



# Women's Sports Foundation

## RESEARCH SERIES

# Who's Playing College Sports?

## Trends in Participation

**June 5, 2007**

## Executive Summary

# About the Women's Sports Foundation

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Founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King, the Women's Sports Foundation is a national charitable educational organization seeking to advance the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. The Foundation's Participation, Education, Advocacy, Research and Leadership programs are made possible by gifts from individuals, foundations and corporations. The Foundation is located in Nassau County, N.Y. For more information, please call the Foundation at (800) 227-3988 or visit [www.WomensSportsFoundation.org](http://www.WomensSportsFoundation.org). The Foundation serves as a center for collecting and sharing information on girls and women in sports and physical activity. The Women's Sports Foundation also produces academic research on the psychological, social and physiological dimensions of sport and physical activity in the lives of girls and women.

This educational publication is made possible by the support of our members and donors. The Women's Sports Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Donations to the Foundation are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. Please give generously to support our mission and activities.

## Authorship and Acknowledgments

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This report is the first in a series of three gender equity reports. The second report will examine which factors influence intercollegiate participation changes, with a special focus on Title IX, spending on men's basketball and football, and changing preferences for less prominent men's sports. It is scheduled for release in January 2008. The third report will examine how the racial and ethnic composition of intercollegiate athletes has changed over time. It is scheduled for release in June 2008.

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# Executive Summary

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The 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Title IX is an excellent time to consider men's and women's participation in intercollegiate athletics. This study provides the most accurate and comprehensive examination of participation trends to date. We analyze data from almost every higher education institution in the country and utilize data and methods that are free of the shortcomings present in previous research on this subject. A 10-year NCAA sample containing 738 NCAA colleges and universities is examined over the 1995-96 to 2004-05 period. In addition, a complete four-year sample containing 1,895 higher education institutions is examined over the 2001-02 to 2004-05 period.

The results demonstrate that women continue to be significantly underrepresented among college athletes. At the average higher education institution, the female share of undergraduates is 55.8% while the female share of athletes is 41.7%. Women did enjoy a substantial increase in participation opportunities in the late 1990s, but this progress slowed considerably in the early 2000s. In fact, the increase in women's participation levels was roughly equal to the increase in men's participation levels between 2001-02 and 2004-05. Progress towards more equitable participation numbers for men and women has stalled.

Debates over Title IX have focused more on maintaining the numerous athletic opportunities that men have historically enjoyed rather than ensuring that women gain access to the opportunities they have been historically denied. In other words, the significant underrepresentation of women among college athletes often receives relatively little attention. Instead, the debate focuses on whether or not men have maintained their high participation levels, and many claim that men's athletic participation has seriously declined over time. The results of this study clearly refute this claim and instead indicate small overall increases in men's participation in intercollegiate athletics. Men's participation levels grew slightly between 1995-96 and 2001-02, a period containing the *Cohen vs. Brown* decision that encouraged colleges and universities to take Title IX more seriously. Furthermore, men's participation levels continued to increase between 2001-02 and 2004-05, a moment of tough financial times for many higher education institutions.

This report demonstrates the importance of providing a complete portrait of participation trends. Examination of specific sports or sets of institutions can produce misleading results. For example, participation in men's wrestling and tennis declined substantially over time, but other men's sports (football, baseball, lacrosse and soccer) experienced much larger gains. While it is true that men's participation levels fell slightly among Division I-A institutions, no other set of institutions experienced declines and many saw their men's participation levels increase.

## Major Findings

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1. Women's athletic participation levels substantially increased during the late 1990s, but this growth slowed considerably in the early 2000s.
  - ◆ For the 10-year/738 NCAA institutions sample, female participation grew by almost 26,000 athletes between 1995-96 and 2004-05, but only 15% of this increase came during the 2001-02 to 2004-05 period.
  - ◆ For the complete four-year/1,895 institutions sample, female participation grew by 11,000 athletes between 2001-02 and 2004-05, an increase similar to that experienced by men.
2. Women's participation still lags far behind men's participation levels.
  - ◆ For the average higher education institution in the complete four-year/1,895 institutions sample, the female share of undergraduate enrollment in 2004-05 was 55.8% while the female share of athletes was only 41.7%.
  - ◆ For the complete four-year/1,895 institutions sample, the reported number of men's participants in 2004-05 was 291,797, while the corresponding number for women was 205,492. In combination, these figures demonstrate that as of 2004-05, only 41% of athletic participants were women and 151,149 female athletes would need to have been added (assuming no reduction in male participants) to reach a share of 55%, the female share of full-time undergraduates in the fall of 2004.
3. Men's overall athletic participation levels increased over time.
  - ◆ For the 10-year/738 NCAA institutions sample, male participation grew by around 7,000 athletes between 1995-96 and 2004-05, an average of almost 10 athletes per institution.

- ◆ For the complete four-year/1,895 institutions sample, male participation grew by almost 10,000 athletes between 2001-02 and 2004-05, an average of slightly over five athletes per institution.

4. While a few men's sports suffered substantial declines, a larger number of men's sports enjoyed increases that far outnumbered those losses.
  - ◆ For the 10-year/738 NCAA institutions sample, only tennis (-678) and wrestling (-488) experienced declines of more than 80 athletes between 1995-96 and 2004-05. In contrast, four men sports grew by much larger amounts: football grew by more than 4,000 participants while baseball (+1,561), lacrosse (+1,091) and soccer (+758) also rose sharply.
  - ◆ For the complete four-year/1,895 institutions sample, only two men's sports (tennis and volleyball) experienced declines of more than 60 athletes between 2001-02 and 2004-05, while 12 men's sports had increases of at least that amount. Men's football, baseball, lacrosse and soccer again enjoyed the largest increases.
  - ◆ For some of the growing men's sports (especially football), the participation increases were primarily due to growth in the average roster size. As a result, the total number of men's teams essentially remained the same over the period of study.
5. The only subset of higher education institutions that experienced declines in men's participation levels was NCAA Division I-A schools, the institutions that spend the most on intercollegiate athletics.
  - ◆ For the 10-year/738 NCAA institutions sample between 1995-96 and 2004-05, men's participation grew in Divisions II and III, remained mostly the same in Divisions I-AA and I-AAA, and fell only in Division I-A.
  - ◆ For the complete four-year/1,895 institutions sample between 2001-02 and 2004-05, all six of the major intercollegiate athletic organizations (NCAA, NAIA, NCCAA, NJCAA, COA, NWAAC) experienced overall increases in men's participation levels.

## Policy Implications

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Many of the arguments against Title IX in intercollegiate sports are not supported by the data presented in this comprehensive report. The findings in this study have implications for the ways that policymakers think about how Title IX has shaped the lives and opportunities of female and male athletes on American campuses.

1. Further weakening of Title IX, as represented by the March 2005 policy clarification, is unjustified.
2. Title IX does not need to be reformed to stop large overall decreases in men's athletic participation because such decreases have not occurred.
3. The debate over Title IX should not be based on the experience of a few individual sports.
4. Efforts to analyze and stem reductions in men's sports should focus on Division I-A institutions, the only set of institutions that experienced declines. Future attempts to explain the declines of men's athletic participation at Division I-A institutions should consider institutional policies and practices associated with the "arms race" in athletic spending.

## How Are Colleges and Universities Doing? Grading Participation, Documenting Expansion

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This report contains an online component (available at [www.WomensSportsFoundation.org](http://www.WomensSportsFoundation.org)) that enables readers to evaluate and compare each higher education institution's performance in relation to its peers. We present the female share of undergraduates and the female share of athletes for each institution to examine whether the gender composition of an institution's athletes is similar to the gender composition of its student body. To help highlight colleges and universities that perform well in this regard, we assign grades. To identify higher education institutions that recently expanded the number of opportunities for female athletes, we also list the change in women's participation levels over recent years.