

Lost Men on Campus

May 22, 2009

Inside Higher Ed

By Elizabeth Redden

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 underrepresentation of men in campus leadership positions, in study abroad, career services and civic engagement programs; and their overrepresentation 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."