been used as a derogatory term (and some community members do still take offense to the term), others use queer as a more inclusive identity label to expand the definition of fluidity.]

Athletic Subcultures, Homonegativity, and Issues and Challenges for LGBTQ Athletes

There is an important distinction to be made between *homophobia*, “an extreme and irrational aversion to homosexuality and homosexual people” (Oxford dictionaries) and *heterosexism*, “the bias that heterosexuality is superior to, or more natural than, homosexuality or bisexuality” (Forrest, 2006, par. 2). *Transphobia* (“fear or hatred of transgender people or gender non-conforming behavior”) and *biphobia* (“fear or hatred of bisexual people”) are even more pervasive than homophobia (University of Michigan, 2013).

Homonegativism describes the learned beliefs and behaviors toward non-heterosexuals, often demonstrated through discrimination, prejudice, and, most notably and relevant to this article, negative stereotypes (Barber & Krane, 2007).

There are many contributing factors to homonegativity in college sport: (a) athletes, coaches, and others involved likely have not had the necessary exposure to different sexualities and gender expressions; (b) the strict (traditional) definition of ‘masculinity’; and (c) the focus on ‘team’ and ‘community’ may cause individual development to be neglected and ignored (Wolf-Wendel et al, 2008). This is especially the case in team-oriented sports, which operate under an umbrella of team-loyalty, and to the organization or athletic department.

Invisibility

Because they have to identify themselves as such, LGBTQ people form a unique minority. As “silent sufferers” it is impossible to say how many athletes are forced to mask their true identity in hopes of passing as heterosexual and cisgender (a person whose gender identity matches their anatomy). But if athletics is a microcosm of U.S. society, it stands to reason that an estimated 6 to 10 percent of athletes are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. LGBTQ athletes are four times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be silent about their identity (Campus Pride LGBTQ National College Athlete Report, 2012). Additionally, although discussions of homophobia tend to lump all members of the LGBTQ community under one umbrella, in striving to create effective strategies to combat homophobia, homonegativism, biphobia and transphobia, campus stakeholders must give consideration to the unique circumstances of each individual group and consider the intersection of other identities, such as race and ethnicity, and its impact on gender and sexual identity.

Pressure to Perform

The world of college athletics has propagated a sub-culture that emphasizes athletics over academics. This has implications for the presence of homophobia in the sports world, particularly within team sports (i.e. football, basketball, soccer etc.). Achieving high levels of athletic and scholastic performance is expected from various stakeholders: college administrators, coaches, and fans. However, the environments are not always conducive for an LGBTQ student-athlete. One lesbian basketball player stated, “If an athlete does not feel like it’s a tolerant environment, they definitely aren’t able to perform. You can’t perform under that kind of pressure” (Griffin, 2006). The pressure of performing at a high level coupled with the visibility of being an athlete on campus and in the community—particularly at the NCAA Division I level—creates an environment where college athletes feel as if they are “living in a little bubble” (Menke, 2010, p.7). In this sub-culture, athletes are often socialized to champion athletic identity over academic identity (Adler & Adler, 1985). Although college athletes often begin their college experience idealistic about their academic future, these athletes are met with pressure from teammates to conform to a more prominent athletic identity (Adler & Adler, 1985; Benson, 2000). This demonstrates the strong influence that team members have on each other. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer student-athletes are twice as likely as their peers to experience harassment, and that harassment frequently comes from coaches and teammates during practice sessions (Campus Pride LGBTQ National College Athlete Report, 2012). Moreover, athletes are often disengaged with aspects of their academic careers, in some cases having no choice in the selection of their coursework (Benson, 2000).

Challenges for Transgender Athletes

Transgender athletes face unique issues in the sex-segregated sports world. Sports are often segregated by binary sex categories (i.e. male or female), requiring a transgender athlete to identify by sex and not gender identity in order to participate. This can cause dissonance, as transgender individuals sometimes see their gender identity as either changing or fluid. The experiences of transgender student-athletes are complex, with no single “trans” experience (Semerjan & Cohen, 2006), further complicating our understanding of transgender student-athletes.

Few policies are in place to allow transgender athletes to compete in the most appropriate arena. This forces most athletes to choose a sport based on their sex assigned at birth and adapt appropriate “norms” because in American society, “variant sexual identity can be accepted as long as gender conventions are not crossed” (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012, p. 30). The NCAA has created a resource for coaches and administrators working with transgender student-athletes. Citing issues of inclusion, fairness, equal rights, and the safety of transgender students, the handbook outlines the concerns regarding transgender athletes in competition, as well as the benefits of including transgender athletes. Because sports are often designated as male or female, concerns about unfair competitive advantage to transgender athletes arise based on erroneous assumptions about transgendered individuals. Some believe that a male-to-female transgender athlete competing in a women’s sport will take opportunities away from women and will have an unfair competitive advantage. Some even express concern that men will claim transgender status to gain an unfair competitive advantage. As the NCAA resource points out, these assumptions claim that trans women are not *real* women and oversimplifies the difficult decision to transition from one gender to another. Because education places a value on diversity and inclusion, denying transgender athletes the same opportunities would go against the mission of most educational institutions and goes against the core values of the NCAA. This resource addressed policy concerns by defining NCAA *mixed teams* as a women’s sports team with one or more male members or a men’s sports team with one or more female members. It also addressed hormone usage. Testosterone is a banned substance in NCAA sports competition but is a commonly part of the medical procedure for transgender athletes. These individuals can receive a medical exception to the rules regarding this banned substance, allowing them to compete in their sport in their respective gender division. The document concludes with best practices, calling for schools to provide equal opportunities to transgender athletes, demonstrate that they value diversity by including and respecting transgender athletes, and work collaboratively within the athletic department as well as with the families of the transgender athletes to provide a safe environment for them to study and compete (NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Athletes, 2011). The trans community is new to higher education scholars and requires a closer examination to reveal the impacts of various campus entities, including athletics, which may facilitate the growth of safe and welcoming environments for transgender student-athletes.

Challenges for LGBTQ Athletes of Color

Sexual orientation and gender identity are identity statuses, but not everyone who identifies as LGBTQ experiences that identity in the same manner. More research should investigate the intersection of gender and sexual identity with race and ethnic identity (Griffith, 2012). The few studies that do exist focus on Black men, who are socialized to behave in ways that are not only hyper-masculine, but also hyper-heterosexual (Southall, Anderson, Nagel, Polite, & Southall, 2010; Harris, Palmer & Struve, 2011). Black men often associate masculinity with aggression, toughness, and the controlling of emotions and femininity with being gay (Harris, Palmer & Struve, 2011). Some men explained that being gay was not valued in the Black community, and thus, men distanced themselves from Black men who *appeared* to be gay (e.g., wearing tight clothing and speaking with a high-pitched voice). Acting in hyper-heterosexual ways, deemphasizing committed relationships, and engaging in multiple heterosexual experiences unless prohibited by a strong religious commitment were common behaviors among the men in their study. The literature tells us very little about the experiences of lesbian, female bisexual, and transgender individuals of color. More studies on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia and its intersection with race, gender, and class will enhance our understanding of the struggles of LGBTQ community members of color. Knowledge of how these identities interact can help athletic administrators create safe and welcoming environments for these athletes.

Implications for Academic Advising

In combating homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, colleges and universities have a responsibility to ensure that their campuses are safe for all LGBTQ student athletes and staff. The need to create a safe environment is critical because “When student-athletes hide their sexuality from their coaches and teammates, they pay harmful emotional and psychological costs” (Wolf-Wendel et al, 2008, p. 33). Because some student-athletes will stay closeted to coaches and teammates, academic advisors can play a crucial role in the continued success of these students by educating themselves on LGBTQ topics, challenging LGBTQ oppressions, advocating for LGBTQ identities with athletic administrators, and promoting an intersectional approach in their one-on-one and group advising.

Academic advisors are in a position to be strong catalysts for creating a safe and welcoming environment for college athletes, and should be knowledgeable about LGBTQ identities. Professional development opportunities allow advisors to educate themselves about appropriate language, become familiar with specific challenges faced by LGBTQ students, and engage in dialogue with other trainees who are experiencing the same difficulties and triumphs. These include: formalized trainings (e.g., Ally Training programs), webinars, and conference sessions. Through continued professional education, advisors will be more prepared to address LGBTQ issues in advising sessions and on campus. More seasoned professionals can continue their commitment to advocacy by increasing visibility through the display of LGBTQ friendly signs, stickers, and resources (e.g., LGBTQ friendly magazines in the waiting room); using bystander interventions skills (e.g., communicating concern when harmful language is used between people); and fostering an inclusive advising office that is free of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia to help challenge LGBTQ oppressions. When negative comments are made by other students or colleagues, advisors should confront the situation in an appropriate manner and ask people to consider how their specific language might impact the overall office. Additionally, colleges and universities must challenge fan behavior that perpetuates a homonegative environment (Barber & Krane, 2007). Advocating on behalf of LGBTQ students within athletics can be accomplished by hosting awareness and training sessions specifically for athletic departments, collaborating with athletic student success staff, and providing resources to coaches and administration.

An intersectional approach to academic advising—being more culturally conscious, understanding the complexities that exist within various minority and subcultural communities, and using social justice as a framework for social change—encourages students to show up in advising offices without the fear of having to silence pieces of their identity. “Because intersectional work validates the lives and stories of previously ignored groups of people, it is seen as a tool that can be used to help empower communities and the people in them” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 12). Advisors should avoid targeted or loaded questions about a student-athlete’s identity that may be based off stereotypes or social constructions, while also supporting a student by using inclusive language. The various identities each student possesses influences their lived-experience and development as a student and athlete. Acknowledging the struggles a student-athlete may experience based off their identities develops trust and rapport. Although improvements in the attitudes towards LGBTQ athletes have occurred in recent years, advisors can build on this trend of inclusion and support.

Conclusion

Denial of the prevalence of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia has plagued collegiate athletics for years, and silencing and closeting members of the LGBTQ community stunts their development and impacts team performance (Wolf-Wendel et al, 2008). Despite the demonstrated issues with homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in college athletics, little research investigating how these phobias affect American college students is available. In a culture that is silent about these issues, it is especially important that advisors who

work with athletes have access to resources that will help them to better engage with these students and nurture and support them as they face such hostile extra-curricular environments.

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