

Language Can Impact How Your Athletes Perform

Identity is complicated. We all identify using different categories like ability, nationality, sexual or gender identity, race or ethnicity, etc. How you talk about identity matters and can have a direct impact on the way student-athletes perform. This is especially true for student-athletes who identify as disabled. Disability represents many conditions that are both visible and hidden. Mental health is a great example of a hidden condition that can also be a disability.

Language around disability is evolving, and people are choosing how they want to be identified. Students may prefer one of these language options for referencing disability, but individual preferences vary. Currently, there are two typical ways to refer to disability:



Identity-First Language

- Disability is an identity category. The identifying word comes first and highlights the integral part that disability plays in the life of that person and how the environment impacts them.
- In autistic and deaf communities, people primarily use identity-first language like an “autistic athlete” or a “deaf professor.”



People-First Language

- The focus is on the person and not on the disability. People-first language was created as a way to destigmatize disability.
- Examples include “a student with depression” or “a student with a learning disability.”

If you are not sure what language to use with someone who identifies as disabled, ask for that person’s preference. It is a good way to talk about disability and communicate respect.





What Can You Do As a Coach, Administrator or Teammate?

- Identify the resources that exist on campus for student-athletes. These resources include departments like the disability center, counseling and psychological services, the cultural center, etc.
- Establish relationships across campus.
 - Know where campus resources are located and what services they provide. Identify a contact person to help student-athletes access that resource.
 - If you know a student-athlete is struggling, you can more easily say, “I know Mike well and may be able to help. Can we call him together?”
- Create a welcoming culture to discuss various identities.
 - Helping student-athletes identify and describe their own identities and the roles they fill can help student-athletes feel less isolated. Knowing how student-athletes want to be identified will help you provide more targeted support.
 - When meeting student-athletes, start by describing how you identify in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, disability status or any other identity. To make this easier, start by having student-athletes fill out an identity worksheet like the one included below. Use this as a team activity or an opportunity to engage in a one-on-one conversation with student-athletes.

Why Is an Identity Wheel Important?

How student-athletes talk to one another about identity matters as much as how coaches and administrators talk to their student-athletes about identity. By using an identity wheel, you can create a space for your student-athletes to talk about their identities and recognize some of the roadblocks that can happen with communication. Removing barriers can increase levels of sensitivity toward differences while building trust, respect and teamwork. Open conversations that break down such barriers can increase success both on and off the field.

How to Use the Social Identity Wheel

1. Gather your team in a setting such as a team meeting to fill out the identity wheel. This is best done when all student-athletes have their own paper copies. This activity should take 30-40 minutes.
2. A coach, member of the athletics department or a team captain can lead this activity.
 - The activity leader should explain the importance of this activity (see above) and specify that open discussions can improve performance and success on and off the field. Communicate that this is a safe space, and an improved team culture can happen by being open and authentic.
3. The activity leader should explain how to fill out the wheel. For all student-athletes and coaches, provide at least 10-15 minutes to complete the wheel.
 - a. Write the number “1” in the identity boxes that you think about most often or that you associate yourself with most often.
 - b. Write the number “2” in the identity boxes that you think about least often or that you do not associate yourself with often or at all.
 - c. Write the number “3” in the identity boxes that you would like to learn more about yourself.
 - d. Write the number “4” in the identity boxes that have the biggest impact on how you see yourself as a person.
 - e. An identity box can have more than one number in it.

4. The activity leader should lead an open discussion (20-30 minutes) and include the voices of both student-athletes and coaches. Below are some discussion prompts.
 - a. What identities do you associate yourself with most often? What life experiences have led you to associate with that identity?
 - b. What identities have the strongest impact on you as a person? Why?
 - c. Were there any identity boxes that you included multiple numbers in? Why or why not?
 - d. What surprised you when looking at the wheel of identities? Was there an identity you thought you might associate with more than others, but this activity helped you to see otherwise?
 - e. What steps can we take as a team to respect the identities of others, even if they are different from our own?
 - f. Did anyone share anything that was surprising to you based on what you thought you knew about them? How will this change your language and view moving forward?
5. After finishing the identity wheel and discussion, keep the conversation current with other identity activities or discussions and through reminders to student-athletes about how they can recognize the identities of their teammates and treat one another with respect.

Social Identity Wheel

Source: Adapted from "Voices of Discovery," Intergroup Relations Center, Arizona State University

