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4-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Jason A. Laker. "What Should We Be Doing to Reduce or End Campus Violence?" *Journal of College and Character* (2009): 1-2.

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What Should We Be Doing to Reduce or End Campus Violence?

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Over the last several years, there have been a number of high-profile incidents of violence on college and university campuses. These have precipitated discussions and new initiatives on campuses and within our professional organizations intended to respond to, and prevent violence. The media have covered these disturbing incidents with graphic detail, challenging educational institutions, businesses (such as gun sellers), and government to do something to end this problem. Governments and particularly law enforcement agencies have convened working groups and generated reports and recommendations.

All concerned have framed questions about the underlying reasons for these incidents, and there have been vigorous debates about root causes and resolutions. One aspect of these stories which has thus far been generally absent from analysis and discussion has been that those who have committed these acts of violence have (with virtually no exception) been males. Further, as each of these profound tragedies have been analyzed, we have heard repeated stories of young men who were disaffected, disconnected, hostile, or emotionally diminished. In many cases, reports indicate that others on campus noticed concerning behavior by these young men, but perhaps did not have the tools to analyze and respond to the situation. Instead of their being discussed in gendered terms, those who have perpetrated these acts have been referred to as "students," "young people," or "kids." The individual acts of violence are not to be condoned. Rather, there is a need for thoughtful discussion about the social conditions, especially relating to identity development, which tolerate, dismiss, glamorize, or otherwise encourage such violence. Student affairs as a field espouses that it is knowledgeable about such topics while effectively responding to them, but has it fully demonstrated such proficiency with regard to campus violence in light of this analysis?

When examining the social construction of masculinity (e.g., the scripts, structures, responses relating to gender performance by males especially, but not exclusively), do we see patterns in the ways these manifest in society and on our campuses specifically? In what ways do we support or challenge hyper-masculine behavior and sexist ideologies? Can we support or challenge such behavior and ideologies without diminishing individual male students, who themselves are an unwitting product of such socialization? What is the balance between challenge and support in this regard? Do we encourage or denigrate help-seeking and emotional/social connections by men and accept anger and aggression as normal?

When examining our own professional socialization and norms in the student affairs field, can we honestly say that we prepare our professionals with knowledge about masculine gender development and/or applications to promote positive and productive development in male

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students? Is there, in our professional culture, a distaste or distrust for males? In what ways might our current approaches be diminishing, avoidant, moralistic, and/or otherwise ineffective at engaging male students generally, or particular male subpopulations?

What is the proper balance between analytical and strategic approaches led by functional units such as campus security or counseling centers and broader campus dialogues? As well, what is the proper balance between discussions about specific incidents of violence and broader campus and community cultures in which these acts are situated?

On most campuses, the overwhelming majority of violent acts are committed by men, and many of these are toward women—and most actually take place in intimate spaces and are thus not transparent to media and other outlets. What is the relationship between those more common incidents and the occasional larger public ones? How are questions of campus climate for racial and ethnic minorities; women; Lesbian/Gay/Queer/Trans people; and other marginalized groups related to questions of masculinity?

This writer sees these questions situated in a broader problem facing our profession—we see growing attention to assessment of performance, but the premise of virtually all of performance assessment relates to declining budgets (e.g., we need to tell our story of performance or we will face even worse cuts in budgets). Rather than getting better at justifying what we are already doing, can we change what we are doing? Arguably, increasing effectiveness in facilitating men's development and capacity for challenging the scripts which promote isolation or violence would have benefit for male students. Would it not also be liberating for women? Would a less rigid masculinity also liberate Queer and Trans people as well from their experiences of marginalization and fear? Would building student affairs staff's facility in these issues help us to notice struggling students earlier, and respond more effectively, and thus prevent and/or mitigate a lot of violence and pain?
