

# Sports law could even the score for women in science

When Harvard president Lawrence Summers said in January that innate differences might account for the low numbers of women in science, he didn't just anger advocates of gender equality—he also energized them. Some have begun wielding a powerful US law that bars sex discrimination in education.

One group has gathered 6,000 scientists' signatures to support using the 1972 law, dubbed Title IX, to address gender discrimination on campuses. Members of the Association for Women in Science, Society of Women Engineers and other organizations plan to deliver the signatures in May to US Senators Ron Wyden and George Allen, who have in the past held hearings on women in science.

Title IX is best known for increasing funding for women's sports, but it also addresses discrimination in employment, admissions and other areas. The law could be used to require institutions to examine—and correct—gender bias in hiring and allocation of resources such as lab space, says Jocelyn Samuels, a Title IX expert at the National Women's Law Center in Washington, DC.

The General Accounting Office (GAO), a government oversight agency, last year examined four federal agencies including the US National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Department of Energy. These agencies should ensure that those who receive funds from them



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**Fair play:** A law known for its impact on women's sports may create equal opportunities in science.

comply with the law, the GAO suggested.

"The laws are on the books ... they are just not being used," says Donna Nelson, a chemistry professor at the University of Oklahoma who also studies diversity in science.

Samuels says it might require action by the US Congress—or a high-profile lawsuit—to have Title IX fully applied to the sciences. In the meantime, the GAO report may change how the NSF administers grants.

"NSF is taking that report seriously, there may be compliance reviews coming down the line," says Alice Hogan, director of ADVANCE, an NSF program that provides \$19 million in grants each year to address institutional barriers to women's scientific advancement.

A report due out at the end of the year by the National Academy of Sciences may provide yet more impetus. The academy is examining Title IX compliance in tenure, hiring, promotion and resource allocation at 89 universities. Another report by the RAND Corporation will examine gender differences in granting decisions at a few US science agencies and is expected this summer.

A Supreme Court decision in April may also support efforts to boost Title IX. That decision held that retaliation against people who complain about Title IX violations is illegal.

These reports may bring more attention to the issue, but some advocates say many institutions already have the information they need to move ahead. "We have studied this problem to death, we have analysis paralysis," says Nelson. "I think many women are ready for some action."

But the stir around Summers' comments has undoubtedly renewed interest in the topic on campuses. "It's given us more focus and credibility," says Sue Rosser, a dean at the Georgia Institute of Technology and co-principal investigator on the ADVANCE grant there.

Meanwhile, Summers has expressed contrition for his remarks and since charged two task forces to look into the status of women at Harvard—those reports are expected in May.

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