

WOMEN'S RUGBY AS AN NCAA EMERGING SPORT

Luke Teixeira

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Approved by:

Tony Patterson

Barbara Osborne

Claude Hughes

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ABSTRACT

Luke Teixeira: Women's Rugby as An NCAA Emerging Sport
(Under the direction of Tony Patterson)

This study examines the current state of women's collegiate rugby in the United States, focusing on the transition from club teams to NCAA varsity status. Despite the classification of women's rugby as an NCAA Emerging Sport, only 27 of over 405 club teams have achieved varsity status since 2002. Through surveys of club leaders, this research sought to understand their interest in NCAA affiliation, awareness of the application process, and perceptions of benefits and challenges related to NCAA affiliation. The study also investigated the role of team culture, leadership, and Title IX in shaping the future of women's rugby. Findings aim to inform strategies for promoting NCAA involvement, fostering the sport's growth, and enhancing gender equity in athletics. By examining these factors, the research identifies barriers to expansion and offers insights into how this sport can better align with the evolving landscape of women's collegiate athletics.

To my mentor and coach, Dr Claude Hughes, I thank you for all your support during my time in America. I couldn't have done it without you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	1
Purpose.....	2
Research Questions	2
Definition of Terms.....	3
Limitations and Delimitations.....	3
Significance.....	4
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	6
History of Rugby.....	6
The NCAA and Title IX.....	8
Women’s Emerging Sports.....	10
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	13
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS.....	16
Research Question 1	16
Research Question 2	17
Research Question 3	18
Research Question 4	21
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	23

Survey Overview	23
Research Question 1	24
Research Question 2	25
Research Question 3 and 4.....	26
Limitations	28
Implications.....	28
Areas for Future Research	29
Conclusion	30
REFERENCES	32

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	16
Table 2	18
Table 3	19
Table 4	20
Table 5	22

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIAW	Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women
CWA	Committee on Women's Athletics
ESPN	Entertainment and Sports Programming Network
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NSCRO	National Small College Ruby Organization
NWRA	National Women's Rowing Association
OCR	Office for Civil Right

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I. Background

Although rugby enjoys global recognition as one of the most popular sports, its presence in the United States remains relatively subdued. The history of men's rugby in American college athletics intertwines closely with the establishment of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) in 1906 and the evolution of American Football. While certain Northeast Ivy League schools initially expressed interest in rugby, its loose rule structure and limited familiarity led to frequent adaptations. This gradual divergence ultimately led to the development of "gridiron" in the late 19th century, which, although distinct from modern football, laid its foundation. Collegiate sports during the early 1900s were hazardous and disorderly, prompting President Theodore Roosevelt's intervention. Following numerous deliberations and reforms, the NCAA began to regulate college football in 1910 (Richards, 2006).

Women's rugby gained traction alongside the enactment of the Equality in Education Act of 1972, commonly known as Title IX. While not explicitly aimed at fostering women's sports, its enactment propelled the advancement of women's athletics. Notably, this led to the establishment of the NCAA's Emerging Sport category in 1994, providing a platform for burgeoning women's sports. This classification serves as a probationary period, allowing sports to attain varsity status within a decade by meeting specific criteria, thereby promoting gender equality in athletics (NCAA Emerging Sports for Women, 2016).

Presently, women's rugby boasts a robust network of club teams nationwide, operated and funded by students through various means. This most common ways include team dues

where each team member pays membership fee to assist the club with operating expenses as well as fundraising initiatives to cover additional costs such as kit, practice equipment, travel, and lodging.

Club sports afford players, and team leaders the autonomy to shape team culture, which is particularly significant in navigating the complex landscape of female rugby identity. Notably, the sport's intensity and post-match traditions foster strong bonds among players. These aspects shed light on the gradual integration of women's rugby into NCAA status, emphasizing factors influencing its progression.

II. Purpose

This study seeks to examine the current state of women's collegiate rugby in the United States. Despite its classification as an NCAA Emerging Sport, the transition of teams from the club to varsity level has been sluggish. Despite the existence of over 405 women's collegiate club teams, only 28 have progressed to varsity status in the 21 years since its designation as an NCAA Emerging Sport. This research aimed to uncover the reasons behind the reluctance of both colleges and clubs, as perceived by club leaders, and to determine the most viable path forward for the sport.

III. Research Questions

- a. How interested are women's club rugby teams in becoming an NCAA varsity sport?
- b. How aware are women's club teams of the application process to become a university sponsored NCAA sport?
- c. What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning?
- d. What goals and values do teams prioritize?

IV. Definition of Terms

- a. Emerging Sport - An emerging sport is a women’s sport recognized by the NCAA that is intended to help schools provide more athletics opportunities for women and more sport-sponsorship options for institutions, while helping that sport achieve NCAA championship status (NCAA, n.d.).
- b. Title IX - “No person shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, be treated differently from another person or otherwise be discriminated against in any interscholastic, intercollegiate, club or intramural athletics offered by a recipient, and no recipient shall provide any such athletics separately on such basis...” (20 USC § 1681).

V. Limitations and Delimitations

- a. Limitations
 - i. Perceptions of club rugby leaders may not reflect the opinions of all current women’s rugby players.
 - ii. There is a possibility that there will be a non-response bias due to the voluntary nature of the survey.
- b. Delimitations
 - i. The study is limited to women’s rugby collegiate players with public email addresses who hold a leadership role within their club during the 2024-2025 academic year.

VI. Significance

This study aims to assess the present state of women's rugby in the United States to provide insights on the attitudes of current clubs toward achieving NCAA status. Understanding the mindset of players within the club model is crucial, as they play a pivotal role in shaping team cultures that will influence the sport's future. If there is interest but limited awareness regarding the process or benefits of NCAA affiliation, information gathered can inform future outreach or marketing strategies by organizations like the NCAA and USA Rugby to effectively tailor their messaging. Conversely, if there is minimal interest, a comprehensive strategy re-evaluation by USA Rugby and the NCAA may be warranted to establish a growth framework that aligns with club interests.

While this research briefly touches upon the financial and Title IX compliance aspects of women's rugby at surveyed institutions through the three-part test, the sport's growth aligns closely with the ethos of Title IX. As a full-contact sport, rugby offers unique avenues for female participation, challenging traditional gender norms and empowering women to express aggression and athletic prowess, qualities often revered in men's sports. This empowerment extends beyond rugby as a platform for unconventional behaviors deemed acceptable, shaping the future of women's athletics by redefining gender identities within sports.

This study represents the second attempt to correlate rugby administration and sport elevation with the ethnographic factors of current players (Sherling, 2014). While most existing literature predominantly discusses gender identity and expression cross-sectionally, this research takes a forward-facing approach. Unlike in varsity sports where coaches wield considerable influence, the club model of rugby development relies heavily on players. Thus, the survey methodology of this research is designed to engage players, who are pivotal in steering the sport's advancement.

This shift in research methodology aims to uncover factors often overlooked in top-down administrative approaches. Evaluating the current status of women's rugby might elucidate barriers to its expansion as a varsity sport, facilitating the identification of causative factors. By realigning development efforts based on these findings, a more effective growth framework can be established. If the NCAA route proves most viable, institutions can authentically uphold the values of Title IX by endorsing a sport that empowers women to transcend traditional gender roles, thereby reshaping women's athletics in America.

Another factor for the replication of this study is because of the commitment of the 2033 Women's Rugby World Cup to be hosted in the USA. It is vital for rugby to continue to grow and create a culture that will provide a strong platform for the USA to host a successful World Cup in the sport.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter traces the evolution of rugby from its origins characterized by a rugged masculinity to its current pursuit of NCAA recognition as a distinctive athletic avenue for young women. It delves into the interplay between the NCAA and Title IX compliance discussing the endeavor to elevate women's club rugby to varsity status. Finally, the literature review examines other scholarly investigations pertinent to the subject matter.

History of Rugby

Rugby can be traced back to the 18th century in England, where the most popular origin story claims that William Webb Ellis, a student at Rugby School sparked the sports with a “fine disregard for the rules of football (soccer)” (Richards, 2006, p. 24). The Rugby School created the first written set of rules in 1845 and later “emerged to become the national code” (Richards, 2006, p. 30).

The game eventually made its way to the United States of America through British imperialism. Harvard played Montreal in 1875 and shortly thereafter, convinced Yale and Princeton to form the Intercollegiate Football Association. Almost immediately, ‘American Football’ began to evolve with the “lack of tradition” and influence from Walter Camp who became known as the “father of college football” (Richards, 2006, p. 52).

Despite the rising prominence of "gridiron" (football) over rugby, the United States assembled teams to participate in the 1920 Belgian and 1924 French Games, two of only four instances in which rugby was included in the Olympics. The American initiative to compete in the Olympics

was primarily driven by California, a state renowned for its rich rugby heritage (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 108). American teams emphasized tackling and endurance to compensate for their relative lack of technical skill compared to their European counterparts, drawing inspiration from the New Zealand All Blacks' robust playing style (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 108). Despite being considered underdogs, the physical prowess and fitness of the American teams led them to clinch two gold medals, both secured after defeating France. As recounted by Richard Hyland, a player from the 1924 American team: "The superior knowledge of the game and its tricks enjoyed by the French could not lick that tackling. Every time a Frenchman touched the ball; he was belted blue. Condition then took over and the last half of the game was a breeze" (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 110). However, despite achieving consecutive gold medals, the conclusion of the Games signaled the decline of rugby's prominence in the USA (Ratcliff, 2007, p. 110)

As American football became more popular, rugby took a backseat in the sporting lives of Americans. While rugby did not become irrelevant in America, it "continued to sit outside the official structures in the universities" giving it an "anti-authoritarian appeal" (Richards, 2006, p. 143).

The game started to gain traction amongst women in the 1970s, in large part to the feminist movement and passage of Title IX in 1972 (Bolin, 2003). "Women's teams developed in clubs and in universities through the 1970s and 1980s and the first National team was founded in 1987, which adopted the name of the Eagles in 1990" (Sherling, 2014).

As of right now, there are 325 club sides (College Rugby Association of America) and 27 varsity programs in America. (National Intercollegiate Rugby Association). Rugby has been considered an Emerging Sport since 2002 and continues to operate under that title.

The NCAA and Title IX

The NCAA's inception aligned with the development of rugby in the United States, stemming from concerns over the alarming rate of fatalities in early versions of American football, attributed to the absence of formal regulations and the recruitment of paid "ringers" (Crowley, 2006, pp. 3-4). The escalating danger associated with early football prompted President Theodore Roosevelt to convene a meeting that ultimately led to the establishment of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) in 1905. Initially comprised of thirty-nine institutions in 1906, the IAAUS evolved into the National Collegiate Athletic Association by 1919, overseeing eleven different sports. A significant milestone for the NCAA was the initiation of championship sponsorship, with Track & Field being the inaugural sport to receive such recognition in 1921.

Since its establishment in 1905, the NCAA primarily focused on overseeing men's sports, with a comprehensive approach to women's sports emerging only after the enactment of Title IX. Before 1972, the principal governing body for women's athletics was the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). The AIAW operated under a markedly distinct ethos compared to the NCAA, emphasizing broad participation, amateurism, and an athlete-centered approach, in contrast to the elite athlete, professionalism, and win-focused philosophy prevalent in men's sports (Greenberg, 2002). As the NCAA expanded its championship offerings, institutions gradually shifted their allegiance away from the AIAW, leading to its dissolution by 1982.

After the passage of Title IX in 1972, the NCAA was then prompted to pick up women's sports, and because of the offering of national championships, institutions shifted away from

AIWA towards the NCAA. This eventually led to the dissolution of the AIWA in 1982. The actual law of Title IX states:

“No person shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, be treated differently from another person or otherwise be discriminated against in any interscholastic, intercollegiate, club or intramural athletics offered by a recipient, and no recipient shall provide any such athletics separately on such basis” (20 USC § 1681).

As previously mentioned, Title IX triggered the transition of women's sports from the AIWA to the NCAA. Despite the NCAA's extensive history in sports management, notable differences existed in the sporting cultures between genders. Men's programs historically originated from aggressive origins and a win-at-all-cost mentality. Conversely, the AIWA evolved from physical education departments, placing a strong emphasis on participation and the development of fundamental athleticism (Greenberg, 2002). While the NCAA provided opportunities for female athlete participation, there was a noticeable shift in leadership dynamics. In instances of mergers between male and female athletic programs, only one athletic director was typically appointed to oversee the combined program. Often, the selected athletic director was male, perpetuating male-centric ideologies of sport and depriving female athletes of visible role models (Greenberg, 2002, pp. 214, 284).

Since its enactment, Title IX has faced significant scrutiny and has necessitated frequent clarification. Institutions must adhere to specific parameters for gender equity in athletics as outlined in the Regulations established in 1975 to remain compliant with Title IX. While institutions are required to comply with all regulations, particular attention has been paid to areas such as scholarships, equal opportunities for participation, and fair treatment for athletes.

Achieving compliance with equal opportunity standards proved challenging for many institutions, leading the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to issue a Policy Interpretation in 1979. The most referenced guidelines related to the addition of new sports by institutions are known as the "three prongs" or three-part test. These prongs provide three distinct pathways for institutions to demonstrate compliance: proportionality (ensuring the ratio of male-to-female athletes mirrors that of the overall student body), continued expansion of programs for the underrepresented sex (typically females), or effective accommodation of the abilities and interests of students, particularly those of the underrepresented sex (Office for Civil Rights, 1979).

In a 1997 News & Observer article, the issue of Title IX compliance remained contentious for numerous programs. The article was published in the aftermath of the Cohen vs. Brown University (1996) verdict, which upheld a stringent interpretation of the statute and confirmed allegations that Brown had discriminated against its female athletes by transitioning two women's teams from university-funded to donor-funded status (Politi, 1997). Within the article, there were advocates for assertively pursuing compliance, while others viewed the addition of new teams as an unnecessary burden on existing programs (Politi, 1997). Although the article may not reflect current circumstances, it noted the University of North Carolina had recently established women's rowing as a varsity sport in the late 1990s. The inclusion of any new women's sport holds significance in the context of Title IX as it contributes to the 'history of progress' in line with the three-prong framework.

Women's Emerging Sports

In 1994, the Emerging Sports for Women program was created by the NCAA based on the recommendation from the NCAA Gender Equity Task Force. This was a result of an NCAA survey conducted in the early 1990s and showed the discrepancies between male and female

athletes regarding athletics participation opportunities offered by NCAA institutions (NCAA Emerging Sports for Women). The Emerging Sports for Women program is managed by the Committee on Women's Athletics (NCAA Emerging Sports for Women, 2016).

The NCAA defines an Emerging Sport as "An emerging sport is a women's sport recognized by the NCAA that is intended to help schools provide more athletics opportunities for women and more sport-sponsorship options for institutions, while helping that sport achieve NCAA championship status." (NCAA Emerging Sports for Women, 2016). These sports are afforded a ten-year timeframe to establish a minimum of forty collegiate varsity programs. A significant incentive of the program is that during this developmental period, Emerging Sports can contribute towards meeting institutional Title IX and NCAA equal opportunity mandates.

There are a host of requirements for a sport to be considered an emerging sport, including but not limited to (NCAA Emerging Sports for Women, 2016):

1. Demonstrate at least 20 NCAA institutions sponsor the sport at the varsity or club level.
2. At least 10 letters of commitment from 10 NCAA institutions that sponsor the sport at the varsity level.
3. Suggested NCAA regulations

If the sport is then granted emerging sport status, it is limited to a 10-year period to become a championship unless it can demonstrate that steady and sustained growth has been demonstrated during that same time period. The NCAA guidelines then allow a National Collegiate Championship to be established in the sport if at least 40 NCAA institutions sponsor the sport at the varsity level.

The Committee on Women's Athletics can recommend to NCAA divisions to promote the emerging sport to become a National Collegiate Championship. Each division can then vote to add the sport through their governance structures.

There are currently five sports that are considered NCAA emerging sports, Acrobatics and Tumbling, Equestrian, Stunt, Triathlon, and Rugby. In this thesis, I focus specifically on rugby, while drawing on cases and examples from other previous and current emerging sports. Women's rugby is currently considered an NCAA emerging sport and has been since 2002 due to the extension of the designation on two occasions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine what factors are contributing to the slow conversion rate of women's club rugby teams to varsity status. Ten years ago, a similar study was conducted, and a key goal of this current study is to understand if the same or different factors are preventing or alienating women's club rugby teams to elevate to varsity status. Additionally, this study assesses players' interest in and awareness of NCAA women's rugby, measures players' perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of the NCAA framework and gauges the extent to which teams identify themselves as a more competitive or social club.

This study utilized the same survey instrument as the original study and the same questions were used to ensure reliability, validity and comparability. The data for this study were collected through an email survey sent to women's club rugby team executive members and team captains. E-mail addresses were collected from an administrator with USA Rugby, National Collegiate Rugby, the USA Rugby website, university campus recreation websites and individual club websites. Participants were e-mailed an online survey through Qualtrics. The survey sent to the women's club rugby players included four main sections addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. The survey utilized a variety of question types including multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, open-ended, and Likert-scale questions. One Likert-scale question had responses ranging from "1" representing "Very Detrimental" to "5" representing "Very Beneficial." The second Likert-scale question had responses ranging from "Not Important" to

“Very Important.” Each Likert-Style question also included a “Not Applicable or Unsure” answer choice that prevented the question from skewing the results.

Due to outdated contact information and team websites, survey participants were requested to identify their institution, USA and National Collegiate Rugby division, NCAA division assignments, and their role within the women’s rugby program at their respective institution. Some teams listed on USA Rugby websites are no longer active, while others have formed more recently, leading to discrepancies in team listings and division classifications. Respondents were given the option to select 'Unsure' regarding both their USA Rugby and NCAA designations to ensure impartiality in the results. The initial survey question directly corresponds to the first research query, inquiring whether respondents would support women’s rugby becoming a varsity sport at their institution. This question was presented in a multiple-choice format with options of "Yes," "No," and "Unsure," followed by an opportunity for respondents to elaborate on their choices.

The second survey question parallels the second research inquiry, asking respondents if they were aware before the survey that women’s rugby is classified as an NCAA Emerging Sport. The question provides a definition of an Emerging Sport before prompting a response, also offering multiple-choice options of "Yes" and "No."

To address the third research question, Likert-style questions were used to gauge perceived benefits of NCAA and club status, covering categories such as Title IX benefits, organizational advantages, and intangible social benefits. Responses ranged from "Very Detrimental" to "Very Beneficial," with corresponding numerical values, except for "Not Applicable or Unsure." Categories within the questions included facilities, equipment, alumni relations, recruiting, publicity, team camaraderie, team leadership, coaching, win-loss record, and injury treatment.

The subsequent section of questions aimed to explore the fourth research question, employing both multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank formats. The first set of questions focused on competitive aspects, querying about practices, matches, and fitness activities, while the latter part delved into social aspects, inquiring about post-match socials and team bonding activities outside of practices.

The final set of questions aimed to ascertain if respondents' interest levels changed throughout the survey in light of new information they gathered while completing the survey. These questions were needed because it is possible that lack of prior awareness might have led to false negatives in terms of interest level.

The study targeted women's rugby club presidents and team captains at collegiate institutions during the 2024-25 academic year, in recognition of the diversity of club structures and executive board compositions among institutions, the study targeted both women's rugby club presidents and team captains at collegiate institutions during the 2024-25 academic year. These two categories of club leaders were selected with the assumption that executives and captains possessed at least one year of rugby experience, harbored a keen interest in the sport, and held a working knowledge of their team operations.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 648 emails addresses were collected and sent the survey via a university email account. Ninety responses covering 60 colleges and universities were recorded, with 87 respondents completing the entire survey. Eighty-seven respondents represent an overall response rate of 13.43%. The demographic information for the survey is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographics

	n	(%)
Division		
Division 1A	25	28%
Division 1AA	2	2%
Division 2	34	38%
Division 3/Small College	16	18%
Not Applicable/Unsure	12	14%
Role within Team		
President	25	29%
Captain	16	18%
Executive Member	22	25%
Coach	10	12%
Other	14	16%
Team Categorized at Institution		
Varsity Sport	4	5%
Club Sport	82	93%
Other	2	2%

Research Question 1: Are existing women’s collegiate rugby teams interested in becoming an NCAA varsity sport?

To address the first research question, survey respondents were directly asked in the survey if they had interest in becoming an NCAA varsity sport, with the options of ‘Yes’, ‘No’,

or 'Unsure'. A majority of respondents answered 'Yes' (71%, n = 63), while 18% marked 'Unsure' (n = 16). Of the 89 respondents who answered this question, 11% (n = 10) had no interest in pursuing varsity status. At the end of the survey, respondents (n = 87) were again asked to rate their interest in pursuing varsity status, to see if respondents responded differently after the reflection involved in completing the survey. At the end of the survey, 49% (n = 43) of respondents indicated that they are 'Very Interested' in having women's rugby as a varsity sport at their institution, while 33% indicated that they were 'Slightly Interested' (n = 29). 5% of respondents (n = 4) indicated that they were not interested. The remaining 13% of respondents (n = 11) marked 'Unsure.' The data has a left skew, with the mean reflecting that more teams were interested than uninterested (M = 3.26, SD = 0.815).

Research Question 2: Are existing women's collegiate rugby teams aware of the application process to become a university-sponsored NCAA sport?

The respondents were asked a series of yes-no questions about their awareness of the status of rugby as an NCAA designated emerging sport, whether they had visited the USA Rugby website, and whether their club rugby program had ever applied for varsity status at their institution. Respondents were also asked a Likert scale question to indicate their level of awareness about the process for becoming a varsity sport at their institution. The answer choices for the question were weighted as 1 = 'Not Interested,' 2 = 'Unsure,' 3 = 'Slightly Interested' and 4 = 'Very Interested.' Finally, a question was asked about their knowledge of USA Rugby resources for those looking to take the next step toward varsity status. The responses to those questions are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Are women's club teams aware of the application process to become an NCAA varsity sport?

	n	%
Emerging Sport Status		
Yes	29	33%
No	59	67%
USA Rugby Website		
Yes	78	90%
No	9	10%
Applied for Varsity		
Yes	20	22%
No	28	32%
Unsure	41	46%
Awareness of Process		
Know nothing about	55	62%
Know a little bit	23	26%
Know a moderate amount	8	9%
Know very well	3	3%
Aware of USA Rugby Resources		
Yes	10	12%
No	77	88%

Research Question 3: What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning?

To illuminate some of the reasoning behind their level of interest, respondents were asked directly for the reasoning behind their answer choice for initial interest. The open responses were grouped into the categories of ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ and ‘Unsure.’ Each set of responses was then further coded to determine whether certain reasons were more prevalent than others. The frequencies of the coded responses are listed in Table 3. Within the ‘Yes,’ subset the most common answer was ‘Recognition and Support.’ For teams not interested in varsity status, the most common response was that they focused on a fun, relaxed, or more social dynamic. For those who were unsure,

teams stated a desire for higher funding and facilities but were hesitant to dedicate the amount of time and commitment that a varsity sport would require.

Table 3
What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning?

	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Please Explain Your Reasoning for your Level of Interest*		
<i>Yes (74.44%)</i>		
Recognition and Support	31	18%
Funding	30	17%
Competitiveness	14	8%
Recruiting/Retention	14	8%
Growing the Sport	24	14%
Facilities	12	7%
Access to Athletic Trainers	8	5%
Coaching	13	8%
Scholarships	7	4%
Administration	3	2%
Academics	3	2%
Women in Sport	12	7%
<i>No (20.0%)</i>		
Fun, Social or Camaraderie Aspect	12	27%
Regulations	5	12%
Lack of Interest	3	7%
Time Dedicated or Commitment	9	21%
Recruiting	5	12%
Happy with Current Status	9	21%
<i>Unsure (5.56%)</i>		
Facilities and Resources (+)	4	40%
Funding (+)	2	20%

Regulations (-)	1	10%
Unlikely at institution (-)	2	20%
Happy with Current Status (-)	1	10%

Note. Respondents may have mentioned more than one of the factors listed. The ‘Unsure’ respondents provided reasoning both for and against wanting varsity status. Answers that were pro-varsity are marked with the ‘+’ and answers against varsity status are marked with a ‘-’.

Respondents were asked in Likert scale questions how each of the elements listed in Table 4 would be impacted by NCAA sanctioning. Answer choices were 1 = ‘Very Detrimental,’ 2 = ‘Detrimental,’ 3 = ‘Neither Detrimental nor Beneficial,’ 4 = ‘Beneficial’ and 5 = ‘Very Beneficial.’ Results are reported as the means and standard deviations of their responses in Table 4. The element with the highest mean was Access to Facilities and the element with the lowest mean was Team Traditions.

Table 4
What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning?

	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived NCAA Impact*			
Access to Facilities	89	4.72	1.08
Team Dynamic	89	3.67	2.04
Team Traditions	89	3.46	2.01
Team Leadership	89	3.89	1.52
Quality of Practices	89	4.43	1.59
Ease of Match Scheduling	89	4.62	1.63
Coaching	89	4.39	1.59
Win-Loss Record	89	4.16	1.55
Injury Treatment	89	4.80	1.10
Player Retention	89	4.25	1.56
Quality of Facilities	89	4.48	1.04
Quality of Equipment	89	4.58	1.05
Alumni Relations	89	4.22	1.56
On-campus Recruitment	89	4.23	2.12
Pre-college Recruitment	89	4.66	1.07

Match Publicity	89	4.44	1.03
Perceptions of Women's Rugby on Campus	89	4.53	1.61
Team Camaraderie	89	3.67	1.50

Note. The scale ranged from (1) Very Detrimental to (5) Very Beneficial. A sixth choice of 'Unsure or Not Applicable' was offered to avoid skewing the results. The 'Unsure/Not Applicable' responses were not factored into the mean and standard deviations. Listed in order of which they were asked in the survey.

Research Question 4: What goals and values do women's collegiate rugby teams prioritize?

In addition to asking teams how they believed NCAA status would impact their team; additional questions were asked to provide more details of how teams operate and what aspects of rugby they most highly value. On average teams held about three practices per week ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.91$), for almost two hours per practice ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.32$). Ninety percent of the teams reported that they have some kind of additional training sessions outside of practice, including cardio/sprint work ($n = 10$, 11%), weightlifting ($n = 38$, 43%) and skills sessions ($n = 15$, 17%). Some other activities reported in open responses included team dinners, community service, watching game film, and strategy sessions. The same elements from the NCAA Impact Likert-style question were carried forward to a second survey item asking respondents to rank each element on a scale where 1 = 'Not Important' and 5 = 'Very Important.' The means and standard deviations were reported, with 'Team Dynamic' having the highest mean ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.56$) and 'Pre-College Recruiting' having the lowest mean ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 2.00$). The full listing of results is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

What goals and values do women's collegiate rugby teams prioritize?

	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
Importance*			
Access to Facilities	89	4.69	1.65
Team Dynamic	89	4.93	0.56
Team Traditions	89	4.52	1.04
Team Leadership	89	4.79	1.10
Quality of Practices	89	4.67	1.07
Ease of Match Scheduling	89	4.16	1.54
Coaching	89	4.76	1.09
Win-Loss Record	89	3.66	2.03
Injury Treatment	89	4.48	1.60
Player Retention	89	4.60	1.62
Quality of Facilities	89	4.27	1.56
Quality of Equipment	89	4.26	1.56
Alumni Relations	89	4.35	1.58
On-campus Recruitment	89	4.64	1.63
Pre-college Recruitment	89	3.16	2.00
Match Publicity	89	3.87	2.06
Perceptions of Women's Rugby on Campus	89	4.37	1.58
Team Camaraderie	89	4.90	1.12

Note. The scale ranged from (1) Very Unimportant to (5) Very Important. A sixth choice of 'Unsure or Not Applicable' was offered to avoid skewing the results. The 'Unsure/Not Applicable' responses were not factored into the mean and standard deviations. Listed in order of which they were asked in the survey.

The results are strikingly similar across the board to the results from the original study conducted over ten years ago. There is a clear consistency in the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning as well as the prioritized goals and values of women's collegiate rugby teams. Using this collection of data, it can provide important insight into what can or should be done to continue to grow the sport in the US and what hurdles there currently are.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study is the second to explore rugby from a club leadership standpoint. Sherling (2014) was the first to examine the sport from this perspective. Past studies of women's rugby had a heavy focus on the identity of women who play rugby in terms of masculinity or homosexuality, but few look at the organization, motivation and administration of the sport at the collegiate level. The purpose of this study was to examine the current state of collegiate women's rugby to inform an improved possible plan for the future.

Survey Overview

Although this survey attempted to reach out to the entire population of women's collegiate rugby leaders, in the process of developing contact lists it became clear that the entirety of this population is not known. While the USA Rugby and National Collegiate Rugby websites list teams according to divisions, some of the teams listed had defunct websites or lacked current contact information. Because a complete listing of institutions with women's rugby does not exist, the study was not able to reach the entire population. Through this study a database of current identifiable teams listed across websites with email addresses has been compiled.

Compounding the problem of incomplete information is that some club leaders are not informed and might hold multiple leadership positions. Thirteen percent of respondents were not aware of their division or classification. It is possible that schools are changing divisions and/or governing bodies, and these changes are not yet acknowledged on the website. Additionally, a

complicating factor in pinpointing the survey population came from club leaders who filled multiple roles. Some players serve as the president, captain and coach of their team. In the efforts to contact teams, emails were sent to coaches to be forwarded to player leaders, but within the data it was sometimes difficult to tell if a coach took the survey or if a player who is also a coach completed the survey. Some of the respondents expressed frustration in the open-ended responses at having to hear so much responsibility for their team by needing to perform so many functions. Having such a narrow power structure can lead to further complications that may not be explicitly stated in the results.

Research Question 1: Are existing women's collegiate rugby teams interested in becoming an NCAA varsity sport?

Broadly, the answer to RQ1 is yes. In both the initial and final interest inquiries, well over forty respondents (the minimum number of institutions required for NCAA sanctioning) expressed interest in pursuing varsity status. While this data validates the research topic, there are many factors that may undermine these responses. Aggregately, respondents skewed toward identifying as more competitive teams as opposed to social teams, but this could be the result of response bias. Competitive teams may be more likely to have an up-to-date and responsive communication structure, thereby making it more likely that their contact information was readily available when and they were sent this survey. Upon receiving the survey, a competitive player may also be more likely to invest the time to complete the survey. Due to the voluntary nature of the survey, it is impossible to tell respondents' motivations for choosing to answer or not answer the survey.

In the open response questions, some respondents had no interest in being a varsity athlete, regardless of NCAA involvement. This could be said for many club athletes of any sport; they enjoy the game, but they don't have the time or willingness to dedicate themselves to a varsity

level program. Based on these survey responses, there is sufficient data to understand teams' perceptions of how varsity status would affect them.

There was limited variability between the original study completed in 2014 and this study, with 71% of respondents answering 'Yes' to being interested in becoming an NCAA varsity sport in this study and 70% answering 'Yes' in the original study.

A final limitation is that the respondents' answers do not necessarily reflect the opinions or desires of their team. In some cases, the respondents wanted their teammates to have higher levels of commitment or attendance, showing a dissonance that may undermine interest as polled in this survey.

Research Question 2: Are existing collegiate women's rugby teams aware of the application process to become a university-sponsored NCAA sport?

Compared to the responses for interest, there were significantly lower numbers for awareness. While 34% of respondents were aware that rugby was classified as an NCAA Emerging Sport (11% lower than in 2014), 61% "knew nothing" about the application process to be a varsity sport at their institution (12% higher than in 2014), while an additional 27% only "knew a little bit" (5% lower than in 2014). Only 11% of the respondents knew that USA Rugby offered resources specifically designed to apply for varsity status (12% lower than in 2014). Even though awareness regarding Emerging Sports was higher than expected, that may not be as relevant in terms of elevating a club team to varsity status. The burden of elevation is almost exclusively on the club teams; institutions will generally not seek out club teams that may be interested in varsity status. Having knowledge about the varsity application process is perhaps more important than just being aware of NCAA Emerging Sports. Reading through the open-ended responses, it appeared as though teams overall do not receive a significant amount of

administrative support from their institution. If teams do not seek out this information on their own, there cannot be any progress made.

In comparison to the first time this study was completed, the respondents indicate a drop in awareness in education about women's rugby as a NCAA Emerging Sport over the last decade. The education piece is lacking to elevate teams to varsity status at their respective institution in order to get to the forty minimum teams to become NCAA sanctioned. Such a significant drop over a 10-year period is concerning for the growth of the game and needs to be addressed.

Research Question 3 and 4: What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning? What goals and values do women's collegiate rugby teams prioritize?

Research Questions 3 and 4 are both designed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the respondents' levels of interest. While standing alone each set of questions provides a certain level of insight; the relationship between the two creates a more interesting picture.

For example, there are strong similarities between what respondents perceive as NCAA benefits and what aspect of their team that they would want to change. A few simply stated that their one change would be to obtain varsity status. The top four elements that respondents saw as being most beneficially impacted by NCAA status based on the mean of responses were injury treatment, access to facilities, pre-college recruitment, and team dynamic (as compared to the 2014 study where quality of equipment was seen as more beneficially impacted than team dynamic and the other three stayed consistent). The top four most desired changes by frequency of response were recognition and support, funding, growing the sport and recruiting/retention (2014 study four most popular were funding, facilities, recognition and recruiting/retention). While there are direct overlaps with facilities and retention, most of these elements are more tangible in nature and directly relate to running a competitive sports team. When teams expressed

a desire for increased ‘recognition,’ often they simply wanted to be seen as a legitimate, hard-working team by their institution.

Conversely, when teams were asked what elements, they found to be most important, the top four most popular answers by mean were team dynamics, team camaraderie, team leadership and access to facilities. The data very clearly presents that teams place a high value on their players and having strong bonds within the team.

A second interesting similarity was the frequency of respondents who want to share their rugby experiences with as many people as possible. In this study, there was a surprisingly high number of respondents who expressed a desire to “grow the sport,” not just within their institution, but across the country. A full 14% of respondents who expressed interest in elevating their team to varsity status cited “growing the sport” as a part of their rationale. Being a relatively obscure sport, this desire to share knowledge could stem from passion for the game or from a deeper sense of empowerment as an athlete.

Looking back to the NCAA impact question, the items that teams saw as being least benefitted by NCAA status were team traditions, team camaraderie, team dynamics and team leadership. This dissonance between what teams’ value and their perceptions of how NCAA status will affect their team could explain some of the general sluggishness of conversion. On the other hand, it is possible that teams don’t see varsity status and a strong team bond as being mutually exclusive and the reasoning can be attributed back to a lack of knowledge regarding the varsity application process or an inability to meet the application requirements.

One element that is a paradigm example of the mixed interests is recruiting. While teams expressed a desire to have higher numbers on their roster and attending practice, many felt that adding a strong recruiting element would create an intimidating atmosphere and deter

inexperienced players from coming out, including the respondents themselves. While there may be some misconceptions about how the recruiting process would be implemented, it makes sense given how highly respondents value a strong team dynamic that they may be wary of changing the mechanisms that have brought their current team together. Varsity status would remove a significant amount of the agency that club teams currently have, and perceptions of recruiting seem to be at the crux of the issue. As a team leader, it may be unnerving to think about which of their teammates might not have found rugby if a more regimented recruiting process were in place. When envisioning the success of a varsity program, the image might be one with unfamiliar faces reaping the rewards.

Limitations

A limitation is that the respondents' answers may not necessarily reflect the opinions or desires of their team as a whole. In some cases, the respondents wanted their teammates to have higher levels of commitment or attendance, showing a dissonance that may undermine interest as polled in this survey.

An additional limitation was the fact that governing body websites, school websites, and individual team websites are not always the most up to date and often had a point of contact listed that was no longer with the club. Likewise, governing body websites fail to regularly update the division and conference to which schools are assigned to. This makes it difficult to ascertain how many schools are being sponsored at the NCAA varsity level.

Implications

This data clearly indicates a need for a robust education system to educate current clubs and schools leadership team about the process to become an NCAA sanctioned sport. This education or training should come directly from USA Rugby and National Collegiate Rugby to coaches,

club presidents, and other senior players to encourage the growth of the sport and development of the game.

The lack of updated website information, division assignments, and contact information demonstrates the need for regular updating to all the necessary information for each registered club to ensure the education is being distributed directly to the relevant club contacts.

Areas for Future Research

After recreating this study ten years on from its original completion, little has been done in educating women's rugby programs and athletic departments in the U.S. Researchers along with sport professionals and athletes should begin showcasing the benefits of elevating women's rugby to an NCAA sanctioned sport.

With the Women's Rugby World Cup being hosted in the United States in 2033, there is a desire from USA Rugby to continue to grow the game and create not only more players, but more fans that are engaged and passionate about the sport. Educating more teams on the process of becoming varsity level programs, having more teams competing at a high level will directly develop better talent within the US and therefore benefit the national team.

Another piece of research that would benefit the greater understanding of the rugby landscape in America would be comparing and contrasting the different governing bodies of collegiate rugby. Would it be more beneficial for the growth of the game if there was only one governing body? How do each of the governing bodies govern the sport and are there opportunities for them to learn from one another? These are all research questions that would seek out answers that would benefit the overall game in America and are relevant before the hosting of the World Cup.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to assess the present state of women's rugby in the United States, discovering the attitudes of current clubs toward achieving NCAA status. Understanding the mindset of players within the club model is crucial, as they play a pivotal role in shaping team cultures that influence the sport's future. Learning there is interest but limited awareness regarding the process or benefits of NCAA affiliation, these insights gathered can inform future outreach and marketing strategies by organizations like the NCAA and USA Rugby to effectively tailor their messaging. Conversely, if there was minimal interest, a comprehensive strategy re-evaluation by USA Rugby and the NCAA may be warranted to establish a growth framework that aligns with club interests.

Regarding the first research question, a high proportion of existing women's collegiate rugby teams are interested in becoming an NCAA varsity sport. In both the initial and final interest inquiries, well over forty respondents (the minimum number of institutions required for NCAA sanctioning) expressed interest in pursuing varsity status. The responses used to evaluate the second research questions showed a clear lack of awareness and education related to the application process to become a university-sponsored NCAA sport. For the third and fourth research questions the results are strikingly similar across the board to the results from the original study conducted over ten years ago. There is a clear consistency in the perceived benefits and drawbacks of NCAA sanctioning as well as the prioritized goals and values of women's collegiate rugby teams.

Given these findings, the most important outcome of this research is the clear indication that USA Rugby executives and the NCAA Emerging Sports Committee should focus on creating greater awareness as well as educational tools and assistance in promoting emerging women's

sports to elevate to them NCAA status. There is interest among women's rugby clubs and players in becoming NCAA sanctioned but a lack of awareness about the process is a significant barrier. Elevating women's rugby to an NCAA sanctioned sport might greatly benefit the game and with the 2033 Women's Rugby World Cup being hosted in the U.S., this should be a priority of USA Rugby to make every effort to grow the sport and level of the game between now and then.

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