

Exploring the Impact of Identity on the Experiences of Entry-Level Men in Student Affairs
(Dissertation excerpt)

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Fewer and fewer men are entering the field of student affairs as compared to their female counterparts (Hamrick & Carlisle, 1990; McEwen, Enstrong, & Williams, 1990; McEwen, Williams, & Enstrong, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006; Upcraft, 1998). In 1972 women accounted for about 17% of all individuals going through job placement in student affairs; in 1987, that number had risen dramatically to 59% (Hamrick & Carlisle, 1990). By 1998, Upcraft estimated the number of women entering student affairs to be over 75%. In a recent study of graduate students in student affairs preparation programs by Taub and McEwen (2006), 222 of the 300 respondents (74%) were women. Although socially it is a great triumph that women are so well represented in student affairs, the lack of men entering the field creates another issue. With so few men in staff positions, to whom will male students turn to for support? As Hughes (1989) stated, "more males in student affairs are needed as role models for students and faculty" (p. 26).

Given the increasingly small numbers of men entering the field at present, such a significant drop off at the entry-level stage clearly will have an impact on the profession. Those men who choose to enter student affairs become even more important, and that critical window within the first five-years in the field is something that needs to be investigated further. As a male student affairs professional, I have a vested interest in this issue. I agree with Hughes (1989) and believe that there indeed is a need for men within this field to serve as role models and mentors for other professionals and for male students in general. The male and masculine perspective is one that needs to be maintained and there is a need for more research regarding men's issues at the professional level within student affairs. This research is significant because it provides a voice for men within the field of student affairs. It may direct leadership behaviors that bring gender balance to the profession by rebuilding the male population of student affairs practitioners, while providing a framework for these men to explore their own identity development within the context of this profession.

The purpose of my study was to understand the experiences of men at the entry-level of the student affairs profession. Using the concepts found in the existing literature related to gender identity as a framework, the research was focused upon the meanings

constructed by entry-level men within the field of student affairs and how those meanings are similar to or different from the societal definitions of masculinity.

The study consisted of 22 entry-level men currently working in the field of student affairs. Participants took part either in individual interviews (n=18) or a focus group (n=4) and discussed their experiences being a man in the student affairs workplace. Careful attention was paid to the perceived identity of entry-level men in student affairs in an effort to see if a relationship existed between this identity and their satisfaction levels. In addition, particular consideration was placed upon the ways in which these entry-level men in student affairs defined their roles and the ways in which they negotiated their identity.

I posited that the shortage of men in student affairs in some part may be attributed to the ways in which those in the profession define their masculine identity, which led me to ask the following research questions:

1. What is it like to be an entry-level man in student affairs today (what are the identities/experiences of entry-level men)?
2. How do men make meaning out of their gender roles in student affairs and in their roles outside of student affairs?
3. What types of relationship networks do men in entry-level positions have in student affairs and how do those networks support/hinder the experience?
4. How do these individuals (entry-level men in student affairs) negotiate who they are as men within the context of the student affairs profession?

The answers to these questions are significant to theory and practice in that they may lead to more appropriate work climates for men, may enhance recruitment and retention of men in the profession, and may establish the foundation for a gendered theory of student affairs practice. By hearing the stories and understanding the perspectives of men within the field, perhaps we can provide a voice to a population that continues to diminish in number. An underlying thread to addressing the shortage of men in student affairs may be found by determining how men, particularly those men at the entry-level, make meaning of the term "male student affairs professional." How these individuals define themselves and their environment during the first five years may help to shed light on their decision to leave or stay within the field of student affairs.

Major Findings

Results indicated these entry-level men in student affairs identified with three distinct roles: Traditional Man,

Leader/Mentor, and World Changer. Despite the often progressive tendencies attributed to student affairs as a profession, the identity of Traditional Man is still very present. Men in the field are often looked at to take on manual labor roles, and also seem more likely to be encouraged to make difficult choices, be the assertive person, and are viewed as more credible by others, simply based upon their gender. All of the men who participated in this study mentioned the importance of leadership, mentorship, and role modeling as helping define their experience in student affairs. Participants indicated that having a positive impact on others helps define their experiences, just as they were positively impacted by their own mentors, leading them to assume the role of Leader/Mentor. Finally, nearly half of the entry-level men in this study felt an even stronger need to make a difference, not only in individual's lives, but in the profession as a whole. These men, described as World Changers, are active social advocates, who are aware of the history of gender and oppression in student affairs and who feel it is their duty to end gender discrimination in the profession. Having chosen the profession of student affairs and learned theories related to student development and gender roles puts entry-level men in a position to help change perceptions and stereotypes about gender at a large level. As one participant summed up:

Being men who have gone through training on how to be empathetic and how to work in ways that aren't traditionally thought of, like in nurturing ways that aren't traditionally thought of as male roles, I think that we're exhibiting some traits that men need to learn to work in society as it is today, in order to be successful, and in order to be able to empathize with other populations. That that's a huge role we play. (Roger)

Also, according to participants, relationships and environmental factors have an impact on the experiences of this population. Meaning is constructed both by traditionally masculine gender norms (breadwinner, competition, status, prestige) and also by contextual factors such as workplace environment and workplace activities. In addition, participants perceive that the student affairs profession is dominated by women and, as such, they often feel like they are in the minority. These feelings can be likened to those of traditionally oppressed groups in society, as entry-level men in student affairs at times feel isolation and marginalization based upon their male gender. Similarly, these entry-level men at times feel as though they are provided fewer opportunities because they are men. This may be due to the past history of the men being those in power, so they are often intentionally or unintentionally not

thought of to serve on committees or to participate in events.

The data suggest there are four ways entry-level men in student affairs negotiate their identities within the profession. These areas are: being self-aware, having a male outlet, recognizing motivation, and having a support system. Those men who are more comfortable with who they are and who are more emotionally and cognitively mature, seem to more successfully embrace their role as men in student affairs. Being more self-aware means having a comfort level with working in a feminine profession and being secure when one's sexual orientation or masculinity is challenged by others. In addition, men who are more self-aware define success themselves, and do not need others to define it for them. The more self-aware men are, the more likely they are to want to make a difference in the field and working with others.

Another method of negotiating male gender role socialization for entry-level men in student affairs is by finding a male outlet. Whether intentionally created or discovered through other means, the participants in this study indicated they require a "safe place" with other men to be themselves. Often, this safe space or male outlet is a place for a man to do or say things where he will not be judged. It is also a place when he can act masculine in an appropriate way. George explained the predicament that some entry-level men seem to find themselves in:

It's one thing to be in touch with our feelings and be a little bit better at it than the typical guy, but at the same time we still are guys. [Not] having that quality time [with other men], facing the illogical or emotion driven stuff all the time can be overwhelming if you have no way to kind of get away from that.

For this group, an outlet serves as a means to deal with the everyday stresses associated with being a man in student affairs. Perhaps Roger summed up the feelings many entry-level men in student affairs have, and why a male outlet is so important for this population.

It's swimming up stream. I mean, we're swimming against what society tells us to be as men. I'm generalizing here, but we are more in touch with our emotions and [there is] more of a nurturing side of us than the average male..., and that's looked down upon. I mean it's not just that it's not considered normal for men [to be sensitive], but it's actively persecuted in a way....My actions sometimes may come off to people as like "wow, he might be gay" or "what a pussy" or something like that. Like we're going

against what society tells us to be as men. I think in the long term, of course, that serves us well, but, doing it all the time - I mean I do have to have a little bit of a release.

For these entry-level men in student affairs facing gender role conflict, there is a need to express themselves as men in a safe environment. Rob added some insight as to why this outlet is important:

I think it goes back to a comfort level. I know for myself there are some things I would say or do in front of just guys and not females, and there may be some things that I feel more comfortable talking about in front of males than I would females...

Having a male outlet and having an opportunity to connect with other men seems to be a key coping method for entry-level men in student affairs.

Results of this study indicate there are varying levels of motivation for men in student affairs. For some men, it is easy for them to see their impact in the field has on others at a more global level. These men are satisfied just making a difference and are undeterred by obstacles. For others, making an impact is important, but it may not be enough to keep them motivated. Competition and other traditionally masculine qualities, such as success and achieving the highest level positions possible can be a motivating factor as well for entry-level men in student affairs. Despite the varying degrees of motivation, in general, the entry-level men in this study are able to successfully negotiate being a man in student affairs because they are able to see the bigger picture and they are motivated by the impact that they can have on other students and staff, both male and female.

Finally, having an adequate support structure is key to a successful experience for entry-level men in student affairs. The results of this study indicated that although entry-level men are able to find support at an individual level, they feel as though support at the division, institution, and professional organization levels are not to the degree needed or desired.

This study provided an opportunity for the voices of twenty-two entry-level men in student affairs to be heard. I hope that by understanding the experiences of these participants that we are heading in the right direction. Perhaps one participant of this study stated it best to sum up role that entry-level men play:

I think one of the things as guys in student affairs that I guess is important to think about, is that whether directly or indirectly, your job as a student affairs person is to reach down and help other guys. Because the state of men in general across the board in our area is dipping, it's getting

worse. Whether that's low attendance in school, the fact that they're not doing as well in their grades as compared to women, whether it's not working in the field, it's kind of our responsibility to reach out and reach down and grab some people and pull them up too, whether they're going to be part of student affairs to work in or just do good in school so they can do other stuff. I guess to raise the level of men back up. It doesn't need to be above women, but I feel like right now it's starting to sink kind of below, so we need to at least be even. (George)

These are their experiences. This is the world of an entry-level man in student affairs. As a profession, it is up to us now to better understand the obstacles that this population faces, and hopefully we can better serve them in the process.

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