



Why It is Time to Take Seriously the Political Power of Women College Athletes

Elizabeth Sharrow, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Despite a surge in activism targeting sexual harassment and assault, many Americans were surprised to watch the mobilization of over 160 women athletes at the sexual abuse trial of former USA Gymnastics' team doctor Larry Nassar. But their engagement was not an isolated event. Women athletes are poised to organize and take a larger role in growing public efforts to fight sexual harassment. And the political power of these women athletes is not limited to confronting sexual predation. They have the potential to challenge the current priorities of college sports which now privilege football, the almost entirely male sport.

Yet there is an evolving tension between the federally protected civil rights afforded to women athletes under Title IX of the 1972 federal Education Amendments and the ascendance of an economic model for organizing college sports which favors spending on, recruiting for, and promoting primarily men's teams. The early decades of Title IX's implementation witnessed multiple legal battles between women athletes and the male-oriented leadership of college sports. During those same years, college athletics became increasingly focused on commercialization and profit-seeking. Today, the media often imply that political struggles over sex equity are a relic of the past and portray college athletes as politically disengaged. Strikingly little is known about whether college athletes –across sports and around the country – continue to care about sex inequities, let alone whether they care enough to take action. To learn more, our new study forthcoming in the journal *Political Research Quarterly*, surveyed more than 1,600 current college athletes in the Big Ten conference.

Do Student Athletes Care about Equity?

Our research focused on athlete opinions about the sex equity practices of college athletics and their willingness to take political actions in response to inequities. We investigated three issues: perceptions about the *actual distribution* of resources and opportunities across women's and men's teams, opinions about how resources and opportunities *should be* distributed between men and women in their home athletic departments, and judgements regarding the likelihood respondents would take action if or when they observe biased treatment.

In questions regarding perceptions and opinions about the practices of college athletics, we used 24 measures employed by the U.S. federal government to evaluate parity under both Title IX and the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act. These include measures about athletic scholarships, participation opportunities, coaching, recruiting, and more. For each topic, respondents were directed to reflect on how their home university *actually* distributes resources across all sports between women and men, and also to say how they think women and men *should be* treated on the same metrics. Respondents were asked about their knowledge of Title IX specifically, their opinions on sex discrimination in society more generally, and their likelihood of taking political action to express their opinions about sex equity in sports – through writing letters, talking with coaches or athletic administration, signing a petition, or participating in a protest.

We discovered that athletes are quite aware of extant inequities *between women and men in college sports*; they support more sex equitable treatment between women and men in university athletics; and many athletes are willing to mobilize politically to express their opinions. Tellingly, these findings were most pronounced among women athletes and among those men – who might be called “allies”— who recognized the persistence of sex discrimination in American society.

Like their contemporaries in professional sports, college athletes appear poised to actively confound the myth that sports are apolitical. Among women athletes and their allies, the assumption that athletes are less engaged than other college students needs updating.

Objectively, sex-based imbalances in resource allocations and opportunities persist as a result of the quest for profits by many college athletic departments and the consistent preference for men's sports in spending patterns. This is documented in annual Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act reports to the U.S. Department of Education. Title IX does not require strict equality in spending, and it therefore does not prevent athletic departments from making unequal allocations if they find doing so to be in their financial and economic interests. College women athletes and their allies are conscious of these unequal distributions, our study found, and they would prefer to see equal treatment, in which neither sex is more or less advantaged than the other. Further statistical analyses suggest that student-athletes' beliefs about how resources should be distributed fit ideal policy guidelines – and in fact these college athletes even favor greater redistribution of resources toward women athletes. Many of them also say they understand the purpose and focus of Title IX and are likely to take political action on equity issues.

College Athletes May Be Poised for Action

These results suggest that many women athletes and their allies understand policy questions and are poised to contest the status quo. Their awareness presents an emerging challenge to the dominant economic model of college sports at the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I level. Title IX's equity imperative, with its equal opportunities and scholarship requirements as well as its protections from abjectly imbalanced treatment, means that women athletes and their allies have robust, federal-level backing in U.S. civil rights policy if and when they choose to challenge the sex imbalances in that economic model for college sports.

Contrary to many media framings, advocacy and mobilization to demand enforcement of Title IX remains an essential part in the lives of athletes – especially women athletes. At the same time, high-profile male sports like college football are under mounting scrutiny by Americans who acknowledge that the violence and bodily trauma at the core of this sport may make it increasingly untenable. Although it is impossible to overstate the centrality of football to the contemporary order of college athletics, there is growing ambivalence about the spending patterns that fuel it. Women athletes and their allies now outnumber those who support the status quo. Our research suggests that new seeds of activism are sprouting – and could soon demand a different future for college sports.

This piece was originally published on May 8, 2018 in *The Gender Policy Report* from the Center on Women, Gender, and Public Policy at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Read more in James Druckman, Jacob Rothschild, and Elizabeth Sharrow, “Gender Policy Feedback: Perceptions of Sex Equity, Title IX, and Political Mobilization Among College Athletes,” *Political Research Quarterly* (forthcoming, 2018).