“Don’t Be Open or Tell Anyone”: Inclusion of Sexual Minority College Athletes

Sarah Stokowski, University of Arkansas
Megan Turk, University of Arkansas
Stephen Dittmore, University of Arkansas

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In comparison to their heterosexual counterparts, sexual minority college athletes (often referred to as members of the LGBTQ+ population) are two times more likely to experience harassment (Rankin & Merson, 2012). Due to their sexual orientation, this population is often ignored, excluded from team activities, and subjected to orientation-based derogatory remarks (Rankin & Merson, 2012). Sexual prejudicial behaviors (e.g., negative attitudes, homophobic language, physical harm, purposeful exclusionary acts) are commonly experienced by college athletes who identify as sexual minorities (Herek, 2009). Research repeatedly has demonstrated that athletes who identify outside the heterosexual narrative often are viewed negatively (Anderson, 2011, 2012; Anderson, Smith, & Stokowski, 2019; Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2010; Griffin, 1998; Herek, 2009; Krane & Barber, 2003, 2005; Magrath, 2017; Pfeiffer & Mitsunori, 2018; Toomey, McGeorge, & Carlson, 2018). As such, adversity is frequently experienced by the estimated 8,500 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) college athletes whose sexual orientation falls outside the heterosexual narrative (Coutal, 2018; Gates, 2017).

To acknowledge this underrepresented group, Ottenritter (2012) developed “a framework for understanding and supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students” (p. 531). This framework relies on organizational support, institutional environment, and the understanding of ‘diverse identities’ (Ottenritter, 2012, p. 531). Sports are seen as social change agents (Cunningham, 2015a), where individuals transcend boundaries through personal identities. Ottenritter’s (2012) framework believes that “understanding and appreciating the importance of sexual identity is key in creating safe environments for LGBTQ students” (p. 533). Numerous studies have demonstrated the competitive advantage of inclusion, as non-inclusive climates negatively affect academic and athletic performance (e.g., Barber & Krane, 2007; Cunningham, 2015a, 2015b; Cunningham & Melton, 2011; Wolf-Wendel, Bajaj, & Spriggs, 2008). Utilizing Ottenritter’s framework, the purpose of this study was to understand and describe inclusion of college athletes who identify as sexual minority within a NCAA Division I institution (University).

The methodological approach for this study was a phenomenological case study. Through convenience and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), this study employed multiple data collection methods including 26 semi-structured interviews with faculty, athletic staff, coaches, and college athletes as well as document review. Through inductive and narrative analysis (Creswell, 2007) three major themes emerged: representation, silence, and accessibility. Representation referred to the fact that college athletes felt they were expected to personify the university in a positive manner. Silence in the present study referred to not expressing in speech or being prohibited from speaking. Accessibility insinuated whether campus inclusivity resources were made known and easily available to college athletes.

The themes of representation, silence, and accessibility demonstrated that the University athletic department did not fulfill the requirements of inclusion but instead created an environment of toleration. The results indicated that much of how college athletes who identify as a sexual minority experienced inclusion is related to how the athletic department addressed or failed to address inclusion. The intent of this study is to positively contribute to the development and implementation of inclusive policies and practices regarding college athletes who identify as sexual minority.