



**NCAA COMMON GROUND VII EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**April 22-24, 2025, MEETING**  
**Indianapolis, Indiana**

**VISION, MISSION AND OBJECTIVES**

The Common Ground initiative was established in 2014 to provide LGBTQ individuals and individuals of faith at public and private NCAA member institutions, LGBTQ organizations and faith-based organizations an opportunity to discuss commonalities and differences and learn how to work more cohesively within athletics.

The vision of Common Ground is to live in a world in which individuals of diverse faiths, sexual orientations, genders, gender identities, gender expressions, and any combination of these identities:

1. Understand each other's common humanity as demonstrated through empathy, respect and inclusive practices.
2. Intervene when witnessing lack of empathy, respect and inclusion.
3. Understand that we each bring multiple identities (e.g., race, class, ability) to Common Ground work and that these identities affect our perspectives and our experiences.

The mission of the Common Ground initiative seeks to find practical ways for people of all faiths, sexual orientations and gender identities to participate in intercollegiate athletics programs that model respect for all.

The objectives for Common Ground VII were to:

1. Build relationships with colleagues at NCAA institutions looking to create spaces of belonging for all student-athletes.
2. Share the mission, vision and benefits of the Common Ground initiative.
3. Build trust amongst colleagues at faith-based, private secular and public NCAA members institutions and the Common Ground Leadership Team.
4. Listen to and learn about what colleagues are facing on their campuses.
5. Share knowledge, skills and strategies for respectful dialogue on difficult topics.:

**OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM – DAY 1**

1. **Welcome and Grounding.** NCAA director of inclusion, Jean Merrill, welcomed Common Ground VII participants to the NCAA national office. Senior Vice President of Inclusion,

Education and Community Engagement, Felicia Martin, extended a warm welcome to participants. Pat Griffin, as a founding member of the Common Ground initiative, welcomed participants and invited them to fully engage in the brave and often-challenging Common Ground discussions. Griffin provided a short history of the Common Ground initiative and introduced the Common Ground Leadership Team. Social justice educator and consultant, Tanya Williams, served as the program facilitator and provided land acknowledgment, an overview of logistics, roles, agenda, objectives and guidelines for Common Ground VII.

2. **Context Arrival Pair Share.** Participants were asked to individually reflect on the following questions:

- a. What's the personal context that you're coming into today's session?
- b. What's the organizational context you're coming into today's session?
- c. What is the larger societal context coming into today's session?

Participants were invited to reflect in pairs or small groups on their reflections.

3. **Introductions.** Participants introduced one another at mixed tables by sharing their names, pronouns (optional), organization/school/team, role on campus and the reason for attending Common Ground VII. Some participants shared with the larger group.

4. **Concentric circles/Macrolab Icebreaker.** Participants created two concentric circles, and individuals from the outer circle paired with individuals from the inner circle. During four rounds, pairs of participants discussed one of the prompts listed below. After each round, new pairings were created to discuss a different prompt. The following prompts were used in the activity:

- a. What brings you to the Common Ground convening?
- b. What's easy about discussing LGBTQIA+ issues for you? What's easy about discussing faith and belief issues for you?
- c. What's hard about discussing LGBTQIA+ issues for you? What's hard about discussing faith and belief issues for you?
- d. Talk about a time you felt like you mattered. Talk about a time when you felt like you were marginalized.

5. **Developing Communication Guidelines and Framing the Container.** Participants ideated, discussed, and agreed to several communication guidelines, with an emphasis on confidentiality, consent, clarity, respect, and the value of new and varied perspectives.

Individuals were asked to engage in a reflective exercise about what guidelines they would focus on in practice, with what guidelines they would need support, and why.

6. **Common Ground Activity.** Participants stood in a circle and remained silent while the facilitator read out specific identities or beliefs. When participants identified with identities or beliefs and were comfortable expressing to the group, they stepped forward into the circle or raised their hand. After the facilitator read several statements, participants were invited to express their own statements to which the group responded. This exercise created a visual representation of participants' identities and experiences, providing perspective on who shared common ground, and in a few cases, who might be the only person who identified with a statement or identity.
7. **Pair Share/Large Group Discussion.** Participants discussed the following prompts in two rounds of pairs, the first round with someone with whom the participant easily shared common ground and the second round with someone the participant did not easily share common ground. Following the pair discussions, the large group reflected on the same two prompts:
  - a. What impact did the Common Ground activity have for you?
  - b. What are you thinking about now?
8. **Home Group Time.** Each home group convened to reflect on the day and to check in with one another. "Home groups" are the teams of people representing their respective institutions. The purpose of the home groups is to have an established team from each institution that holds a similar vision, and multiple networks, to pursue the vision and mission of Common Ground on their respective campuses. The home groups discussed the following prompts:
  - a. What are you noticing about yourself?
  - b. What are you noticing about the larger group?
  - c. What have you experienced and/or learned from Common Ground so far? How can you use the skills to deepen or heighten your learnings?
  - d. What is your vision for Common Ground in your role? On your campus? In your arena? Why is that important?
9. **Table Conversations: Working Skills and Hopes and Fears.** As the final activity of Day 1, participants engaged in table conversations regarding hopes and fears for the work over the next one- and one-half days. Following table discussions, the large group engaged in the same conversation.

10. **Adjournment.** The facilitator closed the first programming day with general announcements about Day 2.

## **OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM – DAY 2**

1. **Terminology Spectrum Exercise.** Participants engaged in an exercise, creating a physical representation of their various knowledge levels about certain terminology. The facilitator invited participants to position themselves along a spectrum, first, based on their familiarity with LGBTQ+ terminology, followed by their familiarity with faith/belief terminology. On one end of the spectrum was a sign that read, “New to this Terminology,” and a sign at the other end of the spectrum that read, “Very Familiar with this Terminology.” The purpose of the exercise was as follows:

- a. Share understanding about different terminology, experiences and beliefs associated with topics being discussed.
- b. Opportunity to listen deeply to others about their understanding of identity and the terms associated with LGBTQ+ identities and religious/faith identities.
- c. Notice the ways one’s misunderstanding or misperceptions about terminology keep people from achieving common ground.

Following the exercise, participants were asked to form “mixed knowledge” groups so each group had different knowledge levels of particular terminology. The mixed knowledge group engaged in a terminology exercise, including sharing current understandings of the terms, clarifying misconceptions, explaining why the terms matter and the context in which they are used. Following the mixed-knowledge groups, the large group engaged in the same conversation.

2. **Home Group Time.** Each home group convened to reflect on the following prompts:

- a. What is the readiness of your campus and the relationships that you have (as individuals and as a group) to bring this work back to campus in transformational ways?
- b. What might your early assessment of the campus/athletic department needs be to have “this work” be adopted on campus?
- c. What is the conversation that we need to have as a group before we leave this gathering in service of our shared and collective work back on our campus?

The home group time was followed by a large group debrief on the same prompts.

3. **The Reality of Power in Seeking Common Ground.** Participants explored the concept of power as it relates to seeking common ground. The facilitator first invited participants to engage in open table conversations using the following prompts:

- a. Why is common ground so difficult to achieve?
- b. How do you know you are in a common ground space?
- c. Why is common ground important.

Following the open table conversations, participants entered into a large group discussion about the presence of power in all situations, particularly in a common ground space.

The facilitator, emphasizing that inclusive efforts have to consider power dynamics, explained what power is, how it directs the behavior of others or the course of events, and that it must be considered at both the individual and systemic levels. They also explained and discussed the following concepts of power relationships:

- a. **Power over:** How power is most commonly understood. This type of power is built on force, coercion, domination and control, and motivates largely through fear or diminishment. This form of power is built on a belief that power is a finite resource that can be held by individuals, and that some people have power and some people do not.
- b. **Power with:** Shared power that grows out of collaboration and relationships. It is built on respect, mutual support, shared power, solidarity, influence, empowerment and collaborative decision making.
- c. **Power to:** The “productive or generative potential of power and the new possibilities or actions that can be created without using relationships of domination.” It is built on the “unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. It is the power to make a difference, to create something new, or to achieve goals.
- d. **Power within:** Related to a person’s “sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others.” Power within involves people having a sense of their own capacity and self-worth.

4. **Home Group Activity: Circle of Influence Mapping.** Each home group convened to engage in the following activity:

- When thinking about creating a common ground space, energy and practice within athletics on your campus:

- (1) Step One: Create a visual map showing who has the power to influence a situation.
- (2) Step Two: Identify what type of power each stakeholder currently exercises: “Power over,” “Power with,” “Power to,” and “Power within,” acknowledge that these forms of power come in many forms (e.g., silence, not giving full attention or resources, not learning more about issues and relying on the marginalized group to teach or do the work).
- (3) Step Three: Develop strategies to:
  - (a.) Reduce harmful “power over” dynamics.
  - (b.) Build collaborative “power with” structures.
  - (c.) Support individual “power to” create change.
  - (d.) Nurture “power within” for marginalized members.

Following the home group activity, the large group debrief on discussions to see if there were any commonalities across home groups’ mappings.

5. **Dialogue Circles Activity.** Participants engaged in dialogue circles to practice real-time Common Ground conversations. The facilitator introduced the importance and principles of dialogue, and shared behaviors that may foster and support dialogue. Then the facilitator provided small groups of 4-5 participants with the following:

- a. Set of cards listing dialogue behaviors.
- b. 3-4 discussion prompt cards.
  - (1) Share a belief you’ve changed over time and what influenced that change.
  - (2) Discuss a time when you had to navigate a relationship with someone whose values differed from yours.
  - (3) What does respectful disagreement look like to you?
- c. Observer feedback forms.

In each round of the dialogue circles, one person served as the observer and distributed two or three behavior cards to each participant. Participants then engaged in dialogue from the prompt, making conscious efforts to practice the behaviors on their cards. The observer noted examples when participants demonstrated the behaviors. After the

dialogue, the observer shared specific examples they observed. Groups then rotated roles and repeated the dialogue circle activity with a new prompt. Following the dialogue circle activity, each participant engaged in an individual reflection, writing which behaviors felt most natural and which were most challenging. Those reflections were then discussed in small groups and then in the large group.

6. **Practicing a Common Ground Conversation.** The facilitator framed and facilitated a discussion about practicing a Common Ground conversation. As part of the exercise, five volunteers with varied perspectives discussed the following topics:

- a. Is it possible to be an LGBTQ ally AND a faithful member of a conservative Christian religion? How? Who gets to define what being an ally looks like?
- b. Are we moving quickly enough/too quickly in making our faith-based campuses more accepting places for LGBTQ students and staff?

Following the exercise, the facilitator continued explaining differences amongst three common types of communication: discussion; debate; and dialogue. The facilitator also explained why dialogue is a more effective communication process toward common ground than discussion or debate and presented several behaviors to support dialogue.

7. **Affinity Group Time.** Participants formed groups based on their identities and were given a guiding question to discuss. Affinity groups included people of faith, LGBTQ people of faith, people who identify as LGBTQ, not LGBTQ/not a person of faith. Participants had the opportunity to create additional affinity groups. The purpose of the affinity groups was to provide participants with a safe space for connection, community building, building resilience and sustainability and providing empowerment.

### **OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM – DAY 3**

1. **Checking in and Reconnecting.** The facilitator welcomed the participants back to the Common Ground program and provided a reminder of the purpose and guidelines. The facilitators also checked in on how participants were feeling and progressing, and noted the importance of self-care, particularly when engaging in deep conversations.

- a. How Are You Arriving Today?
- b. How are you arriving this morning (mentally, emotionally, and physically)?
- c. What are you thinking about as you return to your everyday context?
- d. What is your intention for today?

2. **Navigating Triggering in the Midst of Common Ground.** The facilitator conducted an exercise about navigating triggering events when pursuing Common Ground. As part of the exercise, participants were invited to journal about the following prompt:

- What are some examples of triggering events/moments that you experienced during our time together?
  - (1) How do you know that you are in a triggering moment?
  - (2) What was happening physically?
  - (3) What was happening emotionally?
  - (4) What was happening mentally?
  - (5) What was the outcome of your reactions?

After the participants journaled, the facilitator defined a trigger as any stimulus, either external or internal to a person, which causes an emotional reaction. Emotional reactions may include, but are not limited to, feelings of unexpectedness, disorientation or general intensity. The facilitator also discussed the four common responses to triggering events: fight; face; flight; and freeze. The facilitator also discussed the “window of tolerance” when responding to a triggering event. Specifically, “the window of tolerance is the zone where intense emotional arousal can be processed in a healthy way, allowing you to function and react to stress or anxiety effectively.” The facilitator concluded the exercise by reviewing the “Triggering Event Cycle” and “Triggering Event Traffic Circle,” both of which were developed by Dr. Kathy Obear.

3. **Re-entry Discussion.** Leadership Team member Liz Darger shared with participants her experience as a Common Ground participant returning back to campus. As part of the discussion, Darger encouraged participants and home teams to consider some simple action steps on their respective campuses to ensure accountability and continuity of Common Ground. Specifically, Darger offered the following considerations:

- a. Document your Common Ground experience.
- b. Develop your Common Ground “elevator speech.”
- c. Before leaving the Common Ground VII:
  - (1) Email or text at least one colleague on campus and ask to meet with them to discuss the Common Ground experience.



- (2) Schedule when home team will next meet to debrief the Common Ground experience together and follow-up on next steps.
  - d. Make a list of stakeholders to share about Common Ground (e.g., campus leaders, athletics senior leadership, coaches, SAAC, donors).
  - e. Think about how to “brand” Common Ground when taking it back to campus to get buy-in from key stakeholders.
  - f. Review the Common Ground Action Strategies document for ideas for individual, department and campus initiative.
  - g. Look for normal, natural and immediate ways to share about Common Ground on return to campus.
  - h. Make a list of potential Common Ground allies within athletics and on campus to reach out to.
    - When creating an action strategy list:
      - (1) Make note of the low hanging fruit, the easy wins that can help with momentum.
      - (2) Make note of which items will lead to continued discussion.
  - i. Consider how to leverage athletic department resources/autonomy in order to benefit all of campus (e.g., invite campus entities to be part of athletics-sponsored Common Ground events).
  - j. Consider connecting with other schools from Common Ground VII for continued support in Common Ground efforts.
  - k. Stay connected to the Common Ground Leadership Team and fellow Common Ground participants through webinars, check-in calls, etc.
  - l. Commit to play the long game and celebrate little wins along the way.
4. **Team Re-entry: 30-60-90 Day Planning.** Home teams convened to develop a 30-60-90-day action plan. Specifically, home teams used action strategies and reflections on team members’ experiences at Common Ground VII to begin thinking about what a return to campus looks like. Specifically, home teams engaged in the following exercises:

- a. Break down a return-to-campus implementation into concrete timeframes with the following steps:
  - (1) Define specific objectives for the first 30, 60, and 90 days on campus.
  - (2) Map immediate actions needed in the first week back.
  - (3) Identify quick wins to build momentum.
  - (4) Schedule home team check-ins to assess progress at each interval.
- b. Home teams catalogue what they have and what they need:
  - (1) Map existing campus resources relevant to the initiative.
  - (2) Identify gaps and needed resources.
  - (3) Develop strategies or securing missing resources.
  - (4) Create a resource-sharing plan between campuses when helpful.

Following the home teams activity, the large group convened to share examples of action plans.

- 5. **Appreciations and Closing.** The facilitator encouraged participants to seek out individuals with whom they had made meaningful connections during Common Ground VII and express gratitude for the experience. To conclude Common Ground VII, the facilitator asked each participant to choose one word that they would use to describe what they were feeling at the conclusion of the program. The facilitator also emphasized the leadership team's commitment to ongoing engagement with participants and their institutions.

Common Ground VII April 22-24, 2025, Meeting	
<b>Facilitator:</b>	
Tanya Williams, Authentic Coaching and Consulting	
<b>Participants:</b>	
American University	
Biola University	
Bowling Green State University	
Bridgewater State University	
Eastern Illinois University	
Kenyon College	
Mars Hill University	
Pepperdine University	
Roberts Wesleyan University	
St. Catherine University	
University of Connecticut	
University of Massachusetts, Boston	
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities	
University of Northwestern, St. Paul	
University of Notre Dame.	
Widener University	
<b>Common Ground Leadership Team in Attendance:</b>	
Liz Darger, Brigham Young University	
Kelsey Davis, Christian Athlete Circles	
Pat Griffin, University of Massachusetts, Amherst	
AJ Kurtz, NCAA Consultant	
Drew Martin, University of Texas at Austin	
Keadrick Peters, Bowie State University	
Tim Selgo, Mammoth Sports Consulting	
<b>NCAA Staff in Attendance:</b>	
Niya Blair Hackworth, Debbie Brown, Olivia Brown, Jordan Jones, Ashlesha Lokhande, Felicia Martin, Jean Merrill, Joshua Perez, Carrie Shearer, Shay Wallach and Amy Wilson.	