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# Gents, Jerks, and Jocks: What Men Learn About Masculinity in College

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*The academy plays a significant role in male students' experience of gender. How can educators effectively support healthy and productive gender identity development among college men?*

*This question is explored in this article.*

By Frank Harris III and Laura E. Struve

# GENTS, JERKS, AND JOCKS

## WHAT MALE STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT MASCULINITY IN COLLEGE

**N**EIL attended at large Midwestern research university. He entered college well prepared, having graduated from a high school with a rigorous curriculum, where he excelled academically, personally, and athletically.

Like many students with similar high school profiles, Neil earned a full academic scholarship to attend college. Neil was very successful at making friends in college. He was one of the most popular guys on campus and was the kind of person that made sure everyone around him was having a good time. He became well known for the spontaneous drinking parties he regularly organized. Despite his popularity among his peers, Neil had problems with establishing positive relationships with professors, residence hall directors, academic advisors, and other persons in positions of authority at the university. He was often cited for violating campus policies pertaining to alcohol consumption, property

damage, and excessive noise in his on-campus apartment. Thus, he became negatively acquainted with the campus's director of judicial affairs.

Neil also struggled academically in college. He stayed up late partying on most nights and did not attend many of his classes. He felt that his classes were boring and assumed that none of the professors really cared whether he attended. Consequently, Neil did not pass most of his classes and lost his scholarship. With little or no financial support to pay for college, he has grown angry about his situation and confused about what to do with his life.

Steven is another student who attended the aforementioned large Midwestern research university. Like Neil, Steven also excelled in high school. Steven was offered athletic scholarships from several small colleges but decided to attend the Midwestern university and study nursing. He chose nursing because he desired to



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serve patients in a more personal and hands-on manner than he would as a physician.

Steven found the transition to college extremely difficult. He struggled to make friends primarily because he did not attend parties or drink alcohol, though many of his male peers socialized this way. Like Neil, Steven also struggled academically. Because of his decision to pursue a career in nursing, Steven's peers and his father harassed him regularly and questioned his sexual orientation. Consequently, he disengaged from school and spent most of his free time alone, playing video games and gambling in online poker games. Steven's grades suffered as he became depressed and socially withdrawn. Steven ultimately decided not to pursue a career in nursing. He changed his major three times within his first two years of college and eventually settled on an academic program that he had little interest in but that did not raise questions about his masculinity.

Neil's and Steven's narratives help contextualize some of the gender-related issues that often challenge men as they make the transition to college environments—new places in which a specific set of gendered norms govern students' behavior. Neil saw it as necessary to assert himself as a man by breaking rules, abusing alcohol, and challenging authority. Steven struggled with a different but equally significant set of issues. He found himself in a hostile and unwelcoming environment for men who did not conform to culturally dominant expectations of masculinity. He was treated poorly by his peers and failed to establish meaningful relationships. Like male students on many campuses, neither young man employed effective help-seeking or

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copied strategies. Consequently, they ended up in a state of crisis after breaking down psychologically and emotionally.

Educators have begun to explore the gender-related experiences of college men and have sought innovative strategies to support students like Neil and Steven. Our goal in this article is to provide insight into how campus cultures convey and reinforce lessons about what constitutes “normal” masculine behavior. Like Michael Kimmel, Michael Messner, and other pro-feminist men's studies scholars, we view masculinity as a socially constructed identity that encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are culturally associated with men. We also draw on the theoretical work of Alexander Astin and other student development scholars who have concluded that behavior is the outcome of what people learn from the environments and social contexts in which they interact.

Some educators may be compelled to ask, “Why should I seek to understand and further explore issues of masculinity on my campus?” In response, we offer four compelling reasons. First, attending college offers a unique opportunity for all students to explore issues related to their own identity and establish values and practices independent of their pre-college background and experiences. Gender is one of several identity dimensions (along with race or ethnicity, career, sexual orientation, and spirituality, to name a few) that students must explore and make potentially lifelong decisions about while in college. Thus, student learning in college not only encompasses students' acquisition of intellectual knowledge but also their development of ways to express gender and other identity dimensions in a healthy and productive manner.

Second, student development scholars and practitioners have identified a host of problematic male behavioral trends and issues that suggest a need for educators to better understand and support college men. We know that nearly all acts of violence, sexual assaults, and sexual harassment that occur on college and university campuses are committed by male students. We also know that male students constitute the overwhelming majority of students who are cited for non-academic violations of campus judicial policies. Others have discussed male students' challenges with

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homophobia, alcohol and substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and other psychological conflicts.

Third, when compared with their undergraduate female peers, college men are underrepresented among students who participate in campus activities, civic engagement, and study abroad programs. Men who choose not to become involved in these and other cocurricular programs limit their opportunities for productive engagement in college.

Finally, as Tracy Davis and Jason Laker have argued, college educators have traditionally not viewed their male students as gendered beings nor have they considered the establishment of healthy gender identity a developmental priority for college men. Consequently, many campuses provide few opportunities for college men to receive proactive and targeted support in managing the gender-related issues that challenge them. Collectively, these reasons, which are discussed in greater detail in Gar Kellom's edited volume *Developing Effective Programs and Services for College Men*, speak loudly as to why educators should seek a better understanding of men and the issues that challenge them in college.

It is important to note that we use the terms "male" and "man" interchangeably in this article. However we acknowledge that the term male applies specifically to a biological sex role whereas man is a socially constructed concept that encompasses the meanings that are culturally defined as masculine. Although both terms are used throughout this article, our discussion focuses exclusively on the social construction of masculinity.

## A STUDY OF COLLEGE MEN AND MASCULINITY

**T**O UNDERSTAND how contextual factors (for example, socialization, campus culture, and peer group interactions) influence the gender identities and behaviors of college men, Frank Harris III, one of the authors of this article, conducted individual interviews and focus groups during the 2005-2006 academic year with sixty-eight undergraduate men who were enrolled

at "Widney" University—a selective private research institution in the western region of the United States. The participants represented a wide range of races and ethnicities, group affiliations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and academic majors. The group included twenty-two seniors, fourteen juniors, twelve sophomores, and twenty first-year students. Twenty-two of the participants were African American, twenty-one were white, eleven were Latino, seven were Asian/Pacific Islander, and seven identified as biracial/multiethnic. Thirteen of the sixty-eight participants were openly gay or bisexual. The remaining fifty-five students identified as heterosexual. The participants shared their beliefs and attitudes about masculinity and discussed significant gender-related experiences as men in the Widney campus culture.

Widney offers a very rich context for examining masculinity in that it has an extremely diverse male student population, nationally recognized athletic programs, and a high-profile fraternity system. The published literature on college men and masculinity suggest that these factors may have observable effects on male behavioral norms and the ways in which college men perform masculinity.

## DIVERSITY IS COOL, BUT COMPETITION AND PATRIARCHY RULE: LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT MASCULINITY IN COLLEGE

**T**HE PARTICIPANTS described the Widney campus culture in three ways that had a meaningful influence on the lessons they learned about masculinity and the attitudes and behaviors they associated with it: "diverse," "patriarchal," and "competitive." In this section, we discuss each of these characteristics and support this discussion with verbatim quotations from the participants that reflect the lessons they learned about masculinity and the corresponding influences on their gender-related beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and male campus norms.

### **Diverse**

The participants described Widney as a diverse campus that allowed men to perform a wide range of gendered behaviors and attitudes. During these discussions, the participants often referred to their high schools (many of which were not as diverse as Widney), where the expression of masculinity was heavily restricted to stereotypically male behaviors and attitudes. Two Asian American focus group participants exchanged the following remarks with respect to diversity and masculinity:

*I think in college you have more of a diversity kind of a thing. You see there isn't everyone categorizing masculinity as one image like in high school. The diversity in college kind of lets you define things more broadly.*

*Yeah, people are more confident in their position or the way they define masculinity and to see people who are confident . . . or not everyone's trying to achieve the same standards, then yeah, you can expand the definition of masculinity.*

The participants also acknowledged that in addition to allowing for the expression of masculinities that do not mirror stereotypical norms, the diverse campus culture that characterized Widney provided opportunities to meet, interact with, and establish friendships with men who represented diverse backgrounds and experiences. As a result, the men reportedly gained richer and more complex ideas about gender and masculinity. For example, a Latino interviewee shared that his father regularly offered negative remarks and ideas about gay men. However, attending Widney afforded frequent interactions with openly gay male peers, which has made this student “more educated,” “more open,” and more respectful of gay men: “When my dad sees a gay guy, especially a Latino, he looks down upon [him]. I’m more open to it. I’m more educated. I have a lot of gay friends, [and] I respect people for who they are.” Other participants spoke of lessons learned about themselves and their own gender identity. “You learn things about yourself. From other people’s differences, you see who you really are and you kind of find your identity when you interact with other friends

because you see your own differences,” noted one of the openly gay students in the study.

### **Patriarchal**

The participants also described the Widney campus culture as patriarchal and discussed its influence on male campus norms. While the participants generally agreed that masculinities were wide and varied at Widney, the dominant masculine norms that characterized the campus were established, in large part, by fraternity members and student athletes. The high visibility and success of Widney’s fraternity system and men’s sports teams fostered a perception within the larger male campus community that these men were more popular and respected than other men on campus. An Asian American study participant discussed the influence that fraternity men have on the campus norms at Widney:

*I think the Greek [fraternity] males is what you see more often and they're the ones that try to set the “I didn't shower last night, look, that's the cool thing to do,” or whatever, and “I just drank before coming to class,” or something like that, “We're having a party tonight. You girls can come, but none of the guys can come,” that kind of a thing because they set this norm of being cool or masculine.*

A fraternity member offered a perspective that confirmed this assertion. He acknowledged student athletes as the “big men on campus” but felt that fraternity men were a close second in terms of their influence among men on campus. “Outside of [student athletes], I’d say the fraternity members just because . . . like I said, we’re kind of the leaders on campus and we do things that kind of set ourselves apart from the [rest of the] male population.”

The men in the study also discussed several “social benefits” that accompanied the status of student athletes and fraternity members. For example, the participants observed that these men did not have to invest much effort in garnering the respect and attention of peers and women who sought dating relationships with male students. These men were also granted access to exclusive parties and other social gatherings. One participant discussed the ways in which his peers often reacted to and treated student athletes:

**As a result of the diverse campus culture, the men reportedly gained richer and more complex ideas about gender and masculinity.**

*People are often like, “Oh, they’re on the basketball team. They’re awesome!” And so they get invited to all the parties, they get to get all the girls, they’re very comfortable with themselves, and they really don’t care about what other people think because they are on the . . . whatever team.*

Given their popularity and influence on male campus norms at Widney, the masculine characteristics that were embodied and expressed by fraternity members and student athletes (for example, being in good physical shape, tough, competitive, and sexually assertive) were the standards by which men were judged at Widney.

Quantitative disparities in the representation of men and women at Widney also seemed to influence its patriarchal campus culture and gendered behavior among men. At Widney, as on many college and university campuses, undergraduate women outnumber undergraduate men. Many of the men in the study felt that this was one benefit of being a male student at Widney because it resulted in numerous opportunities to “hook up” sexually with women. For example, a fraternity member asserted, “The common thing I’ve heard is that Widney is not the place to [have an exclusive relationship] because there are so many attractive women here. You don’t want to cut yourself off, especially being in college.” An African American student offered a similar perspective: “There are so many different women and so many different social groups that if you [wanted to] hook up with lots of women you could, because your chances of kind of getting caught are minimal.” The participants also shared that men who had a reputation for hooking up sexually with multiple women were celebrated by their male peers, whereas women who chose to do so were negatively characterized as “whores” and “sluts.” This double standard is indicative of Widney’s patriarchal campus culture, which reinforces beliefs of male superiority and dominance.

### **Competitive**

Finally, the participants described the Widney campus culture as extremely competitive, especially among men. They spoke of the seemingly constant

pressure to outperform their male peers in both social and academic endeavors. Several traditionally masculine activities—notably, video games, sports, and consuming alcohol—were contexts for intense competition among Widney men. One participant noted, “For guys, drinking is a sport. [We challenge each other by asking] ‘Who can drink the most?’ ‘How many beers did you throw down?’ ‘I drank half a case.’” An Asian American student also shared an insightful reflection about competition among men at Widney:

*[For male students] it’s competitive. It seems like I’m always trying to be a jerk enough to where I could get girls or look nice enough sometimes to get girls . . . or not care specifically about what girls think so that girls do think positively of me. I think that’s what it’s mostly been about, girls, but it’s also [about] sports. All of our varsity sports programs are so good that the common [non-athlete] male student is just trying to fight for what [little attention] we have.*

Competition among male students at Widney was not restricted to traditionally masculine activities like sports, pursuing sexual relationships with women, drinking, and video games. The participants also confirmed that the competition was also felt among men in their academic endeavors. Attempts to outperform each other in areas like having the most rigorous major, course load, or class assignments were reportedly common among men. The participants reflected on the ways in which the Widney campus environment fueled the pressure they felt to compete with their male peers. The following remarks were exchanged during a focus group with Jewish participants:

*You’re immersed in this thing, this machine, and you constantly have to try and beat everyone else because that’s what [success] is based on. There’s no absolute good, bad, whatever. It’s just doing better than the guy sitting next to you.*

*Yeah, I’m sure the [success of the] football team and stuff contributes to [the competitive environment]. But when you have to sit down and take a test and be like,*

**Participants passively accepted competition as something in which all men must engage in order to gain the respect they desire and to be successful after graduating from college.**

# Educators should be mindful of ways to get men to step out of their cultural comfort zone and spend time with men of different ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, and abilities.

*"I'm counting on doing better than these guys so I'll get a better grade and do well in life, this is like what I have to do to succeed in life." It's not like a joke. It's not a game of horse that you're playing outside. This is for real. That's the competitive nature [of Widney]. I think that spills over into a lot of other things, and you kind of want to compete with people.*

In sum, the Widney campus culture reinforced three lessons about masculinity that influenced the gender-related beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the men in the study. First, the rich diversity that characterized Widney's male student population exposed the participants to a wide range of masculinities and allowed them to have meaningful interactions with men who were different from them. Through these interactions, the participants recognized that masculinity can be expressed in ways beyond what they had learned and observed prior to college.

Second, the participants learned that although masculinity can be expressed broadly by a diverse group of men, a hierarchy of masculinity does exist. The patriarchy that characterized Widney's campus culture reinforced this lesson. The participants observed that fraternity men, male student athletes, and the masculine characteristics they embodied were dominant and held in higher regard than other men and masculine expressions. Men who expressed masculinity in ways that were consistent with stereotypical masculine norms were afforded highly sought attention and other benefits within the campus culture.

Last, the participants internalized the masculine value of competitiveness through their interactions in the Widney campus culture. Interestingly, the participants expressed anxiety and frustration with the constant pressure they felt to compete with their male peers. However, none of the participants made conscious decisions to not compete. Rather, they passively accepted competition as something in which all men must engage in order to gain the respect they desire and to be successful after graduating from college.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

**P**ERHAPS the most important question that emerges from these findings is "How can educators reshape their campus in ways that infuse lessons about masculinity that lead to healthy and productive gender identity development among their male students?" In response, we offer a set of recommendations that are intentionally geared toward helping men achieve desirable psychosocial outcomes such as pursuing academic excellence, engaging in service-oriented leadership activities, recognizing the privileged status of men and making attempts to reconcile it (as suggested by Tracy Davis and Rachel Wagner), and bonding and interacting without prioritizing the consumption of alcohol and the sexual objectification of women. It is important for us to note that our recommendations are broadly conceived so they can be applied on a range of campuses and institution types. As is the case with all campus-based efforts to enhance student development, educators must account for the unique needs, backgrounds, and experiences of their students as well as sociocultural factors on their campus. Stated simply, programs and interventions should be developed strategically and tailored to engage men in a specific campus context.

The sixty-eight participants in this study arrived on campus having been socialized to embrace stereotypical and narrow beliefs and attitudes about masculinity. For example, the participants had very specific ideas about the roles that men should assume in the home and what academic programs and majors lead to high-paying careers in male-dominated professions. The Widney campus environment, which prioritized patriarchy and male competitiveness, reinforced these attitudes and beliefs. Guest speakers, course readings, class discussions, service-learning projects, and other interactive exchanges that expose students to broader ideas about masculinity and challenge prevailing notions about what constitutes appropriate gender-related behavior for men are necessary.

The study participants confirmed that opportunities to interact meaningfully with men who represent

diverse backgrounds and experiences incited new learning about masculinity. Therefore, educators should be mindful of ways to get men to step out of their cultural comfort zone and spend time with men of different ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, and abilities (to name just a few facets of diversity). The strategies that scholars have proposed for facilitating cross-racial interaction may also be helpful in facilitating cross-cultural interaction among college men—for example, living in a campus residence hall and participating in out-of-class activities. Faculty can provide space for cross-cultural interaction in their courses by having students share their perspectives and experiences and by requiring students to work collaboratively on class assignments.

Educators should also consider critically examining their campus culture and its effects on gender identity and performance among undergraduate male students. Questions to think about when doing so include What groups of men garner the most attention on campus? What groups appear to be marginalized? What images of men and masculinity are most prevalent on campus? What messages about men and masculinity are communicated via campus programs, policies, practices, and activities? In considering these questions, educators should regularly seek to understand the experiences and perspectives of a diverse group of men on their campus. Forming a committee of educators from student affairs, academic affairs, enrollment services, athletics, and other key campus units to provide leadership on this issue may also be a useful strategy on some campuses.

Interventions that are grounded in the principles of social justice may also be effective in teaching and reinforcing new lessons about masculinity. Ellen Broido and Robert Reason discuss the utility of social justice approaches in addressing issues of power, privilege, and oppression. The men who participated in the Widney study recognized male privilege in Widney's campus culture, particularly among fraternity members, male student athletes, and other men

who embodied stereotypically masculine characteristics. Some of the participants were ambivalent and felt uncomfortable about the stratification of masculinities at Widney. However, they lacked the confidence and developmental maturity that are necessary to challenge their peers and to step outside of the restricted behaviors they had learned to associate with masculinities. In her 2003 article "Identity and learning: Student affairs' role in transforming higher education," Marcia Baxter Magolda noted that relationships with peers are central to the ways that college students define their identities. Like many college-age students, the men in this study negotiated conflicts between peer group expectations and their own self-interest by conforming to group norms, which allowed them to retain their status and acceptance among their male peers. College student affairs educators are perhaps best positioned to help men rely more on internal and less on external ways of making meaning of their identity. This is a developmental milestone that most traditional-age college students must achieve. Toward this end, some campuses have established support and discussion groups for college men that allow them to talk about their gender-related experiences and to brainstorm effective means for challenging their peers in non-confrontational ways. Other campuses may also find this strategy useful.

Students who serve in paraprofessional roles (for example, as residence hall advisors, orientation leaders, peer health educators, or fraternity house advisors) also play an important role in institutional efforts to shape campus environments in ways that support the productive identity development of college men. Those who serve in these roles may have greater influence than professional educators because of their status as students. Therefore, gender identity development should be incorporated into paraprofessional training programs and workshops. In addition, these students need to learn that they should take into account where male students are developmentally with respect to

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their gender identity as they choose strategies to facilitate engagement and communication with them. For example, Tracy Davis and Jason Laker suggest engaging men in appropriate action-oriented or “doing” activities such as camping, hiking, or playing video games in order to establish meaningful interpersonal connections. The key point is that men will be more likely to reach out to their residence advisors and other paraprofessionals for help if a relationship that is grounded in trust and mutual respect has been established.

In closing, we caution educators not to allow their concerns about the gender development of college men to divert attention and resources away from institutional efforts to support women. Despite being better prepared academically (as measured by grade point average) and more involved in co-curricular programs than men, women are still underrepresented in some majors and professions and continue to earn incomes that compare unfavorably with those of their male counterparts. Moreover, women are also challenged by gender-specific issues that require ongoing support and intervention. Thus, we urge educators to be sensitive and aware of the group-specific issues that challenge all of their students and to offer timely and appropriate support.

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