

Seeking Common Ground: Religion and LGBT Inclusion in Athletics Think Tank Report

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Introduction:

As the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) rights movement has gained greater traction in the United States, a deep divide has emerged between those who support equal rights for LGBTQ people and those who oppose these social and legal changes. Many of those who oppose the acceptance of homosexuality, bisexuality and transgender identity as well as the claim to civil and social rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity, ground their opposition in faith-based beliefs. This has resulted in a disconnect between many people of faith who believe that homosexuality, bisexual and transgender identity are sinful behavior choices that should not be tolerated and others who believe that LGBTQ identities are part of a wide spectrum of gender and sexual identities and that LGBTQ people deserve to participate in all aspects of society free of discrimination and condemnation. Given this divide, it is not surprising that interactions between these groups are typically characterized by a lack of trust, fear, suspicion, misunderstanding, judgement and anger. That is, if there is any interaction at all.

The polarized nature of this public conversation ignores the reality that the issues driving this debate are complicated and nuanced. Not all LGBTQ people or all people of faith fit comfortably on their assumed “side” of this debate. Many people of faith support and speak out for LGBTQ inclusion and equality. Others struggle with how to reconcile the tenets of their faith that condemn LGBTQ people with their relationships with colleagues, friends and family who are LGBTQ. Still others feel a call to engage in conversations with other people of faith and with LGBTQ people about how to create a world where all of us are treated respectfully. Moreover, many LGBTQ people have deep commitments to faith and are members of faith-based communities struggling to reconcile their identities with the teachings of their faith. Some LGBTQ people of faith face puzzled reactions from LGBTQ friends who do not understand how an LGBTQ person can also be part of faith-based communities that do not accept their sexual

orientation or gender identity. Still other LGBTQ people have comfortably integrated their faith with their LGBTQ identities and find peace in all parts of their lives.

Another part of the legacy of this polarized debate is that many LGBTQ people and people of faith feel silenced, disrespected and misunderstood. When the conversation about religion and LGBTQ people is so polarized and defensive, neither side can afford to reach out in understanding. In this win-lose battle pitting religious rights vs. LGBTQ rights, we all lose an opportunity to move beyond our own stereotypes of people on the “other side” as we fight to protect ourselves and the people on “our side.” This is not to say that hate and ignorance do not drive some parts of this conversation on both sides of the divide. It does and, if we are to find common ground, hate and ignorance cannot be a part of the conversation. Reframing this debate as a conversation with a focus on understanding and finding common ground despite our differences and with an intention to see and appreciate our shared humanity across our differences is an essential goal in bridging the divide that has separated many LGBTQ people and people of faith.

LGBTQ Inclusion and Religion in College Athletics

At the 2013 NCAA National Convention in San Diego, California a session entitled, Seeking Common Ground: LGBTQ Inclusion and Religion in College Athletics, attracted over 300 athletic directors, college presidents, coaches and other convention attendees. A panel of LGBTQ athletes and coaches and athletic administrators from faith-based and public schools discussed the topic from each of their perspectives. This panel was followed by round table discussions among the 300 participants and a brief question and answer period. The overwhelming number of participants who chose to attend the session and the many questions to which they were looking for answers indicate that the topic of religion and LGBTQ inclusion strikes a chord among many college athletic leaders who are looking for more effective ways to address this controversial topic.

Hundreds of thousands of student-athletes and coaches participate in college sports every year. Some of them are LGBTQ and some of them are people of faith. Others are LGBTQ people of faith. They face the same polarizing debate in athletics that rages around them in the broader society. LGBTQ people often hide their sexual orientation or gender identity out of fear that they will not be accepted by coaches or teammates and out of concern that they will be discriminated against in ways that would cause them to forfeit their opportunity to participate in athletics. This can result in pain, shame, fear and isolation. People of faith in athletics often feel pressure to keep their faith to themselves out of fear that openly expressing their faith labels them as zealots or bigots. It is ironic that both LGBTQ people and people of faith in athletics often feel

silenced and disrespected about a core part of their identities and speaks to the need for a more productive way to address this topic.

The seemingly irreconcilable difference between some faith communities' beliefs about homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism and the presence of openly LGBTQ people poses a challenge to athletic programs that are committed to the inclusion and well-being of all student-athletes and coaches. The divide between LGBTQ people who insist on respect and inclusion in athletics and people of faith in athletics who adhere to the belief that being LGBTQ is a sin can create daunting communication barriers. Left unaddressed, stereotypes and negative expectations that dehumanize all members of these groups thrive and limit the potential for reconciliation and full participation for all.

At the same time there is a huge potential for athletics to take a lead role in these conversations on a college campus. College athletics commands a lot of attention in the local community as well as nationally. College athletic administrators and coaches, in addition to being highly visible campus leaders, have a broad sphere of influence. Student-athletes are also highly visible in the campus community and have an opportunity to take a leadership role with other students on campus as well as setting an example for younger college or high school athletes.

The challenge is to inspire members of athletic departments to act on this potential and to see the benefits, not only to their public image, but also to maintaining a successful and competitive program in which all members of teams and the athletic department staff can bring all of who they are to their athletic experience. If athletic leaders are committed to creating a climate in which every member of a team and every member of an athletic department staff can be honest about who they are and true to their values, then it is essential to bridge this divide between people of faith and LGBT people. Faith, sexual orientation and gender identity are core parts of our identities. No one can give their best to coaching or competing while stifling a core part of how they define themselves. The psychological and social damage incurred by hiding, lying or pretending to be something you are not is a high a price to pay for the opportunity to participate on or coach a sports team.

The challenge for athletic leaders who believe that we must eliminate this divide for the benefit of all sports participants is to find a common ground where participants of all faiths, sexual orientations and gender identities can play and coach while maintaining the integrity of their beliefs and their self-affirmed identities.

The purpose of this report is to describe a national think tank which took place on November 4-5, 2014 at the NCAA Headquarters in Indianapolis. The think tank

objective was to convene a diverse group of athletic leaders to take some initial steps to explore the divide between and open up conversations among people of faith and LGBTQ people in college athletics. The report will include resources, sample policies and potential next steps to assist college athletic leaders in their efforts to create competitive climates in which coaches and student-athletes of faith and LGBTQ coaches and student-athletes can all participate in a respectful and inclusive environment

Description of the Think Tank

The title of the think tank was Seeking Common Ground: Creating Respectful Athletic Climates for Athletes and Coaches of All Religious Perspectives, Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities or Expressions. The initial focus of the think tank was to engage in a discussion about best policies and practices for establishing inclusive and respectful athletic climates for participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs. The objectives of the think tank were to:

- Discuss obstacles and “sticking points” in creating athletic climates that are inclusive and respectful of participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs.
- Discuss common ground among participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs in athletics.
- Identify best practice and policy recommendations with the goal of establishing inclusive and respectful athletic climates for participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs.

The think tank was planned by Nevin Caple, Executive Director of Br{ache the Silence; Karen Morrison, former Director of the NCAA Office of the Office of Inclusion; Helen Carroll, Director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights Sports Project and Pat Griffin, Professor Emerita at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. All of the planners are members of the LGBT Sports Foundation, a national network of LGBTQ Sports advocacy organizations and individuals. Funding from the Foundation and the NCAA supported the think tank. The LGBT Sports Foundation was able to support this project with funding from the Nike #BETRUE campaign.

Think tank planners invited a diverse group of 25 people in athletics to attend. These participants included coaches, athletes, athletic administrators, faculty and members of education or advocacy groups working with athletics. Representatives from Evangelical Christian, Catholic and Jewish schools attended the think tank as well as

representatives from large public universities, private secular schools and historically Black colleges or universities. Participants were heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, cisgender and transgender, white and people of color. All participants shared a commitment to seeking common ground in which participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities and faith perspectives can participate in athletics openly and with mutual respect.

Think tank organizers identified a professional facilitator with an understanding of LGBTQ inclusion issues as well as professional experience in a faith-based college to lead all think tank activities. The think tank process began with a review of our objectives. Participants introduced themselves and identified hopes and concerns they had about participating in the think tank. We then established some communications guidelines for the think tank conversation. The agenda consisted of a mix of large group conversations and small caucus group discussions. The large groups focused on information sharing, personal story-telling and caucus group report outs. The small group discussions were self-selected into the following categories: faith-based schools, historically black schools (HBCUs), public schools and private secular schools. This grouping enabled each group to focus on issues of particular concern or interest to that school context. The formal day sessions were complemented on Tuesday evening by a dinner, social time and screening of a documentary film, "Queers in the Kingdom" followed by a discussion of the film.

Think Tank Objective 1: Discuss common ground among participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs in athletics.

We identified several areas of common ground that became part of the foundation for our conversations. We shared a belief in the positive benefits of athletic participation for all participants: physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually. We all believe that athletics provides the potential for participants to learn about people who are different from themselves while working toward common goals, facing challenges, responding to success and failure in competition as a part of a team. Think tank participants also shared a commitment to actions that benefit student-athletes and that promote respect among student-athletes.

Specific to the focus of the think tank, participants shared a commitment to respectful discourse even when we disagreed. We agreed to focus on identifying our common ground as a part of building a foundation for more difficult conversations about how to address our deep differences and questions related to LGBTQ inclusion and religion in college athletics.

One of the most important areas of common ground we shared was a commitment to exploring ways that college athletic leaders can learn from each other across our

different religious perspectives, sexual orientations and gender identities as an essential part of the process of creating inclusive practice and policy.

Think Tank Objective 2: Discuss obstacles and “sticking points” in creating athletic climates that are inclusive and respectful of participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs.

In the course of our conversations, we identified several sticking points that are obstacles to meeting our goals, many of which can be attributed the adversarial nature of the public debate/dialogue about LGBTQ rights and religious rights in which LGBTQ people and people of faith often feel attacked and disrespected. These barriers are made more formidable by a lack of personal relationships across our differences. These concerns engendered fear and a mistrust about being able to speak openly and honestly among many participants of faith and LGBTQ people as the think tank began. This lack of personal relationships across differences also highlighted the misunderstandings and stereotypes many participants brought into the conversation.

One of the most powerful outcomes of the think tank was the sharing of personal stories and the building of personal relationships in the large and small group discussions as well as during informal conversations over meals or during breaks. LGBTQ people shared feelings of pain and anger about feeling rejected or being discriminated against by communities of faith. People of faith shared feelings of remorse about how some communities of faith have treated LGBTQ people and their own feelings of being hurt about being perceived as bigots because of their faith-based beliefs. These conversations were essential to breaking down some of the stereotypes and fear that participants brought into the think tank, and, as it turned out, a necessary process that must precede any conversation about the development of inclusive policy and practice.

Perhaps the most important “sticking point” we encountered was the challenge of defining “respect” as a standard for achieving common ground in a way that can be endorsed by LGBTQ people and people of faith when there are such deep personal and religious disagreements over the appropriate stance regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender inclusion in athletics. This obstacle is particularly daunting for athletic departments in private faith-based schools and sport ministries that have adopted policies prohibiting homosexuality, bisexuality or transgenderism.

Think Tank Objective 3: Identify best practice and policy recommendations with the goal of establishing inclusive and respectful athletic climates for participants of all sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and religious/spiritual beliefs

We realized at the end of the first half day that the goal of identifying best practices and policies was premature and overly ambitious. Before these discussions could occur we needed to spend more time exploring our common ground, learning from each other, about each other and practicing respectful discussions. Spending time in this initial conversation was an essential prelude to reaching our ultimate goal of identifying best practice and policy guidance for college athletics.

In place of this original objective, think tank participants identified several action steps that which will enable us to continue the discussion and move closer to the identification or adoption of specific policies and best practices.

Identifying What We Know and What We Don't Know About Faith-Based and LGBTQ Communities

All participants, on some level, were hopeful about the conversation, but fearful that there would be little common ground to explore. Think tank participants acknowledged very early in our meeting that we all needed to know more about each other. For some participants of faith, the think tank was the first time they had met or had conversations with LGBTQ people. For some LGBTQ people the think tank was the first opportunity they had to talk with people of faith who were committed to open and respectful dialogue about faith and LGBTQ issues

We all brought our assumptions about others into the think tank and were all working under the influence of these assumptions. Some of the faith-based participants expressed some trepidation about being part of the think tank. Their fears were based on the assumption that they would be perceived as bigots or that their religious beliefs would be under attack. LGBTQ participants expressed fears that they would be rejected as sinners or that their religious beliefs would be invalidated because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

An extension of this potential communication gap was the lack of understanding of vocabulary, culture and experience between communities of faith and LGBTQ communities. All participants shared a concern that they might say something that was offensive or that reflected a lack of understanding of others in the think tank. These experiences highlighted the importance of identifying communication guidelines and stressing the importance of stepping out of our comfort zones to say what we believe and ask the questions we need answered. We tried to set a climate in which all participants could acknowledge fears and ignorance about our lives and be heard with a spirit of generosity and acceptance. In addition, the vocabulary of different faiths and

the vocabulary of the LGBTQ communities needed to be explored to better understand the experiences of participants of faith and LGBTQ participants.

In formal discussions during the program and in informal conversations at breaks and during meals, people of faith and LGBTQ people were eager to talk with each other. These “cross-cultural” conversations were a powerful part of the think tank enabling all participants to see the humanity, diversity and the common purpose we shared despite some deeply held differences in belief or perspective.

Different Challenges in Different School Contexts

Many of our discussions took place in small groups organized according to different school contexts: public schools, private faith-based schools, private secular schools and historically black schools (HBCUs). These divisions were based on the belief that finding common ground and creating an inclusive and respectful athletic climate for people of faith and LGBTQ people faces different challenges depending on the school context.

Public Schools or Private Secular Schools

Public schools and private secular schools have specific federal guidelines whose purpose is to ensure that individual students’ right to express and practice their religious beliefs are protected. These guidelines also impose boundaries on school employees’ expression of personal religious faith with the goal of maintaining a “religion-neutral” environment in which all students, regardless of their religious beliefs (or no religious beliefs) are accepted and respected. When school personnel in public or private secular schools actively promote their personal religious perspectives with students, require or imply that students should participate in religious activities, these actions are a violation of federal guidelines designed to protect all students regardless of their personal faith-based beliefs.

The maintenance of a religion-neutral climate in public schools or private secular schools is particularly relevant in this discussion when faith-based beliefs lead school personnel or students to either discriminate against LGBTQ people or try to influence their religious beliefs. Federal guidelines discourage these actions. These federal guidelines in the context of public schools are designed to protect the rights of all students regardless of their faith-based beliefs, sexual orientation or gender identity. In states where student rights laws protect students according to sexual orientation or gender identity, these anti-LGBTQ actions motivated by faith-based beliefs could also be illegal.

Potential conflicts arise in public schools or private secular schools when individual coaches or other athletic personnel integrate the expression of their religious beliefs into their professional communications with students. Coach-led prayers, requiring (or encouraging) athletes to attend Bible studies or prayer meetings, telling LGBTQ students that they are sinners and encouraging or pressuring them to renounce their sins are all examples of actions by athletic personnel that are discouraged by federal guidelines in order to maintain a religion-neutral school environment. Coaches have power over the athletes on their teams and control access to participation. When they overstep the boundaries set by federal guidelines to promote their faith with students on their teams, it is a problematic use of their power to influence.

Public or private secular schools in regions of the country where a particular faith tradition dominates the culture of that region face particular challenges when it comes to establishing and maintaining a religion-neutral school climate. For example, in Utah, where Mormonism is a dominant faith, most students in public or private secular schools may be Mormon, but it is still a violation of federal guidelines for Mormon school personnel to impose their faith on students as a condition of participation in athletics. The same would be true of public or private secular schools in the south where Evangelical Christianity is predominant. HBCUs that are public or private secular may face similar challenges when majorities of the student body or staff hold religious beliefs that condemn homosexuality, bisexuality or transgenderism.

Another obligation in public schools is to protect the rights of individual students of faith. Individual students of faith in public schools have the right to pray, celebrate religious holidays, wear religious symbols, gather with other like-minded students, and talk freely about their faith. Students of faith sometimes feel discriminated against or ostracized because of their faith. In particular some students of faith are stereotyped as intolerant of others who do not share their beliefs or who live their lives in ways that do not adhere to their religious beliefs.

Balancing the rights of students of faith with the rights of LGBTQ students or other students who do not share the religious beliefs of students of faith can be a challenge. This is the case for Evangelical Christian students who feel called to share their faith with others. Determining the point at which an individual student's invitation to a teammate to consider becoming part of a faith-based community becomes imposition or harassment is an essential part of this conversation. Finding common ground would enable students of all faiths and all sexual orientations and gender identities to participate in athletics respectfully without the need to hide or censor who they are.

Private Faith-Based Schools

Perhaps the greater challenge to the inclusion of LGBTQ student-athletes is in private faith-based schools. The purpose of these schools is to create a faith-based educational institution in which students and staff are expected to respect, if not fully embrace, the religious principles that form the foundation for school culture, policy and practice. The rights of private faith-based schools to create culture, policy and practice based on their religious convictions are protected in the U.S. Constitution. Thus, federal guidelines that encourage a “religion-neutral” climate in public schools are inappropriate in the context of private faith-based schools.

When the basic tenets of faith that undergird the institutional philosophy and policies of a faith-based school condemn homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism as sin, school policies may reflect that belief by condemning or prohibiting LGBT campus organizations, same-sex relationships or other open expressions of non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming identities. Because faith-based private schools are fully within their rights to adopt faith-based policies an entirely different approach is called for. This approach must protect both the rights of a private faith-based school to set policy in accordance with the tenets of their faith and explore how LGBTQ students and staff on such campuses can be treated with respect, compassion and fairness.

Some faith-based schools take a “let the buyer beware” approach to their LGBTQ policies. Their position is that prospective LGBTQ students who choose to enroll at a faith-based school where students and staff are required to adhere to policies that prohibit the open expression of LGBTQ identity should not expect to be able to openly express their sexual orientation or gender identity. One problem with this approach is that acknowledgment of same-sex sexual feelings or questions about gender identity emerge after students have enrolled in a faith-based school and are already members of the campus community. For some LGBTQ students who are struggling to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity, choosing a faith-based school is part of strategy to deny or ignore their “sinful” inner feelings. In either situation, LGBTQ students are members of private faith-based school communities.

LGBTQ students and staff at many private faith-based schools are compelled to hide their identities from others on campus out of fear that they will be targeted by attempts to encourage them to renounce their sexual orientation or gender identity or subjected to discrimination or shunning by students or staff. When private faith-based schools have formal policies or covenants that forbid public acknowledgment of LGBTQ

identity or same-sex dating relationships, LGBTQ students risk expulsion if their identities become public.

Some private faith-based schools practice a version of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy by silently tolerating the presence of LGBTQ students or staff as long as they do not call attention to their LGBTQ identity or same-sex relationships. LGBTQ students on such campuses live with isolation, emotional conflict, shame and fear as they negotiate their daily lives in a faith-based climate where they are not accepted unless they live dishonestly. The knowledge that they are at risk of expulsion from school or dismissal from teams if they are identified as LGBTQ is a devastating price to pay for acceptance as a member of their faith-based campus community.

As a result, finding common ground encounters its greatest challenge in private faith-based schools. The question at the core of seeking common ground conversations in the context of private faith-based schools is: Is it possible to protect and respect the rights of a private faith-based school to set policy in accordance with the faith tenets and ensure that LGBTQ students and staff on such campuses are treated with respect, compassion and fairness?

The Role of Faith-Based Sport Ministries on College Campuses

Sport ministries such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) have a presence in college athletics in many schools across the country no matter whether the schools are public or private, faith-based or secular. FCA and AIA view sports as a platform for guiding young people to Christ and encouraging them to choose a Christ-centered life. The FCA vision includes using "the powerful medium of athletics to impact the world for Jesus Christ."¹ These sport ministries provide prayer meetings, religious services and social support for athletic staff and students who embrace Evangelical Christianity. FCA and AIA ministries and their extended leadership teams on college campuses are not officially affiliated with schools, but often work within the athletic department and enjoy open access to athletic staff and student-athletes. FCA and AIA provide Christian-based support and leadership for student-athletes who choose to affiliate with these sport ministries. As long as individual student-athletes, entire teams or coaches are not pressured or required to participate in FCA or AIA sponsored events as a condition of employment or membership on a team, their presence as an independent adjunct to voluntary support services for athletes and coaches is legal in public schools and equivalent to the presence of other religious or LGBTQ resources on campus.

¹ Fellowship of Christian Athletes - <https://www.fca.org/aboutus/who-we-are/vision-mission>

Potential problems arise, however, when FCA or AIA leaders or athletic department-employed coaches affiliated with these sport ministries pressure or require students to participate in religious activities, try to change the sexual orientation of LGBTQ students or discourage students from accepting LGBTQ teammates. This is particularly problematic when working with athletes in public or private secular schools. As is consistent with Evangelical Christian belief, FCA and AIA regard homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism as sin and often see their role as one of discouraging or saving student-athletes from these “lifestyles.” FCA and AIA leaders sometimes encourage college athletes in their meetings to resist homosexual feelings in themselves and to discourage them in friends by seeking Christ and Christian fellowship. Consistent with these beliefs, neither FCA or AIA allow openly LGBTQ Christians to serve in leadership positions within their organizations.

The question raised in regard to the presence and influence of sport ministries in college athletics is, is there a common ground in which students’ individual non-Christian spiritual or religious perspectives can be respected and in which LGBTQ athletes and coaches can be treated with respect even if the tenets of faith that guide FCA, AIA or other sports ministries do not condone homosexuality, bisexuality or transgenderism?

Institutional Obstacles to Finding Common Ground

Collegiate athletics programs are integral parts of larger institutions. Engaging in common ground conversations in athletics must be initiated with the knowledge and support of institutional leaders. In private faith-based schools college presidents and boards of trustees must be aware of and support these conversations, especially when the ultimate goal is to change existing institutional policy that prohibits same-sex relationships or opening expressing LGBTQ identity.

If school leaders or other members of the faith community do not support these conversations, athletic directors, coaches and athletes who want to open up common ground dialogue might be reluctant to initiate these conversations out of fear of being out of step with faith-based tenets of belief or even losing their jobs or places on the team. Influential alumni, donors and other prominent community members can also be obstacles to common ground dialogue if they do not support this conversation or view it as an attack on religious freedom or tolerance of sin. Other obstacles include school leaders who do not want to become involved in controversial conversations or who see initiating a common ground discussion as a low priority among the many pressing issues facing collegiate athletic programs.

Cultural and legal changes that reflect a greater acceptance of LGBTQ people and marriage equality, particularly among young people (including young Evangelical Christians) reflect a generation gap in comfort and belief that current school and athletic leaders must acknowledge and address in campus conversations about the inclusion of LGBTQ students and staff. If campus leaders, such as athletic directors, college presidents and boards of trustees, resist changes in perspectives on LGBT people and the cultural and legal reflections of these changes, common ground conversations will be more difficult.

Silence, Fear and Ignorance as Obstacles to Common Ground

The core of our conversations at the think tank revolved around questions of respect and safety vs. approval or agreement. Is it possible to disagree on the acceptability or need for approval of LGBTQ identity and behavior and, at the same time, create athletic climates in which LGBTQ people and people of faith can respectfully join together as teammates and colleagues? If so, what defining characteristics would describe such an athletic climate? Before we could explore these questions, we needed to identify obstacles to finding common ground.

We identified that several obstacles to addressing LGBTQ inclusion and religion in athletics. Silence or some permutation of the military's former "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy does not lead us to common ground. Silence promotes secrecy, fear and hypocrisy. This is particularly problematic in private faith-based schools that have policies prohibiting LGBTQ identity or same-sex relationships. Not only does such a climate leave LGBTQ students and staff open to discrimination, it can also create uncertainty among heterosexual students and staff who want to support LGBTQ colleagues and students. Ignoring, but not addressing prohibitions on LGBTQ identity or behavior reflects ambivalence toward school policy that may need review. Such a perspective discourages members of a faith-based community from exploring common ground or expressing the desire for policy review toward the goal of creating policy that both reflects basic faith tenets and creates safety and respect for LGBTQ members of the community.

Fear, though related to silence, is another characteristic of an athletic climate that does not promote common ground. If members of faith-based communities are afraid to express their beliefs, concerns and questions about LGBTQ inclusion, understanding and finding common ground are not possible. Fear of being perceived as a bigot and fear of betraying one's faith community are both deterrents to open communication and exploring common ground. Fear of discovery and the resultant fear of expulsion from a faith-based community create psychological and social stress among LGBTQ people

that inhibit their ability to participate in common ground conversations. Members of faith-based communities fear that initiating conversations about LGBTQ inclusion will be viewed by others in the community as condoning or approving LGBTQ identities or relationships.

Silence and fear contribute to ignorance, a third obstacle to exploring common ground. If we cannot talk across our differences, we remain ignorant about each other and stereotypes flourish and guide decision-making. LGBTQ people and people of faith are all affected by these stereotypes and, as a result, our ability to communicate with each other is damaged. One of the outcomes of the think tank was that all participants had an opportunity to learn more about others' experiences that were different from their own. Participants were able to look beyond differences of sexual orientation, gender identity, faith, gender expression, race and gender to see the values and commitments we share. All of us were invited to reevaluate beliefs that we held about each other based on our insular understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ or religious and the assumptions we make based on that small bit of information about each other.

Respect and Safety Vs. Approval or Agreement: Exploring the Core of Common Ground

We agreed that safety, both physical and psychological, is a basic component of establishing common ground. Everyone engaged in the conversation needs to be free to ask questions and express opinions and beliefs openly without fear of judgment or condemnation. This requires creating a climate of generosity and trust in which we assume that we are all motivated by good intentions especially when we are unfamiliar with vocabulary, experiences and beliefs of others.

At the same time that safety is an important component of this conversation, courage is equally important. Taking risks, stepping out of one's comfort zone to express a belief or ask a question are vital to exploring common ground. The courage to speak up despite the fear of offending someone or inviting judgment from others is an essential part of the seeking common ground dialogue.

We agreed that respect is an essential element of common ground and that respect must be differentiated from approval or agreement. If we require approval or agreement with how sexual orientation, gender identity or faith in athletics must be viewed by everyone engaged in the conversation, we will accomplish little more than a debate in which no one wins. In contrast, respect is at the core of finding common ground and respect for each other is possible even when we do not agree.

The Goal of Seeking Common Ground

The goal of seeking common ground is multifaceted and includes creating an athletic climate in which:

- Individual LGBTQ people can be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity and treated with respect, but not necessarily approval
- Individual people of faith can express their faith and be treated with respect, but do not condemn others who do not share their faith or beliefs about LGBTQ people
- People of faith can remain true to the basic tenets of their faith and accept the inclusion of LGBTQ people in athletics
- Private faith-based schools can adopt inclusive and fair policies that 1) enable openly LGBTQ people to be respected members of the community and 2) are consistent with basic tenets of their faith tradition

Think Tank Action Ideas

In the course of our day and a half together, think tank participants identified several action ideas that can move college athletics closer to reaching these goals:

- Create an award to recognize athletic departments that take steps to create an inclusive climate for LGBTQ students and students of faith
- Create model statements of respect and inclusion that can be adopted by athletic departments to publicize their commitment to making their departments inclusive for LGBTQ people and people of faith
- Create a model “common ground” conversation process guide that can be disseminated to groups who want to explore common ground in athletics for LGBTQ people and people of faith
- Create infographics to disseminate information about LGBTQ students experience in athletics
- Create a vocabulary and information guide for LGBTQ issues and for faith-based issues to better acquaint both groups with each other
- Initiate common ground discussions within individual school athletic departments, with sport ministries, with athletic conference leaders, with HBCUs, with private faith-based school athletic departments
- Identify key influencers (college presidents, athletic directors, athletic conference leaders, sport ministry leaders, coaches, etc.) and prepare common ground presentations for each group Initiate a “safe space” campaign specifically for LGBTQ people and people of faith in athletics with a sticker and statement of commitment to establishing common ground

- Create a webinar or conference presentation for specific groups (athletic directors, conference commissioners, coaches, athletes, private faith-based schools, public schools, HBCUs)
- Create videos of LGBTQ people, people of faith and LGBTQ people of faith in athletics sharing their experiences (public schools, private secular schools, private faith-based schools).

Looking to the Future

In addition to the dissemination of this think tank report and the resources included, a well-attended session at the 2015 NCAA Inclusion Forum included several think tank participants who discussed what they learned from the think tank experience. These panelists included an athletic director and an athletic administrator from a private faith-based schools, an LGBT sports advocate and a member of a large athletic conference.

Other initiatives are also focused on addressing the intersections of faith and LGBTQ inclusion in athletics:

- GO! Athlete, an LGBTQ sports advocacy organization, has initiated a project entitled GO! Faith. GO! Faith invites LGBTQ and ally athletes make short educational videos talking about their sexual orientation, gender identity and their faith.
- The NCAA Office of Inclusion supported Nevin Caple and Br{ache the Silence to visit several HBCU athletic departments to discuss LGBTQ inclusion with staff and student-athletes.

Finally, the leaders of the think tank have received another grant from the NCAA and the LGBT Sports Foundation (via Nike's #BETRUE campaign) to design a common ground process template that can be used by athletic conferences, individual schools and other groups interested in addressing the topic of religion and LGBTQ inclusion in college athletics. Part of the grant includes piloting the process by organizing a common ground conversation among LGBTQ people and athletic leaders from private faith-based schools and sport ministries. The planning committee for this event includes two athletic directors from private faith-based schools, a staff member from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and four LGBTQ sports advocates. The event is scheduled to take place on November 2-3, 2016 at the NCAA national office in Indianapolis.

Our goal with this next evolution of the common ground discussion is to address questions of how we can to protect and respect the rights of a private faith-based school to set policy in accordance with the tenets of their faith and ensure that LGBTQ students and staff on such campuses are treated with respect, compassion and fairness.

Conclusion

The goal of this report is to initiate a conversation about religion and LGBTQ inclusion in college athletics by describing a national think tank on this topic. We learned from our experience at the think tank that LGBTQ people and people of faith can have respectful conversations across our differences and that creating policies that respect the rights of all participants, regardless of faith, sexual orientation or gender identity are possible. The challenge is to frame these common ground discussions in ways that respect all participants in the process.

We hope that our experience in engaging in this conversation provides both the motivation and resources for other collegiate athletic leaders to join in the discussion and, ultimately, by working together, create policies and practices that invite LGBTQ people and people of faith to participate in athletics in a climate that is safe and respectful.