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The Case for Using Intersectional Perspectives With Individual College Men

Kyle C. Ashlee, Michael Loeffelman and Kate C. Freeman

OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS, research and scholarship related to men and masculinities have revealed that masculine gender role socialization trains young men and boys to ignore their emotions and prioritize power and domination above all else (David & Brannon, 1976; Kimmel, 2008). Others have outlined the many ways that systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, have been established throughout history to benefit men as a group with unearned privileges (Connell, 2005; hooks, 2004). In higher education, scholars and practitioners have begun considering men as gendered beings through the evolution of college men's gender identity development models as well as effective practices for engaging college men on campus (Davis, 2002; Davis & Laker, 2004; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2010; Harris, 2008; Kellom, 2004; Laker & Davis, 2011; Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019).

Until recently, most of the scholarship and practices in higher education aimed at engaging men have explored their experiences in the aggregate, focusing on men as a monolithic group (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019; Robbins & McGowan, 2016). For example, early examinations of college-eligible men as a group revealed that this population typically applies—and enrolls—less often than their female-identified peers (Adebayo, 2008; Baum & Goldstein, 2005). Persistence rates of college men are lower than that of college women (Harris & Harper, 2015; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Scholarly analyses have also shown that men underperform academically, are less academically motivated, are at higher risk of being on academic probation, and are more likely to be dismissed from college for academic reasons than collegiate women (Musser et al., 2017). Finally, men have been found to be the least engaged group of students on campus and are typically overrepresented among those found responsible for violating campus codes of conduct (Harper et al., 2005).

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While the practice of lumping all men together has been helpful in starting a conversation among scholars and educators about college men's gender identity development, it has also led to the privileging of white, heterosexual, cisgender men's perspectives over those that have historically been marginalized by systems of oppression. Most programs aimed at supporting and engaging college men do not specify other identities or experiences that might be relevant to the content (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019). In other words, when educators develop programs or scholars conduct research, they tend to only think of college men's gender and ignore the other identities that influence how they experience being a man. By default, the men who attend these programs tend to hold mostly dominant intersecting identities. Despite an increased understanding of college men as a group brought about by a gender-only analysis of their experiences, many of the challenges experienced and created by college men continue.

With the development of literature related to college men and masculinities, new questions have emerged about how educators and scholars might expand their understanding of masculinities to consider the experiences of college men who have historically been erased by systems of oppression, such as racism and heterosexism. For example, many professionals seeking to address the educational disparities experienced by Men of Color in college have developed successful campus peer education programs and mentoring initiatives geared toward providing resources and support for navigating racism in higher education (Smith et al., 2019). Still, others have established men's retreats and dialogue groups that welcome diverse perspectives of masculinity among college men (Paquette & Wall, 2019). Some initial research has explored the unique experiences of college men with marginalized identities (Harper & Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011). As a result, the more expansive term *masculinities* (as opposed to the singular *masculinity*) has gained popularity among higher education scholars and practitioners (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019).

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As the need to provide advocacy and support for marginalized college student populations increases and campus challenges related to college men persist, educators and scholars are increasingly finding themselves in need of more nuanced frameworks for engaging and understanding college men. One such model, the *Intersectional Model of College Men and Masculinities Programming* (Ashlee and Wagner, 2019), has emerged and is being used by masculinities educators at some colleges and universities to create programs and initiatives for *groups* of men. And still, those on college campuses who work with individual men in one-on-one settings, such as academic advisors or staff supervisors, have few theoretical models to call upon that account for individual college men's many multiple intersecting identities.

In this article, we make the case for why educators and scholars should consider the *Intersectional Model of College Men and Masculinities Programming* (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019) as a theoretical lens, not only to be used with groups, but also when engaging individual college men in one-on-one settings. This theory can provide a much-needed framework for professionals who are already engaged in masculinities work, as well as insight for those who want to become more connected with individual men on their campuses. In addition to providing an overview of the model, we offer recommendations for how this framework might be applied through illustrative case study examples. Finally, the article concludes with considerations and a call for future research related to engaging college men through intersectional frameworks.

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Contextualizing Intersectional Perspectives in College Masculinities Scholarship

FIRST INTRODUCED BY legal scholar Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality theory describes the unique ways that systems of oppression overlap to marginalize Women of Color. In higher education, intersectionality theory has been used to explore "relations of domination and subordination, privilege and agency, in the structural arrangements through which various services, resources, and other social rewards are delivered" (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 5). As we previously mentioned, some scholars and practitioners alike have begun using intersectional perspectives to better understand the unique lived experiences of college men who hold multiple marginalized identities including Men of Color, Queer men, men with disabilities, as well as Trans* men and Trans* masculine individuals (Harper & Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011). We find Crenshaw's theory to be an incredibly helpful tool for exploring college men's experiences, while also recognizing that the theory may not have been intended for this purpose. In an effort to be good stewards of Crenshaw's original work (Duran, Pope, & Jones, 2019), we use the term *intersectional perspectives*, as opposed to the more specific *intersectionality*.

In order for intersectional perspectives to be used with college men in one-on-one settings, educators must first learn to recognize the connection between a student's gender and their other identities, the influence of systemic oppression on the formation of one's gender identity, and the social construction of gender through an interactive process among multiple identities (Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Moreover, using intersectional perspectives with college men implores educators to focus on the student's many strengths, assets, and cultural wealth that come along with his social identity experiences (Yosso, 2005). This is especially important to consider when using intersectional perspectives with individual college men who hold marginalized identities. While some college men have a positive and empowering association with their oppressed identities, most have been socialized to believe that their marginalized identities are weaknesses that make them vulnerable to further marginalization (Kimmel, 2008). Using intersectional perspectives, educators should focus on the strengths, skills, and support that can be found in a student's marginalized identities (Harper, 2012). This is not to say that educators should minimize students' pain and suffering related to their marginalized identities. Rather, educators should consider both painful and powerful elements of the student's many intersecting identities to help college men better understand themselves.

Four theoretical interventions that educators can use to situate their practice in intersectionality theory include (a) centering the experiences of people of color and other marginalized groups, (b) complicating social identity, (c) unveiling power, and (d) promoting social justice (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Using this theoretical framework, along with the intersectional model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013), Ashlee and Wagner (2019) developed the *Intersectional Model of College Men and Masculinities Programming*, which encourages educators to develop programs and initiatives that situate college men's multiple intersecting identities in systems of power and oppression.

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Examples of Using Intersectional Perspectives With Individual College Men

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND how educators might use intersectional perspectives when working with individual college men, we describe the *Intersectional Model of College Men and Masculinities Programming* (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019) and how it can be applied in one-on-one settings with college men. Additionally, we offer examples from our own professional experience working with individual college men that demonstrate how intersectional perspectives can be implemented in practice. We identify as two white, cisgender men and a white, cisgender woman who have all committed our careers to engage college men as partners in dismantling systemic inequities. By centering the marginalized experiences of college men, complicating their multiple social identities, unveiling power and privilege, and finally,

promoting social justice, we have been more effective in engaging and supporting individual college men through an intersectional lens. We hope other educators and scholars will join us.

Centering the Experiences of Marginalized Men

While college men undoubtedly hold privilege and power within their gender identity, they may simultaneously experience oppression in other social identity categories, including race, social class, or sexuality. Rather than monolithically thinking of students as men, those working with college men in one-on-one settings should complicate their understanding to include the complex influence of students' many intersecting identities on the development of their gender. By framing engagement "in the experiences of marginalized groups and situating masculinity in and among students' multiple intersecting identities, educators will appeal to men's core sense of belonging" (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 81). This is particularly poignant for college men who experience systemic oppression as a result of intersecting marginalized identities, such as Men of Color, Queer men, Working-Class men, and Trans* men, to name a few. Interacting with an educator who acknowledges the importance of marginalized identities, and how those identities influence gender, can go a long way in helping students feel welcome and supported in college.

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For example, when one of the coauthors was advising a first-generation college student about improving his grade point average, the student revealed that he was working a lot in order to help pay tuition. Rather than seeing the students' choice as irresponsible, or a problematic symptom of his marginalized identity, this advisor chose to first acknowledge how the students' working-class identity and values were helping him navigate the complex challenge of paying for college. From there, the advisor worked with the student to develop a structured weekly schedule that would allow him enough time to work and keep up his grades.

In this case, the advisor was centering the experiences of marginalized men by focusing on the student's identity as a first-generation college student. Rather than diminishing his decision to prioritize work over school, the advisor praised the student for drawing on the strengths of his marginalized identity to successfully navigate the financial demands of college. Once he validated the students' experience of marginalization, the advisor moved ahead to help the student find a solution to his problem that would allow him to maintain the assets of his social class identity, while also finding space to value academics and studying.

Complicating Individual Social Identities

As we have seen, much research has demonstrated how college students' multiple identities do not exist in isolation (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013). This same conclusion applies to college men and their multiple intersecting identities (Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Because men with intersecting marginalized identities have had to navigate systems of oppression, it is likely that these students have thought about a salient marginalized aspect of their identity, such as race for Men of Color or sexuality for Queer men (Jones & Abes, 2013). However, on account of their male privilege, most college men have not thought much about their gender identity. College educators can help individual men make meaning of their multiple intersecting identities by complicating the notion that individual identities are distinct from one another. This "allows men to complicate their understandings of social identity by articulating the ways the sites of their intersecting identities influence and reinforce each other" (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 82). Using intersectional perspectives, college men can reflect on their gender identity by exploring how marginalized intersecting identities have shaped how

they understand what it means to be a man as well as some of the ways that their gender has impacted their other aspects of identity, such as race or class.

An example comes from the same coauthor and his work as an academic advisor. In this case, an international student from China came to the advisor's office several times asking for an exception regarding the number of credits he could take in one semester. This student was interested in pursuing degrees in both psychology and quantitative economics. Even though he had a passion for understanding human behavior, he felt compelled to fulfill his father's wish of pursuing a career in business. In addition to being concerned about not having enough time, he was also worried that his father would consider studying psychology to be dishonorable for a Chinese man. The advisor was initially cautious to grant the student an exception, but through an intersectional perspective, he came to see that the two degrees were not mutually exclusive. The advisor applauded the student for honoring his own, and his father's, dreams about his future. Then the advisor worked with the student to identify academic majors that might allow him to fulfill his father's wishes and also pursue his own personal passion. Ultimately, the student decided on marketing as a possible major that would combine his father's hopes for a business-focused degree and his own personal interest in human behavior.

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In this example, the advisor was complicating the student's understanding of his social identities by working with the student to reconsider the boundaries of his ethnic and gender identities. On the one hand, the student's understanding of a business degree reflected values from both his ethnic identity and his gender identity. On the other hand, this student had an individual passion for psychology that seemed at odds with the way he was socialized to think about himself as a Chinese man. Of course, these identities do not exist in isolation from one another. Using intersectional perspectives, the advisor in this case invited the student to consider an understanding of his ethnic and gender identities as being converging, rather than separate. By helping the student better understand this convergence of identities, the educator was able to support the student in finding a solution to his problem.

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Unveiling Power and Privilege

All college men hold power and privilege due to their social location as men in a culture of patriarchy (Connell, 2005). Until this point, we have focused discussion of student identities at an individual level. However, regardless of social identities that might be marginalized, individual college men should understand the connection between their gender identity and the system of oppression that provides them with unearned benefits and power, while simultaneously marginalizing those who do not identify as men (Kivel, 2003). Educators can facilitate a process with college men related to how they have been socialized to perpetuate a culture of male dominance, allowing students to understand "sociohistorical events that have constructed patriarchy and privilege men while oppressing women and Trans* individuals" (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 82). Additionally, educators working with students who hold marginalized identities can facilitate ways to better understand how systems of oppression have shaped their experiences. For college men with salient marginalized intersecting identities, such as Men of Color, Queer men, or Trans* men, there is a clear understanding of how systems of power have marginalized them, yet these men may not be as familiar with the unique and specific ways they experience unearned privilege at the intersection of their masculine gender

identity and other marginalized identities due to patriarchy (hooks, 2004). By providing historical, social, cultural, and institutional background, educators can empower individual college men by helping them better understand the systemic context of their experiences.

For example, when mentoring a young black man, one coauthor learned about the difficult tension this student experienced while working as a peer educator in the office of health promotion on campus. He reported feeling invalidated by his supervisor, a white woman who frequently challenged him about his male privilege without acknowledging the unique challenges he faced as a Man of Color on campus. He was conflicted about the feedback and wanted guidance on how to move forward. The mentor thanked the student for sharing his experiences and affirmed the student's ability to hold the complexity of both privileged and marginalized identities simultaneously. The mentor continued having conversations with the student over the course of the semester to better understand how his racial identity shaped his gender, and vice versa. Finally, the mentor began to reference intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) when talking with the student about his experiences as a black man to shed light on the ways that white supremacy and patriarchy overlap and reinforce one another. By the end of the semester, the student felt more confident in his own identity and more able to navigate conversations with his supervisor about race, gender, and privilege.

Here, the mentor was unveiling power with the student by illuminating the connection between his individual experiences as a black man and larger systems of oppression. Rather than getting caught in the seeming contradiction of this student's contrasting privileged and marginalized identities, the mentor used intersectional perspectives to help him understand both race and gender within the context of white supremacy and patriarchy. Coming to see that these two identities were not separate from one another—but were in fact shaped by mutually reinforcing systems of oppression—the student gained a deeper perspective about his experiences as a black man. Moreover, the student developed an understanding of how his privilege as a cisgender man influenced his marginalized racial identity, and how the oppression he felt related to his race could not be separated from his gender privilege.

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Promoting Social Justice

Individual college men need opportunities to make meaning of their experiences. They also need direction for how to take action with the knowledge and awareness they have about systems of oppression, as well as their position within those systems (Kellom & Groth, 2010). The process of centering marginalized identities, complicating social identity, and unveiling power and privilege, enables college men to situate themselves within larger systems of oppression, which "ultimately lead[s] to insights about how and where they can take action to promote social justice" (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 83). Educators can build college men's capacity to take action for social justice by providing them with opportunities to reflect on their multiple intersecting identities (Jones & Abes, 2013). Finally, educators can encourage college men to identify tangible action steps they can take to challenge systems of oppression.

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For example, one coauthor found himself

mentoring an undergraduate student who was serving on the campus masculinities committee. In light of recent campus events where fraternity men were found responsible for harmful and destructive behavior, the student was interested in developing educational programming for fraternity men to think more critically about what healthy and positive masculinity might look like in the Greek system on campus. Over the semester, the student also expressed interest in sharing his own personal story of masculinity with other Greek men on campus, as one example of how they might begin exploring their own gender identity more thoughtfully. This student's understanding of masculinity was largely informed by the influence of his dutiful father, and his Filipino American grandfather, who served in World War II for the United States Army, two men he had great admiration and appreciation for. After several months of working together and discussing the students' unique experience of masculinity, the mentor invited the student to speak on an undergraduate panel about healthy masculinity. He agreed and shared his story with over 250 Greek men, encouraging them to find positive examples of men in their lives who they could aspire to be like through their actions.

In this example, the mentor was promoting social justice with the undergraduate student by working collaboratively with the student to address concrete problems related to toxic masculinity on campus. On the committee, the student led an initiative to help facilitate a conversation with fraternity men on campus about healthy and positive masculinity. Developing a relationship through this work, the mentor then connected the student with an opportunity to share his personal story on an undergraduate panel required for all fraternity members. Given the students' broader understanding of his own masculinity as a unique expression of manhood informed by his many multiple and intersecting identities, he felt compelled to take action. As he learned from his father and his grandfather, the student's concept of masculinity was intimately connected to taking action for social justice. The mentor in this case simply served as a conduit, connecting the student with opportunities to promote social justice on campus.

Recommendations for Using Intersectional Perspectives With Individual College Men

APPLYING INTERSECTIONAL perspectives when working with individual college men in one-on-one settings may bring about many questions and specific considerations. It should be noted that using intersectional perspectives is beneficial for both college men and educators alike. While the student develops a deeper understanding of his own identities and positionality within systems of oppression, the educator cultivates a more inclusive and expansive understanding of the student by focusing on the strengths, assets, and cultural wealth of their many intersecting identities. Additionally, educators should apply intersectional perspectives holistically with individual college men, considering the unique developmental needs of each student. If a student has already thought extensively about the intersecting nature of his identities, it would be more appropriate for the educator to focus on unveiling power and privilege and promoting social justice. If, however, the student has not thought extensively about his individual social identities, it might be more beneficial for the educator to focus on centering marginalized identities and complicating social identity with the student. Finally, talking about social identities, such as race or class, can be challenging for some college men. This might be especially true when they are speaking to an educator who has drastically different social identities from them. If the educator has many social identities in common with the student, these vulnerable conversations may come more easily. Either way, educators using intersectional perspectives with individual college men should always be mindful of their own social identities and positionality, and how that relates to the identities and positionality of the student.

Educators can build college men's capacity to take action for social justice by providing them with opportunities to reflect on their multiple intersecting identities.

Conclusion

EDUCATORS AND SCHOLARS who work to support and understand individual college men with intersecting marginalized identities—such as Men of Color, Queer men, and Trans* men—are increasingly in need of intersectional perspectives that account for

men's many multiple identities to guide their practice. While there is such a framework that is being used to inform the development of campus programming for groups of college men (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019), the *Intersectional Model of College Men and Masculinities Programming* does not provide specific insights for those who work to support or research individual college men with intersecting marginalized identities. Through an exploration of the *Intersectional Model of College Men and Masculinities Programming* and examples from our own professional practice, we argue that academic advisors, staff supervisors, mentors, and others who work with college men in one-on-one settings can promote intersectional perspectives in college masculinities work by applying the framework to their own practice.

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The time has come for intersectional perspectives on college men and masculinities.

At this point, much is still unknown about the experiences of college men with multiple marginalized intersecting identities. If educators are to effectively support and advocate for these men, we believe more research is necessary. Although identity-based research related to college men as a monolithic group was initially necessary and beneficial in establishing a baseline understanding of men as gendered beings, the time has come for more complex understandings of college masculinity to emerge in the literature. Researchers and scholars can help share these important narratives. Finally, student affairs professionals must be open to complicating their understandings of gender and manhood to include the experiences of men with multiple marginalized identities. Educators can begin to promote intersectional perspectives in their work with individual college men by centering the marginalized experiences of college men, complicating their multiple social identities, unveiling power and privilege, and finally, promoting social justice (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019).

The time has come for intersectional perspectives on college men and masculinities. We believe there is much promise in exploring and understanding these perspectives in student affairs and higher education. In addition to providing opportunities for these men to understand and share their unique understandings of masculinity based on their many intersecting identities, we believe that pursuing intersectional perspectives in masculinities work will also result in better support for college men in one-on-one settings, resulting in improved success for college men with multiple marginalized intersecting identities. With these possibilities in mind, we urge student affairs professionals and scholars to consider intersectional perspectives in their work with individual college men.

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