

Engaging Male Students in Violence Prevention: A Case Study of a Campus Mentoring Program

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Despite decades of prevention programming, sexual assault rates on college campuses remain persistently high. While federal mandates require institutions to provide comprehensive sexual misconduct education, research suggests that targeted interventions with male students may offer a promising approach to addressing the masculine norms that contribute to sexual violence. This case study examines a pilot mentoring program designed for male-identified students at California State University, Sacramento. The program used developmental relationships to help participants explore healthier masculinity and challenge harmful behaviors. Nine students participated in the Spring 2025 pilot. Although challenges in recruiting participants and inconsistent attendance prevented assessing attitudinal shifts, at the group's onset, participant surveys revealed male students' readiness to engage with these topics. All participants expressed comfort discussing these topics, suggesting that common barriers to men's anti-violence programming may be structural rather than attitudinal. The initial surveys uncovered four distinct motivations for participation: seeking a clearer understanding of what constitutes healthy masculinity, processing personal gender-based experiences, connecting with peers around meaningful topics, and developing anti-violence advocacy skills. Many participants described previously feeling isolated in conversations about gendered violence, rarely discussing such topics with male peers. Group recruitment emerged as the primary challenge to implementation, with traditional outreach methods proving ineffective. Success came only through personal endorsements from trusted campus figures, whom students already respected. Evening scheduling also proved problematic for students managing multiple responsibilities. Participants valued the opportunity for authentic conversation more than any specific curriculum content. The male-facilitated environment appeared essential for creating the vulnerability necessary for meaningful engagement. These findings suggest that effective men's programming requires departures from traditional campus intervention models, emphasizing relationship-based recruitment.

Keywords: Healthy masculinity, sexual violence prevention, mentoring leadership, bystander intervention, mentoring interventions

Introduction

Sexual assault rates on college campuses have shown little improvement despite decades of prevention programming (Alonso, 2024). Federal policy has required public colleges to annually provide their students sexual assault annual prevention training since 2015 (VAWA, 2013). Many colleges choose to meet the federal requirement by providing their students with an annual online training (California State University, Stanislaus, n.d.). However, researchers have questioned the efficacy of online training in shifting attitudes (Kimberly & Hardman, 2020) or whether even in-person training, when it is delivered only once, helps reduce sexual violence prevalence (Htun et al., 2022). Even when students demonstrate in online training can clearly define sexual consent, when asked to identify it in a potential real-world context, they struggle significantly (Pella & McClung, 2023). And though some institutions have reported a decline in reported incidents of sexual

misconduct, concerns about underreporting and the need for more comprehensive data collection remain (Alonso, 2024).

Literature Review

Research has established clear connections between adherence to traditional masculine norms and perpetration of sexual violence, pointing to interventions with male students as a critical component of comprehensive campus violence prevention (Murnen et al., 2002). A meta-analytic review by Murnen et al. (2002) identified that masculine ideologies that emphasize dominance, emotional apathy, and sexual conquest significantly predict sexually aggressive behavior among college men.

Mentoring and developmental relationship models have gained support as more effective approaches for engaging men in violence prevention work (Casey & Smith, 2010). Casey and Smith (2010) found that men opt to become

involved in anti-violence work primarily through relationships with other male advocates who are already involved in anti-violence work rather than through lectures about moral obligations or being told that violence is wrong. Their study, which used male advocates to encourage participants to critically examine masculine expectations while still positively affirming their masculine identity, demonstrated meaningful attitudinal shifts (Casey & Smith, 2010). Fabiano et al. (2003) found that small group, relationship-focused, social norms interventions that engaged men as allies in violence against women prevention demonstrated greater efficacy than lecture-style presentations.

In recent years, scholars have advocated for moving away from reductively criticizing toxic masculinity to promoting healthier alternatives (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). This “strength-based” approach recognizes the complexity of masculinity and the need for offering healthy models, rather than focusing on negative behaviors to avoid. Bystander intervention research offers additional theoretical foundation, with studies showing that individuals are far more likely to intervene when they both have the skills and are motivated to take action (Banyard et al., 2007).

McMahon and Banyard (2012) expanded upon this framework by examining situational and individual factors that determine when and how bystanders decide to intervene, highlighting the significance of establishing supportive environments that encourage the motivation to help.

Institutional Context and Program Development California State University system’s Title IX programs underwent assessment in 2022-2023 by Cozen O’Connor committee, which identified considerable gaps in educational programming and response to sexual misconduct, despite comprehensive policies and education initiatives.

The Cozen O’Connor assessment reported that while the CSU system had comprehensive policies, the universities’ efforts focused primarily on mandatory online training sessions and policy enforcement approaches (Maisto et al., 2023). However, research demonstrates that institutional compliance with federal mandates does not necessarily equate to sexual violence prevention (Htun et al., 2022). The persistence of sexual assault rates on college campuses despite decades of prevention programming reveals the shortcomings of traditional educational approaches and underscores the necessity of developing prevention strategies that focus on the primary perpetrators of campus sexual violence (Alonso, 2024).

The body of research on violence prevention with men suggests effective programming needs to move beyond traditional educational models toward relationship-based interventions. Casey and Smith (2010) report that men engage in anti-violence work primarily through relationships with trusted male advocates, while Fabiano et al. (2003) showed that small group, relationship-focused interventions outperformed lecture-style

presentations. This body of research suggests optimal programming be designed as mentorship-based, allowing for ongoing relationships that position participants to challenge deeply held masculine norms and foster the kind of vulnerable self-examination (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

Within the context of seeking nontraditional prevention programming targeting men, and focused on the frame of mentorship, a partnership was developed between Dr. Pella from the Department of Education and Ulyses Dorantes, one of the campus Confidential Advocates. This collaboration merged curriculum development skills and strategies with frontline experience in sexual violence advocacy and group facilitation. Recruitment efforts encompassed sending digital flyers to departments across the university encouraging faculty to promote the group in their own classes, posting physical flyers on campus, and seeking referrals through student organizations. Promotional materials emphasized personal development and leadership skills rather than sexual violence prevention, hoping to entice students’ desire for self-development.

Program Design and Structure

The pilot program was designed as a three-session men’s group focused on exploring healthy masculinity and developing bystander intervention skills. Originally designed as an eight-session program, the format was condensed for the pilot trial. Sessions were scheduled for 90 minutes each, with meetings held once a week for three consecutive weeks, from 5:30 to 7:00 PM. The program targeted male-identified students broadly, while maintaining a single-gender format to facilitate members’ comfort in examining masculine constructs. The curriculum aimed to provide focused curricular content while also serving as a space for peer discussion and reflection on masculine identity development. Sessions incorporated discussion on gender socialization, reductive masculinity, emotional intelligence, male relationships, healthy masculinity, and promoting the notion of a healthy brotherhood.

Ulyses Dorantes, a male campus Confidential Advocate, facilitated the group, aiming to foster the comfort and authenticity necessary for participants to have vulnerable conversations about masculine identity. The program welcomed participants through an inclusive registration process that assessed comfort engaging with emotionally activating content (domestic violence, sexual assault) and inquiring about registrants’ motivations for joining. Pizza was provided at each session as advertised in recruitment materials, and participants could earn a completion certificate for attending at least two of the three sessions.

Methodology

Participant Selection and Assessment Methods

The registration form served as both an assessment tool and screening mechanism, with

participant motivations reviewed to ensure genuine interest in learning and positive group engagement. The registration survey also collected basic demographic information, assessed participants' availability for all three sessions, and gauged their comfort level with emotionally activating content including sexual assault and domestic violence. Participants also described their motivations for joining, which ranged from curiosity about healthy masculinity concepts to personal experiences they wanted to share.

The pretest survey (no posttest was conducted due to low attendance) measured several key constructs including participants' exposure to sexist behaviors (observing sexism, sexist jokes, and gender-based dismissiveness), masculinity attitudes (beliefs about healthy masculinity, pressure to act inauthentically, comfort expressing vulnerability), confidence in identifying and challenging harmful behaviors, and likelihood of bystander intervention across various scenarios.

Additional questions assessed the frequency of discussing healthy masculinity with other men and the perceived harm levels of common masculine policing behaviors.

Program Outcomes and Analysis

Limitations

Limitations of this case study include small sample size (n=9), inconsistent attendance, and lack of posttest data which prevented meaningful statistical analysis or assessment of attitudinal changes. Students were recruited through a campus ambassador, likely impacting student survey responses. While race/ ethnicity and sexual orientation data were collected, the group leaders chose to keep this information private to protect the anonymity of the small group. Despite these constraints, the pilot provides insights into participant motivations, implementation challenges, and the feasibility of men's programming on college campuses. The findings offer practical guidance for developing future interventions and demonstrate male students' willingness to engage with sensitive topics when appropriate conditions are created.

Student Engagement Patterns

While recruitment brought in nine registered participants, most attended only one or two sessions rather than completing the entire program. Registration data revealed strong student interest, with 100% of participants expressing comfort engaging with emotionally charged content, including discussing sexual assault and domestic violence. This finding challenged prevailing assumptions that male students resist discussing gender-based violence (Ringrose et al., 2024).

Instead, it suggests that supportive environments can facilitate meaningful engagement with difficult content.

Understanding Participant Motivation

The initial survey asked students about their motivations for joining the group. The data revealed four distinct motivations for participating: wanting to understand what healthy masculinity actually looks like, processing past experiences related to gender or violence, seeking peer relationships around meaningful topics, and building skills to help others or advocate for change. The most common theme was students wanting clearer definitions of healthy masculinity, with several participants noting they could identify harmful masculine behaviors but were unsure what positive masculinity actually looks like. One participant explained: "The topic or idea of 'healthy masculinity' has always been interesting to me. I know what 'toxic masculinity' is and how that can harm other people, even men themselves... However, I can't easily define or identify what healthy masculinity can look like." This sentiment reflects the confusion many male students feel about masculine identity and aligns with research emphasizing strength-based approaches to masculine identity development (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

Participants who reported wanting to work through past experiences revealed the complexity of male students' relationships to gender-based violence, challenging assumptions that men serve only as potential perpetrators. One participant shared: "I have some personal stories to share where I have been taken advantage of from females in various forms including sexual harassment/assault in one instance. Healthy masculinity is important so I'd like to share how I gradually overcame my struggles." This finding underscores the need for programming that recognizes male students as both potential allies and individuals who may have experienced harm themselves.

Many participants expressed in the surveys wanting to connect with other men about topics they rarely discuss with male peers. One participant noted being "interested in hearing other men's perspective on an issue I almost exclusively talk to women in my life about," illustrating the isolation many male students experience around these topics. This finding indicates that men's programming could help reduce social isolation while creating supportive peer networks for exploring healthy masculinity.

Implementation Barriers and Assessment Challenges

The initial assessment revealed that participants had very different starting points. Some had encountered more sexist behaviors than others, while participants varied widely in their comfort expressing emotions; confidence levels for intervening in problematic situations also differed significantly across the group. This variation suggests that programs cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach but must be flexible enough to address different starting points. Additionally, attendance consistency emerged as the most significant implementation challenge, with only

roughly a third of registered participants able to commit to all sessions. Recruitment strategies utilizing campus tabling, social media outreach, and organizational referrals proved insufficient for generating the sustained engagement necessary for group cohesion and relationship development.

Findings & Discussion

Critical Lessons from Implementation

The most significant challenge to the program proved to be recruitment. While not explicitly mentioned by participants, the facilitator hypothesized students may have perceived joining such groups as potentially “unmasculine” and damaging to social status. Students also appeared concerned about potential progressive political messaging embedded in masculinity discussions. The few participants who successfully engaged came through personal endorsements from respected administrators, coaches, or peer leaders whom students already knew and respected. This pattern suggests an ambassador-based recruitment model utilizing individuals with established credibility among target populations. Additionally, materials and promotional strategies should emphasize personal development, leadership skills, and peer connection rather than explicit violence prevention language that may trigger ideological resistance among potential participants.

Students demonstrated an unwillingness to commit to specific session numbers, regardless of incentives, preferring a drop-in format where they could attend sessions as their schedules and interests allowed. Evening programming proved incompatible with college students who manage jobs, family responsibilities, and social obligations. Students described that midday programming would be a better fit, though this creates new challenges around class schedules and having available space on campus to hold the group.

The facilitator observed that students benefited more from having a safe place to talk than from any specific curriculum, which suggests future programs should emphasize building trust and connections over delivering specific content. The male-facilitated environment proved central for

creating the conditions necessary for meaningful engagement. Participants engaged more openly and shared more vulnerability than might have occurred in a mixed-gender or female-facilitated setting. With only nine total participants and inconsistent attendance across the shortened three-session format, the group creators decided against conducting a posttest, as the results would not have provided meaningful data for analysis.

Conclusion

Synthesis and Future Directions

This pilot demonstrates both the promise and complexity of men’s programming in higher education settings. The data collected, though limited, supported that male students need and want opportunities to explore healthy masculinity. Students expressed openness to discussing sensitive topics and brought sophisticated perspectives that challenge stereotypes about male resistance to gender-based programming.

However, implementation proved far more challenging than anticipated. Assumptions that were made about traditional programming formats, scheduling, and recruitment approaches require modification going forward. Employing a flexible participation model instead of pushing students to commit to attendance may aid buy-in and support students’ needs. Rather than viewing inconsistent attendance as a problem requiring solutions, future programming might embrace rotating participation as an intentional feature. Drop-in formats, programming, and open-attendance options could better serve student needs while still achieving the primary objectives of delivering content and fostering meaningful peer connections. Given the persistence of sexual violence on college campuses despite existing policies and traditional programming approaches, universities should prioritize innovative prevention strategies that engage male students, who statistically represent the majority of perpetrators. This case study suggests that effective programming requires departing from conventional formats in favor of midday scheduling, flexible drop-in participation, and discussion-centered group environments that foster authentic peer connection.

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