A joint publication by the Standing Committee on Men and Masculinities (SCMM) of ACPA and the Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community (MMKC) of NASPA
The Changing Faces of College Men

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Introduction

He steps onto campus for move-in day, eager to explore this new place, anxious about making some new friends, nervous about his future, and hopeful that he will quickly find his place and purpose. Though if he is like many of the college men we encounter, he will likely be somewhat less than fully expressive about these hopes and anxieties. As Student Affairs professionals, we establish committees, task forces, and work groups to try to understand what is happening with the college men on our campuses. The results are often programs, interventions, and dynamic speakers to address some of the needs identified by select data points highlighted by our committees. Our goals vary as widely as the diverse backgrounds of our students – from recruitment to retention to academic success to finding and expressing one’s voice to graduation, and all permutations in between.

Both the Men & Masculinities Knowledge Community in NASPA and the Standing Committee on Men & Masculinities in ACPA are acutely focused on the nuances of identifying these needs for the college men in our communities. And we are equally interested in highlighting creative interventions across our members’ colleges and universities to move the dials in the direction of our admittedly pro-social, male-positive, anti-violent, pro-feminist, anti-racist, gay-affirming agendas. We assume that most men have no interest in perpetrating violence. We assume that most men are interested in connecting with others through meaningful interpersonal relationships. And we assume that men in general are interested in social justice and capable of aligning themselves in the pursuit of it, though many need language to develop cultural fluency and a personal connection to the process to engage substantively.

This joint publication between these two associations is the third of its kind. In August 2009, we published a special edition entitled "The Gendered Dimensions of Campus Violence." Through that first joint publication, we sought to deliberately showcase the gendered dynamics of violence in our campus communities. Many of us began this work having been motivated by the hope for gender-based, sexual, or relationship violence prevention programs, and this publication offered a good platform to be able to feature some of the traditional hegemonic masculine role behaviors and ideas to challenge them. Heartened by this collaborative work, we reprised the joint publication in Fall 2010 with "Stories from Ourselves: Personal Musings about Men’s and Gender-Related Work." As professionals, it is often easy for us to ignore or downplay our own motivations for engaging or sustaining interest in the field, which became the focus of this 2010 special edition. So we began our joint publications with a focus on gender-based violence in our communities, followed by personal reflections on doing this work.

This third special edition shifts our attention to outcomes. What will our campuses look like if we are wildly successful in our work with college men? How will they be different places? And, assuming that we are not yet there, how will we know when we are making progress toward those changes? In this special edition, we are enthusiastic to feature specific interventions on campuses across the U.S. “The Changing Faces of College Men” does not just call us to acknowledge the diversity of our communities, it implores us to understand the fact that college men are not a static population merely mired in the sins of their predecessors. They are capable of doing great things, reflecting deeply on their own experiences, leading and following thoughtfully and inclusively, and influencing modern changes in ways that are no longer restricted by the traditional masculine archetype who exclusively dominated our campuses for the early majority of their histories.

We hope that you enjoy, and find inspiration from, the authors in this special edition.

Co-Editors

Dr. Brian D. Reed, Dartmouth University
Dr. Christopher L. Wilcox Elliott, University of Virginia
In the fall of 2011, I brought together a group of Dickinson College men to better understand the ways in which social expectations of masculinity were deeply affecting our lives and, more specifically, limiting who we could be. We created a student organization called M.O.R.E. (Men Overcoming Restrictive Expectations) with the mission of creating a campus community in which men could be true not to the binding social expectations that surround them, but instead to the deepest, most central parts of their own consciences. This project was born out of a growing emotion inside of me that reached a tipping-point and soon became an articulated concern and vision that others could identify.

I was cut from my college basketball team in the fall of my sophomore year. In my time away from the sport I gained the reflective space necessary to comprehend the anxiety that a life of hyper-masculine athletic competition had created within me. I realized that I felt trapped in a paralysis of expression and forced to perform a balancing act between who I was and what I was expected to be. I suppressed compassion and empathy for the sake of pursuing my place in a masculine pecking order. Certain emotions were restricted, trapped within, and left to boil inside; their existence only evidenced by the steaming anxiety that fogged my path to personal growth and meaningful relationships.

This campus movement began with my ability to personally grasp and communicate to others that this anxiety – this inability to “measure up” – is not representative of a deficiency within the individual but rather of a greater problem within society itself. It is not one person’s individual battle but our shared struggle. Our message also emphasized that social pressures put upon men often generate oppressive behaviors aimed at women and members of the LGBT community – and that men’s ability to transcend binding expectations is inextricably linked to the liberation of these marginalized groups.

M.O.R.E. began with a rocky start. Even after getting the word out by way of mass-email, our first official meeting had an embarrassing total attendance of two, myself and a loyal friend. After gaining administrative support, forming a committed student leadership team, and strengthening our outreach efforts, increasing numbers of men began to engage in our weekly conversations. At first, what we did at our meetings was simple. A student would present a concept related to masculinity, communicated by way of a group activity, a video or a personal message, and we would then collectively reflect on its relevance to our own lives.

As a 19-year-old leader in this work, I had no idea where it would lead. I just held a firm belief in its importance – that to create a healthier, safer Dickinson community, men had to open up and release the tension created from the restrictive social system within which they live. What we found, and often continue to find, is an initial reluctance from men to come to our meetings. After all, attending an event explicitly set up as a vehicle for men to express the deeper parts of themselves is in its essence an exact violation of the very expectations we discuss. But as soon as we were able to get decent numbers of men in the room, the result was both surprising and encouraging.

When we initiated conversation about topics like the impact of childhood trauma, lessons learned about manhood at an early age, pornography, male friendships, “bro” culture, the sexual expectations of men that come from all-male social groups, among many others, men quickly became engaged participants. This seemed to occur because of the lack of opportunity to speak about these subjects in normal life – subjects that create immense amounts of psychological stress on the conscious and subconscious minds of men. Often times little structure is necessary in the “lesson plan” for the types of workshops that we hold. The nature of this education – though guided with a common goal – is based in organic, group reflection on our lived experiences.

As time went on, we successfully developed a safe space for men to be vulnerable and we acknowledged our readiness to reach out to the rest of campus through community activism. We
carried out a poster campaign where community members were able to write brief reflective responses to provocative questions, for example: “How do social expectations of masculinity impact your life?” and “How would you reimagine the expression of masculinity at Dickinson?” We began organizing monthly panels in which a cross-section of male students, faculty, and staff reflect on the development of their own male identity in front of large audiences. Most significantly, we developed the annual Dickinson Men's Retreat, a meaningful experience of personal reflection, gender-identity development, community building, and action planning. Our weekly meetings have drawn an average of fifteen students, our panels typically attract audiences of 30-40, and our most recent men's retreat had 24 participants. All of these are substantial numbers given the small size of our liberal arts institution and our single-gender content focus.

Participants of the first annual Dickinson Men's Retreat, November 2011.

All of our programming is centered upon enabling men to embrace their vulnerability and unlocking the potential that this openness can bring. An inability to do this, I believe, is the greatest cause of male anxiety, depression and destructive behavior. For this reason, we initially try to keep groups from intellectualizing discussion material and moving too quickly to action-planning. Intimate sharing and reflection to the point of significant vulnerability must precede these things, and must be done to a large extent to sustain future activism.

Direct behavioral evidence of our ability to facilitate this process is exhibited at almost every event, retreat or meeting that we hold. When given a truly safe space to express suppressed parts of themselves, the men of M.O.R.E. have opened up about their fears, their traumas, the lessons their fathers taught them, the ways in which they have been beaten, teased and heckled, their inability to feel safe expressing true love, and so much more.

This capacity to overcome their fear of genuine expression also allows these men to be actors in the organic institution of change in other social settings on campus. The men of M.O.R.E. consist of athletes, fraternity members, artists, activists, and students of diverse sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds. As they occupy a range of social spaces, their ability to be themselves and to allow those around them to be vulnerable is contagious and liberating.

The most critical aspect of this work is the theoretical framework behind it. It is important to be explicit about this to prevent the accidental or unconscious use of intervention strategies that take one further away from one's goals. A harmful normative approach to men's development can be seen on certain athletic teams, in military training programs, and within other hyper-masculine social initiatives for male development. These programs discourage weakness, involve “character-building” schemes based upon the suppression of emotion, and often contain rhetoric akin to the parochial phrase “real boys don't cry.” Methods such as these align with what I call the Punitive Approach to men's development. Though this may seem to be a blatantly damaging option when seen on paper, we are often socialized into it, and act on it unconsciously. Therefore we must be very intentional in our attempts to counteract it.
The Concentric Circles Visual Model for the Compassionate Approach to Men’s Development

At M.O.R.E. we deliberately employ a different model of men’s development called the Compassionate Approach. This paradigm presupposes an innate goodness within all people and, specifically in this case, male-identified persons. Unlike the punitive approach which looks to punish expressions of vulnerability, and anything seen as “acting out,” our outlook is based on the belief that vulnerability is positive, and that exhibitions of maladaptive or destructive behavior are cries for help.

In the concentric circles model shown here, male displays of aggressive judgment of others, and physical or emotional violence, are understood as incidents caused by fear, insecurity, anxiety, depression, and at times even PTSD. In turn, the second layer of this model is created by past traumatic experience and continual microaggressions that are products of the entire system of hegemonic masculinity. The healing of these scars happens when we, together, are able to dig deep into the layers of these concentric circles through our collective vulnerability. As we do this work, we create a new normal – a loving community – one that takes on the responsibility of healing each and every community member. Only by surrounding our men with this can we reconnect them to the essence of their beings, and the center of their own consciences: love itself.

The fulfillment that I gain from my work with M.O.R.E. is two-fold. When I see the progression made by others I am thrilled. However I began this journey with no intention of being any sort of savior. I did so because I felt trapped, and suffocated in silence. It is also my therapy, and through it I have been able to reclaim my past. With the support of friends, I have delved deep and uncovered the intricate details of old memory – as a wounded victim of harassment and violence in which I felt not indignant, or even angered, but shameful and cowardly because I could not “measure up.” M.O.R.E. has shown me that the bully was wrong – but not only this. I have also found that my pain has been caused by the lashings out of those who are hurting too; of those who cannot understand the roots of their own pain, or comprehend the distance that they have been led away from their own loving centers. This movement is no fight in the usual sense. There is no group or people that we must overcome. Rather, we must triumph over this exact inclination – this learned impulse to dominate and defeat. We progress in this movement by loving. Courageous and unconditional love is the only pathway to the genuine healing and restoration of my own community at Dickinson, and communities everywhere.

David Dean is founder and Leadership Team Member of M.O.R.E. (Men Overcoming Restrictive Expectations) at Dickinson College, Class of 2013. He can be reached at deand@dickinson.edu