

# Experiences of Male Undergraduates That Lead to Academic Failure

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*We examined the lived experiences of male undergraduates on the campus of a high-research-activity university in the northeastern United States. Interviews with 8 male undergraduates with a grade-point average lower than 2.0 revealed that their poor academic performances resulted from a combination of the following experiences: a disconnect between high school and university academic expectations, adherence to rigid male gender roles, an inability to set priorities and engage with faculty and staff, and the manifestation of mental health issues. We implemented the study as a front-end analysis to understand better these learners and their learning contexts. Recommendations for advising intervention are offered.*

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Through a phenomenological study, we examined the lived experiences of male undergraduates as a way to better understand underlying causes for a gendered pattern of student success at a highest-research-activity, R1 doctoral university (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.) in the northeastern United States, where twice as many undergraduate men are placed on academic probation as their women peers. We used these data as the bases for a front-end analysis of learners and learner contexts. Our goal included addressing the problem through the design of an intervention being developed at the time of this study.

The gender gap in U.S. college enrollment and degree completion rates invite scholarly debate about causes and solutions. In North America, more women earn certificates and college degrees than men (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). In the 1980s, 50% of the college population was male; 20 years later, male enrollment in U. S. higher education had fallen to

35–40% of the total (Harris, 2010; Wimer & Levant, 2011). Despite signs of improvement, the largest gaps in male enrollments characterize the most at-risk student populations: Thirty-six percent of African American, 39% of Native Americans, and 41% of all Hispanic students are male (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007).

We conducted the study after logistic regression analysis of 34,000 student records revealed that two of three undergraduates on academic probation were males with grade-point averages (GPAs) below 2.0, the minimum for satisfactory academic performance at the university (Wilson, 2012; Wilson, Choi, Wangler, & Musser, 2013). In this study, we focused primarily on qualitative inquiry to understand the impacts of a variety of factors on the experiences of individuals. Through this research, we gained insight into ways societal male gender norms underscore student success, which we share along with suggestions for best advising practices that encourage at-risk men to engage in their own academic planning and progress.

## **Hegemonic Masculinity**

A learned construct, masculinity is expressed within societal norms for expected behavior (Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011; Wilson, 2014). Wagner (2011) described masculinity as the experience and the social performance of conducting oneself in a fashion that is commonly accepted as “manly”; gender is a constructed identity, and men and women are assigned particular roles and characteristics based on cultural contexts beyond any genetic dispositions (p. 212).

Thus, an incongruence may exist between behavior considered manly in a group and the demands of academia or self-identification of maleness. Such disparity creates tension, which may be reflected in men’s behaviors on and off campus.

Connell (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the

legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). O’Neil (1981) identified hegemonic masculine identity formation as a key source of male gender role conflict and theorized that men unable to express their masculinity according to societal norms experience conflict and anxiety. Gender role conflict is considered

a psychological state occurring when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles have negative consequences or impact on a person or others. The ultimate outcome of this conflict is the restriction of the person’s ability to actualize their human potential or the restriction of some [sic] else[’]s potential. (O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986, p. 336)

O’Neil et al. (1986) theorized that men without an acceptable male identity of their own adopt society’s norms about expectations for male behavior and therefore act in accordance with the adopted maleness. Their demeanor may take the form of acting out in destructive, boys-will-be-boys behavior on college campuses, including “binge drinking, homophobia, risky sex, and in extreme cases, physical violence and sexual assault” (Harris & Barone, 2011, p. 58). In typical cases, these behaviors negatively affect academic achievement.

Hegemonic masculinity may lead to unfavorable academic performance for men in several ways. Kahn, Brett, and Holmes (2011) looked at the relationship between motivation in higher education and masculinity and found that many men viewed academic work as relatively unimportant compared to establishing a manly image. In an empirical study of 10 male undergraduates, Edwards and Jones (2009) found men’s identity was developed through societal expectations mediated by social interactions with others. Study participants described “putting on a man face” to meet the expectations for the context (Edwards, 2007; Edwards & Jones, 2009). In another investigation on gender, Sallee and Harris (2011) found that interviewed male undergraduate and graduate students responded to questions by aligning their responses with traditional assumptions about gender roles and expectations (p. 409). Because they knew of the researchers’ interest in gender, participants experienced a “heightened awareness of performing gender and acted accordingly” (p. 410) on their assumptions about ways to respond as males to interviewers. Harris (2008)

found that men exaggerated their male behavior and attitudes while expressing stereotypically masculine behavior to fit the assumed expectations of the researchers. The respondents performed to a manly perception despite identifying positive aspects of masculinity inconsistent with their actions; for example, they had responded that respect, integrity, and character characterized masculinity, but they reported engaging in sexual activity, alcohol consumption, homophobia, and misogyny—all key aspects of hypermasculinity. Harris (2010) also discovered that men’s notions of masculinity were well formed by the time they arrived on college campuses, and once in college, men acted in accordance with traditional conceptions of masculinity as influenced by parents, interactions with male peers, and participation in contact sports.

Regarding academic help-seeking behaviors, Ryan, Gheen, and Midgley (1998) found boys more reluctant than girls to ask for help; that is, not only do male peer groups consider succeeding in academics as feminine in nature but they also attach a stigma to seeking academic help. In a study of 193 male undergraduates at a medium-sized public university, Wimer and Levant (2011) found that respondents who conformed to masculine norms were reported as “highly unlikely to seek academic help when struggling in the classroom” (p. 266). The researchers proposed that masculine constructs of self-reliance and dominance may hinder them from seeking academic help, adding that students’ drive to project “stereotypically masculine” personas prevents them from accepting or admitting that they need help (p. 268).

Gale (1999) also explored masculine ideology and found that undergraduate males based their understanding of maleness on their observations of society. Gale (1999) determined that male students experienced ambivalence and uncertainty about this ideology and found that men struggled when confronted with changes in traditional masculine ideology. Such challenges may emerge during times of transition, defined by Goodman et al. (2006) as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). Because of the transition created by leaving home to attend college, some may struggle with masculine identity. In sum, these beliefs and behaviors may contribute to a higher rate of poor academic performance seen among male students.

### **Methodology**

Our interest in at-risk students grew out of concern, as undergraduate academic advisors, to understand and address the needs of undergraduate men at risk for academic failure because of deficiencies in intellectual, social, economic, behavioral, and psychological abilities, and we also wanted to learn more about the invisible, deleterious effects of hegemonic masculinity on male identity. From a psychological perspective, students are at risk when “skills, knowledge, motivation, and/or academic ability are significantly below those of the typical student in the college or curriculum in which they are enrolled” (Maxwell, 1997, p. 2). According to Ender and Wilkie (2000), these academically vulnerable students are likely to display any number of other characteristics such as low academic self-concept, unrealistic grade and career expectations, unfocused career objectives, extrinsic motivation, external locus of control, low self-efficacy, inadequate study skills for college success, a belief that learning is memorizing, and a history of passive learning (pp. 134–135).

By using a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews, we sought to gain a more holistic understanding of male students’ experience with the disjuncture between their academic performance and the gendered expectations established by society. We chose phenomenological thematic analysis, or PTA, (Wilson, 2014) as the method for this investigation.

For this study, we chose an advising center for exploratory students at a large research institution. The minimum standard for satisfactory work at this institution is a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale, and students whose grades fall below this mark are considered at risk for being dropped from enrollment in the university. We used criterion sampling (per Miles & Huberman, 1994), and invited male undergraduates with GPAs below 2.0, identified through an analysis of academic records and a survey, to participate in the study. The Office of Research Protections approved the study under IRB 43216.

### **Participants and Procedures**

Criterion sampling allowed us to select male undergraduates with the risk factor of a substandard GPA (2.0 on 4.0 scale). This recruitment sampling allowed us to gain a rich understanding of lived experiences that may lead to academic difficulties. After identifying candidates through a university student records database, we sent

invitations to secure e-mail accounts associated with the selected sample. Of the 692 prospective participants deemed suitable for and invited to participate in the study, 8 students enrolled in the research study. Qualitative research studies are not bound by sample size constraints or some other measures associated with quantitative research (Knox & Burkard, 2009; Seidman, 1991). Study participants were also enrolled in a prize drawing for a \$25 and \$50 gift card offered as an incentive to participate. An interdisciplinary team of researchers, we participated in interview-training techniques with a professor of education specializing in qualitative research. None of us interviewed a student we had ever advised. The interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 29 years, and the group was comprised of students who self-identified as African American, Arab, and White. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis, and each student was assigned a pseudonym. Following Seidman’s (1991, 1998, 2006) interview protocol, the questions were designed to reveal the participant’s focused life history, details of experience, and reflection on meaning. This approach provided the narratives we needed to access and analyze the meaning of the experiences described by students on their path to academic probation.

We also conducted approximately 5 hours of observations in advisor offices. Observations were intentional and allowed us to reframe our perspectives from advisors as researchers to focus on the interviews as reflective of students’ lived spaces (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; van Manen, 1990, 2007). Observations solidify the trustworthiness of study data collected and provide an alternative data source for purposes of triangulation. For this reason, we assigned one person on our team to record in a journal our reflections on the themes generated as well as our own personal experiences from the interviews (as per Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 195; Schön, 1983). The research notes and themes were subsequently discussed in multiple meetings over the course of the study. On a secure web-based file service, we shared our personal reflections, thoughts, and observations about the research participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 195; Schön, 1983).

### **Phenomenological Thematic Analysis**

van Manen (2007) explained the goal of phenomenology as understanding the very essence of the subject under study. Thematic

**Table 1.** Example of horizons and attributes used in phenomenological thematic analysis for student, pseudonym Sam

Bracketing	Transcript	Horizon	Attributes (normal, ordinal, interval)	Label (action words)	Clusters/ Invariant Constituents
Change my questions as they're too research focused and don't lead to them bleeding stories.	[Sam]: "I guess you could say I got a . . . probably drank a little too much. I was decompressing from the deployments because I had just gotten back a week before I started school here."	"The biggest challenge I faced when I got here is I got . . . probably drank too much. I was decompressing from the deployments."	Stress; alcohol abuse; avoidance behaviors; social isolation	Abusing alcohol; transitioning challenging socially; isolating; losing self-motivation; avoiding	Social isolation; disconnected; no motivation

analysis, a qualitative research method, focuses on examining themes within data and proves especially useful for developing organization for and a rich description of a data set (Daly, Kellehear, & Glikzman, 1997). Therefore, PTA provided a method for identifying themes useful for understanding the phenomenon under study. One member of our team, a graduate student studying qualitative research and analysis, received training in PTA.

Throughout the process, our PTA-trained team member engaged us in collaborative discussions on the themes that emerged in the transcripts, bracketing the team's reflections in a spreadsheet (see Table 1). We then discussed the narrative meaning units and developed an exhaustive list of labels that could be applied to the phenomena detailed by the students. We then wrote an account (or story) for each student on the basis of these phenomena and an associated structural or contextual narrative. Finally, we synthesized the narrative and structural accounts into a single story within a context representing the combined meaningful experiences of all the students retold as single, composite experience representing the entire group.

Experience of academic difficulty for male undergraduates was the unit of analysis for this phenomenology. The units of observation included interview transcripts of our discussions with

the 8 male participants, our self-reflective interpretation of transcript analysis, and interactions between students and advisors in the Division of Undergraduate Studies.

### Results: Textural-Structural Synthesis

The experiences that contributed to male students' unsatisfactory academic standings were filled with powerful and gender-conflicting emotions, including isolation, helplessness, and despair. Many of these difficulties arose from the respondents' failure to negotiate the initial transition from high school to college. Separated from the influences of their familiar social support networks, they struggled to engage with their new environments and meet new expectations that come with enrolling at a university. The research identified five categories or themes of lived experiences common to all of the research participants:

- Disconnect characterized the academic expectations of high school and college.
- Students made social life and academic choices consistent with rigid gender expectations for masculinity.
- Students demonstrated inability to set priorities effectively, focus on academic goals, or balance conflicting demands on their time.

- Students encountered challenges making productive social connections with faculty members, staff, and peers.
- Emergence or intensification of mental health issues contributed to experiences that led the men to perform poorly in academic initiatives.

### **Disconnect Between Past and Present Academic Expectations**

Students explained that college course work is more rigorous and competitive than high school homework. Jason articulated the situation:

In high school, I was always one of the smarter kids. I could study the night before a test and get an A. I could slack off and still get pretty good grades. In college, especially here, you find everyone is um, everyone else around you is smart. You're not the smart kid anymore. You have to apply yourself a little more.

When asked about the specific differences between academics in high school and college, Jason gave an example:

I wrote this paper, this one class had like 50 or 50% of our final grade was one paper. And uh, I did this paper that in high school, I would have considered a good paper. And when I got a D in the class and uh, my dad was like furious. And he wanted to read the paper and he read it and he's like you put no original thought into this. [The father said] "You know this isn't just high school where you just spew out information you just list stats, they want to see like an actual idea."

### **Male Gender Expectations**

The study confirmed observations by Harris (2008) of male students perceiving that other males are rewarded for being outgoing and "macho" in their demeanor. Mike explained:

I feel from a male standpoint, there's a big urge to almost have like an alpha male personality. Just seeing from a social aspect of it. Like, um, in my like, from my perspective, I'll see guys like that and I'll just think like "man, that guy just like sounds like a jerk," like I would never want

to be like him. Like he's rude and stuff. But the same time that's the kind of guy like he has like all the friends um, he just like has a good social life, he has the connections and all that kind of stuff and I don't know. I just found it like confusing 'cause I wouldn't want to be like that but that seems to be what kind of works almost.

Jason perceived a discrepancy between the acceptance of excessive alcohol consumption in men and women:

To me it's seems like if a girl brags about how much she can drink, that makes her seem masculine. Maybe that makes her seem heavy, like maybe that says something about her weight, or that like, you know, it's not like, girls don't brag about how much they can drink. They don't. Guys do. Guys want to show you how much they've drank. Guys want, you know, want to tape their beers together so you can see how much they've drank. Girls being a heavy drinker I would not say is a compliment, at least around here.

The Greek life system as a visible and dominating part of the social system proved a factor in respondents' views of on-campus socializing. Some of the interviewees feel that Greek life was the only way to enter the social scene. Jason discussed the way fraternities seem to limit access to social opportunities for men:

The guys are expected to if they want to have a good time, are expected to pledge to go through the awfulness so you can get in. . . . It's much easier to get into parties being a girl. It's much easier to be invited places being a girl because guys want to invite girls over. So, it kind of pressures you. . . [to be in a fraternity].

Mike confirmed the difficulties with "going through the awfulness" of pledging in the stories he shared:

Um, I can say that taking away from a male standpoint, um, just from the social aspects, I feel there's a really big like Greek life influence at this school, and I chose not to pledge, and I mean I'm still okay with it to today but the same time, but it's hard 'cause

there's like, from what I can take away from a personal standpoint there's a pretty noticeable divide between Greek students and non-Greeks, and I feel that kind of hurts with the whole social connections aspect.

### **Inability to Set Priorities, Balance Demands, or Focus on Goals**

Male students expressed difficulty in making the transition from a highly structured environment to one where they must organize their own lives—getting to class, resisting distractions, and handling peer pressure. When asked about the biggest challenges on coming to campus, Bill reported:

I'd say like the structure, ummm, like, There was nobody there to like tell me like, "okay, you need to do this and you need to do that," and you just. There's more responsibility and you have to, go get the textbook and actually do the stuff.

Respondents pointed to distractions and alternatives to studying as reasons for academic struggles. Greg explained,

I wouldn't even dare to skip a class in high school. I would just be freaked out about that. But um, having that sense of freedom is a huge, is I think a huge responsibility that ends up being a distraction if you really don't know how to handle it properly.

Jason concurred,

No one wants to study for a test when you could go out with your friends or do something else. There's always someone who wants, there's always someone no matter what night of the week who wants to go out and do something real fun.

### **Difficulty Making Connections**

Students who engaged directly with members of the university community travel an important pathway to academic success. Attending office hours, meeting with an academic advisor, and taking advantage of campus academic-support resources encourage personal immersion in academic work. However, they also require

student initiative and motivation. Few interviewees were ready to commit to such steps. For example, Mike admitted unawareness about resources: "In the fall, [I] didn't even know about student tutoring, the tutoring center."

When asked about his connection with his academic advisor, Jason responded:

I did not take advantage of that. I met her once. I kind of scheduled, I kind of just . . . I didn't really schedule properly. I took like a level 300 philosophy class first semester because I didn't know, like I didn't even know what that meant. I was taking metaphysics and my professor himself told me, like, "You're going to fail this class," and I was like, "oh."

Greg made the following statement about seeking help with academics:

I always hear people going, you know, to [university] tutors or study groups. I haven't really; I haven't; I never really did well in study groups or anything like that, so even when I, you know, there was a few maybe, uh, office hours that I went to but none like I didn't go into. I didn't get tutoring, didn't do [university] tutors or anything like that. I took a couple of the [university] notes. I got some of those. No, it was mostly just me with a textbook trying to figure it out.

### **Mental Health Issues**

Social anxiety, alcoholism, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder were cited by several interviewees as academic inhibitors. For example, Mike acknowledged the support he received from a mental health professional:

I've a pretty bad social anxiety problem. Um, I've actually been seeing a psychologist weekly since my junior year of high school. It got really bad once I started going to college, and I started seeing someone up here. And I see him once a week. And I pretty much just talk to him so that's pretty much where I go for it. That's probably a problem that I have. I don't really have someone that I can, like, call a close friend up here. It's, uh, at the same time that's kind of like my personality coming back. I kind of

**Figure 1.** Participant disclosure of five identified themes

Theme	Participants							
	Jeff	Pete	Jason	Greg	Mike	Sam	Bill	George
Disconnect between academic expectations of high school and college	X	X	X	X			X	X
Rigid male gender expectations with regard to social life and academic choices	X		X	X	X	X		
Inability to set priorities, balance demands, and focus on academic goals	X	X	X	X		X		X
Difficulty making connections with faculty, staff, and peers		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Emergence or intensification of mental health issues	X			X	X		X	

don't really get close to anybody it (unintelligible) feels weird to me. But um, yeah, it helps talking to him. That's usually where I go with it.

Bill explained that, after a decent start in his first semester, his situation deteriorated pretty quickly: "But like it didn't last long because, um, I got really depressed. I kept getting bad grades. It was like in math and in computer science, so it was really hard for me." George also related that he had not used coping strategies that had been successful in the past:

Before I came up here, I used to do mixed martial arts and I used to do cross fit to keep myself in shape, and it was also a stress relief, but since I moved up here, I haven't been working out or anything, so, I think that actually attributed [sic] to last semester as well because I didn't have any stress relief.

He also pointed out that his struggles affected his interactions: "Just talking to me you could tell I was frustrated and stressed. I was talking about maybe getting me a psychiatrist or something or maybe somebody I could talk to or even maybe paying for a gym membership."

Figure 1 illustrates the five themes identified using PTA.

### Discussion

The results illustrate that rigid societal gender expectations are laced through male college experiences, preventing some students from en-

gaging in help-seeking behaviors that could potentially salvage their academic progress. The methodological focus on lived experience in this study shows that simultaneous interaction of several factors, not any one alone, affects success of college (Figure 1). Male students whose high school study habits proved inadequate for college course work may not turn to advisors, parents, or staff in academic services trained to assist them. Instead, they resort to behaviors that preserve their masculine image, such as social isolation and substance abuse, instead of asking for help. Official warnings from an instructor or the university, designed to alert and intervene, may push male students into despair and increased deceleration toward goals. The male students in this study appear to lack the resilience needed to recover from academic difficulties because they did not want to appear weak.

Typical advising strategies employed with at-risk students (e.g., referrals to learning support, psychological services, other help-providing resources or instructors) may not be effective with struggling male students. According to the literature, the resistance to seek help or admit need for it reflects a typical masculine identity characteristic (see, e.g., Ryan et al., 1998; Wimer & Levant, 2011). Academic advisors must recognize male students at greater risk of failing or dropping out of college because societal gender norms discourage men from showing any kind of weakness. Also, advising techniques that work with female students in academic distress may not yield positive results with male students, and thus communication, programming, and services need development and

adjustment with an acknowledgment that gender roles influence outreach effectiveness. Although college males and females experience similar academic and social environments, the untoward impact of hegemonic masculinity on men remains largely unexamined except in cases of campus sexual assault. This situation compares to a combustion engine in which heat, smoke, and light are produced, but the underlying chemical forces remain invisible. Statistical analysis of student records reveals that patterns of student success vary by gender, but the forces causing this observation remain unseen as the culmination of a complex interaction of social forces in the environment, personal identity, and the impact of behavioral feedback loops (Hutchins, 1996) stretching back to secondary school. The outcomes of the interacting forces frequently first emerge during the introductory years of life in the complex ecological systems of university life.

One half of the participants revealed personal mental and emotional issues, such as depression and anxiety, for which campus or private health care professionals were actively treating them. According to these students, the college experience intensified the effects of their conditions and students reported feeling pressure to fit in socially and academically in their new environment. In debriefing sessions, we acknowledged that the anecdotal evidence suggests that mental and other health-care issues were growing in number on campus. A follow-up study with 12 male undergraduates was recently conducted and confirmed many of the findings reported herein (Wilson, 2015).

Several students provided negative comments related to the Greek life system at the university. These statements comport with Grubb's (2006) findings concerning the negative consequences of fraternity membership "such as suffering poorer academic performance, participating excessively in parties, drinking, and hazing, and conforming to the group's attitude toward academic work and other social groups" (p. 1085).

### Recommendations

Although evidence of student success patterns by gender has been documented in the literature, we sought to understand the unique circumstances surrounding academically at-risk undergraduate men. To gain the information to create an intervention strategy, we needed to shine light on the phenomena, learners, and learner contexts. In

view of our findings we present several solutions for advisors to implement.

Advisors need to approach male students from a holistic perspective that includes understanding the effect of gender on their academic experiences. The answer to academic problems among students may not come in a single program that addresses one element of academic difficulty. Rather, advisors need to watch for signs of vulnerability and intervene in gender-appropriate ways before the cascade of negative behaviors pushes the student into a downward spiral. Academic early warning systems, advising records used for flagging students at risk, assessments of preparation for college work, questionnaires about social readiness, communication systems between advising and residence life contribute to the identification of issues for these students, but these do not offer the solution to academic difficulty. Individualized responses by advisors to the students after the initial alerts must not challenge students' masculinity as they had been conditioned to see it.

When at-risk male students respond to advisors' outreach efforts, they must meet with a particularly welcoming and nonthreatening environment. Advisors help advisees build positive connections to the academic world by attending to students' interests, strengths, and goals; in this manner, advisors help each student create an image of his academic self that integrates him into the institution.

Advisors explain ways that programs can be adapted to students ("With these courses you could create an emphasis on new materials and maybe even add a minor in biochemistry.") instead of insisting that students must adapt to programs ("You must take this course now because it's not offered in the spring, and it's a prerequisite for that other one you need to graduate."). The successful advising relationship acts as both a personal and an intellectual support, providing male students with confidence that they belong in the institution and that they can gain personal value from engaging with it.

Advisors could further adapt to male students' needs by integrating images related to male discourse. If males prioritize personal fitness over academic achievement, then one might compare the need for hours of study to the time spent lifting weights in the gym. If the male perception suggests that seeking academic help connotes weakness, then a study-skills workshop might be promoted as the road to achieving excellence rather than as a remediation of deficits. If the advising relationship

is thought of as quasiparental and condescending, advisors might arrange their offices so that students sit beside them, as video game players facing a computer, instead of directly across from each other. Above all, in communicating with young men, advisors may benefit from using humor and indirection. Thus, an advisor who says lightly, “Oh, I totally bombed my first test in physics” implies that failure on an exam matters little. In fact, failure on an exam matters a great deal; however, by downplaying its importance, the advisor puts the single event in perspective: It is not the end of the world. Such an approach also provides an opportunity for the struggling student to claim a bond with the speaker.

Men living with the burden of prescribed gender identity need assurance that any single perceived failure, such as a failed exam or botched attempt at socializing, will show up as a blip in the lifetime radar. Jokes that put the student and advisor in the same mindset—“Man, I really screwed up my first semester. You should have seen the look on my dad’s face when I told him!”—help minimize any sense of loss. A simple means of addressing the physical orientation of male students might include taking a walk on campus while discussing the student’s needs and concerns (Steinhaus, 1999).

One novel solution leverages the power of predictive analytics and mobile learning technology. Recently, an undergraduate software-development team created a mobile phone application that helps students locate just-in-time tutoring help for their most challenging courses. The app software has been described as Tinder for Tutors. As an example of a grassroots solution to a campus issue, this tool directly addresses at least two needs identified in this study: (a) the inability of male students to connect effectively with peers, faculty, and student support services in a timely fashion and (b) the disconnect students experienced between the academic expectations of college and high school. We found in a prior study (Wilson et al., 2013), high school GPA and mother’s level of education are significant factors for male undergraduate probation at the target institution, so students matching these criteria are potential candidates for enrollment in the study. The theoretical framework and ecosystem for the app has been described in Wilson (2014).

The success of any intervention depends on at-risk students engaging in advising relationships. However, the very factors that put male students at risk also make them less likely to connect. Eight of the participant pool of 692 responded to our

interview opportunity, and each respondent believed that he was in the process of turning around poor performances. Because of dangers of isolation, advisors and others must engage men at points when they least feel comfortable at the university. In addition, when high-level sports or fraternities seem the only places for men to fit in the campus, some students may feel conflicted about trying out for a team that might reject them, joining a social setting that may not align with their values or lifestyle, or pursuing no institutional connections. During the first few weeks of classes, crucial for students to integrate and find the persons or groups with whom they will feel at home, advisors can use every means possible—orientation, scheduling sessions, walk-in appointments, and newsletters—to point out opportunities for engagement. Because students may feel awkward showing up to meetings alone, advisors might encourage attendance to orientation events in pairs or groups. They might recruit peer mentors to help new students break into a group.

Advisors can also advocate within the institution for clear, immediate, and accurately informative publicity for new male students trying to find their place in the college community. Further research might seek to reveal the barriers to engagement and the proven pathways to integration and academic achievement. Additional research could elucidate the cultural aspects of gender roles. Blee and Tickamyer (1995) described gender as a fluid and multidimensional social construct and individual development of gender roles is affected by one’s social surroundings. Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2005) found unique views on male masculinity on the basis of geographical location such as Latin American, East Asia, and Europe. Differences between the attitudes of White and African Americans toward gender roles have also been documented (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995; Edwards, 2006; Kimmel et al., 2005). However, not much work on masculinity has addressed issues of race in gender studies. A specific focus on ethnic, racial, and class differences in the socialization process would benefit the study of gender roles in higher education and shed light on male students on university and college campuses.

According to Severiens and ten Dam (2012), parental support of sons’ programs of study affects their students’ academic success. Males in female-dominated programs tended to leave programs that parents did not fully support. Parents’ gender-role attitudes should also be examined.

In hopeful findings, almost all the male undergraduates we interviewed had found a branch to grab while struggling in the stream of academic difficulty, and they eventually made a transition toward academic success. Some reached out to a parent, a new set of friends, a therapist, or an advisor. They identified themselves with a role model to help visualize the details of success. These resources gave them the courage needed to make the next step: connect with the institution. In recognition of the difficult initial transition, advisors can advocate for change to the timing for success initiatives so male students can embrace academic recovery from the start of any academic struggle.

Listening to the stories of eight men who were performing poorly in college, we documented the feelings of young men on the cusp of failure. Rigidly defined male-gender norms undermined the men in this study by subverting their motivation, discouraging them from seeking or accepting help, and preventing their genuine connection to the institution such that their academic and social development was negatively affected. Further examination across institutions of various sizes and locations would increase the overall understanding of these issues and allow for each administration to tailor programs for academic success. Perhaps additional examination of the definition of masculinity among various cultures would enlighten educators, including advisors, as well. At the forefront, everyone at the institution must reach and assure the long-term well-being for students while they earn degrees. Strict gender norms prevented undergraduate males in our study from initially accessing resources designed to ensure their academic success. Advisors can help men rise above these restrictive norms and assist them in developing their full potential.

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