Action Strategies for Making Collegiate Athletics Respectful and Safe for Student-Athletes and Staff of All
Religious Perspectives

Introduction

This document identifies action strategies for college athletics departments at public and private secular institutions to create respectful and inclusive climates for student-athletes and staff of all religious or nonreligious perspectives. We believe that all student-athletes and athletic staff should be safe and included in all aspects of athletics department and team programming.

This resource centers on the religious climate at public and private secular schools and does not directly address inclusion efforts at private faith-based schools. We recognize that many private faith-based schools are aligned with specific religious tenets that guide policy and practice and that create distinctive religious climates. Athletic programs at religious institutions are an important part of the diversity of collegiate athletics, and many student-athletes, coaches and staff seek opportunities at schools with expressly religious climates. Faith-based schools can take actions to create inclusive climates consistent with their institutional missions and the strategies identified in this document. All student-athletes, coaches and staff at faith-based private schools should be treated with respect and fairness, regardless of their religious differences.

Focus

Specifically, this document focuses on student-athletes and athletic staff and the role religion plays in their lives. People of all religious faiths as well as those who do not subscribe to any religious faith should be welcomed and respected as valued members of the athletics department community. The guidelines described in this document are our recommendations for enacting this commitment to inclusion in public and private secular institutions.

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

Action Strategies

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

We recognize that the action recommendations included in this document are reflective of an ongoing conversation and will need to be amended and refined as our conversation continues.

What are some ways that a public or private secular school's athletics department can provide a respectful and inclusive climate for all student-athletes, coaches and staff, regardless of their religious beliefs?

Individual Actions for Coaches and Other Athletics Staff

- Coaches and other athletics staff are responsible for ensuring that individual religious expressions of student-athletes, coaches and athletics staff are respected and that individuals of all religious perspectives are welcomed as valued members of the athletics department

- Coaches and other athletics staff also are responsible for ensuring that the climate for all team activities is neutral regarding religion and affirms that all student-athletes and athletics staff of any religious perspective are welcomed and respected. Coaches and other athletics staff in public schools are responsible for adhering to federal and state laws, policy and guidance related to religious expression. As employees of public institutions, these coaches and other athletics staff are required to be neutral about religion in their professional capacity. This means that the activities in which student-athletes participate under athletics staff leadership, such as practice sessions, competitions, travel, official team activities outside of competition, official team communications and any other organized team activities, should all be religion-neutral. As explained below in this document, "religion-neutral" allows these coaches and athletics staff to take actions to accommodate the religious practices of their student-athletes.

- Coaches and other athletics staff at private secular schools are responsible for adhering to state and local laws related to religious expression. These laws may vary from state to state, so athletics leaders at a private secular school should consult with their school's legal counsel to identify how laws affect the responsibilities of coaches and other athletics staff at that private secular school in that state. In the interests of creating an athletic climate in which all student-athletes are treated with respect and fairness, coaches and other athletics staff in private secular schools should strive to maintain a religion-neutral climate in which

individual student-athletes' religious expressions are protected within the limits of the law.

Suggested Action Strategies for Coaches and Other Athletics Staff

- Acknowledge and accept the presence of student-athletes, coaches and staff of different religions in the athletics community, including student-athletes, coaches and staff who do not identify with any religion.
- Indicate your willingness to talk with student-athletes, coaches and staff of different religious perspectives about their experiences in athletics.
- Recognize, respect and accommodate different religious practices regarding matters related to prayer, clothing, dietary needs and religious observance.
- Include religion among the many ways that student-athletes are different from each other in discussions of team expectations for respectful relationships.
- Name different religious perspectives (e.g., atheist, Christian [Protestant, Catholic, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], Hindu, Muslim, Jewish) when talking about respect for people of different religious perspectives.

- Know about campus resources or organizations for people of different religions.
- Speak up to stop anti-religious bullying, slurs, jokes and stereotypes.
- Encourage respectful conversations regarding differences in religious perspectives among student-athletes, coaches and athletics staff.

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

- A coach who identifies as a follower of a particular religion but intentionally establishes a team climate of inclusivity for student-athletes of all religious perspectives.
- A moment of silent prayer or reflection before practice or competition if the team chooses to participate in such an activity.
- A coach reading a nonreligious poem or quote, playing nonreligious music, giving a nonreligious inspirational talk.
- A coach is inclusive in acknowledging the different religious holidays that team members may celebrate.
- Individual student-athletes participating in religious groups or activities of their choosing outside of required or voluntary team activities.
- Individual student-athletes initiating a conversation about religion with a coach, teammate, other athletic staff or the media.
- Individual student-athletes talking openly about their religious faith but not trying to persuade others to accept their religious faith, unless others express an interest in that type of religious conversation. (This is not intended to suggest that students cannot talk with each other about their individual religious perspectives.)

- Individual student-athletes quietly reading religious texts to themselves on the team bus.
- Individual student-athletes praying on their own during practice, competition or at any time in the athletic setting.
- A group of student-athletes voluntarily praying together, or attending religious text study or a religious service together, as long as it is not assumed that these are team activities in which everyone must — or is pressured to — participate.
- Individual student-athletes wearing jewelry, clothing or other symbols of their religion (as is consistent with uniform requirements for practice or competition).
- Individual student-athletes choosing to participate in a postgame prayer with team members from an opposing school.

<u>Examples of Policies and Practices That Can Undermine a Religion-Neutral Team Setting</u>

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

Departmental Actions

In addition to the actions of individual student-athletes, coaches and other athletics staff, it is important for departmental-level policy and practice to provide a consistent and clear foundation for the individual expectations for all members of the athletics department. Departmental policy should provide guidance for coaches and other staff about expectations for accommodating different religious perspectives, observances and practices.

- Write an athletics department statement that acknowledges and welcomes student-athletes and staff of different religions and those who do not identify with any religion and post it on the departmental website.
- Post institutional religious nondiscrimination policies on the athletics department website.
- Explicitly include examples of different religions when communicating to student-athletes and athletics staff the importance of respect for all student-athletes (student-athlete and staff handbooks, orientation programs for new staff and student-athletes, for example).
- Educate athletics staff about federal, state and local legal requirements of public and private secular schools and their individual responsibilities related to religious expression in these educational contexts.
- Provide resources about religious expression in schools:
    - https://www.aclu.org/aclu-defense-religious-practice-and-expression-public-schools
    - http://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/faq/
    - https://newseumed.org/religion
    - www.pewresearch.org
    - https://www.thefire.org/first-amendment-library/special-collections/fire-guides/fires-guide-to-religious-liberty-on-campus/

- Encourage athletics staff and student-athletes to express acknowledgment of people of many different religions or no religion on campus and their intention to create a climate of respect and safety for all people, including those who identify as religious or not religious.
- Provide a department resource or administrator who can act in the role of advocate or ombudsperson for student-athletes who desire religious accommodations.
- Provide educational opportunities for members of the athletics department to better understand different religions in the context of athletics (e.g., dietary needs, worship practices, religious observances, clothing).

- Permit student-athlete-initiated organizations for student-athletes of different religions.
- Engage the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee as peer leaders showing respect for student-athletes of different religious perspectives.
- Educate coaches and other athletics staff about the importance of knowing the different religious perspectives represented on their teams.
- Provide student-athletes, coaches and athletics staff with education about creating respectful climates for student-athletes of multiple religious perspectives (see federal guidelines on religious expression in public schools listed above).
- Learn about different campus-based offices of religious and spiritual life and make student-athletes, coaches and staff aware of the resources they offer.
- Schedule athletics events with an awareness of different religious observances.
- Create policies and practices that treat religious student-athletes with respect and that specifically acknowledge them (along with other minority or marginalized groups) as members of the school community.
- Host a Common Ground conversation focused on religious diversity on your campus. (If interested, contact the NCAA office of inclusion.)
- As appropriate and with the student-athlete's consent, include statements about a student-athlete's religion in videos or print profiles.

- Proactively plan how to accommodate individual religious student-athletes from visiting teams, or entire visiting teams from faith-based institutions, to ensure they have a safe and welcoming experience.

Common Ground Leadership Team Assistance

We strongly encourage athletics leaders who are interested in implementing any of these recommended actions to reach out to the Common Ground leadership team for assistance, consultation, resources or programming that can assist your efforts to become more inclusive for people of all religious perspectives in athletics. We also invite suggestions for improvement of these recommended actions:

- Nevin Caple, LGBT SportSafe — nevin@lgbtsportsafe.com
- Helen Carroll, National Center for Lesbian Rights — hcarroll@nclrights.org
- Liz Darger, Brigham Young University — liz_darger@byu.edu
- Clyde Doughty Jr., Bowie State University — cdoughty@bowiestate.edu
- Jess Duff, Massachusetts Institute of Technology — jduff@mit.edu
- Pat Griffin, University of Massachusetts, Amherst — griffin@educ.umass.edu
- H. Skip Lord, Houghton College — harold.lord@houghton.edu

- Drew Martin, University of Texas at Austin — drew.martin@utexas.edu
- Jean Merrill, NCAA office of inclusion — jmerrill@ncaa.org
- Chris Mosier, TransAthlete.com --- chris.mosier@gmail.com
- Karen Morrison, University of Central Florida — karen.morrison@ucf.edu
- Donna Noonan, former staff, Fellowship of Christian Athletes — djnoon78@att.net
- Gary Pine, Azusa Pacific University — gpine@apu.edu
- Amy Wilson, NCAA office of inclusion — awilson@ncaa.org

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