Old Dominion University celebrates its pioneering role in addressing the landmark federal gender equity legislation known as Title IX, noting with pride that it was among the first universities in the country to offer scholarships for female student-athletes (Brydges et al., 2000). Basketball stars such as Nancy Lieberman and Ann Donovan played for the university in Norfolk, Virginia, helping the Lady Monarchs win three national titles in a seven-year span, starting in 1979. In fact, female athletes have been responsible for most of the University’s 28 national championships. Credit for the accomplishment has been given to the University for its early and enthusiastic adoption of the tenets of Title IX, including in official histories published by Old Dominion (Minium, 2002; Sweeney, 1980).

What the popular portrayal of Old Dominion as a trailblazer misses is the internal struggle over gender-equity issues within the University at the time Title IX was being implemented. A 1975 letter discovered in the Old Dominion University Archives and Special Collections provides unique insight into that conflict, and offers an opportunity to analyze the University’s commitment to gender equity through both a historical and modern lens.

On May 6, 1977 the University published its official response to Title IX in UNews, the official University newsletter (“Title IX report,” 1977). The report, along with Old Dominion’s progress made in complying with Title IX legislation, was published verbatim at the order of University President Alfred Rollins (Rollins, 1999). This response, in fact, was not solely proactive. The ODU Women’s Caucus was co-founded 1974 by Carolyn H. Rhodes, associate professor of English. Rhodes’ correspondence in the Archives suggests ODU was dragged, somewhat reluctantly, to its position of eagerly embracing equal rights and opportunities for women, notably before Rollins assumed his role as University president (Rhodes, 2009). In a June, 1975 letter best described as comprehensive and scathing Rhodes accused ODU administrators, notably President James Bugg and Provost Charles O. Burgess, of a “history of delays and denials” about three years of efforts by the Women’s Caucus for attention to be paid to the issue (Rhodes, 1975).

The letter by Rhodes provides a unique avenue through which to investigate Title IX at Old Dominion University, both in a historical and modern context. The letter itself offers a front-row view to the main fronts of friction between advocates of gender-equity and the University 40 years ago — employment equity, salary equity, equity of opportunity. Today, Title IX is a sport-specific legislation in its popular portrayal. However, the arguments put forward in the Rhodes letter have been articulated in the decades of legal challenges to Title IX, as well as claims from advocates that female participants in higher education have not yet achieved full equality. Therefore a modern-day Title IX comparison was undertaken for this study.

A hermeneutical analysis of the 40-year-old Rhodes letter informed the creation of a line of questions for six women who work in leadership roles at Old Dominion University today. A directed content analysis was conducted of their responses, identifying Title IX-related themes pertaining to fairness of treatment, access, and opportunity. Then the analysis was then reflected back on the Rhodes letter by way of comparison. The researchers were interested in what has changed, and what negative perceptions remain, of the University’s willingness to support and promote gender equity under Title IX. The issue of Title IX compliance for colleges and universities has been examined as an extension of different strains of feminist theory, including liberal feminism (Burke, 2005; Paule-Koba, Harris, & Freysinger, 2013). Liberal feminist theory suggests that females working within the structure of the college and university setting can effect real change (Jaggar, 1983).

It is no secret that life is different in 2015 than it was in 1975. University student populations are more than 50 percent female nationwide; faculty percentages are nearing gender parity as well. The battles being fought by Rhodes
are simply different, both in tone and in content, than the issues being tackled by modern-day gender-equity advocates. However, analysis of the themes being articulated shows strong similarity between the issues of 2015 and 1975. Modern day advocates are still seeking consideration of their concerns in a respectful fashion, they are still eager to forge relationships to work collaboratively on solving gender-equity issues, and they have concern about the future of these issues in a rapidly changing environment for higher education. In that way, though this study is confined to a then-and-now analysis of gender equity issues at Old Dominion, the themes are universal. It would be instructive for any institution faced with effective, ongoing implementation of Title IX protocols to learn from discussions a generation ago.

Exploring the words of Rhodes and the modern-day University leaders through a liberal feminist framework, you find seven individuals working diligently from within to impart meaningful change through their actions. The limitations of liberal feminism in effecting real change, because the advocacy occurs within existing male-dominated power structures (Brake, 2010), is present in the words of some female officials, who worry about rocking the boat by advocating too aggressively. But the contact and access that working within an organization is also seen in the words of both Rhodes, and the modern-day subjects. It is their relationship with administrators, former athletic director Jim Jarrett and the current university president that allows for frank discussion, and airing of grievances. The limitations in making gravitational change from within expressed by the modern-day administrators (yet ironically, not Carolyn Rhodes). However, 40 years of incremental changes can add up to a climate generally portrayed as more positive.