Creating and Sustaining Workplace Cultures Supportive of LGBT Employees in College Athletics

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The purpose of this study was to understand (a) how participants conceptualized lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) inclusiveness in their athletic departments, (b) the antecedents of such workplace environments, and (c) the outcomes associated with inclusion. To do so, the author conducted a collective case study of two college athletic departments located in the U.S. Northeast. Data sources included individual interviews with coaches and administrators (n = 17), a reflective journal, websites, university materials, and external publications. Participants described the athletic departments as characterized by community and cohesion, respect and inclusion, and success oriented. Various antecedents contributed to these workplace environments, including those at the individual level, leader behaviors, inclusive organizational policies, and macro-level influences. Finally, while some negative outcomes were identified, LGBT inclusion was predominantly associated with a host of positive outcomes for the employees, athletes, and organizations as a whole.

Though sport teams are generally more inclusive spaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) athletes than they were in the past (Anderson, 2009; Griffin, 2012), many sport organizations still maintain workplace cultures marked by heterosexism and sexual prejudice. This is fueled, in part, by the legal system. In the United States, Executive Order 11246 prohibits discrimination against LGBT employees among federal contractors, yet there are no federal laws in the United States offering employment protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity for all employees. In many states, sexual minorities can be denied a position or terminated from it based on their personal characteristics. Prevailing values, norms, and expectations within the sport industry also play a role, as LGBT individuals are “othered,” face negative stereotypes, and experience status loss and discrimination (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b). The negative evaluations are maintained by sport organization employees (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010) and endorsed by key external stakeholders, such as parents (Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a). The end result is a negative work experience for many LGBT coaches and administrators. Krane and Barber’s (2005) qualitative investigation of lesbians coaching in U.S. athletics illustrate these dynamics. One of their participants noted, “the coaching world is not always a kind world. . . . It’s a really strange issue within coaching. . . . There are so many lesbians in coaching, and yet it’s not somewhere that people can be comfortable with that being known about them” (p. 257). LGBT administrators in professional sport organizations also report feeling the need to compartmentalize their sexual orientation to remain and thrive in the workplace (Cavalier, 2011).

Despite the prevalence of heterosexism and sexual prejudice, there are exceptions, as some sport organizations have high levels of sexual orientation diversity and LGBT-inclusive workplace environments. For example, while 17% of the college athletic departments in Cunningham’s (2010) study reported no sexual orientation diversity among the employees, approximately 10% indicated their department was very heterogeneous along this diversity dimension. There is also evidence that some sport organizations couple high levels of sexual orientation diversity with an inclusive culture to outperform their peers in the creativity of the workplace (Cunningham, 2011a) and objective measures of performance (Cunningham, 2011b). Thus, despite the prevalence of heterosexism in sport, and in particular college athletics, there are some organizations where diversity and inclusion is the norm and embedded into their workplace cultures.

Recognizing the value in better understanding outliers (Gladwell, 2011), the purposes of this study are to examine how sport organization employees conceptualize LGBT inclusiveness, the factors associated with the presence of LGBT inclusive cultures, and the outcomes associated with such environments. This analysis offers at least three important contributions: (a) a better understanding of the rationale driving an inclu-
sive work environment, (b) critical features necessary to sustain inclusiveness; and (c) a potential blueprint for those sport organizations seeking to transform their workplaces to be more inclusive. In this study, I draw from recent work on inclusion (Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, & Singh, 2011; see also Brewer, 1991) and Ferdman’s (2014) multilevel framework to examine the role of individuals, leaders, groups, and organizational factors affecting the creation and sustainment of an LGBT-inclusive workplace environment. Adopting a multilevel lens is important because "organizations are multi-level systems" (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000, p. 3), and as a result, activities at one level necessarily have the potential to influence outcomes across the organization (see also van Knippenberg, Homan, & van Ginkel, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizing Inclusion

Inclusion refers to "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness" (Shore et al., 2011, p. 1265). Individuals working in inclusive workplaces feel safe, authentic, supported, and trusted (Ferdman, 2014), and importantly, they are able to contribute fully and effectively to an organization (Roberson, 2006). While frequently used together, inclusion is conceptually distinct from diversity. The former represents a psychological evaluation of the workplace, whereas the latter is reflective of the differences among employees across a host of characteristics (Roberson, 2006).

As the aforementioned definitions illustrate, inclusion is fundamentally an individual-level psychological construct that can take on shared properties of the group or organization. Conceptualizing it in this way has two implications. First, as inclusion is a construct with shared properties (see Dixon & Cunningham, 2006; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), coaches and administrators form their own perceptions of whether the workplace is inclusive, and it is the collective evaluations that reflect the level of organizational inclusiveness. Second, Ferdman (2014) persuasively argues that inclusion should be analyzed phenomenologically, such that scholars consider how people perceive and interpret the construct within the workplace. As a consequence, conceptualizations of inclusion are likely to be context specific and shaped by the associated values, norms, and expectations in that setting. McIntosh and Doherty (2010) have also advocated for as much in their evaluation of organizational culture. Applied to the current context, this means that coaches and sport administrators are likely to form perceptions of inclusion specific to the college athletics context (see also Melton & Cunningham, 2014). As such, the first research question guiding the analysis is:

RQ1: How do coaches and administrators conceptualize LGBT inclusion?

Factors Influencing LGBT Inclusiveness

In this study, I draw from Ferdman’s (2014) work to examine the potential for multilevel antecedents of an LGBT-inclusive workplace culture. A number of authors have proposed models for understanding diversity in sport organizations (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999), as well as frameworks to explain the diversity-related change process (Cunningham, 2009). Ferdman’s work is distinct from these contributions, and thus particularly applicable for the current investigation, in that he (a) focuses specifically on inclusion and factors contributing to inclusive cultures, and (b) adopts a multilevel lens to do so. As previously noted, the latter is an important element, as focusing on a single level of analysis necessarily means omitting potentially pertinent factors operating at other levels (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

From Ferdman’s (2014) perspective, individuals, groups and teams, leader behaviors, organizational characteristics, and societal factors all have the potential to influence the degree to which people experience inclusiveness. At the individual level, interpersonal interactions are particularly salient. Indeed, the way people behave around their LGBT colleagues (Nishii & Rich, 2014) and the language they use can affect perceptions of inclusiveness. Note, too, that the nature of the interpersonal interactions need not be explicit, as subtle behaviors can signal inclusiveness or the lack thereof (Cortina, 2008). Finally, people working in inclusive workplaces have equal status and power, irrespective of their personal identities (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Nishii & Rich, 2014)—a characteristic long recognized to facilitate constructive dialogue and interpersonal interactions (Allport, 1954).

Work groups and leaders also have the potential to influence perceptions of an LGBT-inclusive culture, as they set norms of behavior and interactions, such as equality of treatment, the importance of voice, the expectation of collaboration, and productively engaging in conflict (Ferdman, 2014; see also Avery, 2011). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) helps explain these dynamics, as Bandura notes, “virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people’s behaviors and the consequences for them” (p. 19). Illustrative of these effects, there is evidence that employees will engage in inclusive behaviors when their leaders expect as much (Umphress, Simmons, Boswell, & Triana, 2008), that coworkers play an important role in modeling and encouraging inclusiveness (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010; Huffman, Watrous, & King, 2008), and that supportive behaviors from subordinates can signal inclusiveness (Melton & Cunningham, 2014).

Organizational characteristics, such as its structures, policies, and practices, are also likely to influence LGBT inclusiveness (Ferdman, 2014; see also Agars & Kottke, 2004). Sport management scholars have largely focused on these factors in their discussions of diverse workplaces (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Doherty et al.,
Outcomes of LGBT Inclusiveness

The third objective of the study is to identify outcomes associated with an LGBT-inclusive work environment. Recall that much of sport is characterized by heterosexism and sexual prejudice, and as a result, LGBT employees might feel compelled to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity (Cavalier, 2011; Krane & Barber, 2005) or fear exclusion when not doing so (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b). Both sentiments are harmful. As explained in optimal distinctiveness theory, people have “needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)” (Brewer, 1991, p. 477). That is, if people are not able to express who they are (feel distinctive) and also feel they are part of a group (feel included), negative outcomes are likely to result. People who are not able to express identities important to them are likely to experience negative psychological and physical health (Meyer, 2007), internalized stigma (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009), frustration and anger (Pennekamp, Doosje, Zebede, & Henriquez, 2009), and detachment from the workplace (Ragins, 2004).

LGBT-inclusive work environments help address these issues, as they are associated with high belongingness and the valuing of unique identities (Shore et al., 2011). As a result, LGBT coaches and administrators working in these environments are likely to enjoy psychological and physical well-being (Shore et al., 2011), the freedom to express their sexual orientation and gender identity in the athletic department (Cunningham, Pickett, Melton, Lee, and Miner, 2014), a sense of voice and appreciation (Wasserman, Gallegos, & Ferdman, 2008), attachment to and satisfaction with the workplace (Shore et al., 2011), and productivity gains (Katz & Miller, 1996). As Shore et al. (2011) note, most of the benefits associated with inclusive work environments have been theoretically derived and lack empirical investigation and scrutiny. As such, the final research question guiding this investigation is as follows:

RQ3: What outcomes are associated with LGBT inclusiveness?

Method

Research Design and Setting

I examined the three research questions through a collective case study (Stake, 1995) of two National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III athletic departments. This approach is useful when seeking to gain deeper insights into a given phenomenon (Stake, 1995), and when scholars desire a better understanding of how, why, and under what conditions different activities occur (Yin, 2002). Such was the case here. The departments held instrumental value in that, based on a number of indicators, they offered LGBT-inclusive workplace cultures and environments.

I identified the athletic departments through a variety of methods. First, I used professional contacts with individuals working as LGBT advocates in sport, seeking their opinions on the most inclusive athletic departments in the United States. I also used media accounts, including news stories about inclusive athletic departments, to verify these opinions and to identify potentially other athletic departments. Finally, I examined award listings from LGBT-focused organizations. Based on this search and data collection process, I selected the two schools included in the study. I discuss the implications and potential limitations of choosing these two departments in the Conclusions section of the paper.

The two schools included a woman’s college (pseudonym: WC) and small private college in the northeastern
United States (pseudonym: NEC). Both had enrollments around 2,000 students and were founded over 100 years ago. Both schools also had international diversity in their student body, with over 60 countries represented. The racial diversity of the students bodies varied: at WC, over a third of the students identified as African American, Asian American, Latina, Native American, or multiracial, while at NEC, the diversity was considerably less. Finally, both athletic departments offered varsity sports and also delivered academic courses (e.g., racket sports, fitness, study of women in sport).

Participants

Participants were 17 athletic administrators and coaches from WC (n = 8) and NEC (n = 9), all of whom voluntarily provided signed consent to take part in the study. I asked each participant to provide any information about themselves they wanted to share, and I was also able to gather some information from the departmental listings. Some participants shared considerable information about their personal identities and background, while others did not. Thus, I offer in Table 1 those characteristics complete for each participant. This includes an overview of the participants’ position, sex, and organizational tenure.

Procedures and Data Sources

After identifying the LGBT-inclusive athletic departments, I worked with the athletic directors to arrange a campus visit. This included obtaining site authorization and subsequent approval from my university’s Human Subjects Review Board, scheduling a good time for the campus visit, and working with athletic department coaches and administrators to arrange interview times. Both athletic directors supported the project through their positive communications during staff meetings (as one example), but I was also sure to personally arrange the meetings and assure the participants that all data would remain confidential. Toward this end, the colleges and participants all have pseudonyms; I present information about the colleges and participants in general terms rather than offering specific data; and I paraphrase information from the college websites and related materials (as opposed to offering direct quotations).

I collected data from a variety of sources. First, I conducted on-site, semistructured interviews with all participants. Before my campus visit, I emailed the consent form and interview questions to all persons who agreed to participate. During the visit, I first introduced myself, offered some background information, explained the purpose of the study, and then asked each participant a standard set of questions (see Table 2). These were followed up with probes and additional questions, where needed, to further explore the topic being discussed. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 min, were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. I also kept notes during each interview, as they served as a backup to the recordings and also allowed for additional information, such as my impressions of the administrators’ and coaches’ reactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Skip</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Adrien</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Laurie</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Ramon</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Dwight</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>Rolan</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Less than 10 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that two persons not involved in the project reviewed and findings. This included the use of peer debriefers, such for improving the credibility and trustworthiness of the followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) recommendations for a study of the problem or topic under investigation and specific scheme” where codes are “developed from care with what Schwandt (2007) terms, “an a priori, content-focused research process (see Glesne, 2006). In addition to serving as a potential data source, the journal allows researchers to maintain a record of how personal biases, attitudes, and perspectives influence them, their behaviors, and the overall research process (Potter, 1996; Schwandt, 2007).

Epistemological Position and Data Analysis
I followed a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, such that I sought to better cognize the lived experiences and attitudes of the participants (Ponterotto, 2005)—consistent with what Krane and Baird (2005) term a “participant dominant” epistemological perspective (p. 9). In adopting this position, I highlight and seek to richly describe the participants’ voices and the manner in which they negotiate their social environments. As Schwandt (2007) notes, such a position calls on me, as the researcher, to “suspend common sense assumptions about social reality in order to understand how it is that actors experience their world as real, concrete, factual, and objective—in short, to understand how the taken-for-granted features of social life are accomplished” (p. 24, emphasis original).

In terms of analyzing the data, I broke down the various sources of raw data into segments, larger codes, and then broader themes based on the major theses articulated in the theoretical framework. This approach is consistent with what Schwandt (2007) terms, “an a priori, content-specific scheme” where codes are “developed from careful study of the problem or topic under investigation and the theoretical interests that drive the inquiry” (p. 32). I followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) recommendations for improving the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This included the use of peer debriefers, such that two persons not involved in the project reviewed and offered feedback on the codes, themes, and interpretations, thereby serving as a sort of audit for the work. I also included member checks. The participants not only reviewed their transcribed interviews for completeness and accuracy, but I also shared preliminary conclusions with them. The latter involves the organizational members in the feedback and improvement process (see also Alderfer, 1980), thereby adding richness to the research process. As a result, in addition to the multiple sources of data (i.e., interviews, reflexive journal, websites, university materials, and external publications), I was also able to gather multiple checks of the conclusions and interpretations.

Results and Discussion
I discuss the findings in relation to the three primary research questions, including how participants conceptualized inclusion (RQ1), the antecedents of LGBT inclusiveness (RQ2), and the outcomes thereof (RQ3). The iterative data analysis process, described in the previous section, resulted in 44 initial segments, which I then categorized in 19 codes, and ultimately 7 themes reflective of the primary theoretically derived research questions. In Table 3, I offer an overview of these data, with demonstrative quotations also included. I also present an illustrative summary of these relationships in Figure 1.

Conceptualization of Inclusiveness
As seen in Table 2, I asked participants to describe their organizational culture in general and then their LGBT culture in particular. Three themes emerged: community and cohesion, respect and inclusion, and success oriented. Coaches and administrators at both colleges spoke of the tight-knit, close environment that permeated the athletic department. Part of this was due to the lack of personnel and financial resources, thereby necessitating collaboration to achieve tasks. But the sense of community and cohesion was also enmeshed into how people interacted with one another. For example, Summer (WC), who had worked at another athletic department, noted:

Table 2 Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Can you tell me a little about yourself, in terms of your background information, work experience, and demographic information?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How would you describe the organizational culture of this athletic department?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How would you describe the sexual orientation diversity of this athletic department?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What are your leaders’ attitudes toward diversity in general and sexual orientation diversity in particular?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What is the impact of the sexual orientation diversity in the athletic department? For you? For teams? For the department as a whole?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>What are some of the pitfalls for an athletic department to have high sexual orientation diversity? What are ways to address these pitfalls?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is there anything else you would like to add about this topic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrative Quotation or Data</td>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The work environment is probably one of the most positive I've worked in and been a part of in terms of being a team environment. In many athletics departments it's kind of like you fend for yourself. And, there's a lot of people fighting for resources. Here, it doesn't seem to have that feel. Feels more like a family, less like a boxing match.&quot; (Summer, WC)</td>
<td>Community and Cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is an extremely friendly place; I feel a great connection to all my colleagues here. I think we really think highly of each other. It is great. There is a lot of camaraderie and a lot of enjoyment.&quot; (Jack, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;We respect each other, straight or gay.&quot; (Karen, WC)</td>
<td>Respect and Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I think it is very inclusive. . . . It is a very inclusive department&quot; (Rolan, NEC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The other value that I really feel exists here dictated by (the Athletic Director) as our leader is just one of hard work and commitment to success&quot; (Jack, NEC)</td>
<td>Success Oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I think it is hard working. People want to win or improve their programs, including winning&quot; (Laurie, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;She (the Athletic Director) encourages difficult conversations that I guess could easily be avoided&quot; (Barbara, WC)</td>
<td>Difficulty Dialogues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Don’t be afraid to talk about it. Talk about the issues which some people avoid, like sexual orientation. Just being open and saying it is okay to be who you are. I think the relationships and communication talking to each other creates a good community&quot; (Kimberly, WC)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I think it is easy for someone to say, ‘I hate gays,’ or, ‘I don’t understand gays,’ or to make derogatory remarks and be discriminating. . . . When you start having a relationship, even if it is purely professional, with someone who is openly gay, I think it just really forces you to look inside and perhaps change some perceptions&quot; (Jackie, WC)</td>
<td>Intergroup Contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are “lots of trying opportunities to put people who are very different in work situations. Let’s not talk about it. Let’s just do a job together and in some ways sort of build through the work itself.” (Jo, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;(The Athletic Director) has been a champion for diversity certainly in athletics for several years nationally and internationally&quot; (Chris, WC)</td>
<td>Leader Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;(The Athletic Director) is obviously very active in the country promoting diversity and acceptance of sexual orientation diversity. I think that it is part of the culture here as well. I think it certainly trickles down.&quot; (Bobby, WC)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Create a culture where they know harassment and so forth will not be tolerated. In that regard that is what I mean by the top-down and that has to be from the institution or department or from the leaders in the department where it is clear that there will be no tolerance for any lack of tolerance. I think it has to come from inviting students to tell their story and celebrate their story” (Chris, WC)</td>
<td>Leader Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;He (the Athletic Director) is the one who sets the tone for everybody right now. He is just that person who is a no nonsense type. Just tolerant. It just can’t not be that way.&quot; (Adrien, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrative Quotation or Data</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Theoretical Construct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“They did a lot of diversity training. At that time, sexual orientation was included. We had great discussions and people made great connections on campus. It really opened things up on campus.” (Karen, WC)</td>
<td>Education and Programming</td>
<td>Organizational Level</td>
<td>Antecedents of LGBT Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Well, there is one . . . it is sort of a safe space area. You get certified. It is basically a space for any student, not just student athletes, to come talk to people for a variety of things, whether sexual orientation or racial diversity or the rest of the issues, really anything. I think that has been really good.” (Rolan, NEC)</td>
<td>Inclusive Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“I think it is important to understand that (NEC) in general is a very egalitarian place so that permeates the whole culture and certainly the athletic department follows that ethos.” (Jo, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking of the policy of partner hiring: “When we try to hire people at the college oftentimes they will take the spouse. I have heard this for years, but I was at a chair meeting and I heard the dean say, “and we were able to get her partner Sharon a job at [a nearby school]. Nobody even blinked.” (Karen, WC)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT inclusiveness in this area of the U.S., as indicated by political ideologies, laws, and transinclusive policies at higher education institutions.</td>
<td>Inclusive Community</td>
<td>Macro-Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College founders included people who advocated for civil rights and believed all persons should have access to higher education (NEC College Catalog)</td>
<td>History of Inclusion</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“(WC) in general reflects that we support and invite people of all different backgrounds” (Chris, WC)</td>
<td>Broader Diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>“When you leave (NEC) and go into the real world, you are going to be put in situations that have you working with a whole plethora of types of personalities and different backgrounds and a lot of diversity. The ability to understand that you can learn from other’s perspectives, that you can improve yourself, and that you have been there and communicated and succeeded and developed or become better because of your experiences around people different than you; I think is only going to prepare you for life and becoming a better member of society and helping us move forward” (Jack, NEC)</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Positive Outcomes</td>
<td>Outcomes of Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The world is not one way, and they can see positive role models and different role models.” (Joyce, WC)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusiveness “is the right way to do things. It is the right thing to do. In the end, it will make us better.” (Adrien, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think there is a recognition and pride in the fact that at a place that does value diversity, we, athletics, have been pretty proactive in trying to impact that.” (Mike, NEC)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrate Diversity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think we struggle with negative recruiting so the fact that some of our coaches are openly gay and out can be used against them” (Barbara, WC)</td>
<td>Negative Recruiting</td>
<td>Negative Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We have very conservative, religious athletes who have been raised to see homosexuality as a sin. How do you balance that? How do you help groups to understand that inclusiveness does not mean they have to give up their beliefs entirely? It is something else besides that. It is not saying you have to renounce your religion (Jo, NEC)</td>
<td>Backlash From External Stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The work environment is probably one of the most positive I’ve worked in and been a part of in terms of being a team environment. In many athletics departments it’s kind of like you fend for yourself. And, there’s lots of people fighting for resources. Here, it doesn’t seem to have that feel. Feels more like a family, less like a boxing match.

The cooperative nature of the interactions is consistent with van Knippenberg and Schippers’ (2007) observation that, in many cases, cooperative interdependence among diverse group members is associated with positive group outcomes.

Participants uniformly noted the presence of respect and inclusion as a key element of the organizational culture. For example, Rolan, a coach at NEC, described the athletic department as “very inclusive... It is a very inclusive department,” while Laurie noted that NEC “is very proactive about being inclusive.” This inclusiveness was evident in the nature of the interactions, as well as the activities promoted and celebrated. A former NEC transgender student athlete was close to qualifying for a national level athletic team and featured in a publication Skip brought to the interview. In reflecting on the athlete’s success, Skip noted:

She spoke in (publication) about how she was accepted at (NEC). The people on the team were very helpful and about how the coach had gone out of her way to help her. She spoke very fondly of us and it was a pretty good example of a good attitude toward diversity. She... missed the Olympics, but not by much. It was on the (NEC) website so they are still publicizing after she is gone.

Despite the incorrect pronoun usage (the athlete now identifies as a man), Skip took pride not only in the athlete’s success, but also how inclusive and supportive the team was during his transition.

Jack (NEC) also commented on the inclusive nature of the athletic department and how that mindset flowed throughout the college:

We are, from head to bottom, from President on down, very supportive of an inclusive nature and very much wanting to provide everybody with an opportunity to get the best out of the (NEC) experience as possible.

In addition, perceptions of respect were also salient. Chris (WC) noted that, “it feels that there is a great respect for our diversity,” while Bobby (WC) said, “I think it just comes down to respecting people in all sorts of ways.” Wasserman et al. (2008) also highlighted the importance of respect in building inclusive workplaces, arguing that, “a culture of inclusion recognizes, respects, values, and utilizes the talents and contributions of all the organization’s people” (p. 176, emphasis added).

Finally, participants noted that the focus on inclusion coexisted with an emphasis on success. These comments were predominantly observed at NEC, and the success-oriented comments were not as prevalent as those related to the other two themes. That noted, several of the participants noted the emphasis on success and performance. Jack (NEC) reflected, “The other value that I really feel exists here dictated by (the Athletic Director) as our leader is just one of hard work and commitment to success.” Adrien (NEC) also noted the success focus in the athletic department. Thus, in contrast to the notion that inclusiveness and success are mutually exclusive pursuits, coaches and administrators at NEC pursued these in tandem. As will be discussed in later sections, many participants also noted that LGBT inclusiveness allowed them to be more successful than they would have otherwise.

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**Figure 1 — Summary of relations.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual-Level</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Organizational Culture</th>
<th>Positive Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult Dialogues</td>
<td>Leader Advocacy</td>
<td>Community and Cohesion</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup Contact</td>
<td>Leader Expectations</td>
<td>Respect and Inclusion</td>
<td>Whole Self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Negative Outcomes**
- Negative Recruiting
- Backlash from External Stakeholders

**Organizational Culture**
- Success-Oriented

**Macro-Level**
- Inclusive Community
- History of Inclusion
- Broader Diversity

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**Wasserman et al. (2008)**

> “a culture of inclusion recognizes, respects, values, and utilizes the talents and contributions of all the organization’s people” (p. 176, emphasis added).
Antecedents of LGBT Inclusiveness

Ferdman (2014) argued that factors at multiple levels of analysis contributed to an organization’s level of inclusiveness. As seen in Table 3 and Figure 1, I made similar observations. In the following sections, I offer an overview of the key antecedents that emerged in the analyses, linking the findings back to both the multilevel theoretical framework guiding this analysis and other research in the area.

**Individual-Level Antecedents.** Two individual-level themes emerged from the data: the importance of engaging in *difficult dialogues* and the primacy of *intergroup contact*. By *difficult dialogues*, I am referring to those conversations and topics that are frequently eschewed in organizations and that might cause unease, but when endeavored, result in a better understanding of each other and the underlying assumptions with which employees operate. Karen, a WC administrator, continually referred to the importance of these open, honest, and respectful communications. While difficult and perhaps “easily avoided” in other departments (Barbara, WC), the difficult dialogues had value. They help to stimulate different ideas and acknowledge divergent opinions (Kimberly, WC), challenge individuals to think differently (Karen, WC), allow people to take a stand for and advocate for more inclusive behaviors (Jo, NEC), and ultimately result in better relationships and sense of community (Kimberly, WC).

Illustrative of the latter point, Kimberly (WC) reflected on how sexual orientation and gender identity can sometimes be sensitive topics of conversation, but in the end, are worthwhile points of discussion: “Don’t be afraid to talk about it. Talk about the issues which some people avoid, like sexual orientation. Just being open and saying it is okay to be who you are. I think the relationship and communication and talking to each other creates a good community.”

A second individual-level antecedent of LGBT inclusiveness was *intergroup contact*. Jackie, a longtime staff member at WC, noted that people’s preconceived notions of dissimilar others were frequently disconfirmed through intergroup contact:

*I think it is easy for someone to say, “I hate gays,” or, “I don’t understand gays,” or to make derogatory remarks and be discriminating. . . . When you start having a relationship, even if it is purely professional, with someone who is openly gay, I think it just really forces you to look inside and perhaps change some perceptions.* (Jackie, WC)

She further reflected:

*It forces you to face that we are more similar than we are dissimilar. I think a lot of fears, some of it is fear and some misconceptions that people have, are kind of blown out of the water when you sit down and start talking to someone and get to know them.*

Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) have also discussed how contact with out-group members can facilitate learning and help reduce fears and anxiety, both of which ultimately serve to reduce biases.

Jo (NEC) argued that, in addition to interpersonal conversations, intergroup contact could come through working with one another on a task: this includes “trying opportunities to put people who are very different in work situations. Let’s not talk about it. Let’s just do a job together and in some ways sort of build through the work itself” (Jo, NEC).

These patterns are consistent with recent theorizing about factors facilitating an inclusive organizational culture (Ferdman, 2014; Nishii & Rich, 2014) and with the decades of research demonstrating the benefits of intergroup contact in prejudice reduction (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). There is also recent work in the sport context focusing specifically on LGBT individuals, as Cunningham and Melton (2013) showed that contact was negatively related to parents’ prejudice toward gay and lesbian coaches; furthermore, they observed that high levels of contact helped attenuate the otherwise strong, positive relationship between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice. The latter finding is particularly salient given the importance of religious beliefs among key stakeholders—a point to which I return later in the paper when discussing outcomes of LGBT inclusiveness.

**Leader Behaviors.** Two themes emerged under the broader theme of leadership: *leader advocacy* and *leader expectations*. The influence of *leader advocacy* in facilitating an LGBT-inclusive workplace was particularly salient at WC. The athletic director spoke at various conferences and universities across the U.S. on topics related to gender equity, sexual orientation, and inclusiveness. She was widely considered an expert in this area and even taught courses on the subject. The administrators and coaches in her athletic department were keenly aware of her expertise. Chris, for example, noted: “(Karen) has been a champion for diversity certainly in athletics for several years, nationally and internationally.”

Karen coupled her proficiency in this area with strong advocacy and championing for LGBT inclusiveness. This not only impacted work at the national stage, but locally within the department, as well. Bobby commented: “(Karen) is obviously very active in the country promoting diversity and acceptance of sexual orientation diversity. I think it is part of the culture here as well. I think it certainly trickles down.” Bobby’s comments parallel nicely with the recent work showing that advocacy on the part of key persons in sport organizations (Avery, 2011) and athletic teams (Fink, Burton, Farrell, & Parker, 2012) can help set the tone for LGBT inclusion.

Though mentioned less frequently than Karen’s advocacy at WC, some of the participants noted the importance of advocacy on the part of one heterosexual coach at NEC. The coach had helped bring an LGBT
inclusion campaign to the college. This is a campaign among many sports teams where players express to fans and other stakeholders that one’s individual differences do not matter, so long as the individual can play. Mike, the athletic director at NEC, commented on the effectiveness of this campaign within the NEC athletic department, not just for the players involved on the team, but others in the department, too. The same coach helped start a mentoring group designed to: “bring in older student athletes that are involved to lead discussions for the younger kids about what you need to do to be successful at (NEC) certainly athletically, but also academically and socially.” These comments show that it is not just top leaders who can effectively advocate for LGBT inclusion, but also other persons in the athletic department, such as coaches and players (see also Melton & Cunningham, 2014).

In addition to modeling LGBT inclusiveness through their advocacy, leaders also set expectations for LGBT inclusiveness. From a social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) perspective, people learn appropriate and desired workplace behaviors, at least in part, vicariously by observing how leaders behave and the language they use. This is particularly important in setting expectations for diversity (Agars & Kottke, 2004; Cunningham, 2009) and inclusion (Ferdman, 2014), as the modeling serves to demonstrate the importance of inclusiveness in the workplace.

Participants in the current study also commented on the importance of leader expectations for LGBT inclusiveness. Karen (WC) consciously modeled the desired behaviors, such as taking her partner to college and athletic department events—something that had not necessarily been done when she arrived over two decades ago. In reflecting on this, she commented:

I think I was a role model in some ways. . . . In a conscious way, in those settings I feel like I have to push the envelope a bit. Not push to make them feel uncomfortable, but put it out there . . . I am not going to hold back.

At NEC, several of the coaches and administrators commented on the straightforward expectations Mike, the athletic director, had set for inclusiveness. Adrien said: “He is the one who sets the tone for everybody right now. He is just that person who is a no nonsense type. Just tolerant. It just can’t be that way.” Jo echoed these sentiments: “(Mike) is the leader of that and I don’t think he would tolerate anything less. . . . (Mike) isn’t going to tolerate a lack of inclusiveness and that is true for all types of diversity.” Thus, in both workplaces, the athletic directors set clear expectations for inclusion, and these were conveyed and appreciated throughout the department.

Organizational-Level Antecedents. Consistent with theorizing from Ferdman (2014) and a variety of sport management scholars (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Doherty et al., 2010; Fink & Pastore, 1999), I observed a number of organizational-level factors that influenced the LGBT inclusiveness. These primarily came in the way of education and programming, and inclusive practices.

In both athletic departments, coaches and administrators spent time in various forms of education and programming aimed at affecting their attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors. At WC, the staff read and discussed the book, Fierce Conversations (Scott, 2002), which emphasizes addressing interpersonal conflicts through more constructive conversations. In both athletic departments, employees engaged in various forms of diversity training, all of which included sections or complete training modules on sexual orientation and gender identity. Multiple educational opportunities were held throughout the year, and they came in different forms. For instance, there were various workshops, film series (such as viewing the documentary Training Rules, which addressed the sexual prejudice in the Penn State University’s women’s basketball program under Rene Portland), and outside speakers and programs.

Participants expressed that the training was useful in their everyday work activities and in setting the tone for the employees. Rolan (NEC), for instance, noted:

Well, there was this one . . . it is sort of a safe space area. You get certified. It is basically a space for any student, not just student athletes, to come and talk to people for a variety of things, whether sexual orientation or racial diversity or the rest of the issues, really anything. I think it has been really good.

Karen (WC) also saw the value of the diversity training, noting that, “I think the diversity training on campus really helped move us forward.” In echoing these sentiments, Jackie (WC) argued that it was the collective training efforts that helped to get inclusiveness “entrenched” into the culture of the workplace. In drawing from recent work in the area of diversity training (Cunningham, 2012b), this entrenchment is likely due to the training being coupled with other, multilevel factors supporting LGBT inclusiveness (see also Shaw, 2007).

In addition to these efforts, there was evidence that inclusive practices impacted LGBT inclusiveness. This includes formal policies and procedures in the athletic departments, workplace activities signaling inclusiveness, and a strategic focus on diversity during the hiring process. For example, at WC, locker room space was allocated for transgender individuals, thereby facilitating their sense of inclusion and encouraging their physical activity. The communications at WC offer another illustrative example. In many athletic departments, sports information directors include information related to the coaches’ spouses and children. Karen recognized, however, that this serves to privilege heterosexuals and people who can legally wed their loved ones. Thus, at WC, they made the conscious, enlightened decision to not include family-related information on the external websites, instead focusing on information most pertinent to the team. On the other hand, Karen was equally cognizant that sexual minorities in intercollegiate athletics
frequently felt they could not discuss their partners at work or bring them to functions. Thus, she purposefully included them in invitations to departmental gatherings. Joyce was appreciative of such efforts, commenting:

> We have straight men and women, married and single lesbians, so it is very open. It is nice because my partner is always included in any kind of gatherings and there is not hemming and hawing, like “you can bring a friend” kind of thing [as opposed to specifically mentioning a partner.] I don’t feel like I need to broadcast it but I don’t feel like I need to hide here either.

Jo noted similar dynamics at NEC:

> In terms of when we have staff events or whatnot, that spouses and partners are invited, my partner is expected to be there as much as anyone. If she isn’t, people are like, ‘where is (partner’s name)?’ So, you know, it feels very inclusive in that way.

The inclusive practices also carried over into strategic hiring. In both athletic departments, the athletic directors put an emphasis on diversity in the hiring process, with the mindset that the department would improve as a result of these differences. Singer and Cunningham (2012) have also observed this emphasis in their analysis of athletic departments recognized for effective diversity management practices. Reflecting on what factors influenced the inclusiveness in the department, Joyce (WC) said, “I think a lot of it is in part due to (Karen) and her work trying to hire diversity,” while Summer (WC) commented, “I think the majority of that really comes down to the hiring practices.” This focus carried over to hiring committees, as there was an expectation to have a broad reach, bring forward a diverse pool of candidates, and remain mindful of diversity and inclusion throughout the process. Illustrative of these expectations, Jo (NEC) recounted the time when she chaired a search committee for a new women’s swimming coach and recommended a man. Mike (the NEC athletic director) then challenged her and the committee, questioning if they had done all they could to recruit and attract women to the position. While the search committee was able to offer the supporting materials Mike requested and ended up hiring the man, the exchange left an impact on her: “That sort of set the tone for me in many way in that it (inclusive hiring) was so important to him.” These comments parallel Umphress et al.’s (2008) work showing that directives from leaders related to inclusive hiring can meaningfully impact employees’ attitudes and behaviors during the selection process.

**Macro-Level Antecedents.** Finally, Ferdman (2014) suggested societal level factors would influence an organization’s inclusiveness. The participants did not directly speak to the influence of the broader community or region, and as a result, the peer reviewers and I engaged in fruitful debate about the role of macro-level influenced. Ultimately, it became clear that even though the participants did not directly discuss this influence, inclusive community played a meaningful role in the inclusiveness of the athletic departments. To be sure, both schools were in the U.S. Northeast—an area traditionally marked by more inclusive viewpoints that in other areas of the country. Gallup polling demonstrates as much, as people in the northeastern United States express more liberal ideologies than, for example, people in the South (Saad, 2009). In addition, the states in which both campuses were located offered encompassing rights for LGBT individuals, including same-sex marriage, adoption rights, and prohibitions against discrimination in employment, housing, and schooling (“Gay rights,” 2012). As with the data related to political ideology, these broad rights are more likely to be observed in the U.S. Northeast relative to other areas. Finally, only 10% of all colleges and universities have trans-inclusive policies; however, six of the ten top-rated inclusive colleges and universities are in the U.S. Northeast (Beemyn & Windmeyer, 2012). These data collectively suggest that the communities in which the colleges were located were inclusive: they had people with liberal ideologies, had enacted laws to support sexual minorities, and had prohibitions against discriminatory behaviors. Thus, in many respects, societal features influenced the inclusiveness in the organization (see also Barron & Hebl, 2010).

Both colleges had a long history of inclusion. WC, for instance, was founded as a women’s college, has several notable leaders who attended the college, and is committed to educating women from diverse backgrounds in an inclusive learning community (WC website). According to the course catalog at NEC, college founders included people who advocated for civil rights and believed all persons should have access to higher education. Further investigation revealed that the college was founded by abolitionists and has historically had a diverse student body along various diversity dimensions, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and national origin (NEC website). Many of the NEC coaches and administrators referred back to these foundations when discussing the importance of inclusion in the athletic department. Skip, for instance, noted: “(NEC) was born out of the abolitionist movement. (NEC) prides itself on including all types of people.” Jo also recognized the influence of the strong inclusive roots at NEC, pointing to the “historical legacy” of diversity and inclusion at the college.

In addition to their histories of inclusion, NEC and WC were also diverse and inclusive places campus-wide. Some elements of this college-level diversity were described earlier in the description of the colleges, as both entities had a number of students from around the world, and particularly at WC, the racial diversity of the student body was greater than their peers. Participants believed this diversity necessarily spilled over into the athletic department and its inclusiveness. As noted by Chris (WC): “(WC) in general reflects that we support and invite people of all different backgrounds.” Though
not quantified in college statistics or by the participants, coaches and administrators at WC believed the sexual orientation diversity of the campus was also high, with a high number of lesbians and bisexual students enrolled. This diversity, they believed, was also reflected in their student athletes, thereby making all the more salient an LGBT inclusive culture. Along these lines, Summer commented:

I think they [lesbian and bisexual student athletes] feel safe here. I think even some of them who don’t know at the time who come here and they are like, ‘hey, there really is nothing wrong with this.’ And it opens their mind up.

Barbara concurred, noting that WC “created an environment that is comfortable for” lesbian and bisexual students.

**Outcomes of LGBT Inclusiveness**

The third research question was concerned with the outcomes of LGBT inclusive policies. The analyses point to a number of positive outcomes, coupled with two potential drawbacks. As demonstrated in the following text, the administrators and coaches sought to maximize the benefits of inclusiveness while also engaging in strategic actions aimed at minimizing the drawbacks.

**Positive Outcomes.** Positive outcomes included whole self, learning, role model, success, and celebrate diversity. The most salient theme throughout the interviews was the notion that LGBT inclusiveness allowed coaches and administrators to bring their whole self to work. As coaches and administrators can completely disclose their meaningful identities at work, they do not have to worry about hiding a part of themselves. This is powerful, as it allows them to do away with the fear and anxiety associated with others becoming aware of those identities (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007) and instead bring their whole selves to work, focusing on the task at hand. This is consistent with Shore et al.’s (2011) framework and optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), such that employees in these athletic departments were able to be distinctive (re: maintain their personal identities important to them) while also being an important part of the larger group.

Karen summarized these benefits as follows:

I think it is also a healthy environment for our coaches to be able to be who they are. For me, that environment overall just takes the whole layer off of everything. I think hiding a part of yourself when you come into the work environment or not bringing your whole self to the job doesn’t enable you to do your job fully.

Jackie (WC) commented that the inclusive workplace allowed her to “The word that comes to mind is ‘authenticity.’ I think it just allows people to be really authentic and therefore bring that to work and their conversations with each other. I think it is really valuable.” She contrasted this work environment with others where her colleagues worked. In these athletic departments, “half of the people are hiding their personal lives and hiding from other people who are in the same boat. They are all doing it, and it is sad.” In line with these sentiments, Kimberly recognized the importance of bringing the authentic, whole self to work: “it is important to be who you are.”

In addition, and consistent with Ely and Thomas’s (2001) observation that in inclusive organizations, differences are seen as a source of learning (see also Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999), coaches and administrators in this study expressed that the inclusive culture allowed for learning to take place. Jack (NEC) captured this position well:

When you leave (NEC) and go into the real world, you are going to be put in situations that have you working with a whole plethora of types of personalities and different backgrounds and a lot of diversity. The ability to understand that you can learn from other’s perspectives, that you can improve yourself, and that you have been there and communicated and succeeded and developed or become better because of your experiences around people different than you; I think is only going to prepare you for life and becoming a better member of society and helping us move forward.

Thus, from Jack’s perspective, student athletes were able to learn from others who were different from them, and it was this learning that would help them throughout their lives. Karen believed the inclusive atmosphere at WC enabled similar outcomes, such that “it trains and helps to educate people for the world at large, and it is a diverse world overall.”

Many of the coaches and administrators also indicated that LGBT inclusiveness allowed them to be role models to their student athletes. From this perspective, the athletes were able to observe the many benefits of sexual orientation diversity among the coaches and administrators, as well as the LGBT-inclusive cultural practices. In doing so, the participants believed this positively influenced the athletes’ well-being, particularly those who identified as LGBT. Illustrative of this viewpoint, Joyce (WC) commented, “I think it is good for the athletes because they see a positive, good relationship but they also see that it is nothing to be ashamed of. . . . The world is not one way, and they can see the positive role models and different role models.” Jo (NEC) expressed similar sentiments, as she saw the inclusiveness modeled by coaches as helping student athletes during a very important time in their personal development:

I think that it is important because, as we all know, they have a lot of angst about all kinds of things that they are trying to figure out. . . . Part of it is you trying to figure it out and whatever person you decide to be is going to be great. We are going to be excited about that. I think it is hard enough in the inclusive
environment. I can’t imagine—well I can because most of us have lived it—having to go through that and feeling like there is no one to talk to, no one to understand, and if you make the wrong choice you are going to be excluded.

Thus, to Jo, the role modeling among coaches helped show the athletes that their paths toward identity formation would be celebrated. These comments also mirror recent research showing that sexual minority athletes are likely to develop their sexual orientation personal identity within a psychologically safe team environment (Cunningham et al., 2014).

A fourth benefit identified by the coaches was the belief that LGBT inclusiveness resulted in success. Adrien (NEC), for example, noted that the inclusiveness “is the right way to do things. It is the right thing to do. In the end, it will make us better.” Participants operationalized performance gains in several ways, such as the coaches more fully engaging in their work, student athletes being able to achieve their potential, and coaches and staff being able to more fully capitalize on their differences of perspectives. A number of authors have theorized about similar benefits (e.g., Cunningham & Melton, 2011; Florida, 2012) or observed the benefits of matching sexual orientation diversity with an inclusive workplace setting (Cunningham, 2011a, 2011b). The following represent quotations illustrating these perspectives:

*Coaches Engaged:* “People do their best work when they feel like it is an inclusive place and it is a safe place to be whoever they are.” (Jo, NEC)

*Student Athlete Potential:* “A student athlete who has to check part of herself at the door or outside the field before she comes to the team—these people are supposed to be your family and close friends—if you can’t be open with who you are, I don’t think you are going to be able to achieve your potential as an athlete, let alone as a human overall.” (Karen, WC)

*Capitalize on Differences of Perspectives:* “We understand better. Let’s say at the committee meeting or something, because we are different, people have a different opinion. Maybe there are heated conversations or something, but at the end, because we have that relationship, we have that respect . . . that conversation and conflict will make the committee stronger as opposed to that conflict breaking that relationship.” (Kimberly, WC)

Finally, a number of participants suggested the LGBT-inclusive workplace environment allowed them to *celebrate diversity.* Jack, for instance, indicated he was pleased that at NEC, inclusiveness “is all part of who we are and something we promote,” while Adrien expressed that he was proud “to work for a school, an institution, that is promoting diversity and inclusion and tolerance and is liberal.” Chris (WC) also noted that the student athletes recognized differences would be celebrated. She relayed the following exchange one of her colleagues had with a player on his team:

She said, “Coach, you know I am gay, right?” He didn’t and said, “No, actually I didn’t.” She replied, “I am and that is why I am so happy to be here because I can say that to you and know you are going to celebrate me even more.” I thought that was so cool . . . I like that his reaction was, “no, I didn’t know but that is cool,” and that she could feel so comfortable making that statement.

**Negative Outcomes.** Finally, while many of the participants indicated that there were no negative outcomes associated with having an LGBT-inclusive workplace, several did identify two potential shortcomings: negative recruiting and backlash from external stakeholders. Negative recruiting occurs when other athletic departments cast the sexual orientation diversity or LGBT inclusiveness of the target athletic department in a negative light. Such tactics capitalize on harmful stereotypes concerning LGBT individuals, seeking to provoke fear or anxiety on the part of the prospective student athlete and her or his parents (for additional discussion, see Krane & Barber, 2005). Kimberley experienced this, noting “I think that we struggle with negative recruiting so the fact that some of our coaches are openly gay and out can be used against them.” Cognizant of this, Kimberly indicated that she frequently mentioned her male fiancé during her recruiting trips and conversations with parents, presumably to allay concerns that she might be lesbian or bisexual. Thus, even though Kimberley frequently praised the inclusive environment of her department, she saw it necessary to engage in distancing techniques during some recruiting trips.

Related to, but conceptually distinct, from negative recruiting is the potential *backlash from external stakeholders.* Here, it is not necessarily the opposing teams or coaches relaying negative information, but instead, parents, donors, or student athletes express sexual prejudice and are reticent to associate with an LGBT-inclusive athletic department. Bobby (WC), for instance, noted that parents think WC “is all full of lesbians,” while Jo (NEC) acknowledged that “we also have some very conservative, religious athletes who have been raised to see homosexuality as a sin.” Parents played a meaningful role in shaping these perceptions (see also Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a). Chris (WC), for instance, relayed that she had heard of some parents saying, “I don’t want my daughter to come here and be a dyke.” Barbara also reflected on this phenomenon: “At some point, I think that having sexual orientation diversity is not something that a majority of parents in the country are looking for.” Summer relayed the following story:

The only experience I’ve had with that has been with a student who was actually considering (WC) and (a nearby school). And, um, basically it was the
parents of the kid. So she was asking a (rival school) coach who at the time was a woman who was very straight, and she said, “so can you guarantee me in four years that my daughter won’t be a lesbian by the time she leaves here?” So that was not coming from (the rival school) at all. That was coming from the parents.

Karen (WC) also relayed her experiences of sexual prejudice expressed by parents and other stakeholders associated with the athletic program. She uses dialogues with these individuals as a way to educate and challenge their beliefs. Illustrative of this technique, she relayed the following:

I think in some ways that the issue for us is that we have talked about the fact that people will say, “do you have a lesbian problem on this campus?” Our response is, “oh, no we don’t.” We do have lesbians on our teams and we support all of them at (WC) to be the best that they can be. It is like saying, “do you have a Jew problem on your campus or a Black problem?” We have talked about this overall, and I think some coaches are more comfortable than others in how to address it.

While Karen acknowledges that not all coaches feel comfortable challenging and educating the parents, it is noteworthy that they, as an athletic department, have discussed this potential backlash and ways that they can effectively address it.

Conclusions

Despite the prevalence and institutionalized nature of sexual prejudice and heterosexism in many sport organizations (Cunningham, 2012a), there are some athletic departments with LGBT-inclusive environments. Recognizing the value in examining outliers to better understand unique phenomena (Gladwell, 2011), the purpose of this study was to understand (a) how participants conceptualized LGBT inclusiveness in their athletic departments, (b) the antecedents of such workplace environments, and (c) the outcomes associated with inclusion. What is clear is that constructing and maintaining LGBT inclusiveness is a complex, multilevel undertaking. It means recognizing and respecting people’s unique identities while, at the same time, ensuring they are fully integrated and included in the department; it means embedding the values of inclusiveness into all elements of the athletic department’s activities, from personal interactions, to leader behaviors, to policies and procedures; and it means overcoming potential drawbacks associated with LGBT inclusiveness to realize and fully embrace the many positives associated with such practices.

The findings presented here must be couched within the limitations of the study. Specifically, some might question whether the sample size is large enough to draw the conclusions made here. These concerns might be offset by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson’s (2006) work showing that data saturation takes place after 12 interviews. In addition, there are possible concerns as to whether two small colleges in the Northeast are representative of the college sports landscape in the United States. Division I and Division III institutions might vary in their structure, emphasis on winning, and personnel. Further, how do the operations at a women’s college coincide with (for example) those at a large, land-grant university? These questions are worthy of further consideration. In considering these possibilities, it is also worth considering several points. First, there is evidence that athletic departments across the three major NCAA divisions couple sexual orientation diversity and an inclusive workplace (Cunningham, 2011a, 2011b). Thus, while this study was set within the context of NCAA Division III schools, there is reason to believe that focusing on LGBT inclusiveness is not restricted to Division III schools. Second, I conducted a collective case study because I was seeking to gain deeper insights into a given phenomenon and desired to gain a better understanding of how, why, and under what conditions inclusiveness was realized. Case studies are ideal for these purposes (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). Thus, rather than using these findings to generalize to the 1,000-plus athletic departments in the United States, the findings can be seen as a starting point through which better understanding of LGBT inclusiveness in athletics can be endeavored.

Keeping these potential limitations in mind, the findings are instructive in that they begin to illustrate how, why, and under what conditions athletic departments are able to create LGBT-inclusive environments—places where people of all sexual orientations and gender identities are fully included. They provide a step in the inductive theory building process. In reviewing my reflexive journal, I saw where I was so encouraged and inspired by the overall study process. For most of the participants, inclusion was a valued mindset, deeply embedded into the workplace culture. They recognized the potential struggles, but at the same time could not fathom a workplace different than the one in which they worked. This was perhaps best illustrated by Jack (NEC), who said:

I couldn’t right now for the life of me pinpoint a pitfall of being inclusive and helping promote it. . . . I think that what we are doing out here has been positive in all terms. I don’t think there is a negative to trying to include and support people. It comes down to that mentality of why wouldn’t you want to support someone when you know how important that support was to you. If you are not willing to understand or take the time to try and put yourself in their shoes, then it is going to be a long road for you in the future. I feel like it has just been positive.

It is this sort of value, this ethos, that allowed these athletic departments to be inclusive, and it serves as a model for others in sport.
References


