NCAA INCLUSION

Guidance on Inclusive Language

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This resource represents a living document of inclusive language guidelines created to support the NCAA national office review of policies, procedures and manuals for inclusive language, as part of the **NCAA Eight-Point Plan to Advance Racial Equity**. Member schools and conferences are welcome to review and implement these guidelines in their efforts to foster diverse, inclusive and equitable environments. For example, individuals may consider utilizing this resource as part of the **diversity, equity and inclusion review process**.

NCAA Inclusion Statement

As a core value, the NCAA believes in and is committed to diversity, inclusion and gender equity among its student-athletes, coaches and administrators. We seek to establish and maintain an inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes and career opportunities for coaches and administrators from diverse backgrounds. Diversity and inclusion improve the learning environment for all student-athletes and enhance excellence within the Association.

The NCAA will provide or enable programming and education, which sustains foundations of a diverse and inclusive culture across dimensions of diversity including, but not limited to, age, race, sex, class, creed, educational background, religion, gender identity, disability, gender expression, geographical location, income, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation and work experiences. Programming and education also will strive to support equitable laws and practices, increase opportunities for individuals from historically underrepresented groups to participate in intercollegiate athletics at all levels, and enhance hiring practices for all athletics personnel to facilitate more inclusive leadership in intercollegiate athletics.

Adopted by the NCAA Executive Committee, April 2010
Amended by the NCAA Board of Governors, April 2017

What Is Inclusive Language?

The **Guidelines for Inclusive Language**, published by the Linguistic Society of America, define inclusive language as language that "acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities."

Inclusive language positions all people as valued members of society. This involves the use of vocabulary that avoids exclusion and stereotyping and is free from descriptors that portray individuals or groups of people as dependent, powerless or less valued than others. Inclusive language intentionally avoids and defuses biases that are discriminatory toward any individual or group of people.

Why Inclusive Language Is Important

Inclusive language is essential to making all feel welcomed and valued, as words can deeply impact how we view ability, nationality, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and other salient identities. Incorrect labeling and terms that perpetuate harmful stereotypes cause demonstrable harm to the mental, emotional and physical well-being of individuals and communities.

Inclusive language is an integral component of fostering cultural competence and awareness to better serve the increasingly diverse student-athlete population. The NCAA compiles and provides statistical information regarding demographic data of various groups within its member schools and conferences. Data submitted annually by NCAA member schools are available on the **NCAA Demographics Database**.

The use of inclusive language is a statement of intentionality and empathy essential to the viability of inclusive excellence. By eliminating exclusive language and terms that have historically marginalized and currently marginalize many groups and individuals, we aim to harness the power of words to bridge gaps and change habits, rather than create additional barriers.

Guidelines for Inclusive Language

Disclaimer: These guidelines are not exhaustive, but rather represent a living document that compiles other existing resources. This guide will undergo periodic review and be updated regularly. The office of inclusion welcomes any feedback to continue building and refining this guidance. Please send suggestions, questions or comments to **inclusion@ncaa.org**.

Foundational Considerations

- It is always best practice to ask individuals or groups how they would like to be referred to or described. Avoid making assumptions.

- Avoid appearance descriptions (e.g., how someone looks or presents). Exercise good judgment by taking into account implicit biases and stereotypes. For instance:
  - Describe individuals by their position in the workplace rather than perceived notions of their racial/ethnic or gender identity. For example, refer to an individual as "Assistant Director (name)" rather than using a description based on assumptions of how the person identifies (e.g., "white man" or "Black woman").

- Use person-centered language when referring to one's identities. For instance:
  - When referring to a person's race or ethnicity, do not use race/ethnicity as a noun. For example, use "a Hispanic person," not "a Hispanic."

- Be specific when using terms such as "underrepresented," "marginalized," "minoritized" and "minority" as these terms may be used to describe various dimensions of identity. For instance:
  - Use "ethnic minority" to describe an individual from a diverse racial/ethnic background.
  - Use "religious minority" to describe an individual from a diverse religious/spiritual background.

- Use accessible language to allow for clarity and transparency. For instance:
  - Use plain writing rather than jargon (e.g., "the ball is in your court" or "pass the baton").
  - Exercise prudence when using idioms (e.g., "holding down the fort" or "in the trenches").
  - Spell out acronyms and abbreviations the first time you use them. If an acronym or abbreviation would not be recognizable on a subsequent reference, do not use it.

Citizenship/Nationality

- Terms such as "citizen(s)," "American(s)" and the "American public" should be used only if these terms are referring to an individual or group identifying as such. For example, "citizens" should not be used as a generic term for people who live in the United States.

- Use "the United States of America" instead of "America." Using "America" in place of the U.S. implies a primacy of the U.S. over the American continents and regions.

- Avoid terms such as "foreigner" or "alien." Use "international" or "citizen of (nation/country of origin)" as an adjective to describe an individual instead.

- Use "world language" or be specific about the language being used (e.g., "Spanish language" or "French language") instead of "foreign language."

- When referring to citizens of a country or nationalities, avoid using the nationality as a definite noun, such as "the Canadians" or "the Japanese." Instead, use citizenship/nationality as an adjective, such as "people from Canada" or "the Japanese team."

- Use "undocumented" or "citizen of (nation/country of origin)" as an adjective to describe an individual, instead of "illegal immigrant" or "illegal alien." Such words dehumanize individuals by stripping their identity down to a legal status.

Gender

- Exercise prudence before making assumptions that express implicit bias. For example, avoid saying, "The doctor is late. I'm sure he has a good reason," or "The nurse reached out to me. I missed her call."

- Always include the modifier so that the noun alone does not imply bias toward one group. For example, use both "men's varsity lacrosse team" and "women's varsity lacrosse team" instead of "varsity lacrosse team" (for a men's team) and "women's varsity lacrosse team."

- Avoid using "he/him" or "she/her" when referring to someone whose gender identity you do not yet know. For example, avoid, "We're looking for someone who can demonstrate his abilities." Instead, you could say, "We're looking for candidates who can demonstrate their abilities," or "We're looking for someone who can demonstrate ability."

- Use a title ("Dear Professor Smith") or role ("Dear Members of the Alumni Association") to avoid addressing individuals in gendered ways when gender is unknown (for example, "Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. Smith").

- Use the terms "everyone," "all" or "people" instead of "guys" or "ladies."

- It is generally acceptable to use the terms "boys" and "girls" to describe people younger than 18. However, be aware of nuances and unintentional implications. Referring to Black males of any age and in any context as "boys,"

for instance, can be perceived as demeaning and call to mind historical language used by some to address Black men. Be specific about age when referring to individuals or a group, if possible.

  ○ Use the term "women" instead of "girls," unless it is warranted to distinguish based on age. Use the term "girls" or "young women" for those younger than 18.

  ○ Use the term "men" instead of "boys," unless it is warranted to distinguish based on age. Use the term "boys" or "young men" for those younger than 18.

- Avoid gendered terms when the gender is irrelevant. For example:

  ○ Use the terms "workforce," "workers," "staff" or "crew" instead of "manpower."

  ○ Use the term "chair" instead of "chairman" or "chairwoman."

  ○ Use the terms "humankind," "humanity," "human beings" or "people" rather than "mankind."

- Be aware of terms that are typically associated with certain genders and perpetuate stereotypes (e.g., "The women's team showed grace and poise." "The men's team imposed its will on the other team.")

- Exercise prudence when discussing family/marital status and avoid assumptions about marital status and heteronormative standards.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning

- Avoid talking about gender as a binary, rather use language that acknowledges gender diversity.
  - Use "different sex" instead of "opposite sex" as this recognizes gender as a spectrum.
  - Avoid using "he/him" or "she/her" when writing about a hypothetical person or when unsure of a person's pronouns. Instead, use someone's title or rewrite the sentence to make the noun plural, if the context permits you to do so. For example: "Each student should get a schedule today," or "The students should get their schedules today."

- Avoid using phrases such as "preferred pronouns" or "preferred name" as these suggest that an individual's identity is a preference.

- To practice gender sensitivity and clear communication, consider adding your pronouns to your email signature, providing student-athletes the option to list their pronouns on rosters and stating your pronouns in introductions.

- Use "caregiver" or "parent" instead of "mother" or "father" unless the preferred term is specified.

- Use "sibling" instead of "brother" or "sister" unless the preferred term is specified.

- Use "spouse/partner" instead of "husband/wife" or "boyfriend/girlfriend" to refer to someone's significant other unless the preferred term is specified.

- Use "same-sex partners" rather than "homosexual partners" or "gay partners."

- Avoid using "sexual preference," which suggests sexuality is a choice. Instead, use "sexual orientation."

- Use "assigned female/male at birth" rather than "born female/male," "biological female/male" or "female-bodied/male-bodied."

- Use "transgender people and cisgender people" rather than "transgender and normal people." Avoid using terms such as "transgendered" or "cisgendered."

Disability

There are two common ways to reference disability: people-first language and identity-first language.

For many years, people-first language has been widely accepted as the preferred choice. In this approach, the person is listed first, and the disability is second. For example:

- Use "person living with a disability" instead of "disabled person."

- Use "person who is deaf" instead of "deaf person."

- Use "person with bipolar disorder" instead of "bipolar person."

There is a growing trend among some disability groups (e.g., deaf, autistic and many people in the blind community) who prefer identity-first language. In this approach, the disability is listed first because individuals feel it is central to how they experience the world. For example:

- Use "deaf athlete" instead of "athlete who is deaf."

- Use "blind professor" instead of "professor who is blind."

- Use "autistic student" instead of "student who is autistic."

It is best practice to ask how an individual or group identifies, if possible.

- "Person who is hard of hearing" only applies to a particular group of the deaf/hard of hearing community. This varies based on community membership and what form of hearing loss someone has. For example, for someone who has experienced hearing loss due to maturation/aging, "person who is hard of hearing" or "hearing aid user" (if relevant) may be more appropriate. That is a categorically different group than those who use American Sign Language or experience hearing loss at a different stage in their social development.

Certain terms routinely exclude and carry significant negative stigma for those with disabilities. To practice inclusive language, watch for these subtle differences when referring to disability:

- Use "people with health conditions or impairments" instead of automatically referring to "disabled people." Many people who need disability benefits and services don't identify with this term. Further, the word "disabled" is a description, not a group of people.

- Use "living with" instead of "suffers from." The latter suggests discomfort, unbearable pain and a reduced capacity to enjoy life.

- Use "intellectual disability" instead of "mentally handicapped," "retarded" or "defective."

- Use "wheelchair user" or "person who uses a wheelchair" instead of "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound."

- Use "inspirational" only when warranted, not automatically to imply all people with disabilities are inspirational simply because they experience disability.

- Avoid terms like "mentally ill," "crazy," "insane," "psycho," "spastic," "nuts," "moron," "idiot" or "hysterical" when referring to someone living with a mental health condition.

- Avoid using "lame," "crip" or "gimpy" when referring to someone with a physical disability. They reinforce negative perceptions of people with mobility disorders.

Race/Ethnicity

- Avoid making assumptions about an individual or group's racial/ethnic identity based on appearance. It is best practice to ask how an individual or group identifies.

- Avoid using words, images or situations that reinforce racial or ethnic stereotypes (even stereotypes that may appear to be positive).

- Avoid the term "nonwhite," or other terms that treat whiteness as a default.

- Be specific when using the term "minority" to refer to individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., "ethnic minority"). Alternatively, use people-centered language, such as "Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)," "people of color," or "people of the global majority." It is best practice to ask how an individual or group would like to be referred to, if possible.

- Do not use the term "colored people."

- Use the term "Indian" only when referring to people from India, not for Native Americans.

- Use "Native American" only to describe groups of Native Americans — two or more individuals of different tribal affiliations.

- When referring to Indigenous/Native American people, be as precise as possible and identify individuals or groups by naming their specific tribal affiliation(s).

- When referring to a person's race or ethnicity, do not use race/ethnicity as a noun. For example, use "a Venezuelan person," not "a Venezuelan."

- Be specific about the use of "Hispanic" and "Latin-o/-a/-x."
  - "Hispanic" refers to people from Spanish-speaking countries.
  - "Latino," "Latina" or "Latinx" (La-teen-ex) is a person of Latin American descent who can be of any background or language. If the individual or group does not identify as either Latino or Latina, the gender-neutral term "Latinx" can be used. In Spanish, "-o" is grammatical masculine gender and "-a" grammatical feminine gender, so the "-x" suffix neutralizes this distinction and avoids binary in a way that is similar to avoiding "he/him" or "she/her." Some Spanish speakers, particularly outside of the U.S., prefer "Latine" as the gender-neutral term. It is best practice to ask an individual how they would like to be described or referred to.
  - Spanish-speaking people in Spain and outside Latin America are Hispanic but not Latino, Latina or Latinx.

- Capitalize the term "Black" as this reflects a collective identity with a shared history. There is less support for capitalizing the term "white" as white people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color.

- "Black" and "African American" are not always interchangeable. Some individuals prefer the term "Black" because they do not identify as African and/or American. Individuals may identify as African, Caribbean, Afro-Latinx or other. Again, it is best to ask an individual's preference if in question.

- Use people-centered language by referring to groups as "Black students," "Black faculty members," etc., not "Blacks."

- Use people-centered language by referring to groups as "Asian students," "Asian faculty members," etc., not "Asians."

- Try to be specific when possible by recognizing country and heritage, rather than continental affiliation. For example, if you are referring to individuals from Japan, instead of using "Asian" as an adjective, use "Japanese."

- Be specific about the use of "Asian" and "Pacific Islander."
  - "Asian" refers to people who are citizens of countries in the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent or to describe people of Asian descent.
  - "Pacific Islanders" include Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians, Fijians and other people of the Pacific Island nations.
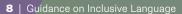
Religion and Spirituality

- Become educated about the diversity of religious and spiritual traditions and practices and become familiar with the terms in use by those who are engaged in religious and spiritual life. Ask the individual or group you are referring to if you are uncertain about the appropriate terminology.
  - For example, use religiou s and spiritual leadership titles such as rabbi, imam, bishop, priest, deacon, pastor, minister, reverend, spiritual director, shaman, venerable, guru, teacher and yogi, among others. Ask the individual if you are uncertain which title to use.
  - When referring to religious and spiritual identities generally, use terms such as "spiritual practice," "spirituality" or "faith tradition."

- Avoid using a specific religious holiday to indicate a time of year or season, such as "Christmas break," as everyone may not observe this holiday.

- Avoid assumptions regarding an individual's religious identity based on the person's race/ethnicity (e.g., Arabs being Muslim, South Indians being Hindu, East Asians being Buddhist, or Americans being Christian).

- Avoid stereotypes and language that assume a particular kind of religious practice. For example, not all Muslim women wear a covering such as a hijab. Individuals practice their faith or religion in various ways, even at different times or seasons in life.

Socioeconomic Status

- Use language that maintains the dignity of individuals and communities and does not lay blame on populations.
  - Use people-first language or language that acknowledges circumstances or challenges faced. Use "under-resourced" rather than "inner-city," which references a location that reflects a stereotype.
  - Use "neighborhoods with high poverty rates" or "neighborhoods with access to fewer opportunities" rather than "disadvantaged" or "distressed neighborhoods."
  - Avoid using terms such as "food stamps" and "the hungry," rather use "food insecurity," "food poverty," "the federal food assistance program" and "hunger."

- Use the word "clients," not "recipients," when referring to people who participate in programs or agencies that provide services.

- Avoid referring to students as "at risk" as it is stigmatizing and perpetuates stereotypes. Rather, use "historically underserved" or "disenfranchised."

Experts Consulted

- **Savithry Namboodiripad**, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Michigan.

- Marci Ridpath, president and founder of MAR Educational Consulting and disability consultant to the NCAA for more than 20 years, providing training and expertise in the development of policy and relevant issues in the field of disability.

- **The Rev. Joanne Sanders**, D. Min, senior associate dean for religious life, Stanford University, retired.

- **Kristen Syrett**, Ph.D., associate professor, Department of Linguistics and Center for Cognitive Science, and associate dean, School of Arts and Sciences Office of Undergraduate Education, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick.

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