



Common Ground Action Strategies

Fostering Collegiate Athletics Cultures that Are Respectful
and Safe for Students and Staff of All Faiths, Religious
Perspectives, Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities





INTRODUCTION

This document offers action strategies for college athletics departments at public, private faith-based and private secular institutions to create respectful and inclusive climates for student-athletes and staff of all religious or non-religious perspectives, sexual orientations and gender identities. The Common Ground Leadership Team believes that every student-athlete and athletics staff member should be safe and included in all aspects of their athletics department and team.

This resource focuses on two institutional contexts: the climate for student-athletes of faith at public and private secular schools and the climate for LGBTQ student-athletes at private faith-based schools. This resource does not directly address religious inclusion efforts at private faith-based schools or LGBTQ inclusion at public and private secular schools.

We recognize that many private faith-based schools are aligned with specific religious tenets that guide policy and practice, creating distinctive religious climates. Athletics programs at religious institutions are an important part of the diversity of collegiate athletics, and many student-athletes, coaches and staff seek opportunities at schools with expressly religious climates. Private faith-based schools can take actions to create inclusive climates consistent with their institutional missions and the strategies offered in this document. All student-athletes, coaches and staff at private faith-based schools should be treated with respect and fairness, regardless of their faith identity or religious perspective.

The action strategies identified in this document provide a range of options. We, the Common Ground Leadership Team, present these strategies with the knowledge that each school will adopt action strategies that are consistent with federal, state and local laws, as well as institutional mission and policies governing religious expression in public and private secular schools.

We recognize that the action strategies offered in this document are reflective of an ongoing conversation and will be amended and refined as our conversation continues.



People of all religious faiths, as well as those who do not follow or identify with a religious faith, should be welcomed and respected as valued members of the athletics department community.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECULAR SCHOOLS

This section focuses on student-athletes and athletics staff, and the role that religion plays in their lives. People of all religious faiths, as well as those who do not follow or identify with a religious faith, should be welcomed and respected as valued members of the athletics department community. The strategies offered in this document may be useful for public and private secular institutions in creating a culture of inclusion and belonging.

In accordance with constitutional protections of freedom of religion, athletics departments at public and private secular schools should ensure a neutral religious climate in which no particular religion or religious belief or practice is promoted over any other, and where student-athletes, coaches and staff of all religious perspectives are welcomed, accommodated and treated with respect. This neutrality enables individual student-athletes, coaches and staff to practice and express their respective religious beliefs while protecting the rights of student-athletes, coaches and staff who do not share those religious beliefs, do not follow any religion, or choose not to participate in any religious activities or public demonstrations of religion within the context of athletics. The goal in public and private secular schools is to find common ground where student-athletes, coaches and athletics staff of all religious and nonreligious beliefs can compete together in a respectful, safe and fair climate.



ACTION STRATEGIES

The action strategies for public and private secular schools focus on respect and inclusion for student-athletes and staff of varied faiths. These action strategies do

not assume that all public and private secular schools are inclusive of LGBTQ people.

Individual Actions

- Acknowledge and embrace the presence of student-athletes and staff of varied faiths in the athletics community, including those who do not identify with a religion.
- Speak up to stop anti-religious bullying, slurs, jokes and stereotypes.

- Encourage respectful conversations regarding differences in religious perspectives among athletics staff and student-athletes.
- Initiate conversations with school administrators, boards of trustees, alumni or other school leaders about how to respect the rights of student-athletes and staff of faith in public or private secular schools.
- Indicate your willingness to talk with student-athletes and staff of faith about their experiences in athletics.
- Name different faith perspectives when you talk about respect for people of faith (e.g., Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim). It is also important to recognize the many denominations within these faith perspectives. For example, in Christianity, it may be important to distinguish among denominations such as Catholic, Protestant and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, among others.
- Include religion among the many ways that student-athletes are unique when discussing team expectations for respectful interactions.
- Where reasonable, recognize, respect and accommodate varied religious observances and practices (e.g., prayer, clothing, dietary needs).
- Know about and how to access campus resources or organizations for people of varied religions.
- Reach out, connect with and get to know student-athletes and staff of faith.





Where reasonable, recognize, respect and accommodate varied religious observances and practices (e.g., prayer, clothing and dietary needs) as consistent with federal, state and local law and NCAA guidelines.

Departmental Actions

- Educate athletics staff about federal, state and local laws related to religious expression in schools.
- Explicitly include student-athletes of varied faiths when communicating to athletics staff the importance of respect for all student-athletes (e.g., student-athlete and staff handbooks, orientation programs for new staff and student-athletes).
- Write an athletics department statement that acknowledges and welcomes student-athletes and staff of all religions.
- Provide ways for student-athletes and athletics staff to acknowledge people of faith on campus and their intention to create a climate of respect and safety for all, including for those who identify as religious or as having no religion.
- Provide resources about religious expression in schools. Some examples include the following:
 - [ACLU Defense of Religious Practice and Expression in Public Schools](#)
 - [Freedom Forum](#)
 - [Newseum Ed - Navigating a Religiously Diverse Society](#)
 - [Pew Research Center](#)
 - [Fire - First Amendment Court Cases](#)
- Where reasonable, recognize, respect and accommodate varied religious observances and practices (e.g., prayer, clothing and dietary needs) as consistent with federal, state and local law and NCAA guidelines.
 - Provide opportunities for members of the school community to learn about various faiths within the context of athletics.
 - Permit and support religious student or staff organizations for people of various faiths and their allies.
 - Educate coaches and other staff about the importance of knowing the different religious or spiritual perspectives represented on their teams.
 - Post institutional religious nondiscrimination policies on the athletics department website.
- Provide student-athletes and athletics staff with education about creating respectful climates for student-athletes of varied and/or multiple faiths (see federal guidelines on religious expression in public schools).
- Connect athletics departments with campus religious organizations or groups and the resources they provide.
- Provide information about resources for student-athletes of faith (e.g., campus or community-based religious groups).
- Develop relationships with different campus-based offices of religious and spiritual life and create an awareness of the student resources they offer.
- Engage the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee as peer leaders showing respect and active support and inclusion for students of varied faiths.
- Schedule athletics events with an awareness of various religious observances.
- Create policies and practices that treat religious student-athletes with respect and that specifically identify them as members of the school community.
- Host a Common Ground conversation on your campus. If interested, email the NCAA office of inclusion at inclusion@ncaa.org, or contact a member of the [Common Ground Leadership Team](#).
- Proactively plan how to accommodate religious student-athletes on visiting teams, or entire visiting teams from private faith-based institutions, to ensure they have a safe and welcoming experience.

Examples of Practices and Policies That Promote a Respectful and Inclusive Religious Climate

- A coach who identifies as a follower of a particular religion, but intentionally establishes a team climate inclusive of student-athletes from all religious perspectives.
- A coach inviting the team to join in a moment of reflection, rather than a religious prayer, before practice or competition.
- A coach reading a nonreligious poem or quote, playing nonreligious music, giving a nonreligious inspirational talk.

- A coach acknowledging the different religious holidays that team members may celebrate and adding those holidays to the athletics department and team calendar.
- Individual student-athletes participating in religious groups or activities of their choosing outside of required or voluntary team activities.
- Individual student-athletes initiating a conversation about religion with a coach, teammate, other athletics staff or the media.
- Individual student-athletes talking openly about their religious faith, but not trying to persuade others to accept their religious faith, unless others express an interest in that type of religious conversation. (This is not intended to suggest that students cannot talk with each other about their individual religious perspectives.)
- Individual student-athletes quietly reading religious texts to themselves on the team bus.
- Individual student-athletes praying on their own during practice, competition or at any time in an athletics setting.
- A group of student-athletes voluntarily praying together, attending religious text study or a religious service together, as long as it is not assumed that these are team activities in which everyone must or is encouraged to participate.
- Individual student-athletes wearing jewelry, clothing or other symbols of their religion, consistent with uniform requirements, per institutional, conference and NCAA policy.
- Individual student-athletes choosing to participate in a postgame prayer with team members from an opposing school, provided participation is not required, expected or encouraged.





Examples of Policies and Practices That Can Undermine a Religion-Neutral Team Setting

- Team prayers of any kind, whether led by coaches, religious leaders or student-athletes, in which all team members are required, expected or encouraged to participate.
- Coaches distributing religious literature to student-athletes, unless an individual student-athlete expresses an interest.
- Team attendance at religious text study, prayer breakfasts, religious services or events, or religious club meetings required, expected or encouraged by coaches or team captains.
- Student-athletes or coaches talking about their religious beliefs to other team members who are not interested in discussing religion.
- Student-athletes distributing written religious information, unless an individual teammate expresses an interest.
- Student-athletes or coaches condemning other team members for not subscribing to their religious beliefs.
- Coaches or team captains including verses from particular religious texts or religious messages in team materials or in team communications (e.g., verbal, emails, texts, letters, office phone messages).
- Coaches organizing a specific religious holiday-related team event or sending specific religious holiday cards to recruits or team members.
- Coaches or student-athletes discriminating against or harassing a player or coach who does not share their religious beliefs.

- Coaches or student-athletes trying to persuade student-athletes or coaches who do not share their religious beliefs to accept their religious beliefs, unless they express an interest in that type of religious conversation.
- Coaches promising recruits and their parents that the team has a particular religious-based ethos or value system.
- Coaches using or allowing team-allotted time for religious engagement (e.g., practice time, pregame meals, game day preparation).

PRIVATE FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS

For private faith-based institutions, this section focuses on respect and inclusion for LGBTQ student-athletes and staff. These action strategies do not assume that all private faith-based schools are inclusive of various religious perspectives.



ACTION STRATEGIES

Individual Actions

- Acknowledge and embrace the presence of LGBTQ students and staff in the school community.
- Communicate with student-athletes and athletics staff about respect and inclusion of LGBTQ people from a faith-based perspective.
- Speak up to stop anti-LGBTQ bullying, slurs, jokes and stereotypes.

- Display resources that address LGBTQ issues from a faith-based perspective in your office where student-athletes and staff will see them.
- Initiate conversations with school administrators, boards of trustees, alumni or other school leaders about how to provide a safe and inclusive campus environment for LGBTQ people.
- Indicate your willingness to talk with LGBTQ student-athletes and staff about their experiences in athletics.
- Indicate your willingness to talk with LGBTQ student-athletes and staff about the intersections of faith and LGBTQ issues.
- Reach out, connect with and get to know LGBTQ student-athletes and staff.

Departmental Actions

- Explicitly include LGBTQ student-athletes when communicating to athletics staff the importance of respect for all student-athletes (e.g., student-athlete and staff handbooks, orientation programs for new staff and student-athletes).
- Write an athletics department statement of welcome that acknowledges all student-athletes and staff, including LGBTQ members of the school community, and post it on the department website.
- If school policy has specific expectations and/or standards of conduct for LGBTQ students or staff, make that policy public on the athletics department website and in other institutional communications with prospective student-athletes and families.
- Provide people who are exploring the relationship among their faith, sexual orientation and/or gender identity with resources and support to help them identify themselves in positive ways.
- Seek out conversations with constituents across campus to learn about efforts to respect diversity and to create inclusive environments.
- Connect the athletics department with campus and community LGBTQ organizations or groups (if applicable) and the resources they provide.
- Provide families, friends and colleagues of LGBTQ people with resources that encourage respect and love.
- Provide student-athletes and athletics staff with education from a faith-based perspective on creating respectful climates for LGBTQ student-athletes.
- Examine department and institutional policy regarding LGBTQ student-athletes and staff to explore ways to increase LGBTQ inclusion.
- Examine departmental and institutional policies and their alignment with the institutional mission regarding specific expectations and/or standards of conduct for LGBTQ students or staff. Host a Common Ground conversation on your campus. If interested, email the NCAA office of

inclusion at inclusion@ncaa.org, or contact a member of the **Common Ground Leadership Team**.

- Provide educational opportunities for members of the athletics community to explore LGBTQ issues within the context of faith.
- Provide ways for student-athletes and athletics staff to acknowledge LGBTQ people on campus and their intention to create a climate of respect and safety for all people, including those who identify as LGBTQ (e.g., faith-based safe space programs/stickers or ally campaigns).
- Permit and support LGBTQ/Ally student or staff organizations.
- Engage your Student-Athlete Advisory Committee as peer leaders showing respect and active support and inclusion for LGBTQ students.
- Create policies and practices that treat LGBTQ students with respect and specifically identify them as members of the school community.
- Examine departmental and institutional policies for transgender student-athletes and adopt the NCAA policy and best practices for including transgender student-athletes.
- Support LGBTQ student-athletes who choose to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity publicly.
- Proactively plan how to accommodate LGBTQ student-athletes on visiting teams to ensure they have a safe and welcoming experience.
- Read institutional nondiscrimination policy before all matches, games and competitions.

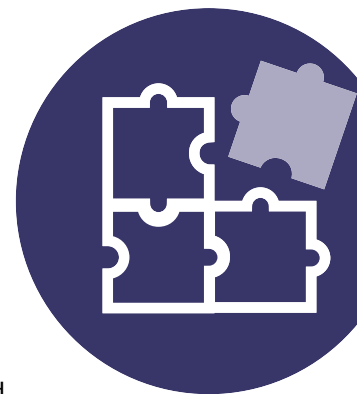
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For further resources for addressing LGBTQ inclusion, please visit [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning \(LGBTQ\) - ncaa.org](https://www.ncaa.org/sportsculture/equity/lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-questioning-lgbtq).

COMMON GROUND LEADERSHIP TEAM ASSISTANCE

We strongly encourage athletics leaders interested in implementing any of these action strategies to contact the NCAA office of inclusion at inclusion@ncaa.org, or contact a member of the **Common Ground Leadership Team** for assistance, consultation, resources or programming that can assist your efforts to become more inclusive for LGBTQ people and people of faith. We also invite suggestions for improvement of these action strategies. More information about Common Ground can be found [here](#).

This document was originally developed by the Common Ground Leadership Team in April 2017 and revised by the Common Ground Leadership Team in 2018 and 2024.





INCLUSION

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