A Game Plan:
Tips from Pat Griffin on Public Scholarship
by Meredith Bagley

Introduction

Imagine Michael Jordan marching in a gay pride parade. Imagine a “wives of the WNBA” cookbook for sale at your local bookstore. Imagine a world where athletes of all abilities feel safe coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual without fear of media backlash, loss of corporate sponsorship or alienation from teammates. If this idyllic vision is ever achieved, we will owe a hearty thank-you to Pat Griffin. Griffin, a professor of education at University of Massachusetts Amherst has made it her life’s work to challenge the homophobia and heterosexism in sports, traveling the nation to work with universities and colleges, sports organizations and research institutions, all in the hope that sports can become a safe place for gay athletes. When it comes to effective public scholarship, it’s hard to get much better than Griffin. I became aware of her work while is college, and recently had the chance to interview Griffin about the key factors in her success. Many of the elements that have led to her professional success can be found in her own lifestory: the strategic planning of her academic career, the social justice values she has had since her youth, and the communication skills necessary for truly open dialogue on controversial issues. (Paul: Underlined = section heading links)
Biography

Griffin was born in 1946 and grew up in Silver Spring, MD as an avid athlete. She competed intercollegiately in basketball and field hockey at the University of Maryland earned a spot on the 1971 USA field hockey team. After three years of teaching high school physical education, she entered graduate school in sports studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She worked her way from teaching assistant to instructor to teaching associate by 1976, during which time she also coached swimming. She became an assistant professor in 1980, and she earned tenure in 1986.

All her life Griffin knew, if at first only on a subconscious level, that she was a lesbian. She recalls hearing the word for the first time at age 12 and immediately realizing it described herself, but also feeling ashamed and not telling anyone. This silence continued through high school and college, despite crushes and a clandestine relationship in her first year of college.

Griffin often tells the story of seeing news reports of the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, where gay men fought back against a police raid and helped spark the gay-rights movement. She also recalls checking over her shoulder to ensure that no one would see her reading the article; despite this residual fear, the protest motivated her to start being more out in her own life. Once established at UMass, she dared to come out to a few of her swimmers and other lesbian coaches on campus, and traveled to Washington D.C. to march in the 1979 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Drawing from the empowerment of participating in the march with over 100,000 people, Griffin decided to take her activism to another level. She chose to focus on the world she loved most, athletics, and began speaking out in her community against homophobia and heterosexism
in sports. Little did Griffin know how complicated it would be to pursue this quest. Her
development as a public scholar on homophobia in sports paralleled her own journey of coming
out – to her family, coworkers and eventually to a national audience of colleagues, athletes and
sports supporters. To navigate these paths, Griffin made many strategic decisions.

For more biographical info on Griffin, see:
Pat’s homepage @ http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~griffin/index.html
A July 25, 2003 Boston Globe profile by Judy Van Handle, available @www.boston.com

Strategic Scholarship

Griffin admits that she was very fortunate to end up at UMass, at an institution and in a
state that would be very supportive of her research interests. “I was very lucky because I had a
department chair who believed in what I was doing and acted as a buffer to the dean,” Griffin
explained. “I had an administrator who went to bat for me and that is a huge factor.”

Still, Griffin knew that doing research on sexism in sports was controversial, much less
taking on homophobia. She knew she had to protect her position as junior faculty if she hoped to
achieve tenure at UMass. These concerns influenced her actions at a 1983 conference sponsored
by the Women’s Sport Foundation (www.wsf.com). A firestorm of concern had erupted among
the executive board when the word “lesbian” had appeared in promotional material for the
conference without the full approval of the board. The board was worried that the conference’s
corporate sponsors would withdraw, and Griffin was asked to conduct one of her trainings. The
board, despite her work, decided to remove the word lesbian from its official program but would
not restrict attendees from discussing the topic. Griffin saw her opening; she had been assigned
to a panel discussing the question, “How can women athletes disarm and deflect threats to our
sense of femininity,” but she instead spoke about the homophobia and silence at the root of that
question. However, Griffin chose to not reveal her lesbianism at this time, and in the debate
about whether the word “lesbian” would be included in conference resolutions, she voted to capitulate to the conference organizers and use homophobia instead. Griffin recalls feeling “sad and sick at the compromise I was endorsing.”

However, she also knew she was “not ready, professionally or personally, to be out and take that on until I was tenured.”

Griffin earned tenure in 1986, and soon had a chance to take advantage of that status. She and her colleague from Amherst planned a panel for the 1987 conference of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) about their research on homosexuality and homophobia. The duo decided they would both come out to the audience to gain credibility. Griffin was still anxious about this decision, and admitted it was “very intentionally tied to when I got tenure.” With the job security to take on what would become the defining issue of her career, she recalls feeling “liberated from all the silence and fear I had lived with all my playing and coaching days.”

Griffin was soon established as the national authority on homophobia and heterosexism in sports. The importance of gaining tenure is reflected in her publication record: before 1988 there is no overt mention of homophobia, heterosexism or lesbians in any of Griffin’s published titles. She focused more broadly on issues of gender or sexism in physical education, and the challenges of co-education. Her first work on homophobia in sports appeared in an edited volume, Analyzing Physical Education and Sport Instruction, when she contributed two chapters, one entitled “How to identify homophobia in women's athletic programs.”

Social Justice Roots

Griffin’s decision to be fully out, both professionally and personally, was influenced by strategic career factors but also by her lifelong commitment to social justice. Griffin says she
cannot remember when she started calling herself an activist, but the knows the impulse had always been there. A glance at her non-fiction writing suggests it may stem from her childhood as a fiery tomboy who wouldn’t back down from anyone, be it a bully sliding into second base or any institution infringing on her civil rights. This commitment led Griffin to a career in coaching and education, which she values for their direct application to the “real” world. “When you’re working with physical educators and coaches, if they can’t use it they don’t want to hear about it,” Griffin laughed.

Griffin’s desire to provide applicable tools for educators led her to participatory models of research. The participatory method, as defined in her publication “From Hiding Out to Coming Out: Empowering Lesbian and Gay Educators,” addresses power differentials from the outset, acknowledges the political nature of research and explicitly links the research process to social change, empowerment and dialogue-building. Griffin chose this method for the ethic of activism that drives it, but it also added another obstacle for her to surmount in securing academic support for her work. “I’d apply for academic funding and be told it was too political, then apply to activist groups and they thought it was too academic,” she recalled. Her goal was to empower educators so she wanted them to be able to understand her findings; “I can take one of my studies and share it with teachers and they get it because it’s real, it’s voices that they recognize and they can see themselves in it.”

In 1991 Griffin’s years of working to empower educators paid off with the founding of a new degree-granting Social Justice Education program at UMass and she has since edited a handbook on designing social justice curriculum. She is also leading a funded three-year project assessing the
implementation of Massachusetts’ Safe Schools programs for gay and lesbian youth. Mixed with all this passion, Griffin possesses an indomitable optimism that athletics can become a safer place for gay and lesbian athletes, a spirit that has carried her through the years of trainings and struggle. “I know I can’t change every coach or athlete’s mind, but I can move them one step closer,” Griffin said. “I expect great progress in the future – it’s an issue whose time has come, partly because of the larger social context.”

Communication Skills

Pat Griffin, for all her studies in education, also draws heavily on her skills in interpersonal communication. Consider this scene: in 1992 Pennsylvania State University basketball coach Rene Portland publicly stated that she had a “no lesbian” policy for her team. Media attention painted Penn State as a homophobic institution and Griffin was called in to conduct a mandatory training for the entire Penn State athletic department. To cap it off, she was allotted just ninety minutes, half the time she prefers. She recalls that Coach Portland sat next to legendary football coach Joe Paterno and other old-guard male coaches and that “anger and discomfort were the predominant feelings in the room.” Still, Griffin managed the get the group into a productive discussion on the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual student-athletes.

Since then she has conducted workshops at dozens of schools, including large institutions such as the University of Michigan, University of Virginia and Temple and smaller colleges or high schools. Most recently, Griffin helped lead trainings at the University of Florida after a softball player sued her coach and the University for sexual orientation Discrimination. Andrea Zimbardi, an All-Conference catcher and team captain, alleged that she was kicked her off the
team because her coach, Karen Johns, objected to her lesbianism. Johns and her assistant are devout Christians and since Zimbardi’s case other former players have made anonymous statements that they too felt forced off the team for being gay. The case was settled out of court, with the National Center for Lesbian Rights representing Zimbardi (see www.nclrights.org for more info on the case) and once again Griffin was brought in to run workshops in the wake of a national scandal. And once again Griffin helped the Florida staff discuss a thorny subject; “Mandatory trainings are the worst case scenario – I feared it would be like Penn State, which was a very difficult situation – but the Florida coaches were great. They really grappled with the questions, were open and willing to talk about it.”

How does Griffin do it? What could be an impossible or incredibly uncomfortable task has become nearly old hat for Griffin, who says she now knows most issues the coaches are going to raise. For instance, Griffin says all her trainings now include men’s sports, and she uses a series of vignettes to initiate discussion. “The men are terrified of the shower situation,” she says. “So if they don’t bring it up, I do because we have to have a conversation about it.” Griffin’s ability to broach this topic and navigate her way to meaningful discussion, even in the macho world of men’s sports, is remarkable. She succeeds, she says, because “I think one of my strengths is that I am able to do this without turning them off. I’m able to join the coaches since I have coaching and athletic experience myself. I don’t come at them like they’re the source of the problem, which is often how coaches feel.”

Maureen Groden, who was coached by Griffin and remains her friend today, praised Griffin’s ability to “educate people without offending them.”

This knack for building trust and opening dialogue has led Griffin to speaking engagements all over the nation, to professional organizations and academic conferences, as well as appearances on ESPN, HBO Real Sports, and ABC Sports Outside the Lines. She has
addressed the NCAA annual convention, and testified before Congress in support of Title IX. Her approachable style also extends to her writing, as demonstrated by her most well-known book *Strong Women, Deep Closets*.\(^{19}\) It is not only a foundational work for scholarship on women in sports, but it is readable for a wide number of audiences. In her preface, Griffin writes that

“The purpose of this book is to initiate a long-overdue discussion about the experiences of lesbians in sport, the effects of homophobia and heterosexism on all women in sport, and the connections between homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism in sport. *Strong Women, Deep Closets* challenges the hypocrisy of championing equal opportunity for women’s sports yet tolerating discrimination and prejudice against lesbian athletes and coaches. The point of view presented in this book will challenge some readers, affirm others, and outrage still others. I hope the perspective I present can be a catalyst for spirited discussion, reflection, and, of course, action toward creating a sports world where all women are openly welcomed and protected from discrimination.”\(^{20}\)

As this excerpt shows, Griffin has the ability to speak to a broad audience, not just to fellow academics, and the desire to connect the issue of homophobia and heterosexism to her audience’s “real lives.”

Communication ability and successful strategy have led to partnerships with major national organizations, such as the Women’s Sport Foundation, and a seven-member partnership project called “It Takes a Team!” ([http://www.homophobiainsports.com/](http://www.homophobiainsports.com/)). Working with prominent institutions can have drawbacks though, and Griffin hasn’t shied away from chiding these powerful groups to do more towards achieving equal rights and opportunities for all athletes. In a 1999 missive to the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, Griffin criticized those who would “push aside” lesbians in sports history for “more acceptable” image of female athletes. She lauded the organizations that had spoken out against what she calls the “lesbian label” in women’s sports, but warned her audience that wasn’t enough. “Now we need
more organizations also to take a clear stand against discrimination and harassment of lesbian and bisexual sportswomen,” Griffin argued.  

Griffin argues forcefully in all her publications and speeches that homophobia in sports, the use of this “lesbian label,” is detrimental to all women in sports, not just lesbians and bisexuals. This approach embodies all three of the factors in her success as a public scholar. There is significant strategic value to appealing to a wide audience, it is driven by her commitment to social justice and rights for all athletes, and requires highly skilled communication.

Looking to the Future

Griffin is now semi-retired, teaching only part time in the Social Justice Education program at UMass and keeping up with her speaking tour. She has launched a new consulting service that enables her to seek out workshop clients after years of being approached by them first (http://lesbianandgaysports.com). With this new venture Griffin will be able to answer that nagging “so what” question of public scholarship: what happens after she’s done her two or three hour training and life returns to normal? “That’s a really great question, and in many cases I don’t know,” she admits. “But now that I have more time, I plan to do some follow up work, to find out what’s been done, and to see if schools have made any changes.” Griffin hopes to administer follow up surveys with the athletes she’s worked with to track changes in attitude or behavior since her initial workshop.

Griffin always comes back to her optimistic view that athletics can and will become a more accepting place for gay and lesbian athletes. She points to the institutional support from groups like the Women’s Sport Foundation, which she describes as “totally on board,” or the
NCAA, which purchased educational materials from the It Takes a Team! project to distribute among colleges. “I’m not saying there’s not people who aren’t happy that [the NCAA] is dealing with gay and lesbian issues,” she warns, “but there’s a critical mass of people moving on this issue and it’s now part of the agenda.”23

Final Words of Wisdom

Asked what tips she would give to would-be public scholars, Griffin reiterated the need for careful planning and awareness of the internal dynamics of your institution. “You have to be strategic, you have to be political,” she says. “You have to know where you’re going to get support, especially from those who have the say-so over your career.” Griffin provides an excellent example of playing this game to a successful end of vital, vibrant public scholarship. Ever the teacher, she admits there are options: “You have to make a decision: are you going to push the envelope and do great public scholarship and not get tenure, or are you going to end up in a place where your work will be not only tolerated but supported and you can earn tenure.”24 Griffin laughs, though, when asked if she followed her own advice in choosing UMass. “No, I fell in love with a girl in Albany and moved as close as I could to her.” Perhaps we add a sprinkling of good luck, then, to the solid game plan Griffin has laid out for a successful career in public scholarship.

Notes

1 Pat Griffin. Telephone interview. 9 June 2004.
3 Griffin interview.
4 Griffin interview.
5 Griffin, Closets, 11.


9 Griffin interview.


11 Griffin interview.

12 Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice (New York: Routledge, 1997).

13 The project’s results are not published, for earlier work by her research team, see Pat Griffin and Matt Ouellett “Going Beyond Gay Straight Alliances to Make Schools Safe for LGBT Students,” Angles 6:1 (2002)

14 Griffin interview.

15 Griffin, Closets, 13.

16 Griffin interview.

17 Griffin interview.


19 Strong Women Deep Closets (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998)

20 Strong Women, x.


22 Griffin interview.

23 Griffin interview.

24 Griffin interview.