Recruiting and Retaining LGBT Athletes Lessons from the Population

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Information presented in this chapter is taken verbatim from the author's dissertation, The Experiences of Gay and Lesbian College Athletes, accessed in ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

This research was supported in part by a grant from the Edgar L. Morphet Research Scholarship in Education.

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of gay and lesbian college student athletes. Participants of the study played at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I or National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) institutions. All contributors were engaged in an hour to 90 minute interview. They were asked a range of questions regarding their family environments and attitudes, institutional climates, and the process of disclosing their sexuality.

The primary research question explored was, What are the experiences of gay and lesbian college student athletes on college campuses? Intentions for the study were to bring awareness to the treatment of gay and lesbian athletes on college campuses, and how they navigated their college surroundings. The submitted chapter provides an outline of implications for athletics and for higher education, overall. Information was collected through resources provide by the NCAA on inclusivity of LGBT student athletes (Morrison, 2012).

Chapter Keywords: Gay Athletes, Lesbian Athletes, NCAA, NAIA, LGBT, homonegativity
CONCLUSION

(Note: This chapter is a reprint of Chapter 7, from the author’s dissertation The Experiences of Gay and Lesbian College Athletes, accessed in ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.)

“The wellbeing and development of an athlete is a student affairs issue. We must remember that everyone has the opportunity to a safe and welcoming environment” (Windover, 2014, para. 8).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of gay and lesbian college student athletes. Studies by Anderson (2005, 2011a, 2011b) explored gay, male athletes during the time of his coming out in the 1990s, this was compared with gay, male athletes of early 2000’s. This research on the experiences of gay and lesbian college student athletes offered insight and added to the literature which included studying both male and female athletes in same gender relationships. Utilizing the framework of identity development, this study deconstructed the stages in which students begin to identify and embrace their individuality. Evans et al. (2010) outlined various student development theories that supported the enhancement of this study, and aided in the understanding of how college students connect with their identities. The research also encompassed and applied gender and gender identity development models and the various models of homosexual identity development. Equally, the coming out process was examined demonstrating how gays and lesbians experience the process throughout their daily lives. The study also assessed both the campus climates of private and public four-year institutions; as well as, gauged the background of the families of the ten participants.

Case studies and narrative analysis was the approach used in this research. This study examined the lives of ten gay or lesbian former college student-athletes. Participant protocol included semi-structured interviews that lasted one to two hours at length. Participants were interviewed one-on-one in a setting chosen by the interviewer. While given the opportunity to meet in an environment comfortable to their surrounds, such as their homes, all but one of the participants declined and wanted to meet in a private location chosen by the interviewer. Most interviews were scheduled in a secluded conference room in various libraries. Majority of the participants were African American and female, however two males and two Caucasian females were interviewed. They also represented both NAIA and NCAA-DI institutions, as well as they played sports in women’s basketball; men’s basketball; softball; cheerleading; track and cross country.
This chapter will focus on the discoveries realized regarding the experiences of gay and lesbian college athletes. The importance, as well as limitations of this study will also be presented and discussed. As the chapter concludes, recommendations will be offered that reflect some of the views from the participants, as well as from the various authors examined in this research. Recommendations will include suggestions for academia, athletic directors, and students. This will include gay and lesbian athletes; heterosexual athletes, and student allies. Moreover, recommendations for future research will be considered.

Importance of Study

Conducting research on the experiences of gay and lesbian college student athletes was important to the study because their voices lend scholarly insight to colleges and universities treatment towards this marginalized population. Hearing the experiences of gay and lesbian college student athletes exposed certain universities attitudes, demonstrating that some campuses do not foster inclusive environments, and selected students do not foster supportive attitudes toward gay and lesbian college athletes (Worthen, 2014). Authors (Ensign et al., 2011; Herek, 1988; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Kimmel & Messner, 2001; Roper & Halloran, 2007) have studied heternormativity and homonegativity in either athletics or the classrooms. Worthen (2014) found in her study where she measured the attitudes of athletes and members of Greek organizations toward lesbian, gay, bisexual men and women, and transgendered individuals, that male athletes and men in fraternities have negative attitudes towards the LGBT population, especially towards gay males and transgendered individuals. Worthen (2014) suggested that the reason for this attitude is because both athletes and fraternities exude “traditional heteromasculine norms” that construct their identities in “homophobic masculinity” (p. 185). In other words, these groups “feel the need to prove that they are heterosexual” (Worthen, 2014, p. 185). Moreover, they exert hypermasculinity to demonstrate that they are heterosexual. This behavior is described as cultivating a culture of homophobic masculinity (Worthen, 2014). On the other hand, females in a sorority and female athletes are more supportive of the LGBT community than their male counterparts. Both Roper and Halloran (2007), and Worthen (2014) concluded that individuals knowing gay men and lesbians possess more accepting attitudes towards them.

Additionally, this topic is of importance to the study, because while universities say they are inclusive, some athletic teams and institutions are heavily influenced by Christian values. Christian values and the people who hold them, in many cases, tend to be in direct opposition to same sex relationships, lifestyles and activities. In turn, the athlete begins to internalize and have self-conflicting views about who they are. Even though Anderson (2005, 2011a) demonstrated that over fifteen years, student athletes felt more comfortable coming out, many are still closeted. Former student-athletes such as Rebecca Windover and Anna Aagenes discussed being a closeted athlete and the social problems they
experienced by not coming out. Additionally, Kate Fagan shared the same occurrences with praying as a team as Regular, even though both attended public, non-religious affiliated universities. Just as Regular accepted praying before every game, Fagan accepted the atmosphere; she even “uttered homophobic statements in an attempt to convince my audience, and especially myself, that I was heterosexual” (Fagan, 2014, para. 4). She even participated in praying for a coach whose “lifestyle was keeping her from Jesus” (Fagan, 2014, para. 3). While attending the Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings she began to question her sexuality (Garcia, 2014). Attending a university that was heavily influenced by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, she felt compelled to continue attending and participating in meetings (Garcia, 2014). While feeling uncomfortable, she stayed at the university and graduated in 2004 (Garcia 2014). In comparison, Emily Nkosi used to play for the Baylor’s women’s basketball team in 2005 (Nkosi, 2014). She recalls her Fellowship of Christian Athletes mentor having an “intervention” meeting with her to discuss her close relationship with another female student (Nkosi, 2014, para. 26). Conversations included being chastised for her sexuality, and that same-sex relationships would not supported. Even the athletic department got involved and questioned her relationship and cautioned her about her sexuality (Nkosi, 2014). Eventually, Nkosi left Baylor because being gay, it is clear that gay people struggle in that school environment. I hope that by sharing some of my story as a gay Baylor athlete, I can help Baylor understand how damaging that climate can be on young people struggling to accept their sexual orientation. (Nkosi, 2014, para. 33)

Another reason for the importance of this study was to give those who have been forced to remain quiet about their true identities, a voice. While some athletic directors and some college administrators discourage college athletes discussing their sexual orientation, this study shows that gay and lesbians do exist on college athletic teams.

The simplest and most compelling reason for intercollegiate athletic programs to take proactive steps to create and maintain an inclusive and respectful climate for student-athletes and coaches of all sexual orientations and gender identities/expressions is that it is the right thing to do. (Morrison, 2012, p. 9)

Anderson (2002, 2005, 2011a, 2011b) demonstrated this element through his studies on masculinities and sexualities in sports; conducting a comparison between the time he came out to teammates in the 1990s to general attitudes of society and athletics fifteen years later in the 21st century. Several authors (Anderson, 2002, 2005; Bickford, 2012; Elfman, 2007; Jacobson, 2002; Katz, 2010; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Kimmel & Messner, 2001; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Mauer-Starks et al., 2008; Pronger, 1990; Roper & Halloran, 2007; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001) were used to shape this research study. Many of their works focused on the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes in college, which include attitudes towards the population and the harassment or hostile environments endured. The importance of this study was
to hear the voices of gay and lesbian college athletes. As a result, the voices gave understanding and meaning to their lives. While Anderson's (2005, 2011a) research demonstrated that gay athletes who show potential on the field or court are accepted, this research shows that the same is true. However, the students do not realize that the environment they played in still proves hostile to gay and lesbian athletes. Both the NCAA and NAIA are working hard to demonstrate that athletics is an accepting environment towards gay and lesbian athletes. The numerous anti-bullying and emergence of inclusivity campaigns alone, demonstrate that, “some traditions accepted in athletics do not promote or reflect a culture of inclusion, diversity, or respect.” Therefore, athletics must act to ensure that the health and well-being of the student athlete is being protected (Morrison, 2012, p. 4). Additionally, Karen Morrison admits that while NCAA guidelines for inclusivity are made available to the 1,281 athletic programs; however, staff, “[are] not mandated to follow or even read the guidelines” (Frankel, 2013, para. 9).

Overall the reason this topic was important to study is because every student-athlete and coach should have the opportunity to reach their athletic and academic goals in a climate of respect. No student-athlete or coach/administrator should fear discrimination or harassment in athletics because of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. (Morrison, 2012, p. 9)

**LIMITATIONS**

Many factors contributed to the limitations of this study. For starters, time was a factor. While one or two hours were spent with the participants, interviews were conducted in a conference room setting that I chose. Majority of the participants did not want me to come to their home environments. As a result, I was not able to see the participants in their own environment and how they truly interact. Merriam (2009) raised the question if it is necessary for an interviewer to be “a member of the group?” (p. 108). Through network sampling, or snowball sampling, participants were more comfortable having me interview them outside of their homes. Whether being a member of the group or not, “both parties bring biases, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that affect the interaction and the data elicited” (Merriam, 2009, p. 109). Spending more time with participants in a more relaxed, or intimate setting, would allow more observation of their support systems, interacting with their peers and families, and would give a more telling account of their lives.

Likewise, the use of yes or no questions caused some limitations in the study. Conducting a narrative research study, “the researcher needs to collect extensive information about the participant, and needs to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual’s life (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). When conducting qualitative research, interviewers should use open-ended questions that foster more in-depth information. Qualitative researchers should limit, or refrain from asking yes-no questions, as they
yield little information (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). “Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional (Creswell, 2009, p. 107). Using yes or no questions should be followed up by rephrasing the question to elicit a more detailed account (Merriam, 2009).

Another limitation to the study includes the demographics of the participants. Whereas participants represented African American women, African American men, and White women, the study excluded some demographics. For example, White men were not interviewed. The group was not intentionally left out, as I was scheduled to interview a gay, White male, former college tennis player representing NCAA Division I; but the closer the interview date, he withdrew as he encountered some personal issues. Another demographic population not represented is African American men playing football in either NAIA or NCAA Division I. Also, White women playing either in NAIA or NCAA women's basketball were excluded. Although the study was general in the description of participants interviewed, the perspectives of the excluded would allow insight, capturing the individual's experiences and the impact their sexual orientation had when playing those respective sports in the two divisions.

Last, while the study included NAIA and NCAA institutions, only participants who attended public institutions were included in the study; as well as only participants who attended a religious, NAIA school were interviewed. Gathering information from those groups could provide more insight into different polices regarding sexual orientation. Brittney Griner attended Baylor, a private, religious-based university. She played in an NCAA generating revenue sport, in comparison with her counterpart, such as AMBB or Regular who played at a public institution. However, the data saturation, demonstrates a commonality between the various stories of those attending a public NCAA Division I school, as well as a participant attending an NAIA religious school. For example, Regular, attending an NCAA school and the other participants attending a religious campus share similar stories of Brittney Griner and Kate Fagan, who attended religious and public schools, respectively. In other words, both types of schools held Christian values, where some rituals of religion were established into the institutional philosophies about same sex relationships in college athletes. Most of the participants discussed praying before games, thus the institution assumed that all people adhere to some sort of Christian, religious ideology. On the other hand, limitations still exist as majority of participants attending religious schools may be considered to be within the Bible Belt, region. Furthermore, even the majority of the participants attending the public colleges and universities may be influenced by their location within the vicinity of the Bible Belt.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

All students attending colleges and universities wish to experience a campus friendly and inclusive environment. As colleges and universities are recruiting students, especially student-athletes, they need to provide welcoming and respectful environments for them to thrive. This chapter will suggest recommendations for academia, athletic directors, and students; including gay and lesbian athletes; heterosexual athletes, and student allies. The recommendations offered are to inform and inspire changes to improve campus culture at our colleges and universities, as well as provide best practices for continued improvements and support. Some of the recommendations offered will reflect the views from the participants interviewed in this study.

Even though colleges and universities whose missions align with religious principles, can offer support to gay and lesbian students. Keisha, Brianna Michelle, RJ, Rae, and Lindsey all attended a private, religious affiliated school who did not offer any services for the LGBT population. Implementing Safe Zones trainings for faculty, staff, and students to participate can educate the campus on fostering inclusiveness. Safe Zones provide trainings on using inclusive language, provide knowledge about students and their coming out process; and participants are given stickers for their doors to show gay and lesbian students, as well as student questioning their sexuality that the office is an ally.

In addition, even allowing graduating gay and lesbian students the opportunity to wear rainbow tassels on their mortar boards, as well as participate in a Lavender Graduation. The tassels symbolize gay pride. In addition, many colleges are having Lavender graduations. First performed in 1995 at the University of Michigan, the ceremony was created by Dr. Ronni Sanlo (“Lavender Graduation,” 2011). “Lavender Graduation is an annual ceremony conducted on numerous campuses to honor lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and ally students and to acknowledge their achievement and contributions to the University” (“Lavender Graduation,” 2011, para. 1). Many colleges and universities are beginning to implement these specialized ceremonies in addition to the traditional pomp and circumstance, as the ceremony “recognizes LGBT students of all races and ethnicities,” and to provide a celebratory event for LGBT students and their allies (“Lavender Graduation,” 2011, para. 3).
Ally programs furnish resources that include activities about using inclusive language, addressing homophobic masculinity, and offering some students and administrators opportunities to sign pledges of their commitment to “fairness, respect, and inclusion . . .” (Worthen, 2014, p. 189). Some ally programs have trainers on their campuses that facilitate speaker panels and programs to raise awareness about same-sex relationships, and how to engage members on college campuses to become advocates. When developing ally training programs, campuses want to create sessions that address heterosexism; incorporate skills trainings that empower allies to interrupt biased behavior; and develop realistic goals for the allotted time of program (Woodford, Kolb, Durocher-Radeka, & Javier, 2014). Also, build gradual programs with identifiable learning outcomes that allow participants to choose and complete trainings based on interest and competency (Woodford et al., 2014). In other words, have varying levels of training programs to encompass all skill levels.

Additionally, many colleges and universities are starting to promote gender and inclusive centers, while others are increasing their course offerings that endorse LGBT majors. Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, is a liberal arts institution that constructed a Gender and Sexuality Center on their campus. In November 2014, the center started listing colleges and universities that promote LGBT and Queer study programs (“LGBT Studies Programs”, 2014). In Barbour’s (2014) dissertation, she acknowledged several institutions who promoted gay, lesbian and queer studies. “Since the 1970s, the University of Maryland has been one of the leading college campuses to offer LGBT courses” (Barbour, 2014, p. 58). San Diego State University publicized the school as, “only the second college or university in North America to have a major in LGBT Studies, beginning January 2012” (“Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Studies, What Can I do with this Major,” n.d.). With the emergence of these centers and course offerings, students are afforded an opportunity to gain an understanding of the LGBT culture, as well as this movement can begin to foster a different pedagogy of learning.

The NCAA offers several best practices for creating inclusive environments (Morrison, 2012). Most importantly, inform staff of expectations as it relates to creating an inclusive environment. “Make it clear to student-athletes and coaches that anti-LGBT actions or language will not be tolerated” (Morrison, 2012, p. 12). Additionally, regardless of sexual orientation, hold everyone accountable for creating a non-hostile and non-discriminatory environment (Morrison, 2012). While some campuses do not have resources supporting the gay and lesbian athletes, partner with local or state social justice programs who provide free resources (Woodford et al., 2014, p. 320).
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ATHLETICS

Institutions, and especially athletic departments who take assessments of the campus climate for LGBT students, can help identify potential problems and create policy that will “manifest a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment” for everyone (Morrison, 2012, p. 2). This does not insinuate that gay and lesbian athletes should be treated in a special manner, but that the policies should be inclusive to all members of the athletic team. In addition, procedures should be clearly outlined and communicated to staff and athletes, and reviewed annually (Morrison, 20012). If institutions do not have LGBT Centers, resources may also be housed in the universities counseling center, or diversity and equity offices within human resources. Administrator’s working in these offices can provide training in areas of fairness and inclusivity (Morrison, 2012). Overall, some factors to consider when creating an inclusive environment include:

• Assume there are gay athletes as well as gay coaching staff even if no one has identified.

• Know what resources are available at respective institution, or where to obtain training and other resources.

• Monitor beliefs about same-sex relationships.

• Use inclusive language.

• Communicate expectations to all staff and student athletes regarding inclusivity and non-discrimination and anti-harassment.

• Educate staff on polices regarding nondiscrimination and anti-harassment.

• Intervene and stop bullying, harassment, and biased language.

• Coordinate sensitivity training for staff and athletes regarding bullying, harassment, and the use of offensive language.

• Place Safe Zone stickers on offices that are safe places for gay athletes. (Morrison, 2012, pp.12-13)
LANGUAGE

When communicating to athletes and staff, do not use demeaning language. Using derogatory terms such as verbiage towards one’s sexuality, ethnicity, or religion is often seen as “part of the game” where athletes taunt other athletes; or is used by coaches and athletes to even motivate players (Morrison, 2012, p. 24). Even though some athletes claim that when using derogatory language, they are not trying to offend. However, coaches allowing this behavior create a negative climate of where this behavior is acceptable (Morrison, 2012). Students who are wanting to disclose to their teammates or coach may feel they will be further harassed. In order to combat this behavior, at team meetings, at the start of academic school years, and throughout the athletic sports season, college coaching administrators should communicate and specify that this type of language will not be tolerated (Morrison, 2012). This action sets the tone and expectation of staff and athletes.

COMING OUT

Sean Smith admits that he did not have a positive experience during his days as a gay, male college student-athlete. The college he attended did not have services for gay or lesbian students, and the athletic staff was not supportive (Morrison, 2012). Sadly, some colleges and universities still are not supportive of gay and lesbian student-athletes. Some athletes are asked to keep their sexual orientation a secret, “conditionally tolerant,” as noted by most of the participants of this study (Morrison, 2012, p. 25). The NCAA, however, has started to “include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies and to provide diversity workshops on sexual orientation to member institutions” (Morrison, 2012, p. 35). Developing an environment of acceptance does not mean that coaches are accepting of same gender relationships, but it means being respectful and making a comfortable environment for the athlete (Morrison, 2012). “Reinforce . . . that being respectful does not necessarily mean approving of homosexuality... All team members have a right to their personal beliefs, but each member is responsible for treating everyone on the team with respect” (Morrison, 2012, p. 27). Additionally, when an athlete discloses to one individual, that individual should not disclose the athlete’s sexuality (Morrison, 2012). In other words, allow the athlete to always disclose their own sexuality.
LOCKER ROOM BEHAVIOR

Some heterosexual athletes fear that gay or lesbian athletes “pose a sexual threat in the locker room,” or hotel rooms where athletes share when travelling to games. In other words, some heterosexual athletes believe that gay and lesbian athletes are looking at them sexually (Morrison, 2012, p. 30). However, gay and lesbian athletes know that these stereotypes exist, and they may feel uncomfortable looking at their teammates or engaging in any positive conversation as they do not want their teammates to think they are gay; especially if they have not disclosed (Morrison, 2012). In order to reduce the anxiety, administrators may schedule counselors to give talks to the team as well as individuals to help address the uncomfortable feelings that are persisting “about the presence of LGBTQ people in the locker room” (Morrison, 2012, p. 31). However, staff should also be aware to make sure that sexual harassment is not present (Morrison, 2012). Proactively, administrators should educate and make all athletes and staff aware of their sexual harassment policies (Morrison, 2012). Additionally, institutions should have areas where any athlete wanting privacy should be afforded the space; because not all student athletes are comfortable in open settings such as open showers or changing rooms (Morrison, 2012).

RECRUITMENT

“The NCAA has rules and guidelines to regulate the recruitment process for the purpose of protecting the recruit and ensuring fairness” (Morrison, 2012, p. 35). One guideline is that websites should not refer to coaching staff by using prefixes that denote gender or married status (Morrison, 2012). Photos should not exude sexuality, they should be action shots and where athletes are in their uniforms or athletic gear (Morrison, 2012). When hosting recruits and their families, hosts should refrain from using identifiers used to describe religion or sexual orientation. Such as “Christian” values, or speaking negatively about gay or lesbians athletes (Morrison, 2012, p. 36) Allow gay and lesbian college student-athletes to host recruits, as well as do not require them to not be themselves, such as asking them not to be seen with their partner while recruits are in town (Morrison, 2012). Embrace diversity and do not pretend that gay athletes do not play on a sports team (Morrison, 2012). Last, work to eliminate prejudice from parents who are concerned with their student-athletes playing on a team with, or being coached by a gay or lesbian by communicating respect and inclusivity (Morrison, 2012).
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

When interviewing the participants, several prominent themes and sub-themes were explored. Still, many sub-themes emerged. As a result, these sub-themes lend leeway to future research to enhance this study. Such topics include the influence of religion upon the coming-out process. Almost all of the participants were either raised in the church, and / or had close family members as preachers or youth pastors. In the participant profiles, many discussed that they were told that same-sex relationships were wrong, or “a sin.” Even though this was a sub-theme, more research can be conducted on both the influence of the church in the lives of African Americans, as well as research on gay and lesbians who were raised Southern Baptist, and how they navigated their lives, as well as what experiences did they sustain. In addition, does religion play a part in their lives? Blue Eyes was raised in the church and still attends regularly, however she is not an out lesbian. The church she attends teaches that “homosexuality is a sin,” and she fears that her coming out would lead to losing her position as the scholarship director. Similarly, look at the topic of depression and see if depression and religion play a part in the coming out process of gay and lesbian athletes. If so did they try to commit suicide, and what coping mechanisms were in place to help them out of the depression?

Another area to further study is the world of clothing in the life of gay and lesbian athletes. The females self-stereotyped by describing their clothes, however, the topic of clothing were a shared culture within the lesbian population. Morris (2013) described meticulously what Brittney Griner and other lesbians drafted in the 2013 WNBA wore to the draft. Describing that they mostly wore men's clothing, such as men suits, ties, and sweaters (Morris, 2013). While Flash and RJ did not engage in much detail about clothing, RJ did allude to perceptions that are associated with gay male athletes and the characteristics of their behavior. Studying the style of dress for both gay and lesbian athletes can help offer more awareness of their expression and self-awareness about the clothes they wear.

In conducting this study, several demographics were not represented. While an African American male NCAA Division I men's basketball player was interviewed, research could focus on a Caucasian counterpart. Research could compare or contrast difficulties regarding the coming out process, and if the role of the church plays a part in this population's life. Additionally, this study focused on gay and lesbian athletes, since the start of the research, transgendered students have entered athletics. Such athletes include Kye Allums, Fallon Fox, and Keelin Godsey; capturing their experiences in college athletics is worth researching, as well as researching to determine if the coming-out process of gay and lesbian college student athletes aided in more transgendered athletes gaining courage to disclose.
With more transgendered athletes coming out, an area that was not discussed, but is trending is gender inclusive housing and gender neutral bathrooms. Since this study specifically focused on gay and lesbian college athletes, the mention of gender inclusive housing, or even restroom usage was not examined. However, these are increasing topics of interest as states, such as South Dakota, Tennessee and Georgia deliberate a law similar to what South Carolina passed requiring people to use public restrooms matching their birth gender (Peck, 2016). Additionally, resources such as Campus Pride has provided a clearing house to inform of colleges and universities with gender inclusive housing policies (“College and Universities,” 2016). Carleton College, not only has an LGBT Housing statement, but also offers a learning community where upper-class students can live in LGBT housing with their allies (“LGBT Housing Statement,” 2016). Overall, these issues are topics for expansion that can lead researches into future discussions expanding upon the literature of experiences for more than the gay and lesbian college student athlete population.

**CONCLUSION**

What are the experiences of gay and lesbian college student-athletes? They are students who want to be accepted by society. They want to be loved and not discriminated against by their families; and they want enjoy life. Interviewing these ten participates gave insight to how they navigated their lives at their respective college campuses. While all were happy to lend their voices to research, some of their stories told of accounts of harassment, discrimination, and bullying. Other accounts told of acceptance, but cautionary tales of being their true selves. Many informed of attending colleges or universities where their coaches and even the universities they attended were “accepting,” however they were advised that they should not publicly show their sexual orientation. Others were clearly advised either by the student code of conduct, brutally attacked, or limited playing time that their sexual orientation was not acceptable. However, many stayed in their environments. While Regular was told by her coach not to display her sexual orientation, and though before every game the team prayed, she felt that the environment was healthy and that she should not be a distraction to the team by being an openly gay college student-athlete. Even those attending the religious affiliated college stayed knowing the consequences of being expelled from the university if charged with being in a same-sex relationship. Clear signs of discrimination and harassment, yet these students endured hostile treatments in order to earn their degrees, as well as play or participate in the sport they so loved.
Additionally, this research showed the importance of family. Surprisingly, majority of the participants had a gay or lesbian family member, but they still withstood scrutiny about how and why. RJ and Regular seemed to have the most supportive parents or family members. However, Flash and Ashley seemed to suffer what may be seen as the most extreme, with either violence or family members disowning them. Regardless, all remarked about not wanting to disappoint their relatives, and just wanting to be loved by their families. As evident by Blue Eyes, who did not want to disappoint her adopted dad.

In conclusion, this research is a reminder that homonegativity is prevalent in college sports, even though many efforts are being touted to demonstrate acceptance. Also, this research is a reminder that heterosexist behavior guides both athletics and society. However, this research shows that times are changing as evident of Michael Sam’s case. Nevertheless, this research is a reminder that “any anxieties players might have about a gay teammate are their problem, not the teammates. Your insecurities aren’t enough reason to maintain an environment where gay athletes don’t feel comfortable. That’s a [expletive] burden to put on anyone” (Wilson, 2013, para. 12). Overall, I have enjoyed being a vessel to bring these stories to light. I thank the participants for having the faith and courage in me to share with society their intimate feelings and breathe life into existence. My wish is that regardless of religious affiliation, heterosexist thoughts, or even fears of same-sex relationships, that we as, college and university employees and society as a whole, contribute at least one nice improvement in the lives of our gay or lesbian college student athletes to make them feel welcomed and accepted.
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athletes’ and fraternity/sorority members’ attitudes toward LGBT individuals. 

*Journal of College Student Development, 55(2), 168-195.*
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