

Going Beyond Training to Foster LGBTQ Inclusive Collegiate Athletic Contexts: Identifying Next Steps

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This qualitative study explored how to facilitate greater inclusion of LGBTQ student-athletes and employees within the context of a collegiate athletic department that participated in a multi-level bystander intervention training for athletes, coaches, and staff. Beyond scholarship that recommends an initial educational training, there is limited literature detailing possible next steps athletic departments can take to facilitate a welcoming and inclusive environment for LGBTQ student-athletes and employees. Eighteen interviews were completed with coaches, athletic department staff, and a student-athlete. The thematic analysis revealed five themes summarizing potential next steps athletic departments could take: (1) Expand Training and Education Efforts, (2) Increase Acceptance and Accountability Across the Athletic Department, (3) Shift to Action, (4) Increase Visibility of LGBTQ Inclusion, and (5) Develop Resources for LGBTQ Students and Employees. The findings of this study provide concrete implications for creating more inclusive spaces, practices, and policies for LGBTQ individuals within collegiate athletic departments.

The inclusion of athletes with diverse gender and sexual identities has recently been a central focus of discourse and debate within media, socio-political, and academic circles (Gastelum, 2022; Riedel, 2025). Although existing research has documented that collegiate athletics appears to be moving toward greater acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) student-athletes and athletic department employees, other studies have found that anti-LGBTQ discrimination and biases continue to shape the culture of collegiate athletics (Anderson et al., 2021; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2018; Cunningham, 2015; Cunningham et al., 2018, 2022; Pariera et al., 2021; Rankin et al., 2011; Toomey et al., 2018; Turk et al., 2019; Xiang et al., 2023). Yet, there is limited research that explores

the steps athletic departments can take to provide a welcoming, inclusive, and safer environment for LGBTQ people (McGeorge et al., 2024). The recommendations that do exist were developed by the governing body of college athletics, the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), and include the following strategies: (a) develop inclusive nondiscrimination policies and codes of conduct that ban anti-LGBTQ behaviors, (b) provide annual trainings to staff and students, and (c) communicate and provide resources in inclusive ways (NCAA, n.d.). The scholarly literature has primarily concentrated on evaluating the recommendation to provide educational opportunities to athletic department members focused either on broad bystander intervention strategies or specifically focused on how to support LGBTQ individuals (Atterberry-Ash et al., 2018; Cunningham, 2015; O'Connell & Bottino, 2024). However, research has yet to explore recommendations beyond introductory trainings or educational opportunities. Therefore, this qualitative exploratory study sought to inductively identify strategies that might facilitate greater inclusion of LGBTQ student-athletes and employees within the athletic department context following the completion of an LGBTQ-focused, multi-level bystander intervention training for athletes, coaches, and athletic department staff.

Literature Review

Literature on creating an inclusive LGBTQ climate within the context of collegiate athletics is limited, however scholars have extensively explored promoting LGBTQ inclusive climates within primary and secondary school contexts. This school-based literature suggests there are four primary strategies to minimize risks for LGBTQ students and employees, as well as facilitate a more welcoming culture: (1) inclusive anti-bullying state, school, and/or district level policies; (2) professional development focused on LGBTQ identities and topics; (3) LGBTQ-inclusive resources for students and staff; and (4) student-led clubs, such as Genders & Sexualities Alliances (GSAs), which to an extent mirrors the suggestions made by the NCAA (NASEM, 2019, 2020; NCAA, n.d.; Russell et al. 2021). When discussing the importance of establishing inclusive anti-bullying policies, scholars specify that these policies need to include statements that bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity are prohibited (NASEM, 2020; Russell et al. 2021). Anti-bullying policies that include protection for LGBTQ identities have been associated with more welcoming school climates for all students, and positive outcomes for LGBTQ students, such as fewer mental health concern, as well as fewer reports of anti-LGBTQ harassment and increased interventions by teachers when bullying does occur (Greytak et al., 2013; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kull et al., 2016; Russell et al. 2010, 2021). Griffin and Taylor (2013) argue for the importance of athletic departments developing similar LGBTQ-specific policies, with an emphasis on nondiscrimination and anti-LGBTQ harassment policies.

Researchers also found that when teachers received an LGBTQ-focused professional development training, they were more likely to intervene when they witnessed anti-LGBTQ harassment (Greytak et al., 2016). Notably, when general

anti-bullying training was provided without a focus on LGBTQ identities, the same pattern of intervention was not observed (Greytak et al., 2016). Within the collegiate athletic literature, researchers have highlighted the need for athletic departments to engage in educational opportunities that specifically focus on LGBTQ inclusion (Fallon-Korb et al., 2025; Havey, 2021; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; O'Connell & Bottino, 2024; Toomey et al., 2018; Turk et al., 2019). In particular, Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020) argued that all members of college athletic departments likely require training given the general lack of information about how to reintervene when witnessing anti-LGBTQ harassment. Other scholars have argued that trainings need to be focused on coaches given their power within team structural hierarchies (Toomey et al., 2018).

The research on the role of LGBTQ-inclusive resources in promoting a welcoming climate for LGBTQ students on the collegiate level suggests that having designated LGBTQ safe spaces fosters an increase in students' sense of safety and connectedness (Evans, 2002; Katz et al., 2016). For students in primary and secondary school contexts, having access to positive information about LGBTQ identities can increase students' sense of safety (Kosciw et al., 2016). Finally, scholars have found that participating in student organizations such as GSAs has been linked to a number of positive outcomes for secondary students, including greater safety, an increased sense of connection and belonging, and more positive mental health outcomes (Ioverno et al., 2016; McCormick et al., 2015; Toomey et al., 2012; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Research has also documented school-level benefits related to having GSAs, including lower levels of anti-LGBTQ bias, discrimination, and harassment (Ioverno & Russell, 2020; Kosciw et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016).

The strategies from the primary and secondary education literature mirror, to an extent, the recommendations made by the NCAA (n.d.) and could have the potential to be helpful in creating a welcoming and inclusive climate in college athletics. In addition to these strategies, the Transformational Tapestry Model (Rankin & Reason, 2008) provides a conceptual framework designed to assess and improve campus climate in higher education. Although athletic department contexts are distinct entities, they also represent a microcosm of the larger university climate. This model outlines several domains that apply to athletics, namely, intervention strategies of symbolic actions, educational actions, and administrative actions, as well as the influence of climate including access/retention, inter- and intragroup relations, policies, and external relations (Rankin & Reason, 2008).

Additionally, research on inclusive workplaces has documented both similar and unique strategies to improve climates for LGBTQ employees. A review of workplace studies identified that the most common and researched strategy includes policies that prohibit workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Roberson et al., 2024). Other workplace policies and practices identified include diversity trainings, inclusive human resources policies, mentoring, and employee resource groups (similar to educational recommendation for GSAs or similar clubs; Roberson et al., 2024). In care environments, interpersonal quality was noted as a strategy for promoting LGBTQ inclusion, including pronoun and

name use, accurate terminology, and patient rapport (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2023). Other care environment strategies for LGBTQ inclusion include visual cues of inclusion (e.g., art, images, symbols), inclusive administrative environments (e.g., inclusive restrooms), competency trainings for LGBTQ inclusion, and outreach and engagement with LGBTQ community partners (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2023). Grounded in all of these strategies and the Transformational Tapestry Model as a conceptual base, this qualitative exploratory study sought to fill a gap in the collegiate athletics literature by seeking the recommendations of insiders (i.e., coaches, administrators, athletic department staff, and student-athletes) about how to improve the climate for LGBTQ student-athletes and athletic department employees.

The research questions for this qualitative exploratory study are based on a review of the existing literature within college athletics and school-based studies and are as follows:

- RQ₁: After participating in a multi-level bystander intervention training for student-athletes, coaches, and athletic department staff, what do participants see as next steps to enhance LGBTQ inclusion within a college athletic department?
- RQ₂: What are participants' dreams for how LGBTQ inclusion work moves forward within a collegiate athletic context?

Method

Data for this exploratory study were derived from interviews with participants following a pilot test of an LGBTQ-focused, multi-level bystander intervention training for student-athletes, coaches, and athletic department staff that occurred in a Division I athletics program in the Midwestern United States. The athletic program is comprised of 14 athletic teams (e.g., softball, volleyball, football) and is housed within a public, land-grant, research university (McGeorge et al., 2025). The intervention training provided education on how to explore personal biases and existing beliefs and offered ideas for intervention and prevention surrounding anti-LGBTQ bias and was led by one of the authors of this study. The current study includes a secondary data analysis of data gathered through a program evaluation of a grant-funded, LGBTQ-focused, multi-level bystander intervention that was supported by the athletic director. This study was approved by a university institutional review board.

Participant Recruitment and Sample Description

Initial participant recruitment involved contacting by email participants who indicated on a survey that they identified as LGBTQ and were willing to complete a follow-up interview, as well as emailing individuals who had indicated that they were interested in being involved in future LGBTQ trainings and identified as allies to LGBTQ people. The remaining recruitment efforts followed a purposive snowball sampling method. Specifically, interview participants were asked to recommend other potential participants and/or share study information (i.e., recruitment email)

with other student-athletes and staff within the athletic department (Nelson & Allred, 2005). When participants shared names of other possible interviewees, a recruitment email was sent to each individual inviting them to schedule an interview with the first author.

Of the 18 participants, seven (38.9%) were athletic department support staff (e.g., administrative assistant, trainer, academic advisor), five (27.8%) were coaches, four (22.2%) were senior-level management or directors, and one (5.6%) was a student-athlete. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 60 years ($M = 38.39$, $SD = 11.92$). All participants identified as cisgender, with 12 (66.7%) women and six (33.33%) men, and 13 (72.2%) identified as heterosexual, three (16.7%) as gay or lesbian, and two (11.1%) as bisexual. The majority of participants were White ($n = 14$; 77.8%), while two (11.1%) participants identified as biracial, one (5.6%) as Black, and one (5.6%) as Asian. Finally, 10 (55.6%) held master's degrees, two (11.1%) had completed some graduate work, and six (33.3%) held bachelor's degrees.

Data Collection

Participants first completed a demographic survey in advance of the interview and received \$30 compensation in exchange for their time. Interviews lasted 17 to 40 minutes and were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and subsequently transcribed using the voice-to-text feature. All transcripts were then compared alongside the audio recordings and revised as necessary. The question on the semi-structured interview guide were guided by the existing literature (e.g., Toomey et al., 2018; Turk et al., 2019) and the input of individuals associated with athletics, and was comprised of open-ended questions and potential follow-up prompts. Sample questions from the interview guide include: "What changes would you like to see within the athletic department in regards to LGBTQ people's inclusion?" and "What do you think would help facilitate these needed changes?" Data collection occurred between December 2022 to September 2023.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive, semantic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015). In line with later work on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), we approached theme development as an active, interpretive process, and engaged in multiple peer debriefing sessions to increase trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To begin the analysis process, the authors read through each transcript to gain an initial understanding of the data to support our inductive analysis. Next, relevant sections of data were independently coded by the first and second authors, who then met for a peer debriefing session to compare codes and reach a consensus, hybrid understanding. Our coding and subsequent theme development was primarily semantic and close to the participants' words. We then identified potential themes and met for a second peer debriefing session to again compare understanding. Data were organized under the agreed upon themes and reorganized as needed, paying careful attention to achieving an accurate portrayal of the participants' words (i.e., semantic) while balancing our own latent meaning-

making (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then met for a final peer debriefing session to select quotes to illustrate each theme. See the Figure 1 appendix for a visual depiction of the coding process.

In addition to utilizing peer debriefing sessions to increase the trustworthiness of our analysis, we also relied on practices of reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Chilisa, 2012), recognizing that who we are as people impacts the decisions we make as researchers and how we perceive data. Through intentional conversations during peer debriefing sessions and writing positionality statements, we worked to minimize the impact of our biases and social locations had on the coding process. Shortened versions of our positionality statements are provided to situate our identities. The first author is a White, heterosexual cisgender woman, who is committed to being an ally to LGBTQ communities in her scholarship and daily life. She further recognizes the incredible amount of societal granted privilege she experiences and how that privilege could influence the data coding process, which heightened the need for her to actively engage in practices of reflexivity throughout the coding process. The second author is a White, bisexual/pansexual, cisgender woman also committed to advocacy. Finally, the third author is a trans, pansexual, man from rural Appalachia who is a parent and White. As an example of the reflexive process, we noticed a shared bias during data analysis around what constitutes a worthwhile or “sufficient” next step—tied to of our own educational privilege.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed five themes that addressed the research questions for this study: (1) expand training and education efforts, (2) increase acceptance and accountability across the athletic department, (3) shift to action, (4) increase visibility of LGBTQ inclusion, and (5) develop resources for LGBTQ students, athletes, and employees. Each theme is illustrated by verbatim quotations.

Expand Training and Education Efforts

Participants suggested that to promote a more equitable climate for LGBTQ employees and student-athletes within a college athletic department, additional LGBTQ training opportunities were needed. Participants’ call for additional educational opportunities were geared toward both employees and student-athletes with the intention of addressing biases and improving understanding of LGBTQ identities as illustrated by the following quotations from Izzy and Lisa:

I think more trainings for the student-athletes as well would be useful. Like, I think a lot of them have deep rooted views and viewpoints that I think need to be tackled. . . we have the athletic credit that all student-athletes are enrolled in, and it’s like as part of it they have to take some classes. I think it would be useful to incorporate some LGBTQ training within there, and I think then, that could be facilitated by the staff in the athletic academics group.

I think that it would be a good idea for each of the coaches to, have a yearly educational session on what that might look like. I also think that our administration, like I mentioned before, could do some education as well. Obviously, what you've done [referring to the interviewer], I think, has gone a long way, but I think that they could use more . . . until that openness to change is there, I think it's gonna take a lot of mandated training sessions and repetition and education.

These quotes reflect participants' beliefs that additional educational opportunities are needed across all athletic department constituents, and they also introduce the idea of needing to mandate or otherwise strongly encourage these trainings. The first quote from Izzy, for example, suggests tying these training opportunities to existing structures such as the mandated credits that student-athletes complete each semester as part of their eligibility requirements, while the second quotation from Lisa introduces the idea of mandating training requirements for coaches. In addition to mandating trainings, other participants discussed the need to incentivize and/or strongly encourage participants to attend these additional LGBTQ trainings as they worried about the impact of mandating attendance. The following quotations from Alice and Francis illustrate this idea:

[Offering] food, apparel, because we tell our student-athletes, they'll go to something if you're going to feed them or if you're going to give them a t-shirt or something. And, you know you hate to make things mandatory. You want people to want to be there and do those types of things. I think the more we make it just important, and that it's a priority of us to understand these things. . . if us in the athletic department can make it a priority hopefully that trickles over to campus community and the larger community, you know. We can be leaders in how we're approaching this.

As far as our student-athletes go, I know that some of them have things that they do through the academic center, where they get credit for going to certain things. And whether or not they can say, you know, hey, we would like you, this semester, to attend one diversity event or one educational session that falls into one of these categories. And I mean obviously, it still gives them a lot of leeway to choose what their comfort level is, but at the same time I feel like sometimes people have to be pushed a little bit to do things that they might not normally choose on their own. And that, that helps everyone learn and grow . . . finding ways to encourage staff to pursue some personal growth in things, and. I, I mean, I'm from the Midwest. I don't like to get too pushy with people but I also feel like saying, like this isn't exactly optional. We're not saying it's mandatory, but it's also like strongly, strongly, strongly encouraged.

Beyond encouraging or mandating attendance at LGBTQ trainings, participants also shared ideas about how these additional trainings should be structured. First, participants discussed the importance of these trainings being geared specifically for the unique context of athletics. Alice stated:

And I will say they're good, it's good information that we're getting, I think it's matter of just how it's, how it's presented, maybe is. . . but to make it, you know, applicable to the group you're looking, you're, who's there. Specific, maybe athletic examples for certain things and scenarios that might be more in tune with us.

Additionally, participants spoke about the importance of having these trainings be focused and not too lengthy, as Alice further shared, "Maybe it's shorter. Maybe they're 45 minutes, and you can keep people's attention, 'Hey, guys this is going to be 30 minutes, 45 minutes so, stay with me for that long.'" Lisa and Jacob further discussed the need for these trainings to be annual and continuously offered:

I think that it would be a good idea for each of the coaches to, have a yearly educational session on what that might look like. I also think that our administration, like I mentioned before, could do some education as well.

I think it needs to be a continued education process . . . I just don't think one conversation is going to fix things. It's going to go one ear in one ear out, the other because it, it doesn't affect them personally, so they are not going to care, but like for me, it affects my life, and, and how comfortable and safe I feel so for me. That's going to mean a lot more than just a one-time deal where it's they're in human history. There are gay people, and it's like we, we know that? But like how do we make them feel more safe? How do we promote those conversations? How do we get people more educated that, like being gay, or being lesbian, or identifying as nonbinary or, or being trans, is not a choice. . . So, one conversation is not going to make them care. It has to be something kind of continued or kind of intensive.

Participants also wondered about having the trainings specifically geared toward student-athletes and coaches involved with men's sports, as illustrated by the following quotation from Grace:

And men aren't as accepting, I guess, when it comes like to being athletes with maybe their teammates being LGBTQ, and I feel like a lot of that stems from just not being educated on it. So, I feel like just continuing the education and continuing to have those conversations around it will definitely help, I feel like more of the men's sports.

Finally, when discussing the need for additional trainings focused on improving individuals' knowledge about LGBTQ individuals and ways to promote LGBTQ inclusion, participants highlighted the importance of promoting trainings and resources that already exist on college campuses, including this example from Francis:

The idea is that it would be provided in the information that goes out for our monthly staff meeting, as part of the agenda. Like, these are the events this month that you might, you know, we would encourage you to consider attending. And hopefully, if we can include it as part of our monthly staff meeting, getting Athletic Director behind that, and saying, hey, really, take a, go, go to this lunchtime thing, or check out this Zoom meeting or whatever.

Ultimately, this theme centered on participants' recommendations for the need to provide additional educational opportunities for members of the athletic department with the hope of increasing their ability to foster a more inclusive space for LGBTQ student-athletes and athletic department staff.

Increase Acceptance and Accountability Across the Athletic Department

Beyond additional opportunities to engage in training, participants also discussed the importance of increasing acceptance across the entire athletic department and felt that having more intentional conversations centered on sexual orientation and gender identity, in particular, would facilitate this greater acceptance. For example, Matt shared, "I think just talking about it honestly. Have an open conversation. Have a dialogue." Jacob highlighted the need "to have more conversations that bring all the different sports together" so that these conversations were not isolated among certain segments of the athletic department. Other participants focused on the need to have these conversations on an ongoing basis to increase acceptance for LGBTQ people across all aspects of the athletic department. For example, Kayla stated:

I think that when we have like monthly staff meetings, it could be something we talk about, even like 10 minute or something, just once a month to know that we are all welcoming, or if there's anything someone has a problem, or question, or something like that, just making that open dialogue for the first, like 10 minutes of a meeting or something.

Still other participants discussed the importance of involving LGBTQ individuals in these conversations so others could learn from their lived experiences, as illustrated by Francis:

And I think that until you have someone saying this is what happened to me, this is my experience, this is how it really feels to attend [university name] as a member of the LGBTQ community, or you know some other faction that's not the majority. That until people actually hear someone saying those things who's experiencing it, it's very hard to really feel like you know what's happening.

Beyond having conversations throughout the athletic department, participants also highlighted the importance of increasing coaches' involvement with efforts to create a more welcoming and inclusive climate for LGBTQ people. Participants particularly focused on how influential coaches are in shaping the climate and modeling inclusive actions to student-athletes. These participants felt it was important for coaches to actively lead efforts to promote LGBTQ inclusion, which is exemplified by this quotation from Darla:

I would like to see more coaches thinking a lot about these things. But I would say, like they need to be more involved in like doing the training, leading trainings, leading conversations with their teams, because I think the admin can require everyone to attend the training and our staff can do things, but I feel like for the athletes, but to really see a change on like the team level I think it has to come from the coaches.

Other participants spoke about the importance of involving coaches in these efforts while also creating accountability structures that would encourage coaches to positively engage with efforts to promote greater LGBTQ inclusion, as demonstrated by Izzy:

Because I think that student-athletes respond the best to, and they are most impacted by what their coaches say. And by like the language that their coaches use. So, if their coaches are using derogatory terms, I think that so often the student-athletes think that it's okay to use that too. And I think that they seem to be the people who they're most impacted by. And if a coaching culture is like, if a specific department, specific sports, coaches show that they won't accept that [derogatory speech towards LGBTQ people] I think, then, the student-athletes are more likely to be more understanding and consider it with what they say. So, I would love to see like coaches having to take like mandatory trainings and coaches having to make changes and more consequences if coaches are found to be using terms that that aren't okay, because I think right now the fallout for coaches is pretty much nothing as long as they're getting wins they can get away with saying anything they want.

Beyond influencing the behaviors of student-athletes, participants also thought coaches could influence each other as further exemplified by Izzy who said, "If maybe there's one coach who's like, particularly keen on the topic they could maybe convince the other coaches. . . but I think that that that could kind of help as well, potentially."

Participants further argued that it would be helpful to engage student-athletes in these efforts for LGBTQ inclusion with a focus on creating accountability structures that clearly communicate there is no tolerance for discriminatory behaviors, as illustrated by the following quotation from Emily:

Comments aren't going to be tolerated again, so, you know, if someone makes a comment in the athletic training room then they get kicked out, that is, they need to leave. They can't say those things there. So, we can do that in our office. Coaches can do it in their practices. It's hard to say necessarily in the locker room, but that's where they would have to have captains and leaders within each team to make that, to stand up to their peers, which can be hard, obviously.

Overall, this second theme focused on participants' beliefs that LGBTQ inclusion involves engaging the entire athletic department in conversations, with a specific focus on coaches and student-athletes.

Shift to Action

The third theme emphasizes the importance of shifting from learning and talking about LGBTQ inclusion to a focus on preparing for and engaging in actions. Participants discussed the importance of having the athletic department take steps to shift into an action orientation, as shared by Hannah who stated, "But I do think more conversations and actually having them, not just saying, yeah, that sounds like

a great idea. And then the thought fizzles, we have to put pen to paper and have some action within it.” Bethany explained that they want to see their athletic department take steps “to actually have change, show change.” As a caveat to this call for change, participants wanted to see their athletic department do more than just ceremonial or surface level changes, or as Bethany went on to state, “Just a little more support, not just a bring you through the training, we’re just, like I said, just checking boxes, so.” This idea of not simply “checking boxes” was also expressed by Darla who said, “I think [athletic] admin needs to take a more active role in this, and not just like checking the box like we did the training and now we’re done, but, being more like an intentional integration into the culture.” Participants were invested in the athletic department doing more than just stating that diversity is important or that LGBTQ people are valued, but rather, seeking a commitment to action that moves beyond trainings and conversations.

Participants believed diversifying the athletic department employees was key to preparing to engage in actions, as illustrated by the below quotation from Otto:

The more of a diverse population that we have within our department that will help attract a more diverse fan base. And those things, I think that’s important to engage a lot of different diversities . . . I think conversations, you know, is, is the big thing opportunities within hiring. I make it clear I’m not into hiring somebody, just you know, from a diversity standpoint, just to hire that person. I still think at the end of the day we need to have the right person. But if the, the right person, you know, fits different diversities or demographics, and those things, I think there’s great opportunities to encourage those, those platforms.

Emily shared that during the hiring process values and beliefs needed to be considered so that the athletic department is prepared to shift to an action orientation:

I think the head coaches can have a big say in their, in the, the people they work with, like the assistant coaches underneath them, the graduate assistants. So, when they hire on making sure they accept, like the person that they’re hiring has the same value [of LGBTQ inclusion].

Several participants focused on the hiring process as an important mechanism to assist the athletic department in moving beyond conversations to preparing for active engagement in creating a more welcoming and inclusive culture for LGBTQ student-athletes and athletic department employees. These participants believed that diversifying hiring and seeking candidates with a commitment to LGBTQ inclusion would serve as a catalyst for preparing athletic departments for greater action. Thus, the third theme was about athletic departments developing a commitment and engaging in a preparation for action to move beyond theorizing and discussions towards concrete steps, with the desired actions being described in themes four and five.

Increase Visibility of LGBTQ Inclusion

The fourth theme reflects actions that the participants perceive athletic departments could engage in to increase the visibility of LGBTQ inclusion with the

ultimate intent to improve the overall climate for LGBTQ student-athletes, coaches, and staff. For example, participants discussed the importance of athletic departments making overt, public statements about their support for LGBTQ people as shared by Peter who said, “Making it more well known, that we are accepting and that we are open, and that we are allies,” and Nancy who explained “Athletics is gonna outwardly show their support for the LGBTQ community.” Others elaborated further on this idea of a public statement of support as illustrated in the following quotations from Emily and Jacob:

To have, like a public stance, or like decree of sportsmanship, and that athletics is not tolerated- doesn’t tolerate any kind of hate comments to the LGBTQ community . . . I want them to partner with the athlete-ally, because that’s what the [athletic conference] is doing. And then having a public presence of allyship, like on the campus, on the athletic page I think is like a minimum. The biggest thing is just having a public statement on the athletic page.

The athletics department releasing something during pride month doing something with, I’ve seen other universities who during pride month they like, promote like you know, queer athletes that have come through their university, or queer staff members that are at the campus, or like things like that, because there are a lot of athletes that I recruit that I mean I feel like if I was to be able to show you like, hey, everybody is welcome here, then that might give me more opportunities to recruit more people.

In addition to making statements about LGBTQ inclusion on the official athletic department website and/or in public spaces, other participants discussed the idea of sharing statements or visuals on social media. This notion of using social media to increase the visibility of LGBTQ inclusion was expressed by Hannah when she stated:

Even as small as what can we do as a [an athletic] department to support and celebrate those within the department that identify as that part of the [LGBTQ] community. And whether that’s even on social media or can there be, you know the rainbow flag is part of, you know, in June . . . How can we combat that [discrimination] a little bit and show our support? I think it could be a lot stronger.

In addition to public statements, another idea that participants highlighted for increasing the visibility of LGBTQ inclusion was developing authentic relationships with campus and community LGBTQ organizations as illustrated by Timothy:

Are there opportunities for us to build relationships with some LBGTQ organizations on campus and in the community? Because I think through that hopefully, I think that sends the message that the campus is accepting. It is inclusive. And not just on campus, but when it’s within its athletics program as well. I think those are ways in which we can help, show that

athletics is inclusive, and you hope to then trickles down to prospective student-athletes, who want to come to and they say, you know what? That is, a place that I can go, and I can be myself, and I can be accepted and have a good experience.

In this quote the participant is connecting increased visibility to more successful recruitment of future student-athletes. Other participants also wondered if having a visual statement in the form of a sticker or poster of allyship might be helpful for both the recruitment and retention of student-athletes. These ideas are encompassed in the following quotations from Calvin and Kayla:

We would get the stickers and things like that, that we are allies. And, you know, maybe something more visual would be helpful. . . That would be, just show that you're an ally, or that it's a safe place. . . To have something visual is, when we have recruits coming to campus too, not knowing their orientation, and they're walking through our offices that might help.

I feel like all of the athletic training staff have like stickers on their doors like this safe space and allied things. So, if you're just new here and don't know that then that's something you could see and know- Okay, I'm welcome here. And then, just if you're comfortable, casually throwing it in your conversations.

These quotations illustrate the role that increased visibility can play in creating a more welcoming and inclusive climate.

A final idea shared by participants to increase the visibility of LGBTQ inclusion was the athletic department hosting pride nights during athletic competitions as described by Emily and Bethany:

I think it would be cool if we could have like some kind of pride night for athletes if a team wants it. And it not be like an outlier thing, like they all have the support of the other sports, even though they might not have necessarily the pride night.

Our basketball team will wear, in warm ups they wear the "Walk with us" shirts or the, the fish shirts kind of showing just unity stuff, so. And to me that's no different than the LGBT, like LGBT awareness as well. I wish we would see more of that with the department. We've- had some of my coworkers have been at another school in the conference. . . It was like Pride Day, and so they had all rainbow warm ups.

Participants noted that hosting pride nights during athletic competitions could provide acknowledgement and validation to current LGBTQ student-athletes and employees in addition to assisting in recruitment efforts. Pride nights could also send a clear message to the public and fans about the values an athletic department holds about inclusion. This fourth theme provides a number of ideas for how athletic departments could intentionally increase the visibility of LGBTQ inclusion and ultimately improve the climate for LGBTQ student-athletes, coaches, and athletic department staff.

Develop Resources for LGBTQ Students Athletes and Employees

The fifth and final theme focuses on the need to create resources to support LGBTQ student-athletes and employees. Before exploring the specific resources that the participants were recommending, some participants discussed the general need for creating safe or welcoming spaces for LGBTQ student-athletes and colleagues. In particular, some of the participants shared the steps they were personally taking to foster safety and their hope that others would also take intentional steps toward creating LGBTQ safe spaces as explained by Grace and Kayla:

Continuing to be a safe space and continue to educate yourself so that way your students feel safe enough to exist as they are . . . So, just making sure that we're always doing the work that needs to be done, whether it be like internally or externally, to make sure those students are safe. And then hold the people accountable who may not be making those, making a safe space for those students, whether it also be teammates, classmates, and you know other administrators and stuff, just making sure that everyone is welcoming and inviting.

I let my team know pretty right away that, I'm a safe space for them. They can come to me for anything. So, I feel like just as a whole. If we can give that persona to our athletes and our coworkers that we're not going to judge them for anything that they come to us for it. This is a place that they can feel welcome at. And so, my dream would be for everyone to feel that presence like when they walk into anyone's office.

Adding to the idea of creating safe spaces, participants also discussed the need for safe and affirmative mental health supports for LGBTQ individuals within the athletic department as illustrated by Izzy:

I think more advertisement around that [mental health services], and like, perhaps even like with a specific thing like if you are struggling with, and perhaps listing it so that it kind of like sparks like. So, if you're struggling, or if you are a member of the LGBT community and you need support. Please find it here. I think it would be useful to have things posted that, like students can physically see. Because I think sometimes, if you're struggling, it's hard to know where you can go to for it. . . And I think, like the psychologist, the psychiatrist could work to help make it a more open-inclusive like to make it clear that the students have somebody to go to.

Another resource identified by participants that could increase LGBTQ student-athletes' sense of inclusion and diminish isolation is creating an LGBTQ student organization within athletics or supporting an existing campus-wide organization that is intentionally welcoming of student-athletes. Participants described the importance of providing an LGBTQ student-athlete club in the following quotations from Bethany and Jacob:

I think every NCAA school has, like FCAA, the Fellow Christian Athletes Association, which is great for them. They have a, a group, and want to connect with their God. I, I think it would be cool, because I, I know we

have a number of LGBT members within the student-athletes that if they could have a group like that as well. . . I think, just a student organization can help a lot of kids. I mean, there's a lot of individuals who get into college that are probably still questioning their identity. And I think just, just for a mental health perspective to have something like that would help those individuals.

In an ideal world I would love to see almost like a like a gay, straight alliance or some sort of organization that that is like an actual physical space for student-athletes to go to. I know that there are organizations like that across campus. I, I just knowing how a student-athlete thinks and what their mindset is. Every single day they do separate themselves from the normal student. So, I feel like having a group that is not specifically for student-athletes. I feel like it could be welcome to everybody, but it is geared a little bit more towards student-athlete life, . . . I would have loved to be able to feel like I'm welcomed and, and wanted on campus instead of it, just being by myself figuring things out by myself.

Other participants commented on how helpful it could be to student-athletes to facilitate their involvement in existing campus-wide student organizations, while also acknowledging the barriers, particularly around time, to student-athletes' involvement. For example, Darla stated:

We struggle with getting our student-athletes involved across campus. They just have so much going on that they don't have, you know, opportunity to get involved as much as the general student population. So, I think, like having- I don't know, having more opportunities for students to get involved with like the, you know, the pride alliances on campus or, and not just LGBTQ, but different, different groups. . . I don't know if it would help to have like representatives come here and just make it location convenient, but I would love to see like instead of us just listing the resources, us actually like helping students get involved who want to be involved.

A final suggestion related to resources is the development of gender inclusive restrooms and locker rooms, which was explained by Lisa, "And then, if, if budget was like a non-issue, you know ideally, I would like to see some restrooms and locker rooms that our trans staff members or student-athletes could potentially use and feel most comfortable." This suggestion corresponds to changes that are already observed across university campuses as more and more colleges create gender inclusive restrooms in their campus buildings. In summary, this fifth theme highlights concrete resources that athletic departments could create to better support LGBTQ student-athletes and employees.

Discussion

The findings of this exploratory qualitative study provide concrete suggestions for creating a more welcoming college athletic department climate for LGBTQ

members that both reflect the existing literature and provide some new insights. In addition to addressing the research questions, participants' responses also illuminated some of the structural challenges and realities that are unique to the collegiate athletics context, including the incredible demands placed on student-athletes and coaches that create potential time constraints for both groups. Participants further noted the unique power that coaches and athletic department administrators have in shaping the culture within their teams and departments (Anderson et al., 2016; Toomey et al., 2018), as well as the need for accountability to exist beyond wins and losses during athletic competitions. These structural realities shape collegiate athletics and the processes for creating a more LGBTQ-inclusive climate, underscoring the importance of engaging the members of college athletic department to determine the steps that could enhance the climate for LGBTQ student-athletes and athletic department staff.

Mirroring the recommendations made by the NCAA, the primary and secondary education literature, and the educational intervention strategy of the Transformational Tapestry Model (Rankin & Reason, 2008), the participants in this study suggested annual trainings for all members of the athletic department to enhance individuals' understandings and awareness of LGBTQ identities and the barriers to inclusion (Fallon-Korb et al., 2025; Havey, 2021; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; NASEM, 2019, 2020; NCAA, n.d.; O'Connell & Bottino, 2024). Beyond a general recommendation for continual education, the participants in this study focused on the need for trainings to include examples relevant to athletics, be concise and focused, and be incentivized or mandated. These suggestions reflect the aforementioned structural constraint of the restrictive time demands placed on student-athletes and athletic department employees. On the other hand, perceived challenges with mandating trainings are that requiring attendance can create a situation where participants are reluctant to engage with the material and/or may develop a more negative attitude about the trainings (Honnes, 2020; Peterson & McCleery, 2014). Yet, the desire to mandate trainings reflects participants' concerns that trainings on enhancing the climate for LGBTQ members would only become a priority and be attended if the trainings were required. The NCAA (n.d.) also recommends that athletic departments mandated trainings annually. Other participants suggested using incentives of free food and apparel, particularly for student-athletes, while still others thought some level of peer accountability among coaches could encourage them to attend. When implementing these trainings, athletic departments could utilize a variety of individuals to provide the trainings including university faculty members who research and teach about LGBTQ populations and/or community organizations who specialize in providing these types of training.

While perceiving the value of ongoing education, participants in this study further emphasized the need to shift from learning to actions that created a more welcoming and inclusive LGBTQ climate, similar to the symbolic actions intervention strategy of the Transformational Tapestry Model and the literature focused on care environments (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2023). Beyond highlighting the centrality of action, participants were aware of the need to take steps to prepare

for action with a focus on the hiring process and the need to hire coaches and athletic department staff who were committed to LGBTQ inclusion, mirroring the access and retention climate areas of the Transformational Tapestry Model and the focus on inclusive leadership practices in workplaces (Rankin & Reason, 2008; Robertson et al., 2024). The importance placed upon hiring reflects participants' awareness of the unique power that coaches and athletic department administrators have to shape and influence the culture within their teams and departments (Anderson et al., 2021; Mullin & Cook, 2021; Oswalt & Vargas, 2013; Toomey & McGeorge, 2018). Again, we see the Transformational Tapestry Model reflected in these findings through the idea that transformation of any kind is largely about action.

Further recommendations from participants focused on increasing visibility of LGBTQ inclusion through public statements, social media, and events like pride nights at athletic competitions. These suggestions were about communicating a commitment to LGBTQ inclusion both to an audience within the athletic department as well as outside contingencies, such as fans and potential student recruits. This suggestion also mirrors the existing recommendations from the NCAA (n.d.) that focus on the importance of media and other official communications from athletic departments being LGBTQ inclusive. This set of findings reflects a difference between the school-based literature and the context of collegiate athletics as the school-based literature focuses solely on internal constituents (i.e., students and school personnel), while creating an LGBTQ-inclusive climate in college athletics requires involvement of external groups as well. For example, Melton (2021) discusses incidents of fans chanting anti-LGBTQ slurs during sporting events. Incidents such as these underscores the importance of athletic departments making public statements clearly situating their commitment to LGBTQ inclusivity (Melton et al., 2023). Yet, we encourage departments to adopt a comprehensive collection of recommendations as a coordinated effort to promote LGBTQ inclusion rather than solely adopt symbolic public statements without action (Levi & Fried, 2024).

The final set of recommendations focuses on resources for LGBTQ student-athletes and employees, which is corroborated by the NCAA and the primary and secondary school-based literature (Griffin & Taylor, 2013; NASEM, 2019, 2020; NCAA, n.d.; Russell et al. 2021). Participants spoke about the importance of creating intentional LGBTQ safe spaces within athletic departments to foster greater inclusion. Research within the general college populations suggests that having designated LGBTQ safe spaces fostered an increase in students' sense of safety and connectedness (Evans, 2002; Katz et al., 2016), similar to the findings in the care context literature focused on creating safe interpersonal relationships to foster LGBTQ inclusion (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2023). Moreover, participants discussed the importance of having LGBTQ affirming mental health resources, which is particularly important given that research has found that LGBTQ student-athletes often experience heightened mental health concerns, which are frequently connected to the discrimination and harassment they face (Klein et al., 2019; Kroshus & Davoren, 2016; Rankin & Merson, 2012). Finally, participants discussed the importance of athletic departments creating or supporting LGBTQ student organizations geared

toward student-athletes. This suggestion directly reflects the school-based literature highlighting the benefits for LGBTQ students and also for entire schools when GSAs are offered (Ioverno & Russell, 2020; Kosciw et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016) and employee resources groups (Robertson et al., 2024). Creating LGBTQ student-athlete organizations could be particularly central to an LGBTQ-inclusive climate given the research highlighting the isolation and exclusion that LGBTQ student-athletes frequently report (Anderson et al., 2019; Pfeiffer & Misawa, 2018; Rankin & Merson, 2012).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this exploratory study offers some potentially novel insights into mechanism for creating climates in athletic departments that are more affirming and inclusive of LGBTQ student-athletes and employees, as with any study there are limitations. The goal of qualitative research is not to recruit representative samples; however, the participants for this study were primarily White, heterosexual, and athletic department employees. Future researchers need to recruit a more racial and LGBTQ diverse samples to explore how the intersection of race and LGBTQ identities might influence participants' perspectives on the steps athletic departments can take to be more inclusive. The inclusion of LGBTQ individuals is essential to ensuring that recommendations for creating a more welcoming athletic department are actually useful; thus, a future study could involve asking LGBTQ student-athletes and athletic department employees their perceptions of the recommendations found in this study. Additionally, researchers might want to replicate this study with a sample primarily comprised of student-athletes to explore how the findings might vary, as the present study's sample included only one student. Moreover, it is difficult to discern how collecting data from a particular athletic department within a singular location impacted the findings of this study. Future research could explore how geography (i.e., the Midwest versus elsewhere), university type (e.g., public university versus private), and divisional level (e.g., Division I versus Division III) might influence the steps identified for creating a more LGBTQ affirming athletic department.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide important insights for creating more inclusive and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ individuals in collegiate athletic departments. In particular, the findings suggest that continual education opportunities, as well as intentional and honest conversations are foundational to facilitating LGBTQ inclusion. The data for this study further suggest that athletic departments need to move beyond providing opportunities for dialogue and education to committed actions that increases visibility of LGBTQ inclusion through public statements, social media, and events (e.g., pride nights). Finally, collegiate athletic departments need to develop supportive resources for LGBTQ student-athletes and athletic department staff. These findings provide a framework for greater inclusion and seek to diminish the presence and influence of anti-LGBTQ harassment and bias.

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Figure 1
Examples of the Coding Process Used for this Study

Data Examples	Open Codes	Consensus Understanding	Theme
“I think just talking about it honestly. Have an open conversation. Have a dialogue.” (Matt)	More conversations	Increasing acceptance across the entire athletic department can be achieved by having more intentional conversations centered on sexual orientation and gender identity.	Final Theme: Increase Acceptance and Accountability Across the Athletic Department Increasing acceptance across the entire athletic department can be achieved by having more intentional conversations centered on sexual orientation and gender identity and creating accountability structures to ensure ongoing discussion and learning.
	Having conversations		
“I think that when we have like monthly staff meetings, it could be something we talk about...to know that we are all welcoming... just making that open dialogue...” (Kayla)	Find ways for folks to share personal experience	Need to have these conversations on an ongoing basis and integrate them into existing accountability structures.	
	More voices		
	Admin accountability		
“And I think that until you have someone saying this is what happened to me, this is my experience, this is how it really feels to attend [university name] as a member of the LGBTQ community...That until people actually hear someone saying those things who’s experiencing it, it’s very hard to really feel like you know what’s happening.” (Francis)	Find ways for folks to share personal experience	Important to involve LGBTQ individuals in these conversations so others could learn from their lived experiences.	
	Opportunities to hear about experiences of LGBTQ people		
“I would like to see more coaches thinking a lot about these things...they need to be more involved in like doing the training, leading trainings, leading conversations with their teams...” (Daria)	Increased coach involvement—because they are influential	Coaches are influential in shaping the climate and modeling inclusive actions to student-athletes, making it important for them to actively lead efforts to promote LGBTQ inclusion.	
	Coach accountability		

“...I think that student-athletes respond the best to, and they are most impacted by what their coaches say... And if... coaches show that they won't accept [derogatory speech towards LGBTQ people] I think, then, the student-athletes are more likely to be more understanding and consider it with what they say. So, I would love to see like coaches having to take like mandatory trainings and coaches having to make changes and more consequences if coaches are found to be using terms that aren't okay...” (Lizzy)		Accountability for coaches	Due to their influence, creating accountability structures that would encourage coaches to positively engage with efforts to promote greater LGBTQ inclusion.
“Comments...aren't going to be tolerated...so, if someone makes a comment in the athletic training room then they get kicked out, that is, they need to leave. They can't say those things there. So, we can do that in our office. Coaches can do it in their practices... Because each leader, each kind of group, has their own leading person, but it can go down to the individual as long as they like commit to a change. Not necessarily everyone has to change, but just- hopefully everyone sees it as an important issue.” (Emily)		Coach accountability	
		Coaches should take trainings	
Not tolerating discrimination		Accountability for student athletes	Creating accountability structures that clearly communicate there is no tolerance for discriminatory behaviors.
		Creating accountability structures	