

Title IX was only the start

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By Heather Bateman

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I'm used to being one of the only female head athletic directors in athletic administration, but that doesn't mean that's how it should be.

Playing college basketball at Oakland University was only the beginning for me. I wanted a career in college athletics. I knew I wanted to help build programs and I knew I would be blazing a path where few women dared to go.

Thankfully, things are changing — unfortunately still slowly, to be sure. When I came to Cleary University in 2019, I was the only female in the athletic department, which hosted 17 varsity sports, except for a female dance coach. Cleary University is not unusual in this regard. Even though Title IX was created in 1972, it was not enforced until years later.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) created the Senior Women Administrator (SWA) position for women to have a voice in athletic administration; however, not a lot of departments take this role seriously, so it's not a position with an actual voice.

College athletics administration is improving, but there are still few women at the helm.

And that needs to change.

Unless women are advocating for women on the field of play, in the boardrooms, and in the recruiting phase, access for all and equal opportunity won't happen. Since football has long been an economic driver of higher education institutions, and women don't normally play college football, we have been left out of the very real old boys club. It's everywhere — in handshake deals, back-door negotiations and deep-pocket alumni who are mainly men.

Thankfully, we're traveling, we have our own locker rooms and we wear fresh uniforms instead of hand-me-downs from the men's JV — which is what happened when women's sports first began to grow. But we still have a long way to go in acquiring a seat at the leadership table, and it's high time it happened. Because sports isn't just a fun way to pass the time. It's symbolic of societal priorities in every corner of this country.

American sports comprise more than half of the global sports market. In America, athletics are everything, driving the economy and the media, representing values and becoming a platform for politics. In many ways, our reaction to, participation in and prioritization of athletics defines American morals and ethics. Likewise, sports fans tune in to find meaning and community, along with affirmation of what matters.

At the college level, athletics represents dreams-come-true, the potential for stardom and high-level acceptance. While American pro football wasn't even popular until the 1950s, it's been a big deal on college campuses since the 1890s. The 15 biggest stadiums in the nation are primarily college football stadiums, with eight that pack in more than 100,000 people.

In the last century, professional sports has grown in reach and popularity, influencing American culture. Successful athletes represent the American dream, giving hope to lower-income youth that they might have a chance at fame and wealth. Sports unites people in the way that it is based on agreed-upon rules and structures, and rewards natural talent.

With all this in mind, women, as half the population, must play a prominent role in athletic administration — at every level, and certainly in higher ed.

When a young adult arrives at university, they are at a pivotal time of life. It's exciting and scary to leave home. My job is not only to produce a reputable and thriving athletic department, but also to guide student-athletes, help them on their journey, be an available ear. I tell students their No. 1 goal is to graduate — because athletic ability will only take them so far. They must gain knowledge and skills to turn that talent into a career.

Athletic and career success alike depend on strong, trusting relationships. Recognizing strengths, knowing when to listen and when to lead, developing routines that make you better every day, these are important lessons for young people. Learning to work in a team setting while excelling in your own skills will take you anywhere you want to go.

Strong athletic directors teach by example, empowering coaches, knowing players' names, creating self-sustaining programs that represent the university and the community.

All the lessons I've learned as an athletic director are universal lessons for anyone wishing to achieve success. Why shouldn't they be modeled by women as well as men?

Lessons like: Find your leadership style. Be ethical. Look for both sides of a story and find the truth within each. Support students. Build relationships that build your department, and your institution. Identify outcomes and align them with institutional goals. Take care of the people who take care of you. Treat everyone equally because they are all part of the same team.

If we all played by the same rules, we'd see that there is no gender divide in athletic administration, nor should there be. It's about empowering people and making America truly great — highlighting the talent, determination and grit that keeps us playing.

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