



Obituaries

Bernice Sandler, 'godmother of Title IX' who championed women's rights on campus, dies at 90

By [Emily Langer](#)

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In 1969, her newly earned doctorate in hand, Bernice Sandler was hoping to land one of seven open teaching positions in her department at the University of Maryland. When she learned she had been considered for none of them, she asked a male colleague about the oversight. “Let’s face it,” was his reply. “You come on too strong for a woman.”

When she applied for another academic position, the hiring researcher remarked that he didn’t hire women because they too often stayed home with sick children. Later, an employment agency reviewed her résumé and dismissed her as “just a housewife who went back to school.”

Dr. Sandler had run head first into a problem that had only recently been given a name: sex discrimination. Knowing she was not alone, she embarked on a campaign that would change the culture on college campuses — and eventually the law with the passage in 1972 of Title IX, the landmark legislation that banned sex discrimination in federally funded educational institutions.

Dr. Sandler, who was widely celebrated as the godmother of Title IX, died Jan. 5 at her home in Washington. She was 90. The cause was cancer, said her daughter Deborah Sandler.

Trained in psychology and counseling, Dr. Sandler devoted decades of her life to documenting, analyzing and stopping the forms of discrimination — subtle and overt — that held women back academically and professionally in educational settings.

When she began her advocacy efforts, many university departments arbitrarily limited the number of women they would hire. Others hired no women at all. Some disqualified married women. Some colleges barred female students from chemistry and other departments that were deemed more suited for men.

Dr. Sandler investigated and found that there was no federal law prohibiting discrimination against women in educational fields. There was, however, an executive order signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson that prohibited sex discrimination by organizations with federal contracts.

“It was a genuine ‘Eureka’ moment,” she later recalled in an [account](#) of her work. “I actually shrieked aloud for I immediately realized that many universities and colleges had federal contracts, were therefore subject to the sex discrimination provisions of the Executive Order, and that the Order could be used to fight sex discrimination on American campuses.”

Dr. Sandler joined the Women’s Equity Action League and, as the one-member Federal Action Contract Compliance Committee, challenged 250 educational institutions for alleged sex discrimination. She also

coordinated a letter-writing campaign that, by her account, “generated so much Congressional mail that the Departments of Labor, and Health, Education and Welfare had to assign several full-time personnel to handle the letters.”

According to the National Women’s Hall of Fame, where Dr. Sandler was [inducted](#) in 2013, her efforts led to the first federal investigation of sex discrimination on campuses.

She worked for a House subcommittee with oversight of the matter and for the Health, Education and Welfare Department as momentum grew, culminating with passage of Title IX. Its chief legislative champions included Rep. Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) and Sen. Birch Bayh (D-Ind.). Today, Title IX is widely known as the guarantor of equal access to collegiate athletics.

For decades after the law was passed, Dr. Sandler continued her activism for gender equality in the classroom. As a speaker and author, she sought to draw attention to what she and a fellow researcher, Roberta M. Hall, in a widely read 1982 academic paper termed the “chilly” classroom environment for women.

Female professors, she found, were more likely than male professors to be challenged on their credentials. Those with PhDs were not consistently addressed as “Dr.,” and students expected greater leniency from women when they failed to complete their assignments.

Female students, for their part, were more likely to receive an “uh-huh” from a professor when they participated in class, rather than the more engaged response that might greet a male student.

“When Title IX was passed I was quite naive,” Dr. Sandler said. “I thought all the problems of sex discrimination in education would be solved in one or two years at most. When two years passed, I increased my estimate to five years, then later to ten, then to fifty, and now I realize it will take many generations to solve all the problems.”

Bernice Resnick — she went by Bunny — was born in New York City on March 3, 1928. Her parents ran a women’s clothing store in New Jersey.

Sexist practices, she recalled, seemed practically part of the natural order of the world. “When I applied to college it was openly known that women needed higher grades and test scores in order to be accepted,” she recalled in a [history](#) of Title IX. “No one complained — it was just the way things were,”

She received a bachelor’s degree from Brooklyn College in 1948 and a master’s degree from the City College of New York in 1950, both in psychology, and a PhD in counseling from the University of Maryland in 1969.

Dr. Sandler spent two decades as the director of the Project on the Status and Education of Women at the Association of American Colleges until she stepped down in 1991. She later held associations with institutions including the Center for Women Policy Studies in Washington and was a sought-after witness in discrimination and sexual harassment cases. As an activist, she also highlighted the danger of rape on campuses.

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Bernice Sandler, godmother of Title IX who championed women's rights on campus, dies at 90. The Washington Post
Dr. Sandler's marriage to Jerrold Sandler ended in divorce. Survivors include two daughters, Deborah Sandler of Martinez, Calif., and Emily Sanders of Los Angeles; and three grandchildren.

Later in her career, Dr. Sandler explored the “chilly” environment on campus that greeted minorities much as it greeted women. Interviewed in 1994 by the publication Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education, she reflected on the rejection that sent her on a path of advocacy.

“I don’t think I would have noticed if they’d said you come on too strong,” she said. The problem was that phrase “too strong for a woman.”


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Emily Langer

Emily Langer is a reporter on The Washington Post’s obituaries desk. She writes about extraordinary lives in national and international affairs, science and the arts, sports, culture, and beyond. She previously worked for the Outlook and Local Living sections. [Follow](#) 

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