



♂ Men: On Campus

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Bad Dogs: Rethinking our Engagement of Male Students

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While most men do not “do bad things,” the majority of disruptive, abusive, hate-motivated, and/or violent behaviors on campus are committed by male students. (Downey and Stage, 1999; Berk, 1990; Herek & Berrill, 1992; Levin & McDevitt, 1993). Student development and social science literature connects such behaviors to issues of psychosocial development: students with strong self-concepts tend not to be of harm to self or others. Student Affairs, as a field, stakes claim to knowledge and efficacy in promoting this psychosocial development in students. If these statements are true, we must ask ourselves: “What are we doing with male students?” If we believe that habits and identities are not formed when students arrive, then as a profession, we must critique our approach to male students.

As Student Affairs has developed as a field, scholars and practitioners have identified deficiencies in classical theory pertaining to many groups including (but not limited to) women, LGBTQ students, students of color, and students with disabilities. Furthermore, classical student development theory is primarily based on research subjects who are middle/upper-class Caucasian men and thus is primarily applicable to this population. While I agree that classical theory poses significant limitations for use with diverse groups, and so newer research and theoretical frameworks have rightly made their way into our field, it nevertheless misses an important point. The early research did not study “men.” Rather, it studied “students” who were men. There was no gender lens in the research and thus the resulting theory cannot capture the gendered nature of identity development, for men or for women. While the theories are gendered male per se (due to the subjects studied), they are resonant with hegemonic (socially constructed and imposed) masculinity rather than what we might describe as human masculine identity (Coltrane, 1994; Morgan, 1981). Meth and Pascik (1990) capture this issue particularly well when they note:

Although psychological writing has been androcentric, 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. (p. vii)

The Student Affairs field has established values and best practices based on this student development literature and uses it for the teaching and training of our graduate students and new professionals. I posit that we must revisit these underlying values and norms and question our resulting engagement with male students. There is now a disjunction that adversely impacts our effectiveness with male students. This disjunction causes alienation of male students, who then seek affirmation from the very peer groups that promulgate negative behavior. To the extent that we alienate men and chase them to this affirmation, we become complicit in the behaviors that offend us.

In the introduction to *Men's Lives*, Kimmel (1998) describes masculinity in terms of a “social constructionist” perspective:

The important fact of men's lives is not that they are biological males, but that they become men. Our sex may be male, but our identity as men is developed through a complex process of interaction with the culture in which we both learn the gender scripts appropriate to our culture and attempt to modify those scripts to make them more palatable. (p. xx)

Male students thus arrive at college socialized according to the hegemonic standard of masculinity. This standard promotes aggressive, hyper-masculine behaviors and it rewards those who exhibit it and punishes those who do not.

If, for example, a male student calls another male a “fag,” (or other hateful remark) the student may hear from a Student Affairs practitioner, “I would appreciate it if you wouldn't use

that word,” or “That is homophobic.” These responses are what I call the “Bad Dog” approach, an attempt to change behavior as opposed to promote learning and understanding about that behavior. The student learns nothing other than “don’t say that in front of this person.” This does not serve the student, and it does not serve the target of the phrase. Those who are marginalized and otherwise harmed by such language would benefit far more in the long term from an attitudinal change and developmental growth in the agent student.

In response to this situation, we must first put forth this issue as a legitimate concern. I believe there are many who quietly feel like we are missing something in our approach to male students, but that the dominant voices in the field are failing to address these concerns. We are missing something when it comes to men. When we do not developmentally challenge and engage the men who cause harm, rather than address the root of the issue, we are relegated to helping the other people who were harmed to cope with the bad behavior (e.g. Rape-Aggression Defense, LGBTQ Support Groups, Hate-Free Zones and Centers). These services are needed to help people who are hurt by homophobia, sexism, racism, and the like, but we must remember that the specific acts that cause this harm are mostly perpetrated by a small number of male students who we don’t know and who do not trust us enough to open up to us. In our deliberation, we need to grapple with the fact that in order to change our approach, we must be willing to give men (and especially the men who do harmful things to self and others) safe space to discuss their thoughts and beliefs. Many of these thoughts and beliefs may be objectionable, but we must hear

them with an open heart and mind. We must give feedback gently, asking the question, “Wow. That’s a really strong view. Where did that come from?” rather than, “Why are you so racist?”

While, I do not condone hateful behavior of any kind nor do I believe that we should remove accountability for those who perpetrate these acts, our students are usually thoughtful individuals who can benefit from a developmental approach. Male privilege and male access to this privilege are unfortunate

realities in our society, but because of their understanding of this concept and their personal development, most men do not feel powerful (see Allan Johnson’s *The Gender Knot* for more on that topic, reference included below). The discourse that men are operating in a male-centered society is frankly irrelevant to an 18 year-old college male who doesn’t even know who he is yet, much less how to “access his male privilege.” He will not “get it” unless we stop using the

behavior modification “Bad Dog” approach and instead focus on really listening to and engaging our male students in challenge and support.

In a course I teach, I recently conducted an exercise in which I instructed people to talk about themselves to a partner, and for the partner to listen deeply. I then asked, “How did it feel to be listened to?” The answers from men were powerful. One participant stated, “I’ve never felt listened to before, it was wonderful.” In order to encourage this type of environment for our students, we must come to terms with our poor handling of male identity development. We must discuss alternatives without allowing our traditional models to cloud a search for a workable alternative that is good for everyone, including young men.

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Knowing that some concepts presented here may be provocative, Jason welcomes email and dialogue on this SCM Brief.

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