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Ticket Office Sexism:  
The Gender Gap in  
Pricing for NCAA  
Division I Basketball

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NCAA Division I Basketball**

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## **Abstract**

Tickets to college sports – and men’s and women’s Division I college basketball in particular – may appear on the surface no different than tickets members of the public may buy to attend professional sporting events. But unlike professional franchises, colleges are non-profit organizations and, in many cases, public institutions. Decisions around ticket prices do not reflect an actual marketplace, but internal calculations and decisions that necessarily reflect a value placed on the event by the institution. This distinction is critical because previous research shows that lower-priced events are perceived as lower quality and less worth watching or attending. Our review of ticket prices for men’s and women’s Division I college basketball for the 2008-2009 season considered entry fees charged by 292 institutions at various seating levels, including season ticket packages and single game tickets. Our results showed significant gender gaps at every pricing and seating level with colleges charging a premium for male play. This gap persisted even among teams identified by the NCAA as top-ranked women’s teams with large fan followings. Analysis of attendance figures further showed that the gender differential in price across schools is not accounted for by differences in attendance. Because athletics, and particularly college basketball, have an increasingly prominent cultural profile, the practice of effectively de-valuing women on the court has implications off the court as well. The results support the broader contention that women athletes – as women in traditionally male arenas – continue to face institutional discrimination that is camouflaged as sensible economic practice.

## **Ticket Office Sexism: The Gender Gap in Pricing for NCAA Division I Basketball**

### **Introduction**

The rising popularity and competitive quality of Women's Division I NCAA basketball has made it, along with football and men's basketball, a revenue producing sport with a growing fan base. Women's games are increasingly televised, and while most often on local or cable channels rather than network TV, viewers still tune in. ESPN, for example, reported that the 2008 women's tournament was the most watched ever, with viewership up 42 percent from the previous year.<sup>i</sup> There is also rising attendance at women's college basketball games, with NCAA statistics showing record crowds for the 2008-2009 season of 11.1 million fans, representing a steady increase in fans in each of the past five years (the NCAA reported 9.9 million attendees for the 2004-2005 season).<sup>ii</sup> The NCAA attendance figures reflect attendance for Divisions I, II, and III, and reveal a broad growing fan base and not simply a surge in popularity among a handful of top teams.

The two-year-old NCAA "Pack the House" campaign, in which athletic conferences and institutions compete to build attendance, has spurred promotion of women's basketball – albeit sporadically – but has yielded results. For example, Auburn University drew a record 12,067 sell-out crowd to its game on January 25, 2009, against 2008 NCAA Champion University of Tennessee. According to the NCAA, Auburn's

promotion and marketing department sent 6,200 fliers shaped like popcorn boxes to local elementary and middle school students (who were eligible for a free box of popcorn at the game) and who helped fill the stands.<sup>iii</sup> Unrelated to such centralized marketing efforts, some individual programs report rising attendance. For example, season ticket sales for the Indiana University women's basketball team were up by 18 percent,<sup>iv</sup> and the Loyola University (Baltimore) women's basketball team drew an average of 7,951 fans to each home game, setting a single-season attendance record and marking a 23 percent increase over the previous year.<sup>v</sup>

Even as women's college basketball is considered compelling athletic entertainment by a growing fan base, it continues to be promoted as a junior varsity enterprise. This is reflected not only in the scheduling and marketing of games, but the pricing of tickets.

### **The challenge of pricing sports tickets**

The literature on athletics and ticket pricing struggles with the lack of distinction between college and professional teams while considering various factors that make sports ticketing imperfect markets, including geography, team success, and the overall popularity of the sport. In addition, factors such as media coverage and sponsorships are said to shape both revenue streams and the perceived popularity and success of a team and, in turn, the desirability of attending an event. As a result, attendance can be enhanced or shaped by institutional forces, particularly in college sports (e.g. the "pack the house" campaign). This also happens in profes-

sional sports, where teams will seek to effectively engage fans so they evolve from low-level of fan identification (social fans) to medium (focused fans) to high (vested fans), with the result that these most avid fans express “decreased price sensitivity” as well as “decreased performance outcome sensitivity.”<sup>vi</sup> College teams have the added benefit of a natural fan base of alumni so that efforts at fan development are not merely rooted in the organic growth of interest in a team (assuming a level of success) or traditional marketing strategies, but also the cultivation of alumni and local boosters as a source of support and publicity. For the purpose of this study, we have focused on ticket pricing, which in some cases does include cultivating booster support through “club” donations to get access to premium seats, but does not include other forms of sponsorship such as corporate advertising, events, or special promotional relationships. We do, however, consider how colleges and universities price their men’s and women’s basketball tickets relative to attendance. Because – as stated previously – tickets for college sports do not reflect a pure market, we also consider the meaning of pricing given that colleges are not businesses, but non-profits, public beneficiaries, and guardians of American egalitarian values.

### **College sports ticket pricing and institutional values**

In recent years, the NCAA has encouraged schools to seek ways to maximize athletic revenues raising legitimate questions about the role and scope of commercial interests in university settings (some athletes have argued, for

example, that they should be paid). This paper does not address this tangled issue, but focuses on how the institution prices game tickets. It is critical to note that popular debate about ticket prices for revenue-producing sports often reverts to language that assumes these tickets – because they are sometimes sold by ticket resellers or brokers or through sites such as Ticketmaster – are part of a free market. But while the sale of a ticket to a college basketball game may appear on the surface to be no different than sale of a ticket to an NBA game, such assumptions ignore that colleges do not operate as pure businesses. As Gordon C. Winston, professor of economics at Williams College, has argued, “the standard economic intuition and analogies, built on an understanding of profit-making firms and the economic theory that supports it, are likely to be a poor guide to understanding higher education.”<sup>vii</sup>

Among his points is that colleges and universities are, in part, dependent on their success – not only by what the university itself offers to students – but through “the peer-effects generated by the students themselves.” Higher education, he argues, is also hierarchical with broad ranges between rich and poor institutions, differences that shape costs, prices, subsidies, and competition. As such, athletic ticket prices do not reflect a free market reality, but a policy decision by the institution. As Winston observes, “profits made from undergraduate education, for instance, might support administrators’ perks, the teaching of graduate students, or a high-powered Rose Bowl football team.”<sup>viii</sup> Thus, the setting of ticket prices is done within a context of institutional deci-

sions that are not limited to the business model applied to a professional sports franchise. Whether universities choose to recognize it or not, decisions about ticket pricing reflect real or perceived judgments about the value of the athletic events for which they are setting entry fees.

### **Colleges are non-profits with social responsibilities**

The notion that ticket pricing “sends a message” must be considered within yet another context: colleges’ status as non-profit (and in some cases public) institutions. As non-profit institutions, colleges and universities receive public benefits, most notably in the form of tax exemptions. This benefit of non-profit status is so economically compelling that some have asked whether the rapid growth and diversification of activities carried out by non-profits represents unfair competition to traditional business.<sup>ix</sup> Burton A. Weisbrod observes that “new commercial activities are the major path open to nonprofits to generate additional revenue,” but suggests that nonprofits that emulate private firms become more like them and “undermine the fundamental justification for the special social and economic role they have played.”<sup>x</sup>

Among theories used to argue in favor of providing tax-exemptions to non-profit institutions is the benefit, quid pro quo, or subsidy theory which considers the tax exemption as an exchange for a community benefit.<sup>xi</sup> Donald A. Krueckeborg calculates the estimated loss in tax revenues from non-profit exemptions at \$22.85 billion in 2000.<sup>xii</sup> And despite the practice of many colleges and universities of providing payments in lieu

of taxes—or PILOT—his sampling of payments by 15 institutions for 1986-1987 showed percentage of payments to calculated value to be as low as 0.4 and as high as 20.5 percent of taxes due. His sample included several colleges with strong basketball programs, including University of Pittsburgh (3.4 percent), Michigan State (3.8 percent), and Stanford (13.4 percent).<sup>xiii</sup>

Concern about the commercial nature of university athletic departments within the institution’s non-profit framework is not just an academic debate. In 2006, the House Ways and Means Committee raised questions about whether college athletics deserved their tax-exempt status.<sup>xiv</sup> While a recent (2009) paper by John D. Colombo at the University of Illinois College of Law argues that “current law makes it virtually impossible for the IRS to withdraw exemption either from the NCAA or universities operating major athletic programs,” he says it possible that the IRS could tax revenues from Division I college athletics.<sup>xv</sup> Such suggestions illustrate both the awkward relationship between the money-making enterprise of big-time college sports and the university’s non-profit identity—and the obvious hierarchy of athletic teams. This hierarchy may appear to be rooted purely in the relative revenue production of various teams, but is clearly a reflection of institutional decisions.

### **Ticket prices and institutional policy**

The matter grows more complicated with women’s Division I basketball. Is it a revenue-producing sport—or not? Rising attendance and popularity of the women’s game reveal a natural

“product” to be marketed and promoted. Some colleges – even those that draw large numbers of fans – have not done this. The University of Louisville women’s basketball team which played in the 2009 NCAA Championship game remains a relative bargain at \$5 a ticket – a price the athletic department has no intention of raising, even though they charge substantially more for their men’s basketball tickets and even though the women have drawn large crowds, even selling out a regular season game.<sup>xvi</sup>

A few colleges and universities that are home to the nation’s most successful women’s basketball programs have sought to price tickets with an eye to attracting meaningful revenue. But the institutions have taken a tentative approach to marketing the teams and charging for tickets, pointedly positioning the women’s “product” so as not to upstage the men’s. At the University of Connecticut, for example, the athletic department charges \$30 for seats to the men’s game and \$22 to the women’s game, despite nearly identical attendance. While UConn makes a more concerted effort to market the women’s team (seven-time NCAA champions) than most, confusion over how to position a top women’s team relative to a men’s team was evident in speaking with a member of the UConn athletic department.

“Tradition and history dictate the cost of the ticket,” stated UConn spokesman Mike Enright. “Historically the women’s tickets have always been a little less expensive than the men’s tickets.” He further stated that, “It’s really a factor of, like I said, history and tradition –

and not that the women’s team doesn’t have a great history and tradition – but the history of ticket pricing.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Such comments raise a critical question: What does the pricing of tickets mean? Researchers Michelle R. Hebl, Traci A. Giuliano, Eden B. King, Jennifer L. Knight, Jenessa R. Shapiro, Jeanine L. Skorinko, and Anjali Wig, Anjali who authored a 2004 study on the effect of differential ticket prices in men’s and women’s sports, argued that in charging less for tickets to women’s sporting events than to men’s sporting events, “the value associated with women’s sports may be denigrated due to this disparity.” The study showed that when tickets to women’s events cost more than to men’s events, test subjects “perceived the women’s teams as equivalent in value to the men’s teams.”<sup>xviii</sup> Authors of the study assert that ticket prices are not, alas, just about ticket prices, but reflect social status and the values we assign to teams and the events we pay to see. Lower ticket prices for women’s events, they observe, are typically justified as a means to encourage more people to “get involved with and view women’s sports.” Michelle R. Hebl and colleagues conclude that such pricing and its attendant rationalization as a vehicle to make women’s events more financially accessible actually represent “a troubling mechanism by which social inequity may persist.”

In conducting our study on Division I men’s and women’s basketball ticket prices for the 2008-2009 season, we sought to understand, not merely the fact of disparities in ticket prices, but to understand the scope of the disparities and how it relates to game attendance.

Are women's tickets priced in proportion to the size of the crowd they attract? For these analyses, we considered the different types of tickets one can buy – single game and season.

We also observed, less for data analysis than for narrative purposes, *how* seats were sold. That is, how does one select the seat from which to view the game and how many seating levels are available (marked by different price points)? Generally speaking, institutions seek to maximize ticket revenues by creating multiple price points for tickets and charging more for seating that is closer to the floor (or even on the floor) or which has a preferred viewing angle. By contrast, selling all seats as “general admission” – very common for women's basketball games – may often suggest that the game is of such low value that whether one sits very close or higher in the stands is of marginal enough benefit that it is not worth a higher price. There are some exceptions to this practice, particularly at institutions which charge low entry fees for basketball and all athletic events or which offer combination tickets to both men's and women's basketball games. It is important to consider such findings through the lens of the university obligation to support and promote gender equitable values. While Title IX does not govern the setting of ticket prices, it does set expectations about equitable treatment for men's and women's athletics. The setting of ticket prices may be viewed as outside of the enforcement area of Title IX, but our study results reveal gender gaps that appear as a matter of institutional policy with concerning repercussions for male and female athletes on – and off – the court.

## **Study Method**

A list of the 344 colleges and universities which host men's and women's Division I (DI) basketball teams (including schools re-classified from DII to DI) was compiled from the most recent list available on the NCAA website. Using this list, we sought ticket price information from college and university athletic web sites. We gathered information for tickets that would be available to the general public and not for special categories of individuals such as young alumni, students, and faculty. We sought ticket prices in the following categories: 1) Most expensive men's season ticket prices 2) Most expensive women's season ticket price 3) Least expensive men's season ticket price 4) Least expensive women's season ticket price 5) Most expensive men's single game ticket price 6) Most expensive women's single game ticket price 7) Least expensive men's single game ticket price 8) Least expensive women's single game ticket price. We also 9) noted the number of seating choices as defined by different ticket price levels available for each men's and women's team. In instances where access to any ticket required a contribution, we noted the minimum contribution required for access, even in the category of most expensive season ticket prices (is possible in some cases to buy tickets that are more expensive than the top-priced tickets in the study).

In cases in which ticket prices were not available online, were unclear, or required contact with the ticket office, phone calls were and e-mails were sent to ticket office administrators. Attendance data and 2008 NCAA ranking was obtained for each college from

NCAA documents available on the web.

After obtaining the data, we eliminated any colleges (7) with incomplete information. We noted 45 schools that offered only combination tickets, requiring fans to buy a ticket that would permit admission to both men's and women's games. In some instances these were legitimate equal-access tickets, while in others phone calls to ticket offices revealed that they actually only charged for admission to the men's games, but allowed entrance to the women's games for free. While we noted this information, because such combination tickets did not offer a means for comparing the institutional valuation (through pricing) for men's and women's teams we did not include them in our data analysis. As a result, we were left with complete data from 292 colleges.

### Results

Our study results show that differences in ticket prices between men's basketball and women's basketball are significant at every ticket type and pricing level studied. Even colleges with popular and successful women's programs, whose teams ranked in the NCAA Top 25, charge more for tickets to men's basketball games than they do to their nationally-ranked women's team. This gender gap results in an average loss of \$600 to \$2,300 for season tickets and \$16.50 to \$25 for game tickets among most U.S. colleges and universities and a great deal more for a few schools (up to \$20K for season tickets and \$145 for single game tickets).

Descriptive statistics for this sample

are shown in Table 1 and reveal broad differences in values (as they relate to men's and women's basketball) among the colleges in Division I. For example, average attendance ranged from 128 to nearly 15,800 for women's games and from 373 to over 22,500 for men's games. Women's games had as many as 12 seating levels and men's games as many as 50. Season tickets to women's college basketball games are free for some schools and over \$5,000 at others. For men's teams, season tickets cost \$15 to nearly \$20,500. The cost of a single game ticket at the height of the season repeats this pattern: up to \$40 for women's teams and up to \$150 for men's teams.

However, it's important to note that the high and low end indicators of a team's ascribed value highlight those schools at the extremes. The means (averages across all schools) for these indicators can give a better sense of the overall valuing of men's teams relative to women's. Men's basketball games average over 3 times the attendance and twice the number of seating levels as women's basketball games. On average, the cheapest season ticket is over 3 times higher for men's games and the most expensive season ticket is over 6 ½ times higher. The average single game price is twice as expensive for both the cheapest and most expensive tickets for men's games.

One could argue that the relative value of teams *within schools* shows greater gender parity than does the relative value averaged across schools. In order to examine this possibility, we created composite variables within each school in order to hold constant school-specific factors (e.g., college/university admin-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

<u>Full Sample</u>	N	Min	Max	Mean	StDev
Women's top season ticket price	258	\$0.00	\$5,295.00	\$171.60	431.42
Men's top season ticket price	273	\$25.00	\$20,489.00	\$1,134.15	2172.65
Women's bottom season ticket price	257	\$0.00	\$660.00	\$70.71	50.11
Men's bottom season ticket price	274	\$15.00	\$7,535.00	\$225.13	571.73
Women's top game ticket price	289	\$0.00	\$40.00	\$8.70	5.24
Men's top game ticket price	290	\$0.00	\$150.00	\$21.55	17.87
Women's bottom game ticket price	289	\$0.00	\$22.00	\$6.54	2.43
Men's bottom game ticket price	290	\$0.00	\$55.00	\$12.77	8.13
Women's seating levels	286	1	12	1.84	1.24
Men's seating levels	289	1	50	3.61	3.58
Women's average attendance	292	128	15,796	1,596.16	2007.21
Men's average attendance	291	373	22,554	5,237.58	4651.32
Women's ranking	292	1	336	157.41	95.91
Men's ranking	291	1	341	158.79	96.59

  

<u>Women's Top 25</u>	N	Min	Max	Mean	StDev
Women's top season ticket price	25	\$50.00	\$1,180.00	\$232.60	254.51
Men's top season ticket price	25	\$120.00	\$13,356.00	\$2,516.20	3479.90
Women's bottom season ticket price	25	\$30.00	\$660.00	\$123.36	121.43
Men's bottom season ticket price	25	\$80.00	\$7,535.00	\$824.52	1763.56
Women's top game ticket price	25	\$5.00	\$30.00	\$13.12	7.65
Men's top game ticket price	25	\$10.00	\$90.00	\$35.34	17.74
Women's bottom game ticket price	25	\$5.00	\$22.00	\$8.60	3.71
Men's bottom game ticket price	25	\$8.00	\$45.00	\$24.38	12.10
Women's seating levels	25	1	6	2.52	1.56
Men's seating levels	25	1	9	3.92	2.06

istrator characteristics and preferences, region, prestige of the institution, etc.) in the gender comparisons, referring to these scores collectively as “differentials” throughout the rest of this paper. Specifically, we computed a ratio of average attendance and ticket prices; we also computed difference scores of ranking and seating levels thus creating composite scores for which higher values represent a gender differential favoring men over women (see Table 2). (It is important to note that these differentials, while a compelling way to

compare teams within school, obscure the actual value differences as measured in actual seating levels, number of fans, and ticket prices. We will also provide these actual value equivalents throughout the paper.)

Within schools, ranking differentials range from -267 (the men’s team outranks the women’s team by 267 points) to 232 (the women’s team outranks the men’s team by 232 points). The mean within-school ranking differential was near parity (1.40), showing that

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for constructed gender differential variables used in the analyses.

Ratio <sup>a</sup> (men \$:women \$)	N	Min	Max	Mean	StDev
Top season ticket price	256	1.00	10,000	51.51	624.76
Bottom season ticket price	257	0.38	10,000	42.52	623.59
Top game ticket price	289	0.00	1,500	8.03	88.11
Bottom game ticket price	289	0.00	2,500	15.85	171.08
Difference (men # - women #)					
Seating levels	286	-2.00	16	1.61	2.06
Average attendance	290	0.66	30	4.59	3.87
Ranking	291	-267	232	1.40	100.31

<sup>a</sup> To avoid dividing by zero, free admission was given a price of \$0.01.

the differential between men’s teams and women’s teams within schools was fairly balanced (roughly as many schools have higher ranking women’s teams as those having higher ranking men’s teams).

Descriptively, the means for the remaining value differentials favor men’s teams. On average, schools offer slightly more seating levels for men’s games than for women’s (Mean=1.61). However, at least one school offers only half as many seating levels for its men’s games as for its women’s games. On the other hand, at least one school offers up to 16 more seating levels for its men’s basketball games than for its women’s. The relative game attendance within schools ranges from 0.66 (the men’s team brings in only two-thirds as many fans as the women’s team) to 30 (the men’s team brings in 30 times as many fans), with an average within-school gender differential reflecting over 4 ½ times as many fans attending a school’s men’s basketball games than women’s. The ratio of men’s to women’s season and game ticket prices also show a large gender differential: Men’s game cost an aver-

age of 8 times as much for the cheapest tickets and over 16 ½ times as much for the most expensive season tickets than women’s game tickets in the same school. Single game tickets cost roughly 3 times as much for men’s games than for women’s in the same school.

Among schools having women’s team ranked in the Top 25, ranking differentials ranged from -18 (the men’s team outranks the women’s team by 18 points) to 40 (the women’s team outranks the men’s team by 40 points). On average, women’s teams tended to outrank men’s team by over 9 points, an artifact of our sampling design for this elite sample. These schools tended to have only slightly different levels of seating: just over 1 more seating level for men’s than women’s teams, on average. Game attendance was similarly near parity within schools; attendance was 1.4 fans of men’s games to every 1 fan of women’s games.

In contrast, however, ticket price differentials strongly favor men’s teams. Even among schools hosting the most elite women’s teams (those ranked in

the top 25 by the NCAA as determined by prior season performance), there are notable gender discrepancies. On average, men's teams in this subsample are ranked below their corresponding women's teams (on average, they are more than 8 positions lower on NCAA ranking lists). Despite this, average game attendance is twice as high and more seating levels (1 ½ on average) are assigned for men's games than for women's in this elite group. Further, ticket prices do not reflect the women's ranking advantage: these schools charge 8 (cheapest seats) to 16 ½ (most expensive seats) times more for season tickets to their men's basketball games than to their women's games and 3 times more to watch a single game.

In our analyses, we did not want schools with extreme values to affect the results. Schools with values lying outside the normal distribution of scores on each outcome ("outliers") were omitted (see Table 3 in Appendix). There were no outlier schools that stood out in terms of the relative ranking of their men's and women's basketball teams.

The remaining variables have outliers that favor men's teams over women's teams. A single school stood out as being an outlier with respect to the ratio of men's to women's game seating levels (16 to 1). Similarly, a single school was identified as an outlier with respect to the ratio of men's to women's game attendance average (30 to 1). Five schools have extreme differentials with respect to bottom season ticket prices (corresponding to a price difference as high as \$7,500) and four schools have extreme differentials with respect to top season ticket prices (corresponding to a

price difference as high as \$20,400). Two schools have extreme differentials with respect to bottom single game tickets (corresponding to a price difference as high as \$25) and four schools have extreme differentials with respect to top single game ticket prices (corresponding to a difference as high as \$145). Because each identified outlier favors men's teams over women's, the omission of these from the analyses produces more conservative results. In other words, taking out the most extreme cases favoring men's teams will work against, rather than toward, finding a male-biased gender differential in the remaining sample.

*Are basketball ticket prices are higher for men's teams than for women's?* To test this, we first conducted a set of comparisons,<sup>xix</sup> the results of which are given in Table 4 (see Appendix). The results of these models show that each gender differential significantly favors men's teams over women's. High-end tickets are over 10 ½ times those for women's teams. This means that the cost for watching a men's game is, on average, an additional \$1,000 per ticket for top season tickets and an additional \$18,500 per ticket for the most expensive season tickets. Low-end season ticket prices are 3 times greater for men's teams than for women's. This corresponds to an average difference of \$150 and \$5,000 for the most expensive season tickets. Single game tickets cost 2 (bottom game ticket price) to 2½ times (top game ticket price) higher for men's games than women's. This represents a difference between \$6.50 and \$13.50, on average, for the cost of men's game tickets and between \$28 and \$94 for the most expensive men's game tickets.

Men's teams have, on average, 1½ more seating levels than do women's.

*How much of the difference in ticket prices and seating levels is due to differences in attendance?* As can be expected, attendance significantly affects ticket price—higher attendance is associated with more seating levels and higher ticket prices. As attendance differentials rise, the ratio of men's to women's top season prices increase by 156%. For bottom season ticket prices, this increase is 18%. Single game ticket prices increase, favoring men's teams by 18% for the most expensive tickets and 8% for the cheapest tickets. Increases in differences in attendance result in a 20% increase in seating levels for men's games than for women's.

We tested the hypothesis that men's to women's ticket price ratios and seating level differentials remain when statistically controlling for these attendance differences.<sup>xx</sup> In other words, these models estimate gender differentials for teams with the same attendance record. The results of these models are given in Table 5 (see Appendix).<sup>xxi</sup> When attendance is included in the ticket pricing models, differentials for high end season tickets were 2½ times higher (250%) for men than for women. At the low end, the differential for season tickets is 118% higher, although this difference was no longer *statistically* significant. Even with the same number of fans attending, seating levels favor men's teams by 65%.

On the other hand, at the same attendance level, single game ticket prices are slightly *higher* for women's teams when compared with men's teams. Women's top game tickets are nearly 15% higher,

a difference of almost \$3 for the average top game ticket, up to a high of \$20. Low end single game tickets are nearly 50% higher for women's than men's games, a difference of \$6 for the average bottom game ticket, up to \$26.50.

*Do differences in team ranking explain price and seating differences?* Among the schools with Top 25 women's teams, men's teams rank from 2 to 236 with an average ranking of 69 (see Table 6 in Appendix). In only four of these schools were men's teams ranked higher than women's. In three of these schools, the rankings differed only by 1. Despite rankings that favor women's teams in this subsample, the gender differential in ticket prices is even more pronounced (see Table 7 in Appendix). Top season tickets are well over 11½ times more for men's teams than women's: a \$2,300 difference on average and up to \$12,200. Bottom season tickets cost well over 3½ more for men's teams: \$600 on average and up to \$5,500. Single game prices are 3 times more costly for men's games than women's: \$16.50 to \$25 for the average game ticket and up to \$30.50 to \$63 in some schools. In schools hosting the Top 25 women's teams, men's games are awarded nearly 1½ times the number of seating levels.

While basketball is considered a revenue producing sport, some colleges also charge nominal admissions to attend other sporting events. Many of these games—so-called Olympic sports—are not seen as key sources of revenue and admission pricing may be more a matter of convention than a budget-balancing enterprise. To consider how matters of gender played out when revenue generation was not the goal, we conducted

a pilot study of DI college soccer ticket prices prior to our study of men's and women's basketball ticket prices. We considered only colleges which had both men's and women's soccer teams. Many colleges do not charge admission (at 91 of the 191 colleges there was no charge to attend soccer games during the Fall 2008 season). At remaining colleges, some charged different prices for men's and women's single game tickets, while some charged different prices for men's and women's season tickets. One college charged to attend the men's tournament games, but not the women's. Of the 15 colleges that charged different single game ticket prices, charged nothing to see the women's teams play, but charged for men's games. At another six colleges the price of the men's soccer ticket was \$1 more than the price of the women's soccer ticket. Such a small price difference cannot possibly reflect a true reckoning of consumer interest or value, so much as the reflexive belief that men are simply "worth" paying more to see.

It may not be possible to assess and evaluate the reasoning behind ticket pricing at colleges and universities. But the soccer pilot study offers a window into what appears to be a subjective approach to pricing based on institutional values and perceptions. What has not been studied, but can be intuited, is the pervasive damaging message that such differential pricing has on female athletes and larger goals of gender equality.

## **Discussion**

It is a popular, but faulty, argument that colleges charge less for women's basketball tickets than for men's basketball

tickets because they fail to draw comparable crowds. Our analysis shows that differences in ticket prices are not determined by differences in attendance. Nor do they respond to differences in the ranking of the teams. Colleges charge a premium for admission to see males play, even when women's basketball teams are ranked as among the very best performers in the nation.

The ticket price discrepancy exists in a broader cultural context and amid the growing popularity of college sports as mainstream entertainment. Interest in some NCAA events rivals that of popular sporting events,<sup>xxii</sup> a fact that has driven programs to maximize revenues in ways akin to professional teams. Given budget pressures faced by college athletic departments, it has been considered critical to maximize (or simply preserve) sources of fan support and revenue. This practice has put even more pressure on the revenues from men's football and men's basketball teams while also highlighting the risks of relying on those two sports for athletic department income. When marquee programs fail to draw the targeted number of fans, sponsorship dollars, or booster support, other programs are in jeopardy.

Although teams typically seek donors specific to their sports, heavy institutional reliance on football and men's basketball has limited development of a broader institutional and community base for college athletics. In other words, the high stakes strategy of relying on expensive sports programming can backfire in a tight economy, leading institutions to cut smaller, non-revenue-producing programs before they have

had a chance to cultivate fans and financial supporters. Teams recently vulnerable to elimination include baseball, lacrosse, track, volleyball, and soccer.<sup>xxiii</sup> Football and men's basketball survive because of deep institutional support and community, business, and alumni relationships fostered over time. Still, athletic departments are money-losing enterprises – and at all but a relative handful of programs, football loses money as well. But because football also brings in money, it is accorded a different status than non-revenue-producing sports. Thus, the ability to generate revenue – despite the large expenses incurred – is critical to a sport's status within the institutional setting. It is this internal calculus that makes football and men's basketball *appear* as quasi-professional sports – even when they are not profit-making ventures. Tight budgets remind us that high profile men's sports teams operate within educational settings. Further, it is critical to see that colleges *choose* to funnel energy, status, and promotional efforts to these teams which are not merely athletic teams, but are institutionally endowed as representatives of school identity. This role is bestowed as an institutional decision: these sports teams will serve as a chief vehicle for community, alumni, and fan cultivation and interface.

When this practice is overlaid on the very visible and public practice of pricing tickets for men's and women's basketball, it reveals a troubling institutional devaluation of women's play, and, by extension, women. In our examination of ticket pricing, it is worth noting some colleges' and universities' practice of charging a single general admission price to women's games while offering

highly differentiated tickets – and pricing – to men's games, even in the same arenas. At some colleges, for example, men's tickets are so highly differentiated that even courtside seats are priced differently according to how close to center court a chair is located. These seats may be part of ticket seating plans designed to court donors to pay for so-called “premium seating” which may require a club donation (sometimes at various levels) to gain the privilege of buying tickets. What's striking about this practice is that even colleges with less successful programs promote their men's basketball teams in this manner while few colleges court club supporters for their women's basketball teams, leaving one to wonder if institutional development offices are overlooking a key opportunity to reach female alumnae and promote gender equitable values.

### Conclusion

The passage of Title IX in 1972 opened doors of athletic opportunity, but did not demand equity. This is partly a matter of vision: no one could imagine at the time the law was passed the quality, talent and skill of the female athletes we see today. The cultural prohibition on aggressive female athletic play and a history of sports for women as a tool for gaining social skills – rather than leadership or competitive skills – situated women's athletics, including basketball, as a quasi-recreational activity. While male college sports have always been about school identity and the development of leadership skills (with values applicable in civic, business, and community life), it has been natural to colleges to promote booster support of teams as an almost patriotic (if not patri-

archal) allegiance to wholesome values and the development of young men.

Some argue that we watch men's athletics because men are, on average, bigger and stronger and they can run faster and jump higher. In basketball, they "play above the rim." But when we attend sporting events what we want to see is competition. No one stays to watch a blow-out, but everyone stays – rapt – for the three-pointer at the buzzer. Today one is just as likely to find compelling high-level competition and play at a women's game as at a men's game.

Further, the pricing of tickets at the college level is not a free market and is not a pure response to consumer demands. Rather, the pricing of tickets reflects a set of social values about the relative status of male and female athletes. As one ticket manager of a small Division I college stated, "It's just not *right* to charge \$5 to see men play basketball," by way of explaining why he was increasing the admission fee for the men's game but not the women's – even though neither team had particularly high attendance rates. (He stated that he was recently hired and that the \$5 men's ticket was in place before he arrived).

As non-profits and, in some cases, public institutions, colleges gain tangible financial and non-tangible benefits from their status. It seems reasonable that these institutions should seek fair ground in the pricing of tickets for men's and women's athletics. This may be particularly true for basketball, a sport with broad public recognition, news reportage, and game coverage (especially during the March Madness playoff tournament). The implications

for colleges are at once ethical and practical. There is need to better promote, support, and feature women's athletics as top quality sporting entertainment while doing so offers a chance to diversify revenue sources by broadening fan bases and drawing booster support from currently untapped sources. Ticket pricing, after all, is not just about paying for a seat, but is also about valuing the athletes on the floor, the fans in the stands – and female members of society who may never see a game.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Kearns, Jennifer. Division I Women's Basketball Games Pack the House. March 18, 2009. *NCAA News Release*. URL: <http://www.ncaa.org>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Women's Basketball Enjoys Attendance Increase. College Sports TV. January 28, 2009. URL: <http://www.cstv.com>.
- <sup>v</sup> Women's Basketball Opens 2009 MAAC Championships Thursday. *Press release*, March 2, 2009. Loyola athletics website. URL: <http://www.loyolagreyhounds.com/sports/w-baskbl/spec-rel/030209aaa.html>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Sutton, William A., McDonald, Mark A., Milne, George R., Cimperman, John. (1997). Creating and Fostering Fan Identification in Professional Sports. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. 6(1), 15-22.
- <sup>vii</sup> Winston, Gordon C. "Subsidies, Hierarchy and Peers: The Awkward Economics of Higher Education." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter 1999): 13-36.
- <sup>viii</sup> Winston, Gordon C., 15.
- <sup>ix</sup> Liu, Yong and Weinberg, Charles B. "Are Nonprofits Unfair Competitors for Business? An Analytic Approach." *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*. Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring 2004: 65-79.
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- <sup>xi</sup> Krueckeberg, Donald A. "Property Without Community: The (Frequent) Consequences of Tax Exemptions for Non-Profit Institutions" in *Private Property in the 21st Century: The Future of an American Ideal*. (Harvey Martin Jacobs, Ed.), Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing (2004): 125-142.
- <sup>xii</sup> Krueckeberg, 127.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Krueckeberg, 129.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Powers, Elia. "Ball's In the NCAA's Court." *Inside Higher Ed*. October 6, 2006. URL: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/10/06/ncaa>.
- <sup>xv</sup> Colombo, John D. "The NCAA, Tax Exemption, and College Athletics." *Illinois Public Law Research Paper No. 08-08*. February 19, 2009. URL: <http://ssm.com/abstract=1336727>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Pappano, Laura. The Price Gap Between Men's and Women's Basketball Tickets is Madness. *Christian Science Monitor*. April 3, 2009. URL: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0403/p09s02-coop.html>.
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<sup>xix</sup> These tests compare the mean of a distribution of scores (average) to a target value (1 for the ratio scores and 0 for the difference scores, both of which represent gender parity) and give the likelihood, or probability, that the target value comes from this distribution. In other words, the value of 1 may lie so far out in the tail of a distribution having a mean of, say, 20 as to be considered to be beyond the reasonable bounds of this distribution. We flag probability levels representing fewer than 5% of the population or 5 out of 100 ( $p < .05$ , represented by a single asterisk in the table), fewer than 1% or 1 out of 100 ( $p < .01$ , represented by two asterisks), and fewer than .1% or 1 out of a thousand ( $p < .001$ , represented by three asterisks) as points at which the target value is considered increasingly further “beyond the bounds.”

<sup>xx</sup> For these models, significance tests compare the estimate of the differential to a value of 0. To test for gender parity, one was subtracted from ratio values prior to the analysis to place parity at zero. Subsequent to the analysis, one was added to the intercept to reflect the original scale of the ratio value. No transformation was conducted for the seating level difference scores since zero reflects true gender parity.

<sup>xxi</sup> We conducted analyses controlling for both attendance and ranking differences but ranking had no independent effect over and above differences in attendance. We show the results for the “attendance only” models in Table 5.

<sup>xxii</sup> Pan, David W., Gabert, Trent E., McGaugh, Eric C., Branvold, Scott E. “Factors and Differential Demographic Effects on Purchase of Season Tickets for Intercollegiate Basketball Games.” *Journal of Sport Behavior*. Vol. 20, No. 4 (1997): 447-463.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Wolverton, Brad. “As Cutbacks Hit College Sports, Baseball Falls Behind in the Count.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 15, 2009 (Vol. LV, No. 36): A1.

## Appendix

**Table 3. Outliers of constructed variable distributions, removed from analyses.**

<u>Ratio Scores</u>		School	Men's	Women's	Difference
Top season ticket	135	UCLA	\$13,356.00	\$99.00	\$13,257.00
	148	Georgetown University	\$7,400.00	\$50.00	\$7,350.00
	241	University of Arizona	\$20,489.00	\$85.00	\$20,404.00
	>500	NC A&T State University	\$100.00	\$0.01	\$99.99
Bottom season ticket	22	UNC-Greensboro	\$1,120.00	\$50.00	\$1,070.00
	26	University of Nevada	\$180.00	\$7.00	\$173.00
	31	UNC-Chapel Hill	\$5,600.00	\$180.00	\$5,420.00
	89	Duke University	\$7,535.00	\$85.00	\$7,450.00
	>500	NC A&T State University	\$100.00	\$0.01	\$99.99
Top game ticket	15	University of Miami-FL	\$75.00	\$5.00	\$70.00
	17	Providence College	\$85.00	\$5.00	\$80.00
	30	Georgetown University	\$150.00	\$5.00	\$145.00
	>500	NC A&T State University	\$15.00	\$0.01	\$14.99
Bottom game ticket	>500	NC A&T State University	\$15.00	\$0.01	\$14.99
	>500	North Carolina State	\$25.00	\$0.01	\$24.99
<u>Difference Scores</u>					
Seating levels	16	University of Arizona	18	2	16
Average attendance	30	University of Memphis	16,748	558	16,190
Ranking	no outliers				

<sup>a</sup> To avoid dividing by zero, free admission was given a price of \$0.01.

**Table 4. Results of t-tests, no covariates (H0 value=1)<sup>a</sup>.**

	Differential		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Predicted Women's at Men's Mean			Predicted Women's at Highest Men's		
					Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference
Top season ticket price	10.56	***	8.28	251	\$1,134.15	\$107.38	\$1,026.77	\$20,489.00	\$1,939.86	\$18,549.14
Bottom season ticket price	3.01	***	11.99	251	\$225.13	\$74.77	\$150.36	\$7,535.00	\$2,502.49	\$5,032.51
Top game ticket price	2.67	***	15.28	284	\$21.55	\$8.08	\$13.47	\$150.00	\$56.24	\$93.76
Bottom game ticket price	2.03	***	14.00	286	\$12.77	\$6.28	\$6.49	\$55.00	\$27.04	\$27.96
Seating levels	1.56	***	14.07	284	3.61	2.05	1.56	50.00	48.44	1.56

\*\*\* p<.001

<sup>a</sup> Attendance and ranking were not included in these analyses but were used as covariates in subsequent models.

Note: The final sample size for each model is not given directly but can easily be computed (df + 1).

**Table 5. Results of regression analyses, controlling for differences in average game attendance.**

<u>Outcome Variables</u>	Attendance <sup>a</sup>		Adj. Diff <sup>b</sup>		Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	Predicted Women's at Men's Mean			Predicted Women's at Highest Men's		
						Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference
Top season ticket	1.56	***	2.55		0.09	\$1,134.15	\$444.59	\$689.56	\$20,489.00	\$8,031.75	\$12,457.25
Bottom season ticket	0.18	***	1.18	***	0.06	\$225.13	\$190.95	\$34.18	\$7,535.00	\$6,391.01	\$1,143.99
Top game ticket	0.18	***	0.88	***	0.12	\$21.55	\$24.41	-\$2.86	\$150.00	\$169.88	-\$19.88
Bottom game ticket	0.08	***	0.68	***	0.06	\$12.77	\$18.92	-\$6.15	\$55.00	\$81.48	-\$26.48
Seating levels	0.20	***	0.65	***	0.17	3.61	2.96	0.65	50.00	49.35	0.65

\*\*\* p<.001

<sup>a</sup> Regression coefficient associated with attendance.

<sup>b</sup> Covariate-adjusted differential.

**Table 6. Men’s and women’s team rankings in schools hosting the Top 25 women’s teams.**

School	Women’s team ranking	Men’s team ranking
University of Tennessee - Knoxville	1	3
University of Connecticut	2	23
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	3	2
Rutgers, State U of NJ, New Brunswick	4	236
Stanford University	5	16
University of Maryland -- College Park	6	91
Louisiana State University	7	191
Texas A&M University - College Station	8	41
Old Dominion University	9	115
Duke University	10	9
University of Louisville	11	10
Baylor University	12	52
University of Notre Dame	13	30
University of Oklahoma	14	34
Vanderbilt University	15	17
University of Virginia	16	149
University of Pittsburgh	17	18
University of Texas - El Paso	18	114
Oklahoma State University	19	95
Kansas State University	20	53
West Virginia University	21	28
UCLA	22	98
George Washington University	23	194
University of Texas - Austin	24	6

**Table 7. Results of t-tests, no covariates (H0 value=1): Women's Top 25 only.**

					Women's Ticket Price/Seating Levels at Men's Average			Women's Ticket Price/Seating Levels at Men's Highest Level		
	Ratio/Diff		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference
Top season ticket price	11.69	**	3.56	23	\$2,516.20	\$215.18	\$2,301.02	\$13,356.00	\$1,142.15	\$12,213.85
Bottom season ticket price	3.65	***	4.45	22	\$824.52	\$226.20	\$598.32	\$7,535.00	\$2,067.16	\$5,467.84
Top game ticket price	3.35	***	5.52	24	\$35.34	\$10.55	\$24.79	\$90.00	\$26.86	\$63.14
Bottom game ticket price	3.12	***	6.24	24	\$24.38	\$7.82	\$16.56	\$45.00	\$14.43	\$30.57
Seating levels	1.40	**	3.66	24	3.92	2.52	1.40	9.00	7.60	1.40

\*\* p<.01

\*\*\* p<.001





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