



Perspectives from Colleges and Universities in Michigan on Women in Sports

*The perspectives of administrators, coaches, and student-athletes on the current state
of women in sport in Michigan*

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Executive Summary

This report is a curated collection of personal experiences and observations from women in sports in Michigan. This study was conducted to provide an overview of the landscape of women in sports at Michigan public universities, from the perspective of those currently working and participating in collegiate athletics. Through conducting in-depth interviews with over thirty individuals, the author was able to extract key themes around what policies, initiatives, actions were working well for women in sports in Michigan, as well as observe the main challenges that still exist. The report provides the detail and stories behind some of the central issues, and collects a series of recommendations from the interviewees for the Taskforce, and for individual athletics.

The study was divided into two parts: female coaches and administrators, and female student-athletes. For administrators and coaches, the two main issues raised and discussed concerned **career opportunities and hiring** as well as **workplace culture**. Despite many formal efforts identified to formally ensure women are being given appropriate opportunities and support, the interviewees revealed how a number of inequalities remain. A big part of these inequalities is a remaining bias towards hiring and promoting *male* coaches and staff, and the pressure women are under in terms of work-life balance. Networks, in particular female-only networks, were seen as an invaluable tool at providing support between women in sports, whilst some “older men” were identified as holding back athletic departments from embracing a more positive culture towards women.

For the student-athletes, it was harder to identify a single key issue. Many of the things brought up were broader societal challenges as opposed to specific institutional ones. Unsurprisingly, the focus was also less around hiring. The biggest issue they raised was around the athletic department’s culture and the **stigma** that women’s sport was “inferior” to men’s. Other issues such as **resources, access to facilities, coaching preferences, and mental health** were discussed. Some notable examples were the desire from some respondents to see more of an explicit promotion of women in sports, including getting more fans to women’s games. Athletic departments had identified mental health an important issue and when raised with student athletes they acknowledged that resources were available but some additionally called for greater accessibility. Overall, however, there was a more positive response from the student-athletes than from the coaches and administrators.



Introduction

Executive Order 2019-16² established the Michigan Taskforce on Women in Sports was formed within Michigan’s Department of State in June 2019. Its primary charge is to “develop strategies that support and promote opportunities in Michigan for girls and women in sports.”³ This report presents research findings from an important part of the Taskforce’s work during its first year, which was to establish the current landscape for girls and women in collegiate sports in Michigan. This report provides information from a wide range of stakeholders to help the Taskforce better understand the concerns of women currently working and taking part in collegiate sports in Michigan and to help prioritise its work accordingly.

National research on women’s collegiate sports in the United States highlights some of the challenges faced by women in sports, at the coaching and administrative level and for student-athletes. According to the latest report from the Women’s Sport Foundation, 87% of institutions across all three NCAA divisions offer “disproportionately higher rates of athletic opportunities to male athletes compared to their enrolment”.⁴ Female athletes are faced with the negative consequences of gender norms and assumed gender roles from a young age, where parents placed a “somewhat higher value on sport for their sons than their daughters”, and nearly one-third of girls reported that sometimes boys made fun of them while they practiced. This gender dynamic is also reflected in the workplace for female employees in sports. One study shows that “(75%) of female college coaches said that men had an easier time negotiating salary increases, more than half (54%) believed that men are more likely to be promoted, to secure a multiyear contract upon hiring (52%), and to be rewarded with salary increases for successful performance (53%)”.⁵ In Michigan, the inequality in coaching for example can be seen at the top level of athletics. Across D1, D2, and D3 teams, only 41% of women’s teams and 4% of men’s teams had a female head coach.⁶

² https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90705-502883--,00.html

³ https://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,4670,7-127-1640_93511---,00.html

⁴ <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Chasing-Equity-Executive-Summary.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Chasing-Equity-Executive-Summary.pdf>

⁶ <https://ope.ed.gov/athletics/#/>



Methods

These issues and more were discussed in over 30 interviews carried out across 5 different colleges in Michigan (Divisions 1, 2, and 3). The 30+ minute interviews were carried out primarily with women occupying positions as coaches, administrators, and student-athletes. A small number of male coaches and administrators were also interviewed to provide a wider perspective on how these challenges and obstacles were viewed within athletic departments.

The interviews were structured around 3 key overarching questions: “What is the athletic department doing well in terms of supporting you as a woman/women in sports?”, “What are the challenges/obstacles that you/women in sports (still) face?”, and finally “What initiatives or policies would you like to see the Taskforce create or support?”. Depending on the specific role and interests of the interviewee, some aspects were then subsequently developed more than others. This report highlights subsequent issues based on the frequency with which they were brought up and the level of interest expressed by the respondents.

The people interviewed were at the time of the interviews working and participating in collegiate sports and therefore are able to provide a current portrait of the landscape. The length and depth of the interviews, combined with their anonymous nature, provided a chance for the interviewees to speak openly and freely about the challenges they face or observe. All interviews were conducted by Edward Elliott (author of this report). Due to Executive Orders related to the Covid-19 pandemic, several in-person site visits and interviews were cancelled and the interviews were conducted via telephone. However, the interviewer had met many of the interviewees in person during the Taskforce’s site visits, which helped to build some rapport. The level of engagement and openness was very positive, but it is important to recognise that the fact that the interviewer was a man could have influenced to some degree the manner in which the content was shared by the interviewees due to the lack of shared experience on many of the issues discussed.

The accompanying report is not an exhaustive list of the challenges or successes but rather represents a summary of the key points raised across the interviews. Equally, this research only involved interviews with women currently working in college athletics, and therefore does not necessarily include the firsthand views on those who have felt unable to continue working in the sectors. There is also a degree of selection bias; in most cases the interviewees either volunteered to be interviewed, or were selected by a point person at the universities. This could affect results in a number of potential ways. Interviewees who volunteered are more likely to be already aware of the issues and potentially more vocal of the challenges than a random sample. Those selected by a point person at the university are more likely to reflect the message the point person looking to convey (this could be more critical, more supportive, or a balance of opinions). The information gathered can nonetheless be considered to be sufficiently reliable due to the wide range of positions held by people interviewed, the depth of the interviews conducted, and the anonymous one-on-one nature of the interviews provided.



Coaches and Administrators

Career Opportunities and Hiring

Coaches and administrators were asked about the hiring process in their athletic departments, including their personal experiences in being hired for current and previous positions, and their experiences in hiring other coaches and administrators. It is clear that the universities have processes in place to assure diversity, including in the structure of their hiring committees. Many female staff and coaches themselves personally considered the hiring processes to be fair.

Based on the interviews conducted, the lack of female coaches is viewed to be less a case of athletic departments not wanting to hire women, but rather the *higher standards expected of women* relative to men. This pressure therefore affects both sides of the equation; it comes from the female applicants themselves, as well as the hiring committees. One interviewee expressed that women in sports feel they “need to exceed the qualifications required before even applying for jobs”. According to several coaches and administrators, the discrepancy in hiring often comes down to what appears to be a difference in standards for male coaches compared to female coaches. There was anecdotal evidence of men with less experience holding coaching roles at the collegiate level in a way that would be unheard of for women. One interviewee asked of the Taskforce: “please make sure the men being hired are as qualified as the women”. Another interviewee who was involved in the hiring process said that she observed how in the more junior coaching roles, the university would visibly lean towards a male candidate rather than an equally qualified female one, adding that “it (the bias towards male candidates in these cases) was kind of scary”. If women are being hired in accordance with their experience but men are sometimes being hired despite a lack of experience (something seen particularly at the assistant coach level) then this makes the hiring process flawed, explaining in part why there is a gender imbalance in athletic departments.

This was particularly the case when talking about male coaches for women’s teams. One younger coach talked about a broader prejudice against young women leaders as a potential reason why, stating: “people don’t like it [having a young woman leading]”. Another interviewee said that in her view there were many instances where men could transition from coaching a women’s team to a men’s team seamlessly, whilst it would be seen as a big step up for equally-qualified female coaches to do the same. In fact it is seen as such a big step up that outside of track and field and swimming there are no female head coaches for men’s teams at any D1, D2, D3 university in Michigan. And for track and field and swimming there are only four and one universities with a men’s team led by a female head coach, respectively. These statistics reveal that the procedures currently in place around hiring at every D1, D2, and D3 University in Michigan are inherently flawed.



What these points show is that those involved in hiring should also be considering how their policies and biases towards *male* coaches affect their efforts to provide female representation.

A small number of coaches and administrators brought up financial inequalities, talking about how women were underpaid and being paid less than male coaches. They talked about the need for women to have a stronger voice and get the confidence to speak up and challenge this. However, athletic departments should be addressing this regardless of the confidence of their coaches in bringing it up. All the positive measures in this report that athletic departments in Michigan's universities are implementing are undermined if something as fundamental as pay is unequal.

Recommendations: Career Opportunities and Hiring

- 1) *An equivalent of the NFL's Rooney Rule for collegiate sports in Michigan.*
This equivalent rule would require universities to interview a minimum number of female candidates for coaching and administrative positions. This policy was very popular amongst the interviewees, who even though they acknowledged that it would not solve all problems around hiring, said it would help encourage women to apply to jobs. **It is important that this rule apply also to men's teams.** A crucial point here is that many public universities consider such action to be against the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (2006). The Taskforce could look to find alternatives which address the challenges identified here without contravening current legislation.

- 2) *Require equal standards and pay for male and female coaches:* Universities should look to hold male and female coaches in the same regard. This could be monitored in the form of an assessment of the experience and pay of female and male coaches and administrators at comparable levels of seniority to establish whether they are unknowingly requiring higher standards from women. This information can allow universities to adjust where necessary, including in establishing the criteria required before conducting interviews to avoid the possibility of the lax hiring of men identified. There is a risk of alienating male coaches in this process, particularly those found to be meeting lower standards than their female colleagues or those that might require taking a pay cut to achieve equal pay, so this work should include them as much as possible.



Networking

Networking is seen by the interviewees as a very valuable feature for women in sports and was regularly identified as something that has provided tangible value to the women interviewed. The NCAA and the conferences are often identified as sources of great professional networks that provide opportunities including buddy programmes and other more informal networks. Their flagship programmes include partnerships with “Women Leaders in College Sports” and “WeCoach”⁷. Given the demands of the job, interviewees said women can end up siloed in a job and having the right networks allows women to advocate for each other and amplify their voices as a collective.

Recommendations: Networking

Responses to suggestions of a similar, formal network for women in sport that could be set up in Michigan were positive. The Taskforce could consider setting something up to fill this gap and help provide a central platform for female coaches and administrators. There was demand for a network where more senior women currently in sport could be helping more junior women. It is also might be important to consider involving men who will advocate for women as part of this network.

Athletic Department Culture

Culture can be hard to define, hard to quantify, and hard to replicate, yet it is an integral part of ensuring female participation and representation. In this context it is effectively the environment in which these women in sports are working. Much of the culture has to do with the individuals who work at the universities, and their leadership styles. There are two recurring aspects of culture at the collegiate level that were identified as currently having a negative impact on female coaches and administrators in sport: mindsets of some older male colleagues and the levels of support and understanding from bosses on the work-life challenges faced by women, particularly around work-family balance.

⁷ <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/inclusion/ncaa-partnerships-women-leaders-college-sports-and-wecoach>



“Older men”

Interviewees showed support across the board for senior male figures in athletic departments across the State for the work they do to create a positive culture and support women in sports in a number of ways. However, whenever the interviews turned to culture and identifying the biggest challenges to having a positive culture, the responses were strikingly similar. Interviewees (coaches, administrators, and student athletes) would pause and start to answer hesitantly, eventually saying things such as “to put it bluntly, the biggest challenge is older men”, with references to old-fashioned, sexist views around female sports. There was a degree of resignation about this challenge, with one interviewee saying: “they are so stuck in their ways, they are not going to change”. Slightly younger male colleagues also shared this opinion, adding that these individuals “often pretend to support change but do not do so themselves”, undermining work done to improve the culture and the environment. In talking about this issue, there were accompanying stories about how other (younger and somewhat younger) male coaches and administrators had been progressively learning and improving in terms of their attitude towards women in sports.

Recommendations: Athletic Department Culture

Athletic departments could more directly challenge older, male coaches and administrators who are not changing their attitude towards women in sports. Recommendations were given to both build women’s groups within the department that can speak as a whole, and for male leaders to promote women’s voices. If this is not effective and their attitude continues to diverge to the extent described by the interviewees, athletic departments should seriously consider the negative impact of keeping these individuals in the department. Whilst this is of course difficult as these individuals are likely to be very experienced and influential within the departments given their age, **it was the number one issue raised by almost every interviewee (including the male ones) when discussing culture.** Addressing this is paramount for any athletic department wanting to seriously tackle the inequalities facing women in sports.

Work-life balance and job retention

Work-life balance is a challenge across the sports industry, particularly at the coaching level. The interviews revealed stories of how coaches would work around the clock for their teams and how that made it hard for many women to view coaching as a sustainable career path. In fact, many women talked about colleagues who had dropped out of the profession for those exact reasons, put under additional



stress due to challenges such as managing motherhood alongside their job. Most of the female coaches and administrators that were interviewed expressed how they had considered leaving the industry at some point in their careers because of these pressures. As one coach put it “the more women that stay in the profession the more it makes it feel OK for me stay”. Those interviewed who had been in the profession longer talked about the importance of having an athletic department that felt like a family, and that a healthy balance between job stability and being competitive for results, suggesting that sometimes a healthy culture can be sacrificed when pushing too hard solely for results.

Having a supportive culture from the university makes an important difference, in particular having flexibility about working hours or some form of childcare support. Several female coaches talked about the university allowing coaches to bring their children to practices as an example of the kind of support available(although she added that this in itself was not the only solution to the problem). Aside from these concrete measures, many women expressed the importance of having an athletic department that understood what these challenges were and more broadly instilled a supportive culture starting with the Athletic Director. One respondent identified the “stress and anxiety of balancing family and work, which can be difficult when the boss’ relationship with family is a different one (to theirs)”. Whilst the interviewees specifically cited examples of how male colleagues were supportive, there was significant agreement about the fact that, in their experience, women had proved to be even more supportive in these roles. Specifically they mentioned how women “understand what it takes to do what we do”.

Recommendations: Work-life balance

Design policies to help keep female staff and coaches. Key factors would include support for maternity leave and childcare. Men need to be similarly supported with paternity leave and other aspects of supporting family leave. Essentially, the athletic departments need to create more flexibility for female coaches and administrators, but also need the male staff to model that behaviour so as to ensure the women are not disadvantaged.



Female Student Athletes

Female student athletes were asked similar questions around what barriers and obstacles they faced, what the universities were doing to support them, and what could be done better in the context of female participation and representation in sport. Similarly to with coaches, they were asked a range of questions relating to the culture and their experience as a female student athlete, as well as specific questions around coaching, mental health, and access to facilities.

Athletic Department Culture

Many of the student athletes interviewed would, from the start of the interview, talk about how their experience has been overwhelmingly positive. Further questions would spark some examples of where things hadn't been as good as they could have been, but overall the responses were more positive than on the coaching and administrative side.

One issue that many of them faced was **stigma**. Whilst some cases stemmed from coaches and administrators, the most frequent culprits identified were male student athletes. Again, many examples were given about how supportive many of them were, and how good they were at attending women's games for example. The fact that they praised this kind of support (when one assumes the men's teams would likely not be making such statements about getting support from female fans) highlights the underlying issues around perceptions of women's sport. There were examples from most universities in Michigan about how some male athletes, described as "cocky", "entitled", and "douche", would make the female student athletes feel "like their sports are less important, that their achievements are less important". Another interviewee referred to some male athletes, usually from the 'bigger sports' who would say: "you should thank me. Without me you wouldn't even be here".

The stigma of women in sports was particularly visible around the image of strong women. Several female athletic trainers and student athletes expressed their desire to see more promotion of strong female athletes to help the legitimisation of women in weights training.

Administrative Support

The student athletes interviewed were quick to identify one or various senior female administrators as an important point of contact for them. When asked about what was important for them and what was working well, they talked about having someone who will listen to their concerns, who is a role model for them as women in sports, and who can act both in their personal interest as well as advocate for



women in sports. Crucially, the student athletes pointed to the fact that these were women who held a position of power in the athletic department and were able to actually effect change. Whilst many of the student athletes felt that they had this point of contact in their athletic departments, what this research shows is that Universities should not underestimate the importance of having one or multiple women in a role where they have significant influence in the athletic departments.

Visible support from the top, particularly from the Athletic Directors, was important for the student-athletes too. Something as simple as having the Athletic Director physically present on game days and actively supporting them was identified as a visible way of showing that the women's teams were not being "overlooked". Some female student-athletes said that the Athletic Director had not even gone to talk to their team and make that personal connection. What this shows is that whilst some policies can help provide better administrative support for female student-athletes, the personal investment of the Athletic Director in them and what they do can be just as important.

Appreciation was shown by several interviewees towards the work done by fan experience/communications teams in promoting women's sports and bringing fans to games. Other positive initiatives mentioned were cases where women working in athletic career's centre's would go above and beyond in terms to support female athletes, including providing connections with other successful women with backgrounds in athletics. Efforts to mentor female student-athletes as leaders through careers centres or other initiatives were observed in multiple universities and were spoken highly of by those interviewed.

Mental Health

Student-athletes were also asked about the mental health support provided. All of them were aware of the support available, and mentioned how either themselves or teammates had previously used that support and expressed satisfaction with the level of support, the privacy, and the overall experience. Seniors talked about the progress made over the course of their time at the universities, and it is clear that much more is being done on this front than even just four years ago. Coaches would usually be the first port of call, and then be connected to the services available with one student-athlete referring to how "they (the counselling staff) care so much".. However, people still "dance around the issue", and the student athletes aren't always connected with the resources that are available.

Another challenge identified, particularly at D1 level, was about finding the right balance between sporting competitiveness and performance, academic success, and mental health. The student athletes talked about burn out, overtraining, and not getting enough sleep. But also about how they kept this hidden, speaking about a



“code of silence”, where there is a culture of pretending everything is going perfectly when everyone is “only just about coping”. This challenge is particularly pertinent for the female-student athletes, with previous studies showing that “nearly a third of women in NCAA-sponsored teams demonstrated signs of depression, compared to 18% of men”.⁸ It is worth noting that women do not have as much flexibility with sacrificing part of their academic achievement, as most of them do not have the opportunity to go professional in their sports. This compounds these issues mentioned.

Several student athletes talked about the problems of having such a decentralised system, where coaches could be unaware and unsupportive (in relative terms) of the difficulties of student athlete’s academic work, and academic staff could be unsupportive and unaware of the athletic requirements. One interviewee described this as “constantly being in the shadow” of their male peers, where professors would point out male athletes in class (both when they performed well/talking about the workload challenges they have). Due to this, the student athletes were being advised not to take “tougher” majors such as engineering as the workload was considered too much. Addressing this issue of decentralisation and finding a better balance between the sporting and as academic requirements could be of benefit for the student athletes.

⁸ <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Chasing-Equity-Executive-Summary.pdf>



Recommendations: Mental Health

Build links between student athletes and mental health resources available:

Currently, according to several interviewees, student athletes in their first and second years are much less likely to use mental health services. As one student athlete suggested, universities could introduce compulsory “introductory” counselling sessions that would create the initial connection between the athletes and the mental health services offered, in order to make it easier and more comfortable for athletes to access as and when they might require it.

A top-down approach to time-off/ better sport-academic-life balance: The current approach is a bottom-up approach, where student-athletes talk to their coaches about their needs and requirements, and interviewees discussed that this was important and effective. But adding to that top-down approach would be even more helpful. It would help coaches better understand the need for time-off, and take some of the pressure off both a) the student athletes who might be afraid of creating a conflict with a coach, and b) the coaches, who have the pressures of performing and achieving results. One student athlete spoke highly of the fact that the NCAA already mandates a number of days off for student athletes.

Coaching support

The interviewees were also asked about their experiences with both female and male coaches as well as to whether they had personal preferences as to being coached by men or women. Due to the fact that most women in sports have had fewer women coaches than men over the course of their lives, the chances of their perceptions of women coaches being disproportionately negatively affected is higher. If they had one “bad” male coach, the chances they also had a “good” one are much higher than the same example with a female coach. There was a very varied response with some preferring male coaches, some female, and some preferring a combination of male and female in the head and assistant coaches. What was consistent in the responses though was that coaching style usually varies between male and female coaches.

Women coaches were described as “more relatable”, “role models”, with importance given to “female relatability” and the “importance of relationships”. Male coaches were often described as “motivational” and “demanding”. The respondents all identified the types of coaching they best responded to and their answers as to whether they had a preference for the gender of coaches varied accordingly. The sample size is small and therefore does not answer the question of “what kind of coaching style is most popular with women and girls in Michigan”, but it does



highlight that a) Coaching style often varies between men and women and b) girls and women in sports' preferences in coaching style varies.

Although not shown directly from this research, it is important to bear in mind that the expectations had of coaches are likely to be gendered, as seen by the correlation between preferences of gender and style of coaches. Male and female coaches are likely expected each to match a certain style, which in turn creates different expectations. One student athlete referred to how “you have to be tough woman to be a head coach”. There is an assumption that “toughness” relates more to the usual “male characteristics” of coaching, which in turn reveals a hierarchy of expectations where a “male style” of coaching is more rewarded.

There were some female student athletes who mentioned examples, outside of coaching style, where the fact that their coach was a man had a negative impact on them or the team. This included examples about how some men feel “uncomfortable engaging with women athletes”, personal examples of sexual harassment they experienced from male coaches when at high school level, and how many would feel more comfortable talking to their coaches about more personal and mental health issues if they were a woman.⁹

“Dual-gender” sports

Sports teams that were jointly coached and regularly trained together, referred to in some places as “dual-gender sports”, provided an interesting case study. Many female student athletes saw it as a positive. It often helps create an environment described by one person as a “big family” that broke down cultural barriers between the male and female teams, representing something closer to “real life”. There were some concerns expressed that some of these measures were being done for the wrong reasons though, such as covering up for the fact that if/when the teams were separate, the women’s team was not getting equal treatment/access to facilities. For sports where training together is less feasible, buddy teams where a women and men’s team (not necessarily even the same sport) are paired socially, provides many of the same benefits to the organisations culture and was seen as a successful initiative in the universities that implemented such a scheme.

Facilities and Scheduling

Having equal access to facilities is an easy indicator of whether a university is actively working to provide equal opportunities for female athletes. Many

⁹ It is worth noting that the interviewees might have been less likely to feel comfortable sharing any experiences of sexual harassment they might have experienced at college as they are still connected to those people and teams.



interviewees, both coaches and student athletes, identified this as an area where universities have made a lot of progress, and where teams had access to state-of-the-art facilities. Some examples were given where this wasn't quite the case. Some student-athletes mentioned how they observed men's teams getting preferential access to the weight rooms, or in a similar vein that men's teams were more likely to have their own weight room than a women's team. Another talked about the preferential treatment that the top programmes (men's football and basketball) would get, which in part contributed to some of the negative stigma surrounding women's sports. She mentioned one occasion where student-athletes had to vacate a study area they were using simply because one of these programmes wanted to use it, despite the men's teams in this case having their own designated spaces. The student-athletes interviewed were aware of the fact that these programmes bring in more revenue which is why they have better and personal facilities, but also pointed out that this translated to a notable difference between men and women's sports.

Equally, several examples that on the surface seem like a positive development, masked instances where equal access was missing or not quite what it seemed. For example, a team would play some games at a top-end facility and most games at a worse facility. One interviewee revealed that the media/comms/promotional team had been explicitly told not to take/use footage from games at the "worse facility". The university is therefore promoting an image of a women's team that does not reflect the reality.

There were other examples related to dual-gender sports, where one of the benefits of having both teams under the same coach/coaching structure meant that they had equal access. Universities should not be using this argument when determining the benefits of dual-gender sport compared to having separate teams and coaches. Some female student athletes who were happy with the scheduling and access to facilities mentioned how it was less likely that a women's team not under the same coaching structure would have their own weight room for example.

Celebrating Women's Success/Active promotion of Women in Sports

Aside from ensuring equality throughout the athletic department, universities also have the opportunity to actively promote and celebrate women in sports. This is often done in the form of a marquee event on campus that highlights women leaders in sport, brings in external speakers, and celebrates the success of their female athletes. For the universities that do such events, the events were highlighted as one of the successes in terms of promoting women in sports. Yet often the interviewees felt that these events could also be used to specifically discuss and address the challenges faced by women in sports. Not all universities in Michigan carry out such events and respondents from those universities were very supportive of the idea of them doing so.

**Recommendation: Promoting Women in Sports**

Introduce an annual celebration of women in sport/enhance current events of this nature. These large events and celebrations provide a visible way for an athletic department to signal its support for women in sports. In doing so it can address many of the issues discussed in this report, from helping modernise thinking amongst male staff and athletes to bringing in role models for women in sport and celebrating the success of their female athletes.

Conclusion

One overarching finding from these interviews is that universities in Michigan and their athletic departments are making a conscious effort to promote the participation and representation of women in sports. Most interviewees who had been at the universities for more than a couple of years spoke about the changes for the better on this front, something that it is important to acknowledge, even when focussing on areas to improve.

The situation appears to be markedly better for female student athletes than for female administrators and coaches. Perhaps this stems in part from the fact that college is likely to be the best competitive athletics opportunity they have had to date. The athletes talked about issues they faced in high school with bad coaches, more inequalities, more stigma, fewer opportunities available etc, and would refer to how collegiate sports were more professional and better on all those fronts.

When it comes to administrative and coaching staff, there remain even more challenges. The most visible actions around equality are being addressed, but even these are not working perfectly, and often some actions taken merely serve to cover some of the underlying cracks.



It is clear from these conversations that, given the systemic inequalities women face in every role and at every level of sports, equal treatment is not always enough and that affirmative action would help in many cases to achieve the desired results. One example out of many is that whilst universities promote women's and men's teams equal amounts, there are still fewer supporters at most women's sports, suggesting the need to increase promotion of these sporting events. As one interviewee succinctly put it: "if you want to achieve a positive impact, you need to be setting up for success". Given that Michigan has laws in place that make it hard for public institutions to put in place affirmative action procedures on initiatives, the Taskforce and the universities will have to work hard to identify innovative ways to achieve similar results.

The responsibility to address the challenges discussed is not the sole purview of the universities. Some interviewees spoke about how the pool of available female coaches was not big enough and more work could be done to build that up, and others bemoaned the lack of professional sport options for women. Repeatedly, interviewees spoke of the importance of starting early, at middle and high school, for measures to be most effective. This is why the Taskforce is looking at the whole range of women in sports, and the other research conducted by the Taskforce will be crucial in joining the dots between it all.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations flow from the information and perspectives shared by the interviewees who agreed to participate in this project, as summarized below:

Female Coaches and Administrators

- **Career Opportunities and Hiring**
 - *An equivalent of the NFL's Rooney Rule for collegiate sports in Michigan.* This equivalent rule would require universities to interview a minimum number of female candidates for coaching and administrative positions. This policy was very popular amongst the interviewees, who even though they acknowledged that it would not solve all problems around hiring, said it would help encourage women to apply to jobs. **It is important that this rule apply also to men's teams.** A crucial point here is that many public universities consider such action to be against the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (2006). The Taskforce could look to find alternatives which address the challenges identified here without contravening current legislation.
 - *Require equal standards for male and female coaches:* Universities should look to hold male and female coaches in the same regard. This could be monitored in the form of an assessment of the experience of



female and male coaches and administrators at comparable levels of seniority to establish whether they are unknowingly requiring higher standards from women. This information can allow universities to adjust where necessary, including in establishing the criteria required before conducting interviews to avoid the possibility of the lax hiring of men identified. There is a risk of alienating male coaches in this process, particularly those found to be meeting lower standards than their female colleagues, so this work should include them as much as possible

- **Networking**

- Responses to suggestions of a similar, formal network for women in sport that could be set up in Michigan were positive. The Taskforce could consider setting something up to fill this gap and help provide a central platform for female coaches and administrators. There was demand for a network where more senior women currently in sport could be helping more junior women. It is also might be important to consider involving men who will advocate for women as part of this network.

- **Athletic Department Culture**

- Athletic departments could more directly challenge older, male coaches and administrators who are not changing their attitude towards women in sport. Recommendations were given to both build women's groups within the department that can speak as a whole, and for male leaders to promote women's voices. If this is not effective and their attitude continues to diverge to the extent described by the interviewees, athletic departments should seriously consider the negative impact of keeping these individuals in the department. Whilst this is of course difficult as these individuals are likely to be very experienced and influential within the departments given their age, **it was the number one issue raised by almost every interviewee (including the male ones) when discussing culture.** Addressing this is paramount for any athletic department wanting to seriously tackle the inequalities facing women in sport.

- **Work-life balance**

- Design policies to help keep female staff and coaches. Key factors would include support for maternity leave and childcare. Men need to



be similarly supported with paternity leave and other aspects of supporting family leave. Essentially, the athletic departments need to create more flexibility for female coaches and administrators, but also need the male staff to model that behaviour so as to ensure the women are not disadvantaged.

Female Student Athletes

- **Mental Health**

- *Build links between student athletes and mental health resources available:* Currently, according to several interviewees, student athletes in their first and second years are much less likely to use mental health services. As one student athlete suggested, universities could introduce compulsory “introductory” counselling sessions that would create the initial connection between the athletes and the mental health services offered, in order to make it easier and more comfortable for athletes to access as and when they might require it.
- *A top-down approach to time-off/ better sport-academic-life balance:* The current approach is a bottom-up approach, where student-athletes talk to their coaches about their needs and requirements, and interviewees discussed that this was important and effective. But adding to that top-down approach would be even more helpful. It would help coaches better understand the need for time-off, and take some of the pressure off both a) the student athletes who might be afraid of creating a conflict with a coach, and b) the coaches, who have the pressures of performing and achieving results. One student athlete spoke highly of the fact that the NCAA already mandates a number of days off for student athletes.

- **Promoting Women in Sports**

- *Introduce an annual celebration of women in sport/enhance current events of this nature.* These large events and celebrations provide a visible way for an athletic department to signal its support for women in sports. In doing so it can address many of the issues discussed in this report, from helping modernise thinking amongst male staff and athletes to bringing in role models for women in sport and celebrating the success of their female athletes.