Working towards gender equity by supporting healthy masculinities in campus and community settings

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

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Dr. David von Schlichten is the coordinator of the Gender and Women's Studies Program at Seton Hill University, the faculty advisor of the Feminist Collective on campus, and serves on the Board of Blackburn Center, a local agency against domestic and sexual violence in Greensburg, PA. According to David, the racial homogeneity (Greensburg, PA is predominantly white, with widespread racism) and socially conservative values that draw heavily on traditional ideas of masculinity contribute to specific community challenges in promoting change. He has found that even getting the community to recognize that gender-based violence is not just a women's issue has been much needed but difficult.

NURTURING HEALTHY MASCULINITIES IN GREENSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

Working to change norms about masculinities and to validate cultural variance in norms can be difficult in any community. In Greensburg, PA, there are a number of established efforts to challenge harmful gender norms– particularly those that are associated with sexual and domestic violence. One of the guiding concepts that David has found useful in engaging men to understand harmful gender norms across his work is the notion of the "Man Box." To fit within the "Man Box," men often feel pressure to



A number of efforts in Greensburg, PA challenge harmful gender norms as a way to prevent sexual and domestic violence. Photo provided by Dr. David von Schlichten.

conform to patriarchal and hetero-centric ideas and beliefs of how a man should be, such as the expectation that males should have greater decision-making power within a relationship. While men are socialized to adhere to these norms, David challenges his students to think outside of this confined "Man Box" and to focus instead on how to create and foster healthy norms about masculinities.

CAMPUS-BASED EFFORTS FOR GENDER EQUITY

Seton Hill University in Greensburg has attracted a more diverse student body and has taken on a number of efforts to push back against harmful norms about masculinity and gender-based discrimination. One of the programs that Dr. von Schlichten is engaged in at Seton Hill University is Setonians Advocating for Gender Equity (SAGE), which focuses on changing students' perceptions and understanding of gender roles and how they relate to gender-based violence. SAGE integrates gender equity into orientation activities and designs curricula to implement in classrooms across various disciplines, and has a compendium of resources available to professors. One of the resources David has used in the classroom is the documentary *The Mask You Live In*, as it addresses harmful masculinity norms and gets students to think in a very intentional and profound way about micro-aggressions and harmful gender norms that have been so prevalent in society. At the beginning of students' time at Seton Hill University, SAGE administers a survey that assesses students' attitudes regarding gender roles. During their senior year, students are asked to take the same evaluation again in order to gauge whether there has been a change in their views toward gender roles. The hope is that, throughout the course of their time at Seton Hill, the various efforts on campus impact students' understanding of gender issues. So far, the senior year survey results have been encouraging and have demonstrated a positive shift in many students' perceptions of gender roles.

Another campus effort that is focused on gender equity is the Equal Pay Rally, which is organized by the Feminist Collective at Seton Hill University each year. It is a largely student-run event where both students and professors get together and walk with signs in hand from Seton Hill to the Courthouse, where they have a friendly demonstration with speakers. The goal of the event is ultimately to heighten awareness about the issue of pay inequity as a real problem with serious consequences that reach far and wide.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY TO PREVENT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Another program in Greensburg focused on preventing gender-based violence through supporting healthy norms about masculinities is Fearless Advocacy for Men's Engagement (FAME). Run by Blackburn Center, FAME reaches out to men in the community to engage in intentional training and discussion around gender-based violence. The group has meetings and trainings where they focus on awareness and skill development for men so that they can model healthy norms about masculinities and engage in ongoing dialogues with men in various community settings. Within the group there are different levels of engagement, ranging from champions – those who are the most deeply involved and serve as leaders and training facilitators – to partners and supporters – those who participate in trainings, assist in recruiting new members, and attend Blackburn Center events.

One of FAME's largest activities is helping with "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes," a community-wide annual event hosted by Blackburn Center. The event is about the community committing to

action to end sexual and domestic violence, beginning with educating themselves about gender norms and violence. It is geared towards challenging men to play more visible roles in advocating for gender equity and ending gender-based violence. Participation in the event has been steadily increasing every year – from 300 participants in 2011, to over 1,100 in 2018. Throughout the event route there are various displays, games, and activities that help people learn about harmful norms about masculinity, as well as healthy behaviors and roles that men can embrace.

Some critics of the "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" event have suggested that the event further reinforces gender stereotypes by suggesting that all women wear high heels, or that it makes a joke of males who may enjoy wearing heels. Blackburn addresses these concerns by taking time to explain at the beginning of the event that the point is not to disrespect members of the LGBTQ community and that the high heels are not to meant to reinforce gender stereotypes. Blackburn indicates in the opening at the walk that all people are free to wear and dress as they see fit and that Blackburn is not implying that all women wear heels or that it is a joke if men wear them. In addition, the educational pieces placed throughout the walk make the intention clear.



Each year Blackburn Center brings the community together to show their commitment to ending sexual and domestic violence. Photo provided by Dr. David von Schlichten.

David and his colleagues at Seton Hill and Blackburn Center are trying to meet people where they are at while underscoring the importance of the language as they shift the dialogue in Greensburg away from harmful gender norms toward a culture that supports gender equity for all.

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RESOURCES

- Seton Hill University's Feminist Collective Facebook page
- Blackburn website
- The Mask You Live In

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