

TITLE IX AT 40: How equal is SJFC when it comes to sports?

Dan Glickman | Posted: Wednesday, April 18, 2012 5:33 pm

In June 1972, President Richard Nixon signed into law Title IX of the Education Amendments Acts. It read, 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 education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance...”

The law, quite simply, meant that schools could not discriminate by gender if they received any type of federal funding. While it was written with primarily academics in mind, it is now most publicly identified when it comes to sports. In fact, some think Title IX only applies to sports.

“People often think of Title IX as something related to athletics, but in fact, it’s much more,” says Rick DeJesus-Rueff, who, as Vice President for Student Affairs and Diversity Initiatives, is in charge of the school’s Title IX requirements.

“It really is about gender equity and responsibility across the board within the institution,” he said.

Despite that, though, much of Title IX’s effects are found in sports. In fact, a three-pronged test looking at finances, enrollment and other factors (such as facilities and coaches) is applied to schools’ athletic programs in case a violation is reported. In theory, if a school does not comply with Title IX, it could be penalized in several ways, up to and including the loss of all federal funds to the institution- although this has never occurred in the 40 year history of the law.

Even without any violations, several groups maintain data about how schools are doing, including the NCAA (which provides Equity in Athletics Data Analysis forms, or EADA, to recruits to look at) and the Women’s Sports Foundation, or WSF, which occasionally releases report cards on colleges.

In 2007, on the 35th anniversary of the law, the WSF graded St. John Fisher College as an “F”.

One of the main reasons for it was due to the disparity in the proportion of female athletes to the proportion of female undergraduates. At the time of the study, SJFC’s undergrad population was 57 percent female, but the proportion of the athletic population was 27 percent. In New York State, only Molloy College had a higher disparity in the proportion between female athletes and undergrads than Fisher’s gap of 30.6 percent.

In the past several years, St. John Fisher has tried to improve its Title IX status, according to DeJesus-Rueff.

“I know that we have tried to balance our efforts as we expanded athletics,” he said. He cited the addition of field hockey, cross country and track and field as signs of how Fisher is taking Title IX into consideration as other sports have been added to the school’s roster.

“When we created the opportunity for track and field, we knew that there would be a number of female athletes who could participate in that just as easily as male athletes,” DeJesus said.

The addition of crew (rowing) will also help even up the proportion of men and women athletes, at least officially.

“We started crew this year,” he said, “and crew is something that counts only towards women athletes.

“You can have a Division III varsity female crew team, there is no Division III varsity male crew.”

Emily Dane, an assistant professor of sports studies at Fisher who has researched Title IX, agrees that Fisher is trying to improve its Title IX compliance.

“Fisher is making progress in the right direction,” Dane said, “[they are] aware of their situation and [are] trying to better address the needs of female athletes in the region.”

“The addition of field hockey, the addition of track and cross-country are clearly a step in the right direction,” she added.

Despite the additions, though, Fisher remains unbalanced in its gender equity proportions, according to an analysis of available data.

According to a 2010-2011 EADA form (available at <http://ope.ed.gov/athletics>), which was taken before the addition of field hockey, track and field and cross country, there were 2,687 undergrads at Fisher, 1,566 of them women (58.28 percent). However, of the 431 athletes, only 131 of them were women, a percentage of 30.39. This proportion gap, of about 27.89 percent, would be an improvement upon the gap of 27 percent noted by the WSF in their 2007 report card, but would still have been rated an F by that organization.

Current statistics on the number of athletes are unavailable, but a rudimentary count based on how many athletes are on the new teams reveals that the athletic population of Fisher is now close to 349 male and 203 female (note, again, that these are unofficial numbers). This would mean the proportion of athletes being female would now be 36.78 percent. The college’s FAQ currently has the proportion of the school’s student body as being 58 percent female, meaning the proportion gap has now been lowered to about 21.22 percent. This is only good enough for a D minus on the

WSF's scale, despite the additions that have been taken over the past five years. (Assuming that 35 additional athletes are added when the women's crew team is formed, the proportion gap would be lowered to 17.45 percent, good for a D plus.)

By comparison, other local colleges are more equitable. The 2010-11 EADA report for the University of Rochester, for example, gives data that shows that their school was 50.67 percent female at the time, and their athletics program is 43.07 percent female, only roughly a seven percent proportion disparity. RIT, a predominantly male school, actually has a positive disparity: women make up a larger percentage of the athlete population than they do the undergraduate population.

No matter how a school is doing with Title IX, however, there will likely always be work to be done, as DeJesus-Rueff admitted.

"There's always room for improvement, no matter how good you get, you are never perfect. The fact is, is that it [Title IX compliance] is a constant work in progress."

Even on a national scale, where participation in collegiate sports by women has increased by several hundred percentage points according to some sources, there is still work to be done, according to Dane.

"[Title IX] absolutely has [worked]," she says, "[but] that doesn't mean the work is done."