

LTE Submission in response to Targeting Gender Equity In Science  
(C&E News, August 24, 2009)

Title IX- A Tool to Keep America Competitive

A recent ACS C&E News article questioned the use of Title IX to increase the number of women in science and engineering. The author uses statistics creatively to assert that women are fairly represented in the sciences, and the real crisis is that the participation of men in the sciences is decreasing.

Certainly, women participate in some sciences, particularly social and biological sciences, at a rate equivalent to men. But in other disciplines, specifically the physical sciences, mathematics and engineering, women's participation has been and continues to be abysmal. Thirty-seven years after the enactment of Title IX, those of us who care about the education and economic security of the women who comprise half the U.S. population continue to wonder why.

The author's characterization of Title IX as a way to "guarantee[] equal numbers" of women and men in these fields is misleading at best. He uses his article to raise the fear that Title IX will do to science what critics believe it has done to athletics -- that is, cut opportunities for men in favor of achieving some sort of quota of women. Such an analysis completely disregards the fact that Title IX is NOT a quota, as well as the fact that the number of athletic participation opportunities for men has actually risen – despite the fact that budgetary priorities have led some schools to cut teams.

Those of us who advocate Title IX as a tool for reforming education in engineering and the physical sciences hope for something more meaningful than simply achieving some numerical goal. We hope that Title IX reviews by federal funding agencies will help to identify those promising practices that bring more women into these fields, and share those practices across academia. We also hope that the reviews will point out areas where educational institutions that are spending taxpayer dollars could do better in terms of meeting the needs of women interested in these fields but perhaps turned off by the climate.

What Title IX can do – as shown by NASA's recent Title IX reviews – is identify the policies, practices and procedures that inhibit the full participation of women in these fields. And experience has shown that, when the climate of an educational institution is improved to support the full participation of women in an academic field, men and the nation's overall competitive edge benefit as well.

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