Cultural Competencies in Sport: Criticisms, Solutions and Actions

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Title IX helped to increase sporting opportunities for many girls and women. Since its implementation in 1972, millions of girls have benefited from increased access to sport as well as changing beliefs regarding females who participate in sport. Common beliefs regarding race, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, ability/disability, and body type, however, continue to inform rules and practices that restrict access for many potential female athletes.

During the session, we reviewed photographs of women athletes from three major Division I universities. The photographs depicted cross country runners and track and field sprinters in competition, golfers walking the course, swimmers and divers posing for a photo at a meet, basketball and soccer players celebrating wins, softball players huddled in a circle, volleyball players during pre-game announcements, and tennis players on senior day. As indicated by the session participants, these photos illustrated the lack of racial diversity that exists in women’s sports on the collegiate level. We then discussed discriminatory racial beliefs and social practices that may contribute to this lack of diversity.

We discussed the lack of cultural competence and consideration of minority religious groups in the design and implementation of sports. The following quote was presented as an example, “FIFA will discuss the decision to bar an 11-year-old Muslim girl from playing in a soccer tournament in Canada last weekend because she was wearing a head scarf” (NBC Sports, 2007). We also discussed scheduling competitions on the Jewish Sabbath while refusing to schedule competitions on the Christian Sabbath.

To demonstrate the existence of beliefs, practices, and rules that continue to restrict access to members of economically disadvantaged families, we read an ad promoting a local volleyball camp. The camp costs $250.00; session attendees acknowledged both the prevalence of such high-priced athletic services as well as the lack of access for girls who can’t afford to pay.

Finally, we read points from the Women’s Sports Foundation position on negative recruiting (Women’s Sports Foundation, www.womenssportsfoundation.org). The published recommendations that, “A coach or athlete’s sexual orientation should not be a factor in determining their eligibility for teams, coaching positions, or athletic or academic honors or awards” and that “Lesbian and bisexual athletes and coaches should be able to identify themselves if they choose to without fear of negative consequences” demonstrate that sports environments are still unwelcoming and unfair to sexual minorities.
Images and quotes were presented demonstrating that following the implementation and relative success of Title IX, beliefs, rules, and practices continue to lead to an underrepresentation of certain groups in sports. For the remainder of the session, session attendees met in small groups to answer the following questions:

1. Is your team diverse? If so, what type of diversity is evident?
2. What characteristics make up your athletes? Who is left out? Why?
3. How have you, personally, adjusted beliefs, practices, or rules to invite diversity into your coaching practice and/or What sports programs are designed to encourage diversity and increase access to sport for members of underrepresented groups?

After several minutes of lively conversation, session attendees mentioned numerous challenges they face with regard to improving diversity as well as many successful strategies that have succeeded toward this end.

Challenges included:
- Athletes’ refusal to join teams/play sports that are non-traditional for their cultural group (ex. Volleyball coach actively recruits African-American girls in her school to join her team but they choose to play basketball instead)
- Expensive sports are, by design, unavailable to low-income groups (ex. Lacrosse equipment costs $500.00 per player)

Successful strategies included:
- Services offered on a sliding scale according to family’s ability to pay (ex. Athletic Director of local Parks and Recreation department instituted a rule to reduce or eliminate registration costs for children who presented any proof of financial hardship)
- Taking sports directly to communities of underrepresented athletes (ex. Soccer program that provides transportation, a healthy snack, and soccer skills to children living in low-income neighborhoods; Lacrosse clinic that provided donated equipment and skill instruction to athletes living in low-income neighborhoods)
- Offering sports clinics and camps at reduced prices (ex. Volleyball coach offers a 6-week skills camp for $75.00 which is significantly less expensive than similar camps)
- Designing sustainable programs (ex. Black Women in Sport Foundation programs in Philadelphia that provide continuous instruction to Black girls in the area in sports non-traditional to that community)

At the conclusion of the session, attendees recognized that youth and high school coaches have a wonderful opportunity to expand upon the success of Title IX by continuing to work toward providing sporting opportunities for all girls and young women. In this session, we discussed common beliefs, rules, and practices that may restrict some girls’ participation in sport, and then discussed options for change and plans for action. Session attendees left with greater awareness of ways to end discriminatory and exclusionary and coaching practices as well as ways to positively affect change in and through sport.