

The Transgender Athlete
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"I was really worried about coming out as transgender to anyone else because I knew there weren't any policies. I was so afraid that my school would ban me from my sport and that was the only thing I had at the time. I finally decided to come out my senior year of college because I was going down a slippery slope and I didn't think I could pull myself out if I didn't come out."

--A transgender former college athlete

Many transgender athletes relate similar experiences that make their participation on college teams painful and frustrating: An athlete is called "she/he" and "it" by opposing players during a game. An athlete stops playing sports in college because it becomes too uncomfortable to use the locker room. An athlete has to change clothes in a utility closet separate from the rest of the team. An athlete quits the team because it becomes too painful to keep reminding coaches and teammates about the athlete's preferred pronouns. None of the institutions or athletic conferences in which these athletes compete have a policy governing the inclusion of transgender student-athletes on sports teams.
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These descriptions and many others like them characterize the experiences of many young people who identify as transgender and want to play on their colleges' athletic teams. Transgender is a broad term used to describe the experiences of people whose gender identity and expression do not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Some people transition to live as their preferred gender by changing their names and the pronouns they use to refer to themselves. They express their preferred gender through choice of clothes, hairstyles and other manifestations of gender expression and identity. Some transgender people undergo reconstructive surgery or take hormones to make their bodies more congruent with their internal sense of themselves. Others do not.

Since the increased visibility of a transgender rights movement in the 1980s and a school-based LGBT "safe schools" movement in the 1990s, more young people have the language and information they need to identify the gender dissonance they experience between the sex they were assigned at birth and the gender identity that they know to be true for them. They are increasingly identifying themselves as transgender and they are doing it at earlier ages. In addition, parents are much more likely to support their transgender children and advocate for them in schools. As more states add "gender identity and expression" to non-discrimination legislation and as these legal protections are applied to schools, transgender students and their parents have increased leverage to ensure that educational institutions address their needs. K-12 school and college educators find themselves playing catch up as they learn to accommodate the educational needs of trans-identified students and protect them from bullying and harassment in school or at college.

Many of these young people want to play on their schools' or colleges' sports teams. As a result, athletic directors and coaches increasingly find themselves unprepared to make decisions about what team a transgender student is eligible to play for. As the number of transgender students who want to play on school sports teams increases, school athletic leaders must identify effective and fair policies to ensure their right to participate. Though the issue of accommodating the needs of transgender students, staff and faculty in higher education has received attention, it has not been adequately addressed in athletics. Many colleges have changed policies on access to bathrooms, residence halls or face controversy because they have not done so. In athletics, conversations about accommodating transgender students have only recently begun.

For the most part, athletic teams at high schools and colleges are segregated by sex and divided into men's and women's teams. For transgender students, determining on which gender's team, if any, they will be allowed to play can be a difficult process fraught with misconceptions, ignorance and discrimination. Few high school or collegiate athletic programs, administrators or coaches are prepared to address a transgender student's interest in participating in athletics in a systematic, fair and effective manner. Few athletes have been given the information that would prepare them to participate on a team with a teammate whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.

The vast majority of school athletic programs have no policy governing the inclusion of transgender athletes and athletic staff have no idea how to accommodate a transgender student who wants to play on a college sports team. Even basic accommodations can be confusing, such as what pronouns or name to use to refer to that student, where that student should change clothes for practice or competition, what bathroom that student should use, or how to apply team dress codes.

Washington is the only state that has a policy identifying the process for enabling transgender students to participate in high school athletics. The National Collegiate Athletic Association does not prohibit transgender students from participating in NCAA sponsored events, but recommends that NCAA member institutions use a student's official identity documents (birth certificate, driver's license or passport) to determine whether a student-athlete is eligible to compete on the men's or women's team. Because of wide variations in state requirements for changing identity documents, however, the NCAA recommendation unintentionally creates an inequitable situation depending on where the student is enrolled.

Applying the 2004 International Olympic Committee policy governing the participation of transsexual athletes in IOC sanctioned events to collegiate athletics is problematic for a number of reasons. The IOC policy, though pioneering, is criticized by knowledgeable medical experts and transgender advocates for requiring genital reconstructive surgery as a criterion for eligibility. Moreover, applying the IOC policy to collegiate sports does not take into account the eligibility limits placed on individual athletes or the age and developmental needs of this age group.

After a number of informal discussions with collegiate athletic leaders and transgender students who want to participate in sports, the National Center for Lesbian Rights Sports Project and the Women's Sports Foundation initiative, It Takes A Team! joined forces to organize a national meeting on these topics in the fall. Two of the guiding principles for the discussion were 1) Participation in interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics is a valuable part of the education experience for all students and 2) Transgender student-athletes should have equal opportunity to participate in sports.

The 40 participants, including representatives from the NCAA and Interscholastic High School Athletic Association leaders, were an impressive group of experts from a range of disciplines — law, medicine, sports, advocacy, and athletics — all of whom share an interest in transgender issues. The goals were to identify best practices and develop model policies for high school and collegiate athletic leaders to ensure the full inclusion of transgender student-athletes. A report will be issued in 2010 outlining specific recommendations for high school and collegiate athletic programs.

Specific issues discussed included:

- * From a medical perspective, what are the salient factors that should be used to determine for which team (women's or men's) a transgender student is eligible to participate?

- * From a policy and school regulation perspective, how can we develop policies governing the participation of transgender students in athletics that adhere to state and federal laws protecting students from discrimination based on gender identity and expression?

- * From an athletic perspective, how can we address concerns about "competitive equity" or "unfair advantage" while acknowledging the broad diversity of performance already exhibited within both women's and men's sports?

- * From an education perspective, how can we ensure that athletic administrators, staff, parents of athletes and student-athletes have access to sound and effective education related to the participation of transgender students in athletics?

In our forthcoming report, we provide recommendations to address each of these questions.

The most powerful information came from the transgender student-athletes in attendance, who detailed their challenges and triumphs and the importance of high school and collegiate sport participation. Their stories reinforced the necessity of developing sound policies and practices that enable transgender student-athletes to play the sports they love in an environment where their gender identity and expression are accepted as one more aspect of the diversity typical of school and college sports teams.

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