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Are We There Yet?

Thirty-seven years later, Title IX hasn't fixed it all.

By R. Vivian Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter

Some trips seem endless. On the road, the call "Are we there yet, are we there yet?" from the back seat is both a sign and a cause of frustration. Implementation of the federal antisex- discrimination legislation known as Title IX is akin to an aggravating trip that seems to take forever to arrive at its destination. The journey has lasted almost thirty-seven years so far. Measured in student lifetimes, that's equal to more than nine generations of students. Measured against our personal professional lives, it has gone on for our entire careers.¹

When the Title IX road trip began, we were young, freshly tenured professors with few wrinkles and fewer aches and pains. Our own collegiate athletic experiences a few years earlier had included varsity team memberships coached by female physical education teachers who carried full-time teaching loads and even fuller community service loads. Our competitive seasons were short; at the time, women were thought to lack the stamina for lengthier competitive experiences. For one of us, short seasons were good, because athletic mediocrity was left undiscovered by the time the season ended. For the other, short seasons terminated dreams of exploring the limits of athletic talents; the seasons ended before boundaries could be discovered.

Our experience was typical of the times. We were not alone in having short seasons, women physical educators as coaches, a woman faculty member as athletic director of women's programs, and little or no financial support. (We provided our own uniforms, traveled on converted yellow school buses, and paid our own lodging and food bills.) But we had a grand time and competed with intensity. We learned a lot about ourselves, forged lifelong friendships, and understood the worth of trying to excel in both the gym and the classroom. Our success in the classroom related to our future; our success in the gym related to our sense of self.

The Journey Begins

As soon as the Title IX road trip began with the law's enactment in 1972, the scenery passing the window began to change dramatically—even though the regulations that would come to define and refine the meaning of the thirty-eight words of Title IX's statutory language were not yet penned. This uncertainty did not dampen the remarkable expansion of new women's teams created to meet pent-up demand for participation opportunities. With explosive growth came the need to find additional coaches for women's teams and to start paying them at least a token salary. Men who coached men's teams had been paid for years. It seemed reasonable to assume that Title IX would require more equitable treatment of coaches of women's teams.

Men who had no interest in coaching women for free, or who had been barred by the unwritten but generally followed road sign "only females need apply," quickly began filling the coaching ranks in women's athletics. Programmatic leadership also changed. Separate departments of athletics were merged, typically with a former men's athletics director becoming director of a combined program. The former female director took a step down and became an assistant director or, like one of us, decided to spend more time on teaching and research.

On the Road

The Title IX road trip continued. Progress slowed now and then for court challenges,

reinterpretations, and sometimes simple recalcitrance. At times, detours threatened the entire enterprise. Yet from where the trip started to mile marker 2009, great progress has been made. This progress can be measured in the positive benefits of enhanced self-knowledge, more widely opened doors, and less fettered dreams.

When we were young professionals, our students often found that wearing athletic attire outside the gym was met with labels of "tomboy" or worse. At mile marker 2009, opportunities for both men and women continue to increase, and women's participation in athletics less often involves negative labels. More female high school and intercollegiate athletes participate than ever before. In 2008, more than 9,100 women's intercollegiate teams competed. Almost 15,000 women are employed in intercollegiate athletics (as athletics directors, assistant or associate directors, coaches, trainers, or sports information directors). And one out of five athletics directors is a woman, the highest female representation since the mid-1970s.

Are we there yet? Some would point to this progress and say we've arrived, that the trip is complete. But progress is not completion. Movement toward equity is not full equity. How will we know when we have gotten there? Indeed, where is there?

"There" includes items that are not part of Title IX but are vital to accomplishing its spirit. Indices of arrival might include the following:

- Title IX requirements are seen as the "normal" paradigm rather than things to be circumvented or feared.
- The institutional role of athletics relates to the mission of the college or university in demonstrable ways.
- The value of the athletic experience is determined not by the fan base but by the experience of the individual athlete.
- College presidents have higher salaries than athletics directors or coaches.
- Coaching compensation relates to the job being done, not to the sex of the athletes being coached, the sex of the coach, or the sport being coached.
- Supporters of athletics teams focus on program-wide loyalty rather than a particular sport.
- Negative pressures on life-balance issues have been eliminated.
- Self-delusional notions that big-time football programs contribute financially to an institution are understood to be false and thus no longer motivate bad administrative decisions.
- Women coaches of men's teams are accepted and supported for their coaching skills, without regard to their sex.
- Women athletics directors are not an endangered species.
- Decisions about hiring and firing coaches and administrative staff are made by school leaders rather than fans and alumni.

In short, equity rather than excuses will be the norm once we have completed our journey.

Roadblocks

As we've noted, much progress, particularly in participation, has been made. Yet three huge issues stand as barricades against arrival: compensation, time, and respect. Overcoming these remaining obstacles hinges on a fourth element: will. The obstacles yet to be traversed can be negotiated only if individual and institutional will exists to traverse them. They cannot be effectively traversed by lawsuits, protests, or legislative enforcement. They are systemic and, in effect, beyond the reach of Title IX, and they have not yet been addressed mostly because of the extreme difficulty involved in surmounting them. Yet they bar the attainment of the spirit and full flower of the law. If they are not dealt with, equity in athletics programs will never become a reality.

When one feels chained to a computer trying to find the best words in the best order to complete a writing task, cleaning out files and closets becomes an appealing alternative. As we prepared to write this article, we succumbed for a while to the appeal of crowded files and closets and came across a long-forgotten article we wrote for the January-February

1991 issue of *Academe* titled, "Back to the Future: Reform with a Woman's Voice." The part of that old article that describes the need for systemic change remains relevant:

Now a word about reality: there will be no reform of real consequence while the governing principles on individual campuses as well as within the [National Collegiate Athletic Association] define profit on a dollar basis. That means that as long as big-time football and big-time men's basketball continue to be pampered as potential profit makers, there will be no effective reform in inter-collegiate athletics until or unless such programs collapse under the weight of their abuses. There will be more rules and regulations, but no significant reform. Having said such a painful thing, let us hope for a change in principles and consider why now, more than in the past, women's voices have a significant role to play in the call for reform.

Unfortunately, in the almost two decades since our previous *Academe* article, no resolution of these issues has been found. Indeed, the issues of compensation, time, and respect, arguably mired in the profit-dollar pothole, remain truly systemic and vexing.

Compensation. Waiting for an influx of unencumbered money to solve unequal compensation between men and women in college athletics, or other equity-based funding issues, is a wait with no end. In light of today's shrinking endowments and less-wealthy alums, athletics programs will probably not see hefty checks soon from benefactors or institutional sponsors. In fact, institutions are starting to compete with their own athletics departments for support, which does not augur well for institutional budgetary support of athletics. Some evidence suggests that benefactors often favor athletics programs over institutions, because athletics programs give them something tangible in return for their checks, such as better seats at games or travel with teams. If benefactors with limited money give only to athletics programs, academic programs will suffer.

Recently announced new stadium projects and ambitious goals for athletics endowment funds make us wonder about the degree of mental health on some campuses. When institutions that continue to have Title IX and equity problems pursue such efforts, they demonstrate a lack of will for equity beyond the minimum required to avoid administrative complaints and lawsuits. The disconnect on such campuses between athletics and institutional mission may be so great that the old, tired notion that athletics is more important than the institution itself still flourishes.

Yet some schools faced with diminishing resources are finding creative ways to tighten budgets for their more expensive teams. Perhaps putting the entire football team in a hotel the night before a home game is not vital, they say. Maybe taking a bus instead of flying to a competition wouldn't be too bad, they think. Spring trips to warm climates may be a luxury no longer affordable, they conclude. To those outside athletics departments, these budget-conserving techniques seem obvious. These same methods have always been available, if not generally used, to fund greater equity in coaching compensation and athletics programs. Perhaps current financial pressures will lead to their implementation. In any event, institutions are now examining budgets they previously held to be inviolate. It takes will. We hope the presence of will and the changing budgetary terrain combine to bring about constructive change.

Time. Changing the 24-7 time demand on coaches, both men and women, also requires will. Women are often affected more strongly than men by the extraordinary time demands of an athletics career. Solutions to the life-balance issue cannot be found without thoroughly evaluating the role of athletics on campus.

Respect. Two to three percent of men's teams are coached by women. Many of these women coaches suffer from lack of respect, derision, and distrust by the institution, fans, and alums. The issue of respect and its impact on equity extends to the often unspoken yet access-blocking belief that women cannot serve as effective directors of athletics at institutions that field high-profile football teams.

Even subtle and perhaps subconscious semantic choices— such as team names preceded by "Lady"—reflect disrespect, which decreases will. Similarly, referring to men's teams as "X University's basketball team" and to women's teams as "X University's women's basketball team" suggests a second-class status. Along the same lines, talking about "qualified" female coaches while omitting the modifier "qualified" when speaking of male coaches effectively

tells the listener that most men are qualified and most women are not. Disrespect is subtle, but it has a deep impact on hiring, firing, funding, supporting, and caring. It also reflects an absence of will to arrive at equity.

So are we there yet? No. Have we made great progress toward arriving? Yes. How much longer until we get there? It depends on the strength of will found in the offices of college presidents and directors of athletics.

There is no road rough enough nor hill steep enough to end the road trip to equity . . . if there is the will to get there.

Note

1. This article draws on *Women in Sport: A Longitudinal, National Study on the Status of Women in Sport*, now in its thirty-first year. The authors of this article direct the study. For the first two decades of its life, the study was funded by the City University of New York Brooklyn College. Now it is graciously funded by the Project on Women and Social Change at Smith College. The study solicits data from all National Collegiate Athletic Association member institutions that have a women's athletics program (currently more than 1,100 schools). Over the years, the annual return rate among institutions surveyed has been between 70 and 80 percent. The data are independent of any organizational database. To download a copy of the current study, go to www.acostacarpenter.org. [Return to article](#)

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