

LGBTQ+ Collegiate Athletes and the Double Bind: Insights From the Experiences of Out Varsity Athletes

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This article presents recommendations for supporting out LGBTQ+ collegiate varsity athletes based on self-descriptions of their experiences. Within a larger quantitative survey, 63 former and current varsity athletes, who were out as LGBTQ+ while competing, wrote about their experiences. We then thematically analyzed their responses. Participants describe a double bind in which they desire more specific support for their unique LGBTQ+ identity at an institutional level yet request that athletic programs not spectacularize that difference at an individual level. Athletes suggest that programs signal their support of LGBTQ+ athletes more proactively and through the use of safe zones, increased educational opportunities for allies, and more visible and vocal pro-LGBTQ+ stances from those in leadership positions. Practical implications, such as an LGBTQ+-conscious approach to supporting athletes, are discussed.

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The relationship between collegiate athletic programs and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) athletes is one of contradictions.² On the one hand, they experience situational differences

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² We use "LGBTQ+" to refer to all marginalized sexual orientations, sex distinctions, and gender identities. Other terms are used only to reflect the language used by participants and/or by previous research. We

dependent on their individual identities and the sports they play. On the other hand, formal policies designed to address their needs treat them as a homogenous group. Additionally, despite the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, recent research identifies varying experiences for LGBTQ+ individuals within American collegiate settings regulated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) practices and policies.³ Some studies show that gay and lesbian athletes experience decreasing incidences of homophobia (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). Alternatively, others have found continued challenges: Homophobic and heteronormative behaviors remain problematic (Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019; Pariera, Brody, & Scott, 2021), coaches, administrators, and student-athletes can exhibit heterosexist and/or homophobic attitudes even when they, too, belong to a marginalized identity (Rankin & Weber, 2014), departments can create environments that promote tolerance but fall short of inclusion (Turk, Stokowski, & Dittmore, 2019), and ambiguous forms of acceptance and veiled forms of discrimination are often present in contexts reporting low levels of explicit homonegativity (Rollè, Cazzini, Santoniccolo, & Trombetta, 2022).

The NCAA states that athletic departments have a "responsibility to ensure that all student-athletes have an opportunity to participate in a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate . . . regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression" (Griffin & Taylor, 2013, p. 2). The NCAA also notes that "LGBTQ student-athletes experience a more negative climate than their straight peers" (Griffin & Taylor, 2013, p. 2). Even though the NCAA recognizes this source of conflict for LGBTQ+ athletes, research on intercollegiate athletic settings has found legitimization and reinforcement of the values, norms, and systems that perpetuate heterosexism and sexual prejudice (Cunningham, 2015; Cunningham & Melton, 2012), and that most programs lack LGBTQ+ inclusiveness (Turk et al., 2019).

The purpose of this study was to explore how out LGBTQ+ varsity collegiate athletes in the United States describe their experiences to derive actionable recommendations.⁴ In particular, we focused on experiences and programs related to supporting LGBTQ+ athletes rather than on policies meant to regulate participation.⁵ While we understand and acknowledge that athletes with differing sexual orientations and gender identities will have disparate experiences (Manning et al., 2020), we also recognize that, in relation to *support* guidelines, these athletes are currently treated as a collective by the NCAA and its member institutions. Additionally, by examining the data as communal responses, we were able to resist the potential to divide the larger LGBTQ+ community, which can create "an atmosphere of separation rather than cohesion" (Parmenter, Galliher, & Maughan, 2020, p. 1020).

include the "+" to acknowledge the range of identities within this umbrella term, especially since athletes identified as pansexual and/or non-binary.

³ We deliberately focus on research examining the experiences of varsity collegiate athletes at U.S. institutions because of important differences in how American collegiate sports are regulated by the NCAA and American culture and norms.

⁴ An athlete was considered "out" if they discussed their LGBTQ+ identity with at least one teammate, coach, or athletic department member.

⁵ This study was completed before recent policy changes intended to exclude transgender and intersex participation in sports (Sharrow, 2021).

This study extends the conversation from a binary of homophobic/non-homophobic to a discussion of specific practices, especially as they connect individual experiences to institutional procedures. In describing their lived experiences, LGBTQ+ athletes spoke to a double bind: They desired more specific support for their marginalized identity at an institutional level, through the addition of inclusive organizational practices, yet requested programs not spectacularize that difference at an individual level, in order to help normalize LGBTQ+ athletic participation.⁶

Background

The Role of Social Climate and Institutionalized Inclusivity in Athletics

The role of social climate in athletic departments is important, as research shows its significance in encouraging organizational diversity and helping individuals to feel included (Smith, 1995). However, the term "diversity" is often used interchangeably to discuss a myriad of marginalized positions, even when these are not viewed the same way within institutions, especially athletic departments. For example, Wolf-Wendel, Toma, and Morpew (2001) examined how and why those in athletics accept some forms of diversity readily, such as racial diversity, but remain closed and often hostile to issues of sexuality. They found that athletic administrators, coaches, and athletes explained away instances of homophobia or heteronormativity "because out gay men and lesbians" were practically unheard of in athletics, as opposed to the "critical mass of people of color on teams" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001, p. 473). The authors concluded that formal and informal policies of nondiscrimination toward sexual orientation needed to be included in athletic programs.

Importantly, research has also found that athletic success is positively associated with an athletic department's inclusiveness (Cunningham & Nite, 2020), especially when an explicit commitment to LGBTQ+ diversity is demonstrated. In a study of senior NCAA administrators, Cunningham (2011) found athletic departments that "coupled high sexual orientation diversity with a strong proactive diversity strategy far outperformed their peers" (p. 458). The study also highlighted how sexual diversity was not enough on its own to have direct effects on performance if not also connected to explicit diversity training.

Research has also shown that LGBTQ+ diversity programs need to be incorporated into the culture of athletic programs. For example, in a study of how Student Union Officers provided support for and promoted LGBT+ inclusion in university sports, Catherine Phipps (2020) discovered that officers often failed "to recognize forms of discriminatory practices, which may not be obvious," and that Student Union Officers were either unaware of inclusivity policies or did not see them as day-to-day practices (p. 313). Such findings demonstrate how inclusivity programs are beneficial for athletic departments generally in addition to being useful for individual athletes.

⁶ Spectacularize is used to signal how LGBTQ+ identities are made hypervisible as markers of difference in momentary and sensationalized ways (Kellner, 2017).

Contextualizing Existing LGBTQ+ Collegiate Sports Equality Resources

The NCAA, along with LGBTQ+ sports advocacy groups, has highlighted the need to support LGBTQ+ athletes through various initiatives, resources, and practices. The most comprehensive is the *NCAA Champions of Respect: Inclusion of LGBTQ Student-Athletes and Staff in NCAA Programs* document (Griffin & Taylor, 2013). This resource provides in-depth suggestions related to supporting LGBTQ+ athletes and helps athletic departments understand the importance of addressing LGBTQ+ issues in intercollegiate athletics. The document also highlights the role of allies in cultivating an inclusive and respectful space, as studies have found that there is support among straight-identified athletes for LGBTQ+ athletes and causes (Kluch, 2020). Policy protections for LGBTQ+ athletes serve dual purposes of supporting LGBTQ+ athletes and fostering prosocial ally behaviors (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010).

The NCAA's *Champions of Respect* guidelines were the most widely available LGBTQ+ inclusion resource offered to NCAA member schools at the time of this study. In addition to this resource, the NCAA launched a summer series in 2014 titled *Common Ground* with the goal of convening "a diverse group of athletic leaders to take some initial steps to explore the divide between . . . people of faith and LGBTQ+ people in college athletics" (NCAA, 2014, pp. 3–4). The program culminated in 2020 with an hour-long webinar. Additionally, the NCAA's Division III Working Group released new resources related to LGBTQ+ programming and inclusion efforts in 2018 under the OneTeam initiative. This program aimed to better understand LGBTQ+ issues in sports but was designed for and provided to Division III member schools only (NCAA, 2018). While these resources and programs show the willingness of the NCAA to create more inclusive environments, our study wanted to better understand how LGBTQ+ athletes describe experiences happening in concurrence with these actions.

In late 2017, Athlete Ally, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ending homophobia and transphobia in sports, released its first Athletic Equality Index, developed to "measure LGBTQ inclusion policies and practices in athletic spaces" through an audit of "handbooks, policy manuals, and campus materials" (Athletic Equality Index, 2017, para. 1).⁷ Initially, the Index only surveyed schools within the Power Five Conferences (ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac 12, and SEC), as opposed to our study's more expansive look at all conferences and at all levels of varsity competition. There were also some discrepancies between the Index score and the scores particular universities received from the Campus Pride Survey. In some cases, this was because the athletic department did not follow the same LGBTQ+-inclusive policies promoted by the wider university. In others, it reflected how certain athletic departments were more accepting than the school's general culture (Zeigler, 2017). Furthermore, the Index was designed to evaluate only formal and public-facing policies provided by administrators and/or found via online searches. In contrast, our study aimed to listen to the athletes themselves to better understand how these procedures were understood by the individuals they were intended to support.

⁷ The Executive Director and founder of Athlete Ally, Hudson Taylor, was coauthor of the *Champions of Respect* guidelines.

Study Overview

This study was part of a larger research project that used mixed methods to better understand how various LGBTQ+ varsity collegiate athletes described their experiences (Pariera et al., 2021; Scott, Brody, & Pariera, 2023). The analysis presented here uses responses from two open-ended survey questions, thematically analyzed, and then contextualized in terms of current guidelines and practices, to better examine how LGBTQ+ athletes describe the role athletic departments play in their lived experiences. Previous research within sports studies has similarly used qualitative data from a primarily quantitative survey (Scarduzio, Walker, Lewis, & Limperos, 2021). The primary research questions guiding this part of the study were as follows:

RQ1: What are significant experiences for LGBTQ+ athletes based on their involvement in American collegiate varsity sports?

RQ2: What recommendations do out LGBTQ+ varsity athletes make to athletic departments based on their time playing collegiate sports?

Method

Participants

A total of 63 out LGBTQ+ respondents provided answers to our open-ended questions hosted on an anonymous online survey platform. Open-ended questions about gender and sexual/romantic orientation were asked. Race/ethnicity was determined by asking participants which term best describes them, with the option to select more than one. For sports not governed by the NCAA, such as skiing and equestrian, respondents were asked to select the equivalent classification. Participants were asked which sport they played, resulting in the following list: baseball, basketball, cheer, crew/rowing, cross-country, equestrian, football, lacrosse, skiing, softball, soccer, swimming, tennis, track and field, and volleyball (see Table 1 for a breakdown of all demographic variables from the sample).

Table 1. Demographics of Study Sample (N = 63).

	<i>n</i>	%
Cisgender women	31	49
Cisgender men	28	44
Transgender men	3	5
Nonbinary	1	2
Gay	23	37
Lesbian	23	37
Bisexual or pansexual	17	26
White or Caucasian	48	76
Black or African-American	5	8
Latinx or Hispanic	4	6
Mixed race	4	6
Asian or Pacific Islander	2	3
Division I	35	56
Division II	17	27
Division III	11	17
Southern region	22	35
Midwestern region	13	21
Mid-Atlantic region	12	19
Western region	9	14
Southwest region	7	11
Played between 2007 and 2012	16	25
Played between 2013 and 2018*	47	75

Note. Percentages do not all add to 100 due to rounding. **Champions of Respect* was released in 2013.

Procedure

On approval from the institutional review boards, a convenience sample of participants was recruited for an online survey. The survey was distributed in the winter of 2017–2018 through LGBTQ+ sports nonprofit listservs, social media sites, and websites for LGBTQ+ athletic communities. Participants were encouraged to share the survey with other current and former varsity athletes. Participants had to be over 18, had to be out to at least one teammate or member of the athletic department, and had to have played varsity college sports at a four-year university since 2006, the first year a transgender athlete competed in an NCAA sport. Measuring “outness” is a difficult task because coming out is an ongoing process that involves multiple stages dependent on social contexts (Scott, 2018). Therefore, we wanted to allow for an expansive understanding of sexual identity disclosure that took direction from the athlete’s own understanding of outness and that also recognized the potential risks and dangers associated with this type of disclosure.

After informed consent procedures, participants completed the anonymous survey, including two open-ended questions. Of the 70 LGBTQ+ people that completed the optional questions at the end of the survey, seven were removed for obvious falsified answers, such as answering "good" or pasting answers from online articles. Each participant wrote an average of 65 words, and all but two participants responded to both questions. The questions were developed using a constructivist grounded theory approach, a productive way to use data from small qualitative studies to reflect larger discourses and trends, especially as they relate to power and inequality (Charmaz, 2017, 2021). We devised open-ended questions that would highlight the participant's experiences since constructivist grounded theory aims to empower participants (Charmaz, 2006). We also recognized that there is conflicting research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes, so we purposively designed questions using neutral language to allow for both positive and negative experiences to be shared. These questions were meant to focus on experiences within the daily lives, roles, and relationships of our participants (Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). The first (Q1) asked, "If you could make one recommendation to college athletic departments (whether to coaches, teammates, support staff, other LGBTQ athletes, or all of the above) about how they work with LGBTQ student-athletes, what would it be?" The second (Q2) asked, "For you, what was the most significant part of your experience as an LGBTQ student-athlete?" After successfully completing the survey, participants had a chance to enter a raffle to win one of five \$100 gift cards.

Coding/Data Analysis

To conduct the thematic analysis, the first author engaged in open coding by carefully reading all open-ended responses to become familiar with the data and to generate initial codes. They then reread the responses and organized them into categories and subcategories, using these codes to refine the emerging themes (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). During this process, the first author engaged in memo writing to explore the data more deeply while still centering the experiences described, and the language used, by the participants (Charmaz, 2021). This constant comparative method meant the elimination of some categories and the incorporation of others (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). Furthermore, this process of inductive data-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allowed the themes to emerge from the data, rather than a priori knowledge, while still acknowledging and analyzing data within the structural and situational conditions of its production (Charmaz, 2021).

After categories were refined, the second and third authors independently analyzed the responses and placed them in either the corresponding codes identified by the first author or created a new code based on their interpretation. The researchers discussed any nonmatching codes to agree on final themes before comparing the emergent themes with previous literature (Charmaz, 2006).

Analyzing Data and the LGBTQ+ Collective

For this article, we analyzed the responses made by LGBTQ+ athletes collectively, as this reflects how they are categorized under existing athletic *support* guidelines. We do not mean to erase the differences between, for example, a Black cisgender lesbian athlete in a revenue-generating team sport and a White transgender gay man in a non-revenue-generating individual sport. Our intention was to listen to their experiences of existing in a system that treats them collectively in relation to support services. Therefore,

our questions were structured around the idea of the collective as opposed to only athletes with one unique sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Focusing on LGBTQ+ athletes collectively also follows previous research findings that individuals with marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities identify with the larger LGBTQ+ collective (Frost & Meyer, 2012; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). While we do not discount that biases and phobias exist within the LGBTQ+ community (such as transphobia, biphobia, sissyphobia, and sexual racism), research has found that LGBTQ+ group identity "is based on shared struggles, resiliency, and support for other LGBTQ+ individuals" (Parmenter et al., 2020, p. 1036), and that LGBTQ+ individuals are often isolated in athletic programs and look to a collective group of other non-straight and/or non-cisgender individuals to create community (Turk et al., 2019).

As our results show, responses from individuals with differing sexual orientations and gender identities overlapped and related to one another and provided evidence for a collective experience shared by many out LGBTQ+ varsity collegiate athletes. However, we also acknowledge the need for more research that can better speak to the particularities of differing identities, specifically.⁸

Findings

The responses to the open-ended survey questions produced two themes that speak to the double bind experienced by LGBTQ+ collegiate varsity athletes: one related to individuals (Normalize Individuals) and one related to institutions (Inclusify Institutions).

Normalize Individuals

This theme illustrates how LGBTQ+ collegiate athletes desire their individual identity categories/differences not be spectacularized and contains two subthemes: (1a) Just Like Anyone Else and (1b) Team First Mentality.

Just Like Anyone Else

Respondents referenced their identities in ways that both attempted to make their LGBTQ+ identity like those of their straight-identified peers and in ways that highlighted their desire for others to see them as more similar to, rather than different from, their straight-identified peers. For example, one White lesbian cisgender woman noted that "LGBTQ student-athletes are just like any other student-athlete . . . they want to train, compete, bond, and receive an education." A Hispanic/Latinx cisgender lesbian athlete stated that athletic departments should not "look at them any different. They are still the talented athlete that you recruited and they are dedicated to their team." One White cisgender lesbian wrote that athletic departments should "treat us like you treat everyone else. We are there to play the game, not be judged according to our sexual identity and preference." A gay White cisgender man added that their main recommendation would be to "just treat the

⁸ A follow-up study that used in-depth interviews confirmed this more uniform collective identity and experience in relation to recommendations for supporting collegiate athletes (Scott et al., 2023).

student athlete as simply an athlete." Respondents also noted that it was an important experience for them to *not* be spectacularized or singled out because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. As one White cisgender lesbian athlete stated, it was significant that "I never felt singled out as an LGBTQ athlete."

Team-First Mentality

This theme reflects how LGBTQ+ athletes often used a team ethos, or "team-first" language, to situate their position in sports. For example, a Black cisgender lesbian athlete stated that athletic departments should "treat them like normal members of the team," and a White bisexual cisgender man added that, while "representation is important," one shouldn't "single out the player" and should treat them as "part of the team and community." Likewise, a bisexual Hispanic/Latinx cisgender man added that a "reliable and solid team" would be formed as long as there was a "welcoming environment that focuses on team participation and unique individual value." This was further supported by a White cisgender lesbian who wrote, "It's not about making an LGBTQ athlete's sexuality or gender identity a more important aspect than the rest of the team as a whole." Nevertheless, this same athlete also recognized the need to ensure the LGBTQ+ "athlete feels supported so that they can compete, train, and live just like any other athlete."

Inclusify Institutions

The second theme is related to structures and includes actionable recommendations for what college athletic departments should *do* to create LGBTQ+ inclusive athletic environments at the systemic level. We deliberately use the term "inclusify" (Johnson, 2020) because it emphasizes the recognition and celebration of uniqueness and dissenting perspectives *and* a *continuous, sustained* effort to help individuals feel accepted and valued. Responses within this theme coalesced around three specific actionable subthemes: (2a) Be Inclusive/Welcoming, (2b) Have Open Conversations, and (2c) Learn More.

Be Welcoming

Responses within this subtheme discussed the importance of open-minded and welcoming attitudes. One White gay cisgender man wrote that athletic departments should "be more inclusive and go out of their way to create a welcoming environment for LGBT athletes." A White bisexual cisgender man reiterated that "it makes a huge difference [when a] school has vocal support for LGBTQ" athletes. Another White gay cisgender man highlighted how this approach would benefit the team, athletic department, and university: "An LGBT student athlete in a welcoming atmosphere is going to be a better teammate and player. We all play to win, and we win when we are inclusive."

Responses also identified specific and practical indicators an athletic department could use to be more inclusive and welcoming. For example, a cisgender lesbian Asian/Pacific Islander athlete recommended "creating a welcoming space for athletes, whether that be a statement by the department or signage such as SafeZone training. All these things are dramatically noticeable to LGBTQ+ athletes especially if they're struggling to come out." A White cisgender lesbian athlete explained that departments need to:

make it clear that LGBTQ athletes are welcome and that harassment in any form will not be tolerated. We as LGBTQ athletes need to hear this and see the support of the athletic department in order to feel safe being out.

This sentiment was echoed by a White gay transgender man who wrote that LGBTQ+ athletes need to know "that there are policies in place to help and protect them." A White gay cisgender man additionally suggested that reexamining assumptions about athletes would help create an inclusive environment when he recommended that programs "be more willing to step outside of the heteronormative, cisgendered expectations of athletes, even in subtle ways, like how coaches talked to the athletes." In line with this recommendation, a mixed-race cisgender lesbian athlete added that departments should "not make assumptions" about their LGBTQ+ athletes, and a White cisgender lesbian stated that programs should not "assume everyone is straight."

Athletes identified the need for more action by individuals in positions of power, such as coaches and administrators. As one White cisgender gay man noted, "the coaches and ADs [athletic directors] need to take the leadership on this. The athletes are ready. This is now completely about leadership." This sentiment was echoed by a White bisexual cisgender man writing, "I think it's important that athletic officials (school employees in the athletic department) make clear that as a matter of policy, the school supports LGBTQ students and has their back in cases of harassment and discrimination." Furthermore, a White cisgender lesbian respondent noted a significant experience: "My coach was very supportive and stuck up for us to our athletic director who made it obvious he was against gays."

Overall, respondents indicated that the creation of inclusive and welcoming spaces was a significantly positive part of their experience. For example, one Hispanic/Latinx cisgender lesbian athlete wrote about how important it was to have "others be understanding and accepting of my life," and a White cisgender lesbian stated that their whole experience changed once they transferred to a larger university whose athletic program made their sexuality "a nonissue" because its "environment was very supportive." This sentiment was summed up by a White gay cisgender man who wrote, "Well, I'm newly out as of about a week ago, and the acceptance by everyone I know is the most significant piece of it."

Importantly, it was also noted that acceptance was only helpful if also accompanied by inclusive actions. As one White cisgender lesbian athlete wrote, it was significant to receive "love from my team . . . this being said, they still say ignorant comments and some really offensive things."

Have Open Conversations

Athletes also suggested there be continued, sustained, and honest dialogue about inclusion and acceptance. Two White gay cisgender men stated that departments should "promote honesty and dialogue about issues of orientation" and "make LGBTQ inclusion part of athlete orientation." An Asian/Pacific Islander bisexual cisgender woman echoed this, writing, "actually have conversations!" A Black pansexual transgender man wrote, "open communication is key." A Black gay cisgender man suggested programs should "provide a forum for LGBTQ issues for athletes and streamlined personnel on athletic staff to go to," and a Black cisgender lesbian athlete noted that organizations of strength for LGBTQ+ athletes are ones

that “listen” and include individuals who an “LGBTQ person feels ok talking to.” This theme was also situated as beneficial to institutions when one pansexual Hispanic/Latinx transgender man wrote that “open communication, talking, and discussions lead to winning.”

Learn More

The final subtheme identifies the need for straight-identified and/or cisgender individuals to learn more about LGBTQ+ inclusivity. This theme differs from *Have Open Conversations* as it focuses on gaining information and can potentially be done individually and/or without LGBTQ+ athletes present. In contrast, the previous theme must happen in interpersonal settings and focuses on the productive aspects of open dialogue.

Athletes recommended that straight-identified and/or cisgender individuals should try to listen more to LGBTQ+ athletes to be better equipped to support them. One White gay cisgender man wrote that understanding “the specific needs of lgbtqia+ individuals” is vital to provide support, and a White cisgender gay athlete added that departments need “more awareness building about diversity, inclusion, and anti-LGBTQ language.” This was echoed by a bisexual White cisgender man who suggested that departments should “bring in guest speakers who are LGBT athletes.” Athletes also stated the importance of equipping straight athletes and coaches with knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community through training programs. One gay White cisgender man stated that “more often than not we have allies who are more than willing to defend their LGBTQ teammates but don’t have the resources or even the lexicon to do so.” A White cisgender lesbian athlete added that “doing diversity trainings with coaches would help a lot because a lot of the times they have good intentions but are just ignorant.”

Discussion

Results from our findings illuminate how LGBTQ+ athletes see the recognition of, and attention to, their identities along an individualized versus institutionalized axis (see Table 2 for a summary of themes).⁹ In particular, as individuals, they are looking for their identities to be normalized or seen as similar to others, whereas at the institutional level, they want more attention drawn to the unique experiences navigated by LGBTQ+ athletes. Put another way, they do not want to be singled out as LGBTQ+ individuals, but they do want these differences to be recognized institutionally, especially as it pertains to consistent and uniform departmental policies, programs, and resources aimed at cultivating greater acceptance, inclusivity, and positive environments for LGBTQ+ athletes.

⁹ Related bifurcations have also been identified in previous research on sports settings (McClearen, 2017).

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes.

Theme	Subtheme	Example
Normalize Individuals	Just Like Anyone Else	"treat us like you treat everyone else"
	Team-first Mentality	[treat them as] "part of the team and community"
Inclusify Institutions	Be Welcoming	"it makes a huge difference [when a] school has vocal support for LGBTQ athletes"
	Have Open Conversations	"open communication, talking, and discussions lead to winning"
	Learn More	"bring in guest speakers who are LGBT athletes"

As it pertains to individual experiences, one explanation is that LGBTQ+ athletes are often understood as existing in conflict with cultural schemas about successful elite athletes, which are usually cultivated via institutional norms (Billings, Moscowitz, Rae, & Brown-Devlin, 2015). This historical positioning of athletic identity and nonnormative sexual and/or gender identities as at odds with one another means that LGBTQ+ athletes often feel compelled to highlight specific character traits to distract from their LGBTQ+ identities (Kauer & Krane, 2006).¹⁰

As supported by our findings, responses from athletes show how, at an individual level, they engage in the process of depersonalization by categorizing themselves in relation to the group in ways that minimize or erase unique individual characteristics (Turner, 1987). This finding supports the notion that, within the social environment of sports organizations, LGBTQ+ identities are often hidden because those who reproduce social norms are more likely to be considered team players; "conversely, if they do not reflect the team norms, they can be labeled a 'non-team player,' or a 'loose cannon'" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 34). Regimented sports participation, especially at high levels, such as collegiate varsity sports, forces athletes to adopt a team-first mentality. This prioritizes group cohesion over individual expression and is compounded by media narratives and fan discourses that promote the idea that LGBTQ+ players are detrimental to team cohesion (Brody, 2019; Kian, 2015), despite evidence to the contrary (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; Pariera et al., 2021; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001). Furthermore, the fear of being labeled a distraction causes some collegiate athletes to delay coming out (Billings & Moscowitz, 2018). While championing ideas that seem too individual-oriented has derailed the careers of successful athletes—Colin Kaepernick is an example—this logic does not extend to all athletes equally. Individuals with majoritarian identities are more positively framed and less frequently disciplined for displaying individuality in team settings (Brody, 2019). This has particular ramifications for LGBTQ+ athletes since mere acknowledgment of an LGBTQ+ identity can be seen as disregarding perceived institutional norms of an athletic department and/or ignoring the team-first mentality.

Therefore, athletic departments should recognize that LGBTQ+-identified athletes are navigating multiple conflicting identities since they are members of a high-status group (varsity collegiate athlete) and a marginalized group (the LGBTQ+ community). This is a complex process that can present unevenly and

¹⁰ This is an example of identity negotiation theory, wherein individuals work to make certain identities more salient over others depending on the cultural context (Ting-Toomey, 1986).

has material consequences related to team cohesion, individual well-being, and athletic performance since there is importance in “validating *both* group membership identity salience and personal identity salience issues to develop quality relationships” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 2; emphasis in original). These identities, situated as contradictory in both ideological and material ways, are important to recognize because the development of one can cause regression in another.

Athletes understand that, as individuals, they need to be seen like straight-identified members of the athletic program so as to not spectacularize their difference or affect team chemistry. However, results from *Inclusify Institutions* identified that athletes would welcome structural changes that normalize LGBTQ+ identities at an institutional level. These responses show that while athletes work to protect their identity as an athlete, they still recognize the need for support for their specific and unique marginalized gender and/or sexual identity.

In response, we propose that athletic departments take an LGBTQ+-conscious, rather than blindfolded, approach.¹¹ This method, developed as the concept of queer blindfolding by Smith and Shin (2014), is modeled on a color-conscious versus color-blindfolded approach to race and ethnicity.¹² A color-blindfolded attitude attempts to ignore race and/or ethnicity, in an effort to be egalitarian, whereas a color-conscious attitude understands that visible markers of minority status have profound effects on inclusivity. Previous studies have found that color-blindfolded approaches do not promote equality and/or eliminate racism, nor do they prevent racial bias. Alternatively, a color-conscious approach is “predictive of reduced racial bias in White children” (Perry, Skinner, & Abaied, 2019, p. 1036). As it relates to LGBTQ+ identities, Smith and Shin’s (2014) queer blindfolding refers to the “process by which well-intentioned heterosexual identifying individuals” minimize heterosexual privilege, eschew the negative effects of heteronormativity, and attempt to make LGBTQ+ identities an invisible social phenomenon through the rhetoric that these individuals are just like their straight counterparts despite evidence to the contrary (p. 940).

Our results show the need to consider these differences because of the unique implications sexual and/or gender identity has on mental health and social hierarchies. An LGBTQ+-conscious attitude works to identify systems of privilege and situates the negative experiences of sexual minorities as an ongoing problem in need of proactive solutions rather than a historical issue or one with no present-day consequences. Adopting this approach could help to produce a holistic and sustained environment of inclusivity that recognizes and provides support for difference as a routine function of the organization rather than as a reaction.¹³

The recommendations from our athletes, as seen through the theme of *Inclusify Institutions*, are more in line with an LGBTQ+-conscious mindset that calls for discussions of discrimination and inequality

¹¹ Smith and Shin (2014) use “queer” to refer to the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, we use LGBTQ+ conscious, rather than queer conscious, for consistency.

¹² The term “blindfold,” as opposed to blind, is used because the latter “when used in a pejorative sense, is inherently oppressive to those who thrive without being sighted” (Smith & Shin, 2014, p. 942).

¹³ The goal is not to normalize difference but to make difference normal and expected and to assume support for LGBTQ+ identities is a daily practice independent of hypervisible LGBTQ+ identities.

and the exposure to other cultures. This approach will allow athletic departments to be proactive rather than reactive in their understanding of, and support for, LGBTQ+ athletes.

Furthermore, based on results from *Inclusify Institutions*, we found that out LGBTQ+ athletes discussed the importance of athletic programs clearly articulating that they are a safe zone for LGBTQ+ athletes in both implicit (ideological) and explicit (instrumental) ways. Ideological safe zones refer to how athletic departments think about and discuss their programs and athletes. A paradigmatic example is the recommendation that programs “not assume” all their athletes are heterosexual. Instrumental safe zones refer to how formal support is provided and may include policies and procedures that protect LGBTQ+ individuals. This could also include the display of symbols that support and validate LGBTQ+ persons, as they are found to improve the environment, among other factors, for LGBTQ+ individuals (Evans, 2002; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008). These two approaches should be understood as intentional, complementary, and constitutive. Rather than solely relying on stickers (instrumental safe zones), pro-LGBTQ+ support also needs to be cultivated through the way language is used, both in terms of the values espoused by administrators and coaches and the way in which athletes speak to one another (ideological safe zones).

These athletes’ recommendations make it clear that supporting LGBTQ+ athletes is not just about what you think, but also about what you do, and must be reflected throughout an institution in deliberate ways. This supports previous research that found that diversity policies are useless unless tied to day-to-day practices and built into an organization's culture (Phipps, 2020; Shaw, 2007). It also highlights how LGBTQ+ respondents, as opposed to straight-identified participants, see more significant benefits and efficacious outcomes from these types of resources (Turk et al., 2019). This proactive and intentional approach will also aid in the process of positive self-categorization within the athletic in-group, as a more explicit stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion will rebalance LGBTQ+ identity to be perceived as a positive fit for the organization. Additionally, since previous research shows that the promotion of explicit acts that express a sports organization’s commitment to LGBTQ+ diversity led to an increase in athletic success (Cunningham, 2011), the creation of more visible support for LGBTQ+ athletes would not negatively affect a program, but instead would benefit the overall department through increased success, both on and off the field.

One of the most common recommendations made by LGBTQ+ athletes was the need for more education about LGBTQ+ issues in sports. In addition to antibias training during athletic orientation, these athletes discussed the need for more continued conversations, which would aid in normalizing the discussion of LGBTQ+ athletes instead of expecting the coming out of one athlete to serve as a catalyst for conversation (further reflecting that LGBTQ+ athletes believe structural changes will lead to productive individual experiences). They would also provide straight and cisgender-identified individuals more opportunities to learn how to better support LGBTQ+ athletes. While the NCAA currently suggests that individuals “learn more” about LGBTQ+ issues in sports and has provided opportunities to do this through their *Champions of Respect*, *OneTeam*, and *Common Ground* initiatives, the results from our study show the need for the NCAA to take a more active role in assuring that member institutions attain this goal.

Additionally, the findings from this study demonstrate how LGBTQ+ athletes encouraged those in a position of power to make visible acts and have open conversations. This supports research that found that sexual orientation continued to be a divisive topic in college athletics because of the inability of those

in a position of power to support LGBTQ+ identities (Fynes & Fisher, 2016), and that a lack of an overriding culture of acceptance, including structures and/or policies to enhance the experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes, contributed to a culture of silence that marginalized sexual and gender minorities (Fink, Burton, Farrell, & Parker, 2012). This is further buoyed by research that found that athletes struggled more in deciding to come out to coaches than to teammates (Pariera et al., 2021). Moreover, this approach would help build a culture of inclusivity since allyship among non-LGBTQ+ athletes is higher when individuals perceive their coach to hold more supportive attitudes about LGBTQ+ individuals (Toomey & McGeorge, 2018).

The recommendations made by the athletes in this survey, who represent various sexual and gender identities, NCAA divisions, school locations, and sports, point to a lack of consistent messaging and uptake/deployment of the NCAA's resources for supporting and including LGBTQ+ athletes. This finding is significant given that many of the athlete's recommendations for how athletic departments could improve, including safe zone signage and training, clear statements regarding inclusivity policies that are built into athlete orientation, continued conversations about diverse groups, and guest speakers who are LGBTQ+, revolved around visible acts that are already recommended by the *Champions of Respect* guidelines as well as the *Common Ground* and *OneTeam* initiatives. This is significant because it supports the efficacy of the practices laid out in these resources and because it highlights an apparent disconnect between NCAA policy and implementation across its membership athletic departments. This conclusion is echoed by Schmidt (2018), who found that LGBTQ+ inclusive policies did not trickle-down to member institutions. The findings from our study suggest that if the NCAA truly wants to ensure that all athletes have an opportunity to participate in a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate, then they should require the recommendations be adopted, rather than providing them as suggestions.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of our study relates to the sample. While best attempts were made to reach a diversity of individuals from across the country, the majority of responses were from White cisgender athletes. Future studies might recruit more specifically based on racial and ethnic, and/or gender, diversity. Another limitation was that this study did not ask participants about the specific aspects of the *Champions of Respect*, *OneTeam*, and *Common Ground* guidelines and programs, and some participants played before these resources existed. A different project could more directly ask participants to identify and rank which, if any, of the best practices they experienced. This study could potentially include the best practices and LGBTQ+-inclusive policies identified by the Athletic Equality Index to better understand how athlete experiences correspond to public-facing policies and athletic administrators' self-reported practices. Future research could also test related theories, such as optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) or communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993). Since this study occurred before a surge of policies meant to exclude transgender and intersex participation in sports (Sharrow, 2021), future research should more thoroughly examine the effects of these restrictions on athletic experiences. Lastly, a limitation of this study involves the method, as the researchers were not able to probe the responses made by the respondents. While a subsequent part of this study did ask follow-up questions related to these responses (Scott et al., 2023), which aligned with the responses from this survey, future studies could test these findings as the sole focus of semi-structured interviews to discover what nuances might be present.

Conclusions

While athletes are experiencing less homophobia than previously reported, there continues to be difficulties cultivating LGBTQ+ inclusive and welcoming communities within American collegiate athletic departments. Significantly, our study found that athletes see inclusivity differently dependent on an individual versus institutional axis. This bifurcation exemplifies the power dynamics at play wherein athletes adhere to group norms at an individual level, which involves suppressing their unique qualities, while still asking for structural changes that would counteract the idea that their personal characteristics are detrimental to sporting success.

Furthermore, this double bind means that LGBTQ+ athletes and allies necessitate support and programming that recognizes the unique minority stressors experienced by members of LGBTQ+ communities at both the institutional *and* broader cultural level. LGBTQ+ athletes do not exist in a vacuum and cannot cleave their athletic and social experiences. Instead, research would benefit from an increased focus on how heteronormative cultural expectations affect LGBTQ+ experiences and identity production among high-performing athletes instead of focusing solely on the homophobic/non-homophobic binary. This new orientation will potentially help to better understand the ramifications of implicit and/or structural biases in addition to explicit and/or individually experienced prejudice.

Additionally, LGBTQ+ athletes request that athletic departments actively work to decenter bias and heteronormativity in the way that they communicate their support for these individuals. Our study provides evidence as to how athletic departments could potentially accomplish this by fully utilizing the resources already available to them and by taking an active role in both identifying and embracing an ethos of inclusivity.

Lastly, athletic departments must be proactive in how they approach supporting LGBTQ+ athletes and must be conscious, no matter how uncomfortable it might be, in acknowledging the presence of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and hetero/trans normativity that permeates U.S. culture generally and sports culture specifically. Athletic departments cannot assume that sexuality and gender identity do not matter to athletic success, nor can they wait for an athlete to come out to begin their diversity programs. If they genuinely want to support all their athletes, they must be LGBTQ+-conscious, which includes proactively acknowledging and addressing issues related to sexual and gender-identity difference and building these ideas and actions into their everyday culture.

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