

The WNBA and Graduation Rates  
of Female Basketball Players

by

Elizabeth T. Knopman  
Paul M. Sommers

September, 2006

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE ECONOMICS DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 06-11



Department of Economics  
Middlebury College  
Middlebury, Vermont 05753  
[psommers@middlebury.edu](mailto:psommers@middlebury.edu)

JEL #: I20, L83

## **The WNBA and Graduation Rates of Female Basketball Players**

L. DeBrock [“The economics of persistence: graduation rates of athletes as labor market choice,” *Journal of Human Resources*, Summer 1996] found that professional opportunities have a significant (negative) impact on the graduation rates of male football and basketball players. At the time, however, there was no professional alternative for women basketball players. Since the Women’s National Basketball Association’s (WNBA’s) inception in 1997, one might wonder what (if any) effect the arrival of women’s professional basketball has had on the graduation rates of (i) black, (ii) white, and (iii) all women basketball players at the 64 schools invited to the 2005 Women’s NCAA Basketball Tournament. We then examine the before-and-after graduation rates of all women basketball players at each of the 32 NCAA Division I-A athletic conferences and the 25 winningest teams over the period 1998-2003.

The NCAA publishes graduation rates for all students by sports team ([www.ncaa.org/grad\\_rates](http://www.ncaa.org/grad_rates)). The NCAA report for the year 2000 (2005) provides the four-class average graduation rate for female basketball players from the incoming classes of 1990 through 1993 (1995 through 1998) and who would have graduated before (after) the WNBA’s inaugural season. We ran a series of paired *t*-tests on the difference between the before-and-after-WNBA mean graduation rates. Graduation rates for female basketball players would be expected to fall if the WNBA offers sufficiently higher returns from immediate entry into the labor market.

For all 64 aforementioned schools, there were no differences between average graduation rates before or since the inception of the WNBA (blacks,  $p = .555$ ; whites,  $p = .162$ ; and all women basketball players,  $p = .792$  for a one-tailed test.) Among the 25 winningest teams over the period 1998-2003, there were no differences between average graduation rates (blacks,  $p = .569$ ; whites,  $p = .684$ ; and all women basketball players,  $p = .647$ ). And, of the 32 NCAA athletic conferences, in only three – the Horizon League ( $p = .002$ ), the Mid-American

Conference ( $p = .005$ ), and the Missouri Valley Conference ( $p = .042$ ) – did average graduation rates for all women basketball players fall after the WNBA came into existence.

The recent arrival of women's professional basketball has had (with few exceptions) little effect on the probability of graduation among women basketball players. Even among the winningest teams in women's basketball whose athletes have the best chance of playing the sport professionally, the WNBA has not lowered female basketball graduation rates.