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Fostering Healthy Masculinity at the University of San Diego

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Fostering Healthy Masculinity at the University of San Diego

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Abstract

The purpose of my study was to enhance supportive relationships for male undergraduates at the University of San Diego (USD) who may struggle with their masculinity, sense of belonging, and gender identity. My research question is how I can collaborate with others to create a culture that supports male undergraduates with their identity development and fosters positive connections for these men in the campus community? My findings indicate that while there are successful group spaces on campus that support USDs male students, there is a clear need to reframe and improve the approach of doing this work.

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Introduction

My research began with reflecting on my values. These values were empathy, faith, honesty, and love, and they have been vitally important in shaping my own personal development. As a result, while reflecting on the culture of USD, I became concerned about the engagement of male students. According to USDs undergraduate student body profile, the student body is 55% female and 45% male. This disparity appeared larger on campus because male students at USD were significantly less involved than female students. This gave me great concern about the ability of male students to positively engage and contribute to USD's campus community. I also became concerned with the ability for male students to find opportunities of growth and development on campus due to their reclusive behavior toward the campus community. Although I am part of the graduate school community, I was an undergraduate at USD from 2011 to 2015 and experienced what many USD males experience during their time here. In my experience, there was a small group of male students that were heavily involved across campus while the majority remained uninvolved or only involved with one group or activity. The male students that were involved often held multiple student leadership positions one campus; whereas, many other male students were generally associated with one group in particular such as a sports team, a social or academic fraternity, or a specific club. As I reflected more on the impact of this institutional culture, I wondered what allowed some men to feel so comfortable being overly involved and what hindered the majority of men from engaging with the greater campus community. In order to understand how I could work with others to support and engage these male students on campus, I decided to find out what resources existed on campus that men were engaged in and who on campus was creating these spaces for them. My desired result of this study was to align my values with my purpose in order to collaborate with

students, staff, and faculty to offer recommendations on how to improve the structures that exist

around support and engagement for male students. This goal created the opportunity to focus on

what structures were working well at USD, how to improve them, and how to create new

structures that reach those male students not being supported and engaged.

Background

My research is oriented around the lack of involvement of college men in their collegiate

communities. In order to understand this lack of male involvement, I used these theoretical

frameworks; male-student involvement, gender identity development, and masculinity. These

constructs are not easily discussed or reflected on by men. Most young males do not know why

they act the way they do, they simply behave in reaction to social cues.

Kellom (2004) said, "Despite a history of privilege and success in higher education,

troubling trends for student affairs and academic leaders have emerged with regard to college

men's recruitment, retention, and academic success" (p. 107). To a degree, focusing on the

involvement and development of those who self-identify as males can come across to the greater

community as dismissing the struggle of women and reinforcing the gender binary. However,

this focus on male development is not to put other gender identities down but rather to address

specific issues facing men in order to help them personally develop and increase their positive

engagement with all other gender identities.

The Department of Education website reports that in the 2018-2019 academic year 56%

of students enrolled in universities were women and that the trend of less men attending

universities shows no sign of slowing down. Overall, male undergraduate student enrollment

indicates that less men are going to college and lower numbers of those that do attend college

actually graduate. Tinto (1993) studied the cause of student attrition from universities and said,

"we need to recognize the need to design programs for different groups of students, we must never forget college is an individual experience, one that is similar but never exactly the same" (p. 182). Tinto's research is one of the most widely known on student persistence in college and he claims that a student's sense of belonging, defined by social and academic integration in their college community, is the core principal of student persistence. However, a shortcoming of Tinto's persistence models is the lack of specific information provided for gender differences, racial differences, and ethnic differences between students. Additional studies have shown the continued lack of connectedness expressed by males who identify as a racial or ethnic minority (Strayhorn 2003; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Harper 2013).

Despite the relative scarcity of literature looking specifically at male students' collegiate persistence, there have been some significant studies that have identified masculinity, the term used to describe the gender expression of those who self-identify as men, as a core reason men struggle to get involved in college (Bowman & Filar, 2018). The dominant traditional definition of masculinity "serves to oppress women, marginalize some men, and limit all men" (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p. 211). As a result of this narrow gender role, Kindlon and Thompson (2000) described men as "emotionally illiterate" (p. 5). This emotional illiteracy speaks to the higher risk of behavioral issues, substance abuse issues, and depression men are experiencing in college. In the research done by Edwards and Jones (2009), they found that their ten college male participants could not articulate where they learned this patriarchal, or dominant, expression of masculinity. Edwards and Jones (2009) describe this as "internalized patriarchy" (p. 212). They discussed how, as young men grew up, they internalized these characteristics by responding to the societal expectations put on them as men. Essentially, they learned how to be "manly" by listening to what society told them they could and could not do. One participant described this

performing to societal expectations as, "putting my man face on" (p. 214). In the documentary, "The Mask you Live In" (2015), they use the concept of a "man box." As young men grow up, they learn that they it is only socially acceptable for them to embody traits from within this main box, which often hyper masculine traits such as you must be "dominant over other men and women" or "boys don't cry." In the documentary, a men's group of individuals serving life sentences for violent crimes discuss how this "man box" prevented them from processing their trauma and feeling whole. These traits or masks do not just take place in public; it takes place in front of women, other males, and all types of authority figures. Now, this becomes problematic because if schools are punishing male students for behavior misconducts, but not looking to see if there is a deep-rooted issues, school officials are perpetuating a patriarchal masculinity paradigm. Edwards and Jones (2009) make it very clear that some male misconduct is a cry for help in the sense that "it may be that men are just as frustrated, ashamed, or embarrassed by their behavior" (p. 224) but do not know what else to do.

In order to break down the negative aspects of patriarchal masculinity, there must be a focus on fostering positive male gender identity development. Gender is socially constructed; therefore, gender identity development can be viewed as an ongoing process of how your characteristics and personal traits are influenced by your environment and expressed in your actions. According to Davis and Laker (2004), "the array of masculinities is best [understood] through the Jones and McEwen Multiple Dimensions of Identity model" (p. 52). This model takes into account "sexual orientation, race, culture, class, religion, and gender as dimensions central to one's identity" (David & Laker, 2004, p. 52). This shows that when dealing with the identity development of a male college student we must take all of these factors into consideration, and not make assumptions. For my research, I will use a gendered lens, while

taking into account these other previously listed criteria, to help break down these harmful, traditional masculine traits that hinder male students from being their authentic selves. One key to fostering this growth for males within the college community is through their involvement.

Astin (1999) defines student involvement as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to their academic experience" (p. 518). The term academic experience does not simply mean succeeding in the classroom but refers to the overall college experience both socially and academically. Astin does a great job of making student involvement approachable and simple to understand; however, he also believes that involvement can only be measured through behaviors and not by how one thinks or feels. This is the type of shortcoming Edwards and Jones point out in their later research that can hinder male development. Their participants actually cited the three interviews in that research project as having a profound influence on their own gender identity development. It is clear that male involvement must involve measuring both behaviors and emotions.

Other studies have identified the necessity of programs and interventions such as learning communities or mentorship programs, which are vital to improving the emotional and behavioral outcomes of men (Zhao, 2013). David and Laker (2004) frame this recommendation, "More effective educational interventions for college men will not only benefit college men, but also college women and the entire campus environment" (p. 55). The goal of my research is to increase male involvement at USD by discovering how to deconstruct these internalized, negative behaviors in male students and give them the tools to live and act authentically. Bowman and Filar (2018) have begun this type of action through a praxis-based approach that gives universities tools to rethink how they engage college men moving forward. I will emphasize this type of approach in my research and build on it.

Context

This issue of poor engagement by undergraduate males is quite present in the USD community. Even though USD is a small institution with many clubs and organizations, very few possess a large number of male members outside fraternities. As a former undergraduate male, I take particular interest in increasing programs and initiatives to improve the engagement of males on USD's campus. However, I wanted to be clear about my intent. Based on existing research related to masculinity and poor male engagement, I aimed to increase the developmental support of these young males to increase their ability to break down the societal stereotypes of what men are supposed to be like in order for them to be their authentic self. This type of work and support will not only improve the experience and involvement of males on USD's campus, but it can have positive impact the campus community as a whole.

In order to accomplish this initiative of providing gender identity-development support for undergraduate males, I decided that I did not want to limit myself by only working through my role as a graduate assistant on campus. Additionally, during my time on campus my role changed from working in Living Learning Communities and Orientation Office to being the Assistant Community Director for the Alcala Vista Apartments, which allowed me to co-supervise 17 Resident Assistant and support 670 second year residents. This change provided more opportunities to work directly with students, and also further convinced me that I should engage with my participants outside of my role. However, I believed that my formal authority as an Assistant Community Director would hinder the amount of data I received from my participants if my participants were under my supervision. This decision was also made in conjunction with the fact that I have been a member of the USD community since 2011, which provided me the social capitol to recruit male participants.

Male engagement and involvement at USD has been a long term issue. There are previous Action Research projects that date back to 2011 that were dedicated to finding a remedy for this dilemma. There are many societal influences that are in need of change to fix the attitude around what it means to be a man in today's society; however, there are also specific issues present at USD.

This action research is extremely important in trying to understand what type of culture and services are needed to meet these young men where they are in order to help them personally and collectively. Through my research, I hoped to understand where college men are from a developmental lens in order to make recommendations for implementing new practices around engaging and supporting them. It is important that there are some concrete ways of improving the way that the USD community and professionals work to support and engage college men.

Methodology

In order to create lasting cultural change within the USD community, I focused on certain groups and practices that are already effectively helping male students. For the purposes of this study, male students encompassed undergraduate and graduate male students. The goal was to figure out what was working well, how to improve upon those efforts, and develop ways to engage young men that are not being supported by the existing structures. Therefore, I chose to use the Appreciative Inquiry action research approach. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) describe Appreciative Inquiry as the backbone to focusing on collective strengths to transform organizations. Additionally, Wright and Boyd (2007) speak of Appreciative Inquiry as an "opportunity-centric approach that has the potential to reframe and dramatically shift organizational and community norms" (p. 1019). It was important to maintain a strong practice of reflection throughout my research. Appreciative Inquiry has four main stages; Discovery,

Dream, Design, and Destiny. I also chose to add an extra step to my approach to encourage constant reflection, which is the reflection section at the end of the first three stages. This allowed me to make more intentional decisions as I progressed through the four main stages and to more adequately adapt to my positionality in the research and the campus environment. This also gave me a more comprehensive understanding of how to approach creating recommendations that would create lasting cultural change on campus. This added aspect of reflection was influenced by Jean McNiff (2016) in order to maintain flexibility and awareness throughout my research.

I chose to use qualitative methods of gathering my research data in order to capture themes and stories of the USD male student experience. These methods included; informational interviews with USD administrators, a mind mapping focus group, a group reflection with fellow graduate students that are studying masculinity, discussion based focus group, the Men@USD leadership retreat, and an open-ended question survey. All quotes, notes, and journal entries from these meetings were logged post interaction in order to create and maintain an authentic relationship within these groups and with these male students. I journaled throughout the entire research project in order to capture as much data as possible and to try and prevent bias from entering into how I remembered my experiences.

My research methodology was reflective of my epistemological assumptions of research. In my experience, research results have been too problem-specific, and I was worried that by using traditional forms of research I would be limiting my ability to focus on the USD campus culture as a whole. There is not one issue with male gender identity development; therefore, I do not want to approach this issue with the expectation of there only being one major factor to address.

Needs Assessment

I have been affiliated with USD since 2011 when I moved to San Diego from Washington DC for my freshman year of college. In 2012, I moved off campus and started to notice outside of my friend group there was not much of a male identity or network of support. In my time as a graduate worker and student, I have further experienced the lack of involvement by male students. In order to better reach out to these men, I have coordinated with the creators of the Men@USD Retreat and the Resident Minister who has run the weekly Men's group that meets every Monday night. These men are administrators and faculty members in the USD community who have already begun working toward a more supportive culture. Moreover, a story that was told to me by one of these administrators really moved and further motivated me to do research on this topic. This administrator told me that the very first day of the Men@USD Retreat a few years ago they asked the students their name, year at USD, and why they were attending the retreat. The very first student who raised his hand, eager to answer, said his name, said that he was a senior, and then said that he was there because he was going to graduate that May and he felt he has been a boy his whole time in college and he wanted to graduate as a man. We do not often discuss these issues, but the reality is that many young males need challenges, support, and dialogue in order to develop their sense of identity and maturity. The Men@USD Retreat has done a great job of giving young men the space to be vulnerable, to be challenged, to be supported, and to grow; however, I wondered what more can be done besides a three day retreat.

I reached out to male students who had been involved with the Men@USD retreat or the Men's group that meets every Monday. I asked them if they knew anyone who was interested and if they themselves were interested in this research project. As a result of this personal

invitation and snowball sampling recruitment approach, I was able to recruit 11 participants to

partake in two hour and a half focus groups. Additionally, the administrators and faculty that I

conducted information interviews with invited me to help co-facilitate the Men@USD leadership

retreat. Then, I attended an existing men's group on campus and asked the 10 members, 8 of

which were upperclassmen, to fill out my open-ended question survey. We then held a fifteen

minutes dialogue around what they thought might help close the gap that exists between what is

being done to support and engage men and what needs to be done. It is also worth noting that I

attended the weekly men's group put on through University Ministry. This group participation is

not recorded in my research but has influenced the depth of relationship I have with certain male

students and has positively contributed to my personal journey with healthy masculinity.

Although this technique of gathering data did not use the same participants throughout the

research project, I decided I wanted to capture as many male voices and stories as possible to try

and understand the USD culture as a whole. Through this broad approach, I was able to dialogue

and be vulnerable with over 75 active male members of the USD community. This group ranges

from first year, eighteen year old male students to the current president of USD.

Stage I	Discovery	- Informational Interviews - Focus Groups *Reflection*
Stage II	Dream	- Men@USD Retreat *Reflection*
Stage III	Design	- Open-ended question survey *Reflection*
Stage IV	Delivery	Recommendations

Table 1: Cycle Descriptions

Discovery

(September 1st 2018- November 15th 2018)

Informational Interviews

(September 1st 2018- October 8th, 2018)

I met individually with three full time, male staff members at USD who work with men on development and masculinity for an hour each. The goal of these one on one meetings was to discuss my interest in pursuing the topic of developing healthy masculinity and to understand their perspective on the venture. Each of these three men have dedicated considerable time to working with young male students and helping them develop and mature either spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually.

The first professional, who we can call George, is a Communication Studies professor at USD, and has written a book with a colleague entitled, *Masculinity and student success in higher education.* The second individual, who I will refer to as Stan, is the Assistant Vice President of Mission and Ministry at USD. Stan has also published articles around health masculinity and co-created the Men@USD leadership retreat that focusses on helping USD male students understand and reflect on what it means to be a man in today's society. Lastly, there is our third staff member, who I will refer to as Fred, and Fred is the Senior Director for mental and behavioral health at USD, and has done a lot work with male students that have either physical or mental difficulties. All three of these men have also participated heavily in the Men@USD leadership retreat in order to work experientially with USD male students.

In our conversations, there were a few themes that emerged in all three conversations that set the tone for exploring how to foster healthy masculinity with USD men. The first theme was story telling. In each conversation, there was significant time spent around story telling. Story

telling emerged in different ways. There were instances where I needed to share my own

personal struggles and path in understanding my gender identity to help them understand where I

was coming from. They needed to share stories around their personal experiences and

interactions with male students that have positively impacted them. I remember specifically

when I met with Fred and he told me the story of how he decided to go into counseling work.

The story was that while he was working in an inner city school in Chicago one of his students

basically told him he was not a great teacher but was good at listening and talking with him

outside of class. The story was quite funny to hear and very relatable.

Next, there was the idea of 'unlearning' what it means to be a man. In our conversations,

which was mimicked in much of the literature on masculinity, it is vital to understand how

socialized we are as men. Often times our worst and most harmful habits are the ones we

unconsciously chose to embody. I remember speaking to all three of these men about my

inability to accept failures I have experienced throughout my life. They all were able to speak to

their personal need to unlearn bad habits as well.

Lastly, the idea of trust. Trust can take many forms. A very concrete way trust can be

seen is through mentorship. In these information interviews, I was very intentionally looking for

mentorship and guidance from these men. Additionally, they all spoke to other men being their

mentors. They mentioned their fathers, teachers, students, friends, or spouses. Trust is also

important when we think about what it takes to create an environment where men can be

vulnerable.

These conversations were important in both setting my expectations on how to relate to

my participants and understanding ways of connecting with them. These conversations were also

intentional because all three of these men have been doing the work with male students in their

masculinity development, and understanding their perspective was vital to being able to get involved with what they were already doing and figuring out how to add onto their existing work.

Participants	Race-ethnicity	Sexual Orientation
Chet	Multiracial	Heterosexual
Harley	White	Heterosexual
Aaron	Multiracial	Heterosexual
Roscoe	White	Heterosexual
Wilmer	Latino	Gay
Dewey	Latino	Heterosexual
Javier	White	Heterosexual
Ross	White	Heterosexual
Dominik	White	Heterosexual
Tracey	Asian	Heterosexual

Table 2: Focus Group I with Mind Mapping: *(October 11th 2018)*

From the first week in September until my first focus group on October 11th, 2018, I focused on recruiting participants through attending a men's group on Monday nights and asking current students I already personally knew. On October 11th, I hosted my focus group in the Quiet Study Lounge in the Alcala Vista Apartments, which is the second year housing community on USD's campus. This first focus group had 10 participants and myself present. These participants ranged from first year undergraduate students to second year graduate

students, and ages 18 to 25 years old. This session lasted an hour and a half and I provided

snacks for the participants to help them stay engaged.

In order to begin the session, I had everyone stop talking and listen to a four minutes song

by the California Honey Drops called Long Way. The intention behind this introduction to the

session was to try and center the group. Once the music finished, I introduced myself and the

purpose behind this focus group. I then told everyone we would be doing a mind mapping

session and explained to them the rules. I put up a large poster board piece of paper with a word

in the middle of it, and I asked as they filled in the branches associated with the word to remain

silent. There were three sessions and each session was timed for ten minutes with a ten minute

discussion after each session. Additionally, if anyone felt during the session that they strongly

agreed with a term written on the board they could put a check mark next to it to express that

rather than rewriting it and taking up too much space. Please refer to Appendix A for the

following topics, as well.

Masculinity

The first session had the word Masculinity written in the middle of the poster. The

purpose of starting with this word was to gage the understanding and perspective of the group

around the term. Masculinity is a buzzword that often times gets thrown around in conversations

or descriptions and it was important that in starting out my research I make sure I understand

what my participants working definition of masculinity. The written words with the most

expressed agreement were being "self-sufficient, being emotion-less (specifically not crying),

and having sexual confidence." As the debrief conversation began, there was a real sense that all

the participants could find positives and negatives with each word written on the board. There

was also a strong group mentality around the controversial nature of the word. Overall, the

participants felt as if they could speak to aspects of masculinity, but it was difficult to define in a concise manner.

Failure

The second session had the word Failure written in the middle of the poster. The purpose of this word was to see my participant's perspective on what it means to fail when you are a man. More specifically, trying to gage the group's perspective around what it means to fail in either aspects of one's life or in trying to be "a man." There was a wider range of words placed on the board with less agreement amongst participants based on check marks. Some words that were agreed upon were "scrutiny, humiliation, self-worth, important, integral of success, and un able to support others." The dialogue following the written work was lively. Participates showed the ability to view their understanding of failure in a complex way. There was a consensus that failure is difficult to experience but also necessary for growth. Many mentioned how when they fail it feels that they are letting others and themselves down.

Identity

The third session had the word Identity written in the middle of the poster. The purpose of this word was to try and get an understanding of how participants might view themselves. This session had a lot of writing, similar to the first two; however, this session showed a phrase that was the most agreed upon from all three sessions. The phrase was, "Change to fit in" and was written down by Ross. This phrase set the tone for the discussion after the writing portion. The conversation revolved around the idea that there are a multitude of identities they feel connected to but feel that there are very few socially "acceptable options." It was evident that most, if not all, participants were alluding to the fact that there are parts of themselves that are

not acceptable to openly share or show in public. They expressed how they must change to some degree in order to feel like they fit in.

Focus Group II

Participants	Race-ethnicity	Sexual Orientation
Chet	*Multiracial*	*Heterosexual*
Harley	*White*	*Heterosexual*
Aaron	*Multiracial*	*Heterosexual*
Roscoe	*White*	*Heterosexual*
Wilmer	*Latino*	*Gay*
Dewey	*Latino*	*Heterosexual*
Karl	*Latino*	*Heterosexual*
Ross	*White*	*Heterosexual*
Dominik	*White*	*Heterosexual*
Tracey	*Asian*	*Heterosexual*

Table 3: Focus Group Participants (November 15th, 2018)

The second focus group was a more traditional focus group that focused on what it means to be vulnerable as a man in society. Before this meeting, I emailed all participants a Ted Talk by Brene Brown (2010) in order to give them a base level understanding of vulnerability. Vulnerability can be a buzzword and I wanted to make sure the participants did not feel they were being asked to share their whole live story, but rather to be willing to take risks in their emotional exposure in our upcoming conversation. It is also worth noting that in the transition from the first focus group to the second focus group, Javier was not present due to a scheduling issue; however, existing members invited a new participant named Karl. Therefore, this session

had 10 participants including myself. Please refer to Appendix B for these questions. The

questions used in this focus group were: 1) What does it mean to be vulnerable as a man in our

current society? Do you have an example of a time when you felt you could not be vulnerable or

could not express yourself how you truly want to? 2) Do you find it hard to be vulnerable with

yourself? 3) If being vulnerable is hard for men how do you think this affects men when they

interact with others? Where does this show up for you? The group was quick to engage these

questions. It had not been longer than twenty second before Chet said,

> When I am vulnerable with other men it sometimes makes me feel weak, even though I
>
> know I shouldn't. I feel self-conscious making other people worry about me, so
>
> sometimes I am not vulnerable with them so they don't feel like they need to worry about
>
> me.

Roscoe expressed how often times a full day at USD can be mentally and physically draining. He

said that he "does not want to bring things up when hanging out with guys because it's his time

to finally get away from his issues throughout the day." These comments led into talking about

how retreats are so necessary for being vulnerable because it is easier to build time and space

into having tough conversations. It was also expressed that during retreats it feels acceptable to

have these conversations where as in everyday life it is hard to know when it is acceptable. After

allowing the conversation to discuss why retreats are so valuable, I posed a probing question,

"how do we bridge the gap between vulnerability on a retreat and being vulnerable in our day to

day lives." The participants struggled to answer this question quickly. There was discussion

around the idea of a 'retreat high' where life seems better and more full than it normally does;

however, everyone was in agreement this emotional high eventually dissipates and more often

than not we go back to our old ways of thinking and living. There was also a bit of defensiveness

from the group. Dominik answered the probing question by alluding to the fact that we cannot be vulnerable all the time, and seemed to show that he felt retreats might be one of the few places this is acceptable.

The group then transitioned into the next two questions, which organically tried to tackle the issue of being vulnerable and honest with yourself and how that shows up in your interactions with other men. This part of the conversation began with men discussing how they feel this pressure to be logical in their rationalization of their emotions. Dominik said, "It is hard to find the balance between acknowledging your emotional reaction to something and then rationalizing it." Then Wilmer described this process as "exhausting." At this juncture, I decided to add another probing question in order to try and direct this conversation to a more concrete issue with men. The group was discussing how difficult it was to be honest and vulnerable with oneself around how they are feeling because it was exhausting; however, I wanted to know how this fatigue around emotional processing showed up in our same-sex relationships. My probing question was, "does anyone else find it hard to cry or have a tough conversations without consuming alcohol?" The entire room verbally agreed, and I was honestly shocked. Now, it is important to point out that statistically more people, men and women, perceive that most of their peers drink when in reality that is not the case. This could have resulted in higher response rates within the group. However, this question and response speak more to the culture in which men feel allowed to express emotions. This notion worked to affirm the idea that consumption of alcohol is a socially acceptable way for men to be vulnerable with other men. However, it also gave room for participants to discuss the need to share with each other more and build interpersonal relationships. Dewey spoke to how his father has lost many of his friends due to the inability to play golf with them anymore. Whether it was sports or drinking, there seems to be a

need to spend time with other men but an inability to deepen relationships beyond simply

participating in the same activity together.

Reflection

The initial conversations with Stan, Fred, and George were vital in understanding that I

must remain open to how this work will affect me. I realized the issue with my attitude leading

up to these meetings was that I was holding assumptions that there is not a lot of work being

done on this topic. I quickly found out that there are many administrators and faculty doing

incredible and in-depth work around men and their masculinity development. These assumptions

came from the same issue that is currently existent on this campus, which is that young, USD

men do not seek out this help. These conversations showed me that I had been feeding into the

illusion that because there is a problem that means that nothing is being done to address it.

This first focus group had a significant amount of depth and engagement from the

participants. In the beginning, I was worried about how to set the tone properly for the group. In

a journal reflection immediately after the session I wrote, "I struggled in the beginning to make it

feel seamless from logistical to connective." It felt uncomfortable to transition from chatting with

people as they walked in, to eating snacks, to signing waivers, to silence and music, and then

starting the session because I had been part of these groups but never run one myself before. My

personal lack of confidence did not seem to prevent the session from being productive and

engaging, and as time went on my confidence in leading the group increased. The majority of the

participants had not done a mind mapping session before. Also, I believe the silence during the

10 minutes when they were writing words on the poster was effective because it was an added

layer to prevent too much group think. In the end, there was a wide array of phrases and words

on all three posters, which fostered very engaged conversations. It also seemed helpful to get everyone standing where they could both write and speak what was on their minds.

After writing a reflection journal entry for my first focus group session, I began engaging in dialogue with other graduate students around the topic of healthy masculinity. These conversations led to a meeting right before my second focus group on November 8th, 2018. In these meeting, seven of us (including myself) met to discuss our understanding around the work we are trying to accomplish in supporting men develop healthy habits around masculinity expression. This meeting was incredibly refreshing because we were able to discuss as a group our differing perspectives on the issues, which only helped widen my lens in doing this work. More specifically, we discussed how we as researchers, graduate students, administrators, and role models show up to other men in our communities. This idea of "showing up" not only refers to our social identities and how we are perceived and how we present, but also it relates to us exploring how we have been socialized as men. This conversation added depth to reminding ourselves that we need to keep processing our negative socialized behavior in order to make sure we are doing the same work we are trying to do with our participants. This ownership of mistakes and shortcomings takes a great deal of vulnerability. It is worth noting that this meeting was in the wake of the horrific Thousand Oaks, CA shooting where twelve people were killed by a mentally ill man. This event brought an added layer of depth to our conversation and reminded us all of the pressing need to help men address these inner struggles in the hopes of healthy expression of emotions and reducing these types of incidents.

For the second focus group, the conversation that evening was productive. The focus was on what it means to be vulnerable as a man and how that affects our lives. We talked about how hard it can be to share with those closest to you. Aaron said, "You like the way your relationship

with your friends are and I worry that sharing something so RAW might change the way they see me, and I don't want that." We talked about how guys often bond by 'doing' and girls bond by talking. While that may hold some truth, that does not address the issue that men suffer from not sharing and talking with one another. There was a lot of conversation about how there never seems to be the right time or place to be vulnerable, and it seems to challenge deep seated ways of thinking these men have of themselves. Another comment was the question of how can you love someone else, if you do not love yourself. In this group, how can we be vulnerable with others if we are not vulnerable and honest with ourselves about what we are going through? A second year, undergraduate participant named Ross pointed out how they both seem semi-dependent on one another and the process of being internally and externally vulnerable is an interesting paradox. A senior participant named Dominik spoke to rationalization of his emotions or "freaking out" and how comparing ourselves to others can help. Wilmer then pointed out how it's interesting that "we often compare ourselves to others when we are feeling down or sad." I posed the question, how do we maintain this high or ability to make a habit of being vulnerable. Harley said the basis of this is continuing to build those relationships that are built on trust. Chet chimed in saying, "it is up to us to be vulnerable first, so that we can give other people the unconscious permission to also be vulnerable with us."

I recommended to the group to practice gratitude for each day, and acknowledge their mistakes in a reflection for five minutes every night. In the hope that this practice will help make a habit of them reflecting and being more vulnerable about their day with themselves. Understanding and being honest with themselves about the positives and about the places where they can improve. The idea is that this practice will help them slow down and think about their actions and thoughts. This could, in maybe an indirect way, help them be vulnerable about their

transgressions. A big point in the beginning was how hard it is to share with those you are closest with, but how those people can often change throughout life. There seems to be a real need and desire to figure out how to practice vulnerability with those we are close with. To test that level of trust in our friends, from the position of being confident in who we are. But a lot of confidence at this age is based on external validation. Oh what a dance vulnerability in college truly is to men. There is a true need, from this conversation, for space where men feel they can share and be vulnerable. It also seems that even talking about the subject in general terms is hard at times, but sharing personal stories can be even harder. I wonder if a men's group can facilitate this type of sharing that men need, or if it needs to start on a more one on one level. Again, if you love the relationship you have in the men's group, it can still be scary sharing something not knowing how it will land. It might be even scarier to show a RAW side of you to a group where you find the most support. Even when we are in a vulnerable space where people share, how can we push it to the next level, or does it need to start in an even more intimate setting. Where could mentorship play a role in this? Could a mentor program help facilitate this sharing on a smaller scale that could encourage vulnerability more in small groups and eventually to the USD community. How would a mentorship program work for those most in need who might be unwilling to participate or take it seriously? Or would the ripple effect of those willing to engage be enough of a change to improve the culture of men on this campus?

Dream

February 15th 2019- February 17th 2019

I participated and co-facilitated the Men@USD leadership retreat that was held in Julian, CA for three days and two nights by University Ministry. There were forty individuals on the retreat, which included facilitators and participants. We stayed in cabins together at a retreat

center. The members varied in age between traditional eighteen year old first year students to

men in their fifties and sixties. Although sexual orientation was not information gathered for this

retreat, the racial and ethnic breakdown for the retreat was 45% men of color and 55% white

men, and all participants on the retreat were part of the USD community. Each day consisted of

facilitator speeches, physical activities, breaking bread together, large group activities, small

group activities, and a lot of time for personal and group reflection. The structure of the retreat

was designed to build relationships with other men in the USD community and to work together

to share in the ability to deconstruct some of the harmful and negative behaviors that all

participants engage in.

Each day contained an extreme amount of reflection, vulnerability, and openness from

the participants. I do not believe explaining the ins and outs of the retreat structure was pertinent

for my research purposes, but the ability to participate and co-facilitate allowed me as a

researcher to better understand what type of impact I wanted my research to have on the USD

community.

Reflection

This retreat was a wonderful example of brotherhood and growth. I found the best part

was that my role as a co-facilitator and participants mirrored my work within my focus groups. I

had a speech to deliver, but I was just as much a participant listening to all the other voices and

stories shared by the larger group. There was such an added level of depth and vulnerability from

this retreat group. Everyone does not sign up believing that it is going to be a transformational

process, but I do think each person, on some level, is open to reflection and bonding because of

the nature of a retreat. Therefore, there was a sense of it being easier to become vulnerable since

we were away from our daily lives and communities, and most seemed to be ready for something

new.

As human beings, we all experience ups and downs in life. It feels that the world is

flooded with cliché phrases around perseverance and triumph; however, those words mean

nothing without a connection to a concrete example of struggle. The large and small group

reflections were incredibly powerful because I believe they humbled all of us. Not in the sense to

prove that one person's life stories were better than another person's but to willingly offer a

piece of your story to another and trusting they will respect that was a major moment in your life.

If something in your past inhibits you from growing, vulnerability is a tool to help you let go.

However, in order to let go you have to learn to trust someone else in that moment. A good

example is when I had to get up and speak to the group about re-imagining leadership. I was the

last facilitator to speak before our final mass and we departed back for campus. However, by the

time I spoke, I had learned that there were at least 5 men in the group who had done multiple

tours of war, and I was supposed to talk to them about leadership. The youngest individual was

at least 7-8 years older than me. What could I possibly have to offer these men? They have more

life experiences than I could imagine. However, I got up and gave the speech. I was nervous and

I am not sure I did as well as I could of, but a moment after that almost brought me to tears was

hearing validation from one of those military veterans. He thanked me for sharing and

appreciated what I had said. As men, we crave acceptance of other men. I know I do, especially

when you have experienced failure or lack of a father figure. That man's few sentences gave me

so much confidence in continuing to do this work.

That moment with the army veteran really made me think how important that would be

for men to have a figure that could challenge and validate them. As I mentioned in a previous

reflection, this comes off as mentorship. It could also be in group work, but the need is for there

to be the room to take risks and fail, and to be supported by another man who is not going to

abandon you because of a shortcoming. It is not that I needed that veteran to tell anyone else how

he felt, all I needed to know was that what I said was good enough and that I, myself, am good

enough.

Design

March 12th 2019

After the few weeks of reflection that followed my experience on the Men@USD

leadership retreat, I began to form an understanding of what I thought I could implement and

recommend for USD to improve engagement and support of their male students. However, as I

formed my hypothesis, I did not want to make a crucial mistake. I realized that making an

assumption from my experiences on what all USD men need is narrow minded; therefore, I

designed an open-ended question survey to get a more detailed understanding of what current

UDS male students think would be effective. I administered this survey to a new group of

participants during a Monday night men's group. (See Appendix C) There were ten participants

who took the survey and only one participant was an overlap from my two focus groups. These

ten participants were all heterosexual men and three of them were men of color. Two of these

men were graduate students and the other eight were undergraduate students. They spent fifteen

minutes filling out the survey and then we conducted a twenty minute discussion on what their

recommendations were for improving USDs engagement and support of men.

There were two very interesting findings that came from both the written submissions

and the conversation. The first was the expressed desire for change in how men were portrayed

by the community. One participant wrote, "Definitely don't be afraid to embrace the incredible

parts of masculinity. The brotherhood, care and tenderness is what makes men the amazing

individuals they're meant to be."

> Another participant wrote; "Give males more opportunities to talk about their feelings
>
> and outlets where they can share their passions, insecurities and how their life going.
>
> Don't make events or things around campus portray men as the bad guy in every
>
> situation. Have leaders on campus talk about how masculinity means being vulnerable
>
> and being full of love that you pour out [to] others.

These quotes speak to a feeling that many men see and hear how they are always the problem,

and the continued desire to want to engage but how many men feel unwanted.

The second interesting outcome from the discussion was the desire for more individual

and more group options for engaging in authentic and vulnerable conversations. The

conversation naturally went into the direction of mentorship and how the implementation or

availability of mentorship would be a great thing at USD. Most of the participants present for

this survey were involved students and they expressed how they would take advantage of these

opportunities and believe that less involved male students would also take advantage of these

resources. These two key insights from my design stage played a major role in creating my

recommendations.

Reflection

This portion of my research helped me align my values and purpose with meeting the

male students of USD where they are. One of the biggest mistakes made in higher education is

assuming that you know what the students want without asking them. Through providing space

for this survey and dialogue around the questions, I was able to garner what current male

students want. These survey results are not representative of the entire male student population

here at USD due to the very small group that filled out the survey, but they do speak to ideas of innovation and change that might help engage men in the USD community. Through reflecting on this process, I was better able to think about how to not only implement a new structure but how to make current structures more available. I realized that many involved men that participate in this men's group did not even know about the other men's groups on campus. Then it clicked for me. There is no consolidation of resources for men and conversations about masculinity on campus. Everything was done through word of mouth. While personal invitation is powerful for creating connections and retention for groups, it should not be the only way men are able to find out about resources for them. Especially in a day and age where so many students are more comfortable behind a screen than creating interpersonal dialogue, it was inconceivable how USD had not created a website or online platform to a list of consolidated resources. It actually made me laugh because so many individuals on campus complain that most men participate in fraternities rather than any other group; however, fraternities are more advertised and resourced through USD than any other all male group.

After processing these realizations, I was best able to consolidate my thoughts and articulate them into a clear and direct list of recommendations for the men in the USD community already doing this work and to the institution itself.

Destiny: Recommendations

<u>I. Invite nonparticipating men into engagement</u>

   This recommendation is for the students, faculty, and staff that are already engaged in

creating space for dialogue, support, and engagement for those who self-identify as men on

USDs campus. My research showed that there are many groups on campus that exist where men

feel a true sense of support and connectedness to one another in being able to be their authentic

self. A major aspect of individuals who are willing to reflect and feel connected to these men's

groups cite the fact that they were invited in by those already having these talks. <u>Men who are

already willing to have these vulnerable conversations and attend these men's groups should

invite nonparticipating men into those spaces.</u>

<u>II: Creation of a website dedicated to resources, groups, and events for self-identified male

students</u>

   There is no doubt that there is a need for more male student engagement on USDs

campus. This action research project has helped bring to light that a step in the right direction has

been the development of groups that allow men to dialogue about their ability to express their

masculinity in a healthy manner and to trust other men to respect them being their authentic self

in these groups. However, USD creates institutional barriers to encouraging men to join these

groups and there are limitations to only utilizing groups to create male student support and

engagement. As a result, <u>I recommend that the institution create a website dedicated to resources,

groups, and events for self-identified male students and a formal mentorship program.</u>

   First, USD had recently researched the idea of creating a formal space for men and

masculinity on the fourth floor of the Student Live Pavilion (SLP) to go in conjunction with the

recently remodeled "commons." The idea was to try and create a physical space for men to

gather and engage with the campus community. The decision was made that such a space would cause discontent amongst other social identity groups on campus and would not be utilized by men; therefore, the space was not created in the reforming of the fourth floor. I agree that this was the right decision to not create a physical space. However, after the decision to not create a physical space was made there was no follow up discussion on how to create any type of space or resources for these male students. This has left USD in the current state it has been in for at least a decade, which is a state of isolated groups run by a small number of overly engaged male faculty and staff. An obvious improvement that can be made is the creation of a USD website dedicated to men and masculinity work. My recommendation would be to title this page "Men at USD." On this page, there should be a list of all the active groups for men to participate in with their meeting times and locations, events on campus that relate to topics that may interest male students (like guest speakers), and any experiential events like the Men@USD leadership retreat run by University Ministry. This website model would be very similar to that of the current Women's Commons website or the Black Student Resource Center website, and it would send a nonverbal message to current and incoming male students that there are spaces on campus for you to be in companionship with other men outside of joining a fraternity. Additionally, with the creation of a graduate assistant for Men and Masculinity Development, this would be a great project for that graduate student to take on. It would help increase their knowledge of resources and spaces on campus where healthy masculinity is being practiced and streamline their ability to see where other gaps may exist.

III. Mentorship program

Additionally, I recommend that there is a creation and implementation of a formal USD male student mentorship program. The purpose of this mentorship program is to create a formal

structure that allows men to engage in developmental and authentic conversations in a manner that is different than a group setting. The application process for the program will be posted on the newly created website for Men at USD. The application should consist of basic information about the individual, what type of mentorship the individual is seeking, and the goals they have in connecting with a mentor. The three main types of mentorship offered will be; *Champion of Your Cause, Spirituality Guide, and Master of Your Craft. Champion of Your Cause,* stands for someone you are looking to connect with who will show you the ropes of the general USD community. This mentor would be a male student on campus that is interested in showing a mentee the USD community and connecting him with his network of people. The *Spirituality Guide* would be a mentor that would help a male student discern his faith journey, which could be related to University Ministry but does not have to be tied to Catholic beliefs. Lastly, the *Master of Your Craft* mentor would be someone interested in receiving guidance in a specific aspect of the USD community. This could be recreational sports, engineering, or social justice work. This pairing would be with a mentor heavily involved in one area that a student is very passionate about and connecting them in order to build a relationship and experience in the specific area. In general terms, the three categories are general USD community mentor, spirituality mentor, and specific USD activity mentor. Also, once paired, there would be a minimum of three mandatory meetings that would take place ideally over the course of two months. This would allow frequent interactions in order to build a relationship without being too frequent, and create a formal structure for the pairing to follow.

Depending on which type of mentor an individual is seeking, the mentee would be connected with a current male student (second year students or older), male administrator, male faculty, or male resident minister. The goal in having such a broad spectrum of mentorship is

twofold. One, it is to encourage men to seek guidance in getting involved in what they are

passionate about. This is important because although the mentorship is a one on one relationship

between two people, this relationship and sharing of social capitol will encourage these male

students to get involved in groups across campus that encompass the broader university

community.

There would need to be parameters around training students to be peer mentors for this

program; however, the added work would be a great way to create leadership roles for men in the

community. This would allow a culture of companionship and connectedness amongst men to

grow at USD and would also alleviate the dependence that currently exists on a small number of

administrative staff members. There would also need to be a semester long requirement for those

who sign up as mentors in order to not create real opportunity for connection and follow through.

It would make the most sense to create this mentorship program on a smaller scale with initially

5 to 7 mentors. Then the program could grow organically from there based on participation.

IV: Advertise and recruit men to participate using existing social identity resources at USD.

Lastly, in order to create real cultural change, there needs to be an intentional effort to

reach both current male students and incoming first year male students. I believe empowering

male students and staff on campus as mentors and creating a presence on USDs website with

resources and mentorship opportunities will help start creating this change. Additionally, I

believe there is a way to bring this effort of developing healthy masculinity and social justice

together in a practical way to incoming students. After coordinating with the Assistant Director

for New Student Onboarding, I discovered that when a new student accepts and deposits to

attend USD they are sent a link for the Torero Countdown Handbook. In this handbook, there is

information about the university and general opportunities for engagement on campus. However,

there are missing opportunities to advertise and recruit for participation in social identity resources at USD. I believe in this handbook not only should there be information about the new website and mentorship opportunities for men at USD, but also include information about the Women's Commons, Black Student Union, The United Front Multicultural Center, and the LGBTQ+ allyship center. This type of promotion and marketing will show the universities commitment to gender and identity work for all groups of people on USDs campus.

Limitations

Although the research yielded a high participation rate with a wealth of information, there were limitations in the process. First, the young men who participated in these conversations, whether in my focus group or on the men's retreat, are already exploring the topic of masculinity and what it means to them. Therefore, this research lacks more in depth insight on the opinions and perspectives of USD men that are not engaged in these conversations of vulnerability and authenticity. This is important to point out because there is a real need to discover new ways to invite men into this mindset of exploration and self-reflection on what it means to be a man in today's society. It would be valuable in moving forward with more research on this topic to try and target the men whom appear to not be already doing this work.

Second, there is the limitation of religious influence. USD is a Catholic school and the weekly men's group and men's retreat that were a major part of my research both operate within the context of University Ministry. As a result, there is both a conscious and unconscious filtration that may take place by individuals not feeling comfortable being themselves or being vulnerable within this context. As research in this topic continues, it would be valuable to see the different influence of spirituality on this work, whether it is part of the context where these conversations take place or it is seemingly absent.

Additionally, there was a lack of diversity represented in my research in regards to race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. This is prevalent in my focus groups and interviews with Fred, Stan, and George, whom all identity as heterosexual, white men. The Men@USD leadership retreat, which was extremely insightful in regards to my research, also struggled in this regard. My research had about the same amount of diversity, around 50% white, as the undergraduate population; however, this represents both a lack of representation in my research and in the university community.

Another issue was presented in the transition from fall to spring semester. This transition hindered the ability to continue with the focus group with new conflicts surrounding Greek Life recruitment and participation, job searching, and change in academic schedules. This dilemma is also unique to my research. According to University Ministry staff and Residential Life staff, male participation drops in spring semester due in large part to Greek Life involvement or new schedules.

Finally, a possible limitation that is stated throughout my reflections after each cycle and the men's retreat is the fact that I am still going through my own process of developing a healthy way to express my masculinity. This process has been a profound one for me personally and professionally. It is important to understand that although I made attempts to remove my bias or world view on the issue, some of that shows up in my interactions in these spaces with other male students. Conversely, it is also possible that being in this place developmentally was a positive aspect of my work. Brene Brown (2010) defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en). She also talks about how there is a real need to stop associating "emotions with liabilities" (https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en). In walking alongside

these men through this research, there has been this ability to be vulnerable and grow with them.

I am not sure our conversations and connections would be able to form as they did without my

willingness share struggles, hardships, and mistakes of my own. I firmly believe that when

someone is willing to be vulnerable with someone else it gives the other person the unconscious

permission to do the same, and this type of connection is deeply rooted in love.

Conclusion

There is a lot of great work being done to support male students in living and engaging

authentically at USD. This work needs to continue and needs to be built upon. As USD moves

forward with figuring out new and innovative ways to support men in their development and

engagement, there needs to be a clear understanding that this work is a "man's problem."

Michael Katz, a participant in the documentary *The Mask You Live In* and a published academic,

speaks about this often in relationship to men and gender violence. It is very clear that men

practicing healthy masculinity will benefit the community that surrounds them, but there needs to

be an understanding that men need to do this work for themselves, as well. It is not someone

else's responsibility that we act morally, ethically, and authentically, it is our own responsibility.

Therefore, as this masculinity work moves forward, there needs to be a conscious effort by men

to invite other men into this new culture. The work women and other genders have done in

fighting negative, socialized behaviors of men has been amazing and necessary. However, the

solution to these behaviors does not lie in women telling men to behave, it relies on men holding

other men accountable and supporting one another. As an institution, I hope USD sees that to

create this new culture of authenticity and engagement there needs to be an understanding that

men need to be the one's spearheading this effort to change the culture.

I believe that the good work and high interest in research on this topic will yield a positive impact on the USD community. It is important to realize that the reason this work is so vital with men is because by engaging in vulnerable and authentic dialogue we consciously and unconsciously give young male students the tools to break down these negative socialized behaviors. In turn, this gives them the ability to live better lives and engage with others in a healthy manner. Healthy masculinity is a practice and process of unlearning bad habits with the intention of living authentically for the betterment of oneself and their community.

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Appendix A: Focus Group 1 Mind Mapping Terms

Questions:

1.) Masculinity
2.) Failure
3.) Identity

Each word was silently added to for ten minutes then followed by a ten minute discussion on what came up for the participants.

Appendix B: Focus Group II

Questions:

1.) What does it mean to be vulnerable as a man in our current society? Do you have an example of a time when you felt you could not be vulnerable or could not express yourself how you truly want to?

2.) Do you find it hard to be vulnerable with yourself?

3.) If being vulnerable is hard for men (both personally and on a personal level) how do you think this affects men when they interact with others? Where does this show up for you?

Appendix C: Open-Ended Survey Questions

1.) What do you do that makes you feel like your most authentic self?
2.) What part of the USD community (if any) allows you to act authentically?
3.) What (if any) clubs, organizations, groups, or extra-curricular activities are you involved in?
4.) If you are involved in any extra-curricular groups, what makes you continue to stay engaged and or involved with these groups?
5.) What part of the USD community (if any) makes you feel like you need to put you "Mask" on? (putting your mask on refers to the idea of hiding your authentic self in order to feel accepted by others)
6.) What would you recommend that UDS do to improve the culture of engaging and supporting their male students?