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## Creating an Inclusive University Athletic Team Through Systematic Alliance Building

Delilah Poupore

*Diversity training efforts often attempt to address exclusion in groups by creating opportunities for engagement across difference. However, this work tends to happen through singular, isolated programs. The author's experience working for five years with an National Collegiate Athletic Association Division One women's athletic team and coaching staff demonstrates that ongoing diversity training efforts make significant changes possible. The training efforts lead to increased structural diversity, increased ability to address mistreatment, and the ability to deal more openly with the effects of race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, and social class on the team and coaches. The team's successes around inclusiveness have been matched by its on-court teamwork and winning record.*

Few group environments demand a search for commonality like that of a sports team, a group of people who have common activities, goals, values, and norms. Yet, the emphasis on “common” values and norms may conceal a hidden expectation for athletes to assimilate into dominant cultural norms established by or for those with the most social or political power. Ultimately, such a pressure to assimilate can create an unwelcoming team environment, particularly for those who do not fit within the dominant culture. This dynamic can be seen today in college sports. For example, coaches have been sued for creating hostile environments for lesbian athletes or Muslim athletes (American Civil Liberties Union, 2006, para. 1; National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2005, para. 1).

Diversity training efforts often attempt to address this exclusion by creating opportunities for engagement across difference. However, this work tends to happen in singular, isolated programs, with at most yearly follow-ups. For example, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) offers fundamental and advanced diversity training programs for universities who wish to proactively address diversity

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issues. However, the trainings are two or four hours long and are intended to be offered only on an annual basis (NCAA, 2006, para. 1).

The key to significant progress toward creating an inclusive team environment requires moving beyond the one-shot program and creating ongoing efforts to build alliances across differences. Below is the story of the Division One women's basketball team and coaching staff at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), which has maintained a deep, ongoing engagement of difference. The process and results described below can be adapted for use by student affairs professionals in other settings, such as residential life staffs, fraternities and sororities, and with the many other kinds of "teams" that exist on a college campus.

### Background

In 2001, I received a call from the campus sexual harassment educator, Judy Guillermo-Newton, asking if I would assist her with a race-related conflict on the women's basketball team. She knew I worked in the Housing department and provided diversity training and mediation in my work at the University as well as through a consulting company. Judy, a heterosexual Philipina American, told me she wanted to collaborate on this project with a White ally who could also address heterosexism. As a former Division One college athlete myself, I was particularly drawn to working with this group. Together, along with Maria Mahoney (a student affairs professional who interned with us), we formed a diverse team for this project.

When we met with the head coach, we were told that the two African American players on the team were feeling belittled by the comments of some of the White players. When the coach was told of the situation, he admitted he had not known where to begin in addressing the problem and had called the campus sexual harassment educator who then called me.

At first, we were concerned that we would have a one-shot program with the team, which would not address underlying issues that would be likely to crop up again. That is, we would come in, provide a little education and facilitation, the coach could say he had "done something," and the players' feelings would be temporarily assuaged. Instead, the coach committed to an ongoing, in-depth attempt to create an inclusive organization. He expressed that because he viewed the team members as student-athletes, he was committed to the development of life skills. Our work would also be in support of an NCAA Core Value: "An inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes . . . from diverse backgrounds" (NCAA, 2006, para. 3). Therefore, our goal was to create a team and coaching staff who were not only more diverse (in terms of race, sexual orientation, class, and religion) but also skilled in addressing mistreatment and inequities. We wanted

the team and staff to have processes for dealing with conflict and to communicate openly with how racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, religious oppression and classism affected the players and coaches.

When we began in 2001, the team had a majority of White, Christian, middle-class athletes; most identified as heterosexual or were not out about being lesbian or bisexual. Meeting with the team and coaches, we learned that in the past, few athletes of color joined the team because they often felt peripheral once they did join. The silence around sexual orientation on the team created an environment in which lesbian and bisexual athletes either did not come out, or, in some cases, left the team. In addition, the predominance of Evangelical Christians made prayer a pre-game activity, which created tension for some athletes who were not Christian. Due to these dynamics, the coaching staff was limited in whom they could recruit and retain. Clearly, there were numerous opportunities for learning and change, which could help create a more inclusive organization.

Over the next five years, the team and coaches undertook the unique effort to go deep into the engagement of difference with a group that could easily have settled for a more limited sense of team. By learning the tools necessary to become allies with one another, the group became more able to value individual differences, to support change, and to acknowledge and address conflict and the impact of oppression, or the systematic mistreatment of team members.

Certain things did not change over these five years. The team and coaches remained committed to their existing team values. In addition, they maintained a commitment to the common goal of winning, and they continued to do so. They maintained their top record in the Big West Conference and achieved their highest-ever National Championship performance. Though the road was not smooth at every point (barriers will be described below), the values and skills that were learned contributed, and continue to contribute, to many individual and team successes.

#### Our Work with the Team

As trainers, we employed models we used in other settings; the unique situation in this case was the duration of time available for training. At the beginning of each year, we communicated our training assumptions and why the team was participating in diversity training. Then, we introduced several *pillars* (key concepts), which were taught during parts of the year when three- or four-hour trainings were possible. During the season, we held one-hour monthly sessions, which focused mostly on group dynamics. At the end of each season, we conducted evaluations to check progress and make plans for the next year.

*Our Assumptions*

We wanted the team and coaches to know our assumptions and to convey that they were indeed only assumptions. We were not coming in to tell them “the Truth,” with which they had to agree. This process would be an opportunity to learn and try new ways of being with each other, but no one would be asked to change who they were. We communicated that all groups would benefit from this type of work, and by participating in diversity training, they were in fact models of how a team can be. We described the three pillars that I developed with my consulting company, The Dialogue Consultants, which would serve as scaffolding for the rest of our discussions. These three pillars were supplemented with skills for listening across differences.

*The Pillars: Self-Awareness, Awareness of Others, Understanding the System*

The first pillar was self-awareness. We began with this pillar to show group members that everyone has a culture, a history, and a set of beliefs that are formed by their backgrounds. We started with self-awareness because we wanted to avoid the type of training in which people in dominant groups learn about “others.” Our experience showed us that this more traditional approach to diversity training creates distance between people, and, at best, leads to paternalistic attempts to “help the less fortunate.” Therefore, our trainings began with exercises for participants to learn more about themselves.

For many of the athletes and coaches, these were unusual activities. They were more familiar with interacting physically with each other. So, just learning about what makes them “tick” and how to tell their own life stories were big steps for many of these student-athletes and coaches. Particularly because we were working with athletes, we attempted to include physical components in the trainings wherever possible to appeal to those with kinesthetic learning styles. For example, we introduced a discussion about being allies through a physical game in which the whole group had to climb through a spider web of string. Following the exercise, the group talked about what it was like to ask for support and what type of support they most needed. This easily led into a discussion regarding the role of allies.

The second pillar was focused on increasing awareness of others. We used exercises that allowed people to tell their stories with one another. We often began the year by having the “rookie” players talk about how it felt to be new, while the “veteran” players talked about what they remembered about starting on the team. We saw one of the first major team behavioral shifts in 2002 when the veterans developed a strategy to welcome and include the new players, realizing that they wished that they had been welcomed in this way when they were new.

We used various exercises to help the players talk about the effect (or lack of effect) of race, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, and ability on growing up and on

their current daily lives. During the first discussions, we strongly encouraged the athletes and coaches to tell their stories and refrain from judging or assessing the “truth” of someone’s story. This helped raise the levels of honesty and trust as most participants felt they could talk about their lives without being criticized.

A third pillar of the training was increasing understanding about the “system” we operate within. Here, we introduced the concept of *oppression* as developed by academic and activist Ricky Sherover-Marcuse (1988), emphasizing that this phenomenon is carried out through societal institutions as well as through individual actions. We also discussed how oppression could be internalized, such that people end up believing the misinformation they are told about their groups and take it out on themselves and others in their groups. Stressing our belief that people resist these roles as best they can, we encouraged the team and coaches to take steps to become allies to one another by uncovering stereotypes, learning accurate information, interrupting oppression, creating inclusive environments, and thinking about ways to change institutions.

#### *On-Going Monthly Check-Ins*

With these pillars in place, it was possible to discuss some of the day-to-day group dynamics with a larger perspective in the monthly check-ins. For example, one player mentioned that she felt belittled when people made negative comments about Kmart clothes, explaining that her family was working class. From her story, others realized that they had negative stereotypes about working-class people and that they were perpetuating those stereotypes through their language and jokes.

In another example, on road trips, the team would make decisions about where to eat or what to watch on television through a majority vote. With only two African American players on the team the first year, a majority-win vote meant that the decisions were made by the White players every time and often reflected White culture (e.g. watching *Friends* on television). The team was able to discuss this during the monthly check-in and change their decision-making process to allow for more diversity in activities.

In another monthly check-in, stereotypes about lesbians arose. The environment in women’s sports can be hostile to lesbian athletes, as explained in detail in Pat Griffin’s (1998), *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sports*. Griffin writes that the “fear of the lesbian label continues to control women’s sport” (p. 49). Not surprisingly, the team and coaches at UCSB reflected some of these predominant attitudes. For example, discussions about homophobia on the team unearthed the stereotypes that lesbians try to “convert” heterosexual women or that they are sexually promiscuous. So, the first time a player “came out” on the team, it was a very emotional session. Over the five years, however, the heterosexual players and coaches became allies while the lesbian and bisexual

players addressed their internalized homophobia. The environment on the team changed quite drastically, so much so that the athletes almost came to take for granted their new environment, which was safe for varying sexual orientations. In the diversity training sessions, they would discuss what it felt like to bring their same-sex partners to team events. Within a few years the change in the environment was very evident: a top player not only brought her partner to the end of the year awards ceremony, but proudly and publicly introduced her to the boosters (community members who give financial and moral support) present at the event.

Creating a welcoming environment for lesbian and bisexual players brought up concerns for some of the Evangelical Christian athletes. It was important for us as trainers to find a space for them to talk about their concerns, as the conflict would not have been solved by declaring, “If you aren’t pro-lesbian, you’re homophobic.” The heterosexual Christian athletes met separately with a heterosexual trainer to talk through the differences between 1) Evangelical Christian-based beliefs about sexuality and 2) discriminatory or hostile behavior toward lesbians and bisexuals. An amicable agreement was formed on the team, but we often felt this topic could use many more hours of work than time allowed.

Each year, the coaches also learned the same pillars and engaged in practical discussions. They were encouraged to talk about their own stories and to focus on working relationships, rather than to immediately focus on the concerns of the team. The idea was that the coaches could best teach by demonstrating to the team that they were also doing their work. Head Coach Mark French agreed that “understanding and valuing the differences on the coaching staff [were powerful tools] for teaching and role-modeling” (personal communication, November 21, 2006).

#### Success Factors

There were several factors that helped to keep this process going. Most important was the support from the head coach. He conveyed his support during recruitment and devoted significant time for trainings throughout the year. In this way, players joined the team aware of the commitment to diversity and perhaps self-selected to sign up for a team that would deal openly with diversity issues.

Another key factor was the presence of an on-campus facilitation team that was trained and available for a long-term commitment. After experimentation during the first years, we found that setting the schedule before the year began ensured that the sessions would occur. We scheduled the longer sessions during the fall pre-season, in the winter break, and in the spring after the season’s end, with the shorter sessions occurring throughout the season. The number of sessions each year allowed for increasing awareness along with time for putting the awareness

into practice. One without the other would likely have been less successful, and the combination allowed the players and coaches to develop their thinking and skills over time. Also, since the facilitators did not have to travel to campus, the program was very affordable, as well as flexible.

Finally, it was important to the players that the coaches were also involved in training efforts. This created both a common language and experience among the players and coaches. Importantly, players and coaches felt safer doing the work separately, so rarely did the two come together for the trainings.

### Barriers

One potential barrier was concern from the coaching staff about the willingness of the community and boosters to accept the team's changing perspective on inclusion. Though the team environment was becoming safer for people to share more about themselves, the change did not necessarily mean the greater community would be supportive. The head coach decided early that he would stay committed to the plan of creating a more inclusive team even if there was resistance from outside the team. This did not ever become a major issue, and there was speculation that new fan bases were created as a result of the changes.

There was also a fear of a can of worms being opened through these trainings and discussions. Indeed, by openly addressing oppression, more issues were brought up by the players, along with a heightened expectation for resolution of the issues. The coaching staff may have needed additional support to deal with these additional responsibilities, and this wasn't always in place for them.

### Application to other University "Teams"

Many organizations use the term *team* when they discuss group dynamics, labeling group development activities as *team-building*. Therefore, any group that functions like a team could apply the lessons learned through this basketball team's work.

Residential life staffs and other peer leadership groups often have a diversity component in their trainings. If the training only occurs in the fall, additional sessions that build on the fall training could be offered in the winter and spring. In addition, supervisors could lead monthly check-ins that invite staff members or leaders to discuss the ways heterosexism, classism, ageism, etc. affect the group. These regular check-ins could allow for changes in policies and practices, perhaps clearing out resentments or preventing resignations. Fraternities and sororities also carry out diversity training efforts on many campuses. By creating a long-term relationship with a Greek organization, a facilitator could build trust to guide deeper discussions than those that usually occur in a one-time training.

Professional staff could also engage in systematic anti-oppression work with other student affairs professionals on campus and perhaps with other groups, such as faculty. Similar to the dynamic with the coaches and players, the modeling provided by the professional staff could demonstrate to students that ongoing work makes a difference and leads to more empowered and dynamic relationships.

Many student affairs professionals, particularly if they have attended graduate programs, have researched diversity and oppression issues. In many cases, these professionals already provide trainings for groups on campus. Campuses could draw upon the skills of these professionals, pairing them with sports teams, fraternities and sororities, diversity-themed residence halls, or student leadership groups. These partnerships would have the potential not only to transform campus culture but also to bring satisfaction and learning for the professional.

#### Summary

Through systematic, ongoing alliance building with the UCSB women's basketball team, there has been marked change between 2001 and 2006. Athletes feel safer to come out as lesbian or bisexual, and heterosexual athletes have the awareness and skills to be allies. The racial diversity of the team has increased; athletes of color are now the majority of the team. In addition, the team deals more openly with how racism impacts their decision-making and communication.

Jenna Green, a current team member who is biracial, recently expressed that her White team members are "more open-minded and considerate" due to the ongoing trainings (personal communication, November 16, 2006). Recent graduate Karena Bonds noticed increased understanding of differences on the team due to the opportunity for people of "all sexual backgrounds to talk honestly" (personal communication, November 30, 2006). In addition, team members interrupt jokes and comments that reflect classism and racism. The predominance of Christians on the team and its effect on team dynamics are discussed openly, and the facilitators have noted an increased willingness to listen to Christian athletes' feelings and beliefs by non-Christian team members.

Karena Bonds also reported that over the years, players applied more and more of what they learned during diversity training to their personal lives. She explained:

I noticed a difference in my own life when I began to set rules in my house that stated that my house is a hate free zone and that I would not tolerate any negative comments about sexual, racial, cultural, or financial differences. (personal communication, November 30, 2006)

The diversity training efforts supported Coach French's commitment to the student-athlete's development on and off the court.

The last five years have shown that as racism, sexism, heterosexism, religious oppression, and classism are systematically addressed (ongoing over a multi-year period). Athletic teams can become inclusive environments that bring out the best in each person (student-athlete and coach). The method we employed at UCSB is different from many other diversity training efforts in particular because the training has been for the athletes and coaches, it takes place regularly throughout the year, and happens over many years. There is no sense of a one-shot effort, but a realization that organizational change happens with effort and support over time. The successes of this team and coaching staff do not mean there is no conflict, or that discrimination or mistreatment is absent. However, the difference between this group and many other groups is that this team and coaching staff have the skills, awareness, and processes to address problems that arise. Importantly, this case study demonstrates that a team that brings out the best in each person can maintain and actually improve its performance and record on the court. Organizations seeking to function as inclusive teams are welcome to adopt and adapt the model that was used successfully with UCSB's basketball program.

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