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University of Maine News

OCR Gender Equity Complaint Against UMaine Closed

Nov. 8, 2002

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ORONO -- Citing progress toward achieving gender equity in intercollegiate athletics, the U.S. Dept. of Education Office of Civil Rights has closed its five-year-old complaint against the University of Maine.

In 1997, on the 25th anniversary of the passage of Title IX, the landmark federal law mandating gender equity, the National Women's Law Center cited 25 universities, including UMaine, for being in violation of the law. The National Women's Law Center filed its complaint with the OCR, which began working with the 25 institutions to correct the shortcomings. It is believed that UMaine is the first of the 25 to have its complaint closed.

"We are pleased with this outcome. Not only is compliance with gender equity the law, it's the right thing to do," says Evelyn Silver, UMaine's director of equal opportunity and Title IX coordinator. "We have made dramatic and steady progress since 1997 and are firmly committed to continuing to move in this direction."

In closing the complaint late this summer, the OCR studied data from the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 academic years and determined that UMaine's funding of academic scholarships is in proportion to the percentage of females who wear the Black Bear uniform. In fact, in the latter year, the percentage of scholarship funding was slightly higher than the percentage of female athletes. Additionally, the OCR noted that UMaine is in compliance with Title IX requirements that the percentage of female student-athletes be in proportion to the percentage of women in the student population.

"It is no coincidence that UMaine is seeing athletics success in women's sports that closely parallels the success of our men's teams," says Paul Bubb, UMaine's interim athletic director. "Field hockey is an excellent example. Student-athletes in that program are having remarkable success on the field and are contributing in a measurable way to the university as students and campus citizens. Those are the kind of positive benefits that accrue from working to develop the kind of balanced and equitable athletics program that we have at UMaine."

Unlike some other universities and colleges facing Title IX issues, UMaine worked from a plan (originally developed in 1994) that did not include the elimination of men's sports to gain compliance. Rather, the university focused on fund-raising for women's scholarships and adding women's soccer, ice hockey and volleyball programs. The men's golf and women's tennis programs have been eliminated during this time frame, but not for gender equity reasons.

"This process has required, and will continue to require, flexibility and commitment," says Suzanne Tyler, the UMaine athletic director from 1995 until earlier this year. "We were making progress when the complaint was filed, but it helped us to focus our efforts and to continue to move toward compliance in terms of scholarships and participation."

In recent years, UMaine has also made progress in other gender equity-related areas, including facilities for women's sports. The field hockey team plays its home games on Morse Field in Harold Alfond Stadium and the softball team plays on the two-year-old Kessock Field. The ice hockey and basketball teams play in Alfond Arena, the same venue that is home to the men's teams in those sports.

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