Lost Men on Campus

Elizabeth Redden

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PHILADELPHIA -- The 2nd Conference on College Men brought about 100 professors, student affairs professionals and counselors to the University of Pennsylvania this week. Frank Harris' list of citations offers some insights into why they came: Research showing lower rates of enrollment, persistence and graduation among college men in comparison to college women; the *under*representation of men in campus leadership positions, in study abroad, career services and civic engagement programs; and their *over*representation among campus judicial offenders.

"When we think about acts of violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment on college campuses, overwhelmingly the perpetrators of those acts on our campuses are men. When we talk about how to convince our colleagues that we need to be engaged in these discussions, these are some of the ideas we need to share with them, particularly this last one," said Harris, an assistant professor of postsecondary education at San Diego State University.

Harris and Keith Edwards, director of campus life at Macalester College, presented Thursday on the results and implications of two separate qualitative studies about the gendered experiences and identities of men in college. Edwards, who conducted three interviews each with 10 men, said his primary research question was, "How do you understand what it means to be a man, as a man?" Harris' study involved 68 men and nine focus groups, divided by subcategory (African American athletes, Asian American men, first-year men, etc.) Edwards' study involved a large public East Coast university, and Harris' a large private institution on the West Coast.

"The men in both studies really described external pressures to perform hegemonic masculinity," said Harris. In other words, they felt external pressure to be unemotional, calm, cool under pressure, to be competitive, aggressive, self-assured; to *not* be gay, feminine or vulnerable.

Furthermore, "It was not manly to put a lot of time and effort into academics," said Edwards. It's not cool to study, to read the book: "Sometimes it's not cool to even buy the book. But you've got to ace the test. You've got to make the grade," continued Edwards, who described male students studying on the sly, telling their buddies they were spending the evening with their girlfriends and then hitting the books instead. "The script to be a manly man means you're good at everything and you don't have to work at it," he explained.

Edwards and Harris also reported finding that the students had limited relationships with other men, particularly their friends and fathers, and experienced a loss of self. "It's sort of for me the most poignant part of all this," said Edwards. "I lose my authenticity when I pretend I'm someone I'm not."

"And there's a loss of humanity when you deny who you really are."

In terms of strategies and recommendations, Edwards and Harris suggested first giving college men permission to stop performing and to be themselves. “It’s really about creating some kind of balance to the external pressure,” said Harris. “We talk about challenge and support, challenging the negative behavior.”

Edwards and Harris also recommended providing opportunities for critical self-reflection about what it means to be a man – “to disrupt the functioning of hegemonic masculinity” – including through facilitated student affairs programming and academic courses (a course in women’s studies, for instance). They recommended a need to build "cultural competence" for faculty and staff in issues of gender. While many in the audience lauded the transformative impact of small group discussions among men, one common point was the need for a facilitator who really understands gender dynamics.

The biennial conference, which continues through today, was co-sponsored by NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and the American College Personnel Association. Shaun R. Harper, an assistant professor of higher education management at Penn and a keynote speaker, planned to close the conference today by stressing the need for coordinated, strategic action to promote male students’ success. “It’s not uncommon to find a particular group or activity or perhaps a dialogue series, but none of that is coordinated usually,” said Harper. “Doing what we’re currently doing in a fragmented fashion will very likely have us spinning our wheels for years.”

One obstacle to such strategic action has been a pervading sense that men -- who, after all, out-earn women in the workforce -- don't need extra attention. “What I’ve seen in my work with institutions and with college administrators and faculty is what I would consider the model gender majority myth,” Harper explained. “It works very much like the model minority myth with Asian American students” – in other words, there's an assumption that all males are doing well. But subsets are underperforming academically – most notably African American men, who lag behind African American women in college enrollment by 27.2 percentage points. Overall, when not disaggregated by race, 57.2 percent of students enrolled in higher education in fall 2007 were women, and 42.8 percent were men.

Gender is a sensitive subject, however. “We should continue to be concerned about the status of women,” Harper stressed. “In higher education, unfortunately, we are notorious for falling into the either-or trap.”

Kathleen Holgerson, director of the Women’s Center at the University of Connecticut, echoed a similar sentiment during an afternoon panel featuring women’s center directors. “Now more than ever we need not to be playing the zero-sum game."

Commentary

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Elizabeth Redden, author of the *Inside Higher Ed* article, *Lost Men on Campus*, succinctly articulated the growing concerns about many college men at postsecondary institutions. Her review of results and issues presented at the *2nd Conference on College Men* highlighted decreased rates of enrollment for men, underrepresentation of men in campus engagement activities, and lower rates of persistence and graduation in comparison to college women. Another theme focused on the gendered experiences and identities of college men. Scholars at the conference summarized qualitative studies to support these trends and provided potential strategies and recommendations to address concerns. Two of these studies were recently published and merit further examination.

Harris and Edwards conducted separate studies on college men's experience. Although the student demographics were different (e.g., Harris explored men attending a private institution in the West; Edwards a public school in the East), they shared their comparable findings in a later study (Harris & Edwards, 2010). Themes included: 1) external pressures and expectations to engage in hegemonic masculinity; 2) consequences of hegemonic masculinity, and 3) efforts to transcend hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, the authors noted that much of what male students learn about masculinity identity is socially constructed; they model other male behavior and push relentlessly to fit in. Edwards calls this *wearing a man face* as a disguise. Young males cited external pressures to be manly, to not appear gay or feminine. Unfortunately, as college men strive towards peer acceptance and socially constructed ideals of manhood, they hinder themselves from establishing authentic relationships with other men *and* women, and perhaps most disheartening, their true selves (Harris & Struve, 2009). One strategy that was briefly addressed in the Redden news summary is the need to intentionally explore issues of male student engagement and identity as a way to address hegemonic masculinity.

The salience of academic and social engagement for men (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Sax, 2008) is a key mechanism for greater male student engagement and helping them to assume responsibility for their individual actions. Equally important is for student affairs administrators, practitioners, and faculty to create and deliver more coordinated learning opportunities that help men get more intentionally engaged academically and socially in college. Kuh (2008) outlined high impact educational practices that institutions can implement to enhance engagement. These practices include: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences (e. g., common book), learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning opportunities, service learning/community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. Overall, these strategies have proven to be effective at both 2-year and 4-year institutions; yet a common critique of high impact educational practices is that they can be time-intensive, expensive, and difficult to sustain over a longer period of time. Despite these challenges, male students especially benefit from these intentional, integrative activities. However, they tend to participate less often than other students, and rates are even lower for male students of color (Sax, 2008). Ideally, these initiatives would infuse features that assist men to explore gender and identity

development issues. Meaningful learning experiences for men *and* women to reflect on issues of gender identity development in particular are needed (Harris & Lester, 2009).

Redden specifically mentioned in her article that gender identity discussions can be relevant yet sensitive; we need to avoid the either-or-trap and the model gender majority myth (i.e., all men are doing fine) as noted (Harper & Harris, 2010). Some critics claim that men historically have always done exceptionally well in college and the workplace, and therefore don't need extra assistance. However, this statement is *not* true for all male student groups, especially underserved populations such as African American males, as described by Redden.

Both male and female academic engagement is vital, but men will rarely seek out these opportunities on their own volition. Student affairs practitioners and educators will likely need to encourage male students to get actively involved in high impact educational practices, and sell them on the merits of participating and engaging in these initiatives.

Strategies

There are specific strategies that student affairs educators might employ. Thoughtfully designed, research-based programs that are embedded directly into the curriculum can provide a forum for engagement around issues of male gender identity development. Based on principles of the learning community movement, thematic connections can be created with male identity development issues at the forefront (Harris & Edwards, 2010). Institutions are encouraged to experiment with offering targeted learning communities (LC) to male students as part of a transition program like Summer Bridge initiatives (Harris & Lester, 2009). A specific example would to create a thematic LC titled: *Exploring Identities through Writing, Sociology, and Work*. The package would include a first-year writing course, an introductory sociology course that explores issues of race, class, and gender, and a two-credit life-career planning course that examines issues related to male achievement issues, work-life balance, stress management, and exploration of multiple identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender). It would be important to involve faculty members and career development professionals who are familiar and comfortable discussing sensitive gender identity development issues (Davis, 2004). One recommendation would be to include a career counselor who teaches the life-career planning course, plus serves as a liaison to the other faculty members to help address more sensitive issues that surface throughout the semester.

Harris and Struve (2009) suggested that institutions can rely on the expertise and role modeling potential of student paraprofessionals, including residence hall assistants, orientation leaders, and other upper-class students who help address issues related to identity development. Peer-to-peer influence will likely be more impactful in terms of helping students adjust behavior and attitudes around issues related to homophobia, gender stereotyping, diversity, and social justice issues. As an example, a key strategy would be to identify a senior student or recent graduate from a fraternity who would feel comfortable addressing these issues with other younger male students. Harris and Lester (2009) provided a number of gender-specific recommendations for male and female student identity development issues.

These include:

- Develop student support groups
- Train student affairs educators (I would include new faculty members and instructional staff)
- Restructure programs to focus on identity development
- Offer transition programs (such as a first-year experience program or learning community)
- Examine campus cultural symbols (another strategy would be to examine campus rituals)
- Offer service learning opportunities (and other high impact educational practices targeted to college men).

The research on male college student development has much to offer for informing proactive and responsive interventions. Implementing timely and innovative academic and social engagement strategies informed by the literature is an effective way to reach both men **and** women.

References and Suggested Readings

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Discussion Questions

For those that may wish to use this article for teaching and/or professional development related purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. What can student affairs administrators, practitioners, and faculty members do to encourage more college males to participate in high impact educational practices as identified by Kuh (2008) and outlined in the review?

2. Davis (2004) suggested the use of entertainment media, including clips from TV, Internet, and media, to educate students around gender and identity development. Brainstorm and discuss 2-3 ideas of entertainment media that you could use in the classroom or in a professional development training session that addresses male college student development and identity issues. Think about your own developmental experiences. What messages (from media or other sources) did you receive that influenced your gender identity? (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

3. Assume that you were involved in *the Exploring Identities through Writing, Sociology, and Work* learning community mentioned above. What issues or concepts would be most important to you? How might you structure the learning environment, curriculum, and/or reflection process to facilitate your learning objectives?

4. The current situation regarding male students may seem especially challenging. Assume you engage in this discussion to address the problem. How do you measure success? How would you justify requesting resources in lean economic times?

5. You are a director or student affairs practitioner for a student services office on campus (e.g., career development center, service learning, study abroad, etc.). You realize that men are not regularly using the services. What specific ideas do you have that helps to promote and highlight your services? What might be potential advantages and disadvantages of these ideas? Discuss.