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Agency and the Development of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics in Ontario: Equity and Autonomy

Women's athletic programs in Ontario traditionally combined educational, social, and competitive notions. Recently, competition for elite athletes has received emphasis over traditional notions of wide participation and athletics as one aspect of development of the whole person. Women's intercollegiate programs have steadily increased in number and participation, and championship competitions have been modeled on those of men's programs. Competition has been linked with notions of "equality." Yet "equality" has been achieved at a price, elitism along the lines of male athletics and a loss of women's autonomy in the governance of athletic programs. Women physical educators of an earlier period have been criticized for yielding to prevailing notions of women's physical inferiorities.

However, there is another way to look at their efforts – one that avoids re-victimization. That is to recognize the agency of women athletes and educators in developing vital athletic programs for university women as a whole. As pioneers in a harsh environment, they faced under funding, institutional obstacles, and general social bias. Nevertheless, they conducted programs, maintained autonomy and gradually brought women athletics to a higher level (e.g. changing "girls rules" in basketball and abandoning dowdy uniforms). Present programs are based on initiatives of many individual women of the past. Once again, in the 1990s it has been women on campus who have formed intramural teams in traditional men's sports as rugby, wrestling, and ice hockey. Their initiatives led to nationally sanctioned competition in these sports.
