University of Pennsylvania

January 2008

Masculinities go to community college: Understanding male identity socialization and gender role conflict

3

Previous research has neglected to explore identities and development among male students at community colleges. This chapter provides some insight into who these men are, their precollege gender socialization experiences, and conflicts that impede the development of productive masculinities.

Masculinities Go to Community College: Understanding Male Identity Socialization and Gender Role Conflict

Frank Harris III, Shaun R. Harper

"The Case of the Missing Men," a front-page news story in the January 26, 2007, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, focused on gaps in college enrollments between undergraduate men and women. As is the case with most other treatments of gender in the higher education literature, the story highlighted disparities at four-year institutions, leaving readers relatively uninformed about similar trends at community colleges. Also problematic is the insufficient attention given to gender identity development, as well as attitudinal and behavioral expressions among male community college students. Most of what has been published about men at community colleges pertains to how many enroll and actualize the aspirations with which they entered (completing one course for skill acquisition, earning a certificate or associate degree, or transferring to a four-year institution) and, secondarily, the extent to which they are engaged in educationally purposeful activities. In 2006, men were 41.4 percent of students enrolled at two-year colleges and earned 38.4 percent of associate degrees awarded (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Although gendered attainment disparities exist across all racial groups, the gap is widest among black students, with black women earning 68.6 percent of associate degrees. Analyses of data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2006) revealed that women put forth more academic effort and spend more time studying, reading, doing homework,

and participating in other class-related activities. Furthermore, black male respondents to the survey were less likely than their same-race female counterparts to discuss ideas or readings with others outside class, use the Internet for academic work and research, or spend significant amounts of time studying. Thirty-one percent of black men were uncertain of their plans to return to college the next term, compared to 24 percent of black women. These engagement data, absent of social context to explain gender differences, are hardly useful for educators who endeavor to enhance male student outcomes, increase their participation in enriching educational experiences, and ultimately improve their persistence toward associate degree attainment and transfer rates to four-year institutions.

Disparities in enrollment, attainment, and engagement constitute most of what is known about men at community colleges and therefore make the exploration of gendered questions necessary: What prior gender socialization experiences do men bring with them to college? How do variable masculinities and identity conflicts affect male students' attitudes and behaviors on campus? And what sociocultural factors explain gender differences in engagement and retention within community colleges? These questions have been explored theoretically and empirically using samples of male undergraduates at four-year institutions (Davis, 2002; Harper, 2004; Harper, Harris, and Mmeje, 2005; F. Harris, 2006), but not at community colleges.

Informed by perspectives from sociology, men's studies, and education, this chapter devotes attention to some of the challenges and experiences of men at community colleges. Our exclusive reliance on published literature pertaining to male students at four-year institutions is attributable to the dearth of research exploring men at community colleges. Notwithstanding, we examine how these students are socialized and how various dimensions of their identities intersect, regardless of postsecondary educational context (meaning, two-year or four-year).

Manhood Messages: From Boyhood to College

This section provides insight into the precollege sociocultural factors that contribute to the behavioral trends that are common among male students in college contexts. We consider some of the published literature on boyhood, adolescence, and masculinities. Several socializing agents are identified by researchers as key influences on boys' and young men's precollege gender socialization. Families, male peer groups, and schools are consistently cited as having the most significant and lasting effects on the development of masculine identities for boys (Harper, Harris, and Mmeje, 2005; Kimmel and Messner, 2007; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell, 2005). These influences are discussed in further detail below.

Parents and Familial Influences. The traditional American family structure facilitates the gender socialization of children (Kimmel and Messner, 2007). This process entails teaching and reinforcing norms and expec-

tations of gendered behavior, which are respectively characterized as masculine and feminine for boys and girls. Children learn the expectations of gender performance for boys and girls (and subsequently men and women) by way of the direct and implicit messages they receive from their parents, as well as through observation and imitation of their parents' gendered behaviors and interactions (MacNaughton, 2006). Children learn throughout their development that domestic duties are culturally associated with women and femininities. Conversely, men and masculinities are associated with duties that represent physical rigor, strength, and power.

The interactions that characterize father-son relationships are especially critical during the process of gender socialization. The ways in which a father shapes his son's gender identity is informed by his own conceptualization of gender. More often than not, fathers' perceptions of masculinities are heavily influenced by traditional, socially constructed expectations. As such, Harper (2004) maintained that "no father wants his son to grow up being a 'pussy,' 'sissy,' 'punk,' or 'softy'—terms commonly associated with boys who fail to live up to the traditional standards of masculinities in America" (p. 92).

Fathers' expectations are reinforced through their daily interactions with their sons and reflected in the toys they purchase, the games they teach their sons, and the strategies they employ for punishing and rewarding gender performance. Fathers are also chiefly responsible for getting their sons involved in sports, martial arts, and other socializing activities that are popular among boys. These activities, coupled with the pressure from fathers to perform gender along stereotypical norms, lead boys to internalize the masculine values of competitiveness, toughness, and aggressiveness. Since these activities and interactions often take place in male-dominated spaces, boys also learn the language and lessons of patriarchy and male privilege (Griffin, 1998).

Male Peer Groups. Male peers also have profound influences on boys' gender identities. Interactions with male peers reinforce the early lessons about gender and masculinities that are learned primarily in the home. Harris (1998) contended that the influence of male peers on gender performance among boys is more intense than parental influences. Similarly, Pollack (2000) described a boy code, which restricts emotional expression among boys. Boys consider being called a "girl," "sissy," or "fag" highly insulting. Therefore, many boys conform to the expectations of their peers by engaging in behaviors and expressing attitudes that are contradictory to what they deem appropriate and desirable in order to avoid these characterizations.

Participating in sports also weighs heavily in peer interactions among boys. Sports provide contexts for boys to establish status by way of physical dominance and competitiveness (Griffin, 1998). Martin and Harris (2006) suggested that boys who can run the fastest, throw the farthest, and hit the hardest are positioned at the top of the hierarchy within their peer groups. Conversely, boys who are not gifted athletically and those who are uncomfortable interacting in male-dominated spaces struggle to gain the acceptance of their peers; they are often the targets of teasing and bullying.

Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) noted that boys' peer interactions are shaped by their athletic prowess in school settings too.

Schools as Venues for Socialization. Masculinizing practices, as characterized by Swain (2005), are heavily situated in traditional American school settings. Gender-related lessons and messages that are consumed by boys in schools are remarkably consistent with those reinforced within families and peer groups. Scholars consistently note that the tasks that lead to academic success do not complement the activities in which boys engage to achieve a masculine identity. Swain described the relationship between achieving a masculine identity and attending to schoolwork as fundamentally incompatible, given the processes of gender socialization for boys. For boys, learning and studying are equated with femininity.

Establishing a masculine identity becomes especially difficult in middle and high school contexts in which sports and heterosexuality emerge as important indicators of masculinities. The most popular boys are those who are perceived to be cool, which is defined in large part by a young man's athleticism and his heterosexual desirability. Teenage boys who establish reputations for engaging in sexual relationships with girls are considered among the coolest by their peers (Davis and Jordan, 1994). Thus, increasing their popularity and masculine statuses becomes an incentive for boys to pursue sex with girls and share the details of these acts with their peers. Consequently sex and girls are often the subjects of highly charged sexist behaviors and conversations among male teens. There is intense pressure to engage in these conversations; those who choose not to do so are viewed with suspicion by peers.

The patterns of interactions among middle and high school boys also persist into postsecondary settings. Ludeman (2004) asserted, "If the male socialization process indeed shapes or restricts the emotional skills and development of boys and men, then it seems likely that the demands of the college environment will create challenges for men related to their relationships and experiences on the college campus" (pp. 79–80). Ludeman's remarks facilitate our transition to the next section of this chapter, which considers the ways in which traditional patterns of male socialization conflict with men's development and success in college.

Masculinities in Conflict During College

Scholars who have explored undergraduate men in their research have not focused their analyses on men enrolled at community colleges. Therefore, little is known about the gender-related developmental challenges with which these men must contend. This discussion of masculinities in conflict during college is, by default, informed by the published research on college men who attend four-year institutions.

Higher education researchers have linked healthy psychosocial development with the achievement of important outcomes in college (Chickering

and Reisser, 1993; Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Engaging in campus activities and organizations, cultivating meaningful friendships and interpersonal relationships, and seeking help when necessary are some indicators of healthy psychosocial development for college students. College men are often reluctant to exhibit these behaviors because they are traditionally defined as feminine and conflict with lessons learned about masculinity prior to college (Harper, Harris, and Mmeje, 2005; Ludeman, 2004). Moreover, men's adherence to unproductive masculine conceptions such as sexism, homophobia, violence, and anti-intellectualism are often requisite for their access to male peer groups. As is the case in high school, men who openly reject these conceptions risk being alienated or having their masculinities questioned by their male peers (Kimmel, 1996; Messner, 2001). When examined critically, the incongruence between the behaviors that are linked empirically to student development and success in college and those that constitute the performance of traditional masculinities are evident.

Male Gender Role Conflict

Male gender role conflict (MGRC) is an empirically grounded phenomenon that helps to make sense of the gender and identity-related challenges with which college men must contend. O'Neil (1981) characterized MGRC as a negative consequence of the discrepancies between men's authentic selves and the idealized, socially constructed images that are culturally associated with masculinity. When men are unable to perform masculinity, they are likely to view themselves as less masculine and assume others will do the same. MGRC is also directly related to men's fears of being perceived as feminine (O'Neil, 1981). Femininity, when exhibited by men, is associated with being gay and therefore encourages homophobia and hypermasculinity among men. Young men are socialized at very early ages to strategically avoid values, attitudes, and behaviors that are socially constructed as feminine or gay. Thus, the detrimental effects of MGRC are not surprising.

The consequences of MGRC on development and outcomes for college men are noteworthy. Several behavioral patterns that are associated with MGRC are reportedly prevalent among men in college. Restricted emotionality relates to men's difficulty or unwillingness to express their feelings, their refusal to display emotional vulnerability, and their disdain for male femininity. This pattern stems from the belief that disclosing feelings, emotions, and vulnerabilities is an indication of weakness and therefore should not be exhibited by men (O'Neil, 1981). Seeking help through counseling and other means of emotional expressiveness is also inconsistent with restricted emotionality. In college contexts, men who have internalized restricted emotionality can be overwhelmed by failure, setbacks, and frustrations (O'Neil, 1981). Once internalized, these feelings surface through acts of aggressiveness and, in extreme cases, physical violence. O'Neil also found that restricted emotionality discourages genuine interpersonal closeness between

men. This may explain why college men often limit their interactions with male peers to stereotypically masculine norms (Ludeman, 2004).

Socialized control, power, and competition is a second pattern of MGRC that informs this discussion of college men. Whereas restricted emotionality denotes men's control over their feelings and emotions, this pattern relates to men's desires to regulate the situations and the people in their lives (O'Neil, 1981). The pattern describes a man's tendencies to compete with and show superiority over other men in order to assert his masculinities. Key sites for power and competition among college men are sexual relationships with women, status within exclusively male peer groups, and the accumulation of material possessions. When college men are unsuccessful in securing the power and control within these and similar contexts, they often rely on other, usually destructive, strategies for doing so. For instance, O'Neil (1981) posited that socialized power and control are achieved through homophobia within male peer groups. "Homophobia," O'Neil writes, "is a device of social control to maintain traditional male behavior appropriate to social situations and to control all men, not just [gay men]" (p. 208).

Finally, men's obsession with achievement and success has also been identified as a behavioral pattern of MGRC that provides insight into behaviors and outcomes for college men. Men are socialized to embrace the breadwinner role in the home. Thus, many college men pursue postsecondary degrees for access to high-paying jobs and careers, and thereby facilitate their fulfillment of this expectation. This pattern also partially explains why men have traditionally been overrepresented among students pursuing degrees in business, engineering, and other technical disciplines. Fears of failure and intense pressure to succeed are two consequences accompanying men's obsession with achievement and success (O'Neil, 1981). College men who fall into this behavioral pattern are predisposed to physical and emotional stress and reliance on food, alcohol, and drugs to sooth anxieties.

Identity Conflicts Among Four Community College Male Students

In this section, we present the profiles of four racially different men enrolled in community colleges. Each student is confronting a unique set of challenges relating to his masculine identity. These profiles illustrate the concepts and conflicts discussed in the chapter.

The Working White Mechanic. Adam came from a working-class background. While pursuing an associate degree in business, he simultaneously worked part time as a mechanic in order to make ends meet. Adam was a former high school all-American football player. In fact, he had expected to earn an athletic scholarship to attend a major university with a high-profile football program, but in the summer prior to his senior year of high school, he was in a motorcycle accident and suffered severe head

and leg injuries, which ended his athletic career. The accident and subsequent injuries left Adam angry and depressed, and they marked the beginning of a downward spiral.

Adam did not have grades and test scores that would earn him admission to a four-year institution without an athletic scholarship. Therefore, he pursued other career options that did not require a degree. To cope, he began abusing alcohol, having risky sex (which led him to fatherhood at age nineteen), and occasionally engaging in violent altercations with others. In his third semester of community college, Adam encountered a host of challenges. He struggled academically and found it difficult to fit in with the "smart kids," as he often referred to his classmates. His girlfriend suggested that he talk with his professors, join a study group, or consult a tutor at the college's academic support center. Adam refused for fear that his classmates and professor would view him as incapable. "They already think I'm stupid and don't belong there. I am not going to kiss their asses to pass a class!" he exclaimed.

Adam also found it difficult to accept the opportunity costs he had to endure in order to attend college. Prior to enrolling, he worked sixty hours a week and earned enough income to allow his girlfriend to stay at home and take care of their two children. Suddenly Adam had to reduce his work hours by half to make time for classes and studying. Consequently, his girlfriend took a part-time job to supplement their income. Adam recently asked a friend, "What kind of man has two kids and quits working so he can go and read poetry at some damn college?"

The Struggling Asian Help Seeker. Jimmy grew up in a traditional Vietnamese family in which education and high academic achievement were constantly emphasized. He has two older brothers, both of whom graduated with honors from top universities. His issues stemmed primarily from the pressure he felt to follow his father's professional footsteps. Jimmy's father expected him to earn an accounting degree and assume ownership of the family business. But Jimmy wanted to be a writer, which had become a source of tension between him and his father.

In his second semester of college, Jimmy began to struggle academically and suffered from undiagnosed depression. He also had not established any meaningful friendships in college, in sharp contrast to his high school years when he was highly engaged in clubs and regularly enjoyed social interactions with his friends. An academic adviser offered access to tutors, counseling, and other sources of support, and she encouraged him to consider changing his major. However, Jimmy refused to take advantage of these options, fearing they would be met with his father's disapproval.

The Latino Homeboy. Erik had always enjoyed school and was a good student until his freshman year of high school, when he began hanging out with a group of young men who had a bad influence on him. They regularly skipped school, spent significant amounts of time pursuing sex with girls, and were occasionally involved in minor illegal activities. At times Erik tried to

pull away from the group and get on the right path. However, the other questioned his loyalty and manhood. Somehow Erik managed to complete high school, but he decided not to participate in graduation for fear of his friends' reaction. In fact, one year had passed before Erik disclosed to them that he earned his high school diploma.

A critical moment occurred in Erik's life that motivated him to reconsider his future and recapture some of his promise and potential: his father became terminally ill. Realizing that in his father's absence he would need to care for his mother and two young sisters, Erik decided to enroll in community college to pursue a vocational certificate and an associate degree. His friends from high school offered a perspective on his decision: "School is for girls and sissies. If you need to support your family, be a man and go out and get a real job." Despite this advice, he lived at home with his mother and siblings, commuted to campus each day, and decided not to work so he could concentrate on school. Erik's performance in college classes was satisfactory; however, he often questioned his decision to return to school and wondered if he should have gotten a full-time job.

The Closeted Black Gay Achiever. Toreé graduated from high school with an academic record that would have easily gained him admission to a four-year institution. He chose to spend his first two years at a community college to relieve his family of some of the financial burden of paying for college. Toreé came from a tightly knit family with strong religious values. In fact, his closest male friends were those he had met in church as a youngster. The significant roles that family and religion played in Toreé's life and identity were profound.

During his time in community college, Toreé established a reputation as an outstanding student and a respected campus leader. He served as president of the student government and was well known by many of his peers. On the surface, he appeared to be enjoying a healthy and fulfilling college student experience. However, no one around him knew that Toreé was incredibly conflicted. As a junior in high school, Toreé discovered his attraction to other men and started engaging in sexual experiences and relationships with boyfriends. Toreé worried that disclosing his sexual orientation would change the way he was perceived on campus. Moreover, he was certain that his family would disown him if they learned he was gay. Over the years, he had heard his father make strong homophobic remarks about gay and lesbian persons. Also, given his religious background, Toreé was concerned that his sexual orientation would bring shame to his family. Overcommitment was a strategy he employed to cope with the stress and anxiety. The community college had only a handful of student clubs, and Toreé was involved in nearly all of them. Of course, he was applauded for his high level of service and commitment. But in spite the success and status he enjoyed in college, Toreé became increasingly depressed and unhappy.

A Conclusion on Conflict Among Community College Men

Though racially different, Adam, Jimmy, Erik, and Toreé, had one thing in common: each experienced conflicts related to his masculine identity while enrolled in community college. These four men's stories are more common than atypical, which makes understanding the unique issues and gendered experiences of college men urgently important. For example, two gender-related challenges were prominent in Adam's profile. First, he had clearly internalized the breadwinner role that men are often socialized to embrace. He viewed his decision to enroll in community college as a violation of this prevalent masculine norm, especially considering that his girlfriend had to share the responsibility of earning the income necessary to provide for their family. Second, much of the success Adam experienced during his adolescent years came by way of his participation in sports. Thus, returning to school required him to learn new skills and develop his intellectual competence. These new growth and learning processes resulted in increased anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and frustration.

Taken as a whole, Adam's behaviors were consistent with the restricted emotionality and socialized power and control patterns of MGRC. Sources of support that validated his new identity as a student would have eased his college transition. Also, connecting Adam with a male faculty or staff mentor could have been helpful. Supporting Adam through his challenges may have provided an opportunity to identify other men on campus who had recently returned to school and were balancing academic demands with caring for their families and working off campus. Finally, Adam may have benefited from career advising. Given his past involvement and success in athletics, pursuing a career in coaching, athletics administration, sports medicine, or a related field may have elicited more enthusiasm for college. Getting reconnected to sports also could have offered therapeutic benefits for Adam by providing some closure on the unexpected termination of his football career. Similarly thoughtful approaches should be used to understand and help resolve identity conflicts with students like Jimmy, Erik, Toreé, and other men with conflicted identities at community colleges. We offer the following potentially promising suggestions:

- Encourage male students to reconsider their negative perceptions of help seeking that many have been socialized to assume
- Provide opportunities for critical reflection on masculinity through journaling, course readings, analyzing popular media, and other assignments (Davis and Laker, 2004)
- Increase male students' participation in campus activities and programs that facilitate healthy identity development and lead to productive outcomes
- Provide opportunities for bonding by way of facilitated discussion groups and other activities that are popular among male students

- Collect campus-level data (interviews, focus groups, and surveys for example) from male students to assess their gender-specific needs
- Organize a committee of student affairs administrators, counselors, faculty members, coaches, and student leaders to provide proactive campuswide leadership in addressing issues concerning male students

One question remains: How do masculinities in community college contexts differ from those in four-year institutions? The paucity of published literature that provides insight into the gender-related experiences of community college men makes this question difficult to answer. While this chapter serves as a first step toward understanding community college men, additional inquiries that consider their unique challenges and experiences are urgently necessary. Studies that provide insight into the ways in which community college campus contexts both facilitate and hinder gender identity development for male students are especially needed.

References

"The Case of the Missing Men." *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Jan. 26, 2007, p. A1.

Chickering, A. W., and Reisser, L. *Education and Identity.* (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Community College Survey of Student Engagement. *Act on Fact: Using Data to Improve Student Success, 2006 Findings.* Austin: University of Texas, 2006.

Davis, J. E., and Jordan, W. J. "The Effects of School Context, Structure, and Experience on African American Males in Middle and High School." *Journal of Negro Education,* 1994, *63,* 570–587.

Davis, T. "Voices of Gender Role Conflict: The Social Construction of College Men's Identity." *Journal of College Student Development,* 2002, *43*(4), 508–521.

Davis, T., and Laker, J. "Connecting Men to Academic and Student Affairs Programs and Services." In G. Kellom (ed.), *Developing Effective Programs and Services for College Men.* New Directions for Student Services, no. 107. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., and Guido-DiBrito, F. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Gilbert, R., and Gilbert, P. *Masculinity Goes to School.* New York: Routledge, 1998.

Griffin, P. *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sports.* Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1998.

Harper, S. R. "The Measure of a Man: Conceptualizations of Masculinity Among High-Achieving African American Male College Students." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology,* 2004, *48*(1), 89–107.

Harper, S. R., Harris III, F., and Mmeje, K. "A Theoretical Model to Explain the Overrepresentation of College Men Among Campus Judicial Offenders: Implications for Campus Administrators." *NASPA Journal,* 2005, *42*(4), 565–588.

Harris III, F. "The Role of Pre-College Socialization in the Meanings College Men Make of Masculinities." Paper presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education annual meeting, Anaheim, Calif., Nov. 2006.

Harris, J. R. *The Nature Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do.* London: Bloomsbury, 1998.

Kimmel, M. S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History.* New York: Free Press, 1996.

Kimmel, M. S., Hearn, J., and Connell, R. W. (eds.). *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2005.

Kimmel, M. S., and Messner, M. A. (eds.). *Men's Lives.* (7th ed.) Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2007.

Ludeman, R. B. "Arrested Emotional Development: Connecting College Men, Emotions, and Misconduct." In G. Kellom (ed.), *Developing Effective Programs and Services for College Men.* New Directions for Student Services, no. 107. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

MacNaughton, G. "Constructing Gender in Early-Years Education." In C. Skelton, B. Francis, and L. Smulyan (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Education.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2006.

Martin, B. E., and Harris III, F. "Examining Productive Conceptions of Masculinities: Lessons Learned from Academically Driven African American Male Student-Athletes." *Journal of Men's Studies,* 2006, *14*(3), 359–378.

Messner, M. A. "Friendship, Intimacy, and Sexuality." In S. M. Whitehead and F. J. Barrett (eds.), *The Masculinities Reader.* Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001.

O'Neil, J. M. "Patterns of Gender Role Conflict and Strain: Sexism and Fear of Femininity in Men's Lives." *Personnel and Guidance Journal,* 1981, *60,* 203–210.

Pollack, W. S. *Real Boys' Voices.* New York: Random House, 2000.

Swain, J. "Masculinities in Education." In M. Kimmel, J. Hearn, and R. W. Connell (eds.), *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2005.

U.S. Department of Education. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2006.* Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

FRANK HARRIS III is assistant professor of postsecondary education at San Diego State University.

SHAUN R. HARPER is assistant professor of higher education management at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.