

Conduct Based Interventions for Men: The MAGIS Program

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It did not take long after I began hearing conduct cases in graduate school that I quickly realized how frequently male students were in my office compared to female students. As Capraco (2000) notes,

men outnumber women in virtually every category of drinking behavior used in research for comparison—prevalence, consumption, frequency of drinking and intoxication, incidence of heavy and problem drinking, alcohol abuse and dependence and alcoholism. (p.308)

What was perhaps of most alarm, however, was how this was accepted as commonplace. As educators, we let societal expectations and messages dictate our methods. After all, boys will be boys, right?

However, when I had the chance to talk individually with male students something unique happened. They took off their masks of masculinity, let go of the chips on their shoulders, and opened up. I learned about histories of depression, abuse, drug use, and the challenges of managing relationships with parents and significant others. I was not doing anything unique, I was simply asking a few questions and offering a listening ear. I was intrigued by these conversations and wondered what it would take for these young men to begin having these conversations with their peers. Our discussions were helpful, but many were suffering in silence, while peers struggled with similar challenges. And, yet often our conduct processes do not make room for these meaningful discussions. Our energy is spent on the behaviors that present themselves and rarely the underlying causes. Cycles of poor decision-making based mostly on choices that were deemed to reinforce hegemonic masculinity prevailed, and I became increasingly uncomfortable letting the belief that “boys be boys” stop me from confronting the trend I was seeing emerge.

In 2006, I began working at Loyola University Maryland and saw similar patterns in my conduct meetings with male students. A colleague, Alejandro Covarrubias, and I had regular conversations about this and decided to put our thoughts into actions. We took our chances on putting together what would later be called the MAGIS Men’s Group. MAGIS stood for Masculinity Awareness Gained through Introspection and Solidarity. It also, not arbitrarily, had the term magis as its namesake, a Jesuit philosophy of doing

more for Christ and therefore for others. Utilizing the mission of our institution in connecting the work we were doing was of paramount importance. We saw this program as helping the institution advance a tenet of their missions, creating men and women for and with others. We wanted to create a space where men who continued to make poor choices on campus had a chance to discuss these decisions and how they related to socialized masculine conditioning. However, we knew it had to be a space where they felt safe, trusted, and would be willing to share. When looking at some foundational research related to this project, Ludeman suggests men should be provided a safe space to explore their emotions, not only at that time, but what they may have been experiencing before, during and following the incident (2004). However, with such a short time devoted to the actual hearings for these cases, we wanted to create a supplemental program that increased student learning.

An overarching assumption in creating this program was that male students who continually display aggressive behaviors and poor decision-making do not want to continue making these choices. We did not view them as troublemakers who set out to make the lives of administrators or fellow students difficult, but instead as boys exploring the difficult terrain of becoming men and not having a positive model of masculinity to guide them. We viewed these men as individuals who were caught in a pattern of destructive decision-making and needed to explore what was impacting their decisions before having the tools to begin making more productive decisions. I believe this is a vital paradigm for any conduct officer desiring to have an impact and keep perspective in this difficult work of helping students grow through the conduct process.

Another foundational assumption for our program was that conduct officers often require students to participate in anger management programs, which we did not believe were as useful as many deem them to be. We believed anger management itself was not the root of many of our male students’ problems, but that emotional avoidance was (and is) often the root. If these individuals truly had a problem with anger they would have little control over when it occurred. They may simply be walking out of a class and feel the urge to hit a classmate. This is rarely the case in conduct. Male students are often in the conduct process because they have a great fear of emotions and this fear of emotions is a strong predictor of hostility, anger and a diminished ability to control anger (Jakupack, et al., 2005). When alcohol is added, the outcome is a toxic prescription for violating standards for conduct.

We gained the support of supervisors and within two

months we had sanctioned eight men to the group and were ready to begin the program. We targeted men who had been through the conduct process at least once previously as well as men who displayed a disregard for any consequences of decision making and/or who exhibited repeated aggressive behaviors. We planned to require the men to meet three times for meaningful discussions and end the program with a relaxed activity where they could interact more comfortably. We had no idea if our plan would work, but we realized the outcome of not doing anything was not a useful one. We knew these men needed to discuss their decisions more and there would be great benefit from sharing their stories and vulnerabilities with peers.

We were clear with fellow administrators from the inception of this program that it was not meant to reduce recidivism. Not all colleagues were on board with this concept, but we felt strongly that many of the individuals we were hoping to target required significant self-reflection and growth and that our goal was to help them learn a more effective range of emotional expression, and not necessary to stop or change their behavior. Ultimately, we hoped this would occur over an extended period of time, but developmentally we did not feel the men in the program could change eighteen to twenty years of gender programming in a three-meeting series that extensively.

Our first meeting began uncomfortably. The eight students entered the group thinking they were there to be reprimanded. They were closed and confused, however, within a half hour the mood changed. The men let their guards down and genuine discussion ensued. One particularly gregarious student was very helpful in the process, and by the end of our first meeting, stories were shared regarding decisions these men were not proud of, early messages of what it meant to be a boy or man, and some even began sharing things they were struggling with personally. As leaders of the group, we left the first meeting knowing we were onto something. The following meetings produced productive discussion about challenges, role models, mistakes, and pain.

Throughout the next three years we repeated the program five times. Nearly thirty men had the chance to engage one another in discussion about choices, relationships, personal struggles, and obstacles they had overcome. Stories ranged from one of a father dying from cancer manifested in overly-aggressive behaviors from one student to a best friend who had been taken by leukemia, leaving one young man unsure how to cope. Lighter discussions also occurred, including the difficulty of relationships in college, ways to tell your father how much he means to you, and the complicated life of sex in college. Most importantly, the men involved genuinely enjoyed their time in MAGIS and formed meaningful relationships with one another. And even those who repeated their poor-decisions and were

back in the conduct process were better able to articulate themselves throughout.

Understanding what was occurring within the group to help it be successful became top priority. Why were these men having such a great experience? What were we actually accomplishing? The research of Jakupcak, et al. was able to help us understand that group work analyzing the impact of cultural and society influence on emotional expressiveness can provide male clients a chance to analyze their own experiences and identify persons or events that contribute to restricted emotionality (2005). We reviewed our learning outcomes, solidified what we were attempting to accomplish and replicated the program each term thereafter. We increased our assessment methods, including reflection essays which were coded for signs that learning outcomes had been met, surveys upon completion of the program, and focus groups one year post-participation.

Ninety-four percent of participants stated they felt more comfortable being themselves and eight-seven percent said they were more likely to intervene when friends were making poor decisions. Surveys suggested the men involved in the MAGIS program were truly able to shed their tough persona and be real with one another. They began realizing emotions were affecting their decision-making and that finding outlets to express those emotions appropriately would have a positive benefit in their lives. Ninety-four percent stated they were more aware of how emotions affect their decisions after participating in the MAGIS program. As one participant put it, "I felt this group helped support us in a time of need. We had to recognize our previous errors so that we could soon change them to improve our futures."

Throughout our two years of collecting data, we noticed the following themes emerge:

1. comfort in knowing others had similar challenges/experiences
2. MAGIS served as a referral source for participants to seek counseling
3. participants' appreciation for the facilitators and seeing us as mentors,
4. new level of trust in the conduct process, which they often saw as adversarial prior to MAGIS, and
5. appreciation for common stories, but a need to stand alone on issues and be true to self.

Jakupcak, et al. (2005) suggest that "helping men identify sources of gender socialization can facilitate a critical examination of societal standards and help men to redefine their personal definition of what it is to be a man." As such, this clarified our most prevalent theme, being that the men had a new definition of what it meant to be a man. As one participant put it, "The group helped me because it changed my view of what a man

actually is. I took time after to look at some of the men in my life and see how they act and try to model myself after their great qualities.”

Despite productive results, the group had limitations and obstacles. Lack of consistency in co-facilitators due to staffing changes and an inability to dig further into to the root of many of these men’s struggles were top challenges. The groups only spent about six hours total together, which does not allow for great depth. Timing was also difficult since the group only occurred once a semester. This resulted in some individuals beginning anywhere from one week up to eight weeks after their incident that required their participation in the group. We also quickly learned that a similar program for women would be useful. While I believe the patterns of male behavior will be most effective in beginning to change campus culture for numerous reasons. Namely, the power, privilege and cultural capital men have that allows them to largely direct the social setting on college campuses, suggested a great need to continue focusing on our male students. Simultaneously we began building partnership to assist in creating similar venues for women so that women on campus could benefit from similar discussions on gender socialization and decision-making.

For colleagues considering creating a similar program at their institution there are many ways to go about having this type of impact; ours was the best fit for our campus culture. Our model could easily be replicated, but may not be the best concept depending on campus environment. I would first suggest planning what you hope to accomplish by identifying the core area of concern on your campus and set learning goals. Oftentimes we create programs and then identify the learning goals we hope to see happen. I would encourage the opposite, to outline what you want students to learn first, and then shape the program based on those outcomes. This allows for more flexibility and creativity in tackling the challenge at hand.

In planning the content of our meetings, there were two books that provided great insight, and a third that we read along the way that was also very helpful in shedding light on the work we were attempting to accomplish with these men. The two books that provided insight on the approach we hoped to take and outlined factors that could have contributed to the decisions the MAGIS men were making include *I Don’t Want to Talk About It* by Terrence Real and *Real Boys* by William Pollack. *Guyland* by Michael Kimmel also shed light on what we were trying to accomplish and was very helpful for colleagues unfamiliar with the conduct process and level of what regularly saw to gain a better understanding.

Knowing our goals and planning in increments as the program developed also helped MAGIS be successful. Supervisors often wanted detailed outlines of the

program and curriculum before we began the program. However, we built curriculum progressively based on themes that emerged, allowing for flexibility. We felt it most important to get the program off the ground and learn along the way, altering as needed. Along the way we also built collaborations with faculty members in psychology or gender studies who we were able to bounce ideas off of. Building partnerships with our colleagues in academic affairs is good practice in developing new programs of this nature, as getting campus-wide support is of utmost importance for success and longevity.

It is important to determine exactly what you are choosing to accomplish and to communicate that message carefully and concisely. New programs, especially ones targeted at men can often require education of peers as you proceed, so it is important to spend time constructing a unified message you hope to send. Finally, it is essential to build partnerships across campus. We had great support from our Counseling Center, as they saw us as being very helpful in referring students who could benefit from their services. Carefully constructed and extensive assessments were helpful in determining the learning that occurred in the meeting as well as garnering support across campus for the program.

Indicators of success can be hard to find when working against a system of socialization as strong as the one men on our campuses operate in. This is a main reason we required men to write a reflection about MAGIS at the conclusion of their experience—to search for signs of growth. As one of the participants states in his final reflection,

MAGIS has shown me what type of person I really am. It made me realize that as men, many people believe that you must act certain ways. This is not true; it is not important whether you are a stereotypical man or not. What is important is that you act respectful, kind, and just be yourself. I know that I am a good person and have strong values and morals. MAGIS has helped me see these values more and realized there is nothing wrong with upholding them. I am able to uphold these values more easily now.

Knowing we have helped this young man free himself of the difficult cycle of decision-making based on what he viewed his role to be as a man in college is a clear indicator of success.

References

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