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Submitted by Greta Anderson on June 1, 2020 - 3:00am

“A betrayal” is how athletes at [Brown University](#),^[1] described the decision by senior administrators to cut nearly a dozen varsity teams from the institution's roster of athletics programs. The athletes were even more infuriated that they got the news in a brief video call with the university's athletic director, who explained that the decision was being made to propel the competitive success of other Brown teams.

“We feel like we’ve just been burned by the athletics department, as if we’re not ‘excellent’ enough,” said Lauren Reischer, a rising senior who is on the equestrian team, the Brown Bears. She derided the logic behind the university’s athletic restructuring plan, called the [Excellence in Brown Athletics Initiative](#) ^[2].

“Is it possible that we’re misinterpreting what they mean by ‘excellence’?” Reischer asked.

The plan completely reshapes Brown athletics, eliminating 11 varsity sports and promoting two others to varsity status. University officials said the move will increase its competitiveness in the Ivy League, but athletes whose programs were cut said they were completely blindsided by the decision. And some people in the collegiate sports community are questioning if the decision will diminish racial and socioeconomic diversity in the university's athletic programs over all.

Brown had 38 varsity athletic programs, the third most in the nation, but earned the fewest number of championship titles in the Ivy League between 2008 and 2018, according to a [press release announcing the decision](#) [3]. The high number of sports programs has “hindered our ability to fully achieve” one of the main goals of Brown athletics: to be successful in competition with Ivy League peers, President Christina Paxson said in an email to Brown students and staff members on May 28.

“While many of us have seen recent announcements about [reductions in athletics programs](#) [4] at other universities in the wake of novel coronavirus, this initiative at Brown is not a measure to reduce budget or an effort to contend with the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic,” Paxson said. “Rather, it’s an opportunity to invest even further in advancing excellence in our full lineup of sports programs.”

After a university committee of Brown alumni reviewed the university's athletic competitiveness and other factors, such as diversity and inclusion, roster sizes, and the quality of facilities, it concluded it was no longer viable for the university to support certain sports, the press release said. The cuts included men's and women's fencing, golf, and squash, women's skiing, women's equestrian and men's track and field and cross-country, which is considered three separate programs for the purpose of counting equal athletic opportunities for men and women under Title IX, the law prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded institutions. The women's and coed sailing teams, which were previously club sports, were promoted to the varsity level, after considering Brown's location in Providence, R.I., which has "one of the best sailing bays in the country," Paxson said.

Brown will continue to recruit the same number of athletes, and the athletic department will see no budget reduction, the press release said. But cutting the number of varsity programs will allow operating expenses from the removed sports to be "allocated strategically" elsewhere in the athletic department, Brian Clark, assistant vice president for news and editorial development, said in an email. The primary purpose of the restructuring is to streamline athletics resources into the most promising programs.

“It’s a strategic opportunity to invest even further in advancing excellence in Brown’s full lineup of sports programs,” Clark said. “There will be no budget reduction or savings, and that’s intentional.”

A statement from the Ivy League, the intercollegiate athletic conference in which Brown's teams compete, said the league “recognizes the various considerations that led to the difficult decisions” to restructure Brown’s athletic department.

“Brown continues to offer one of the most broad-based athletics programs in the country with 29 varsity teams and shares the league’s commitment to providing a world-class academic and athletic experience for student-athletes,” the statement said.

The university will support the transition of some varsity sports into club organizations, some of which already exist for golf, running, skiing and squash, the press release said. Reischer said the reality for equestrian is it’s “almost impossible” for it to succeed as a club sport without financial backing from the university.

Reischer has cerebral palsy and never imagined she'd have the opportunity to ride competitively in college, much less compete in any Division I sport. She was thrilled to be able to do so at Brown, which she called an “anomaly to the rest

of the horse world” because it offered equestrian as a full varsity sport [5].

“I’ve
gone
on to



competitions. Lauren Reischer, of the Bears' equestrian team, competing during a recent semester. People's Reischer said. “That basically changed my life ... It’s so rare to see disabled people in college athletics at the Division I level.”

To have that experience taken away was a “devastating blow,” she said.

Like Reischer, Kevin Boyce, a rising senior on the men’s track and field team, doesn’t consider transferring to another college to compete as a viable option. Boyce and other athletes in men’s track and field have launched a campaign to convince the university to reinstate their team; they started a petition on Change.org [6] that had nearly 25,000 signatures as of May 31.

Boyce said the athletes won't accept moving their sport to club status. "That's not the level we compete at," he said.

"We've proven that we deserve to be a varsity sport at this school," Boyce said. "It's hard because we've been here for three years. That's a lot to ask us to transfer and start all over. Now we have to be forced to choose. It's hurtful and brings tears to my eyes and makes me so upset and angry."

Kobina Johnson, a 2020 Brown graduate and men's track and field athlete, and others [7], noted on Twitter that Brown chose to eliminate one of the more racially diverse teams in its athletic programming, and he questioned the impact that would have on the university's diversity efforts. Diversity and inclusion, particularly as it relates to gender equity in sport, was one of the main tenets in the restructuring plan, the university press release said.

Johnson, who is black, said it seemed hypocritical that Brown values having a diverse campus but cut one of the more diverse athletic programs.



Kobi Johnson
@kobij20

Brown consistently lets me down, but nothing has ever hurt as much as [@BrownAthletics](#) decision to cut Men's Track and Field. This decision makes absolutely no sense given that the program is not only one of the most successful ones but also one of the most diverse. I'm disgusted

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37 people are talking about this

“In terms of the socioeconomic diversity, track and field and cross country are the most accessible sports for low-income families,” Johnson said. “All you really need to get started is a pair of shoes.”

Clark said that while track and field and cross country are more racially diverse on average, they are not Brown’s most diverse athletic programs -- those include football, basketball and soccer. Diversity was one of the considerations made by the committee reviewing options to improve Brown’s athletic department, and the changes made will maintain the 20 percent of athletes who come from historically underrepresented groups, Clark said.

“While it’s difficult to predict whether the diversity of each team will remain the same over time, the revision of the lineup of varsity sports would maintain historically underrepresented groups’ representation at similar levels,” Clark said. “The same is true for representation in varsity athletics of students with high financial need.”

Ellen Staurowsky, a sport management professor at Drexel University and expert on social justice issues in college sports, said the questions about how the restructuring will impact racial diversity of Brown athletics are “worth asking.” Track and field is one National Collegiate Athletic Association sport that does have higher levels of racial

diversity than others, whereas sailing is a primarily white sport.

“If you have a team that was racially diverse, and that team gets cut, then we might anticipate that there’s potentially a disparate impact on their ability to gain access to education there,” Staurowsky said of Brown. “These are important questions to raise. As painful as this moment is, it’s very important to engage people who are being impacted around these issues and help them all understand it.”

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Links

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/college/217156/brown-university>

[2] <https://athletics-excellence.brown.edu/initiative>

[3] <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-05-28/athletics-excellence>

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/24/financial-crisis-related-coronavirus-hits-athletic-departments>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/01/despite-downsizing-few-campuses-college-equestrian-programs-riding-high>

[6] <https://www.change.org/p/brown-university-department-of-athletics-retain-brown-men-s-track-field-s-varsity-status?>

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[7] <https://twitter.com/letsrundotcom/status/1266200260185120768>

[8] https://twitter.com/BrownAthletics?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

[9] https://twitter.com/kobij20/status/1266083043342778368?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

