

# Making Meaningful Cultural Change in Athletic Departments

October 9, 2020

---

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged collegiate sports in ways we could not have anticipated. From the obvious – deciding when and how to practice and play safely – to addressing grievances voiced by student-athletes related to fairness, inequality and their personal experiences with institutions and coaches. Student-athletes are voicing their concerns through various channels, on campus and off, and demanding acknowledgement and change. They are also seeing and are inspired by the activism of professional athletes who, with some success, are forcing conversations with professional sports organizations about equity and fairness issues that have long been ignored. Their concerns invoke significant legal, educational and moral tenets and practices that colleges and universities should and can address.

Goulston & Storrs has developed a unique program for partnering with colleges and universities to address proactively the challenges that college and university athletic departments face with cultural issues. This [cultural assessment program](#) has three phases. *First*, a retrospective look at its sports culture in addition to evaluating the current climate of its sports program. *Second*, an objective analysis of the retrospective review and current culture. *Third*, developing an action plan for achieving meaningful change in partnership with the college or university.

## **A Unique Environment**

Colleges and universities face unique challenges in responding to demands for accountability, action and change in response to racism, discrimination, and other inequities on campuses. As evidenced by the growing number of national news stories exposing reports of unfair treatment based on race, gender and other characteristics in college sports, student-athletes understand that by stepping outside of the campus community and into the public sphere, they can bring meaningful attention to their concerns.

As the pandemic wears on, institutions have been forced to reevaluate their approaches to providing space for the learning and growth that is essential to students' education. At the same time, institutions are being urged to take immediate action to confront campus cultures and develop plans for eliminating barriers to inclusion in all areas of the institution, including within sports programs. Institutions that fail to respond appropriately or remain silent on these issues risk having their actions (or inaction) perceived as an endorsement of the cultural and systemic issues which have sparked outrage from many student-athletes, coaching and other staff, and alumni. In some instances those same institutions also risk finding themselves at the center of highly publicized, protracted legal disputes with students, staff, and other stakeholders concerning compliance with laws such as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits

discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs or activities that receive federal funds, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits workplace discrimination and harassment based on race, color, sex, and other protected characteristics. These potential risks underscore the value of an objective cultural assessment for any college or university that seeks to work toward meaningful change, ensure institutional accountability, and maintain the support of past, current and future constituents.

### **Opportunity in Challenge: Meaningful Change**

Although it may seem daunting and unfamiliar, the best starting point for institutions that seek to assess the culture of their sports programs is to recognize the opportunity in the challenge. By creating space to engage in a dialogue with student-athletes and staff, and taking a proactive approach to evaluating the culture of the athletics department, an institution can demonstrate care and concern for the well-being of its student-athletes and the employees who work with them.

### **Goulston & Storrs' Unique Cultural Assessment Program**

The first phase of the assessment includes reviewing reports or complaints and having trained investigators, who have a deep understanding of the cultural issues that the college may be facing and their legal implications, conduct interviews of student-athletes, coaches and other staff, and administrators. Additional feedback can also be gathered using carefully-designed culture surveys and discussion forums facilitated by experienced inclusion professionals. This approach enables the institution to provide an inclusive forum that will empower all stakeholders, including coaches and other staff, student-athletes and administrators, to reflect on their experiences.

After gathering this information, the second phase is for our team of experienced counsel and inclusion professionals to work with the institution to analyze objectively the critical findings from the information obtained in phase one.

In the third phase, our team works closely with the stakeholders to develop long-term strategies for achieving meaningful change. The strategies are uniquely suited to each institution's status, culture and needs. They might include comprehensive policy reviews and training on topics such as discrimination and harassment prevention, unconscious bias awareness, bystander intervention and inclusive leadership. Depending on the size of the institution or program, trainings can be designed as peer-led sessions or can be led by experienced facilitators whose expertise includes assisting institutions and teams with navigating difficult conversations. Transparency during this phase of the action plan will enhance trust and commitment in the process, both of which are essential to any institution's ability to maintain support from all stakeholders.

### **Reconciliation and Progress, Together**

Sports can unify communities—both on campus and off—in ways that no other activity can. By taking steps proactively to address and respond meaningfully to student-athlete and staff concerns, institutions can improve the quality of their experiences in ways that will ultimately benefit the broader communities in which we live and work. Colleges and universities that choose to embrace this opportunity have experienced partners who are ready to help.

Goulston & Storrs's team includes experienced attorneys and inclusion professionals who provide counsel on compliance issues, investigation and training services, cultural assessments, and other long-term strategic support to institutions and organizations of all sizes.