

Gender Differences Related to Interest in Participation in Intercollegiate Athletics: Another Look at Title IX

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Abstract

Since 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments has required that institutions eliminate all vestiges of discrimination in education based on an individual's sex. This has come to be known as gender equity. In the area of intercollegiate athletics the determination of how to achieve gender equity has been problematic and, at times, contentious. These are not simply abstract issues, since, in many institutions, large numbers of dollars are involved.

Recently, court ruling have held that the most appropriate way to determine if gender equity has been achieved is by means of the criterion of proportionality. This criterion holds that an institution should provide essentially the same opportunities for participation of female athletes in its athletics program as female students represent in the undergraduate student body. In a challenge to this criterion, Brown University argued that such a measure was inappropriate in that it assumed that female students were as interested in participating in intercollegiate athletics as male students. The court ruled that this was not an essential element of proportionality, and that if opportunities were provided, women would eventually utilize those opportunities. However, the question of how male and female students compare in terms of their interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics has not been studied.

"The single most important influence on what we feel about another person is whether that person happens to be a man or a woman. We have fixed ideas about what men and women are like, and about what constitutes 'typical' masculine and feminine behavior." (Nicholson, 1984)

Introduction

In 1972 the Congress enacted legislation intended to eliminate all vestiges of discrimination in education based on an individual's sex, intending to achieve what we now refer to as gender equity. The enabling legislation was Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This legislation reads in part:

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance..." (Kaplin and Lee, 1995).

The legislation addresses the time frames for implementation and, finally, describes exceptions that may exist for institutions which are religiously affiliated and for which *"...the application of this subsec-*

tion would not be consistent with the religious tenets of such organizations." Title IX originally was associated with *"...many activities and areas including admissions, student activities and organizations, student [services]...all institutional rules and policies, treatment of students, publications, facilities, housing and employment."* (Durrant, 1992, p. 60). Lazerson (1996) states that Title IX is viewed as either a villain or a hero, depending upon one's view as to whether the impact is to create more opportunities for female students, or result in fewer opportunities for male students. Guenin (1996) points out that initially there was confusion about whether Title IX applied to athletics because the scantiness of the language did not specifically mention equal opportunity or athletics. In 1984 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Title IX applied only to program receiving direct federal funds. However, in 1988 Congress specified that Title IX applied to *"...all aspects of an educational institution's programs, including athletics, if any part of it received federal funds."* (Suggs, 2000, p. A56).

Although many of the goals originally intended by the Congress have been real-

ized, questions still remain almost thirty years since the passage of Title IX. Many of these questions relate specifically to athletic participation and the associated opportunities which schools should provide for women. As with most legislation aimed at changing the ways in which individuals and groups behave, it takes years and, predictably, court challenges before the intent of the legislation evolves into practices that are widely understood, agreed upon and fully implemented. While the goal of gender equity has remained clear, and while Title IX is understood as the mechanism to achieve this goal, confusion and disagreement continue to exist as to how to determine when institutions have achieved compliance. Regardless of how well-intended the individual institution, coach or athletic director may be, there remains a lack of clarity as to what gender equity means and should mean, and how to achieve that elusive goal.

The initial attempts to implement Title IX produced a broad array of daunting questions. Even assuming a real desire to achieve gender equity, it was not always clear how to proceed. For example, did the law mean that an institution was required to spend the same number of dollars on women's athletics as on men's? Was the number of sports, the number of scholarships, the number of dollars or the number of participants an appropriate measure? Did the law absolutely require a quantifiable definition of gender equity? Did exactly the same sports have to be offered to both men and women? Did each sport offered to male students have to have an analog in a sport offered to women students? If the decision was that it was either inappropriate or unnecessary to have a women's counterpart for each men's sport, what about the participation of individual women in traditional "men only" sports? Could a woman try out for the football team? Was it different if the woman was a potential kicker as opposed to a potential lineman (lineperson)? What about a woman trying out for the wrestling team? Should the "revenue sports" (i.e., men's basketball and football) be exempt from the intent of the legisla-

tion since they were the sports which, by definition, produced the revenue that helped support the other sports, both men's and women's, offered by the athletic department? The questions proliferated, and, with the passage of time, answers to most were worked out in practice. As would be predicted, most women were not basically interested in playing football or wrestling, but in having the opportunity to compete against other women in such sports as swimming, gymnastics, soccer, tennis, basketball, softball and others.

At the same time as some of these questions were being resolved, resistance to Title IX evolved, based largely on financial considerations. If athletic budgets were relatively fixed and now had to be stretched to accommodate a whole new group of participants, the former "haves" were in danger of becoming "have nots" and responded predictably. With this resistance, the need to have a clear measure of when gender equity was achieved, or even if an institution was moving in the right direction, became more acute.

The criteria which evolved to determine compliance required a university athletics program to meet at least one of three tests: 1) having a history and continuing practice of expanding athletics opportunities for women; 2) demonstrating success in fully and effectively meeting the interests and abilities of female students; or 3) providing approximately the same percentages of female athletes and female undergraduates. Given the resistance to Title IX based upon its financial impact, and the fact that two of three criteria were difficult if not impossible to quantify, it was predictable that the criterion of percentage would come to dominate the discussion of compliance. Thus, the discussion of whether an institution's athletics program is in compliance with Title IX is largely determined by what has come to be known as substantial proportionality; that is, the institution should provide essentially the same opportunities for participation of female athletes in its athletics program as female students represent in the undergraduate student body.

The most recent issue which has arisen as a result of this focus on proportionality

was demonstrated in the case of *Brown v. Cohen* which was filed in 1992. In this case Amy Cohen, a Brown undergraduate and member of its women's gymnastics team, filed suit in federal court claiming she and other women had been discriminated against when the university cut support for its women's gymnastics and volleyball teams as part of a series of budget cuts that affected two men's teams as well. The argument made by the plaintiffs was "...that Brown was required to fund all viable women's sports or continually expand opportunities for women until gender parity is achieved on the varsity level." (Mahoney, 1998) A lower-court judge found that the university was in violation of Title IX, and the First Circuit upheld that judgment. The case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court with the university claiming that, if the decision were upheld, colleges would have to either eliminate men's sports or spend unreasonable amounts of money on women's sports. The university's counsel of record argued that the measure used – proportionality – was not an appropriate measure of institutional compliance. Her argument was that women have less interest in participating in athletics and thus the criterion of proportionality to determine gender equity in athletic programs is inappropriate.

In an article describing her views to a lay audience, Maureen E. Mahoney, Brown's attorney in the case, describes the issue as follows:

"Title IX should not be read to prohibit a varsity program that is 60% male at a university where half the students are women for the same reason that we do not prohibit a collegiate dance program that is 90% female or an engineering program that is 70% male. Who would advocate a ruling requiring colleges that receive applications from 100 qualified dancers - 75 women, 25 men - to set aside 25 spaces for men and 25 spaces for women to ensure gender balance in a program with room for 50 dancers? Is it fair to structure that dance program so that it affords qualified men a far greater chance of participating and guarantees that many more qualified women will be excluded? That's

not equal opportunity, that's preferential treatment - which Title IX expressly says is not required." (Mahoney, 1998)

The Supreme Court refused to hear Brown's appeal, thus letting the lower court ruling stand. In analyzing this sequence of litigation, it is important to note that the general conclusion is that the courts believe that if athletic opportunities for women exist in sufficient number, interest in participation will grow. After all, the argument goes, men have had a much longer period of time to develop interest in participating in athletics since they have always known that the opportunity to do so was available. This might be viewed as the "If you build it they will come" scenario. While the relationship between opportunity, interest and participation can be postulated, it has not been demonstrated. However, the argument regarding differences in interest in athletic participation between men and women has also not been demonstrated, but only speculated upon. Thus, it seems important to determine if men and women have the same level of interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics as an important step toward establishing more equitable practices related to proportionality and participation opportunities for male and female students.

Since the criterion of proportionality has evolved as the primary basis for determining if an institution is in compliance with Title IX, it seems reasonable to address the underlying question of whether women have the same level of interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics as men. If this assumption were supported by available data, the criterion of proportionality as currently interpreted in the *Cohen v. Brown* case would seem clearly appropriate. If, however, this underlying assumption is not valid, it may be necessary to address the question of whether different levels of interest in athletic participation between men and women should influence institutional requirements for gender equity, and, if so, how those requirements might be modified. For example, if men and women students differ in their interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics, institutions might be required to

monitor those data annually to determine what would be, at a given point in time, equitable levels of participation opportunities for men and women students.

Given the great size of athletic department budgets, the impact of finances on number and types of athletic teams available to men and women college students, the great visibility of intercollegiate athletics and their importance to their sponsoring institutions, as well as the long history associated with the determination of what the phrase "gender equity" means in this regard, this is an important question to address and resolve.

This article reports a study undertaken by the authors that was designed to provide real data that would provide at least a partial answer to the questions raised in this discussion. The purpose was to survey the members of a freshman class at The University of Oklahoma to determine if they had participated in varsity athletics at the high school level, and also to determine if, given the opportunity, they would be interested in participating in intercollegiate athletics. These questions were embedded in a larger questionnaire regularly given to incoming freshmen students who participate in the summer advance enrollment program run by the university.

Methodology

The University of Oklahoma, like many other institutions, conducts an extensive summer advance enrollment program for incoming freshmen students. In this program, students are asked to respond to a number of issues so that they can be compared with national data. Demographic information is also collected so students' responses can be compared on such variables as gender, ethnicity, high school background, etc. As part of this process, students were asked if they participated in high school athletics, and if they would be interested in participating in athletics at the college level. The freshman class consisted of 3,224 students, 1,576 (48.8%) of whom were men and 1,648 (51.2%) of whom were women. However, not all incoming freshmen students are required to go through the advance enrollment pro-

gram. Of the total of 3,224 students in the freshman class, 2,710 (84%) participated in the advance enrollment program and turned in completed questionnaires upon which the results of this study are based. Of the total number of men in the freshman class, 82.5% participated in the advance enrollment program and thus participated in this study, while 85.6% of the total number of women in the freshman class participated in the advance enrollment program and this study.

The specific items to which the students were asked to respond were as follows:

- 1) While in high school, I participated in varsity athletics: Yes No
- 2) If the opportunity arose, I would be interested in participating in a varsity sport at O.U. (The students answered using a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree.")

Results and Discussion

The data in Table 1 show that freshmen men had a significantly higher rate of participation in varsity athletics in high school than freshmen women. Over one-half (55%) of the total freshmen students indicated they had participated in high school varsity athletics. Of the male freshmen, the percentage who had participated was 62%, while for the female freshmen, the percentage who had participated was 49%.

The data in Table 2 represent the responses of all male and female students to the question of interest in participation in intercollegiate athletics. Fifty percent of the male students agree or strongly agree, while only twenty-three percent of the female students answered in this manner.

The data in Table 3 show the responses of male students who had been high school varsity athletes vs. female students who had been high school varsity athletes regarding interest in participation in intercollegiate athletics. Almost twice as many males (41%) strongly agreed that they would be interested in participating in college varsity sports if the opportunity arose than did females (22%). Almost three times as many females (20%) strongly disagreed with this item than did males (7%).

The data in Table 4 shows the same sig-

nificant differences between male and female level of interest in competing in varsity athletics at the collegiate level when non-high school varsity athletes are compared by gender. Three times as many non-athlete males (27%) strongly agreed or agreed that they would be interested in participating in college varsity sports than female non-athletes (8%).

The data in Tables 5 and 6 clearly indicates that past participation in high school varsity sports has an impact in level of interest in participating in college varsity sports. Both male and female high school varsity athletes indicated a higher level of interest in participating in college sports than did the male and female non-athletes.

Table 1: Male vs. Female High School Varsity Athletic Participation

While in high school, I participated in varsity athletics.

	Yes	No	Mean	sd	t
Males	801 (62%)	499 (38%)	1.38	.49	
Females	696 (49%)	714 (51%)	1.51	.50	
Total	1,497 (55%)	1,213 (45%)	1.45	.50	6.46*

*p<.0001

Table 2: Male vs. Female Students' Interest in Participating in Intercollegiate Athletics

If the opportunity arose, I would be interested in participating in a varsity sport at OU.

	Males	Females	Total
Strongly Agree	373 (29%)	175 (12%)	548 (20%)
Agree	271 (21%)	160 (11%)	431 (16%)
Neutral	247 (19%)	284 (20%)	531 (20%)
Disagree	190 (15%)	286 (20%)	476 (18%)
Strongly Disagree	216 (17%)	506 (36%)	722 (27%)
Mean	2.70	3.56	3.15
sd	1.44	1.39	1.48
t			15.81*

*p<.0001

Table 3: Male Athletes' vs. Female Athletes' Interest in Participating in College Varsity Sports

High School Athlete: Did participate in high school varsity sports. If the opportunity arose, I would be interested in participating in a varsity sport at OU.

	Male HS Athletes	Female HS Athletes	Total HS Athletes
Strongly Agree	324 (41%)	152 (22%)	476 (32%)
Agree	186 (23%)	124 (18%)	310 (21%)
Neutral	143 (18%)	154 (22%)	297 (20%)
Disagree	86 (11%)	129 (19%)	215 (14%)
Strongly Disagree	56 (7%)	136 (20%)	192 (13%)
Mean	2.20	2.96	2.56
sd	1.27	1.42	1.40
t			10.91*

*p<.0001

Table 4: Male Non-Athletes' vs. Female Non-Athletes' Interest in Participating in College Varsity Sports

Non-High School Athlete: Did not participate in high school varsity sports. If the opportunity arose, I would be interested in participating in a varsity sport at OU.

	Male non-Athletes	Female non-Athletes	Total non-Athletes
Strongly Agree	49 (10%)	22 (3%)	71 (6%)
Agree	84 (17%)	36 (5%)	120 (10%)
Neutral	103 (21%)	129 (18%)	232 (19%)
Disagree	103 (21%)	156 (22%)	259 (21%)
Strongly Disagree	160 (32%)	368 (52%)	528 (44%)
Mean	3.48	4.14	3.87
sd	1.35	1.08	1.24
t			9.43*

*p<.0001

Table 5: Male High School Athletes' vs. Male Non-High School Athletes' Interest in Participating in Intercollegiate Athletics

If the opportunity arose, I would be interested in participating in a varsity sport at OU.

	HS Athletes	Non-Athletes	Total
Strongly Agree	324 (41%)	49 (10%)	373 (29%)
Agree	186 (23%)	84 (17%)	270 (21%)
Neutral	143 (18%)	103 (21%)	246 (19%)
Disagree	86 (11%)	103 (21%)	189 (15%)
Strongly Disagree	56 (7%)	160 (32%)	216 (17%)
Mean	2.20	3.48	2.70
sd	1.27	1.35	1.44
t			17.02*

*p<.0001

Table 6: Female High School Athletes' vs. Female Non-High School Athletes' Interest in Participating in Intercollegiate Athletics

If the opportunity arose, I would be interested in participating in a varsity sport at OU.

	HS Athletes	Non-Athletes	Total
Strongly Agree	152 (22%)	22 (3%)	174 (12%)
Agree	124 (18%)	36 (5%)	160 (11%)
Neutral	154 (22%)	129 (18%)	283 (20%)
Disagree	129 (19%)	156 (22%)	285 (20%)
Strongly Disagree	136 (20%)	368 (52%)	504 (36%)
Mean	2.96	4.14	3.56
sd	1.42	1.08	1.39
t			17.57*

*p<.0001

Conclusions

The data in this study show that freshmen male students differ significantly ($p < .0001$) from their female counterparts in regard to the degree to which they participated in varsity high school athletics and the degree to which they might be interested in participating in intercollegiate athletics. Further, the data also show that, for both male and female students, their interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics is associated with whether or not they participated in varsity high school athletics. In other words, the male students participated in high school varsity athletics more than their female counterparts, and they were more interested in the possibility of participating in intercollegiate athletics. Both male and female students were more likely to be interested in intercollegiate athletic participation if they had been high school varsity athletes. These results seem logical in light of the longer history during which males have been encouraged to participate in athletics.

However, perhaps the most striking observation regarding participation rate in high school varsity athletics is that almost half (49%) of the females surveyed indicated that they had participated in high school varsity athletics. While the males' participation rate (62%) was significantly greater, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the impact of Title IX has been dramatic in increasing participation rates among women. Further, it is also not unreasonable to speculate that, at least at the high school level, the participation rates for females in high school varsity athletics might be expected to equal that of males in the not-too-distant future.

For students overall, the difference in interest in participation in intercollegiate athletics is also significant, but far more striking with 50% of the men indicating they agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in participating in intercollegiate athletics, while only 23% of the women expressed such an interest. In other words, regardless of whether they participated in high school athletics or not, men are more than twice as interested in participating in intercollegiate athletics.

When these responses are divided among those men and women who participated in high school athletics vs. those who did not, the gender differences remain. For those with high school varsity experience, a total of 64% of the males expressed interest or strong interest in intercollegiate athletics, while only 40% of the females expressed such an interest. For those without high school varsity experience, a total of 27% of the males expressed interest or strong interest in intercollegiate athletics, while only 8% of the females expressed such an interest. Finally, for both male and female students, interest in participation in intercollegiate athletics is greatly increased for those who participated in high school athletics.

Looking at these outcomes, it is possible to see a pattern evolve. For students overall, these figures indicate that male students are a bit more than twice as interested (50% vs. 23%) in participating in intercollegiate athletics as women. For students without high school athletics experience, male students are more than three times as interested (27% vs. 8%) in participating in intercollegiate athletics as women. For students with high school athletics experience, male students are slightly more than half again as interested (64% vs. 40%) in participating in intercollegiate athletics as women. In other words, it appears that although men certainly seem more interested in participating in intercollegiate athletics than women, that difference narrows if they have had the opportunity to participate in high school athletics. If further studies should determine that these results are widely applicable, one might reasonably conclude that as women students move toward equity in high school athletic participation, they may also be expected to move toward equity in their level of interest in participation in intercollegiate athletics. In other words, the "If you build it they will come" scenario may indeed be reasonable.

As with any such study, one must make assumptions regarding the respondents' accuracy and honesty in reading, interpreting and responding to the questions. However, in this case the questions were straightforward and it is reasonable to as-

sume that few, if any, questions as to meaning should have arisen. While the present study is based on a rather large number of responses, questions of external validity must also be raised. The University of Oklahoma is a large (>20,000), public institution in a specific region of the country. In addition, it is an institution with a tradition of athletic excellence that has long been a source of pride on a statewide basis. Since the percentage of incoming students who are state residents is, like most state universities, quite high, it is reasonable to assume that a large percentage of its freshman class would be aware of this tradition, possibly increasing their interest in athletic participation at the intercollegiate level. Thus, it may not be appropriate to make direct extrapolations of the data from this study to other types of institutions in other areas of the country. On the variables of size, source of funding, region and athletic tradition, The University of Oklahoma and, as an example, Brown University are quite different institutions and further study may indicate that the results of this study are institution type-specific. However, as an initial effort designed to test the question of whether men and women differ in their interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics, this data answers that question affirmatively.

Finally, it should also be noted that the "If you build it they shall come" argument can be seen as supported by the data in this study. Given the fact that male students participated significantly more in high school varsity athletics than females, coupled with the fact that interest in participating in intercollegiate athletics is associated with high school sports participation for both men and women, it is logical to guess that if more athletic opportunities were available to women in the years before they enter college, their interest in participating when they come to college would also increase. Almost three decades after the landmark passage of Title IX, it appears that questions remain as to how to best achieve, and measure, gender equity, a goal that is both the law of the land and in the best interests of all students and institutions.

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