

Intercollegiate Athletes' Attitudes Towards and Perceptions About Sexual Minorities

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According to Sabo (1998), homophobic attitudes are learned before we are capable of stringing together sentences. We learn social cues and behaviors before we can even explain their social and cultural meanings. Although the institution of sport is not the sole locale where attitudes towards individuals with various sexual orientations are formed, nevertheless sport does provide an avenue for the expression of those attitudes as well as a space where attitudes may take root and be reinforced. The internalized social cues and attitudes that are learned through the tightly bonded arena of sport are carried into athletes' everyday lives and further into their adult lives. While numerous scholars (Anderson, 2008; Griffin, 1998; Sabo, 1998; Sartore & Cunningham, 2008; Southall, Nagel, Anderson, Polite, & Southall, 2009) have made significant contributions to the literature in exploring the experiences of sexual minorities in sport and the homophobic culture that exists in sport, there remains much more to be done in fully understanding the dynamics that occur around issues of sexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism. This presentation will focus on findings from a two phase project that was done for the purpose of examining the attitudes and perceptions of college athletes in the United States toward sexual minorities. The first phase involved the distribution of an online survey distributed to all current varsity athletes at a midsized liberal arts college in the Northeast between the months of March and April of 2009 which yielded 122 responses (male athletes = 31; female athletes = 91). The second phase of the project involved interviews with 10 athletes about their attitudes toward openly gay athletes and levels of homophobia among teammates and coaches. Themes associated with the tolerance of college athletes for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or transgender (LGBT) teammates, perceived pressures to remain closeted, factors that contribute to LGBT athletes feeling comfortable to be out on their teams, and areas where LGBT athletes receive support from teammates will be presented using both quantitative and qualitative data. Based on the findings from this study, recommendations will be made for ways to foster more inclusive athletic experiences for college athletes.