

# ResearchLink

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## What does LGBTQ ally development and engagement look like in athletics?

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Heterosexism, the societal and institutional privileging of heterosexuality, is still pervasive in the sports context despite growing national acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities in the U.S. To address heterosexism, it is important to focus on heterosexual people, and particularly heterosexual allies who may be well-positioned to take a stand against it. Increasingly, programs that promote allyship are becoming more popular in university settings, including collegiate sports. This ResearchLink describes Dr. Russell Toomey's research examining heterosexual allies in collegiate sports contexts.



## Unpacking Key Terms

- **Heterosexism** is the societal and institutional privileging of heterosexuality as the norm, and the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual. Heterosexism can be subtle or overt, and it is enacted at interpersonal, institutional, or structural levels.
- **Heterosexist bias-based incidents** in the sports context occur when athletes experience harassment, discrimination, or exclusion because of their sexual minority identity.
- **LGBTQ ally** is defined as a member of the “dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate for, the oppressed population” (Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 195). In the context of college athletics, allies should act in ways that reduce heterosexist climate and bias-based incidents in the sports context.

### Finding #1 – College student-athletes define being an ally to the LGBTQ community as involvement in advocacy behaviors and supporting LGBTQ teammates

A recent study by Dr. Toomey explored heterosexual student athletes’ own definitions of LGBTQ allyship. Students were asked to describe what it means to them personally to be an “athlete ally” to the LGBTQ community.

First, participants identified the importance of **standing and speaking up** and defending the rights of LGBTQ teammates.

- For some this also meant **political action**, the idea that being an LGBTQ ally involves involvement at the political level.
- For others it involved **supporting** members of the LGBTQ community and other athletes.
- Finally, another way of standing and speaking up was **role modeling**, or the idea that student athletes have a responsibility as athletes and role models on campus to model being an LGBTQ ally.

Second, **attitudes** were identified that define being an LGBTQ ally, specifically certain types of beliefs or understandings about the LGBTQ community. These included:

- Accepting attitudes;
- Attitudes related to equality and human rights, or the idea that LGBTQ individuals deserve the same rights and treatment as heterosexual persons;
- And non-judgmental attitudes, meaning not judging LGBTQ teammates.

Student athletes also described different experiences which influenced allyship. These included personal beliefs, relationships with LGBTQ people, family socialization, and discrimination.

Lastly, there were also students who did not identify or see themselves as LGBTQ allies.

## **Finding #2 – While most heterosexual student athletes were not allies, two different types of LGBTQ allies emerged.**

In a second study, Dr. Toomey examined profiles of ally development and engagement, hoping to better understand different experiences of allyship among heterosexual student athletes.

- The largest profile, or group, of students **were not LGBTQ allies**, and engaged in little to no actions associated with being an ally and indicated little to no involvement in ally related events.
- The next largest group, about one third of the sample, **were engaged but not visible LGBTQ allies**: they had thought to some degree about why they became an ally to the LGBTQ community, engaged in a moderate level of ally actions, but reported attending few to no events intended to support the LGBTQ community.
- The smallest group, which was made of 7.5% of the sample, were **highly engaged and visible LGBTQ allies**: ally identity was salient or important to them, and they reported high levels of ally actions, as well as high levels of involvement in ally-related events.

In addition, heterosexual student athletes who were in each ally group also differed in their affirmative attitudes about LGBTQ people, their religious beliefs about LGBTQ people, and social justice attitudes:

- Some students were engaged but not visible allies. These students were more likely to report affirmative beliefs about LGBTQ people or to feel that their coach was supportive of LGBTQ people.
- Students who were highly engaged and visible allies were more likely to report higher levels of social justice values.

## **Finding # 3 – Individual and climate-level factors affect heterosexual student athletes' likelihood of intervening in an incident of heterosexist bias.**

Finally, in a mixed-methods study of heterosexual college student athletes, the contrast between attitudes and actions was evident. Heterosexual students reported relatively high levels of **personally accepting attitudes toward LGBTQ people** but few reported intervening in bias against LGBTQ athletes.

- Several factors influenced how likely heterosexual athletes were to intervene. First, heterosexual athletes who **reported affirming personal beliefs toward LGBTQ people** also had greater likelihood of intervening in bias incidents.
- On the other hand, **perceptions of heterosexist sports climate** were associated with lower likelihood of intervening. Taken together, this suggests that both individual and climate-level factors both influence how heterosexual athletes decide whether or not to intervene in bias incidents targeting LGBTQ student athletes.

## Key Takeaways

- Among student athletes, it was found that many students did not see themselves as allies. This suggests that there are potentially heterosexual student athletes who are not currently allies but could become allies in the future.
- In addition, student allies described a variety of types of allyship.
- Finally, certain individual and department-level factors were associated with students' allyship, including perceived coach support.

## Recommendations

Recommendations for how to address heterosexist bias in collegiate sports environments suggests that it requires the intervention against incidents of heterosexist bias, along with anti-discrimination and anti-bias policies at the department level (Griffin & Taylor, 2013). Institutions of higher education, including sports departments, should focus on both cultivating affirming personal beliefs by raising awareness and educating heterosexual students about heterosexism. Further, efforts should be made to address and eradicate heterosexist sports climates in such settings, through policies as well as education and investment by coaches and administrators.

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