



# Meeting Men

## Male Intimacy and College Men Centers

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*Given the ongoing trend of declining enrollments of males in college (currently at 40%), it is essential for educators and parents to understand its causes. As the issue becomes better understood, in the meantime the important part played by men's groups on college and university campuses to support young males has become evident. The functions of such groups are varied, but their basic value is to provide a safe space for an experience of genuine intimacy with other males.*



### THE SETTING AND THE PROBLEM

In the States, attending college and completing a program of study leading to an undergraduate degree is now, for most young people, a common aspiration, if not a necessity in order to be well placed to find a position in society where a sustainable income should be attainable. While it may seem that most of what one needs to know

to take an entry-level position can be found on the internet, without guidance, however, a course of study in cyberspace is not an orderly journey. Besides, the internet does not grant degrees. And so, the traditional way of acquiring the skills to function effectively in a technologically sophisticated culture—formal education—remains essential for access to most positions that confer on an individual, along with official, legally sanctioned recognition of presumed competence, what is perhaps the most important prerequisite of a life lived well, a degree of autonomy. And yes, it is still possible for a young person to be educated at a college or university, although for how long is a serious question. For some, of course, genuine autonomy may mean having maintained independence from all institutions, but while this may be a noble goal, it is not yet one that is supported by the culture and its institutions.

With so much riding on being able to don the bachelor's sheepskin when needed, not all, however, will have the opportunity to attend college through to commencement. For some, the venture is too expensive. Others have not been well prepared by public schooling to do the work at college. Finally, teenagers are now savvy to the fact that even with a costly diploma in hand, there may not be jobs for them after they turn tassel and frisbee their mortarboards skyward. All the same, college is the way to go, no matter how difficult it may be to get there. The evidence is that, in the States, about 70 percent of high school graduates will at least begin a period of tertiary education. Employers, the media, and parents all support this. Besides, campus life promises social pleasures.

What I have to say here is about what is now a minority of these aspirants—young men—and the special predicament in which they find themselves, quite apart from whatever else makes attending college more difficult and perhaps less rewarding for everyone. Yes, men are now in the minority of college students. Currently, they constitute roughly 40 percent of the total, parity between the sexes in college attendance having been reached about 1980. There is much to be said about this trend. It is closely related to fundamental changes in the intellectual and ideological environment of academe since 1970. In fact, talk about academe and talk about men in academe have a great deal to do with each other.

An objection is often raised that more *people* are attending college than ever before and that obviously this means there are more male bodies on campuses overall, even if many of them are non-traditional, older or part-time students. That is not the issue. The problem is the atmosphere on campus, given the shift in *proportion* of men to women living and studying there.

We have heard hardly a peep about how men are experiencing campus life and the college classroom, but this is what, more than anything else, is causing fewer men to stay in college and, as word trickles down, fewer to matriculate. Why have we heard next to nothing about these young men's dysphoric experience?

First, the trend is quite new, even though for a matter of such importance, thirty years is a long time, and news of what men are experiencing is long overdue. More important, the full force of the trend has only hit home in the last decade. Even though explicit warnings were sounded as early as 1990, they have been ignored. This is something about which the pilots of higher education must be ashamed, especially since



for some time now *in camera* their admissions office teams have been puzzling over what to do about declining male enrollments and how to get more men to attend without breaking the law, short-changing female students, or offending anyone. I suspect we will eventually learn that trustees and governing boards were often not informed of the problem. Accountability will eventually be demanded, but will it be too late?

Next, most males in their late teen years are long-suffering. They have learned the habit of male silence from their fathers and grandfathers. From about age six on, they learn the lesson that they must accept what happens to them. The performance of American cowboy and Indiana Jones masculinity is still required across the board beginning early on. This holds for sons of blue-collar workers as well as for those whose parents completed college and professional schools. Boys learn to pretend they are not feeling pain when injured. They come to accept the imputation of predatory, testosterone-driven adolescent male aggressiveness. They are taught to accept guilt for the original sin of presumed patriarchal privilege, no questions asked. Just as a 16-year-old will still usually not complain of testicular pain because he expects people will think he is a sissy if he does, a young male scholar who witnesses a malignant image of him painted in a gender studies class will say nothing. He will put up with it. He has learned that if he does speak out, he will likely be charged with wielding the overbearing assertiveness that comes with being an embodiment of willful male "attitude." And so he sits, silent, in disbelief that the professor could be talking down to him and about him. Of course, in doing so, he loses credibility in his own eyes. On the other hand, if is not docile, he becomes an advertisement of the need to correct his male excesses.

Finally, feeling unwelcome is not something anyone likes to admit to, especially when he is young and chronically suspects something might be wrong with him, as young males are taught to believe about themselves. The late adolescent years for boys and male teenagers are a minefield of well-disguised self-doubt, fueled by demands for accountability vis-à-vis expectations about what it means to be a "real man." For a young male undergraduate, to acknowledge not feeling at home on campus is equivalent to not feeling at home in his body.

So, the *problem* young college men are facing is still barely visible. Tutored to silence by relentless demands imposed on them to live up to the "big impossible" (as the Fox Indians termed manhood) and sustained by the fragility of the developing young male psyche, a male at college is increasingly invisible. Gradually, he has been disappearing. If he fails to hide, he is seen as implicated in a presumptive self-serving conspiracy to maintain patriarchy at all costs. His presence on campus (unless perhaps he is an athlete) is often perceived as a threat. At best, he is superfluous.

Not remarkably enough, however, his presence is still desired by what we once called co-eds. This should not be surprising, since most young women still like men, just as most young men still like women. It is noteworthy that as the number of males has declined on campus, gay guys are now often befriended by co-eds, not because they do not pose sexual risk, but because no matter how they might want to be perceived, these guys exude masculinity. How about that! Moreover, masculinity remains a desirable human quality for many. For example, it is the basis for homosocial relation-

ships between men. Young men honor it in each other, and that will not change, no matter how often a gender neutral culture is imagined in the dry dreams of aficionados of “queer theory.” At the same time, however, we see masculinity increasingly denigrated on campus and in the culture at large, unless it is performed in the context of athletic contests, which to the disappointment of feminists remain admired by men and women. This is a problem for even the most effective anti-male folks, since male athletes generate a lot of income for institutions of higher learning. And, yes, it is no compliment to a young man to be labeled a “jock,” even if MTV representations of the endless spring break party seem to suggest otherwise.

For most college males, campus is increasingly a world in which they are marginalized, at best perceived as an annoyance, at worst as bad weather brewing. For those of us who teach undergraduates, it is well known that putting down men has never been a hobby of young college women. The source of the practice was and is some faculty, albeit a small but powerful group, whose animus against men has been institutionalized, for example, in the compulsory “date-rape” consciousness-raising seminar required of incoming fresh-men in most schools, or in more and more course syllabi. Administrators who have been complicit in supporting this will soon be accountable for their sins of omission. On college campuses, misandry is tolerated. Is this an exaggerated account? I invite the reader to show that it is not.

## A SOLUTION AND A MODEL

Three noteworthy developments have taken place in response to the decreasing numbers and increasing silence of young males on campus. First, the past few years have seen the appearance of studies of the measured lack of men’s involvement in campus life. Second, in Australia, Canada and the States, male studies programs and projects are being established. Third, men’s centers on college campuses are being instituted. All of these initiatives are path-breaking, yet the studies have yielded only preliminary data, the programs and projects are just under way, and the establishment of college men centers is slow-going and meets stubborn obstacles. I will limit myself to talking about the last of these developments, since it represents an immediate, concrete response to the problem of the fading college male.

At the time of writing, there are only a handful of college men’s centers. Over the next few years, however, they will increase in number here, in Australia, Canada, the UK and Europe. Each center is inventing itself and formulating its unique mission and face. As noted, setting one up meets resistance (if only by being ignored), and a precarious funding base is a common problem for all of them. In what follows, I will briefly describe a few existing men’s centers and the part they play in responding to the new invisible man on campus. I will pay special attention to one model and recommend it because of its focus on the matter of male intimacy.

### *Pioneering Groups*

*Saint John’s University* in Collegeville, Minnesota, was the first school to establish a

men's center. Formed in 2005 under the stewardship of Gar Kellom, the Center for Men's Leadership and Service gained funding from the Lily Endowment to carry out pilot projects on sixteen campuses. It hosted a series of conferences for participating schools. The results of its work were published, in 2010, in *Engaging College Men: Discovering What Works and Why*. Saint John's is an all-men's college based on principles of the Benedictine tradition: <http://news-business.vlex.com/vid/introduction-men-leadership-saint-john-63424975>. Its story is especially noteworthy as an illustration of how precarious the situation is for a men's center even after it has been established. Men's spirituality groups continue at Saint John's, even though financial support for the Center was lost after six years.

*Winona State University's* men's group is Dedicated Academic Dads (DAD). It provides a place for discussions among young fathers about how to balance studying and parenting. While the group of about 20 men meet, their sons and daughters are tended by staff at the university's day care center: [http://collegemcenters.com/?page\\_id=21](http://collegemcenters.com/?page_id=21).

*Gustavus Adolphus College*, in St. Mary, Minnesota, was one of the Saint John's pilot project schools. Begun in 2008, its "M-Pact" program is one of the most inspired among those that have developed for college men. The motto of M-Pact is "Mentoring Men for Lives of Meaning and Making a Difference": <https://sites.google.com/a/gustavus.edu/m-pact/>. The group sponsors a speakers series and members are involved in community service in the States and abroad.

The *University of Portland's* "League of Extraordinary Gentlemen" (LXG), another Saint John's pilot school, was formed in 2007. This group boasts the largest membership at a men's center with 75 students and more than a dozen faculty mentors participating. It features a highly organized program. During each of the four college years students focus on a theme: identity (fresh-men), relationships (sophomores), resiliency (juniors), and life after college (seniors). The group has received recognition from the national Catholic Campus Ministry Association: [http://collegemcenters.com/?page\\_id=247](http://collegemcenters.com/?page_id=247).

*Temple University's* Men's Health Initiative was the birthplace of its men's group. Formed in the summer of 2010, the group's goal is to spread the word about the importance of attending to the overall wellbeing of young men. Its work extends to the Philadelphia community in which this major research university is located: [http://collegemcenters.com/?page\\_id=225](http://collegemcenters.com/?page_id=225).

*Springfield College*, in Springfield, Massachusetts, is the newest college men's group. Formed at the end of the spring semester, 2011, among its by-laws is a commitment to encourage male-positive attitudes on campus and to challenge trends that marginalize men or foster misandry: [http://collegemcenters.com/?page\\_id=88](http://collegemcenters.com/?page_id=88).

*The Men's Center at Wagner College* was established in 2010. Also one of the pioneering pilot programs sponsored by Saint John's University, the Wagner Center is conducting research on men's centers. However, its Men's Study Group is the heart of the Center's initiative, serving as a safe space for college men to talk and generate information about how men are experiencing college life. The Wagner model is one among many represented at [www.collegemcenters.com](http://www.collegemcenters.com), a website which is maintained by the Center. Student-driven, the Study Group's weekly discussions return again and

again to a few fundamental questions, including: What is life like for men at Wagner (and other colleges and universities)? And then there is the all-important question: What is male intimacy? At orientation, fresh-men are introduced to the group as a place to meet other male students outside of classes, especially if they may not be considering pledging a fraternity at some point or do not play a varsity sport. Wagner, like Gustavus Adolphus, is one of the twenty-six colleges and universities historically affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=145349208837901>.

The history and character of each center are different. Since the purposes and importance of college men centers are only gradually becoming known, membership in them is small. As administrators and faculty discover that such centers are not reactive and “against” any constituency, however, their programs are receiving more attention, and the experience of young men who meet in groups is being seen as valuable. Recognition of their importance is increasing (See Kellom, 2004, and Kellom & Groth, eds., 2010).

### *The Wagner Model*

The Wagner College model has tried to incorporate the most effective elements of other programs. As its faculty mentor and director of the Men’s Center at Wagner College, the author is in a position to present the model in some detail.

We are learning what works and why in *re-engaging* college men in campus life. We do this by *promoting* male-positive attitudes on campus, *emphasizing* once again what young men do well, and *demonstrating* the need and desire college men have for being mentored. Above all, young men are *rediscovering* their need for meaningful friendships with other men. It has quickly become clear that to understand groups for college men, the core issue is, quite simply, male intimacy.

I will first describe how a group forms at the Wagner Men’s Center and what goes on in it. Next I will review related activities of the Center as they illustrate its stated goals. Throughout, I will highlight the importance of intimacy in young college men’s lives.

### *Formation*

The core of a men’s group is a number of students who are acquainted individually with the faculty mentor. They, in turn, bring friends. But what is the purpose of a men’s group? What do the guys talk about? What do they do together? Here the essential meaning of college men groups comes into view: intimacy between men. In the end, that is what they are about.

This is sensitive territory. Why would men meet other than in a fraternity (to drink alcohol) or on a team (to play a sport)? Often, when a men’s center forms on a campus, it is perceived as “gay.” As men who have been part of a group will tell you, they have all worried over the misperception. But they stopped by.

The group begins by discussing the situation for men on campus. Soon enough, however, other themes emerge. These include closeness between the members and their

girlfriends, but also other bonds, such as the father-son relationship, the chum or pal bond of boyhood, bonds formed in the past with male teachers and coaches (often some of the closest homosocial relations young men have known), the links between men that eventually coalesce and constitute a team (athletic, artisan and, yes, military), comparably deep and intense non-sexual relationships with women, and the all-important kind of relationship some have experienced with a mentor. As the nuclear family and with it the father-son relationship have become more tenuous for many boys and young men, mentors have come to have a greater role in young males' lives. Eventually, they risk talking about their own friendships. The most successful groups achieve this.

A word is in order about male intimacy. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, friendships between men were a vital part of their lives. Husbands and fathers were in close sexual and personal relationships with women, but men also maintained extremely close ties with other men, some younger, some older, some peers. These were the days before the invention of homosexuality, which for several generations of men has cast suspicion on deep male friendships, suggesting that they always have an implicit sexual subtext. This is a legacy of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century sexology and a century of Freudianism. Freud's own lack of close male friends was anomalous for his time. The 20<sup>th</sup> century produced a remarkable shift from seeing same-sex sexual relations as a very small subset of intimate relationships between men to a view of intense same-sex relations in general as being always unconsciously sexual, while only occasionally having been "sublimated" into a "purified" friendship. Such a reading of men's relationships with each other has been disastrous. College men's groups answer a need to expose the oddity of American culture in this respect.

Obviously, some male-male relationships will be sexual, but most are not. More important, it is well known that among gay men, intimacy may well be lacking. In fact, for some gay men, becoming part of a men's group might mean finding the first genuine friendship with another male he has known.

One of the first important discoveries made in a men's group, then, is that intimacy between any two members does not imply sexuality, but that something else is going on that men crave, something that our culture, however, no longer values.

Men of college age are renegotiating their relationships with their fathers (if they are on the scene), weighing the differences between friendships with women and sexual relationships with females, reconsidering their boyhood, wondering what fatherhood might mean to them, especially as the father of a boy, and coming to terms with having a male body. These topics increasingly come up in college men's groups.

### *Other Activities*

Apart from the group's regular meetings on campus, the Wagner model includes two other elements that are especially meaningful to members of the group and bring into focus the issue of intimacy: retreats and forming connections with young men in the local community. A few words about each are in order.

Each semester, members of the Men's Study Group spend a weekend at a rural lodge

north of New York City. A college-approved driver who is usually also a member of the group transports the group there in a college van. One member of the group coordinates scheduling the retreat as he does the weekly meetings. Not surprisingly, the weekend is structured around getting to know each other, figuring out living arrangements and preparing meals. However, each man is also invited to be responsible for an hour sometime during the weekend. This may mean leading a walk in the wooded area around the lodge, providing an hour of music-making, or essaying a spiritual practice. Some members of the group pass on “making an hour” during the first retreat. Most of the time, what takes place is given up to serendipity and the exploration of living together as a small group.

Living closely together for even a few days forces situations to form and topics to surface that are usually insulated from discussion by the routines of the regular college day on campus and the option of having a room to go to away from the group. Sometimes the most important “event” during a retreat is the discovery by the group of some previously unknown interest or talent of a member. One turns out to be a remarkable cook. Another knows about living in the wild. For some, the retreat may be a time to be alone for a greater part of the weekend, observing other interactions. For him, the difficulty of closeness hits home. On the other hand, this is an important discovery for each member of the group. Nearly always, new relationships form and existing relationships are modified. These changes become topics of private conversations or discussions in the group back on campus.

Now if all this sounds unlikely and hokey beyond belief for inhabitants of the sophisticated world of New York junior academics, I am here to tell you that we have found that a few days away from cell phones and computers (yes, this is suggested for retreats) is refreshing. By the way, keeping cell phones away except for emergency calls is recommended. The Wagner group has tried it both ways. One result is questioning the world of online relationships (if that they be), the phenomenon of Facebook (which many are now abandoning), and the need for unmedia-ated interactions in a crowded city where people must learn how *not* to look at someone else, whether it be on a street, in packed subway car, or in the campus cafeteria. In short, the retreats foreground face-to-face encounter.

A recent development of the Wagner group has been to try to include young men from the local community. Friends of members of the group are invited to sit in on a session. Some will return. A by-product of this innovation is bringing the college community into closer contact with young men living on Staten Island, New York, where Wagner College is located. The most valuable result of this collaboration has been the realization that young men who are in college and those who are not face the same problems and challenges.

### ***Fundamentals***

The Wagner model continues to be modified and redesigned as we gain in experience. Ongoing renovation is part of its youth. Like other centers, however, it has identified some basic features that work for it. We think that a few may be an important





part of any men's center.

I. The Wagner Center secures external funding. Harold Theurer, an alumnus of the college with a young teenage son, and his wife committed to supporting the Center for a two-year start-up period. After that, we will have to look for funding elsewhere. The benefactor has offered to advise the Center on how to raise money to support itself. It should come as no surprise that our supporter is the author of an important children's book on father-son relations, *Hey Dad! Let's Have a Catch!*

While it is recognized by the college as a legitimate student "entity" or activity, the Center values financial independence from the constraints of the institution's budget. This is important. We strongly recommend that every men's center find support by reviewing with a colleague in the Alumni Relations Office prospective contributors for the start-up period and beyond. This will require some effort on the part of the faculty mentor at the outset. Later on, members of the group might look to the local community, parents and friends to help support a center from which their young men can benefit.

II. And who is the faculty mentor? Every college and university campus in the States, Australia, Canada, the UK and Europe has among its tenured faculty a man who is keenly aware of the situation described in the opening section of this paper. As men's centers multiply, they will do so because someone stepped out of the shadows and had the courage to speak up on behalf of young men on the campus he shares with them. Speaking up for them permits college men to begin to speak for themselves again. This means, first of all, talking to each other. Given the current campus culture and the not so "great" male silence, the role of the mentor is significant.

Mentors are not paid for what they do. That is in the nature of mentoring, which is freely given and based on a perceived need that cannot be ignored. This makes mentoring closer to fathering than any other intergenerational male relationship. Do not confuse mentors with advocates for a cause or coaches. Interest in the wellbeing of young men is the sole motivation for organizing a college men's center and this population's wellbeing is not a cause but a moral duty especially for older men. Some mentors are themselves fathers; others are not. Not all have known a father and the intimacy of the son-father relationship, but they understand its power, perhaps precisely because they have missed it. Those who have benefitted from a strong relationship with their fathers have a precious legacy to share. Mentors of young men understand the empty place in a male's experience that forms without the intimacy that a long-term relationship with another man provides. Until recently, the first and most important of these was with the father. Mentors model a kind of relationship that is, however, different from that bond. We believe it is one that college men can emulate in forming friendships with each other.

A mentor realizes that, like fathering, mentoring a young man is something only a man can do. The gratification of mentoring is in seeing the young men for whom they have made a place to meet experience deep friendships. Again, this is more than anything the goal of a college men's group. It is a simple thing, but profound: the authorization of intimacy between men. Like a father, a mentor has a part to play for a time

in a young man's life. That time follows its course and passes.

Given the now nearly universal ethos of competitiveness between men at all levels and in all kinds of work, for a little over a century men have been deprived of close relationships with other men. Compare this to a time when cooperation among farmers or artisans in guilds was essential to the economy of the community. For many men since 1900, the only glimpse they have had of a deeply meaningful relationship with another man was in the context of war: two World Wars and later venues in Korea, Indochina and parts of Asia. While terror and imminent death do galvanize deep friendships, surely they are not the only or the most desirable circumstances in which to form them (Fussell 1975, 1989; Gray 1959). College men are in a setting that is favorable of forming such bonds, especially given the deprecation now showered on fraternities and even some athletic teams by campus culture.

A college men center is effective only if the mentor knows to step back. Providing funding and a place for meeting are obviously necessary functions, as is maintaining a tie with each of the members of the group if he can. He will make recommendations about which member of the group might best coordinate its meetings and retreats. He will provide guidance as needed and act as liaison with the institution. But the effectiveness of a college men's group depends on its being student-driven. This brings me to the third fundamental element of an effective college men's group.

III. Each year of a group's existence requires the presence of at least one strongly committed member. Often, several share the responsibilities of coordinating meetings and providing presence in the Center during the week. Avoiding setting one member up as the "head" or "leader" of the group is desirable, however, just as is downplaying the authority of the faculty mentor. At Wagner, we have been lucky in having had a series of such young men.

Here, then, is a model for a college men's center. It may not be the best and certainly will not work at every institution. Its aspirations are generous but not grandiose. We think it has identified a crucial need young men on college campuses have today. They do not need snazzier dormitories or more technology. They will find and enjoy close physical and emotional relationships with young women. They do not need anyone's help in that area. On the other hand, they do need the acknowledgment that this is a precarious time for college men. Young men welcome the news that deep friendships with other men have always been part of men's lives, even though they are looked upon with suspicion in our time.

## IN CONCLUSION

College men's groups are experiments in rediscovering the importance of intimacy and friendships in young men's lives. They are in the service of making college campuses once again a place where young men can feel completely at home. This is of the greatest importance to academe. If the trend identified above were to play itself out, the last bachelor's degree awarded to a male would be conferred in this century. That surely will not happen, but it is a sobering and alarming thought that such a projection



has been calculated at all. As for friendships between men, they may well be critical for maintaining a sane sociopolitical environment for everyone and modeling loving and supportive relationships between the sexes as well as between parents and their children.

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