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Women's Athletics at SUNY Brockport since 1970:
A Struggle for Gender Equity

The History Seminar
Dr. O'Brien

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For almost thirty years, the athletic department at SUNY Brockport, like other college programs, has had to struggle with the issue of gender equity. At the beginning of the 2000 fall semester, Brockport athletics consisted of 10 men’s teams and 12 women’s teams. The College spent more per capita on female athletes than on male athletes. These numbers alone often lead people to assume gender equity in athletics has been reached at Brockport. But, is SUNY Brockport a model for Title IX compliance and equal rights?

When looking more closely at statistics, we see unequal spending. However, according to the Gender Equity Task Force of the NCAA, “an athletics program can be considered gender equitable when participants in both men and women’s sports programs would accept as fair and equitable the overall program of the other gender.” There is not a struggle here for the female athletes. They do not have to beg for new uniforms or for more traveling funds. The mandatory athletic fee paid by the students, along with an athletic department run by only the second female athletic director in SUNY history, ensure that every team at Brockport gets adequate funding, equipment, facility use, and competitive opportunities. Although not every statistic can show that the College is in compliance, there is a sense that gender equity is a priority for Brockport athletics today.

The athletic director, Linda Case has a reputation for fighting for gender equity. Since she was hired for the position in 1995, she has demonstrated her concern for the women’s program, as well as the men’s. Joan Schockow, the women’s soccer coach said that she feels that Case is the most approachable athletic director she has worked with, and is genuinely concerned not only about the women’s program, but each individual
athlete. In the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act put out by the athletic department yearly, Case says that the department feels "that both the men's and women's programs should be mirror images. I believe that we are doing that and will continue to find even better ways to serve our female athletes each year."3

These measurable statistics and statements from administration are not the only factors that show Brockport's support for its women athletes. The students and athletes themselves show encouragement for one another through their attitudes and reactions that can be seen on campus. The Stylus, the student-run newspaper regularly devotes as much of its sports section to women's teams as it does to men's teams. And although women's basketball does not get the same number of fans at their games as the men's teams, and the softball team does not attract the crowd that football does, there is as much availability to see women's games as their male counterparts. Having at least a small fan base at the basketball games, and being able to get new uniforms every few years may seem like small victories for women. However, the situation for the women athletes at Brockport today is much better than it was just 15 years ago. As Dr. Orbaker, a professor at Brockport and the first women's soccer coach said, "It's not really an issue here anymore. The girls had a hard time getting equality for a long time, but I think the playing field is terribly level today."1

Title IX is part of the Education Amendments of 1972 to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. "It prohibits sex discrimination in education programs, including athletic programs, that receive or benefit from Federal funding."2 In 1979, an Athletics Policy Interpretation was made in order to clarify how the law applied to athletics. There are three ways that a
school can be in compliance with, or in violation of Title IX: accommodation of interests and abilities (sports offerings), athletic financial assistance (scholarships), and in eleven other program areas. These areas are: equipment and supplies, scheduling of games and practice time, travel allowances, tutoring, coaching, locker rooms and facilities, medical and training facilities and services, publicity, support services, and recruitment.

**New Opportunities and the Hurdles that Follow (the 1970s)**

The road to equality for women athletes at Brockport has spanned over three decades, six athletic directors, and numerous coaches. There were many hurdles along the way, as well as small victories for the individual teams. These events are what helped them achieve the status they have today. The first references made to female sports in *The Stylus* and *Saga*, the college yearbook, went as far back as the early 1900s. However, only female sports clubs and intramural teams are mentioned. The yearbook would not list these “club” and “honor” teams with the male sports, and it was not until the late 1960s that *The Stylus* finally awarded these teams varsity status. Women’s basketball and volleyball were referred to as varsity teams in 1966, field hockey and tennis by 1968, and swimming by 1970.

Although *The Stylus* was reporting on these teams, and a few of their contests, they did not report on them with the same attitude and effort as they did the men’s teams. It can be inferred that the reporters acted as though they were doing the women a favor by writing about their games, and wrote with a patronizing tone. In a 1973 article, Mike
Kaufman, a sports reporter for *The Stylus* wrote that although women’s sports have “come of age” at Brockport, “they will never compete at the same level as men.” He announced that the newspaper would continue to give priority to men’s sports, because he felt that students showed more interest in their games. Kaufman recognized the women’s efforts, but said they needed to realize “where the line is drawn.” He promised that he would make sure there was some coverage of the female teams, but made it clear that *The Stylus* viewed the men’s teams as the top sports priority.° Kaufman’s views may have been on the extreme side, but he wrote on reaction from the student body, and felt that he was representing student interest. Having minimal respect and support from their peers was a constant struggle for the female athletes at Brockport.

The women participating in sports in the 1970s had many more obstacles to deal with besides negative student response to their athletic participation. In 1976, Dr. Charles Crawford succeeded interim athletic director Mauro Panaggio (also the men’s basketball coach) as the new athletic director at Brockport. By December of that year disorganization and tension within the athletic department caused four coaches to resign. Among them was Shirley Carmichael, the women’s basketball coach. The coaches cited Dr. Crawford’s “inconsistencies regarding policies from one sport to another, and his inability to co-ordinate the department” as the reasons for their decision to leave Brockport.°

Dr. Crawford, as well as Dr. Pat Smith, the Vice President of Student Affairs at that time, were seen as unsupportive of the women’s teams. Dr. Orbaker felt that their attitude was to let the women take care of themselves, and they did not show much
concern for the teams. In December of 1976, the women’s basketball season was already underway, and the team was without a coach. While the women on the team expressed their concern with having to deal with a mid-season coaching addition, Dr. Smith claimed that it would not be a hard adjustment. Dr. Orbaker remembers that incident, and he imagined that Dr. Smith assumed that the situation would play itself out. He felt that it was the least of Smith’s concerns.

Student-athletes also felt neglected by Crawford’s athletic administration. In an interview with The Stylus, two members of the 1978-79 women’s basketball team, Vicki Sendlebeck and Fleda Palmer, both said they felt that their team had received unfair treatment from administration. Sendlebeck said, “They kept taking away our sweats and giving us different ones. Also, the accommodations on road trips were the pits.” Palmer commented, “the vans would only start in the school parking lot and there was not (sic) heat.”

When faced with the issue of Title IX, Crawford had a logical excuse for not having an equitable program. In a 1979 article in The Stylus, Crawford was asked if Brockport was in compliance with the newly emphasized Title IX requirements. His answer was that “Until the guidelines are published, there is no way to tell whether we are in strict compliance... Relative to other colleges in the country, to the best of my knowledge, Brockport is better off than most for equal opportunity for men and women.” But when another member of the Athletic Advisory Board was asked the same question, she replied, “if you were to look for discrepancies (in the numbers) I’m sure you would
find some interesting figures.” A department member also stated, “Our department is literally and subtly not geared for equality. Maybe our athletic director should read a book on how to lie with statistics.” In his interview, Crawford makes it clear, purposely or not, that gender equity at Brockport was not a top priority for him.

An incident occurred in 1972, before Dr. Crawford’s arrival, that reflected a similar feeling on the part of Brockport’s administration. A plea was made by the women’s basketball team and their coach, Shirley Carmichael for use of the health and physical education gym for practice once a week and for home games. They only used the Hartwell gym while the men’s team had use of the “H and P.E.” gym. The team felt that there should be more equitable distribution of use of the newer, larger gym. The Hartwell gym had poor lighting and broken windows. The Facilities Committee turned this decision over to the athletic director, Dr. Richard Youngberg. His decision was to sustain the situation. From this inaction taken by Dr. Youngberg, we see that Dr. Crawford was only continuing a tradition of athletic inequality that started before his administration began.

The 1970s were a time of frustration and strife for women athletes at SUNY Brockport. Under Youngberg’s, Panaggio’s, and Dr. Crawford’s leadership, the athletic department seemed to remain satisfied with the condition of the women’s athletic program. Meanwhile, the women participants fought for recognition and equal opportunities. As the 1980s approached, and Title IX was finally being applied, the women’s teams would begin to grow into the cohesive program that exists today.
From Financial Crisis to the Affects of Title IX

The 1980s would prove to be a test for the athletic department at SUNY Brockport. The decade started with a major financial crisis, as the enrollment of the College was declining, and there was growing inflation. In early 1980, Dr. Smith, Vice President of Student Affairs, proposed a cut of eleven athletic teams in order to alleviate the financial strain on the department. The following teams were eliminated for both men and women: golf, lacrosse, tennis, indoor track, and cross country, in addition to men’s gymnastics, swimming and baseball. The availability of facilities, ability to maintain the fields, and the implementation of Title IX were some of the reasons given for the necessity of the cut. The proposal was eventually approved by President, Dr. Brown, and the new program would go into effect in the Fall of 1980, leaving only five men’s and six women’s teams remaining, in addition to a coed track team.13

The team reduction was expected to give better financial support to the remaining teams. Dr. Smith and Dr. Crawford both regarded the cut as a move that would make the remaining teams’ funding, equipment, and opportunities equitable. However, for the surviving women’s teams, there was not much change in their treatment, although they were beginning to overcome the inequalities they faced. In the Fall of 1981, the Field Hockey team was participating in their second national tournament in as many years. In a story in The Stylus, reporter Dave Trudeau said,

“Despite being ignored for the most part by an athletic department which has concentrated its efforts almost solely on the development of the football and
soccer programs, through hard work and determination Arena and her staff have made Brockport a ‘total program’ which is admired throughout the state and around the nation.  

In 1983 there was a sign of improvement in Brockport’s level of financial stability and gender equity. It was announced that by the fall of 1983, seven teams would be added. The women’s teams added were a soccer team and a junior varsity basketball team. By 1985, the College expected to add men’s lacrosse and women’s tennis to the list.

When women’s soccer was added to the athletic program, it was the first team of this kind in school history. The idea for the team came about because there was some student interest on campus, and Dr. Orbaker was willing to start a team. As he said, “if you could breathe, you could play soccer for me!” According to the interpretation of Title IX made in 1979, “Accommodation of Interests and Abilities, or sports offerings” is a necessary component for compliance. In other words, if there is a significant interest to participate by one sex, and there is a team in that sport for the other gender, the opportunity is to be made available to the other sex.

In hindsight, this addition was a watershed for women’s athletics at Brockport. It reflected a new attitude among women- one that said that they wanted to participate and they would fight to get the opportunity. It also revealed a new side of the athletic department. It was really the first time that Brockport took into consideration Title IX regulations and incorporated them into its department.
This new attitude taken on by the women at Brockport was not an automatic, permanent change. Although the female athletes at Brockport began to accept themselves as real athletes, and learned to make athletics a part of who they were, the change did not come without some problems. Dr. Orbaker, the first women’s soccer coach, shared a story that described these newfound feelings his team members were experiencing. He recalled walking around the field during pre-game warm-ups and collecting all the earrings the girls were wearing. He said that as soon as the game was finished, before the team would even leave the field, they would each come to collect their earrings and immediately put them back on. Orbaker finally asked one of his athletes why the earrings were so important. Her response was that her boyfriend had come to watch. He did not mind her playing soccer, but she felt like she at least had to look feminine while she played. It was then that Dr. Orbaker realized the internal struggle the girls were facing. Their friends and family were finally beginning to accept them as athletes, but they were still expected to look and act feminine. He said that he would hear many rude comments about his team and other female athletes. People would remark on their sexuality, and lack of femininity. But according to him, the girls stuck it out and continued to play. 17

Beginning with the addition of teams in 1983, a more supportive attitude emerged in the athletic department, in reference to female athletics. It was also in that year that Dr. Stier took over as athletic director. Dr. Orbaker viewed Stier’s administration as the beginning of improvements in women’s athletics at Brockport. It was during his administration, although not solely because of him, that a mandatory athletic fee was
approved. This helped equalize funding for men’s and women’s athletics. Orbaker remarked that this upward trend in women’s sports continued with Dr. Matejkovic, whom he felt was instrumental in the acceleration of gender equity at Brockport. Linda Case was hired as athletic director in 1995, and many coaches feel that she has continued and improved Brockport’s effort to provide a fair, equitable environment to all of its athletes.

The new vision of the athletic department and the improving attitudes of society, specifically SUNY Brockport students and staff, concerning gender equity and the new role of the female athlete resulted in noticeable improvements in team records and overall successes. The women’s basketball program has posted a winning season eight of the last nine years. This is after having only five winning seasons in the previous 17 years. The women’s softball team was the SUNYAC West Champions from 1984 to 1997 and, in soccer, the women have had nine straight seasons above .500.

Women’s teams are finally exhibiting more stability, especially in their head coaches. Since the birth of Brockport women’s soccer in 1983, the program has only had three head coaches. In softball, the team has had only four different coaches in the past ten years, compared to the seven it went through in approximately twenty years before. The basketball team has shown the most improvement in consistency, not only with their winning records, but in coaching. The program has had only two head coaching changes since 1985. These signs of stability and success represent an overall improvement in the effort that has been applied to making women’s athletics at Brockport equal to the men’s teams.
It is evident that there have been incredible improvements in the standards and condition of women's athletics at Brockport. Not only have student attitudes, athlete self-image, and administrative involvement improved, but there has been measurable progress made in the success of women athletes and teams on this campus. However, these strides and the increasing implementation of Title IX have affected the men's programs as well. The 1996 Brockport Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act stated that in order to add women's sports in 1995-96, there was a decrease in the size of the practice squads for both the wrestling and football teams. It is often difficult for a college to remain within the boundaries of Title IX. This is especially true if it has a football program because of the enormous size of the team and the need for equipment and several coaches. At Brockport, although there is a 16.2% difference in the operating expenses of the men's and women's programs (the men spend more), $721.00 is spent per every female athlete while only $684.00 is spent for every man. As early as 1974, it was announced that cutbacks would begin in the men's program in order to finance the women's teams. In an effort to make gender equity a reality at Brockport, the men's programs do not experience the superiority in funding that they used to.

**SUNY Brockport on a National Scale**

Women's sports at Brockport began taking on varsity status in the 1960s. While there were calls for gender equity in the early 1970s, the government did not start to strictly implement the guidelines set by Title IX until the 1980s. Where has Brockport
stood compared to the rest of the nation throughout the thirty-year struggle for gender equity?

According to an April 1974 article in The Stylus, statistics showed that Brockport was ahead of the rest of the nation in Title IX compliance. The article attributed this to the fact that Brockport is a Division III college, which means that it is prohibited from giving athletic scholarships. Therefore, the College does not have to be concerned with unequal scholarship distribution between genders. Irene Shea, the women’s basketball coach at the time, also stated that the women’s program at Brockport was considered to be one of the best in the country.22

On the surface, it looks as though Title IX has been realized at Brockport. But a closer look shows that the College is not in complete compliance with the law’s regulations today. The men’s teams still receive more funding than the women’s, regardless of women receiving more money per capita. The men’s teams spend over three times as much on recruiting expenses as the women’s do, although women’s teams do not spend all that they are allocated for recruiting. Coaches of men’s teams receive $10,000 more than women’s coaches and there are 324 male participants (over 100 on the football team) compared to only 222 women.23 These numbers, however, do not seem to hinder the success and opportunities that the women’s program receives.

When comparing Brockport to national statistics, there are remarkable similarities. At the national level, women account for 55% of the undergraduate population in Division III colleges and universities, while they only make up 40.6% of the athletes competing at this level.24 At SUNY Brockport, women account for 56.1% of the
undergraduates, and 40.7% of the athletes. Brockport’s statistics fall within one percentage point of national statistics. In the field of operating expenses, the trends continue. On the national spectrum, women’s expenses are at an average of $261,436, which is 40.1% of the overall spending. At Brockport, the women’s teams spend a total of only $160,037. This is 41.9% of the total expenses at Brockport. In comparison, Brockport spends a lesser amount on athletics overall, but a greater percentage (by 1.8%) on its women’s teams. In analyzing this information, it looks as though Brockport is about as equitable as the average Division III College in the United States. However, not all Division III colleges support a football program. Because of the financial strain football can put on a school, it is even harder for a college with a football team to be in compliance with Title IX. Therefore, Brockport’s statistical similarity with the rest of the nation, in reality, shows its superiority in the area of gender equity.

Through the past thirty years, SUNY Brockport has formed a reasonably equitable athletic program, where women have approximately the same advantages as men, both financially, and in competitive opportunities. The increased emphasis on the women’s program and the teams’ successes has greatly affected SUNY Brockport as a whole. Since its establishment as a liberal arts college in the mid 1960s, Brockport has maintained a strong reputation in the field of physical education. The emphasis on equal opportunities for female athletes goes hand in hand with equal educational opportunities for the women at Brockport.

Although competitiveness and success is stressed more in athletics today than thirty years ago, Brockport still finds the academic side of athletics to be imperative to
the success of the program. The gender equity in athletics that has evolved here has paralleled the educational standards of the College.

The individual success of an athlete cannot be overlooked when examining the benefits of gender equity in athletics. In giving women equal opportunity, Brockport is giving females the opportunity to develop the self-confidence, pride, and successful experiences that are valuable throughout college and life beyond formal education. Achieving athletic and educational equality means that Brockport is giving women and men an equal chance at success. This is the spirit in which Title IX was formed.

“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 education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

-Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 to the 1964 Civil Rights Act
Endnotes

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2 Interview with Joan Schockow, April 23, 2001.
4 Interview with Dr. Orbaker, April 23, 2001.
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8 Brockport Athletic History, <http://www.brockport.edu/~athletics/history/>
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15 “Title IX Investigated,” The Stylus, 24 April 1979. p. 1
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