

**LIMITATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION'S
ONLINE SURVEY METHOD FOR MEASURING
ATHLETIC INTEREST AND ABILITY ON U.S.A. CAMPUSES**

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LIMITATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S ONLINE SURVEY METHOD FOR MEASURING ATHLETIC INTEREST AND ABILITY ON U.S.A. CAMPUSES¹

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The Department of Education has endorsed using an online survey method as the sole means of assessing student interest in additional athletic participation opportunities. The March 17, 2005 *Additional Clarification on Intercollegiate Athletics Policy: Three-Part Test—Part Three* would allow colleges and universities to use a “Model Survey” alone to claim compliance with Title IX’s mandate that schools provide equal participation opportunities to male and female students. In particular, the results of the Department’s survey could be used to determine institutional compliance with the third prong of Title IX’s three-part participation test.³ Under this prong, an institution may comply if it can show that its athletics program fully and effectively accommodates the interests and abilities of the underrepresented sex.

Until it issued its new Clarification, the Department had interpreted the third prong of the test to require a systematic evaluation of a host of factors, beyond surveys, to assess whether institutions had fully met the interests and abilities of their female students. *See Clarification of Intercollegiate Athletics Policy Guidance: The Three-Part Test* (January 1996). The Department’s new “Additional” Clarification would eviscerate that interpretation and allow educational institutions to rely exclusively on a survey to measure unmet interest. But it would be methodologically misguided for institutions to utilize the Department’s on-line survey method as the sole measure of compliance with Prong 3. Instead, sound methodological guidelines dictate that multiple approaches to assessing the athletic interests and abilities of students be deployed. Moreover, the online survey authorized by the new Clarification suffers from serious methodological flaws.

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³ Under Prong 1 of the three-part test, a school will be in compliance if its representation of male and female athletes is substantially proportionate to its male and female enrollment. For example, if females comprise 54% of the student body, the school will comply with Prong 1 if about 54% of its athletes are female. Under Prong 2, a school will be in compliance if it demonstrates a history and continuing practice of expanding opportunities for the underrepresented gender. Adding teams for women in order to balance team offerings for men, for example, would support compliance. Prong 3 requires a demonstration that the interests and abilities of the underrepresented sex have been fully and effectively accommodated by the school’s existing program.

Sound Methodology Requires the Use of Multiple Measures to Evaluate Interest and Ability and Shows the Limitations of a Survey

Basic methodological principles, as well as substantial research, demonstrate that exclusive reliance on a survey to evaluate women's interests and ability to participate in sports is not likely to fairly reveal the true extent of those interests and abilities. This is so for several reasons:

1. Research shows that an individual's disposition and willingness to express personal interest in athletics is influenced by social norms, culture, gender, race, and ethnicity. For example:
 - a. Boys and men are apt to express interest in sports and identify as athletes because these interests are traditionally associated with appropriately "masculine" behavior and identity.⁴
 - b. Girls and women often have a higher set of behavioral standards for what it means to be an "athlete." Researcher and author Catherine McKinnon, for example, practiced the martial arts for five years, two hours per night, and five nights a week before she began to consider herself an "athlete."⁵ For many young women, increased involvement with sports entails rethinking traditional cultural notions about femininity.⁶
 - c. The pervasiveness of "Marianisma" in some Latina/Hispanic cultures (which emphasizes conformity to housewife-motherhood and discourages nontraditional roles for girls and women) can lead some Latinas to downplay interest and involvement in athletics.⁷

⁴ See Connell, R. W. (2000), The Men and the Boys, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Messner, M. A. (2002), Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Pollack, W. (1998), Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood, New York: Henry Holt and Company; Senay, E. & Waters, R. (2004), From Boys to Men: A Woman's Guide to the Health of Husbands, Partners, Sons, Fathers, and Brothers, New York: Scribner.

⁵ Stimpson, C. R. (2004), The Atalanta syndrome: Women, sports, and cultural values, Inaugural Helen Pond McIntyre Lecture, *Scholar & Feminist Online*, October 20.

⁶ See The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Report (1997), Physical Activity & Sport in the Lives of Girls: Physical and Mental Health Dimensions from an Interdisciplinary Approach, Washington, D.C.: Department of Health and Human Services; Sabo, D., Miller, K.E., Melnick, M.J. & Heywood, L. (2004), Her Life Depends On It: Sport, Physical Activity, and the Health and Well-Being of American Girls, East Meadow, N.Y.: Women's Sports Foundation.

⁷ Melnick, M., Sabo, D. & Vanfossen, B. (1992), Educational effects of interscholastic athletic participation on African-American and Hispanic youth, *Journal of Adolescence*, 27(106):295-308; Melnick, M., Sabo, D. & Vanfossen, B. (1992), Effects of interscholastic athletic participation on the social, educational, and career mobility of Hispanic boys and girls, *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 17(1):57-75; Sabo, D., Melnick M. & Vanfossen, B. (1993), The influence of high school

2. Any failure to express interest likely reflects a lack of prior exposure, which in turn is the result of discriminatory limitations on women's opportunities. Interest cannot be measured apart from opportunity, particularly in the context of sports, where women's interest in athletics has been limited by the discrimination to which they have been – and continue to be – subjected. As a result, surveys cannot measure the extent to which women would show interest and ability if non-discriminatory opportunities were made available to them.
3. As a related matter, any survey of athletic interests is based on the problematic theoretical assumption that surveys of interest can be used to predict athletic behavior. Behavioral scientists have long observed the discrepancy between attitude and behavior. For example, millions of Americans who profess a keen interest in quitting smoking or losing weight continue to smoke and overeat. Particularly in the context of athletics, where women's opportunities have historically been limited, the converse is also true: individuals who fail to express interest in participating in sports will often embrace the chance to play if offered the opportunity. Many girls who would have expressed no interest in sports, for example, become enthusiastic participants after joining a team because a friend did so, because they were actively recruited by an enthusiastic coach, or because they were taken to tryouts by a pro-sport parent.

For all of these reasons, the Department's long-standing prior policies, including its 1996 Clarification, make clear that a survey of students is only one of many factors that schools must consider in evaluating whether they are fully meeting the interests and abilities of their female students. The 1996 Clarification also requires schools to consider requests by students to add a sport; participation rates in club or intramural sports; participation rates in sports in high schools, amateur athletic associations and community sports leagues in areas from which the school draws its students; and interviews with students, coaches, teachers and administrators.

The use of multiple measures, as set forth in the Department's 1996 Clarification, is methodologically sound and enhances the likelihood that schools will accurately assess the extent of their students' interest in additional sports opportunities. Moreover, this approach has worked as a practical matter. According to the Additional Clarification, between 1992 and 2002, approximately two-thirds of schools complied with Title IX's athletic participation requirements under the third prong of the three-part test.⁸ The evidence thus supports the overall efficacy of the Department's long-standing policies, and their reliance on a multiple-measure approach, for promoting athletic opportunity and assessing compliance with Title IX for both sexes.

athletic participation on post-secondary educational and occupational mobility: A focus on race and gender, *Sociology of Sport Journal* (Winter, 1993).

⁸ Additional Clarification at 2.

The Department's Survey Suffers from Methodological Flaws

Although the Department's Additional Clarification was issued with 177 pages of policy and text, the methodological procedures it authorizes and the rationales for those procedures need systematic review and assessment. Even a preliminary review of the Clarification, however, reveals serious concerns about the methodological efficacy of the Department's proposed survey.

1. *The Department's Survey is Likely to Generate Low Response Rates.* Online surveys often result in low response rates, thereby creating the risk of drawing conclusions based on inadequate sample sizes. Many campuses experience difficulty generating full responses to online surveys, which makes it likely that relatively few students would participate in the Department's online survey.

The problem of low response rates is exacerbated because the Department's survey does not take into account variation in student access to or use of e-mail. The Department's design deploys erroneous sampling logic by assuming that use of campus-based e-mail services is either supplied or utilized uniformly across student populations. But student access to and use of university and college e-mail services is varied and uneven. Some students frequently use college-based online services for e-mail; others do not use it at all. At institutions where frequent disruptions or periodic shutdowns of e-mail services occur, students may seek and secure commercial e-mail suppliers. Students who work full-time or part-time jobs may spend less time online and/or check e-mail less frequently. Poor students may not own a computer or be able to pay for convenient e-mail services. And numerous students may ignore campus e-mail systems in order to avoid real or perceived encounters with what they regard as bureaucratic or commercially invasive spam.

Some (but not all) campuses maintain policies requiring students to check email at certain intervals--for example, once a week or once a day. But even on campuses that do have policies that require students to check email regularly, one cannot guarantee that students actually conform to such policies, or that the institution maintains current (and reliably accurate) directories of e-mail.

Moreover, the Department's survey methodology does not take into account the accelerating diversity in telecommunication preferences among college students. The campus-based online survey design ignores both national and international trends among young and tech-savvy consumers to increasingly rely on text messaging through cell phones as a vehicle for interpersonal communication. Those students who are opting for these regional, "off-campus" communication vehicles would likely not be included in campus-based online surveys.

For all of these reasons, the Department's survey is likely to yield a low response rate. Additionally, nothing in the new Clarification makes clear how policymakers will determine when a large enough sample has been generated by a particular administration of the Department's survey.

2. *The Department's Methodological Procedure to Count Nonrespondents is Misguided.* The User's Guide for the Department's survey recommends that institutions conduct a "census" of the student population. Under a census methodology, there is no attempt to draw a sample from the student population. Rather, a census involves polling *all* students. But unless completing the online survey is somehow made mandatory (e.g., student registration is blocked until the survey is completed),⁹ it is highly unlikely that all students will complete it, based on the reasons set forth above, among others.

Recognizing this reality, the Department's survey guidelines treat the survey methodology as a "census" if all students are simply contacted and asked to go to a website and complete the questionnaire. If a student does not respond to the request, the Clarification specifically states that schools may interpret the nonresponse as evidence of lack of interest—in other words, that student is still "counted" as a respondent and, furthermore, operationally defined as someone with no interest in athletics. By equating nonresponses to a lack of athletic interest (past, present, and future), the Office for Civil Rights' methodological procedures do not meet basic scientific criteria for establishing reliable and valid survey results and interpretations.

Furthermore, even if students are screened at the point of registration using a campus ID, one cannot be certain that the person completing the registration is the student who is being targeted; e.g., it is not uncommon for students to have other people register for them. On many campuses, some students, faculty, and staff share their campus IDs and passwords, even though doing so is against University policy.

3. *The Department's Survey is Properly Understood to Embody a Sampling Methodology, but is Unlikely to Generate a Representative Sample.* Based on the foregoing analysis, what the Department's survey really relies on is a sampling methodology. But unfortunately, there is nothing in the new Clarification that ensures that the sample that responds to the on-line survey will be representative of the student population. One major problem is referred to as the "coverage error," which occurs, for example, when a researcher assumes that those who did not respond to the survey are similar in all other respects to those who did respond. In many instances, however, the respondents may be very different from the nonrespondents in ways that remain hidden or are not measured. When this occurs, the sample is compromised and the empirical results become suspect.

In addition, the Department's survey suffers from blind recruitment of respondents. A methodological bias often inherent in an online survey method is that participants are blind-recruited online, and thus, respondents self-select for participation rather than being randomly or strategically pre-selected from an existing population roster and individually

⁹ Even if the online survey is made mandatory, students who do not want to participate (irrespective of their interest or participation in athletics) may "protest" the requirement by providing inaccurate information (e.g., indicating "no interest/experience" at the beginning). This may be particularly likely since the survey will probably take many students more time to complete than is stated in the Clarification. The difficulty is that analysts would not know the extent of the inaccuracy.

targeted for recruitment by researchers. Much on-line survey research is done by posting a link to a survey on web pages visited by the target demographic--e.g., a link to the National Basketball Association website, a website for cat or dog lovers, or CNN.com. Analysis and inferences based on resulting data are limited in value because the respondents are entirely self-selected, compared to research designs in which respondents are contacted directly by phone, e-mail, or face-to-face and then enlisted in a study.

4. *Some Students May Misinterpret the Purpose of the Department's Survey.* The Department of Education survey is called "Assessment of Students' Athletic Interests & Abilities." Because those terms are undefined, some students may misinterpret the goal of the survey as an assessment of their interest in participating in intercollegiate sports rather than the broad spectrum of real and potential recreational, intramural, club, or junior varsity activities that might be part of campus life. But schools have an obligation to ensure gender equity in all athletic offerings, not just intercollegiate teams. Moreover, to the extent that these latter athletic activities are historically marginalized or comparatively under-funded within a specific campus community, students could fail to see them as viable or realistic choices in comparison with the notoriety and institutional centrality of the major intercollegiate sports. Personal interest in participating in a wide array of athletic activities could be skewed or dampened by a realistic assessment of the institutional inequalities that actually exist on campus. As a result, surveys are unlikely to capture the full range of athletic interests that institutions should consider in structuring each level of their sports programs.

Conclusion

The above deficits of the Department's online survey method call into question its empirical efficacy. As a result, it would be methodologically misguided for institutions to utilize the Department's online survey method as a sole measure of compliance with Prong 3. Moreover, the Clarification states that the Department "is not requiring that individual schools conduct elaborate scientific validation" of the procedures and results of the online survey.¹⁰ But the procedures and results are suspect unless they are validated based on established scientific and methodological criteria.

We encourage policymakers, government officials, educators, and researchers to fully evaluate the Department's proposed use of the online survey method to further elucidate these and other methodological concerns.

¹⁰ See <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/title9guidanceadditional.pdf>