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College Males: Keeping Them Engaged on Your Campus

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Achieving Successful Outcomes with Male Students: A Challenge to Student Affairs Leaders

There has been much discussion in the popular media over the last few years to the effect that there is a "crisis" with regard to men in higher education. There have been several angles in these reports, including arguments suggesting that men are declining in student ranks, or that women are outpacing their male counterparts. In any case, these reports have asked questions about where the men are if not in college; and what will be the consequences of this problem in terms of the workforce, families, or the potential nature and future of higher education. One could easily be both intrigued and concerned by the fact that (not unlike a number of other issues facing higher education) the conversation is being led by individuals and organizations generally outside higher education itself (e.g. governments and media).

Most readers will likely be at institutions that see the effects of this topic, such as significant and growing differences in enrollments between men and women, often including in majors historically dominated by men. On the one hand, this is a testament to the positive and steadfast efforts made over the past several decades to nurture learning and aspiration in girls and women. Indeed, there is much to celebrate in this regard. Despite the seemingly obvious value of incorporating a gendered lens in educational efforts, very few campuses or Higher Education organizations have engaged in a critical introspection about what it would take to recruit and retain male students; or to foster their development as people generally and men in particular. This bottom line will be discussed in this article, including what SSAOs can do to lead their colleagues and staff in this regard. But first, it is necessary to discuss some contextual dimensions of these issues and questions, so that successful strategic responses can be crafted in an informed manner.

It should also be noted that despite larger proportions of women enrolled in, and graduating from college, these women still arrive on campuses where men are significantly overrepresented in policy violations, violence, sexual assault, bias-motivated harm to others, vandalism, and other dangerous, disruptive and/or hurtful behaviors. In short, the large and growing female enrollment doesn't necessarily translate to an improved campus climate for women—which is not only a retention and success issue, but a broad ethical one as well. This is important to think about, because it not only reminds us of the obligations we have to address climate issues, but it suggests that focusing on male engagement and development is not only good for men, but also for women. Since the majority of men generally, and male students in particular do not engage in negative and threatening behaviour, there is much to learn about and from successful and engaged male students in terms of how to build capacity in the men at risk of dropping out, being suspended, or hurting themselves or others to choose or be directed to a more positive and successful path. Student Affairs is in an ideal position to lead an institutional commitment to resolving the issues discussed in this article. The oft-repeated adage, "If you keep doing what you're doing you'll keep getting

what you're getting" seems appropriate to invoke here. So, before discussing what to do next, it is critical to reflect on how the field and its members think about male students so we can understand the challenges in transforming our work to pursue a more hopeful path.

This author's own dissertation examined, from a critical gendered lens, the socialization (e.g. graduate studies, staff training, professional association involvements, departmental/divisional discussions, supervisory experiences, etc.) of new professionals in Student Affairs and in turn, how they make meaning of male students. Residence Hall Directors were interviewed because they represent perhaps the most generalist and proximal (e.g. living and working directly with students and supervising student peer leaders) professionals in the field. When asked whether men were discussed in any of the touch-points of their professional socialization mentioned in parentheses above, the answers were consistent. In short, with rare exception these professionals could not recall any reading, training or discussion about men's gender identity development. Instead, there were some assertions by these young professionals to the effect that since seminal theory was derived from (White) male subjects, this was unnecessary. This has not been seen as a controversial viewpoint. Indeed most of the research and resulting innovations over the last several decades have focused on specific subpopulations other than men, or at least other than Caucasian men.   However, the initial assertion about what we "already know" has only recently been critically reviewed. We are beginning to understand that such early studies generalized "students" from male subjects, but these students were not studied AS MEN. Meth and Pasick (1990) put it this way: "Although psychological writing has been androcentric [male-centered], it has also been gender blind and it has assumed a male perspective but has not really explored what it means to be a man any more than what it means to be a woman" (vii). In short, just because some of the famous and familiar names of founders in our field used men in their studies, precious little is offered in the theoretical models to explain men or their development.

The field of Student Affairs is predicated on at least three notions. First, that to be effective in promoting students' growth, learning, and success, it is first necessary to understand them. Second, that this field does understand students and is thus expert in their identity development (cognitive, psychosocial, and otherwise). And third, the field asserts that it is effective in this regard. With every conceivable metric painting a concerning or in some cases dire picture of men generally, and certain male subpopulations especially (especially African-American men), the field is compromising its ability to demonstrate its value in this area.

Another common argument heard against pursuing knowledge about men or developing targeted programs for them has been a set of remarks such as "men already own everything" or that "they are

privileged" or that the campus is "male-centered" because of "patriarchy" or the like. This is a difficult argument to navigate, because as was discussed at the beginning of this article, women face significant barriers, dangers, and marginalization on campus directly related to (overwhelmingly but not exclusively) the behaviors of their male counterparts. How then do we affirm that truth while also making a case for learning more about, and building efforts for male students? The earlier point about the link between men's development and climate for women becomes relevant here. The well-known Feminist Scholar, bell hooks (1984) makes this point: "Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism, but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it. This suffering should not be ignored. While it in no way diminishes the seriousness of male abuse and oppression of women, or negates male responsibility for exploitative actions, the pain men experience can serve as a catalyst calling attention to the need for change."

The progressive leanings of the Student Affairs field draw its members to work on solutions for the harm done to marginalized students; and there have been many effective interventions in this regard. Yet, the same virtues which have directed creative energies in this way have also clouded recognition that one must go upstream, so to speak, and work on changing those who most benefit from the oppression/privilege arrangement in order to challenge or dismantle this dichotomy. Furthermore, this author argues that there has been standing permission in the field to equate "patriarchy," which is a descriptor for a system, for men, who are individuals. These are most certainly related, but the current oversimplified paradigm has also authorized negative attitudes toward male students by Student Affairs professionals (including male professionals). This author calls this the "*Bad Dog*" approach, in which male students who behave badly are effectively talked to in a patronizing, antagonistic, and most importantly a developmentally ineffective manner.

For instance, when a male student writes a homophobic slur on a peer's residence hall door, the first student is often scolded for being a homophobe or otherwise a bad person. Indeed, the behavior is hurtful and inappropriate, and should not be tolerated. But, here is an opportunity to approach the student where he is developmentally and to engage him in a constructive dialogue about how he makes meaning of the word he used, how the other student might have experienced it, and how this hurtful impact can be restoratively addressed. This is important, both in terms of effecting a behavior change and in fulfilling the mandate of developmental growth and learning. Otherwise, diminishing the first student will more likely rigidify his attitude rather than changing it, which can stimulate additional such behavior and arguably implicate the failed teachable moment and professional staffer in future such incidents committed by this student. Moreover, this student can retreat (or be pushed, in this instance) to any number of normative environments where such behavior will be reinforced (e.g. SOME fraternities and athletic teams, among other locations). It is a professional duty to find ways to translate one's social

justice orientation into a respectful and engaging intervention rather than projecting one's distaste and personal issues on the student. The opportunity illuminated by bell hooks (1984) is to engage and nurture the hurt and vulnerable part of the man, which builds trust and fosters growth and change. It also encourages retention and success.

Recommendations

Read

Since it is very likely that readers of this article (whether SSAO, middle manager, or entry-level professional) have not been exposed to literature about men's identity development specifically, the first recommendation is to read about it. One very valuable model, the Gender Role Conflict Scale (O'Neil, et. al, 1986, 1995, 1999) articulates four themes of men's development upon which training, programs, and other efforts can be based: Restrictive Emotionality; Socialized Control, Power, and Competition; Restrictive Sexual and Affectionate Behavior; and Obsession with Achievement, Work, and Success. The descriptors of these themes can stimulate ideas for particular learning outcomes. As well, there are scales developed by O'Neil and his colleagues which have been used to measure progress along this journey. There are many publications based on this model, and a full list can be found on his website: http://web.uconn.edu/joneil/ManuScripts.html. There have been several books and articles published over the last few years in the major association journals. One recent example worth reviewing is the article by Harper, Harris, and Mmeje (2004) on men's overrepresentation of college men in judicial proceedings, the bibliography from which also contains many valuable resources.

Discuss

Supervisors generally, and SSAOs in particular must come to terms with the fact that few if any in their Division are familiar with the literature about men, or the reasons why it would be important to review it. It is recommended that training be arranged, and discussions encouraged and supported for professional and eventually student staff to familiarize themselves with information and to strategize ways to apply this knowledge. As with any new approach, mentoring, coaching, and assessment will be critical for success. Partners in this discussion could include Enrollment Management and Admissions staff, Institutional Researchers, Student Leaders, and certainly Faculty allies. In any case, that which gets discussed often will be seen as important. It is also important to identify male opinion leaders (such as in athletic teams, residence halls, fraternities) to approach early and to act as a student advisory panel (much more enticing than simply asking them to help you engage men) on men's success. Women students can

be included in particular ways informed by the issues discussed in the next section. These individuals will not only be a sounding board, but can encourage peers to buy-in and participate in new efforts.

Partner with Women Leaders and Resources Early

Before engaging in any strategy discussions or resource allocations directed toward men's recruitment, retention, and support, there is some ethical housework to complete. Specifically, the SSAO and others who plan to lead this effort should approach women leaders and related support centers/offices (e.g. Women's Studies, Women's Centers, community agencies, women student leaders) to discuss the rationale for this interest and more importantly to make two commitments. First, that these activities will be preceded by an effort to inventory women's support resources, identify gaps, and direct some resources toward filling those gaps. Second, that representatives from the women's resources will be given full access and transparency, and will be welcome partners in any discussions, planning, and execution of strategies to ensure these complement efforts to support women (sometimes, these will be one and the same).

To elaborate, consider that Women's Studies and Women's Centers came to be only after years of lobbying by women who were made to "prove" the need and often to find seed resources before any institutional support was given. This continues to be a struggle on many campuses. Thus, to cavalierly develop men's outreach and support strategies without a transparent, rigorous, and accountable process would be insulting and promoting of mistrust. This author is both a CSAO and a male professor of women's studies and is utilizing the strategy described herein with very good results. A working group has been inventorying women's resources and a team was sent to a conference on engaging men in ending violence against women. From this, several hopeful discussions and efforts have developed. It is very much worth pursuing this approach and the payoff in trust and collaboration is enormous. From here, programs, services, and other strategies are likely to be supported by the women who have been consulted at the very earliest stage in this organizational exercise.

Convene a Team and Build the Plan

Once a group of well-informed and supportive people are assembled, it is actually fairly easy to conduct a benchmarking exercise. It is suggested that team members be assigned different tasks such as researching programs at other campuses, identifying books and manuals relating to male students, connecting with potential partners (counselors, admissions representatives, faculty conducting gender research and teaching related courses, non-profit agencies who work with boys and male teens, to name a few). The

team should also identify a few publications to read together and to share in professional development workshops within the Division and other partner areas.

The plan should include specific gender-aware efforts for each area of the Division. Be warned that this will at times be a difficult and provocative exercise, for reasons including those discussed earlier. Here are some examples of areas and questions to be considered:

Consider implications for Resident Assistant and Hall Director recruitment and training. Are the men who get hired the ones who resonate with male students? Might it be prudent to identify men who are stereotypically seen as disengaged and to approach them to nurture an interest in the job? How can the Residence Life Department adapt to such questions and make changes without abandoning core principles?

In Career Services, Academic Advising and/or Commuter Affairs, encourage the staff to talk with men about their experience of societal messages that they must pursue a career in which they can financially supporting a family? How do male students navigate their passions and interests with this pressure?

Do athletes and coaches discuss the masculine role messages that pervade their world, in terms of the benefits and costs to themselves and their peers? Schools considering the creation or expansion of athletic programs to attract or retain male students should engage these questions carefully to determine if they are prepared to shape this dynamic in a pro-social way. The large financial commitment of such expansion might be better applied to academic support and early outreach (e.g. middle/high school students) programs to strengthen the male student pipeline.

Are the therapists and physicians at the Counseling and Health Centers familiar with men's development models and health research? How do they incorporate this knowledge into their practice? For instance, since men's help-seeking attitudes are affected by social messages against being vulnerable, how can these clinicians invite men to participate in health promotion and mental health support? Should clinicians go out to find the men rather than waiting for them to come to their location?

In Student Activities and other leadership programs, do the coordinators go out and approach male students who have not historically been involved and personally invite them. Rather than criticizing men for "lacking initiative," consider other ways of framing this issue. For instance, in the former case the implication is that men don't engage. An alternative view that should be used is the notion that the programs are not engaging. This is a difficult and risky-feeling viewpoint for professional staff, and so the SSAO needs to make it safe to discuss from this angle.

In Judicial Affairs, has anyone ever asked why more men are being seen than women? If so, has this been a superficial and brief conversation or has it developed to inform practice?   Identify specific ways to include discussion of gender with male respondents. For instance, this author has served as a Dean of Students at a men's university and regularly talked with male respondents about how our scripts of masculinity encourage heavy drinking, violence, and the like to our own and others' detriment; and invited male students to consider how they might be following someone else's script rather than being "the captain of their own life" and engaging a "vision" for their future to inform daily choices.

By posing such questions in each department (including Women's Centers and LGBTQ Resource Centers, who have generally been on the forefront of thinking about the relationship between their work and male students), it won't take long to develop a current picture of knowledge and approaches, and to set goals and objectives for specific programs, services, and professional development.

Finally, make certain that both quantitative (e.g. increased participation, decreased negative incidents, increased satisfaction) and qualitative (e.g. themes associated with how men make meaning of/describe their experiences of the program or institution, staff perceptions and knowledge) measures are identified for new efforts. Some existing institutional research efforts, whether satisfaction surveys, health & wellness surveys, NSSE results, or the like can be disaggregated to look at male responses. As measurable wins are achieved, more ambitious efforts such as new or refined majors and programs that interest men can be discussed and pursued. In the end, fostering more developmentally mature and engaged men on campus will produce many benefits for everyone.

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