



September 2008

Who's Playing College Sports?

Money, Race and Gender

Executive Summary



Authorship and Acknowledgments

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Critics of Title IX regularly claim that men's intercollegiate athletic participation has severely declined over time. But these claims could not be properly vetted in the past, because the research community had not produced the necessary body of evidence. In the past year, however, two separate and rigorous examinations of athletic participation data provided clear evidence that both men's and women's participation have actually increased during the last 15 years (Cheslock, 2007; Government Accountability Office, 2007).

Although past research has now clearly identified how athletic participation has changed, it has not provided as much evidence on the factors that drove these changes. Past debates usually attribute participation trends to two factors: Title IX and rapid athletic expenditure growth in men's basketball and football. This report presents new evidence for both. The three lines of inquiry undertaken for Title IX all produce the same conclusion: Athletic programs have responded to Title IX pressures by increasing women's participation rather than by decreasing men's participation.

The analysis of athletic expenditures is limited by the poor quality of available data. Higher education institutions do not utilize clearly defined accounting standards and often underreport important costs, such as coaching salaries and the costs of facilities. These flaws make it difficult to directly estimate the effect of expenditure growth on participation opportunities. However, the available data can still provide insights into whether or not athletic expenditures are growing at unsustainable rates that make it difficult for athletic programs to expand participation opportunities or even maintain current levels. The findings in this report clearly suggest that expenditure growth is restraining participation opportunities.

Title IX and rapid athletic expenditure growth by themselves cannot explain why participation in certain sports like lacrosse and soccer has grown

steadily over time for both men and women while participation in other sports (such as gymnastics, tennis and wrestling) has plateaued or declined. A complete explanation of these trends would incorporate the large number of factors that can simultaneously influence athletic directors and college presidents when they choose what sports to offer. This report does not examine every such consideration, but it does review the four for which available data provide meaningful insight: the influence of shifts in high school participation trends on intercollegiate sports offerings; the impact of rising health care costs on sports with high injury rates; the increased number of international student-athletes in particular sports; and the rise of enrollment management strategies that favor sports with athletes who are well prepared academically, able to pay high tuition prices, and diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. The findings suggest that a number of less prominent considerations in the Title IX debate have collectively influenced the rise and fall of individual sports.

The substantial variation in participation trends across sports has altered the extent of racial and ethnic diversity within college athletics. For men, some of the largest participation growth occurred in football and track and field, two sports that contain some of the highest levels of racial and ethnic diversity. For women, the initial sponsorship decisions after the passage of Title IX favored female sports with the highest levels of racial and ethnic diversity, but more recent sponsorship decisions favored female sports with fewer athletes of color. This latter shift is not surprising, because most of the female sports in which athletes of color regularly participate are already sponsored by most NCAA institutions. As a result, efforts to increase the extent of racial and ethnic diversity within many sports are needed to ensure that the participation levels for athletes of color continue to increase.

Major Findings:

1. All available data on intercollegiate athletic participation produce the same conclusion: Both men's and women's participation levels have increased over the last 25 years.

- Analyses of Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) data and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) data demonstrate that men's participation increased by around 6% between 1995-96 and 2004-05 and women's participation increased by more than 20%.
- NCAA data, the only source of information for earlier years, indicate that similar trends occurred between 1981-82 and 1995-96. During this period, men's participation slightly increased, while women's participation grew at faster rates.
- In recent years, gains in women's participation have slowed. NCAA data show that women's participation increased annually by 3.6% between 1991-92 and 2001-02, but only by 1.5% between 2001-02 and 2004-05. As a result, the gap between men's and women's participation has not meaningfully narrowed since 2001-02.

2. Higher education institutions have responded to Title IX by increasing women's participation rather than by decreasing men's participation.

- Between 1992-93 and 2000-01, the period during which Title IX was most vigorously enforced, women's participation increased annually by 4.5% and men's participation increased annually by 0.3%. The corresponding figures are 2.5% and 0.2% for the periods 1981-82 to 1992-93 and 2000-01 to 2004-05. These findings indicate that the period containing the strongest enforcement of Title IX had substantially higher growth rates for women but did not contain substantially lower growth rates for men.
- The number of men's wrestling teams fell by 36 between 1984-85 and 1987-88, one of the largest three-year declines in wrestling sponsorship. Because athletic programs were exempt from Title IX between 1984 and 1988, this finding suggests that Title IX is not the primary cause of the decline in wrestling sponsorship.
- Schools that were far from compliance with Title IX in 1995-96 were more likely to add women's participants over the next nine years but were not more likely to drop men's participants relative to schools closer to or in compliance (as measured by substantial proportionality).

3. Expenditures on intercollegiate athletics, especially for men's basketball and football in Division I of the NCAA, have grown at unsustainable rates.

- Expenditure data collected under the EADA demonstrate that aggregate athletic expenditures increased annually by 7% between 1995-96 and 2004-05 after adjusting for inflation. Fulks (2008) found a similar rate of growth for the 2003-04 to 2005-06 period using NCAA data.
- While the overall rate of growth in athletic spending did not meaningfully differ by NCAA division, the growth rates for individual sports did. In Division I, the highest growth rates occurred in basketball and football, while in Divisions II and III, expenditure growth was more rapid in sports other than basketball and football.
- Because the scale of expenditures varies dramatically by NCAA division and sport, a comparison of growth rates can hide important differences. A 7% annual growth rate for the 1995-96 to 2004-05 period increased athletic expenditures per school by around \$8.2 million in Division I, \$1.2 million in Division II and \$675,000 in Division III. Within Division I, a 7% annual growth rate increased expenditures in men's football by approximately \$2.45 million per team and increased the expenditures in women's sports (other than basketball) by around \$135,000 per team.

4. A variety of factors beyond Title IX and rapid athletic expenditure growth help explain why participation in certain sports (such as lacrosse and soccer) has grown steadily while participation in other sports (such as tennis, gymnastics and wrestling) has waned.

- In both men's and women's athletics, lacrosse experienced the largest percentage increase in high school participation between 1991-92 and 2004-05. Relative to most other athletes, lacrosse participants have stronger academic preparation and come from families with higher levels of income, traits that college presidents increasingly value.
- Tennis sponsorship has declined most rapidly in those NCAA divisions where international student-athletes are most prevalent. For example, men's tennis sponsorship has remained steady in Division III (where only 2% of tennis participants are international) and has substantially dropped in Divisions I and II (where 20-25% of tennis participants are international).
- Over the last 15 years, gymnastics is the only sport to experience participation declines at the high school level. Gymnastics has higher injury rates than other sports at a time when health care costs are steadily rising.

5. While the early growth in women's athletics favored those sports with the highest levels of racial and ethnic diversity, recent growth has favored women's sports with less diversity. This latter shift has occurred because almost all NCAA schools already sponsor most of the sports with high participation by female athletes of color.

- Of the 10 sports that contain the largest percentages of athletes of color, five (basketball, volleyball, cross country, softball and tennis) are offered by more than 83% of NCAA institutions. Two other sports (indoor and outdoor track and field) are sponsored by 59-68% of NCAA schools.
- Of the 12 sports with the lowest levels of diversity, only one (soccer) is sponsored by more than 48% of NCAA schools.
- The implication of these sponsorship patterns for future participation growth is most severe for African-American female athletes because they are heavily segregated by sport; close to 68% participate in three sports: basketball, indoor track and field, and outdoor track and field. Available data indicate that the level of segregation for African-American female athletes did not change between 1999-2000 and 2005-06.

About the Women's Sports Foundation

The Women's Sports Foundation—the leading authority on the participation of women and girls in sports—advocates for equality, educates the public, conducts research, and offers grants to promote sports and physical activity for girls and women.

Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, the Women's Sports Foundation builds on her legacy as a champion athlete, advocate of social justice, and agent of change. We strive for gender equity and fight discrimination in all aspects of athletics.

Our work shapes public attitude about women's sports and athletes, builds capacities for organizations that get girls active, provides equal opportunities for girls and women, and supports physically and emotionally healthy lifestyles.

The Women's Sports Foundation is recognized worldwide for its leadership, vision, strength, expertise, and influence.

For more information, please call the Women's Sports Foundation at 800.227.3988 or visit www.WomensSportsFoundation.org.



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