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There's No “I” in “Team”: Lessons from Athletics on Community Building

*Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel, J. Douglas Toma,
and Christopher C. Morphey*

Building community within an environment increasingly marked by difference is perhaps the most significant challenge—and likely the most exciting opportunity—in contemporary American higher education. It is easy to proclaim stronger community as a goal, but models of creating real community from significant difference are rare. Intercollegiate athletics may provide just such a model. Though students involved in sports like football, basketball, and track and field at most large institutions are typically a much more diverse group than those on the campus as a whole, community is especially strong on these teams. In athletics students from a vast array of back-

Lisa Wolf-Wendel is an associate professor of higher education at The University of Kansas, J. Douglas Toma is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and Christopher Morphey is an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Kansas. The authors acknowledge the generous support of the Ford Foundation and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) for funding this study. In addition, we thank the athletes, coaches, and athletics administrators who shared their time and perspectives with us. NASPA published a final report of this study on its web page as part of its *Diversity Projects: Reports from the Field* initiative. This report can be found at http://www.naspa.org/Ford%20Foundation/Diversity_Reports.htm. Address queries to Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel, Department of Teaching and Leadership, 421 Joseph R. Pearson Hall, 1122 West Campus Road, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, telephone: (785) 864-9722; fax: (785) 864-5076; e-mail: lwolf@ukans.edu

grounds integrate into a coherent whole, where factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and even gender (in the case of mixed gender track and field teams) assume much less meaning than what individuals can contribute to the team. In short, intercollegiate athletics has accomplished much of what institutions generally are attempting to achieve in building community out of difference. Despite a history marred by the most blatant forms of discrimination, intercollegiate athletics has responded particularly well to challenges associated with diversity—and now enjoys the advantages associated with bringing together people from different backgrounds in the pursuit of a common goal. Our goal is to suggest what intercollegiate athletics can offer other campus constituencies facing the same challenges and seeking the same opportunities.

Across American society, as in higher education, sports-as-metaphor is a common, straightforward, and, too often, overly simplistic means of communicating concepts or framing goals. Ideas such as the importance of “taking one for the team”—sacrificing individual interests for the betterment of the whole—have the potential to become catch phrases devoid of real meaning. Our intention is to move beyond catch phrases and explore intercollegiate athletics as a microcosm of the American campus. Certainly, there are aspects to participating in competitive sports, particularly at the elite level, that are not necessarily transferable to other areas of campus life. However, there are many parallels between intergroup relations on an intercollegiate team and intergroup relations elsewhere on campus. We build from these similarities—conscientiously noting the differences—in suggesting what the rest of campus might learn from intercollegiate athletics in building community from difference.

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that the experience in intercollegiate athletics can be instructive for institutions generally. Intercollegiate athletics is a battleground—if not *the* battleground, given its wide visibility both on and off campus—for several of the most contentious issues currently being contested on university campuses. Ongoing debates over various questions in college sports, such as gender equity, racial diversity, and student development, closely parallel current discussions about core values in higher education. In fact, these core values—equity, fairness, duty, autonomy—are often discussed more completely and passionately in the context of intercollegiate athletics than in other venues (Toma & Cross, 2000). How institutions reconcile these key current issues in the athletic department may well indicate something potentially meaningful about current values in higher education and how key decisions reflect these values. We suggest that the same is true in how those in athletics frame—and sometimes realize—goals of community and diversity.

Drawing on case studies at five institutions, we focus upon how student-athletes and coaches in the five most diverse college sports conceptualize diversity within their teams, as well as how athletics administrators frame

diversity issues within their departments. We explore what coaches specifically do to enhance the teamwork needed to be successful in competition, and how student-athletes respond to these approaches. We note the challenges toward accepting difference that remain within college sports. Finally, we use our findings from intercollegiate athletics to make recommendations for creating community across difference within other areas of the academy.

COMMUNITY AND DIVERSITY

"Community" and "diversity," as constructs, are sufficiently broad and complex as to defy straightforward or comprehensive definition. Our focus here is on community at the most local level. According to Dewey (1944), a community must share the aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge that afford it a common understanding and like-mindedness. Calderwood (2000) associates several images with community—connection, caring, interdependence, shared values, rituals, and belonging to a group. The essence of amplifying these images—thus building community—is to strengthen commonalities within a group. Doing so requires effort, as community cannot be decreed but must emerge through mutual recognition and identification (Calderwood, 2000). Furthermore, community is not only a process of stressing what is common to the group, but also of accepting differences within the group. "For a social group to be a community there must be a belief that they in fact share identity, beliefs, values, practices, history, and goals specific and unique to the group . . . [and that] existing or potential differences between competing values, beliefs and practices within the group must be recognized, reconciled, and tolerated" (Calderwood, 2000, p. 3). Finally, community can exclude as it includes: "The impulse to community often coincides with a desire to preserve identity and in practice excludes others who threaten that sense of identity" (Calderwood, 2000, p. 12).

Community thus intersects with the climate for diversity, including on American campuses. Smith (1995) outlines four dimensions of diversity in higher education: (a) access, (b) campus climate, (c) educational mission, and (d) institutional transformation. Our focus is on the second of these dimensions—diversity within the context of campus climate. Campus climate can shape feelings of inclusion or alienation, encourage or discourage student retention, and define positive or destructive intergroup relations. Although higher education institutions have improved access and become more inclusive, problems with campus climate persist. In short, diversity remains an issue when considering campus climate. In concentrating on campus climate, we necessarily focus on everyone—not just those who feel marginalized—in framing diversity issues. Nevertheless, we recognize the importance of group identification in addressing diversity issues. Some argue against the "self-segregation" of students on campus (D'Souza, 1995;

Schlesinger, 1995). We instead side with the developmental researchers, among others, who have suggested that, rather than problematizing the need of individuals to spend time with those who are like them, we need to find ways that bring students from different groups together in meaningful ways while still allowing people to gather periodically “in comfort zones of shared experiences, identities, and concerns” (Cortes, 1991, p. 11; see also Montero, 1995; Tatum, 1997). It is this aspect of diversity on which we focus—creating a campus climate that allows members of different groups to interact with one another in multiple, fluid communities.

Perhaps linked with the increase in diversity, both in fact and in perceived importance, several commentators are troubled by what they perceive to be a decline—or even absence—of community on American campuses (Boyer, 1987; Kerr, 1982; Levine, 1983; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Tierney, 1993). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) reported that “feelings of fragmentation and disconnection, even alienation and anomie among students, faculty, and staff” may be intensifying (p. 7). Some view the decline in campus community in nostalgic terms, longing for the days when the terms “campus” and “community” were synonymous (Boxill, 1995; Boyer, 1983; Schlesinger, 1995). What we understand as “collegiate” in America is intertwined with a vision of the campus as “a place, a group of comradeship of those who follow learning as their guide and who welcome others in the same pursuit” (Meiklejohn, 1969, qtd. in Goodchild, 1999, p. 7). That vision implies that community once existed within higher education—and that we have lost something once fundamental to the academy.

Levine and Cureton (1998) explain the current interest in community, describing where our society is in our cycle of individual and community ascendancy. They suggest that since the rise of the research university at the end of the nineteenth century, we have “move[d] back and forth between periods of individual and community ascendancy . . . in a continuing effort to find the perfect balance between the community and the individual” (p. 147). Currently, we are demanding more community because we have been in a period of individualism and “when the pendulum swings too far toward individualism and independence, people are apt to feel alone and isolated in an apathetic and uncaring world. In response, they move in the opposite direction” (p. 148).

The demand for community is, of course, both entrenched in American higher education and is a response to cycles in our history. What is certain is that several structural trends in higher education have impeded attempts to build and retain a sense of community on campuses. Specifically, the role of faculty has evolved and expanded, particularly at research universities, leading many to self-identify primarily as externally focused researchers, rather than as teachers who focus on students and campus matters (Amey,

1999; Clark, 1987). Elsewhere on campus, a sense of community has declined due to factors such as the diffusion and bureaucratization of decision-making authority, the overall decline in confidence in processes for administrative decision making, and the sheer size and complexity of institutions (Astin, 1998; Boyer, 1987; Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Clark, 1987; Levine, 1983; Levine & Cureton, 1998). We have become a group of "multiple communities" where our disparate goals work against the creation of a common campus community (Kerr, 1982).

Furthermore, changes in what students want and who students are make it even more difficult for campus constituents to gain common ground and create community (Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Cortes, 1999; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Tierney, 1993). Contemporary college students, as a group, are fundamentally different from students in the past. Research suggests that current students seem to have less sense of academic purpose and more orientation toward careers than prior generations (Astin 1998; Boyer, 1983; HERI, 1998; Levine & Cureton, 1998). Not only are their motivations different, so is their composition. Compared to college students of the past, students today are more likely to be older, from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds, in debt, working to support themselves, and fulfilling external responsibilities in addition to their academic pursuits. Furthermore, the current generation of college students is more likely than previous groups to attend school part time and to live off campus (Astin 1998; HERI, 1998; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999).

The sum of these trends makes developing a sense of community on campus not only more difficult now than it might have once been but also more critical than ever before. Blaming structural and demographic forces for the perceived lack of community on American campuses does nothing to resolve the problem of a lack of community. In fact, solutions to the decline of community on our campuses must address the reality of exactly these forces. "We live with heterogeneity," observes Gardner (1989), "and must design communities to handle it" (p. 74). Moreover, community does not have to be exclusionary or marked by conformity (Gardner, 1989). Consequently, although our large, bureaucratic, and diverse institutions make it more difficult to develop community, finding ways to develop community have never been more important. Diversity without community represents a lost opportunity, not only for people from underrepresented groups, but also for other students, faculty, and staff members who could benefit from the interaction with diverse groups. Campuses must seek new formulae for enhancing connections between and among individuals and small groups and maintaining the collegiate life so closely associated with American higher education (Thelin, 1996; Levine & Cureton, 1998).

Calling for community, however, is a clearer and more straightforward proposition than identifying what types of environments, academic and

otherwise, contribute to developing a sense of community that confers identity, belonging, and security upon everyone on campus, particularly students. It has become axiomatic that students are more likely to benefit from college when they are engaged in academic, extracurricular, and interpersonal ways. In short, student learning improves when students feel involved (Astin, 1998; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The movement toward building learning communities on campuses responds to this idea, particularly in the ability of these communities to bring students from different backgrounds together to seek similar academic objectives. Similarly, other groups affiliated with campuses—faculty, administrators, alumni, and even the local community—share the many benefits of strong community (Amey, 1999; Toma, 1999). As Gardner (1989) suggests, building community is the best way to improve quality of life on campus.

Intercollegiate athletics provides the most notable example in higher education of creating community among students and others who are different from each other. Mass spectator sports like football or basketball, of course, foster community in the most global sense. Attending games encourages what the 1990 Carnegie report calls a “celebrative community,” which remembers the heritage of the institution and shares rituals affirming both tradition and change. Indeed, the Carnegie report notes that “athletics has contributed greatly to the spirit of community on campus . . . powerfully uniting students, faculty, and alumni behind a common passion” (p. 59). Others have also noted that college sports provides a potent source of student spirit and popular entertainment, as well as an outlet for energy and a focal point for loyalty (Bailey & Littleton, 1991; Cady, 1978; Toma & Cross, 2000). Without question, campus constituents, even those who share very little in common, can unite around the success or failure of their athletic teams.

Our focus here is on the local level, however, in exploring how athletics can build community across difference within a team—and what this dynamic can teach the rest of us on campus as we try to do the same. Student-athletes in the five sports we examine are typically more diverse than college students as a whole. Students from underrepresented groups often account for a substantial portion of the composition of the college sports that receive the most attention at most of our largest universities: football, men’s basketball, and women’s basketball. Track and field for men and women alike is also notable for the diversity of its participants. In fact, students of color are often a majority in these five sports (NCAA, 1996).¹ Furthermore,

¹Forty-one percent of all male student athletes at Division I schools are people of color, while 24% of women athletes are people of color. Of the 5 schools in our study, minorities constitute 63% of football players, 52% of women basketball players, 75% of those in men’s basketball, 52% of those in women’s track and field, and 46% in men’s track and field.

although people of color and women continue to be underrepresented as coaches and administrators, particularly in relation to the proportions of students of color on certain teams, they are often better represented in athletics than elsewhere on campus (Toma & Cross, 2000).

Not only is diversity relatively pronounced in intercollegiate athletics, but so is a spirit of community. Levine and Cureton (1998) noted that the only exceptions they saw to the pattern of self-segregation by race on college campuses were in athletics and theater. Although they did not explore this notion, Levine and Cureton hypothesized that "the close working relationships among students in these fields appeared to overcome the perception of difference looming larger than commonality" (p. 87). They further posited that "close contact and common goals appeared to be the best stereotype-busters and inducement for integration on campus" (p. 87).

Finally, it is important to note that, while research on intercollegiate athletics has dealt with gender and race issues, there is little theoretical research on the specific topic of diversity among individual participants and nothing published that describes how intercollegiate athletics facilitates community. Indeed, scholarly research on intercollegiate athletics that looks at either gender or race focuses more on the impact of participation on self-esteem, cognitive outcomes, and academic persistence (Acosta & Carpenter, 1994; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Petrie, 1993; Young & Sowa, 1992). We attempt to fill this void by exploring the idea that athletics can illustrate much of what colleges and universities are trying to achieve in creating community out of difference.

CASES, METHOD, AND ANALYSIS

We visited five campuses that are representative of the different types of universities that compete at the highest and most visible level in intercollegiate athletics, Division I.² We used purposive sampling to select these campuses in an attempt to best represent the diversity of institutions that compete at this level (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although the campuses share an intense emotional and financial investment in college sports, they are different in several respects.³

We visited each campus in two-person teams for two or three days to gather data through interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and ob-

²At certain institutions, men and women competed on a single track and field team, which allowed us to explore the role of gender diversity within a team.

³These include academic reputation, geographic region, size and type of local community, diversity within the local community, diversity within the campus community, general openness to diversity, diversity among student-athletes, diversity among coaches and athletics administrators, strength of tradition in athletics, resources available to athletics, and the athletic department budget.

servations. Before visiting each campus, we secured the cooperation of the athletic department through the athletics director, whose office assisted in scheduling the interviews and focus groups. We conducted 12 to 15 formal interviews or focus groups on each campus, with 50 to 100 individuals per campus. We made particular efforts to include those who are traditionally underrepresented in intercollegiate athletics, such as women and African American administrators and Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American student-athletes.

We analyzed the interview and focus group transcripts using the constant comparative approach. Thus, we took an inductive approach to analyzing data, working to identify common themes and emerging patterns. We took appropriate measures to ensure that the derived categories were internally consistent but distinct from one another (Guba, 1981; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Two additional internal checks on decisions were to search throughout the analysis process for negative instances and for rival structures (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). We stopped searching for data to generate and substantiate our ideas when all the major concepts and their interrelationships were theoretically saturated—when we could find no additional data to embellish the ideas (Conrad, 1982).

Our data collection and analysis conformed to the highest standards of qualitative research. Instead of demonstrating constructs appropriate to quantitative research, such as reliability, internal validity, and external validity, we rigorously applied the parallel set of standards appropriate to qualitative research. Qualitative research establishes the trustworthiness of its findings by demonstrating that the findings are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. We used four techniques to ensure trustworthiness: triangulation, member checking, thick description, and keeping an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

LESSONS LEARNED

A remarkably strong sense of community exists among participants on the sports teams we studied—teams marked by their diversity. These bonds link students across most differences, including race, socioeconomic status, and geographic background. Student-athletes, coaches, and athletics administrators suggest several ways that participation fosters community for members of teams. Those who participate in intercollegiate athletics recognize the following traits as facilitating intergroup cooperation:

- Sharing a common goal
- Engaging in intense, frequent interaction
- Sharing adversity in the form of hard work, suffering, and sacrifice
- Having a common “enemy”
- Recognizing that each individual has something important to contribute

- Holding team members accountable
- Having coaches who guide them
- Exposure to difference from an early age

Sharing a Common Goal

Members of teams share a common, significant goal—winning. Students, coaches, and administrators from across sports and institutions agree that striving to win helps to foster community, bringing together even the most diverse individuals. Below are typical responses from those we interviewed:

It comes back to that common goal. You can work with anybody if you are trying to get to the same goal. [student-athlete]

It seems that while everybody brings something different to our team—personality wise, playing wise, the works—there is always the common goal and the common sports theme going, where we have similar interests. Because of that, there are always similar things for the team to talk about and to come together with. [athletics administrator]

When you get to college and you play a sport, you have one common objective and you're not seen as a person from a small town or a Black person or a White person. You tend to bond with your teammates no matter who they are or where they are from, just because you have that common objective. [student-athlete]

Respondents were clear that sharing a common goal allows teammates to value one another for the contributions they make to the team regardless of their background.⁴ A coach spelled it out:

I think athletics is pretty quantifiable in terms of what you are trying to achieve. You know, you win the game. . . . An extreme example would be Dennis Rodman. . . . Dennis Rodman can do what he can do and be a freak or whatever . . . be himself because he still gets the job done. And I think that attitude makes people accepting when they deal with differences; whereas when people don't have clear-cut objectives in terms of what the organization or group is trying to get done, . . . then there's a gray area, and personal biases come into play. [coach]

⁴This has not always been the case. People of color were long restricted from competing in intercollegiate sports. Administrators and coaches either banned them from participating altogether or severely limited the number of people of color who could be on a team or in the lineup at any one time. For instance, Davidson and North Carolina were the first institutions in the South to desegregate basketball in 1966, and it took until well into the 1970s until everyone else followed. It was well into the 1980s and even the 1990s before coaches created lineups as a color-blind exercise, both in the North and South.

Interestingly, when it comes to winning, individual goals and team goals are usually complementary, rather than contradictory. Whether athletes aspire to “go pro” or just achieve their personal best, most recognize that the best means to achieve these goals is to be a good team player. As a football player explained: “No matter how good you are, if you all aren’t on the same page, or having your best day together, then you might lose as a team.” A basketball player echoed his thoughts: “You have individual goals as a person to better yourself; and if you better yourself, then you better your team.” Not only is individual achievement conducive to winning as a team, but winning as a team is consistent with achieving individual goals. “I think everybody has individual goals . . . and goals for the overall team championship,” according to one student-athlete, “and if you are lucky it all comes together.”

Having a common goal is important even in track and field, which is more of an individual sport than team sports like basketball and football. “We basically have to have our individuals do well for the team to do well,” a track coach commented. As a track athlete added: “If we do what we’re supposed to do in practice and show up and do what we’re supposed to do in the meet, then as a team, we’ll come out all right.” Another track athlete explained that, in his experience, “the seasons when we have done the best are seasons when we have a really good core group working together. So, it is individual in one sense, but you cannot do it yourself.”

Engaging in Intense, Frequent Interaction

The significant amount of time that athletes spend with people from diverse backgrounds helps them to build community. Interacting with their teammates allows them to get to know people as individuals and to see beyond stereotypes. Athletes spend considerable time together on a daily basis. “Interaction is instrumental in the way that we get along,” a basketball player explained. “We have to go 4–5 days straight where we see no one but each other. . . . That leaves us here having to depend on one another.” Another basketball player suggested:

We are around each other constantly. Whether we have to do our individuals during the day and we run into each other and then we got to lift and practice, then team meal, whatever it is. . . . It is like we get to class and then we are with each other the rest of the day basically until we go home.

Another student-athlete added:

[Among] athletes . . . everybody has such a regimented schedule. You get out of class and this is where you spend the majority of your time. You have no choice but to interact. You have a lot in common with them as far as schedules and I don’t think anyone can really understand the life of a college athlete until you have lived it.

Considerable community building occurs among teams on the bus and plane trips to competitions off-campus. It is here, according to one coach, that "these kids talk to each other and this is where a lot of exchanges go on . . . ideas, dance and just general habits and these are the ways in which these barriers are broken down and later they begin to realize that an individual is an individual." The result of spending so much time together makes community within teams inevitable in several ways. The amount of time devoted to athletics limits interaction with others on campus. As an athlete explained: "That is who you get to know—you are surrounded by them. We don't really get to meet other people so much." Another stated: "You spend most of your time around athletes, around coaches, and you don't really interact with the other students unless they're your friends from home." Furthermore, through spending a lot of time together, student-athletes often become close friends. As a result, they seem to develop a high degree of comfort in responding to differences. As a coach explained: "They get to really know each other and they bond and they learn a lot about each other." In the words of an athlete: "We're like we are because we live together and play together and go through so much together and therefore we are close."

Another outcome of spending so much time together is that it allows students to see each other as individuals rather than as members of a particular social group. "Just like any preconception you have about anyone when they come in—once you know someone well, it really doesn't matter as much," a basketball player commented. According to a track athlete: "We don't talk about individual differences based on groups—we are just all friends and we are all comfortable around one another. We know each other as individuals." One coach, in particular, captured the thoughts of others when he explained how time together helped his athletes understand differences:

After a while, you begin to realize that . . . there are differences, but there are actually similarities to those within your family and within your neighborhood. This is where the barriers begin to melt away, with this realization. But the realization only comes about by having to work together . . . by being thrown together like that. Here is where you begin to see people as people and not as some racial group.

Sharing Adversity (Hard Work, Suffering, and Sacrifice)

It is not only the amount of time that athletes spend together and with their coaches that allows them to develop a sense of community, but it is also the adversity that they endure together that helps them to come together. As one student-athlete explained: "Put people together, and let them go through something together and they will get closer. . . . Like a family, when they go through hard times, it seems after the hard times they are

closer." A football player concurred: "When you have a whole group of people going through the same kinds of trials and tribulations, that tends to bond people a lot." When people in athletics describe how shared adversity brings people together, two common metaphors are family and war. According to an athlete:

Any time there is a struggle, I think people come together. . . . There is a struggle day in and day out. We take it back in history and you look at slavery, when they come up with these songs and singing and coming together, uniting as one. It was such a struggle that they had to come together in order to survive. Well, us on this team are family. These are my brothers and we are in a struggle every day and the struggle is over here, amongst ourselves, trying to go out and perform.

A football coach suggested that to understand the team-building process one needs to understand that

. . . it kind of goes back to the attitude of the marines or the armed service, where you go through boot camp together. You bond because you are suffering so much that you got to lean on each other to make it through. That is part of football. You are out there in 100 degree temperatures, all those pads, and you are out there all day long, you got coaches hollering and screaming, because that is part of the mentality of the game. Sometimes it is just medieval and just not right, but that is the way it is.

In fact, several coaches conveyed a sentiment similar to the following: "We try to make things so hard for them in conditioning that they have to stay together as a unit to be successful."

Having a Common "Enemy"

Sometimes what brings people together is the idea of "us vs. them." Having a common "enemy" helps teammates develop bonds with one another. Describing the competition against a rival team, a basketball player noted: "If we are getting ready to play a big game with a team we really hate . . . you can see how much we are depending on one another to get the job done."

Coaches commonly assume the role of the enemy. Often, as a coach explained, this is purposeful: "What you create as a coaching staff is when the kids come in you want them to work so hard together as a unit that it is kind of them against us at first." A student-athlete agreed: "In winter workouts and everything, they [coaches] will tell us that you guys are not up to standards right now. And that kind of rallies us together. We want to prove them wrong. . . . That is the kind of thing that coaches do."

Not only are rival teams and coaches cast as the enemy for student-athletes, the same is sometimes true of students on campus who do not com-

pete in intercollegiate athletics. Athletes typically perceive themselves as having responsibilities beyond those of other students. They often resent it that other students do not appreciate the extra burdens that being on a team entails. A football player explained:

This whole scholarship thing—regular students are upset that we are here with free tuition and free books. They think that we are just here to play football, that we aren't struggling like they are. What they don't understand is that we are in the same classes that they are, plus they have their afternoons free to go home and study and we are over here practicing, lifting weights, running.

Another student-athlete added:

You have respect for them [other students], but you know they don't really understand your time commitments and what you are going through and they think you have it easy and you don't have to do this and the professor is going to give you a passing grade regardless, and that makes you kind of upset at them that they don't respect you. You look at them and a lot of the kids here, they don't do any work until about two days before the test and they pull all-nighters. If we pulled an all-nighter, our bodies would break down the next day at practice. We don't have that luxury.

The perceived division between athletes and "regular" students is another likely reason athletes bond so closely with one another. As one explained: "There are going to be divides along any line, but I don't think it makes us . . . better than you or you're better than us, so we're not going to hang out with you. . . . We just understand more about what we are going through than you do." According to another student-athlete: "When we go out into society, we still got another struggle because people think we are getting handed something. They don't understand what we do. . . . So, we are family. We come here and we come together."

Recognizing That Each Individual Has Something Important to Contribute

In sports, according to respondents, everyone plays an important role in the final result. This sentiment is demonstrated by the following quotations:

In athletics in general, [as] in drama, you are clearly dealing with teams or casts in a play or something like that where the success of the team depends on all the players or the success of the drama depends on all the cast members and the lighting and everything else. [student-athlete]

That is the good thing about football—everybody is important. You need everybody out there. We have kids on our football team right now that I

don't understand— . . . If they ever played high school football, they must have had the worse team in the country. But they are still important to us—they serve a purpose. You just need bodies to line up. It takes so many people. If you have a first-team offense and a second-team offense, they all have to be ready to go. That is 22 players. Then a first- and second-team defense—that is 44 players. Then you have 7–8 specialists—that is 51 players. Then you have to have a whole other team to practice against. [coach]

Similarly, people in athletics share a belief in the axiom that a team, like a chain, is “only as good as its weakest link.” As a result, coaches and teammates support those who are struggling. They see it as being in their own interest. One coach explained his philosophy as “coaching from the bottom up.” He believed in helping the worst athletes to get better so that they push the others to improve: “The measure of a program is how good the less strong athletes are.” In describing how he gets his team to pull together, another coach suggested: “If one person or a couple of people fall, then the whole group is going to tumble. So, like a three-man workout, you got to have someone to push you. . . . They have to push each other.”

Student-athletes also noted the importance of recognizing the contribution of all teammates by supporting them. A track and field athlete, for example, explained: “It's really hard to run until you're dying if you are by yourself. But if you have got six people out there who are pulling you along, it is a huge difference.” A basketball player concurred:

We help each other. We try to do a little more when someone in line says. . . . You know, I'm a little tired. If you know, then you jump ahead of them or something in line something like that . . . cause sometimes they come to practice and they just need a little break, a little support.

This type of support occurs both off the court or field, as well. In the words of one basketball player: “When something happens with another athlete, we all rally around each other for support, just because we know we are all athletes.”

Acknowledging the different roles that teammates play on the team and supporting one another helps to engender a feeling of community among the student-athletes. Teammates can readily see how they are contributing, when they are being helped by one another, and when that teamwork pays off in the form of wins, better running times, or in any number of other ways:

You learn that you have to be cooperative and work together. . . . You learn to work with people; and if you see some differences, it is not an impediment because there is something for this person to do. There is some way this person can contribute. In terms of our sport, we have some very, very fast and accomplished people and we have some people who aren't as fast, but there is a place for them. They can and do make contributions. Some of them may not be as good as other kids, but they are there helping them, rooting for them to give it all. [coach]

Holding Team Members Accountable

Athletes, coaches, and even administrators in intercollegiate athletics are accountable for what they do—and what they fail to do. They know that they will be evaluated on the spot through the final score in a game or their record of wins and losses over a season. The immediate accountability inherent in sports pushes people in athletics to do whatever it takes to “get the job done.” In terms of building community, knowing their achievement will be readily and publicly evaluated prompts those in athletics to look beyond differences and helps them to cooperate with one another. “We all come here on full scholarship,” a basketball player suggested, “so when you come here you know that whether you like your teammates or not, they are your teammates. . . . You have no choice but to find a way to get along with one another.”

The accountability with which they live each day can separate athletes from other students. Athletes describe what they do in college as being equivalent to having “two full-time jobs—being an athlete and being a student.” Sometimes, the job comes in the form of their athletic scholarship—or even a professional career following college for a very lucky and very talented few. Despite issues of compensation, student-athletes are acutely aware that failure to perform means that they could find themselves “unemployed.” Since student-athletes must maintain sufficient academic standing to remain eligible to compete, performance and evaluation extends to the classroom. Furthermore, athletes must follow team rules regulating their off-field or off-court conduct. As an athlete explained: “If they get the job done, great. If they didn’t, at the end of the year when scholarships come up, they’re outta here.”

Athletes view accountability as both a responsibility and an opportunity. Specifically, many are aware that they would not be able to attend college and enjoy the opportunities that come with the experience without an athletic scholarship. “I really think of this as a full time job,” said one athlete. “It is an opportunity that I have always wanted. To think I am saving my parents one hundred grand because I have to play basketball everyday and do something that I love.” Another student-athlete explained:

I am talking about all week. We don’t just do this [practice, hard work] one day, not just Monday. We are talking about Monday through Friday, *deja vu*. . . . This is our way to the future. You play ball to make some money. It’s all about—I mean—there’s a lot of money out there.

Because the stakes are so high, if working closely with teammates is what is necessary to allow athletes to take advantage of the opportunities before them, then that is what they will do.

Having Coaches Who Guide Them

Through the process of recruiting high school athletes to their teams, coaches get to know their students and their families very well. Once the

students enroll, coaches work closely with them for long hours on a daily basis. All coaches understand that establishing the hallmarks of community—characteristics such as teamwork—are the keys to success. In doing so, coaches serve as role models for their teams—either positive or negative. According to an athletics administrator: “How you respond to the media scrutiny, the fans, and that kind of thing in your winning and losing certainly fosters a sense of community or can be a detriment to community [on your team].” In praising how one of his coaches builds community, another administrator described how, at his initial press conference, “the first thing he says was: Win or lose, we are family.” Another coach described how he tries to be a role model:

I think, as a coach, I see our role here as educators. And all of us take that role as educators seriously. I think what we do and what we tolerate and don't tolerate . . . our ability to speak and correct and set examples is a major part of our ability to have strong programs that do build a sense of community.

One of the ways that coaches facilitate team work is by dictating the behavior of the athletes. Coaches are able to do this, in part, because they have substantial power and control over their athletes. As one coach explained:

[In sports,] there is someone [the coach] who sets the rules and parameters and the expectations for behavior and expectations for the way people treat each other and holds them accountable to that. . . . In a sense, the rest of university life doesn't have that oversight. They don't get together on a regular basis, every day with the same adult in charge saying: “This is where we are going. This is what we are trying to do and here is what I expect of all of you in order to achieve that goal.”

Another coach agreed:

We all have say so on their scholarships and stuff. That is one thing we can hold over some of 'em's head. . . . We have team meetings and we talk about what we believe in and what they should do, how they should act when they go on trips and everything; and if they don't follow those, then they know they're in trouble.

Another way that coaches facilitate and strengthen community on their teams is by helping to solve problems and disagreements between or among teammates. A basketball player explained: “They keep us in line. They can sense when things are going wrong. They bring us back together.” Another coach explained her responsibility here: “Any time you are on a team, whatever the differences, the role of the coach is to facilitate a dialogue and to try to get them to communicate as adults.”

There's going to be some differences with them, and we have to try to get in there and try to mend them together because all of them—everybody's—got a different opinion about things. They're not going to agree. . . . It is tough, but just talking with them and seeing what the problem is and going from there and trying to solve the problem, trying to get them together. [coach]

Similarly, another coach stated that his job is to "make sure they understand we are all in this together."

Finally, coaches facilitate community by making individual athletes understand that they are important. This is essential, one coach explained, because "the way we are handling them is a good example of how they should interact with each other." In return for the support demonstrated by many coaches, athletes were clear that they would "lay it on the line for a coach that really shows that he loves you on a personal level." However, coaches and athletics administrators recognize the "line" between being too close and not being close enough to the athletes in their charge. As an athletics administrator explained: "You want them to respect you and you want them to feel like they could come to you with whatever problem they have, but there is definitely a line that has to be there." While conscious of that line, coaches believe:

You have to care about the kids and care about them as people, not just as football players. I think kids see that. . . . I don't ever try to tell them what to do. I just say, "Let me give you some advice and you take that advice and use it the way you need to."

Exposure to Difference from an Early Age

One of the explanations given for why athletes are able to work with others from different backgrounds is beyond the control of those within higher education. Specifically, many Division I athletes were exposed to teammates and opponents from diverse backgrounds at an early age. As such, their ability to work with different people comes not only from day-to-day interactions but also from experience. Athletic teams are typically more diverse than the other social settings that young people experience in their neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Broad exposure to difference is almost a given in athletics, as athletes compete with and against people from socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and religious backgrounds other than theirs. This early exposure to difference allows individuals to work "with a whole bunch of people, 'cause you're used to doing it." An athletics administrator explained:

When a young kid goes and signs up for the YMCA team in the third grade, they have no choice about the ethnic makeup of that team, nor should they, so it is a natural for these kids. The experiences they have had and the relationships they have had—they start at a young age and for the most part they don't separate.

Similarly, a coach commented: "I think in athletics . . . since the time of their growing up, they played together, worked out together. . . . You don't think about it [difference] like in society. We're just used to it." Finally, a student-athlete stated how early exposure to difference helped him to understand it:

We have all been playing for such a long time. . . . We have been playing since we have been five years old, so we are now more open-minded and ready to accept this person because of what they can bring to the table. Athletics makes that a lot easier because we have been doing it for so long.

LESSONS CONTEXTUALIZED

Before discussing the application of these ideas to other aspects of campus life, it is important to understand them contextually and from a theoretical perspective. Indeed, the answers given by those in athletics to explain their ability to respond affirmatively to the differences on their teams parallel foundational hypotheses proposed in social psychology. Specifically, Allport (1954) hypothesized that prejudice between groups is lessened when the group members possess equal status, seek common goals, are dependent upon each other, and interact with the positive support of authorities. Similarly, Sherif et al. (1961) proposed the superordinate-goal hypothesis, which states that when groups of diverse individuals are seeking to achieve "compelling and highly appealing" goals and must cooperate to achieve those goals, then conflict within the group will be minimized. Certainly the responses by respondents in the present study suggest that these theories are useful in explaining much of the positive intergroup behaviors and attitudes.

It should also be noted that, in the 1970s and early 1980s, several researchers explored the applicability of these two theories to sports teams with mixed results (Chu & Griffey, 1981; McClendon & Eitzen, 1975; Miracle, 1981; Scott & Damico, 1984; Sigelman & Welch, 1993). Some of the researchers found, for example, that White athletes participating on sports teams with African American athletes had more positive racial attitudes than those in control groups (Chu & Griffey, 1981; McClendon & Eitzen, 1975; Scott & Damico, 1984). Research concluded that the same benefits do not seem to hold for African American athletes who are on mixed teams (McClendon & Eitzen, 1975). These studies also conclude that the win/loss record of the team affects intergroup cooperation (McClendon & Eitzen, 1975), that the positive effects were greater for those in individual sports than those in team sports (Chu & Griffey, 1981), and that the effects of positive intergroup cooperation learned on the athletic fields do not readily occur in other venues (Miracle, 1981). All of these studies utilized quantitative experimental designs in their analyses and unfortunately, all are dated.

Our study, of course, uses qualitative methods to explore the coaches', athletes' and administrators' views of diversity in intercollegiate athletics. While our results tend to mirror the findings of prior research on this topic, our methods broaden the perspective of how participants view and achieve intergroup cooperation. Specifically, if one looks at our lessons in light of the theories that Allport (1954) and Sherif (1961) proposed, one can see both overlap and new perspectives. Our findings and these theories, for example, agree that sharing a common goal, recognizing that each individual has something important to contribute, holding team members accountable, and having a coach that guides the interaction are important components to bridging intergroup differences. Our research also highlights the importance of engaging in intense, frequent interaction, sharing adversity, and having a common enemy⁵ if individuals are to come together and bridge differences.

Our methodology also allows us to acknowledge that intercollegiate athletics provides a poor model of inclusiveness when it comes to diversity in at least two areas. First, the student-athletes, coaches, and administrators we interviewed consistently provided homophobic perspectives. In contrast to the ways in which athletics builds community with little regard for racial, socioeconomic, geographic, and other differences, the topic of sexual orientation remains a complex, potentially divisive issue in athletics. We found minimal outright hostility to gays and lesbians on various teams, but it is clear that students, coaches, and administrators alike in athletics are generally unwilling to confront and accept homosexuality. One common response is to avoid consideration of the issue altogether, instead pointing out the presence of gays or lesbians in other sports. Another response is to argue that it would be impossible for gays or lesbians to be productive members of teams given the reaction that "straight" coaches and teammates would have to them. The bottom line is that, although people in athletics are progressive and successful in building community from other diverse groups, they lag considerably in recognizing the place of gays and lesbians on their teams.⁶

⁵Some scholars may be bothered by the notion of having a common enemy as a means to facilitate intergroup cooperation because they view this device as inherently exclusionary and negative. Allport (1954) suggests, however, that any time you have a community or in-group, you also have an out-group. He further suggests that one's loyalty to the in-group does not necessarily equate with hostility toward the out-group. As one can see in the examples that follow, having a common enemy can be regarded metaphorically and need not be reduced to meaning the hatred of those who are different.

⁶We delve into these issues in a companion paper: L. E. Wolf-Wendel, J. D. Toma, & C. M. Morphey. *How much difference is too much difference? Perceptions of gays and lesbians in intercollegiate athletics*. Paper presented at the ASHE annual meeting, November 2000, Sacramento, CA.

The second shortcoming in intercollegiate athletics is diversity in the coaching and administrative ranks. While traditional barriers related to race and ethnicity have fallen among participants, athletic departments have not achieved the kind of diversity within their staffs that they have within their teams. Too few women and minorities hold positions of authority in athletics, particularly when considering the racial composition of certain teams, particularly prominent teams. Often, this reality was intertwined with the homophobia found in the athletics community. For example, student athletes (and their parents) were “warned” about the lesbian coaches at University X when being recruited by another university. In this respect, promoting or hiring a female coach might be viewed by universities as a risky proposition because it could be used as a recruiting tool against that institution by other coaches and universities. Many respondents in our study, especially those in the coaching and administrative ranks who represent traditionally marginalized groups, identified this important limitation to responding to difference in intercollegiate athletics.

LESSONS APPLIED

As noted, Smith (1995) suggests that diversity can be framed in terms of both access and climate. We knew at the beginning of our study that the composition of athletic teams was diverse in that access by members of underrepresented groups is less of an issue in intercollegiate athletics than it might be on other parts of campus. From a climate perspective, we found that teams were also particularly successful in integrating students from a vast array of backgrounds into a coherent whole. Our findings support the observations made by Levine and Cureton (1998) that athletics creates environments that are conducive to positive intergroup interactions. Student-athletes blend into teams where factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and geographic diversity assume much less meaning relative to what individuals can do to contribute to the common goals of the team. Teams set aside the importance of group differences as they come together to work toward the accomplishment of goals that they agree are significant and worth working toward. While part of this is intrinsic to college sports, community also results through affirmative efforts by students, coaches, and administrators to work across difference. The question remains: In what ways can the experience of athletic teams serve as a model to other campus constituencies facing the same challenges and seeking the same opportunities in building community from difference?

In working toward building community from difference, those involved in academic and student affairs might consider, within their own settings and contexts, the overall model that we draw from athletics. While considering the various “lessons” we explore above one by one is illuminating,

they should not be implemented in a piecemeal fashion. Instead, it is the combination of factors—common goals, intense frequent interaction, shared adversity, etc.—that helps teams facilitate community across difference. Potential avenues abound in higher education for paralleling the success of intercollegiate athletics in building community from difference or building strength from what some consider a challenge. Below we offer a few examples that use some, though not all of the lessons learned from athletics within both curricular and co-curricular realms of higher education.

Curricular Examples

College classrooms and campuses are becoming more diverse, not only in terms of race and gender, but also in terms of academic preparation and learning styles. Just as athletics programs and coaches have devised strategies appropriate for their diverse teams, individuals in higher education need to consider how to construct academic programs and curricula that are effective for our diverse students. The findings from this study provide some direction and suggest that curricular strategies can be improved by taking into account some of the lessons learned about community building in intercollegiate athletics. Two promising strategies are cooperative learning and learning communities.

1. Cooperative learning. Much of what we have learned from our research and identified as the "strength" of athletics in terms of building community can be easily linked to research and practice on cooperative learning in heterogeneous classrooms. For example, research on effective cooperative learning in classrooms where students come from diverse backgrounds shows that the curriculum must require unique roles for students and acknowledge the competencies and different skills that students bring to their pursuance of a shared goal (Cohen, 1994; Cohen, Lotan, & Holthuis, 1995). This same research acknowledges the importance of the metaphor of the teacher as coach, particularly in the role of "assigning competence" to students who might otherwise feel less capable of learning or, in the case of athletics, competing (Bruffee, 1999; Cohen, 1994; Cohen, Lotan, & Holthuis, 1995). These studies show that new strategies must be constructed and applied when educators confront the unique challenges of a diverse classroom. Using traditional curricula and assigning students to "work groups" is not enough. Instead, faculty must acknowledge the realities of the classroom and the different backgrounds and skills that students bring to classroom settings and cocurricular activities (Bruffee, 1999).

Like high-functioning athletic teams, well-designed cooperative learning assignments can offer groups of students a common goal (learning or earning a grade), frequent interaction, shared adversity (difficult assignments, tasks, or learning goals), and accountability for the outcome (through a shared grade and individual responsibilities). They can also allow the pro-

fessor to serve as a “coach” to facilitate intragroup cooperation by providing each group member with important roles to play that capitalize on their strengths and a structure that allows everyone in the group to support one another and to contribute in a meaningful way. The only lesson not directly incorporated in this example is that of having a “common enemy,” although one could envision a cooperative learning scenario that involves groups competing against one another to achieve a learning goal. In this scenario, the competing teams would serve the role of enemy. This idea is not uncommon in engineering programs, for example, where groups of students compete to design the best cement canoe or most efficient solar vehicle. Research demonstrates that intergroup competition, though not beneficial in all circumstances, can be an effective learning tool and can facilitate intragroup cooperation (Cook, 1978; Johnson et. al, 1984).

2. Learning communities. According to Gabelnick et al. (1990), a learning community is “any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses . . . so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise” (p. 10). Though the creation of learning communities varies considerably by institution, research has demonstrated positive outcomes for participants including assisting new students in the transition to college, facilitating student achievement, and ultimately improving retention (Tinto, 1994).

As with cooperative learning, the success of learning communities in bridging differences between students can be enhanced by looking to intercollegiate athletics as a model. Athletics and learning communities bring students together to achieve a common goal—winning for the former and learning for the latter. As students in learning communities engage in a common academic curriculum and often participate in shared cocurricular pursuits such as study groups and other forms of out-of-class activities, they engage in intense frequent interaction. Just as with athletics, this interaction allows learning community participants to break down stereotypes, cooperate across differences, and recognize the unique abilities and contributions of their “team” members. One might argue that for students in learning communities, examination periods are roughly equivalent to the tests athletes face in their contests, because it is during these intensive periods when students learn whether their shared experiences pay off in terms of their increased knowledge and better grades.

There are no “enemies” found within learning communities, although one could look at the term metaphorically and envision the “enemy” as the difficulty of the curriculum. The comparison between learning communities and athletics could break down in two important areas. First, faculty who engage in learning communities usually do not play the role of a

coach—at least not explicitly. The disciplinary nature of faculty work militates against faculty members taking the lead in coordinating learning activities across courses and developing a coach-like relationship with individual students (Gabelnick et. al, 1990). Second, learning communities do not always bring together a diverse group of students. On the other hand, one could envision a learning community where faculty members or student affairs professionals purposefully bring diverse students together to participate and serve a more active role in facilitating group dynamics among learning community members.

Co-Curricular Examples

Across campus, students come together in a variety of venues to engage in activities that enhance their in-class experiences. These out-of class experiences can also be enhanced by looking to intercollegiate athletics as a model for getting students who are different from one another to work together. Campuses can provide opportunities for students to participate in community-building activities during orientation. For example, the student-led orientation program at Texas A&M, called Fish Camp, brings students together in a retreat setting where they share common experiences and even “survive” some degree of adversity. Such extended orientation programs allow for intense interaction among participants and allow individuals to make unique contributions to the group process. These types of extended orientation programs can result in positive intergroup interactions, especially if there is someone who can play the role of coach. They do not typically, however, have the kind of accountability standards that are found in intercollegiate athletics so they may not work as effectively.

Campus community service activities can also use the model offered by intercollegiate athletics in that they typically bring students together to work toward common significant goals that require collective efforts. In addition, such volunteer activities, especially those that are more extended in duration, allow students to engage in intense, frequent interactions and to play roles that capitalize on their strengths. One model of community service allows groups of students to work together in teams, even competing against other student teams. This model creates an “enemy” in the form of the other teams. Examples of this kind of competitive community service already exist in the form of blood drives and other volunteerism-based activities where student groups compete against one another based on the funds they raise or the hours they volunteer. On many campuses, Greek systems offer opportunities for groups to engage in these kinds of activities. Traditionally, however, Greek systems have not been particularly good at building community across diverse groups. The biggest challenge here might be incorporating these kinds of activities without building upon already existing differences between Greeks and non-Greeks on campus. One means

of doing this might be to enlarge the groups competing against each other, thereby allowing for greater diversity among participants. Community service activities that incorporate competition between residence halls, classes, or even between campuses might be an answer.

LESSONS CONCLUDED

In light of the suggestions offered, it is important to remind those responsible for academic and student life on campus that coaches contribute substantially to the successful integration of their teams. Just as coaches play a significant role in bringing athletes together to create community, administrators, faculty, and student leaders can serve this same function on the rest of campus. In athletics, coaches emphasize what each individual can bring to the team. Leaders involved in the construction of communities elsewhere on campus would do well to consider the need for a “power forward” as well as a “shooting guard” when pulling students together into a cohesive community. That is, we need to help faculty and student services leaders to think beyond diversity for diversity’s sake. Instead, we need to educate our college and university leaders to understand that we can build community by building upon our differences and learning—along with students—that the skills and aptitudes each of us brings to the table makes our larger community capable of achieving greater things.

These ideas work only if groups are themselves diverse. Given the tendency of groups to self-segregate—something that occurs even in athletics—leaders need to make a conscious effort to introduce diversity into the campus mix. Unlike the majority of the student-athletes, coaches, and athletics administrators in our study, relatively few students have extensive exposure to settings marked by diversity before coming to campus. Those in academic and student life generally do not enjoy the same benefits as their colleagues in athletics of working in a context where people have become more comfortable with diversity due to long exposure to it. In contrast to the rest of campus, student-athletes, coaches, and athletics administrators view diversity as a given—they expect their teams to include students from different backgrounds and races and thus rarely focus on diversity per se. They are instead able to focus on the goals that are integral to their sport; as a result, they can view diversity, not as a goal or as a barrier, but simply as an expected means of achieving their ultimate goal. Because those in academic and student life cannot expect diversity they must instead focus on “putting diversity together,” whether through various types of programming or more structural approaches like the construction of learning communities.

Despite these shortcomings, athletics reminds the rest of campus that through the application of some very basic philosophies and concepts, “winning” through building community out of difference is possible. It also re-

minds us that accomplishing goals involves hard work and sacrifice over a sustained period. And although athletics programs are unique in some respects, we believe that the rest of campus can learn some lessons from the ways in which athletics programs have been particularly successful at bridging differences among students from diverse backgrounds.

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