



Caring About University Men: Why We Need Campus Men's Centers in a Time of Crisis

MILES GROTH



Centers for men on university and college campuses are necessary at a time when enrollments of male students in higher education are at an all-time low. The background of this trend is explored and several examples of centers for men are provided. The logistics for establishing centers are described.

Keywords: college men, campus life, misandry, male studies

Note: This address was given September 27, 2013, at the University of Toronto as the fourth in a series of talks sponsored by the Canadian Association for Equality (CAFÉ).

* * *

One week before the beginning of the new semester at Wagner College, where I teach, a young man entering his senior year arrived on campus to join other residential education staff in greeting incoming freshman. The first day of classes, August 26, he finished his last class and in the late afternoon took the campus shuttle to the Staten Island Ferry. He had not returned to his dorm room by late that night, but at 5:30 am the following morning he phoned his roommate to say he was in van Cortlandt Park, as far away from campus as he could be and still be in New York City. He only said he was groggy and confused. Later that day, his mother phoned the college to say that police had found his dead body among the huge rocks in the park. Next to him was a suicide note and an empty bottle of pills, which evidently he had taken just before calling his friend. That was one month ago to the day.

It is not known what he wrote in the note. This much we do know. He had been unable to put into words for his parents, his best friend, or anyone else what was on his mind. Evidently not even his doctor, since had gone into the city for a check-up. His name was Justin. Like so many boys his age, while he was outgoing, popular and funny, he contained within him feelings and ideas that he could not or would not share with others.

The suicide rate for boys Justin's age is four times that of girls. Over the last 15 years or so, it has increased. Moreover, younger boys—as young as 13 or 14—are now committing suicide, something unheard of in earlier generations. The numbers are probably higher, especially when we realize that so-called accidents among boys in their late teens are often disguised suicidal gestures. Driving a car recklessly and competitive drinking are common examples.

I've come to Toronto to talk about boys Justin's age, boys at university or, as we say in the States, college-age boys. My aim is to stimulate interest in their lives in order to understand a number of trends that, if not fatal, are noxious and toxic for young males. Some boys are doing well, but too many are not. For example, at a time when a university degree is essential for most well compensated work, young men are enrolling in college at the lowest rate on record. Extrapolating from the many sources of statistics on attendance at institutions of higher education, here in Canada, in the States, and elsewhere in Europe, Australia and even Asia, the most conservative estimate is 43% attendance by males. At the small liberal arts college where I teach it is officially 37%. Directors of admissions know it is even lower, now approaching 35% internationally in developed countries. Head counts reveal the obvious. Every instructor at university knows that, roughly, in most classes for every boy in a class there are two girls. As I will argue, in absolute terms, this is not good for boys. But it is also not good for girls, for universities, or for the culture as a whole. It is especially worrisome for the small liberal arts college—a unique institution in the States—where it is known that a “tipping point” of 40% attendance of males means that girls soon will not want to attend there. They like boys, and the presence of males (straight, gay or otherwise) on campus is important to them. Wanting that, they look elsewhere and the school suffers financially.

If girls want an all-female environment in the States, they may choose from among 48 all-women's colleges, overseen by the national Women's College Coalition. There is no national Men's College Coalition, since there are now only three all-men's college. (Incidentally, all-men's colleges were very common until 1970—I attended one from 1964-68. 1969, the year after I graduated, many schools went co-ed. The reasons for doing so were complex, but they included the bonanza of attendance of women at university and no school wanted to fail to profit from the largesse.) Altogether, the all-male colleges serve only about 6,400 boys.

To put this in broader context: In 1960 the current ratio of female-to-male attendance was what it is now for male-to-female attendance, two to one. By 1980, parity had been attained—50-50. Given the current trend, which has been identified since the mid-1990s by admissions directors, the last male to be awarded a bachelor's degree in the States will turn his tassel in about 50 years. Is this likely to happen? I won't be here. You will see. If the trend persists, over a hundred-year period, we will have seen the near disappearance of men at university.

The trend has made a difference already, so much so that most masters and doctorate students are now female. One of my former students, now finishing his doctorate in psychology at a major New York university reports that among his cohort of about 10 doctoral candidates, there are seven women and three men. This is typical everywhere at graduate schools.

Once on campus in the States boys will be subject to Title IX guidelines. Having passed its 40th anniversary last year, Title IX is a federal law that dictates the allocation of money and services to boys and girls in equal proportion to their rates of attendance. This momentous piece of legislation covers all areas of university management of resources but is best known in athletics where the proportion of students by sex at a given institution must be reflected in the availability of sports programs to men and women, respectively. The way this plays out is that even if there are more males than females on campus, the number of male sports teams must be reduced to reflect the ideal proportion of males to females.

Arriving on campus, boys will also see the effects of Women's Studies programs. Now usually termed Gender Studies programs, make no mistake about it, however, they are still women's studies programs. There are about 900 such programs worldwide, around 400 of them in the States. There are 45 in Canada (including one here at the University of Toronto), 35 in the UK, and 15 in Australia. There is one Men's Studies program in the States at the undergraduate level at Hobart William Smith College. Its relation to the Women's Studies program on campus is emphasized. In four years, a Center for Men and Masculinities is to be established at a State of New York university (the one at Stony Brook, on Long Island), funded by a large grant of \$300,000 from a well-known philanthropic foundation. To be headed by Professor Michael Kimmel, its advisors include the actress and fitness expert, Jane Fonda, Gloria Steinem, and Eve Ensler, the author of *The Vagina Monologues*. As part of nearly every Women's Studies program offerings on campus annually, boys will see a production of this play featured and supported by the university.

During the first-year student orientation week (the word freshman has been replaced on most campuses because it contains the word 'man'), boys will sit in on required co-ed seminars about male-on-female date rape. They will be portrayed as potentially dangerous and apprised of the poli-

cies governing accusations of unwanted sexual approaches towards girls on campus. That these policies are based on the principle "guilty until proven innocent" has been illustrated recently by high profile cases on several campuses, including one of the Ivy League schools. One case was reported a few months ago in the *New York Times* by a young man's mother, who happens to be an attorney. The mother has challenged the university on the fairness of treatment of her son, who it turned out had done nothing wrong.

Incoming freshman boys will see that most Women's Studies programs include a women's center. By contrast, there are currently only nine men's centers in the world, eight of them in the States, one in the UK. The status of fledgling centers here in Canada is according to recent information problematic and at best precarious—the word I favor to describe the situation in general for boys on campus.

While women's centers have been in existence for decades, the first men's center opened in 2006 and has now closed for want of funding. The second oldest, at Wagner College, remains open. I'll tell you more about it in a moment.

Membership in the extant centers is small, usually under a dozen. This is because currently the centers are at best tolerated and ignored, at worst mocked, making them places that are perceived to be undesirable for boys to be known to have an association with.

There you have some of the background of campus men's centers to date. Their history is brief—only about seven years—and their prospects until recently have been dim. But—and this is why I am here tonight—I am convinced that increasing their numbers is essential and that the time is ripe to do so. I would like to see a men's center on every campus of every college and university in Canada and the States.

I have described the situation for college men as precarious. Some speak of it as critical—that there is a crisis for young men and boys, if not also for most males. I agree with this assessment, but remind you what crisis means in its basic sense. A crisis is a turning point—the turning point, for example, in a disease or drama. In medicine, it refers to the moment in the natural history of a disease when, for example, a fever breaks and the organism starts to get better. In a play, it is that episode when the outcome of the story is determined. I think of the present crisis for young men as such a moment. I see the crisis young men face as that episode in the story of women and men, boys and girls, of civilized life itself, during which how things will turn out for all of us, males and females living together in community, is being determined and I see university campuses as the stage on which the action of this episode is unfolding.

Thinking of the many young men I have mentored in the last 40 years, I am impressed by the ones—especially in recent years—who show remarkable vitality in the face of an often noxious and even toxic socio-cultural and educational environment. I am optimistic, however, that given our support, the silent ones will "come to" and be reinvigorated. Like Justin, they are the majority and we will have to be generous in our support of them. It will take a great deal of our effort and care. Responsible parents, university faculty and administrators, policy-makers, mentors and, yes, advocates outside academe will have to speak out on their behalf to jump start a renewal of involvement in

campus life for young men. Centers for university men are the place where this will begin. Now mostly quiet boys will begin to talk about their experience on campus and in the wider world of other young men, if they are permitted and encouraged to do so. In turn, these young men will carry a new outlook back home to their younger brothers and male friends, and to their fathers, and forward into their lives after university as friends of men, as male partners of women, and as fathers of sons.

Let me review why such centers are necessary and then tell you how to build one. To address the first part, I will revisit some of what I have already said.

Why are university centers for men necessary?

First, as already indicated, there are fewer men on campus and so they need to have a place to talk about why they are now in the minority. I may be able to guess at why we are seeing the trends I've reported, but only the boys themselves can tell us what their experience is that has produced the trend. I like to think of a men's center on campus as a place where the silence most males have learned since childhood (and may also be part of very deep-lying tendencies related to being-male) may be lifted, at least on the matter of how they see themselves and are being seen by administrators, faculty, and other boys on campus, and by their female counterparts.

Second, a perspective on being male must be provided that contrasts with that which nearly all universities now provide. An audible and visible male-positive presence must be foregrounded. Study groups on the topic of the well-being of boys and men are places where that presence can be established. Even if there is only the plan for such a center and such a group, there will be a positive effect. It is important for a discussion to be opened that could lead to establishing a men's center. I want to stress that: In the short term, even if there is only a discussion going on among administrators and faculty and the young men themselves about the need for such a center, the atmosphere on campus will change. These discussions must begin immediately.

Third, the curriculum and co-curriculum have changed in important ways in the past thirty years. In an effort to point out that history is the legacy of a small group of males (which is true), changes have been made in courses in the social sciences and humanities (history, sociology, and psychology most of all) to add to the narrative the part women have played in history. But since history is not about most men's lives, we must also add to the official record what we know about them, too. What has been left unsaid is that the lives of most men, like the lives of most women, have not been and are not now characterized by real power. As Warren Farrell pointed out many years ago, if real power is power over one's life, most men have been and are impotent. To repeat: That a few men have been extraordinarily dominant in society misses the point that most men have been without real power. To allow the means for finding access to such power to diminish even further—especially for young men—cannot be tolerated. I am here to ask that we respond to the weakening of means for young men to achieve personal power—power over their lives—as that is related to their life at university.

As offerings by the optional extra-curriculum, university boys are asked to participate in "Take Back the Night" and "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" and wear a white ribbon. These may be worthy consciousness-raising offerings for a small group of young men. But where are there, in balance,

events that consider the high suicide rate of young men, for example, or the missing father in so many boys' lives, or the dismal performance of small boys as readers? Moreover, where is there a tribute to the positive contributions average men—the blokes—have made and are making? The building we are sitting in, the roads that got us here, the metal fabricated from mined ores that holds up the buildings and span rivers—these were and are provided almost entirely by the effort and design of men. Who hauled nearly every bit of food from farm to market to the dining halls here at the University of Toronto? And who will lift and empty the overfull trash receptacles out on this beautiful campus? A casual glance outside in the early morning hours and late at night will reveal that it was almost always a man, often a young man. Lifting boxes from truck to dolly to shelf is tough work. So is emptying trash containers onto waste removal vehicles.

Fourth, college men are known to be less involved in extracurricular life: civic engagement, volunteerism, campus government, journalism and other outlets for creative work. They are visible for the most part only on playing fields—for example, the dangerous green of American college football—but hardly anywhere else. This was confirmed by a series of studies I edited for publication in 2010, *Engaging College Men: Discovering What Works and Why*, where data are provided that show how relatively little men, by comparison with women, are involved in co-curricular programs, including all-important self-discernment exploration. The notion of self-discernment refers to reflection on one's calling in life. As studies have shown, college boys pay very little attention to this—something, by the way, that is independent of scoping out job opportunities. They seem not to care about the future. As psychologists say, their future is foreshortened. We should be very concerned about this.

Finally, as academe became a place where activism masked as research mingled with scholarship, certain ideological commitments caused many to overlook the interests and well-being of young men on campus. The university is not the place for activism by any group. It should be what it was intended to be: a forum for the reasoned exchange of ideas, temperate debate, and cautious conclusions. Otherwise, it becomes more like a seminary where a belief system operating in the background orders the curriculum.

The net result of these developments can be best summarized as an ambience—a socio-cultural and intellectual atmosphere on campus—in which college boys have come to feel unwelcome, and just at time when the press is reporting on the presumptive “end of men” and the superfluousness of males in an economy that no longer needs traditionally male qualities such as physical strength to make it run.

At a time when a college degree has come to be required for more and more entry-level positions, where are the boys going who used to go to college? Some are living with their parents for as long as they can. Others are moving from place to place, following minimum-wage employment offers. But that leaves many unaccounted for. Some economists argue that these young men are better off than the ones who have completed a bachelor's degree and head into the world with \$100,000 in loan debt and no prospects of employment. These economists judge that part of the decline in male attendance at college is a certain common sense about the realities of the job market. I have no evidence that acting on the option not to go to university is a sensible thing for young men to do, since the degree is a lifetime credential and its earning power and dollar value will change as the economy

improves. The larger picture, of course, is one of women's likely alienation from less credentialed prospective partners. A woman will be less inclined to want to pair up with a man who cannot earn as much as she can, especially if the decision is taken to start a family. No. I see only more uncertain, alienated young men who feel of less value in not having pursued and acquired that first post-secondary degree, no matter whether there is an employer ready to hire them after graduation.

In uncertain times, it is still important to have the option of attending university and making the most of the time. But what if it is a place where one feels unwelcome, unimportant, and suspect. Those boys who are there need the validation of their voice and place on campus, a campus community that is aware of the difficulties they uniquely face and is open to hearing about their experience. A university men's center can provide this.

I turn now to the components of a men's center. No two centers will be entirely alike, but the best of them will share some common features.

Above all, a university center for men should provide an opportunity for an informal study group that meets regularly—twice a month is enough. With the permission of the university, a faculty mentor arranges for a place where young men can meet. He or she may offer a short list of possible topics (in the form of questions), which usually include the following:

How are we seen on campus?

How do we see ourselves here?

What is it to be a male in contemporary society—whether he is a young man like us, a man already established in a trade or profession, or a boy entering elementary school?

What is life like for most men now—those our age who are not in college and those who are older?

What about fathers?

What was my father's life like?

What was my experience with my own father?

Do I have it in me to be a father?

What would that be like? What would that mean?

And if I did not know the presence of a father, what effect did that have on me—and perhaps on my sisters?

(In the States, the divorce rate is 50% and if there is a son custody battle, two out of three times, the mother will be awarded the joy and responsibility of raising the couple's son on her own,

but as a “single mom.” It is well known that most find this a very demanding task since single moms are usually employed, often full-time.)

How are my relationships with girls on campus?

And since there are some young men who are drawn sexually and romantically to other males, the question is sometimes raised about same-sex relationships.

A question that inevitably turns up in discussions is: How do I feel about my relationships with my male friends?

There is an intimacy in these relationships that men desire. It is not sexual, but it runs deep. In fact, some of that kind of experience is generated in the study groups I am describing. In the past, these relationships were formed only among athletes and in fraternities. Study groups for men on campus are very different in that their members are typically very diverse. A men's group is not a fraternity, which generally selects for a kind of person. It welcomes everyone, no matter his race or ethnic background. Our groups each year have included athletes, nerds, science majors, and philosophy majors.

Wagner College was able to sponsor retreats for small groups of men who met at the center. This is a second element of an effective men's center—the opportunity each semester to spend a weekend off campus with other young men. Talking about these experiences, which I was able to provide for four years at Wagner College, the boys who participated in such retreats reported “good times.” Provided with a place in the country—a small, private retreat center near Bard College, about three hours from campus—they traveled to it together, bought food, made music, played chess, walked in the woods—and, at my suggestion, tried to observe one or two protocols. No cell phones from 8 am to 8 pm, and an invitation to each of the boys to be responsible for an hour during the weekend—to lead a discussion, play music, demonstrate a skill. Believe me, I know there was much officially unsanctioned, unofficial silly behavior during such retreats, but trusting to the basic good sense of these boys, I'm happy to say that everyone stayed safe. They looked after each other. They lived together for a period of time and no doubt the most important conversations did not take place during organized hours. The retreats set the stage for forming deep relationships after the boys returned to campus. Many of these relationships have continued beyond graduation. A group of graduates who were part of the Men's Center now meet regularly online.

For four years I was also able to pay for an annual dinner for the group at the close of the school year. This is an important element of a men's center's offerings. It was the only time each year that I met with the group as a whole. Meanwhile, I saw each of the boys individually, informally, throughout the year from time to time.

The website www.collegemencenters.com and the Facebook page “College and University Centers for Men” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/227103590741286/>) have become points of reference for some of the men following graduation. These virtual centers are hubs for men's centers. Part of the strength of the development of such centers will be derived from the social media that will follow their activity. We have only just begun to see the prospects offered by this.

As I have suggested, a university center for men can be effective in its mere visibility, no matter how active it is at the beginning. This is important to keep in mind. At Wagner, the center is my office and one seminar room reserved four hours a month for group meetings. A sign under my name above my door—Men's Center—tells the campus community a great deal about what should be important to everyone. I will have something to say about logistics and the response of the wider campus community shortly.

I chose the name Sodality for our center. It's a good old word that means brotherhood and fellowship. Other schools have named their group "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen" and "M-Pact." The center should have an identity and a logo.

A men's center should try whenever possible to extend its reach beyond campus. At Wagner I did this by making a connection with the University of South Australia, which went on to sponsor a graduate of the college for a three-month paid postgraduate research-in-living experience at the Whyalla campus of the university. The student must pay for transportation to and from Australia. All other expenses are carried by the university. While there, the young man is engaged in research. There is currently one alumnus of that program and a second arrangement is being made at this time. The research project of the first postgraduate was on the effects on rural men of extended employment stays away from home and family.

The center also experimented with reaching out to young middle school boys from the poorest area of Staten Island, the borough of New York City where Wagner College is located. With parental permissions in place, we brought mostly African-American middle school-age boys to campus, where our young men spent afternoons with them on the basketball courts and on the oval. Many of the boys had never been in a gymnasium. Some had not eaten in a diner or played on a spacious grassy field. Some had never handled a frisbee. This sort of civic engagement by our small group of men was not unnoticed by the college. Young men at other schools, recounted in the book *Engaging College Men*, have worked in similar ways with boys in their local communities.

Briefly, then, these are the major elements of a university men's center. Now, what of the logistics in setting up such a program?

It is, of course, necessary to gain the support of the president or dean of the university. I was easily able to convince our president of the value of a men's center at Wagner College, and I am sure he has never regretted giving me the OK. His foresight and our friendship carried the day. A conversation followed by an email is all that is required. Easier said than done? If this has happened at ten schools, it can happen at every college and university. I am surprised by the resistance so many universities have shown. What are they afraid of?

I suggest remaining independent of the club system. This will be good news to administrators who are always understandably concerned about costs. In any case, a men's center is not a club for men but an organization dedicated to men. It is about men. I see it as part of a greater movement committed to addressing and ensuring the well-being of boys and men in general. It is not against anything—not anti- anything, anyone, or any group. A men's center nicely complements a women's center on campus

Funding should be sought from alumni/ae. Here the development office is especially important in providing access to subgroups of alumni/ae who are of an age to have college-age sons and daughters. An article in the alumni/ae magazine about the center can go a long way to raising awareness and securing funding. For two years, an alumnus and his wife designated gifts totaling \$8,000.00 to support our center. This year an anonymous donor made a gift of \$800.00 for the current semester. It helps to have the support of the news director on campus. I have been fortunate in that way. Our activity and, in several cases, speakers on boys and men I brought to campus have been covered.

It is important that the group be student-driven. The faculty mentor should turn over the management of the group to students—all the while monitoring its health. Better that it flounder at first and be secured by student effort. It belongs to them. Each year I invite one student to act as the coordinator of the group. He represents the Center during freshman orientation week, recruits potentially interested group members, and convenes group meetings.

In closing, let me summarize what I would like to see happen:

I would like to see a men's center on every private college and university campus in two years and, within 3-5 years, a men's center on every public university campus.

This is going to depend on a variety of efforts on behalf of college men, but also on behalf of boys and men in the world surrounding the university. Last year, Warren Farrell spoke in this series of talks about the situation for boys and the need for bolstering their experience in childhood, especially in school. Students in men's centers should discuss that situation. Men's centers can also be places where much-needed real intersexual dialogue begins, the sort of dialogue that Paul Nathanson and Katherine Young encouraged during their presentation at this forum earlier this year.

Centers for men will be places where a voice for college men can be heard. Only these boys can tell us what we really need to know about their experience. What we need to know will not come in the first place from sophisticated research and scholarly panels. It will come from the young men themselves. Now is the time to add that the boys I have come to know are nothing like the "guys" portrayed in a well-known book published five years ago. They do not live in a "perilous world" as the author termed it, but rather one in which they are stunned and hurt to find they are less than welcome. We need to understand what has happened and is happening to young men, not paint a picture of them that is inaccurate and punish them further. Such "research" based on questionable data is not helpful. Some would argue that it is dishonest.

Centers for men on university and college campuses will be also places where an appeal to fathers and mothers originates. When I tell parents what I have told you here tonight, the standard response is one of amazement. This is going on? There are so few boys there now? They simply didn't know. Most are also not aware of changes in the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and the extra-curriculum I have described that have taken place since they graduated.

I would like to see the beginning of a few new projects based at university centers for men, including meetings of fathers and sons. Advocating only for the importance of the father-son relationship, this was tried at St. John's University for several years and, while the funding lasted, there

were three years of hugely successful annual father-son banquets.

Twenty years ago, just about the time men started to disappear from university, the British writer, Neil Lyndon, published a book called *No More Sex Wars*. I'm convinced that university campuses can become known as places where peace tables are set up to end harmful and wasteful battles between the sexes.

College campuses are the ideal place where an understanding of the issues challenging the well-being of young men can be gained. But to understand, we have to hear from our young men, and to hear from them they have to be there. Centers for university men are the place to welcome young men, listen to what they have to say about their experience, and care for them at this turning point in their collective life.



Miles Groth is the Editor of *New Male Studies: An International Journal*. He is Professor of Psychology at Wagner College on Staten Island, NY. He has been in private practice as a psychotherapist since 1977. He can be reached at mgroth@wagner.edu.

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL (NMS) IS AN OPEN ACCESS ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FACING BOYS AND MEN WORLDWIDE. THIS JOURNAL USES OPEN JOURNAL SYSTEMS 2.3.4.0, WHICH IS OPEN SOURCE JOURNAL MANAGEMENT AND PUBLISHING SOFTWARE DEVELOPED, SUPPORTED, AND FREELY DISTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE PROJECT UNDER THE GNU GENERAL PUBLIC LICENSE.

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTP://NEWMALESTUDIES.COM](http://newmalestudies.com).