

Vivian Barfield, Assistant Director of Athletics: Title IX and the Fight Against Discrimination in Sports

Context

This collection of documents from the Vivian Barfield Papers helps students and teachers to explore:

- Second-wave feminist movements and gender discrimination in the 1970s
- Using office memos and institutional papers as a source of historical evidence

Introduction

Several of Barfield's letters contain language that betrays her anger and frustration with the Athletics Department, but many of the documents do not. Nevertheless, both kinds of documents provide important information about the series of events that eventually lead to Barfield's resignation. With advanced students, the collection as a whole can be used to approximate the work of professional historians: reconstructing, with little or no background information, the events that took place during Barfield's tenure at UMass, and assessing why, or whether, the events are significant.

Another approach to the collection is to provide students with more background information and use selected documents, such as McInerney's May 17, 1976, letter to Barfield, or newspaper interviews with Barfield, to expand students' understanding of workplace discrimination in the 1970s and the kind of challenges second-wave feminists faced.

Background Information for Students

Before beginning their analysis of this document collection, students should review women's movements from throughout twentieth-century American history, such as suffragettes and the right to vote; working women and work in WWI and WWII; first-wave feminism in the 1950s. Pose the question: by the 1970s, what battles remained for women to fight? Ask students whether they think of the 1970s as a time in which women were discriminated against, or treated differently on the basis of gender. Frame the exploration of documents from the Barfield collection as an answer to this question.

Discussion

For advanced students, begin the discussion by noting only that Barfield served as the first female Assistant Director of Athletics at UMass Amherst from 1975 to 1976. Then distribute copies of the entire document collection to individuals or groups of students, and ask them to answer the following questions:

- Why was Vivian Barfield hired by the University of Massachusetts Amherst?
- Why did Frank McInerney renew Barfield's contract in May 1976, but recommend that that eighteen-month contract be terminal?
- Why did Barfield resign from her position in July 1976?

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Discussion (continued)

Give students ample time to examine the document collection before reconvening the class. Guide the discussion to establish a chronology of events based on the documents. Then ask students to comment on their own reactions to the documents: were Barfield's charges of male bias and paternalism in the Department of Athletics justified? What did McInerney hope to accomplish by recommending her contract be terminal?

Assignments and Additional Discussion Questions

- Use McInerney's open memo to Barfield about her decision to speak to the local press, and his May 17, 1976 letter, sent to Barfield at her home, to discuss Barfield's charges of paternalism. Ask students to consider whether McInerney would have written to a male employee about “using the media to discuss personal-professional problems” or “what it must be like to leave family, friends, [and] a Southwestern (USA) culture.” Prompt students to consider not only McInerney's tone, but also the fact that his memo was distributed to the entire department. Compare McInerney's memo on the media to the news stories to which he is reacting, and ask students to consider whether his response was in line with the articles.
- Review Barfield's letter to the June 29, 1976 letter to the School Grievance Committee. Despite her obvious anger and frustration with the Department of Athletics, Barfield establishes her grievances in terms of procedural violations, rather than claiming that she has been the victim of gender discrimination. Why might Barfield use this approach? What does Barfield's approach suggest about the challenges of “proving” gender discrimination?
- Compare Barfield's letter to the School Grievance Committee with her resignation letter, addressed to David Bischoff. Ask students to speculate on the difference in tone of the two letters. What changed for Barfield between late June and late July 1976?