Viewpoint
Changing the Game
By Caitlin Morris & Nicole M. Lavoi

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Changing the Game

A collaboration between Nike and the Tucker Center taught us about how to keep girls in sports and how to get more from cross-sector partnerships.

BY CAITLIN MORRIS & NICOLE M. LAVOI

Play is innate and necessary for children. However, only one in five kids gets the physical activity necessary to thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic further reduced kids’ access to physical activity and sports, highlighting this growing problem. These trends have serious implications for kids’ overall development, health, and well-being.

This problem is even more pressing for girls, especially those from underserved and marginalized communities. Fewer girls participate in sports compared with boys, and the World Health Organization estimates that more than 75 percent of 11- to 17-year-old girls fail to get enough physical activity. Research further shows that girls enter sports later, drop out earlier, and leave at higher rates than boys.

To address this problem, Nike partnered with the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota (Tucker Center). After three years of working together, we created Coaching HER, a free, online, evidence-informed, global tool to train coaches on how best to support girls in sports. It is an industry-first coaching tool designed for any coach, in any sport, at any level. Informed by new data from coaches and girls around the world, Coaching HER is girl-focused, gender-responsive, and grounded in the recognition that girls experience the world differently, face additional barriers, and are treated differently than boys simply because they are girls.

Our experience working together taught us a lot about the potential and challenges of cross-sector partnerships in addressing social problems. Successful cocreation depends on bringing diverse and complementary groups of experts, industry leaders, and local communities together and leveraging their respective strengths. Our joint effort produced insights that can help organizations aspiring to pursue similar collaborations.

In the process of developing Coaching HER, we specifically identified five strategies from our successful collaboration, which may serve as a resource for other organizations looking to embark on a similar journey of cocreation.

First, pinpoint the problem and identify your greatest leverage point. The patterns of girls’ physical activity and sports participation raised several pressing questions for us: Why are girls not as active? What are the systemic factors that lead to higher dropout rates for girls? And how can these be addressed?

WORKING TOGETHER
To tackle these questions, we delved deeply into the problem. In 2018, the Tucker Center produced a report, Developing Physically Active Girls: An Evidence-based Multidisciplinary Approach. The research pointed to numerous socio-ecological factors that affect girls’ relationships with and participation in sports through adolescence (11 to 17 years old). It looked at systemic barriers ranging from social beliefs to interpersonal interactions, including relationships with coaches, peers, and parents.

A trend emerged: Coaches are a primary and salient influence in a girl’s sport experience. Same-identity role models matter greatly, yet fewer than 24 percent of youth coaches in the United States are female-identifying. Girls need coaches to create welcoming, supportive, and safe environments to help them thrive, especially when they enter puberty. Unfortunately, coaches are often undertrained and lack confidence to address a host of issues, such as gender stereotypes, gender identities, and ways to support girls and their unique needs in sport.

Second, set clear goals together. From the start, our overarching aim was to create systemic change for women and girls in sport, and we knew that each of us could not achieve that goal alone.

To determine how to better equip coaches to support girls in sport, we formulated three goals together that would guide our partnership. First, we would ground our work in the research, build on organizational contributions and strengths, and partner with organizations that were equally committed to creating impact. Second, we would develop evidence-based tools for coaches and girls to help reduce gender stereotypical beliefs and create a positive environment for girls in sport. Third, we would get the tools in the hands of coaches around the world to shift the environment not just for girls, but for coaches themselves.

Third, leverage the strengths of both sides. A successful academic-industry partnership can ensure a rigorous process in development that leverages the strengths of both. Academics provide multidisciplinary and unique perspectives of an industry at large, along with access to a network of faculty, thought leaders, and social science researchers. Meanwhile, corporations can bring added resources, experience creating products and solutions for consumers, brand influence, and a deep knowledge of the market.

Cocreation and a culture of mutual learning is the backbone of Coaching HER. Nike’s global commitment to getting more girls to participate and remain ac-
Feedback from coaches indicated that boy athletes were the physical, social, and psychological standard and norm with which girls were often compared, judged, and evaluated.

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