

## Colleges Can Change the Dynamics Plunging Young Men into Crisis

*Schools have a responsibility to push men beyond what's expected of them*

By Scott E. Feller

There are too many men across the country are struggling in college, dropping out of the workforce, and failing in their personal lives, particularly when compared to their female counterparts. This is pointed out quite clearly by author and scholar Richard Reeves in his new book "[Of Boys and Men](#)", which examines why males are struggling in today's world and what higher educational leaders can do about it.

As the president of one of only a handful of [colleges for men](#) in the United States, I am intimately engaged in trying to help young men succeed every day. So, I understand some of the challenges that Reeves explores but also the ways that colleges and universities can help tackle this crisis.

It is complicated to lay blame, but some reasons for this unhappy state of affairs are the pigeonholing of men and straight-jacketing them with expectations about what to study or what kind of job they should aspire to. In short, we are hurting men by narrowly defining what they can or should "be."

When a young man is getting ready to go away to college, far too often, no one is asking him if he plans to be an elementary school teacher or a nurse. But maybe they should.

STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) occupations have traditionally been the bastion of male students, but they are a small slice of the economy, accounting for only 7% of jobs. The HEAL (health, education, administration and literacy) occupations, by contrast, account for [26% of jobs](#) – and between now and 2030, there will be three new HEAL positions created for every new STEM job. But currently, these HEAL fields are predominantly female.

Put another way, opportunities are out there. But something is keeping men from reaching out and grabbing those opportunities that are right in front of them, and [salary differentials](#) can't fully explain it away.

I think there's a way for colleges to help change this situation and put more young men on a path that's right for them — one that could bring greater satisfaction and hope.

For starters, faculty and administrators should question more when young men say they want to study engineering, computer science, business, or other traditionally male-dominated fields.

Undoubtedly, some of them really want to do that. But when more men are choosing to be computer science majors than all the humanities majors stacked together, do we really think

that men are following their true interests and passions? Or are they embracing a certain path because that's what society expects of them?

There's a better chance of success – in college and in life – when someone has genuine excitement for their field instead of being a square peg jammed into a round hole. Those kinds of ill-suited matches have left students feeling dispirited and dejected by a lack of opportunities – when, really, all they needed was to be prodded to look into fields they might not have ever considered.

Exposing young men to more academic areas early on is key. It's also helpful for young men to have male role models in these fields to interact with and emulate. As the saying goes, you have to see it, to be it. Bringing to campus successful males from fields like human resources, teaching, or nursing on a regular basis helps to shatter the boxes that men put themselves in.

We also need to increase the number of young men who [take advantage of study abroad opportunities](#). It broadens their outlook, builds relationship skills, and encourages risk-taking. Overhauling our approach to dealing with males on our campuses is a good thing: When young men feel free to pursue interests far beyond what society might dictate, everyone benefits.

But addressing this crisis with boys and men doesn't just mean expanding their sense of who or what they can be once they get on our campuses. It also requires us to put more eyes on them at the first signs that they're struggling – academically, personally, or emotionally.

At our school, we have WIN: the Wabash Interaction Network. Any faculty or staff member who sees something concerning in a student – absences from classes, changes in outlook, academic struggles – can submit a report that triggers an outreach. Depending on the issue, alerts are sent to that student's teachers, advisor, coach, counselors, or other support staff. Having this intervention network helps to catch issues before they become larger problems.

Additionally, it's vitally important to encourage men to take care of themselves, physically and mentally. Part of this is normalizing the conversation around mental wellness by encouraging young men to take advantage of all campus counseling resources, services, and support networks. Even something as simple as a t-shirt we have on campus that says "Men's Mental Health Matters" is an important signal that despair shouldn't be something to "just live with" if you're a male.

The troubles with boys and men are certainly complex. While colleges can't singlehandedly solve this crisis, I am convinced we can do more to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We should all take heart in that.

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