Emancipatory and Controlling: Examining the Negotiation of Masculinity-Centered Practices by Women's and Gender Equity Center Practitioners

Ashley M. Brown

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

EMANCIPATORY AND CONTROLLING:
EXAMINING THE NEGOTIATION OF MASCULINITY-CENTERED PRACTICES
BY WOMEN’S AND GENDER EQUITY CENTER PRACTITIONERS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY
ASHLEY M. BROWN
CHICAGO, IL
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Sciences of masculinity may be emancipatory or they may be controlling. They may even be both at once.
- Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*
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ABSTRACT

Initiatives to understand and transform masculinity have increasingly emerged in higher education, calling attention to the consequences of dominant, masculine gender expectations that permeate throughout college campuses. These masculinity-centered practices in higher education encompass formalized, departmental initiatives for students, faculty, and/or staff that examine topics related to masculinity through educational workshops, speaker events, professional development sessions, dialogue spaces, and other efforts. While it is often assumed that these practices support the advancement of gender equity, scholars have theorized the ways in which this work can also lead to depoliticized efforts that may, in fact, reify patriarchal and other systems of domination. To analyze these tensions in practice, this dissertation study centered the perspectives of women’s and gender equity center (WGEC) practitioners who engage masculinity-centered practices utilizing feminist and other critical frameworks. Through an interpretive, phenomenological research design, this study closely examined the lived experiences of 12 current and former WGEC practitioners as they negotiated the liberatory possibilities, limitations, and complexities of examining masculinity as part of their feminist-oriented praxis. An analysis of the findings revealed critical insights for developing more equitable approaches for masculinity-centered practices in higher education.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, conversations about transforming masculinity have emerged in U.S. public discourse, often rooted in the need to address cultures of violence and other contemporary social issues. Notably, the viral #MeToo movement, based on the work of Tarana Burke to support young Black women and other women of color survivors, brought renewed attention to the pervasiveness of sexual violence, primarily acts disproportionately committed by men against women (Johnson, 2018; metoo, 2018; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018). The movement consequently raised questions about the need to disrupt ‘toxic masculinity’ (de Boise, 2019), the relationship between masculinity and rape culture, and men’s responsibility to create change for gender equity (PettyJohn et al., 2018).

In addition to advancing the work of violence prevention, the need for understanding the construction and influence of masculinity is grounded in gender disparities related to physical, mental, and public health; education; and economic outcomes. Increasing visibility of these concerns is evident in the American Psychological Association’s recent guidelines (2018) to address the consequences of traditional masculinity expectations and foster healthier behaviors for men. Additionally, My Brother’s Keeper Campaign (The Obama Foundation, n.d.) engages issues of masculinity at its intersections with race in order to close opportunity gaps for boys and men of color. At the 2019 My Brother’s Keeper Conference, President Obama acknowledged the
ways in which values and expectations related to masculinity can lead to violence and pain in communities. He advised,

Racism historically in this society sends a message that [men of color] are ‘less than’ and weak … We feel we have to compensate by exaggerating stereotypical ways men are supposed to act. And that’s a trap that we fall into that we have to pull out of. (NowThis News, 2019)

By aiming to make visible the behaviors, needs, and responsibilities of boys and men, diverse efforts like the ones above continue to emerge, calling attention to the harmful consequences of dominant, masculine gender expectations that permeate throughout society.

This work includes

thinking not just about what men and boys do, but also about who they are and how their identities are formed…. [What] new possibilities can be opened up for men and boys to live their lives in more positive and less damaging ways? (The Coalition on Men and Boys, 2009, p. 4)

As masculinity-centered programs and interventions continue to grow, however, a question often left unasked is what risks or challenges these well-intentioned efforts may pose. These possibilities demonstrate the need to better understand practices to transform masculinity and their implications.

**Statement of the Problem**

Initiatives to address a wide range of issues related to masculinity have increasingly surfaced in K-12 schools, workplaces, healthcare, policy development, the media, and the non-profit sector (A Call to Men, 2019; American Psychological Association, 2018; Gilpin & Proulx, 2018; Promundo, 2019). Attention to examining and transforming masculinity is particularly widespread in higher education. Over the last three decades, higher education practitioners have developed professional associations, national and regional conferences, and diverse masculinity-
centered practices to understand the influence of masculinity across college and university campuses and explore opportunities for social change (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). I define masculinity-centered practices in higher education as formalized, departmental initiatives that explore topics related to masculinity through educational workshops, speaker events, staff training or professional development sessions, dialogue spaces, peer education, and other programs. While these efforts are predominantly designed to engage cisgender men students in consciousness-raising activities, others are open to students of all genders and even faculty and staff. Starting in the 1990s, higher education researchers have promoted the liberatory possibilities of masculinity-centered practices, citing the need to support college men’s identity development (McGowan et al., 2019), disrupt harmful masculine behaviors on campus (Laker, 2019), and support movement towards social justice (Catalano et al., 2018; Davis & Wagner, 2005). Receiving little attention in the higher education literature, however, are the tensions posed by these efforts and navigating them in practice, particularly as they relate to other forms of gender practice on college and university campuses.

The emergence and implications of masculinity-centered practices are critical to investigate, as the shift to analyzing masculinity has not been without critique for its potential to recenter patriarchal and other systems of domination. This shift has been most closely examined in the context of gender scholarship. As masculinity emerged as a category of analysis in gender research, scholars questioned its role in supporting the feminist, political commitments of the field of women’s and gender studies (McCarry, 2007; Thomas, 2002). In other words, scholars have debated whether the centering of masculinity as an object of study supports the advancement of gender equity or ultimately reproduces masculine dominance in the academy.
Mirroring this analytic shift in gender research, *masculinity* has also emerged as an object of practice in higher education and beyond to transform gendered power relations. Along with women’s and gender studies scholars, researchers across various applied fields have raised similar concerns that centering masculinity in practice may hinder practitioners’ aims for gender justice. Predominantly explored in the fields of violence prevention and gender and development (GAD), a sub-field within international development, researchers have discussed tensions brought about by selective agendas that fail to address structural gender inequities and the institutionalized nature of violence (Cornwall et al., 2011), men’s accountability (Duriesmith, 2017), lack of clarity in programmatic aims and theoretical foundations (Burrell & Flood, 2019; Duriesmith, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2015), as well as the problematic adherence to notions of a gender binary and gender as embodied (Casey et al., 2016; Dworkin et al., 2015). While it is increasingly assumed that masculinity-centered practices are critical for transforming gender inequities, researchers have pointed to the specific ways in which this work can lead to disjointed or depoliticized efforts that may in fact reify hegemonic masculinity (Burrell & Flood, 2019; Cornwall et al., 2011; Duriesmith, 2017) and dilute the feminist orientation of gender-based agencies and organizations (Flood, 2015). These concerns reflect the inherent complexities in engaging dominance as a strategy to support liberatory aims.

In the context of higher education, researchers have only recently begun to examine the complexities related to the increased attention to masculinity and its potential to reinforce gender inequities and other forms of oppression, and this work is overwhelmingly theoretical (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019; Catalano et al., 2018; Jourian, 2017, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2019; Okello & Quaye, 2019). To date, one empirical study has acknowledged opportunities and limitations related to
incorporating examinations of masculinity in higher education practice (Marine et al., 2017). By looking to the inclusion of cisgender men and trans* people of all genders within campus-based women’s and gender equity centers, Marine et al. (2017) documented the benefits and challenges of shifting gender practices in feminist-oriented organizations. Although masculinity-centered practices were not the core focus of the study, the findings reflected tensions that emerged when incorporating masculinity and cisgender men in organizational efforts to support gender equity. Recognizing the dearth of empirical research on the topic, Ashlee and Wagner (2019) articulated the need for researchers to examine ways to align college men and masculinities programming with social justice frameworks. As part of this effort, a critical next step in the scholarship is to more deeply and explicitly explore “the processes involved, the challenges, problems, limitations and politics” in centering masculinity as an object of practice to create social change (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. S85).

**Purpose and Research Questions**

This qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study closely examined how campus-based women’s and gender equity center (WGEC) practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices. Situated within sites of feminist pedagogy and practice in higher education, WGEC practitioners were selected based on the hypothesis that they could offer valuable insight for representing varying approaches and perspectives for dismantling systemic inequities. By specifically exploring how these practitioners incorporated the examination of masculinity within the work of WGECs, this study aimed to reveal in-depth insights on the risks and possibilities of masculinity-centered practices.
I want to make clear that the intention of this study was not to explore the engagement of cisgender men as allies for gender equity in WGECs. Rather, I was interested in how masculinity-centered practices, in all its forms and aims, were considered, understood, applied, and monitored by WGEC practitioners. By examining how practitioners experienced and negotiated these practices with the delicate balance of gender activism and advocacy (Bengiveno, 2000), I believed we could better understand how to more effectively attend to dynamics of gendered power and oppression and extend these insights to inform masculinity-centered practices in higher education and beyond. The following questions guided my exploration of this topic: how do women’s and gender equity center practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices and what is it like for these practitioners to engage in masculinity-centered practices?

**Rationale**

My interest in this topic stems from my experiences navigating the tensions of masculinity-centered practices as a higher education practitioner. From 2013-2017, I worked alongside a group of colleagues to develop the Men’s Project, a six-week, college men and masculinities dialogue program. At the time, I believed that in order to address gendered patterns on campus related to sexual and other forms of violence, binge drinking, and mental health, we needed to directly engage students who identified as men in critical self-reflection and dialogue about masculinity. As we developed relationships with campus partners, some expressed concerns with our approach. Colleagues had apprehensions that the Men’s Project was taking resources away from women’s services. Others wondered how we were working to include trans* and masculine students and whether or not the program was serving to reinforce the
gender binary. Additionally, without any committee members representing the violence prevention office on campus, was the program going beyond individual consciousness-raising to address systemic, gendered violence and other forms of oppression?

The constructive feedback we received challenged me to think much more deeply about the complexities of centering masculinity in practice. Could the Men’s Project engage men-identified students (participants were almost exclusively cisgender men) to transform hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously addressing the consequences of gender oppression for cisgender women, trans*, and non-binary individuals? By communicating these tensions, our colleagues helped us recognize that if our goal was to support gender equity through centering masculinity in our practice, we also needed to better understand the implications and potential consequences of this work.

While I chose to focus on the masculinity-centered practices of WGECs to explore this topic, it is important to acknowledge that efforts to transform masculinity take place across higher education functional areas including residential life, student conduct, violence prevention, counseling, multicultural affairs, athletics, and Greek life (Catalano & Jourian, 2018; Klobassa & Laker, 2018; Martin & Harris, 2006; Smith et al., 2019; Wagner & Tillapaugh, 2018). Consequently, masculinity-centered practices are rife with diverse and, at times, conflicting approaches, aims, viewpoints, and contexts (Gibbs et al., 2015), making it difficult to gain an in-depth understanding of their potential and limits to supporting change. Because a common critique of these efforts is their lack of alignment with movements for gender liberation, this study deliberately intended to learn from how this work is approached by WGEC practitioners working within feminist-oriented organizations whose missions are firmly rooted in advancing
gender equity. What can we learn from the ways in which WGEC practitioners understand and negotiate the complexities, limitations, and liberatory possibilities of masculinity-centered practices to reflect the priorities and aims of their broader work?

**Significance**

As masculinity-centered practices continue to emerge, it is necessary to understand the role and implications of this phenomenon within real-life contexts. Drawing upon feminist, theoretical considerations of the risks and consequences related to centering masculinity, this study aimed to advance our understanding of what it means for feminist practice and masculinity-centered practices to “part company, join forces, or perhaps sometimes contingently meet” (Beasley, 2015, p. 575). The outcomes of this study can provide guidance to WGEC practitioners from within their own community, informing future practices for supporting their organizational missions for advancing gender equity and social justice more broadly. Additionally, as masculinity-centered practices continue to increase in higher education and other applied fields in ways that may unintentionally reify patriarchy, genderism, and other systems of domination, this study reveals insights for developing and implementing practices that align with critical frameworks.

**Core Concepts Defined**

As follows, I provide definitions of core concepts that ground my approach to the study.

**Feminism**

It is important to acknowledge that feminism as a critical theory is situational and constantly negotiated, often leading to contradictory conversations about how to advance social change (Maparyan, 2012). In tracing its history, Chris Beasley (2005) described how feminism
began as a critique of misogyny, assumptions of male centrality, and masculine bias in Western thought and, therefore, worked to shift the focus to those who were marginalized – women. While a necessary corrective, this approach to U.S. feminism has historically been dominated by narratives of White, heterosexual, middle and upper-class, cisgender women aiming to create an essentialized sisterhood framework for women’s liberation at the cost of recognizing the diverse needs and experiences of women impacted by interlocking systems of oppression (Bordo, 1990; Mohanty, 2003; Rich, 1986).

Over time, many theoretical threads of feminism have developed to critically advance understandings of gender equity. Black and other women of color feminist perspectives (Anzaldua, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989), for instance, recognized that women’s liberation is inextricably tied to other forms of liberation and strive to deconstruct sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and other oppressive systems (Maryapan, 2012). Additionally, postmodern and queer theoretical perspectives (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1994; Sedgwick, 1985; Sterling, 2000) have called attention to the restrictive nature of the unitary category ‘woman’ and advanced expansive understandings of feminism and gender to include people of all genders in conversations and activism for gender equity. I include this brief overview because, while feminism is consistently named as the foundation of gender scholarship and practice, researchers have applied varying and conflicting understandings and continue to do so as they grapple with concepts of power, gender, and difference. As a result, it is not productive to rigidly define feminism; instead, for the purposes of this study, I rely upon the understanding that feminism is dynamic, ever-changing, and in constant dialogue within itself to work towards dismantling oppressive structures.
Masculinity

Throughout the study, I rely upon Raewyn Connell’s (1995, 2005) concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* and *masculinities* as a reference point. Although Connell’s theory is not without critique (Beasley, 2012; Hearn, 2012; Howson, 2006; Whitehead, 2002), it is the most prevalent and influential conceptualization of masculinity/ies across gender scholarship (Beasley, 2005, 2012; Berggren, 2014; Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016). Connell (2000) argued that masculinity is not reducible to bodies or individual personality traits; instead, masculinity is defined as a social location within gender relations and an identifiable and malleable set of practices understood to be masculine. Additionally, Connell’s work revealed that “within particular social contexts there exist specific ‘gender orders’ in which a particular ideology of hegemonic masculinity dominates” (Elis & Beasley, 2009, p. 285). Hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Connell (2005), is the configuration of gender practices, which maintain men’s collective dominance over women. When first formulated, the concept of hegemonic masculinity “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” through cultural consent, institutionalization, discourse, and the subordination of alternatives (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). By positioning hegemonic masculinity as ascendant, Connell described how it obscures ‘subordinate’ and ‘marginalized’ forms of masculinity which are often rooted in their relation to sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and other structural inequities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2015; Howson, 2006). Connell (2000) recognized such social hierarchies across masculinity by utilizing the plural form masculinities.
Over time, Connell’s conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity moved away from a top-down model of social power relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Instead of locating masculinities in terms of a “single pattern of power, the ‘global dominance’ of men over women,” Connell and Messerschmidt clarified the concept of hegemonic masculinity to better reflect an expansive understanding of gender hierarchies (p. 847). Connell and Messerschmidt argued that the concept of hegemonic masculinity must incorporate the mutual conditioning of gender relations with other social dynamics to represent how idealized notions of masculinity are embedded in and shaped by social processes, organizations, and even global relations. For instance, by examining the underlying gender politics of social practices, it becomes possible to examine how forces such as neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism have reinforced inequities by promoting a masculinity based in competition and individualized notions of success and failure (Cornwall, 2019; Dardot & Laval, 2013).

Similar to differing conceptualizations of feminism, the concept of masculinity is taken up by researchers through varying paradigms of gender and power. Across gender scholarship, the concept of gender, which refers to the “social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of sexed identities” (Beasley, 2005, p. 17), is predominantly understood through modern and postmodern theoretical perspectives which will be further explored in Chapter Two (Beasley, 2005; DiPalma & Ferguson, 2006; Gardiner, 2005). Due to these inconsistent approaches, debates about gender and its associated terminology have revealed tensions within and across the field of knowledge (Beasley, 2005). For instance, while some scholars have worked to decouple men from masculinity, most foundational masculinity studies scholars conflate the concepts, presenting them as one and the same. The literature also
overwhelmingly relies upon dominant “narratives of white heterosexual cisgender men” without explicitly naming these qualifiers (Harris & Barone, 2011; Jourian, 2018, p. 3). According to Jourian (2018), these practices maintain the “invisibility of whiteness, heterosexuality, cisnormativity, and so forth that define hegemonic masculinity” and essentialize “masculinity as a cisgender men’s-only construct,” which is evident throughout much of the literature in the next chapter as well as in the findings of the study (pp. 4-5). Because the theoretical handling of masculinity is varied across the literature and in practice, my use of the term *masculinity* when referring to masculinity-centered practices throughout the study is meant to encompass the ways in which the concept is differently understood and applied in the dialogue for gender equity.

**Campus-based Women’s and Gender Equity Centers and Practitioners**

Having emerged from the feminist consciousness of the women’s movement (Brooks, 1988), women’s and gender equity centers have developed into critical sites of feminist practice in higher education. While their missions, organizational structures, and practices vary across institutions, most WGECs serve as a campus space for “feminist activism, education, and empowerment” for gender equity and the elimination of oppression more broadly (Kasper, 2004; Marine et al., 2017, p. 45; Pasque & Nicholson, 2011). Across higher education, campus offices focused on women’s and gender equity reflect diverse titles and configurations, including student-staffed organizations, professional staff member(s) within a broader multicultural office, and stand-alone campus units (Bengiveno, 2000; Goettsch et al., 2012). For the purposes of this study, I focused on professionally staffed, stand-alone units as they represent the most documented form of feminist practice on college and university campuses. To that end, I use the term *women’s and gender equity centers* to comprehensively refer to any office dedicated to the
“personal, social, academic, and civic development and engagement” of students, staff, and/or faculty holding marginalized gender identities (Suggs & Mitchell, 2011, p. 147). I use the term *practitioner* to refer to the professional staff members working within these units.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. To situate the purpose of the study, Chapter Two presents a review of research that explicates the tensions related to centering masculinity in both gender scholarship and higher education practice. The review then explores the role, structures, and diverse institutional contexts of campus-based WGECs to provide a foundation for understanding the shifting practices and experiences of practitioners within these spaces. The chapter concludes by describing the conceptual framework informing the study.

Chapter Three provides a detailed outline of the research design, including the phenomenological methodology, sample, data collection, and analysis. The findings from data collection and analysis are presented in Chapters Four and Five, and the dissertation concludes with Chapter Six, which includes discussion and implications for future research and practice.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned in the introduction, this study examined how WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices. To situate the study, this review of the literature is divided into four main sections. Because research on the development of masculinity-centered practices in higher education is limited, the first section provides a foundational, in-depth overview of the emergence and related tensions of centering masculinity in gender scholarship. The following section then reviews literature related to the incorporation of masculinity in higher education practice and its potential opportunities and limitations. To further explore the navigation of masculinity-centered practices in an embedded, feminist context, the third section discusses the shifting gender practices within campus-based WGECs, drawing upon research that outlines the diverse institutional missions, structures, and contexts that inform the aims and direction of its practitioners. The chapter concludes with an overview of the conceptual framework for the study which offers a lens for politicizing masculinities in gender practice.

Masculinity in Gender Scholarship

This review’s initial focus on the examination of masculinity in scholarship, instead of practice, is deliberate. First, there is a dearth of research dedicated to the development of masculinity-centered practices in higher education (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019). Further, in the few references to its emergence, researchers have acknowledged the direct influence of masculinity studies as a field of knowledge. Capraro (2004), for instance, argued that masculinity studies
provided the foundation to informing higher education practice with college men. As this research continues to expand, the influence of the broader field of masculinity studies has remained. In fact, Harper et al. (2011) viewed college men and masculinities scholarship as part of a “movement to bring men’s studies to [college] student affairs” (p. 92). Therefore, in order to understand the role of masculinity-centered practices and its associated tensions in higher education, it is critical to first draw from an in-depth examination of how masculinity studies is situated within the larger field of gender scholarship, also referred to as feminist scholarship. This section will first review the history and justification of masculinity studies as an intellectual project. While there are strands of masculinity studies that are explicitly anti-feminist, for the purposes of this study, my focus only extends to the predominant approaches to the scholarship that emerged with intentions to support and even enhance feminist aims. I then present scholars’ varying perspectives on whether or not centering masculinity as an object of study can effectively achieve the sub-field’s intentions to support gender equity.

Emergence of Masculinity Studies

Women’s studies, often perceived as the intellectual arm of the U.S. political women’s movement, emerged in the 1970s as a feminist project in teaching and research (Auslander, 1997; Chamberlain, 1994; Duelli-Klein, 1991). Directly challenging the centrality of men and masculine biases across the academic disciplines, U.S.-centric feminist scholarship initiated a paradigm shift by explicitly centering cisgender women and “correct[ing] misinformation and unexamined assumptions about women’s place in history” in order to create anti-sexist theories, methods, and values (Davis et al., 2006; Grosz, 1990; McIntosh & Minnich, 1984, p. 146; Pini & Pease, 2013). In its early years, much of the focus of the field included understanding women’s
oppression, studying women throughout various disciplines, emphasizing women’s differences from men, and seeking empowering role models (Auslander, 1997; Wood, 2015). These early analyses often relied upon the fixed category woman, which ultimately represented the interests of dominant, white women (Brandzel, 2011).

Challenging these intellectual limitations, feminist activists and scholars, many of whom were women of color and lesbian women, provided the impetus for expanding the field’s scope to include a “more complex and qualified understanding of the endless variety of sexism and gender” (Auslander, 1997; Hill, 2003, p. 355). Additionally, the influence of postmodern and queer theories and their critiques of identity categories shaped an understanding of gender as dynamic and connected to relationships, processes, and practices (Beasley, 2013). Not only did disrupting the rigid category woman allow for a more critical and expansive understanding of women’s diverse experiences and identities, but this shift also suggested moving away from a sole focus on woman as the field’s central object of study (Morgensen, 2012). As a result, it became common for women’s and gender studies scholars to understand gender as relational and variable, which led to the exploration of topics such as sexuality, the formation and intersections of identities, and meanings attached to manhood and womanhood (Hill, 2003; Wood, 2015).

By challenging previous understandings of gender as static and unchangeable, shifting conditions in feminist scholarship laid the foundation for masculinity studies to emerge. As feminist scholars worked to develop more nuanced understandings of sexism and gender, they became “increasingly wary of yet again preserving ‘man’ as an ostensibly ungendered subject” (Hill, 2003; Shapiro, 1994, p. 11). Feminist theorists, therefore, sought to expose and problematize the construction and role of masculinity as part of understanding patriarchy, men’s
domination, and gender inequities. These shifting conditions in feminist scholarship made “masculinity visible as a central concept of gendered ideology, [named] men as gendered, and [problematized] the position of men” (Adams & Savran, 2002; Davis et al., 2006; Hearn & Kimmel, 2006, p. 53; Hearn & Morgan, 1990).

While women’s and gender studies scholars have long been examining concepts and issues of masculinity, men, and power as they relate to the oppression of women, the formalized study of masculinity as a topic in and of itself is a more recent intellectual project (Connell, 2003; Macleod, 2007). The sub-field’s rise in the early 1980s in the English-speaking academy was marked by the growing development of academic courses, journals, monographs, and anthologies on the topic (Connell, 2003; Kimmel, 1986; Reeser, 2015; Richardson & Robinson, 1994). As it first emerged, masculinity studies scholars predominantly focused on men’s experiences and subjectivities, the social construction of masculinity and its intersections with other cultural and historical factors, and the restricting and harmful nature of masculinity on men’s lives (Brod, 1987c; Cornwall et al., 2011; Hearn & Kimmel, 2006). In its early stages, this scholarship was perceived by many as “heterosexual men’s entry into feminism” (Adams & Savran, 2002, p. 6), and, although the work was viewed as cooperative with feminist scholarship, it was largely considered a separate project (Newton, 2002).

**Rationales for Studying Masculinity**

To further understand the development and trajectory of masculinity studies, it is important to examine the varying ways in which masculinity studies scholars rationalized the sub-field’s role and placement within the broader gender scholarship.
Strengthening Feminist Scholarship

Many scholars believed it necessary to include men and masculinity as subjects of research in order to critically advance feminist scholarship. Harry Brod (1987b), often acknowledged as one of the founding figures of the sub-field, stated, “Men’s studies is essential to fulfilling the feminist project which underlies women’s studies. Feminist scholarship cannot reach its fullest, most radical potential without the addition of men’s studies” (p. 180). Like Brod, other early masculinity studies scholars emphasized a political commitment to feminism and positioned the scholarship as a necessary complement and extension of women’s and gender studies (Adams & Savran, 2002; Brod, 1987b, 1987c; Kimmel, 1987a; McCarry, 2007). Believing that feminist analyses of masculinity are a critical component to adequately studying gender and gender relations, masculinity studies scholars emphasized the necessity of the field in furthering critiques of patriarchal structures and exposing men and masculinity as restrictive “social constructions which need to be explored, analyzed, and changed” (Gardiner, 2002; Hearn & Morgan, 1990, p. ix). Additionally, Brod (1987c) posited that men and masculinity must be examined to effectively change women’s social position for the better. Therefore, in order to understand and challenge issues related to men and masculinity, scholars argued that they must be centered in scholarship; otherwise, if left unstudied, masculinity would remain normative and less likely to change (Clatterbaugh, 1990; Thomas, 2002).

Revealing the Construction of Masculinity

Another rationale for masculinity studies lied in the need to recognize men as gendered, masculine subjects (Horlacher, 2015; Traister, 2000). Prior to the emergence of feminist scholarship, men scholars across academic disciplines produced knowledge in relation to
themselves and, as a result, defined their experiences and priorities as representative of all groups (Robinson, 2002; Spender, 1981). Consequently, the experiences of men were falsely generalized as universally ‘human,’ leaving men’s gender and dominant social position uninterrogated and unmarked (Brod, 1987b; Hearn, 1998; Reeser, 2015). It was argued that leaving men’s dominance unexamined only served to further perpetuate gender inequities (Ashe 2007; Brod, 1987c); “by denying implicitly or explicitly that men were gendered, they could escape close scrutiny and resist critique or the need to change” (Reeser, 2015, p. 16).

Scholars, therefore, viewed masculinity studies as having the important task of making the construction of masculinity visible by studying ‘men as men’ (Kimmel, 1986; Traister, 2000). In doing so, the scholarship demonstrated “that masculinity, too, is a gender and therefore that men as well as women have undergone historical and cultural processes of gender formation that distribute power and privilege unevenly” (Gardiner, 2002, p. 11). Through explicitly applying a gendered lens to analyze men’s experiences, practices, and dominant social position, masculinity studies scholars intended to illuminate the harmful constructions of masculinity to reduce men’s violence and influence social change (Connell, 2015; Peretz, 2016; Easthope, 1990).

*Diversifying Views of Men*

Along with making dominant constructions of masculinity visible, scholars also worked to transcend rigid understandings of masculinity to acknowledge the plurality and complexities of men’s behaviors and experiences. In the 1950s and 1960s, sex role theory dominated the scientific study of masculinity and gender across the disciplines of psychology, social psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Brod, 1987c; Hearn & Kimmel, 2006). Joseph Pleck
(1987), a leading scholar who reconceptualized the theory, explained that the sex role framework developed from cultural concerns about men’s (in)adequacy in the 1930s.

[T]his theory holds that for individuals to become psychologically mature as members of their sex, they must acquire male or female ‘sex role identity,’ manifested by having the sex-appropriate traits, attitudes, and interests that … ‘validate’ or ‘affirm’ their biological sex. (Pleck, 1987, p. 21)

Consequently, a primary assumption of the sex role paradigm is that men’s mental and physical wellness is dependent on a strong sense of masculine self (Brod, 1987c).

Early feminist scholarship played a role in popularizing the sex role framework as a way to understand gender roles as learned behaviors and, therefore, changeable and fluid; however, as the women’s and gay liberation movements and scholarship evolved, scholars began to challenge traditional sex role theorizing as problematic (Brod, 1987b; Pleck, 1987; Reeser, 2015). Some have contended that “the idea of men’s studies as an academic field emerged out of debates sparked by this critique” of the sex role paradigm (Hearn & Kimmel, 2006, p. 56; Kimmel, 1986). With an intention to move towards more nuanced and diverse understandings of masculinities, early masculinity studies research directly critiqued sex role theory for being ahistorical and reductive, perpetuating biological determinism, and ignoring power structures between women and men and between men themselves (Hearn & Kimmel, 2006; Kimmel, 1986, 1987b; Pleck, 1987; Newton, 2002; Whitehead, 2002). In challenging the many limitations of the sex role paradigm, masculinity studies scholars began to theorize men and masculinity as “multiple and internally complex,” hoping to widen the analyses of men and power in gender relations (Brod, 1987c; Connell et al., 2005, p. 5).
Appealing to Men’s Stake in Feminism

Finally, masculinity studies was welcomed as an important source for fostering transformational perspectives for men (Brod, 1987b). Based on the notion that men’s cooperation is required to create social change, it was believed that masculinity studies could play an important role in prompting men to actively participate in advancing gender equity (Brod, 1987b; Dubbart, 1979; Goodman 1981). In large part, this appeal was grounded in the understanding that men, too, stood to gain from feminism. If men became aware of the ways in which they were also harmed by constructions of masculinity, scholars argued that it would make them eager to surrender their power and “join with women in common cause against patriarchal privilege” (Brod, 1987a, p. 55, 1987c).

Much of this thinking was heavily influenced by Pleck’s (1981, 1987) reconceptualization of the sex role paradigm, as explored in the previous section. Pleck (1981) offered an alternative approach to studying masculinity by replacing sex role theory with the sex role strain paradigm. Instead of viewing men’s stress as caused by an inability to properly adhere to the male sex role, Pleck’s theory revealed how men’s stress stemmed from contradictory, harmful, and unrealistic demands of the male sex role itself (Brod, 1987c; Pleck, 1987). Masculinity studies, therefore, could play an important, therapeutic role for men through validating their specific needs and challenges as well as acknowledging that men, too, needed new role models (Brod, 1987b; Traister, 2000). Scholars utilizing this approach argued that men should support feminism because “all men were harmed by this ‘hegemonic masculinity’… [which] narrowed their options, forced them into confining roles, dampened their emotions, … and doomed them to continual and humiliating fear of failure to live up to the masculinity mark”
(Gardiner, 2002, pp. 5-6). As a result, many scholars cited the harmful impact of hegemonic masculinity on men’s physical and mental health outcomes (August, 1982; Brod, 1987c). By appealing to men’s personal stakes in transforming gender relations and structures, masculinity studies scholars aimed to motivate men to take an active role in feminism.

**Tensions**

An examination of overlapping intentions for masculinity studies reveals scholars’ motivations to complement and advance feminist scholarship. As masculinity studies progressed through the influence of queer theory, critical race studies, and the range of feminisms in the academy (Gardiner, 2002), however, the following tensions surfaced regarding the role and risks of the scholarship (McCarry, 2007; Thomas, 2002).

**Compromising the Role of Women’s Studies Scholarship**

For many scholars, masculinity studies negates the defining purpose for the development of women’s studies. Despite the good intentions of the sub-field, these scholars view its theoretical agendas, and even its very existence, as potentially harmful to the feminist intellectual project. This critique must be understood within the context that women’s studies first arose as a direct challenge to dominant, masculinist research practices and the centrality of men in the academy (Pini & Pease, 2013). Consequently, masculinity studies could essentially serve to reproduce the centrality of men against which feminist scholarship defined itself (Modleski, 1991; Wiegman, 2001). In response, scholars have expressed concern that masculinity studies, instead of making critical contributions, has the potential to deradicalize and weaken feminist scholarship in a number of ways (Beasley, 2005; Canaan & Griffin, 1990; Morgan, 1992; Robinson, 2003). Robyn Wiegman (2012), for instance, argued that while the increased study of
men and masculinity reflects a broadening feminist research agenda, this shift “create[s] enormous anxiety for a field founded on the belief that its relation to its object of study was a reparative project not simply on behalf of women but in the service of women’s emancipation” (p. 59). By debating the contested position of masculinity studies, these scholars have directly challenged the sub-field for its potential to subvert the political boundaries of feminist scholarship.

*Deflecting Feminist Theory*

Scholars have also critiqued masculinity studies for marginalizing feminist theory. While foundational feminist contributions directly influenced the emergence of masculinity studies as a sub-field (Brod, 1987b; Robinson, 2002; Shepherd, 1998), these theories are overwhelmingly marginalized or even ignored across its scholarship (McMahon, 1993; Ramazanoglu, 1992; Segal, 1990; Shepherd, 1998). Because masculinity studies literature does not “explicitly address as a main theoretical priority how feminist theory is used, cited, and analyzed within masculinity theory” (Robinson, 2003, p. 130), authors have raised concerns that the sub-field serves to assert masculine dominance in gender scholarship.

Predominantly, feminist scholars have pointed to specific ways in which masculinity studies neutralizes, reduces, and selectively applies feminist theories for its own purposes (Ashe, 2007; Brittan, 1989; Harstock, 1990; Hanmer, 1990). Not only do masculinity studies scholars limit their engagement with feminist theory to “one or two feminists who represent only one strand within a particular perspective,” but they also generally acknowledge those perceived to be sympathetic to men’s issues (Robinson, 2003, p. 132). Thus, feminist theories in which men are viewed as violent, dominant, and benefiting from the continuing subordination of women
tend to be overlooked across the scholarship (Hanmer, 1990; McCarry, 2007; O’Neill, 2015; Robinson, 2003). There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern, and contemporary writing on masculinity provides numerous examples of a thoughtful and more critical engagement with feminist theories; even so, it is argued that approaches to the scholarship remain overwhelmingly limited, partial, and selective (Berggren, 2014; McCarry, 2007; Morgan, 1992; O’Neill, 2015; Robinson, 2003; Shepherd, 1998). Based on patterns of avoiding or selectively engaging with feminist theories within masculinity studies, O’Neill (2015) contended that questions must be raised about the political orientation of the sub-field. Although masculinity studies scholars have expressed the desire to support feminist aims, the literature itself brings little recognition of gendered power dynamics or engagement with the complexities and contradictions inherent within feminist theory (Ramazanoglu, 1992; Robinson, 2003).

**Utilizing a ‘Masculinity in Crisis’ Framework**

The most far-reaching critique of masculinity studies relates to its examination of the costs of masculinity to men. Much of masculinity studies scholarship is sympathetic to the ways in which men are also harmed by patriarchal structures; this approach has analytical utility for men scholars who, in aiming to dismantle gender oppression, strive to simultaneously free themselves from restrictive gender roles (Ashe, 2007). This intellectual preoccupation with men’s victimization is referred to as ‘masculinity in crisis,’ a prominent theme across the literature that “manhood as we know it … requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self … that the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half human” (Horrocks, 1994, p. 25). Masculinity studies scholars argue that there is a disconnect between how men are socialized to behave and what they
experience as individuals, thus leading them to act in harmful ways to hide insecurities and fears of not meeting gendered expectations (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Pleck, 1981, 1987; Robinson, 2002). Across the literature, scholars urge men to disrupt restrictive gender expectations through personal transformation and discovering their full, authentic selves (Kimmel, 2000; Whitehead, 2002).

Although masculinity studies may represent a search for new forms of vulnerability, intimacy, and healthier expressions amongst men (Gardiner, 2002), many scholars have problematized this therapeutic discourse for its investment in individual transformation (Connell, 1995; Gardiner, 2002; Grieg, 2011; McMahon, 1993; Stoltenberg, 1977), self-interest in men’s liberation (Flood, 2005; Horrocks, 1994; McCary, 2007; Stoltenberg, 1977), and the undermining of men’s continued political, economic, and social dominance (Canaan & Griffin, 1990; Connell, 1995; Forsberg, 2010; Gardiner, 2002, 2005; Grieg, 2011; Hanmer, 1990; Hurtado, 1999; Macleod, 2007; McMahon, 1993; Messner, 1998; Morgan, 2006; O’Neill, 2015; Schacht & Ewing, 1998; Schrock & Schwabe, 2009; Traister, 2000; Williams, 2013). Jack Halberstam (1998), for instance, argued that it is “hard to be very concerned about the burden of masculinity on males, … if only because it so often expresses itself through the desire to destroy others, often women” (p. 274). In response, feminist scholars have claimed that the ‘crisis of masculinity’ narrative is strategically used to decenter the ways in which masculine dominance is maintained. By “[leaving] White, upper-class, male privilege intact and unexamined” through a victimhood framework, masculinity studies leaves the status quo unchallenged (Hurtado, 1999; Gardiner, 2005, p. 41). Additionally, although masculinity studies scholars intend to critique dominant forms of masculinity, Canaan and Griffin (1990) directly challenged how the
scholarship’s “main political priorities so seldom involve challenging the patriarchal, (and racist, and capitalist) power bases” (pp. 212-213). This critique is vividly supported by Traister (2000), who emphasized the inherent dangers of neutralizing dominant forms of masculinity.

What do we say to the African American man still being dragged behind pick-up trucks driven by white men? To the gay college student mercilessly beaten unconscious and left to freeze to death over the course of a cold, Wyoming prairie night? To the women and children hiding in underfunded shelters? I just do not know whether the vicious masculinity behind these crimes is enduring a ‘crisis’ in any way comparable to that of their victims, or if instead we are dealing with a manhood smoothly coherent, frighteningly competent, and alarmingly tranquil. (p. 293)

Across these critiques, scholars demonstrate how the ‘masculinity in crisis’ narrative and its desire to improve the condition of men conceals the dangerous consequences of power relations by leaving the effects of dominant masculinity unexamined (Forsberg, 2010; Halberstam, 2002).

**Masculinity in Higher Education Practice**

Researchers have argued that while it is important to understand the theoretical dissonance within gender scholarship and the possibility for masculinity studies to assert dominance, it is all the more critical to examine how these challenges are translated into practice, specifically through interventions focused on masculinity (Beasley, 2015; Berggren, 2014; Connell, 2002; Schacht & Ewing, 1998). This section will review the emergence, intentions, and limitations of masculinity-centered practices specifically in the context of higher education.

**Emergence of Masculinity-Centered Practices**

The proliferation of masculinity studies in the academy led to the subsequent emergence of higher education research specific to college men and masculinities in the early 2000s (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). Prior to this expansion of scholarship, higher education research related to gender, much like the field of women’s and gender studies, focused on the
experiences of cisgender women “as a response to how gender inequities for women are historically situated and structurally organized” (Harper & Harris, 2010; Wagner et al., 2018, p. 64). As men and masculinities emerged as objects of study in higher education research, the scholarship directly informed practitioners’ growing interest in developing initiatives and services for men on college and university campuses (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). The professionalization of college men and masculinities research and practice also became evident through the surfacing of professional associations, affinity groups, and regional and national conferences where higher education researchers and practitioners could share knowledge about supporting men’s needs and identity development (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a).

**Intentions for Centering Masculinity**

Professional associations provided a space for practitioners to come together and advocate for programs and services targeting cisgender, college men. American College Personnel Association (ACPA) members, for instance, communicated a need for campus initiatives that explore “what it means to be a male, how to explore being male, and how that experience impacts women and other groups” and established the Standing Committee for Men in 1984 (Canon, 2004 as cited in Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education followed suit in 2005 with the Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community which focused on understanding the developmental needs specific to college men (Laker, 2005; Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). While some higher education practitioners were wary of the institutionalized centering of men and masculinity, some of these concerns were alleviated by the Standing Committee for Men’s mission to support the feminist movement as well as its ability to build a relationship with the already established Standing
Committee for Women (Canon, 2004 as cited in Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). This work has continued to expand in higher education, and practitioners have demonstrated diverse and evolving approaches to transforming masculinity. This section will review the ways in which college men and masculinities research directly informs diverse approaches to masculinity-centered practices. Three broad themes were identified that encompass campus programs and interventions related to transforming masculinity: supporting identity development and success, addressing patterns of behavior, and working towards social justice.

**Supporting Men’s Identity Development and Success**

Similar to scholars in the broader sub-field of masculinity studies, higher education researchers aimed to reveal the construction of masculinity and disrupt monolithic views of men. Across the scholarship, researchers pointed to the lack of research on college men as men and argued for increased understanding of how gender shapes men’s experiences in order to support their healthy development (Davis, 2002, 2010; Davis & Laker, 2004; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Foste & Davis, 2017; Harris, 2008; Harris & Harper, 2008; Harper et al., 2011; McGowan et al., 2019). Researchers also worked to demonstrate that men’s experiences and needs are interconnected, nuanced, and diverse. Harper et al. (2011) wrote,

> [A]n erroneous assumption could be made that healthy identities are achieved once men resolve the various aspects of gender role conflict that have been described in the literature. But what about those who are simultaneously experiencing dissonance concerning their class and racial identities …? The point here is that men are not just gendered beings with unidimensional needs and patterns of identity development. (p. 82)

By applying multidimensional frameworks, researchers explored the intersection of gender with other social identities including spirituality (Longwood et al., 2004), race (Harper, 2004; Harper & Harris, 2010; Harris et al., 2011; Pelzer, 2016; Martin & Harris, 2006; McGowan, 2017),
ability (Gershick, 2011), sexuality (Anderson-Martinez & Vianden, 2014; Berila, 2011), multiple marginalized identities (Chan, 2017), and a range of diverse backgrounds (Harper et al., 2011; Harris & Edwards, 2010) to reveal the complexities of college men’s experiences and their differential access to masculine dominance. Along with empowering men to be more integrated with themselves and others (Longwood et al., 2004), researchers have also addressed achievement and outcome disparities by disrupting deficit-based approaches to understanding and supporting college men, particularly men of color (Foste & Davis, 2017; Gershick, 2011; Harper & Harris, 2010; Pelzer, 2016).

This research has directly informed the development of masculinity-centered practices intended to support college men’s identity development and success on campus. Speaking directly to practitioners, Harris (2008) stated, “Sources of institutional support that challenge men to embrace a wider range of gender-related behaviors and help them develop effective strategies to resolve gender-role conflict productively should be a priority for student affairs educators” (p. 471). In response, practitioners have developed various types of campus-based initiatives that promote critical self-reflection, self-authorship, authenticity, and community-building. Through dialogue-based programs and retreats, mentorship opportunities, speaker events, film screenings, men of color success initiatives, affinity spaces, and workshops, college men are provided with the space to make sense of masculinity and embrace a wider range of more authentic ways of being (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris & Harper, 2008; Harris, 2010; Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a).
Addressing Patterns of Behavior

Another common approach to masculinity-centered research and practice stems from the need to disrupt the “problematic attitudes and behaviors associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity that cisgender men are socialized into” (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 74). Acknowledging high-risk patterns related to academic dismissal, conduct violations, alcohol abuse, violent and disruptive behaviors, sexual assault, mental health, and suicide, researchers urgently present the need to address a number of issues disproportionately facing college men (Capraro, 2004; Davis & Laker, 2004; Harris & Edwards, 2010; O’Neil & Crapser, 2011; Wagner et al., 2018). Ludeman (2011), for example, argued that only recently has research explored how “men’s experience and performance of gender is related to disruptive behavior. … It would seem beneficial … to understand better how gender roles and socialization impact male students in the collegiate environment in order to proactively intervene” (p. 199). By applying understandings of hegemonic masculinity and gender performativity, researchers examine how gender role conflict can lead college men to perform in ways that harm themselves and others (Berkowitz, 2011; Harper et al., 2010; Loschiavo et al., 2007; Wagner & Tillapaugh, 2018).

In response to the concerns delineated in the scholarship, practitioners have developed interventions to transform hegemonic masculinity (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019). Through judicial interventions (Harper et al., 2010; Klobassa & Laker, 2018; Ludeman, 2011), alcohol and violence prevention programming (Engstrom, 2012; Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a), student staff recruitment and training processes (Wagner & Tillapaugh, 2018), and men’s dialogue spaces, practitioners can create opportunities for men to express vulnerability, critically explore messages they have received about masculinity, and trouble dominant narratives (Davis & Laker,
Arguing that men have the inner desire to be vulnerable, empathetic, and communicative, Berkowitz (2011) called upon practitioners to “[nudge] men in the right direction, … creating a space for men to do the difficult emotional and transformational work necessary to be more mature, socially engaged beings” (p. 171).

**Working Towards Social Justice Aims**

Across the scholarship, researchers also agree that liberation work requires attending to dominance and power. Despite concerns that re中心ing men and masculinity in higher education research may reify dominance, researchers argued that this engagement is necessary to the process for dismantling gender and other forms of intersecting oppressions (Catalano et al., 2018; Davis & Wagner, 2005; Edwards et al., 2019; Jourian, 2017; Wagner, 2015). Davis and Wagner (2005), for instance, contended that instead of viewing the study of college men and masculinities as a self-serving project for “male enlightenment,” placing men’s “privilege at the center of attention as opposed to leaving it unacknowledged” is critical to creating change (p. 36). In the same vein, Catalano et al. (2018) explained that, “the systems that hold masculinities in place such as sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny influence all aspects of our lives. … [Thus], drawing attention to how masculinity is centered resists oppression and opens conversations toward liberation” (p. 11).

It is clear that these researchers view the examination of masculinity as having a primary role to play in dismantling oppressive structures towards the liberation of all people. They make a critical acknowledgement that, along with cisgender college men, rigid expectations of hegemonic masculinity have pervasive consequences for cisgender women, trans*, and non-binary students. To support social justice aims, researchers offered various recommendations for
higher education practice. Some urged practitioners to foster social justice perspectives in college men by facilitating dialogue on topics of patriarchy, privilege, hegemonic masculinity and systems of oppression to not only support men’s learning but to also help men assume responsibility in creating social change (Barone et al., 2007; Catalano et al., 2018; Davis & Wagner, 2005; Wagner, 2011, 2015; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris & Barone, 2011; Jourian, 2018). Additionally, researchers presented strategies when engaging men in conversations that might elicit their resistance and defensiveness, urging practitioners to contextualize their behavior and create spaces for vulnerability and trust. Wagner (2011), for instance, suggested that practitioners focus on systems over individual acts as a pedagogical approach. Edwards and Jones (2009) also offered suggestions for appealing to college men in ways that create “men who are more effective, consistent, sustainable, and accountable in their efforts to work against their own sexism and the sexism in society” (p. 225). While recognizing that engaging men in their dominance has its challenges, researchers view these practices as necessary to advancing social justice.

**Recentering Dominance**

Across these diverse efforts to transform hegemonic masculinity on college and university campuses, researchers have increasingly revealed the ways in which college men and masculinities research (and the practice it informs) recenters intersecting forms of dominance. A core critique is that masculinity-centered scholarship and practices continue to rely upon monolithic representations of men without taking into account the intersecting identities that shape how men experience and understand gender (Foste & Davis, 2017). In doing so, men’s experiences have been problematically universalized to represent white, heterosexual, middle-

Researchers have also challenged masculinity-centered research and practices for presenting essentialist and binary understandings of gender, sex, and the body through conflating masculinities with “cisgender maleness” (Jourian, 2017, 2018; Catalano & Jourian, 2018, p. 44; Wagner et al., 2018). Nicolazzo (2019) articulated that “[j]ust as some bodies assigned male at birth don’t align with masculine-gendered realities, many bodies not assigned male at birth do” (pp. 196-197). Referencing Halberstam’s (1998) theory of female masculinity as a critical example, Nicolazzo (2019) demonstrated the need to disentangle masculinity from bodies to “recognize masculinity in various identities, expressions, and embodiments” (p. 197). In response, several scholars have urged college men and masculinities researchers and practitioners to ground their work in expansive understandings of gender and include people of diverse gender identities and expressions in conversations about how masculinity operates (Catalano et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2018). Jourian (2017) demonstrated this approach by exploring trans*masculine perspectives to destabilize hegemonic masculinity, disrupt the gender binary, and support gender liberation.

Along with problematic representations of men and masculinity, another widespread critique is the marginalization of feminist and other critical perspectives across research and practice. There are, of course, examples of college men and masculinities scholars and practitioners expressing commitments to feminism and gender equity (Canon, 2004 cited in Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a; Capraro, 2004; Edwards & Jones, 2009). Providing a rationale
for the focus on men and masculinities in higher education, Harper and Harris (2010) argued that the status of women cannot improve without a corresponding focus on engaging men to develop productive masculinities. Similarly, Davis et al. (2011) acknowledged that they have “been transformed in some way by feminist theory and pedagogy and take an explicitly pro-feminist position” (p. 148). Despite these intentions, the critical application of feminist theories and other social justice perspectives to analyze gender and masculine domination is overwhelmingly missing, which serves to reify dominance across scholarship and practice (Brown & Ismail, 2019; Catalano & Jourian, 2018; Wagner et al., 2018).

The concerns explored in this section have led to emerging considerations about how masculinity-centered research and practice can support liberatory aims while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchy, genderism, whiteness, and other structures of erasure (McGowan et al., 2019; Nicolazzo, 2019; Okello & Quaye, 2019; Tillapaugh et al., 2019; Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019a). In response, researchers have communicated the need to embrace these complex realities (Nicolazzo, 2019) and apply critical, intersectional theoretical approaches to the work (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019; Beatty et al., 2019; Catalano et al., 2018; Jourian, 2017, 2018; Okello & Quaye, 2019). Wagner et al. (2018), for instance, wrote that “starting research with men means acknowledging the existence of male and masculine domination, as well as how sexism upholds other forms of oppression on college campuses” (p. 68). Jourian (2017) further argued that utilizing post-intentional, queer perspectives; women of color feminisms; and critical trans* politics in college men and masculinities work could support liberatory potentials for people of all genders.
Higher education practitioners engaging in masculinity-centered practices must apply critical theories to their work. An integral part of this process requires practitioners to examine whether and how their practices “are being challenged and changed by a thorough incorporation of different feminist stances” (Brown & Ismail, 2019; Robinson, 2003, p. 134). Practitioners must call into question how their programmatic efforts work to unsettle systems that have maintained dominance over women, trans*, and non-binary individuals in higher education and beyond (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019; Brown & Ismail, 2019; Jourian, 2017, 2018). Some researchers have theoretically looked to critical gender frameworks, particularly various feminisms, to inform liberatory college men and masculinities practice. Harris and Barone (2011) argued that “in our research and practice, it is essential that we pay particular attention to the feminist, women’s studies, and queer studies scholars who have been studying gender, femininities, and masculinities for decades” (p. 54). Okello and Quaye (2019) specifically centered Black feminist thought to not only acknowledge its foundational role to [cisgender men’s] learning about gender but to also demonstrate that “Black feminism may offer the critical praxis and theoretical sensibilities that begin to intentionally address the open wounds inflicted by hegemonic procedures … .” (p. 136). Alongside the application of critical theories, researchers have also argued that masculinity-centered practices need to be guided by those on the margins (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2019). Ashlee and Wagner (2019) wrote,

A promising method for maintaining accountability with men’s programming is to actively invite and prioritize the perspectives of people who experience gender marginalization (women and trans* individuals) on campus. To be clear, women and trans* people should not be required to give their time or labor to support college men and masculinities programming. Rather, masculinities programming can contribute to a liberated campus community by following the leadership of women and trans* educators.
To address the risks related to masculinity-centered practices and “ensure that the intent and impact of [these] efforts are aligned with social justice on campus” (Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 84), we must learn from critical frameworks and those who experience gender marginalization. Therefore, to gain critical insight, the next section in this review will examine how women’s and gender equity centers, as campus spaces dedicated to supporting and empowering those who experience gender oppression, have engaged in shifting practices to support their aims, including the incorporation of masculinity as an object of practice.

**Shifting Gender Practices in Women’s and Gender Equity Centers**

Since very little is known about masculinity-centered practices and the navigation of associated tensions, particularly from feminist frameworks, this section takes an in-depth look at the expanding gender practices of campus-based women’s and gender equity centers (WGECs). Having emerged from the feminist consciousness of the women’s movement (Brooks, 1988), WGECs have developed into critical sites of feminist practice in higher education. While their missions, organizational structures, and practices vary across institutions, most WGECs serve as a campus space for “feminist activism, education, and empowerment” for gender equity and the elimination of oppression more broadly (Kasper, 2004; Marine et al., 2017, p. 45; Pasque & Nicholson, 2011). Historically serving cisgender women students, staff, and faculty, WGECs commonly offer programs and services focused on sexual violence, mentorship, networking, skill-building, and leadership development (Wetzel, 1988). Over time, many WGECs have also “undertaken practices of gender inclusion, expanding their missions and programming to include cisgender men and trans*people of all genders” as well as examinations of masculinity (Kupo & Castellon, 2018; Marine et al., 2017, p. 45).
While there is limited research on the engagement of masculinity in WGECs, the broader literature on WGECs provides insight on the ways in which their feminist practical interventions have “shifted and expanded to include new ways of thinking, being, and doing” (Bickford, 2019, p. 1). To understand both the possibilities and challenges brought about by these shifts, this section will begin by examining the foundation and relevance of WGECs as spaces for feminist practice. The remaining focus of the section serves to analyze the influence of institutional contexts to the development and limits of WGEC practice for supporting gender equity.

The Role of Women’s and Gender Equity Centers

Currently, there are over 500 WGECs across U.S. higher education institutions (Marine et al., 2017). In striving to respond to the ever-evolving needs related to women’s and gender equity, WGECs have taken on various issues and offer a wide range of resources, services, and research (Bickford, 2019). Additionally, the groups WGECs serve have shifted over time, including larger populations of students of color as well as trans* and non-binary, international, first-generation, non-traditional, veteran, pregnant, parenting, and cisgender men students (Bickford, 2019; Marine et al., 2017). While students remain the primary focus, many WGECs also provide support specifically to women faculty and staff through support groups, workshops, networking opportunities, policy formation, and campus climate improvement efforts (Byrne, 2000; Marine et al., 2017; Mellow, 1988). In reflecting the needs of the varying populations they serve, WGECs are markedly diverse in purpose, approach, size, and structure (Kasper, 2004; Kunkel, 1994; Marine, 2011; Vera & Burgos-Sasscer, 1998). Despite their differences, WGECs share a common commitment to raising women’s consciousness and calling for institutional and individual change to advance gender equity (Brooks, 1988; Kunkel, 1994). With a rich 50-year
history, WGECs collectively continue to bridge scholarship and activism in higher education to advance feminist aims (Byrne, 2000; Davie, 2002a; Willinger, 2002; Wies, 2011).

As WGECs continue to engage in this critical work on campuses, these units have faced questions related to whether or not they continue to serve a necessary function. These concerns are primarily grounded in the belief that women no longer face societal discrimination (Girard et al., 1980). To support such claims, upper-level administrators and others who influence higher education policy often point to women’s increasing enrollment across institutions. Not only did women surpass the number of men undergraduates by 1980, but by 2006 women were also earning more degrees at every level except professional (Goettsch et al., 2019a; Touchton et al., 2008). Along with these figures, the current political, economic, and social climate has contributed to increased suspicion of the work of WGECs, identity centers more broadly, and even higher education itself (Goettsch et al., 2019a).

Amid claims that WGECs have lost social relevance, scholars have reaffirmed their value by articulating the many ways in which women experience inequities in higher education. Bickford (2019), for instance, offered the important reminder that increasing numbers of women across institutions does not signify the end of gender oppression. In fact, women in higher education continue to disproportionately face chilly campus climates evidenced by harassment, sexual violence, underrepresentation in certain disciplines, and other barriers (Goettsch et al., 2012; Kupo & Castellon, 2018; Lonnquist & Reesor, 1987). Further, women faculty and staff members face ongoing challenges to receiving equitable pay, balancing life and work responsibilities, and reaching high-ranking faculty and administrative leadership positions (Bonebright et al., 2012; Goettsch et al., 2012; June, 2009). It is critical to also acknowledge that
these challenges are even greater for multiply marginalized women (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002; Goettsch et al., 2012). In direct response to the notion that women’s increased access to higher education reflects gender parity, Vlasnik (2011) explained that first, we must identify which women and men we are discussing and attend to how intersecting identities change access and equity in higher education; second, the ‘quantity’ of women in higher education is a different discussion than the ‘quality’ of their experiences; and third, the many histories of women’s access to higher education are critical to understanding their current status, opportunities, and challenges. (p. 24)

Thus, with an understanding of the realities facing women across multiple identities, scholars and practitioners argue that WGECs continue to serve a necessary and even urgent function in higher education. Citing the current hostile political climate towards women, particularly women of color, those who are undocumented, and trans* and non-binary individuals, the need is clear to maintain formalized campus spaces that provide advocacy, support feminist organizing, and promote social change (Bonebright et al., 2012; Marine et al., 2017; Wright-Mair & Marine, 2019).

**Institutional Factors and Shifting Practices**

Despite the establishment of WGECs on many campuses, little is known about the possibilities and limitations of their gender equity work (Bickford, 2019; Davie, 2002a; Kasper, 2004; Marine, 2011). To better understand these dynamics, the remainder of this section closely examines the factors shaping patterns of change in WGEC practice. Specifically, this section will review trends related to administrative structures and resources, sociopolitical climate, organizational identity, mission, and stakeholders to shed light on WGECs’ various trajectories, needs, and practical strategies.
Administrative Structures and Resources

Without the existence of a national organizing agent, WGECs do not have models to universally guide their mission, structure, and funding; consequently, each center develops as an independent unit to address the particular needs of their respective institutions (Clevenger, 1988; Wetzel, 1988). Predominantly placed within either student or academic affairs divisions (Suggs & Mitchell, 2011), centers’ reporting lines and locations within the hierarchical institutional structure directly influence their work and impact (Goettsch et al., 2012; Goettsch, 2019a). In fact, Clevenger’s (1988) study of 125 centers found that those who were two or more levels removed from the Office of the President were more likely to report constraints and lack of institutional commitment to their efforts. WGECs placed within closer proximity to upper-level administration, on the other hand, experience increased visibility and influence on campus, allowing them to prove more effective in developing relationships and advocating for institutional change (Goettsch et al., 2012). Physical space and location also contribute to the work of WGECs. Whether a center is assigned to a stand-alone house, administrative or academic building, shared space with other identity centers, or even the outer limits of campus, each location sends a message in regard to its institutional value, purpose, and intended constituents (Goettsch, 2019a).

In addition to the ways in which centers are situated on campus, financial resources play the most prominent administrative role in shaping WGEC functions. Across the literature, researchers have repeatedly discussed the shortage of funding as the greatest barrier facing WGECs, regardless of institutional type (Clevenger, 1988; Goettsch et al., 2012; Marine, 2011). Funding streams vary from center to center, and while some receive financial resources from
outside grants, student government, or private funds, WGECs primarily receive institutional budget appropriations (Brooks, 1988; Clevenger, 1988; Kunkel, 1994). Increasingly, WGECs have experienced difficulty obtaining and sustaining the required resources and professional staffing necessary to actualize their missions (Boyd et al., 2009; Brooks, 1988; Kasper, 2004), particularly at public institutions where state appropriations have drastically dwindled (Bengiveno, 2000; Marine, 2011). WGEC practitioners must then divert energy from their work to instead focus on survival, competition with other offices for institutional resources, and staff burnout due to the expectation to “do more with less” (Brooks, 1988, p. 20; Girard et al., 1980; Marine, 2011; Vera & Burgos-Sasscer, 1998). In response, WGEC practitioners act strategically to maximize their limited resources for the greatest impact (Girard et al., 1980). For instance, some centers aiming to serve as a resource for all genders are limited “to put[ting] women’s issues first” (Marine et al., 2017, p. 55).

**Sociopolitical Climate**

For many campuses, the ongoing dearth of resources provided to WGECs directly reflects the sociopolitical climate. Conservative backlash to feminist organizing on campus has materialized into political pressures to cut higher education budgets and pursue anti-affirmative action agendas (Bengiveno, 2000; Martell & Avitabile, 1988). Such “attacks on U.S. universities by the right and increasingly stingy state legislatures have led high-level [campus] administrators to pay attention to - and satisfy - the desires of politicians, corporations, right-wing watchdog organizations, rich conservative donors, and the public-at-large” (Kleinman & Ezzell, 2012, p. 403). In reported cases, campus administrators have attempted to control WGEC mission statements and activities to suppress feminist activism, pressuring one center to eliminate
programming on reproductive rights and asking staff members in another not to use the word ‘oppression’ (Kleinman & Ezzell, 2012; Parker & Freedman, 1999). In the context of politicized budgetary constraints and other threats, WGECs are vulnerable to significant administrative pressures while simultaneously working to best serve marginalized communities on campus.

WGECs must also navigate a climate in which they are deemed as no longer necessary or valuable. As previously discussed, the belief that gender equity has been achieved has led to apathy towards women’s issues and even negative attitudes towards feminism (Kasper, 2004; Nicolazzo & Harris, 2014). Because feminism can be perceived as polarizing, some WGEC practitioners contemplate whether or not to articulate a strong feminist stance in their mission statements so as not to discourage the engagement of students, faculty, and staff (Marine, 2011). Additionally, WGEC practitioners must assume the ongoing responsibility of justifying the need for their work and space on campus, which is often measured by the numbers of constituents utilizing their resources (Kasper, 2004; Marine, 2011; Marine et al., 2017). With neoliberal expectations to provide concrete evidence of their relevance and impact in higher education (Giroux, 2014; Marine et al., 2017), WGEC practitioners feel pressure to increase their numbers of attendees through various strategies. Some of these strategies include being more gender inclusive (Marine et al., 2017), adjusting programs to meet contemporary and diverse needs (Bonebright et al., 2012), and developing high visibility programs at the risk of integrating into the “mainstream” of the institution (Girard et al., 1980, p. 36; Kasper, 2004). Forming strategic campus collaborations also helps WGEC practitioners insist upon their relevance. Not only do partnerships allow for cost-sharing to bring in visiting speakers, but forming alliances with women’s studies, gender/sexuality studies, institutional commissions on women, and campus
LGBTQ+ and other identity-based centers also allows WGEC practitioners to enhance their sphere of influence and connection to the institutional mission (Davie, 2002b; Goettsch et al., 2019b; Iverson & Pegg-Kirby, 2019; Wies, 2011).

Organizational Identity

Since their emergence, the role and scope of WGECs have shifted in various ways. Beth Willinger (2002) categorized WGECs into two distinct types – resource centers and research centers; while both aim to advance social change, resource centers do so through direct advocacy, services, and programs, while research centers engage in feminist research to produce and promote knowledge for gender equity. Based on their expressed intentions, WGECs engage in varying types of services and activities (Davie, 2002a; Marine, 2011). Though not an exhaustive list, programming can include education and support related to sexual and intimate partner violence (Kasper, 2004; Nare, 2019) and societal discrimination for multiply marginalized populations (Wies, 2011); workshops for leadership, career, and skills development (Clevenger, 1988; Marine et al., 2017; Wetzel, 1988); resources for parents and pregnant constituents on campus (Clevenger, 1988; Curry, 2008; Keller & Rogers, 1983); and support for feminist organizing and activism (Kunkel, 1994; Marine et al., 2017).

Interestingly, despite having origins in the women’s movement, WGECs have engaged in fewer programs related to activism and women’s movement agendas (Clevenger, 1988). In some cases, these shifts reflect the reality that the women faculty and staff who advocated for the creation of WGECs are now retiring, making room for staff members from younger generations to change centers’ directions and goals (Goettsch et al., 2012). In large part, however, WGECs have struggled to maintain their identity as feminist, political change agents because of
institutional constraints and conservative resistance. Most WGECs are expected to act as service providers rather than political agencies on campuses; in fact, not only do upper-level university administrators try to suppress activist intentions of WGECs, but they also expect centers’ staff members to keep any controversies out of the media and president’s office (Allen, 2001). Consequently, WGEC practitioners must negotiate a delicate balance between providing services to women and their activist identity, which often results in avoiding political stances, “being quiet, cleaning up the messes, maybe teaching kick boxing, but certainly never insisting, embarrassing, offending, or for God’s sake blaming anyone” as a means of organizational survival (Allen, 2001, p. 14; Bengiveno, 2000; Marine et al., 2017). Additionally, the right has co-opted progressive discourses for increased inclusivity, thus placing pressure on WGECs to represent all views in their programming, even those that represent oppressive perspectives (Kleinman & Ezzell, 2012). Some WGEC practitioners have challenged such shifts for causing harm and diluting their mission to advocate for historically marginalized populations in higher education (Kleinman & Ezzell, 2012).

It is important to note that the attention paid to the activist orientation of WGECs has unintentionally overshadowed their critical educational and academic functions (Wies, 2011). Often collaborating with women’s studies programs, WGECs connect theory with practice to foster learning and consciousness-raising about intersecting, oppressive structures (Byrne, 2000; Nicolazzo & Harris, 2014). By positioning WGECs as having an educational or activist identity, however, the literature undermines the important dialectical relationship between knowledge creation and action, also known as praxis, that supports centers in reaching their fullest potential (Wies, 2011). Instead of operating within a binary, it is important that WGECs simultaneously
advance both education and activism in their work, “compel[ling] individuals and communities to take action as a result of their knowledge acquisition” (Arcana, 2005; Wies, 2011, p. 266). Additionally, by emphasizing their educational role, WGEC practitioners can better articulate their alignment with the academic and learning goals of the larger institution, thus demonstrating their relevance in the campus community (Wies, 2011).

Mission and Stakeholders

Grounded in a shared commitment to serve marginalized groups, WGEC practitioners have increasingly questioned the feminist boundaries of their spaces, asking “who are [WGECs] for? Who belongs, who is less often included, and how do matters of belonging and inclusion define their work?” (Wright-Mair & Marine, 2019, p. 161). Just like the feminist movement’s long history of exclusionary practices, WGECs have struggled to include and engage women in their multiple identities (Marine et al., 2017). By utilizing a single axis of gender in their efforts to support women, the needs of women of color, queer women, low-income women, women with disabilities and others largely went unacknowledged (Marine et al., 2017; Nare, 2019). In fact, a 1994 national survey indicated that only 52% of WGEC respondents provided programming related to race, ethnicity, or religion (Nare, 2019). Additionally, early centers reflected the feminist movement’s fear of including lesbian women in the work (Bonebright et al., 2012, p. 81). It comes as no surprise, then, that marginalized women have historically felt alienated from WGECs, rightfully viewing them as spaces designed for white, straight, cisgender women (Dilapi & Gay, 2002).

Directly challenging mainstream feminist discourse for perpetuating White, middle-class perspectives of women’s experiences, Black feminist and other woman of color theorists
advanced intersectional frameworks to acknowledge the interconnectedness of women’s oppression across identities. As part of this shift in thought, WGECs aimed to intentionally expand their scope to better serve diverse groups of women and incorporate intersectionality throughout their practice (Davie, 2002b; Goettsch et al., 2019b; Vera & Burgos-Sasscer, 1998). While there is still much work to be done, many WGECs have demonstrated a more authentic engagement with anti-racist and social justice work more broadly (Goettsch et al., 2012). These centers have built collaborative partnerships with LGBTQ+ and multicultural centers (Goettsch et al., 2012); engaged in campus climate efforts (Byrne, 2000); facilitated groups for white women to dismantle racism and white supremacy (Case, 2012; Dilapi & Gay, 2002; Salsbury & Millermacphee, 2019); and consistently addressed “complex interrelationships between gender and other categories of identity” throughout their programming and services (Bickford, 2019; Byrne, 2000, p. 49; Salsbury & Millermacphee, 2019).

As WGECs applied more intersectional and inclusive frameworks to their work with women, they also began to critically question their understanding of woman as a concept in itself (Iverson & Pegg-Kirby, 2019). Having emerged to serve women students, staff, and faculty, WGECs operated within a binary understanding of gender, thus focusing on cisgender women without addressing the complexities and fluidity of gender identity and expression (Kupo & Castellon, 2018). While binary conceptualizations of gender continue to frame the work of WGECs, many centers have increasingly focused on “efforts to create feminist-centered, gender-inclusive spaces on college campuses” (Goettsch et al., 2012; Marine et al., 2017, p. 49). This work has been directly informed by queer theoretical perspectives that deconstruct essentialist thinking and show gender as socially constructed, discourse-dependent, fluid, negotiable, and
created through repeated performances (Berger, 2006; Gardiner, 2005; Mann & Patterson, 2016). To move beyond the binary and acknowledge the diverse experiences of gender, many centers have expanded their services to serve stakeholders of all genders, including trans*, nonbinary, agender, and gender expansive individuals (Kupo & Castellon, 2018; Lou, 2019; Marine, 2011; Marine et al., 2017).

For some WGECs, this expansion also includes cisgender men and the examination of masculinity in their programming (Kunkel 1994; Kupo & Castellon, 2018; Marine, 2011; Marine et al., 2017). Much of this work was initially informed by Black feminist thought. WGECs situated in historically Black colleges and universities were intentionally designed to support women of color in their racialized and gendered experiences (Bickford, 2019). As part of their intersectional work, they “pursue an economic, political, and educational space to share the burden of systemic racism alongside Black men in ways White women had never been required” (Suggs & Mitchell, 2011, p. 146). By doing so, Black feminist thinking articulates the shared oppression of Black women and men within white supremacist structures while also grappling with the gendered tensions between them. These conversations directly challenge feminist separatist ideology through intentionally creating campus spaces for women and men to build coalitions for justice.

Many WGECs engage in gender-inclusive practices to better support their mission to advance gender equity. By inviting others into the work, WGECs can have broader reach in raising awareness and facilitating education and dialogue about critical topics related to gender (Goettsch et al., 2012; Marine et al., 2017). Additionally, WGECs can develop initiatives that recognize and affirm gender diversity on campus (Goettsch et al., 2019b). While there is very
little research on how WGECs have directly engaged the needs of trans* and gender non-binary constituents, several scholars have written about the engagement of cisgender men and examination of masculinity in programming. Practitioners have indicated that they encourage cisgender men’s attendance at events and even offer opportunities to join groups related to men’s anti-violence work and dialogue programs to explore masculinity (Iverson & Pegg-Kirby, 2019; Kaplan et al., 2002; Kasper, 2004; Marine et al., 2017). Some WGECs have also acknowledged that “masculinities applies to more than cisgender men” and consequently aim to destabilize and complicate notions of gender in their programs (Kupo & Castellon, 2018, p. 20). Despite this increased engagement, many centers struggle with whether to include cisgender men and/or masculinity-centered practices as part of their direct work (Kasper, 2004). Kasper, for instance, argued that WGEC programming focused on masculinity may threaten men and undermine their potential support of the work. WGECs also face the challenge of how to navigate the engagement of cisgender men or people of all genders with the need to protect WGECs as spaces intentionally designed for women on campus (Marine et al., 2017). Not only is there a concern that gender inclusivity would redirect already strained resources away from women, but WGECs also risk losing their focus and feminist identity (Brooks, 1988; Goettsch et al., 2019b; Grewe, 2012).

As mission-driven organizations grounded in feminist frameworks, WGECs serve as promising sites for examining the opportunities and tensions related to practical interventions for gender equity. Despite articulating a collective commitment to feminism, WGECs reflect diverse ways in actualizing their shared mission. The literature makes clear that institutional factors prompt WGECs to negotiate how to best support gender equity, as evidenced by their varying
directions in programming, targeted populations, objectives, and strategies. As a result, questions have emerged regarding the liberatory possibilities of WGEC practice. “What does the term ‘feminism’ really mean, and how does a women’s center go about enacting feminist values” in higher education? (Nicolazzo & Harris, 2014). Who should WGECs engage to create social change and how? In expanding their reach to include masculinity-centered practices, how can WGECs maintain their organizational identity and commitment to serving those on the margins? And how can centers engage in gender equity work without reproducing systems of dominance? In navigating these institutional complexities, WGECs strive to protect and advance their practices for resistance, empowerment, and social transformation.

In the next section, I will provide an overview of the conceptual framework for the study. As will be further discussed in Chapter Three, it is important within interpretive phenomenology to bring theoretical assumptions “to bear on one’s interpretive understandings of the phenomenon under investigation” (Vagle, 2018, p. 82). Given the role of campus WGECs in supporting social change, this study utilized a framework for politicizing masculinities to explore how WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices within these spaces.

**Conceptual Framework: Politicizing Masculinities**

To explore the application and meaning of masculinity-centered practices in WGECs, I apply Cornwall et al.’s (2011) framework for politicizing masculinities. Stemming from the interdisciplinary field of gender and development, Cornwall et al. responded to the rising concern that work on men and masculinities has played a role in depoliticizing the gender agenda, which has been “stripped of the original concern with inequitable power relations and reduced to interventions that are palliative rather than genuinely transformative” (p. 1). Cornwall
et al. called upon men and masculinities practitioners to center a “more explicit concern with the deeper structures of gendered oppression” (p. 16), proposing the following three dimensions for politicizing masculinities:

- challenge normative perspectives on men, masculinity, bodies, and the gender binary;
- critically examine ‘subordinate variants’ of masculinity and its intersections “as a tool with which to excavate the structures and workings of power” (p. 10); and
- think beyond limiting frames of current approaches to masculinities work and focus on building constituencies and alliances for action and advocacy.

This framework converges structural, institutional, and individual considerations to better analyze the possibilities and limitations of men and masculinities work. Although this approach was developed with economic development and globalization in mind, it translates well to masculinity-centered practices across applied fields. The ‘politicizing masculinities’ framework can shed light on the ways in which WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices in their work to support gender equity.

When considering approaches to politicizing masculinities, it is important to acknowledge the inherent complexities. As illustrated in the literature review, scholars, in debating the uneasy relationship between masculinity studies and feminism, utilize varying concepts, terms, and theories to analyze gender, power, and the boundaries of feminist scholarship. Beasley (2012) argued that these varying theoretical directions should not necessarily be discouraged, as the goal of the scholarship is not to create a monolithic understanding of gender. Differing understandings of gender categories can, however, prove confusing, especially when employed by scholars in inconsistent ways (Beasley, 2012). One of the resulting consequences for masculinity studies scholarship is the continuing lack of consensus about its object of study (Adams & Savran, 2002). For instance, should masculinity
studies “be a field devoted entirely to the analysis of men? Of patriarchy as an institution, that affects men and women alike? Does the study of masculinity need to consider men at all?” (Adams & Savran, 2002, p. 2). Across the literature, these questions are indicative of tensions between modernist and postmodern ways of framing issues related to gender and how to approach them (Holter, 2005). It is therefore important to understand how elements of these frameworks not only “inform the political intentions and goals” of masculinity studies but also serve as the basis for critiques of the sub-field (Beasley, 2012, p. 748).

Modernist perspectives of gender are the most widespread throughout research on masculinity (Beasley, 2005; Holter, 2005). This framework understands gender as socially constructed, historically variable, and interconnected with other identity groupings. Through socialization processes, people with certain bodies are divided into the categories ‘girls/women’ (feminine) and ‘boys/men’ (masculine) and come to understand rigid gendered expectations about their behavior, attitudes, and emotions (Gardiner, 2005; Lorber, 1994; Pleck, 1981). Further, in conflating masculinity with the category ‘men,’ modernist perspectives view gendered power as inherently patriarchal with masculine practices reifying the dominant social position of men and the oppression of women (Holter, 2005). Even as more fluid and expansive understandings of gender have developed, much of the scholarship relies upon stable gender identity categories and power structures, emphasizing men’s dominance and the immediate effects of masculinity (Beasley, 2012; Holter, 2005).

As evident in the literature review, modernist perspectives also ground many of the feminist critiques of masculinity studies, particularly those that invoke rhetoric of feminist boundary keeping. Underlying many of the critiques of masculinity studies is the notion that
feminist scholarship must maintain an explicit focus on the experiences and oppression of women (Beasley, 2013). For instance, Modleski (1991) and other scholars argued that in order to maintain a political commitment to feminism, the scholarship must primarily focus on women as its object of study. It is important to note that such critiques are based in the notion that masculinity studies scholars are cisgender men, which is not an assumption held by all gender scholars. Based on this idea, some scholars question if it is even possible for men to engage in feminist theory “from the standpoint of the proclaimed oppressor” (Heller, 2007, p. 583; Robinson, 2003). Viewing feminism as grounded in experiences of gender oppression, they have argued that “men lack the epistemological foundations of feminist resistance” (Ashe, 2007, p. 83), thus making it difficult for feminist and masculinity studies scholarship to be in dialogue. In keeping with fixed gender identity categories, these scholars view masculinity studies as displacing the role of feminist scholarship and consequently strive to protect its boundaries (Ashe, 2004). Some scholars, on the other hand, utilize the very same framework to challenge feminist separatism and defend the role of masculinity studies. bell hooks (1998), for instance, argued that while “men do oppress women, people are hurt by rigid sex role patterns. These two realities coexist … [and] feminist activists should acknowledge that hurt. … It does not erase or lessen male responsibility for supporting and perpetuating their power” (p. 270). In this way, scholars demonstrate that both men and masculinity studies can and should engage in feminist politics to create change.

Women’s and gender studies scholars also employ a postmodern framework to challenge feminist boundary keeping. Much less utilized in masculinity studies literature, postmodern thinking moves away from a fixed, top-down understanding of the gender order, instead viewing
both power and social identity as contingent, shifting, and unstable (Ashe, 2004, 2007; Beasley, 2013; Berggren, 2014; Holter, 2005). Influenced by trans and queer feminisms, postmodern perspectives work to deconstruct dualistic and essentialist thinking, viewing gender as a process that takes place through discourses, material structures, and the constant reproduction of the “practices and normative ideals of gender identity” (Ashe, 2004, p. 196; Beasley, 2015; Butler, 1990; DiPalma & Ferguson, 2006). Judith Butler (2004), a prominent figure in postmodern thought, argued that “discourse insists on binary of man and woman as an exclusive way to understand gender … [and] forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (p. 43). Consequently, postmodern thinkers, instead of providing direct critiques of men, masculinity, and patriarchal power, assert that such gender categories and concepts fail to address alternative arrangements of identity; thus, by decoupling masculinity from men, the postmodern project aims to demonstrate that the dismantling of gender categories is critical for creating transformative change (Beasley, 2005; Halberstam, 1998; Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1995; Lorber, 2000).

By disrupting fixed conceptualizations of gender, postmodern perspectives challenge feminist separatism or boundary keeping as counterproductive. Rather than debating whether or not men can do feminism, such approaches work to “detail the forms of masculinity that emerge from the project by disentangling maleness, manhood, and masculinity” (Halberstam, 2002, p. 362). While postmodernism is now more prevalent across women’s and gender studies scholarship, some scholars have raised concern that this theoretical direction is inaccessible for the work of gender practitioners outside of academia (Spivak, 1988). Advocating for ‘strategic essentialism’ instead, Spivak argued that the conditional usage of identity categories might be necessary and “effective in dismantling unwanted structures or alleviating suffering” (Beasley,
2005, p. 85). Moving forward, the disjunctions across modernist and postmodern perspectives raise important questions about how both gender scholars and practitioners alike will continue to situate masculinity within the feminist political project. These varied approaches are important to keep in mind when exploring the political commitments and strategies of WGEC practitioners.

**Summary**

As practical interventions related to masculinity continue to increase in educational spaces and beyond, it is critical to explore the meaning of these efforts. Because little empirical research has been conducted on the potential and limits of masculinity-centered practices, the first section of the review closely examined the emergence of masculinity in gender scholarship. This foundation is useful because both women’s and gender studies and masculinity studies research have directly served as a theoretical guide to the development of gender practical interventions (Connell, 2015). The literature revealed that while masculinity studies emerged to support the efforts of women and gender studies scholarship, their collaborative potential is highly disputed due to the concern that masculinity studies may serve to reinforce gender oppression and other structural inequities. The contentious relationship between the fields have raised many questions about the boundaries of feminist scholarship, specifically regarding who should conduct the research, its objects of study, and the impact of either expanding or limiting its scope.

These tensions have also translated into direct practical interventions focused on masculinity. The second section of the literature review focused on the emergence, intentions, and limitations of masculinity-centered practices in higher education. Across diverse efforts to transform hegemonic masculinity, researchers have identified ways in which college men and
masculinities research and practice recenter forms of dominance and marginalize feminist and other critical perspectives. In response, researchers have argued that masculinity-centered practices must be informed by both critical theoretical approaches and practitioners who experience gender marginalization. Given the lack of empirical research on such approaches, the third section examined the practices of WGECs to gain insight because, like women’s and gender studies, these organizations emerged from the women’s liberation movement to advance feminist aims. Additionally, as their practices expanded over time, many centers have incorporated masculinity-centered practices to support gender equity. Similar to women and gender studies scholars, WGEC practitioners navigate dynamics of gender power and oppression when determining the boundaries of their feminist practice. Only one study to date (Marine et al., 2017) has empirically investigated gender-expansive practices within WGECs; this review of the literature demonstrates the need to explicitly examine the processes, challenges, and politics in centering masculinity in practical interventions.

By looking to the lived experiences of WGEC practitioners within embedded sites of feminist practice, we can better understand the ways in which masculinity-centered practices appear and manifest within these spaces. Because the scholarship demonstrates various factors shaping centers’ shifting agendas, approaches, and targeted populations, this study utilized a conceptual framework for politicizing masculinities to examine how WGEC practitioners experience and understand masculinity-centered practices to actualize their mission for gender equity. The existing literature as well as the identified gaps inform the research questions and design for the study, which are outlined in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine how WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices. The following questions guided my exploration of this topic: how do WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices, and what is it like for WGEC practitioners to engage in masculinity-centered practices? In this chapter, I will first discuss the qualitative, phenomenological research design. I then outline the research procedures for data collection and analysis.

Phenomenological Research Design

To examine the experiences of WGEC practitioners engaging masculinity-centered practices, a qualitative, phenomenological design was the most applicable methodological approach. Qualitative methods are useful when seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of how people interpret their experiences and construct their worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). The research questions in this study directly aligned with a qualitative approach, as they intended to understand the experiences and perspectives of individual practitioners. Further, a phenomenological research design was appropriate due to its focus on better understanding a particular phenomenon through exploring how others made meaning of their everyday experiences with that phenomenon (Gill, 2014; van Manen, 2014, 2016). It is important to note that phenomenological researchers are not studying individuals as the “unit of analysis;” instead, the object of study is the phenomenon itself and how it manifests in the world (Vagle, 2018).
van Manen (2014) explains,

Phenomenology is primarily a philosophic *method for questioning*, not a method for answering or discovering or drawing determinate conclusions. But in this questioning there exist the possibilities and potentialities for experiencing openings, understandings, insights – … giving us glances of the meaning of phenomena. (p. 29)

By employing a phenomenological research design, this study engaged the lived experiences of WGEC practitioners in order to gain insight on the ways in which the phenomenon of masculinity-centered practices takes shape. In this section, I will present an overview of the philosophical foundations that underpin interpretive phenomenology as a research methodology. This overview will provide the necessary context to understand the methods and approach outlined later in this chapter.

**Philosophical Foundations**

Phenomenology as a methodological approach is rooted in a 20th century school of philosophy first developed by Edmund Husserl to investigate consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; van Manen, 2016). Responding to the limitations of scientific positivism and the prevailing idea that there is one objective reality, Husserl (1983) expressed that objects in the world can only be known as they are understood within human consciousness (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Giorgi, 2017; Mulcahy, 2019; Wertz et al., 2011). Husserl thus called for a transcendental phenomenology (also commonly referred to as descriptive phenomenology) that aimed to capture the essence of phenomena in the world of human experience, or the ‘lifeworld’ (Vagle, 2018). Essence, for Husserl, “is what makes a phenomenon what it is, and without it, it would not be that phenomenon” (Beck, 2020, p. 11). In order to reveal the essence or essential meaning structures of a phenomenon, Husserl (1983) believed that we must go “back to the things themselves,” returning to the world as first, pre-reflectively experienced (p. 35). In other
words, “anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 42). Based on this understanding, by peeling away layers of symbolic meaning, subjectivity, and theoretical interpretation, the essence of a phenomenon can be discovered within human experience in its essential form (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014).

Initially one of Husserl’s students, Martin Heidegger is known for departing from transcendental phenomenological perspectives to advocate for a new approach – hermeneutic, or interpretive, phenomenology. Challenging Husserl’s epistemological focus on knowing core concepts of pre-reflective experience, Heidegger called for an ontological exploration of being in the world, recognizing that human consciousness and the world are interconnected (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Reiners, 2012; Vagle, 2018). Interpretive phenomenology, then, defines phenomena as everyday occurrences in the lifeworld that we come to know through human interpretation and understanding (Mulcahy, 2019). “The assumption is that meanings [of phenomena] do not just appear, emerge, or rise” as invariant structures, but that meaning comes into being through human experiences which are influenced by social, cultural, and political contexts; language; interactions; and one’s own understandings (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 100; Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Flood, 2010). Therefore, in contrast with Husserlian perspectives, Heidegger believed “a phenomenon was not so much a ‘thing itself’ … but was ‘brought into being’ in the day-to-day contextualized living in and through the world” (Vagle, 2018, p. 20). Heidegger’s distinct turn towards interpretation spurred the development of an interpretive phenomenological research methodology in the social sciences. The next section will describe
key philosophical concepts in phenomenology that informed the interpretive approach to this study.

**Interpretive Phenomenology as Methodology**

By applying the philosophy of phenomenology, qualitative researchers can reveal the “ambiguity, poignancy, complexity, and richness of the lived experience” to understand phenomena in new and meaningful ways (Finlay, 2008, p. 480; Reiners, 2012). Interpretive phenomenology, specifically, serves as a useful guide for social science researchers aiming to understand how meaning comes into being through the inseparable interactions between individuals and their embedded contexts. To engage an interpretive research design, I drew upon the core phenomenological tenets of lifeworld, intentionality, essence, and bracketing.

**Lifeworld and Intentionality**

Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld – the world as immediately experienced in everyday living (van Manen, 2016). In the lifeworld, meanings of phenomena come into being through the intentional relations between humans and their surroundings (Merleau-Pointy, 1964; Vagle, 2018). The concept of intentionality in phenomenology is different from the common use of the term ‘intention’ to describe a person’s purpose or objective; in a phenomenological view, intentionality refers to the interconnectedness between individuals and the world (Bhattacharya, 2017; Vagle, 2018). From an interpretive perspective, van Manen (2016) elaborated on the mutuality of this relationship, stating, “On the one hand [the lifeworld] is already there; on the other hand we take part in shaping and creating it. In other words, the world is given to us and actively constituted by us” (p. xi). Together, lifeworld and intentionality are important concepts
for framing interpretive phenomenological research, particularly as they relate to the notion of essence.

*From Essence to Manifestations*

Revisiting Husserl’s conceptualization of essence is necessary for understanding the new possibilities that emerged when Heidegger developed an interpretive phenomenology. Based on Husserl’s philosophical perspective, transcendental phenomenological research would involve searching for the essence of “a phenomenon and the intentional relations that characterize that phenomenon” (Vagle, 2018, p. 30). In other words, this approach to research assumes that intentionality has essential qualities as established in human consciousness. Heidegger, however, challenged the notion that there could be an essence of a phenomenon. Instead, he believed that phenomena could be understood by looking to human experiences in the lifeworld, which are nuanced, multi-layered, contextualized, and ever-changing (Finlay, 2011; van Manen, 2014).

For Heidegger the root *phenomenon* in phenomenology meant that which becomes manifest for us. In this conception, phenomenology becomes more about manifestations than about essences. … [S]uch manifestations come into being through intentional relations, which are always already being interpreted. Intentional relations, then, are in a constant state of interpretation – and logically there would not necessarily be an “essence” of a phenomenon, but plausible interpretations of manifestations [instead]. (Vagle, 2018, pp. 31-32)

Rather than working to develop a stable description of a phenomenon (essence), Heidegger aimed to construct an interpretive description with the awareness “that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (van Manen, 2001, p. 18). This interpretive act is always tentative, partial, and open for further interpretation, as language cannot fully capture lived experience and individuals subjectively experience phenomena in varying ways (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014). van Manen (2016) further explained that interpretive
phenomenology “does not offer the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 8). This study, therefore, sought to reveal the manifestations of masculinity-centered practices, rather than the fixed essence, to better understand the meaning of the phenomena through the lens of possibility, partiality, and ongoing interpretation.

Another way to understand the relationship between intentionality and manifestations is through Heidegger’s notion of the hermeneutic spiral. Heidegger believed individuals made sense of phenomena through an ever-circulating spiral of interpretation (Peoples, 2020). Interpretation is a constant process of revision; as we interpret a phenomenon, we have a pre-understanding, and as we receive new information, we re-examine and revise that understanding (Peoples, 2020). Additionally, our understanding of phenomenon is situated within various social, historical, and cultural contexts which influence the ways in which we make meaning (Bhattacharya, 2017). Vagle (2018) used the below images (see Figure 2) to illustrate this dynamic process. The first figure represents the Husserlian approach in which there is an essential core, or essence, of a phenomenon once layers are peeled away. The second figure, the hermeneutic spiral, provides a helpful visualization of the interpretive process. As depicted by its open space in the center and multiple and shifting contexts, we can see that interpreted meanings are always in motion, that these meanings circulate. In this way, we are entering into a dialogue with these meanings, rather than describing the essence of these meanings. … [T]here are no layers to peel, just an ever-circulating motion that can come back to, remake, do, and undo itself. … [T]here is no core, just multiple meanings always already in motion. (Vagle, 2018, p. 34)

The hermeneutic spiral will be revisited in the data analysis section later in this chapter.
Another distinguishing characteristic of interpretive phenomenological research centers on the notion of bracketing. Based on Husserl’s phenomenology, researchers must bracket, or set aside, the lifeworld in order to describe the essence of a phenomenon as experienced in human consciousness (Vagle, 2018). By actively suspending their preconceptions, biases, and theoretical understandings, researchers can more carefully analyze participants’ experiences (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Rejecting this notion, Heidegger (1988) believed that we are always ‘in the world’ and therefore cannot separate phenomena from our own interpretation (Crane, 2004; Smith, 2016). Because “phenomena are lived out interpretively in the world, … the world should not be bracketed but fully engaged in the phenomenological inquiry” (Vagle, 2018, p. 8).
Thus, a key element of interpretive phenomenology is that the researcher is considered inseparable from their personal preconceptions and beliefs, which must be made explicit in the research process (Tuohy et al., 2013; van Manen, 2016). Dahlberg (2006) expanded upon this notion by developing the method of bridling. For Karin Dahlberg, bridling is the ongoing practice of naming and questioning one’s judgments. Like tightening and loosening the reins when riding a horse, the phenomenologist tries to do the same with their judgments. Further, the idea of ‘suspending’ one’s judgments is not the goal of bridling: rather the focus remains on becoming much more familiar with one’s judgments so they do not compromise one’s openness to the phenomenon. (Vagle, 2018, p. 14)

For this study, I adopted bridling as a tool for self-reflection to open my understanding of the phenomena to more possibilities; this process is further detailed later in this chapter. The core phenomenological concepts described in this section (lifeworld, intentionality, manifestations, and bridling) directly guided my interpretive phenomenological approach to this study. The remainder of this chapter will outline the research procedures for gathering and analyzing data, bridling, and addressing reliability.

**Data Collection**

Applying the philosophy of interpretive phenomenology to research is challenging since there is no “procedural method that one can follow, step-by-step, for conducting research into specific lifeworld phenomena;” the phenomenological researcher, however, can work to closely align with Heideggerian perspectives in ways that are open and dynamic throughout the research process (van Manen, 2014, p. 230). In line with this thinking, my research design was informed by Heidegger’s aim to reflect the “ever-shifting nature of the lifeworld and the interpretive flow of how humans move in the lifeworld” (Vagle, 2018, p. 62). To do so, I drew from van Manen’s
(2016) method for conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research, which is described by
the following six, iterative phases:

- Turn to the phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world
- Investigate experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it
- Reflect on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon
- Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting
- Maintain a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon
- Balance the research context by considering parts and whole

I will touch upon these phases as I explain the research procedures for this study. In this first
section, I will describe my procedures for selecting research participants and process for
gathering phenomenological material through conducting individual interviews.

**Participant Selection**

In phenomenological research, it is important to purposely select participants who can provide experientially rich descriptions of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). For the aims of this study, I define the phenomenon of masculinity-centered practices as any embedded, recurring departmental initiatives that examine topics related to masculinity through workshops, speaker series, dialogue spaces, peer education, or other programs. With the intention to explore how WGEC practitioners make meaning of this phenomenon, I utilized the following inclusion criteria: a participant needed to be a current or former professional staff members of a stand-alone Women’s and Gender Equity Center in higher education; additionally, while working within a WGEC, the participant must have directly and closely supported the development, coordination, and/or facilitation of masculinity-centered practices.
To determine the sample size, I looked to van Manen’s (2014) guidance. Since interpretive phenomenological researchers cannot possibly uncover an essential meaning of a phenomenon, van Manen intentionally does not prescribe an ideal sample size (Beck, 2020). Further, van Manen (2014) dissuades phenomenological researchers from using data saturation as a standard for participant selection. He argued,

Data saturation presumes that the researcher is looking for what is characteristic or the same about a social group of people … The researcher keeps collecting data until the analysis no longer reveals anything new or different about the group. But phenomenology looks not for sameness or repetitive patterns. … [A] phenomenologist may actually look for that instant when an insight arises that is totally unique to a certain example of a lived experience description. … [T]he general aim should be to gather enough experientially rich accounts that make possible the figuration of powerful experiential examples or anecdotes that help to make contact with life as it is lived. (p. 52)

Based on these perspectives, I developed the criteria for this study to explicitly center practitioners who could provide in-depth insights on the phenomenon of masculinity-centered practices through their own lived experiences.

To identify potential participants, I attended the Women’s Centers Pre-Conference at the National Women’s Studies Association in November 2019. While there, I built relationships with current WGEC practitioners and scheduled individual, post-conference meetings to gather information about masculinity-centered practices at their respective centers. I also learned that the NWSA Women’s Center Committee maintains a list of self-reported WGECs. I carefully reviewed this list of 263 centers and their respective institutional websites, paying close attention to their stated initiatives and programs. Through this process, I identified 24 centers that explicitly hosted information about recurring, formalized masculinity-centered practices on their institutional websites. This initial exploration provided me with more detailed information about
the types of masculinity-related programming within WGECs, which informed my process for developing a participant screening form (see Appendix B).

I began the recruitment process by posting a recruitment message (see Appendix A) to the NWSA Women’s Centers listserv and Facebook group as well as to the NASPA Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community and ACPA Coalition on Men and Masculinities Facebook groups. I also emailed the recruitment message to WGEC practitioners in my personal network as well as at each of the 24 centers referenced above. In the recruitment message, I included a link to an electronic screening form (see Appendix B) and asked recipients to send the link to any of their colleagues who may be interested in participating. The screening form communicated detailed information about the study to interested practitioners while simultaneously serving as a helpful tool for me to discern whether or not practitioners met the study criteria.

The final sample consisted of 12 WGEC practitioners whose examples and anecdotes represented diverse institutional contexts, organizational structures, and masculinity-centered practices. Additionally, I only included practitioners who have directly engaged in masculinity work for at least one full year, preferably longer, in the hopes that they could meaningfully relate to the phenomenon and share rich and detailed stories (Miller et al., 2018).
Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years as a WGEC Practitioner</th>
<th>Years Engaging Masculinity-Centered Practices</th>
<th>Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>6-8 years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Genderqueer, white, queer, temporarily able-bodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>3-5 years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cis woman, white, asexual and aromantic/queer, currently able-bodied, feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1-2 years, current</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Cis woman, Black, queer, able-bodied, neurotypical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lani</td>
<td>1-2 years, current</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Female, Asian, bisexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Woman, white, straight, able-bodied, immigrant, mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Cisgender woman, white, queer AF, Disabled, survivor of childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault as an adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>3-5 years, former</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cis woman, Black, bisexual, able-bodied, Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>3-5 years, current</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Genderqueer androgynous woman, white, queer lesbian, educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moni</td>
<td>3-5 years, former</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Woman, Black, pansexual/queer, able-bodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Genderfluid/non-binary, white, under the bi/pan/fluid umbrella, temporarily able-bodied with invisible disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>3-5 years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cisgender woman, white, bisexual/queer polyamorous, bipolar II diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tegan</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cisgender woman, white, queer, able-bodied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual Interviews**

Because phenomenology aims to explore the unique and particular meaning of everyday phenomenon for those experiencing it (Smith & Bekker, 2011), phenomenological researchers commonly gather narrative material through individual interviews (Merriam, 2009). Individual interviews provide a useful approach for understanding how people shape and interpret the world.
around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). As the previous section outlined, I first selected participants who could provide access to important manifestations of the phenomenon through their lived experiences. As interested participants completed the screening form, I individually reached out to those who met the study criteria on a rolling basis and asked them to read and sign the participant consent form (see Appendix C). Eligible participants were invited to engage in two individual interviews and also had the opportunity to collaborate during the preliminary data analysis phase.

Based on Heidegger’s aim to explore “taken for granted background meanings” through interpretive phenomenology, this study specifically utilized individual, semi-structured interviews as a way to engage and dwell in “the immediacy of the participants’ worlds” (Gill, 2014, p. 125). Unlike the Husserlian approach, which urges researchers to suspend or bracket their biases and preconceptions from the data collection and analysis process, the Heideggarian interpretive approach to phenomenology acknowledges the researcher’s own lifeworld. As a result, the semi-structured interview structure allows for a data collection “process in which the researcher and participants work together to explore and develop their understanding of the phenomenon being studied” (Alirezai & Roudsari, 2020; Lauterbach, 2018, p. 2883; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). van Manen (2016) encourages a conversational, semi-structured approach to interviewing as opposed to unstructured or open-ended interviewing to help participants revisit their lived experiences and make meaning of the phenomenon in ways that are guided by their own reflections and memories (Crotty, 1998; Lauterbach, 2018).
**Initial Interview**

I first conducted 90-minute, semi-structured interviews with current and former WGEC practitioners. Based on each participant’s preference, interviews were offered via phone or video conference. While the interview protocol (see Appendix E) was prepared in advance of the interviews, it was not intended to restrict or rigidly structure the conversation; the semi-structured interview design prompted open-ended conversations with each participant, primarily guided by their experiences to allow for new ideas on the topic to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The interview protocol began with three descriptive-oriented questions to gather context of the participant’s background; these questions related to their path to working at the WGEC, the mission of the center, as well as the types of masculinity-centered practices they coordinated. The remainder of the interview was guided by open-ended questions that focused on the participant’s experiences, stories, anecdotes, and how specific moments or interactions have shaped the way they make meaning of masculinity-centered practices.

Because phenomenological research is not meant to be comparative, “all interviews are treated as exciting opportunities to potentially learn something important about the phenomenon. … [Thus, it] is not necessary nor even desirable to ask the same questions in the same way” (Vagle, 2014, p. 314). The interview questions listed in the protocol served as starting off points for the conversations, and follow-up questions prompted participants to share about their personal experiences, feelings, and processes for sense-making. van Manen (2014) reminds phenomenological researchers to avoid asking questions related to personal opinions and explanations; instead, questions should prompt participants to stay close to their experiences as lived. Phenomenological questions ask, “what is given in immediate experience and how it is
given or appears to us – it asks what a possible human experience is like” (p. 197). Through gathering specific stories, events, and anecdotes in an open and exploratory way, the semi-structured interview protocol for this study was designed to learn about the phenomenon from the unique standpoint of each individual participant (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014).

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. To maintain confidentiality, I separated personally identifiable information from interview transcripts and analyses. Pseudonyms are used, and institutions and centers are described in broad enough terms to avoid identification. All interview transcripts, memos, and notes related to analysis were stored in password-secured folders in a password-protected, web-based file hosting service. Following the first interview with a participant, I sent them the interview transcript so that they had an opportunity to clarify meaning and provide further details in writing about the anecdotes they shared. They could also write about additional events or interactions related to the phenomenon, if they chose to do so. I provided participants with the following prompt:

While reviewing the transcript, I encourage you to use track changes to provide additional reflections or clarify meaning regarding your lived experiences working with masculinity-related programming. Please keep in mind that I am interested in learning about how you make meaning of this work and what it has been like for you to directly support/coordinate/facilitate these programs. Are there examples or anecdotes you shared in our interview where you can provide additional details about what you experienced? Are there moments in our interview where you did not provide an example or story, and now you can? Perhaps, since our interview, a new experience or moment has come to mind that you can now share.

Once I received the revised transcript from each participant, I prepared for the follow-up interview.
Follow-up Interview

In interpretive phenomenology, follow-up interviews allow for collaborative conversations between the researcher and participants (van Manen, 2016). Following the initial gathering of experiences and the participant’s written reflections on the interview transcript, I scheduled a 45-minute follow-up interview. Prior to the follow-up interview, I conducted a line-by-line reading of the transcript and made margin notes of emergent insights, themes, and questions; this process is further outlined in the next section of this chapter. During the follow-up interview, I asked each participant to further reflect on the transcript and our previous conversation “in order to determine the deeper meanings or themes of these experiences … [and] aim for as much interpretive insight as possible” (van Manen, 2016, p. 98).

Depending on what participants had already shared and my preliminary analysis of the transcript, I asked for clarification, additional details, or even new reflections they may not have already expressed in order to better understand how they make meaning of the phenomenon (Miller et al., 2018; Peoples, 2020). The follow-up interview allowed us to collaboratively “interpret the significance of the preliminary themes … [T]he interview turns indeed into an interpretive conversation wherein both partners self-reflectively orient themselves to the interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view” (van Manen, 2016, p. 98). During this process, it was important for me to remain open to revising any understandings I gleaned from the initial interview process (Peoples, 2020). Following the second interview, I transcribed the audio-recorded conversations verbatim to prepare for in-depth data analysis.
Data Analysis

In interpretive phenomenological research, Heidegger’s notion of the hermeneutic spiral (see Figure 2) directly informs data analysis. Like Heidegger’s understanding of interpretation, data analysis, rather than following a linear path, is a spiral process (Peoples, 2020). This dynamic process of analysis is a continual movement between the parts and whole of participants’ narrative descriptions in order to reconstruct new analytic wholes that illuminate particular meanings about the phenomenon (Beck, 2020; Finlay, 2011; Heidegger, 1971; van Manen, 1997). In addition to analyzing the parts and whole of the transcripts themselves, hermeneutic scholars value situating the text and the author in their social, historical, and cultural contexts as our lived experiences are not occurring in a vacuum nor are our ways of understanding and making meaning of them, … In this way the hermeneutic [spiral] is conceptualized as the analysis moves from the individual to a contextualized world back to the individual again with a stronger and amplified understanding. (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 69)

The researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon, then, is continually renewed as different contexts and data are considered (Peoples, 2020). The whole-part-whole analysis method is a key component of phenomenological research, and, to engage in this process of analysis, I followed a six-stage method as described by Vagle (2018).

It is first important to name that, although my interview transcripts and memos were organized in a web-based file management system (Dropbox), I predominantly analyzed the data by hand. While data analysis software can be a helpful tool in qualitative research, its role in phenomenological research has been questioned by some scholars. It has been argued that software “separates the researcher from the data (Goble et al., 2012), hinders abductive reasoning (van Manen, 2014), and instrumentalizes a process that should be intuitive” (Peoples, 2020, p. 66). Given the understanding that “coding, abstracting, and generalization” cannot produce
phenomenological insights (van Manen, 2014, p. 319), software systems such as Dedoose and NVivo are often viewed as unnecessary. Overall, these researchers contended that data analysis software can produce mechanistic representations, thus impeding the researcher’s process for deeply dwelling on and becoming familiar with the whole text (Vagle, 2018). My method for whole-part-whole data analysis took place in six steps; the first five steps focused only on the narrative descriptions of one participant at a time, and the sixth and final step put the participants in dialogue with one another (pp. 110-112). In other words, I did not engage in cross comparison of data until the very last step of analysis.

1. I first conducted a holistic reading of the revised transcript from the first interview to get a feel for the whole text. During this reading, I did not take any notes so that I could focus on closely reading and getting acquainted with the material.

2. I then read the transcript line-by-line and took careful notes by hand to identify excerpts that appeared to contain potential meanings. I marked seemingly relevant excerpts, made note of questions I had, and wrote short phrases to capture initial meanings. I also wrote research memos in a separate document to make sense of my interpretations.

   This is an example of bridling, because it allows one to harness what is being read and thought. This does not mean that we can totally set aside our presuppositions, but it does mean that we can try to own them … and interrogate how they might influence the analysis. (Vagle, 2018, p. 110)

3. Following the first line-by-line reading, I conducted another holistic read-through of the text and reviewed my margin notes in order to develop questions for my follow-up interview with the participant. At this stage of analysis, I crafted follow-up questions that sought clarification of the participant’s lived experiences in order to better understand and interpret the phenomenon.
4. After the follow-up interview, I conducted a second line-by-line reading of the combined transcripts (inclusive of the initial and follow-up interview). I continued to make margin notes and markings by hand to articulate the meanings that emerged from the text. I then copied and pasted meaningful parts of the participant’s transcript into a new, electronic document. Each individual participant had their own separate document of pulled excerpts that potentially contributed to how the phenomenon took shape.

5. I then did a line-by-line reading of the participant’s list of excerpts, or parts, in the new document. During this process, I articulated my analytic thoughts about each part in short paragraph form in the margins of the electronic document, rather than by hand. For each individual participant, I moved through steps 1-5 and subsequently created a second document of summary themes for each participant in the study (see Appendix F). I shared this document with each respective participant, seeking their feedback.

6. All subsequent readings involved reading across the participants’ data in search of patterns of meaning (or manifestations) and nuances of the phenomenon embedded in lived experience. These patterns across the data were given preliminary titles, though, as I continued reading across the data, my analysis continued to shift as I developed deeper meaning of the phenomenon.

By engaging the iterative process of whole-part-whole analysis, I attempted to capture each participant’s entire story, “deconstruct the story into relevant bursting-forth pieces (the parts), and then reconstruct the story in a new way to illuminate the phenomenon across individual accounts (i.e., the whole again …)” (Mulcahy, 2019, p. 64; van Manen, 1997). Rather than looking to cultivate a determinate set of themes to describe the phenomenon, which is an
impossible task when working with lived experience, the purpose of the data analysis process was to offer possible interpretations of what the phenomenon can mean (van Manen, 2014, 2016). Vagle (2018) described how

sometimes a single statement, from one participant, at one moment in time is so powerful that it needs to be amplified. Another time, there might be convergence across multiple data moments and this contextual variation … provides deep and rich insights into a particular shape the phenomenon has taken. In both cases, (the single moment or the multiple moments), what we craft is equally important to the final representation. (p. 108)

Thus, in this study, manifestations of masculinity-centered practices will be shown through moments and experiences as described by WGEC practitioners, individually and collectively. These emergent patterns of meaning serve as “abstractions of the interpretive descriptions” that reveal a deepened and more reflective understanding of the phenomenon “for the moment” (Laverty, 2003, p. 9; van Manen, 2016).

**Limitations and Trustworthiness**

One limitation of phenomenological research is its focus on whole-part-whole analysis. Battacharya (2017) explained that, “because there is no universally agreed upon way to claim wholeness … any interpretation is always situated with the researcher’s understanding of the big and small picture” (p. 71). In fact, researcher subjectivity is the core critique of phenomenological research. Because phenomenology does not aim to generalize or discover a set of fixed findings (Vagle, 2018), it proves difficult for phenomenological researchers to establish reliability and validity as defined by traditional qualitative research standards (Patton, 2002). In direct response to this concern, van Manen (2014) argued for a different set of criteria for evaluating the quality of phenomenological studies, which includes the demonstration of heuristic questioning, descriptive richness, interpretive depth, and distinctive rigor (does the text
remain guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the phenomenon?) (p. 355). Vagle (2018) similarly “found entry into discussions of validity to be marked primarily by a consideration of the researcher’s sustained engagement with the phenomenon and the participants who have experienced the phenomenon … throughout all phases of the study” (p. 72). To remain open and sensitive to the phenomenon at hand (Vagle, 2018) and establish trustworthiness, I engaged in member checking, peer debriefing, and bridling.

As described in previous sections, I engaged in member checking at several points throughout data collection and analysis. Following the first interview, I asked participants to review and mark their transcript to clarify meaning and provide further examples that illuminate the phenomenon. Following the second interview, I presented a summary of analysis document (see Appendix F) to each participant for corroboration and verification that their experiences aligned with the interpreted meanings (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Along with collaborating with the individual participants, I worked with a peer debriefer during data collection and analysis. We met during different stages of the study to discuss the first round of interviews, the development of follow-up interview questions, and preliminary analyses. Once the summary analysis documents were reviewed by participants, I sent these documents to the peer debriefer for review. We then met one final time to discuss preliminary themes across the data that potentially pointed to manifestations of the phenomenon. This process helped uncover my biases and assumptions and provided a collaborative space to test whether or not my analyses seemed plausible based on the participants’ experiential descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, based on Heiddeger’s (1988) notion that researchers can never fully detach from their “environing world,” (p. 164) or separate themselves from the meanings that emerge from
the text (Reiners, 2012), I engaged in the reflexive process of bridling. Dahlberg et al.’s (2008) concept of bridling involves making explicit and restraining our pre-understandings of the phenomenon. Since we cannot fully set aside our assumptions, beliefs, and values, experiences, bridling helps us “limit their influence on the present … so that the researcher might see the phenomenon in a different way” (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018, pp. 73-74). By writing a reflexivity statement at the onset of the study and consistently writing research memos through data collection and analysis, I worked to “remain focused on the phenomenon while both reining in and reflectively interrogating [my] own understandings” (Finlay, 2008, p. 29). This process also allowed me to track how my interpretations of the phenomenon changed and shifted as I continued the data analysis process (Peoples, 2020).

**Reflexivity Statement**

In any qualitative study, the primary research instrument is the researcher. Consequently, “all observations and analyses are filtered through [my] worldview, values, and perspectives” (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). To acknowledge and monitor the ways in which my subjectivity influenced my interpretations of the data, I practiced bridling by consistently recording my reflections in memos throughout the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Probst & Berenson, 2014). It was also important that I explored my assumptions and beliefs as they related to the study.

My approach to this research is directly shaped by my professional experiences in higher education coordinating a masculinity dialogue program for students who identified as men. As a multiracial, heterosexual, cisgender woman, my positionality informed my initial approach to developing the program. My experiences at the intersection of race and gender, for instance,
shaped my understanding of gender as multidimensional and constructed and sanctioned by intersecting systems. Consequently, I intentionally designed the curriculum to facilitate dialogue about the influence of race, sexuality, class, spirituality, ability, and other identities to how we understand and interact with masculinity. My experiences as a heterosexual, cisgender woman of color, however, situated me in both a privileged and marginalized position in doing this work. By relying on my experiences as a woman of color within a white, patriarchal structure, without simultaneously attending to my dominance as heterosexual and cisgender, my approach to the work often centered dominant and, at times, deficit-minded narratives related to hegemonic masculinity. Not only was this approach limiting, but it also problematically served to reify heteronormativity and binary understandings of gender, as discussed in Chapter One. By recognizing and engaging my learning edges, I have come to understand that masculinity-centered practices can simultaneously encompass both liberatory and harmful possibilities, and this study intended to further explore these complexities to provide insight on more equitable approaches.

In addition to challenging me to think more critically about gender practices, my experiences coordinating masculinity-centered practices also highlighted the role of institutional and social factors in shaping the work and even creating additional tensions. For instance, the same year I began coordinating a masculinity dialogue program at a large, public institution, the school also reported harrowing campus climate survey results that confirmed the pervasiveness of sexual violence on campus. In preparation for a press conference, upper-level administrators worked to quickly pull together a list of campus initiatives aimed at preventing and addressing sexual violence. The masculinity dialogue program was intentionally placed on the public list of
programs, despite the fact that it was not explicitly a violence prevention initiative, in order to bolster the various steps the institution was taking to create change. Now placed in public view, the masculinity dialogue program became the focus of conservative news outlets based on the belief that the program, and others like it, was attacking and indoctrinating college men; this increased visibility led to conservative state legislators threatening to cut state appropriations if the university did not dismantle the program. At this point, my experience with upper-level administrators drastically shifted. Instead of celebrating the program’s aims to support gender equity to demonstrate the institution’s plan to address sexual violence, they were now urgently connecting me with legal counsel to address a new concern that the program problematically excluded women, thus violating Title IX. Due to the sociopolitical climate and threats from lawmakers to cut already dwindling state appropriations, the meaning of the masculinity program shifted from once supporting gender equity on campus to now hindering it. Through this experience, I saw firsthand how social and institutional contexts could influence how masculinity-centered practices are understood and navigated on campus. As a result, I am interested in better understanding the various factors and experiences that shape how practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices on their respective campuses.

Finally, my approach to this study is informed by the formal and informal messages I received that questioned my role in this work as a cisgender woman. When I worked to develop a masculinity dialogue program at a private institution, I was told by campus stakeholders that, since I do not personally understand men’s lived experiences, they were not comfortable moving forward with the program without men on campus directly expressing the need and desire for one. Once my colleague and I alleviated their concerns by presenting research on masculinity-
centered practices in higher education, we were able to pilot the program. During my subsequent meeting with a dean to secure financial resources, he shared that, once the program was implemented, he wanted me to “roll off” from coordinating the program because it would be more appropriate for a man to take the lead. Even though the dialogue facilitators identified as men, the dean felt that the “face” of the program also needed to be a man. Both instances were based on assumptions that masculinity-centered practices could only be credible and justified when initiated and coordinated by cisgender men. My colleagues and I had a different approach to this work, however. We were invested in the program’s liberatory possibilities for people of all genders and believed it was important to include the voices of those who experience gender marginalization when developing any programming related to masculinity. Because of these experiences, I chose to examine the experiences of WGEC practitioners for this study to acknowledge examples of this work that are, in fact, led by those experiencing gender marginalization. Further, my choice was grounded in an assumption that WGECs, as feminist-oriented organizations, may offer insight on more equitable approaches to masculinity-centered practices.

Along with practicing reflexivity, I, as a researcher, wanted to center models of connection and nurturing to work towards seeking knowledge with people instead of about them (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 2004). Errante used the term ‘flow’ to describe such “instances of potent and powerful connection between interview and respondent” that stem from the openness to feel and the bonds created during the interview process (as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 217). While active and careful listening to the whole person is critical to achieving flow, Errante also emphasized that researchers should show interest, appreciation, and respect during
the conversation. Because I have personally engaged in the work of developing masculinity-centered practices and negotiated the resulting tensions as a practitioner who experiences gender marginalization, I hoped that my positionality would serve to demonstrate my shared curiosity, vulnerability, and desire to learn as a member from within the community, rather than as a researcher from the outside.

**Summary**

To address this study’s research question of how WGEC practitioners experience and make meaning of masculinity-centered practices, I employed an interpretive phenomenological research design. I gathered phenomenological material through individual interviews with 12 current and former WGEC practitioners representing varying practices and contexts. Utilizing a six-step method (Vagle, 2018), I then analyzed the material to gain insights on how masculinity-centered practices take shape. These insights are detailed in the findings presented in the next two chapters.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS ON ALIGNING MASCULINITY-CENTERED PRACTICES
WITH WOMEN’S AND GENDER EQUITY CENTERS

The purpose of this study was to understand the ways in which Women’s and Gender Equity Center (WGEC) practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices. As masculinity-centered practices continue to emerge in higher education, this study specifically explored how WGEC practitioners experience and negotiate the examination of masculinity in the context of their work on campus to advance gender equity. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, 12 former and current WGEC practitioners described their lived experiences developing, facilitating, and/or engaging with masculinity-centered practices. As previously explored in Chapter Three, this study sought to uncover manifestations, or emergent patterns of meaning, to gain a deeper and more reflective understanding of how the phenomenon takes shape for practitioners (Vagle, 2018). Whole-part-whole analysis of the interview data revealed that WGEC practitioners understood masculinity-centered practices in complex, multi-layered, contextualized, and shifting ways. Two broad patterns of meaning emerged from their individual and collective lived experiences: (1) aligning masculinity-centered practices with the priorities and values of WGECs, and (2) negotiating tensions and complexities of masculinity-centered practices as a component of gender equity work. Throughout Chapters Four and Five, these patterns of meaning will be described and supported by practitioners’ direct reflections, perspectives, and experiences with the phenomenon.
This chapter will detail how WGEC practitioners in this study engaged in masculinity-centered practices as part of their respective center’s efforts to foster social change. In describing their experiences developing, coordinating, and/or guiding formalized programs to examine masculinity, practitioners reflected diverse levels of engagement and approaches to the work. While most practitioners developed and led masculinity-centered practices from within their units, a few directly contributed to collaborative, cross-unit initiatives housed outside of their centers. Additionally, practitioners expressed varying levels of commitment to masculinity-centered practices. Many positioned initiatives to examine masculinity as a core part of WGEC work while others viewed them as tangential to their organizational mission. Despite these differences, all practitioners in the study acknowledged valuable contributions of masculinity-centered practices. They collectively hoped this work could allow for expansive and intersectional examinations of masculinity; disrupt the ways in which hegemonic masculinity causes harm; create space for healing, accountability, and agency; and provide opportunities for men, predominantly cisgender men, to examine and better understand masculinity in order to create change.

Approaching this work through the lens of their embedded sociopolitical, organizational and personal contexts, each WGEC practitioner applied the aforementioned understandings in diverse and even divergent ways. This chapter will first explore participants’ approaches to shifting gender practices. This context will provide a foundation for better understanding how practitioners made meaning of the emancipatory potential of masculinity-centered practices based on the priorities and values of their centers, which will be explored in the remainder of this chapter. Through recounting their experiences, practitioners described the role of masculinity-
centered practices in four core ways: as a necessary component of gender equity work, as a complement to violence prevention efforts, as an approach for thinking about equity beyond a gender-only lens, and as a challenge to normative thinking about gender. It is important to note that practitioners did not describe these four approaches in rigid terms; rather, practitioners in the study applied overlapping approaches in their engagement with masculinity-centered practices.

**Framing Women’s and Gender Equity Center Practice**

The literature review in Chapter Two provided an overview of shifting gender practices within WGECs, and these shifts were also reflected in the experiences of practitioners in the study. Many practitioners described a process of examining or rethinking the values, identity, and/or mission of their centers to expand the scope or approach of their work. While acknowledging the historical role that women’s centers have played to serve women on college campuses, practitioners believed the work of these spaces needed to critically shift to better acknowledge gender as expansive and intersectional.

For many participants, this shift in gender practices initiated a pattern of considering name changes for centers, typically through the addition of ‘gender’ or ‘gender equity’ to the name. For instance, Alex, a current WGEC practitioner who has worked in their center for six-eight years, explained the importance of first aligning the values and work of the center in practice before engaging a name change process. In the midst of students protesting racist building names on campus, Alex was able to position the center as part of the changes taking place. To better reflect the intersectional and relational practices of the center, Alex helped facilitate a name change from a stand-alone women’s center to a women and gender center named after a Black woman activist. Alex stated,
The name change followed in [the] lineage [of the practice that was happening]. It felt important to me that we were already doing the work because a name change in itself is not going to change people’s perceptions. I feel like adding gender to our name, having a Black woman’s name on our building, those can’t be symbolic. Name changes must be more than symbolism, we must be doing the praxis that shows there is value change, that there are programs that align with those values.

Before signaling the values of the center to others on campus, Alex wanted to make sure the center staff actively committed to racial justice and feminist practice through their programming and resources.

Practitioners across the study similarly experienced working to align the practices of their centers with newly defined values and priorities. Moreover, one of the core values for framing practice that emerged through participants’ experiences was a need to challenge the binary-based foundation of traditional women’s center work and, instead, promote expansive understandings of gender to equitably serve students. Mel, a current practitioner of three-five years, questioned,

> How do we continue to do the work that supports people of all genders, understanding the ways that their gender impacts their experiences at our universities, their experience of the world, and their impact on other people, and how do we get them into a space together?

In specifically naming the needs of trans* and non-binary students on campus who felt erased and unheard, Mel hoped that expanding the work of the center and changing the center name to include ‘gender’ could create a more welcoming and inclusive space for students beyond those who identify as women. For a similar reason, Tegan, who has worked in her center for over nine year, aimed to include ‘gender’ in her center’s name to reflect the diversity of students who engage with the space. She shared, “Especially when we think about the trans* and non-binary students that we serve, we feel really compelled to have our name be more inclusive.”

Practitioners in the study acknowledged the limitations of WGECs as historically women-only
spaces and aimed to expand their practices to serve students of all genders, particularly those on the margins.

Along with articulating the need for expansive understandings of gender, practitioners shifted their practices to confront the racist history of WGECs. As a challenge to the historical exclusion of Black and other women of color by WGECs, several practitioners aimed to explicitly center the needs of women of color in their work. When Jordan transitioned into her role two years ago, her experiences confirmed her belief that women’s centers predominantly attract and serve cisgender white women. As a woman of color, she shared,

Moving forward, part of the work that we will need to be doing as a center is thinking about how do we get in front of communities that historically have not interfaced with our center? … I think the more women of color start to understand intersectionality and find words to explain their interlocking experiences as women and as people of color, they’re maybe more likely to interface with the women’s center, but only if they know we exist. … I’m the only person of color that works in the Women’s Center … I have to make it a point to find time in my schedule to build those relationships in ways that maybe some other directors don’t have to do. And that’s just the unfortunate reality of the way white supremacy has manifested within our spaces is that by the time you do get a woman of color director, the amount of extra work we have to do to repair or build relationships is immense.

In recounting her experience, Jordan conveyed that in order to center women of color, WGEC practitioners cannot solely rely upon interpersonal relationship building. By naming white supremacy, Jordan called attention to the systemic nature of the exclusion of women of color in WGEC spaces. Alex similarly argued that “feminist work has to include racial justice work or it’s not feminist. … So how are we taking a systems level approach to that?” As part of this approach, practitioners discussed targeted recruitment of student staff, professional staff, and/or program facilitators of color as well as prioritizing programs and initiatives related to racial
justice within the center, particularly through the centering of Black feminism in program content.

Across the study, many practitioners emphasized the importance of aligning with intersectional feminism in practice not only to center the needs of women of color but to also recognize oppression as interconnected. Tegan referred to this shift as doing “gender and” work. When she first entered the center, the mission statement focused on the academic, personal, and professional growth of women. Tegan worked to revise the mission, stating, “We just felt it was important to not just do gender but to really do intersectional feminism work. … [The mission now] focuses more on social justice, anti-racism, and marginalized identities.” Moni, a former practitioner of three-five years, also believed that the equity work of her center could not be done through a gender-only lens. Moni supported the addition of ‘gender equity’ to the center’s name as an accountability measure, stating, “If we’re the center for gender equity, what does that look like across all identities and not just gender identity?” In their programming and initiatives, most WGEC practitioners across the study worked to include examinations of intersecting experiences rooted in race, disability, sexuality, spirituality, and other identities.

In many ways, practitioners’ commitments to more expansive and intersectional approaches provided a foundation for the emergence or re-envisioning of masculinity-centered practices within WGECs. While this process was not necessarily linear, shifting values and priorities within WGECs created conditions for practitioners to (re)consider the relevance and role of including the examination of masculinity in their practice. The next section will provide an in-depth exploration of how WGEC practitioners aligned masculinity-centered practices with the priorities of their centers.
Emancipatory Potential of Masculinity-Centered Practices

In framing their work, WGEC practitioners described their centers as positioned to support social change in liberatory, intersectional, feminist, and expansive ways. Due to the critical orientation of their practice, a few practitioners even argued that WGECs are better suited for facilitating masculinity-centered practices as compared to other neutral or apolitical spaces on college campuses. Practitioners in the study described the role of masculinity-centered practices within WGECs in four overarching ways: as a necessary component of gender equity work, as a complement to violence prevention efforts, as an approach for thinking about equity beyond a gender-only lens, and as a challenge to normative thinking about gender. This section will expand upon each of these approaches as described through practitioners’ lived experiences engaging with masculinity work.

Masculinity-Centered Practices as Necessary for Gender Equity Work

Many practitioners in the study engaged masculinity-centered practices as a necessary step for advancing gender equity. In order to move the dial towards a more equitable future, these practitioners argued that hegemonic masculinity and its relationship with patriarchy and sexism cannot be left critically unexamined. Often referring to hegemonic masculinity as ‘toxic masculinity,’ practitioners created various opportunities for examining, problematizing, and disrupting toxic masculinity to foster change.

Through facilitating programs and initiatives covering various topics related to masculinity, practitioners aimed to raise awareness through education and dialogue. For example, Ellen, a current practitioner of three-five years, led a committee to plan and offer a series of masculinity programs through the center which included dialogue-based workshops,
panels, as well as film screenings that aimed to reframe masculinity in healthy ways. Many of these programs were campus-wide and open to all students to come and discuss masculinity. Ellen viewed these educational programs and their exploration of healthy masculinity as feminist and in direct support of the center’s mission to resist sexism and all forms of oppression. Ellen further emphasized the importance of masculinity-centered practices by arguing that “it’s not good to not have it.” She added,

Masculinity is not inherently bad, toxic masculinity and … how it exists within rape culture and popular media, that’s what we’re here to dissect … it’s bringing a new perspective for people who may have never thought about it before.

Ellen asserted that not only are masculinity-centered practices important, but by aligning them with feminism, this work also plays a necessary role in advancing gender equity.

Marie, a former practitioner of three-five years, developed comparable types of workshops and programs to increase awareness and understandings of masculinity. It was important for her that the center continue to

be a resource for women, for other underrepresented or marginalized populations of people who needed us to advocate for them and support them in those ways, while at the same time understanding that if we don’t engage men, if we don’t look at masculinity, if we don’t bring in a lot of these other outside topics and folks that are different from us, we’re not really going to get where we need to be. … We had to do more around education and awareness about masculinity, about gender identity, gender expression, and toxic masculinity as well.

By positioning masculinity programming as work that is on the “outside,” Marie seemed to understand the engagement of masculinity as synonymous with engaging dominance. Marie believed that examining the relationship between masculinity, misogyny, and patriarchy can support “where we need to be” in supporting women and other marginalized groups. This approach was further demonstrated by her engagement of masculinity beyond educational
programming. Aiming to advance gender equity on campus and centering the needs of those who hold marginalized gender identities, Marie formed and led a committee of key campus partners to specifically examine institutional policies and practices in order to shift patriarchal structures within the institution. She shared,

Higher education is patriarchal, it was established for men. So I think some of these policies, these systems that indirectly impact women and people who don’t identify as male on college campuses are particularly problematic or troubling. We wanted to drive change, a cultural shift, where there was more equity. We wanted to utilize understanding masculinity and understanding patriarchy and misogyny in a way that could do that.

For practitioners across the study, masculinity-centered practices created various opportunities to critically analyze topics of masculinity to drive change.

Many practitioners also viewed masculinity programming as a way to specifically engage cisgender men in the dismantling of oppression. In fact, a common theme across participants’ experiences was that cisgender men have a necessary role to play in the change process. By hosting masculinity programs through the center, Moni stated, “I really do think that to advance gender equity, we have to talk about ‘what is toxic masculinity?’ What cis men bring, what they don’t bring. We have to have these conversations or we’re never gonna all get free.” In describing her center’s name change from ‘women’ to ‘gender equity,’ Moni detailed that “(A) gender does not just include women and cis women, right? but (B) the shift was to show that even cis men who are perpetuating masculinity and harming folks could come in and talk about that.” Shelby, who has been working in her center for three-five years, offered a similar reframe. Explaining that the primary goal of masculinity programming was to engage men with the center, Shelby argued,

If we’re doing work that is centering women then you have to talk about patriarchy, and you have to talk about men. We all exist together, we’re all contributing to the issues,
we’re all affected by the issues a lot of times in very negative ways. … As bell hooks says, “feminism is for everybody.” It’s not just for women. But again, the goal is to end sexism, specifically as it intersects with white supremacy, imperialism, capitalism. … To only focus on women and not focus on men or, even more importantly, patriarchy and how that influences the way we express gender, would be missing the forest for the trees.

Moni and Shelby, like many others in the study, expressed that without engaging men, gender equity work can only go so far.

Practitioners utilizing this approach also hoped masculinity-centered practices would provide men with opportunities to examine their relationship with hegemonic masculinity, power, and dominance. Lani, a current practitioner of two years, stated,

If we are doing equity and social justice work, then we can’t just work with empowering women. … In order to change culture, we can’t just change one section of the culture. … So we need to work with men.

Lani first started masculinity-related programming within the center when a few student athletes reached out to her with concerns about the harmful culture within their team. In response, Lani created spaces for men student athletes to openly and honestly discuss the ways in which toxic masculinity manifested within their team dynamics, and this work eventually expanded to include student athletes as peer facilitators. For Lani, the purpose of these dialogue spaces was for students to recognize the relationship between power and masculinity, break down restrictive stereotypes, and disrupt “some of the toxic things that are happening within the sports teams.”

Despite her role in getting this work off the ground, Lani admitted that engaging masculinity pushed her outside of her comfort zone. While she shared that it was easier to focus her work on the empowerment of women, she asked, “What happens if I just forget about the men? … If I just continue to be nervous and not work on this, I’m not changing culture, I’m not changing anything.” Lani reflected the understanding that masculinity-centered practices play a necessary
role in disrupting hegemonic masculinity and changing campus culture. Jordan, who served in an advisory capacity for the campus masculinity dialogue program, also saw the potential for engaging men and masculine folks in conversations about masculinity, gender violence, and personal and systemic change to help shift culture. She described, “I think if we’re really trying to shift culture and the way toxic masculinity shows up in our communities, you have to do some of those interpersonal, one-on-one, small group developmental work” where there is a level of personal accountability. In her experiences, Jordan had seen students transforming in these spaces or at least starting to think about these ideas in real ways. Jordan acknowledged the potential for masculinity-centered practices, particularly personal accountability and developmental work, to shift the harmful ways in which hegemonic masculinity shows up in our communities.

As part of WGEC practitioners’ reflections on the role of cisgender men in advancing gender equity, several drew direct parallels between masculinity-centered practices and white accountability programming. Tegan spoke to the connection between anti-racism and gender equity work, arguing that just as white folks have a direct role to play, so do men. Believing our liberation is interconnected, Tegan stated,

Until white folks do the work, equity isn’t going to be able to exist … It’s kind of the same concept around men and masculinity when we think about gender and all the violence that’s happening to women, specifically trans* women of color. She added that “just as white folks need to do some deep soul searching and figuring their shit out,” the movement for gender equity can only go so far “as men are willing to do the work and unpack what scares them, what freezes them, or doesn’t help them be free to just let people be who they are.”
Along the same lines, Ruth, a current practitioner of over nine years, shared their personal experiences coming to this understanding. As a white person, Ruth learned that they, along with other white individuals, have a direct role to play in dismantling racism. They further argued that it is important for people who have power and privilege to be in spaces together with skilled facilitators where they can brutally make mistakes without harming people with marginalized identities. In their own learning as a white person, Ruth did not have such spaces; instead, much of their learning took place because of the labor of women of color. Articulating a need for white accountability spaces, they shared, “I harmed a lot of people who took the time to teach me, and what would that have looked like if I had had [white] role models who were speaking out against white supremacy?” While they understood the role white people must play, it took them some time to develop this lens when it came to men and gender equity. Ruth reflected that while they had been in many spaces where women and femme folks were critical of toxic masculinity, they were not having these conversations with those who held gender privilege and power. When Ruth began working closely with a cisgender man who viewed it as his responsibility to dismantle hegemonic masculinity, Ruth experienced a significant shift in thinking. They said, “I haven’t seen an overflowing majority of masculine folks doing that work, so it’s nice for me to have a role model, to hear someone say, ‘Obviously I should be doing this work.’ … That was a helpful reframe.” They added,

I feel so much ownership as a white person to try to end racism and discrimination and systemic issues that are impossible for folks who don’t have the power and privilege in the systems [to do] on their own. And then I was like, “Why do I not feel that way about men? Why am I letting men off the hook here?”
In drawing a parallel between white accountability work and masculinity-centered practices, both Tegan and Ruth demonstrated their belief that men must be accountable to and disrupt the ways in which they wield dominance over people with marginalized identities.

As a final note, participants who viewed masculinity-centered practices as a critical part of gender equity work also conceptualized hegemonic masculinity as harmful to everyone, including men. These practitioners believed that engaging men in critical self-reflection and the practice of vulnerability and authenticity could shift how men show up in the world, thus creating broader change. For instance, when Ruth helped to facilitate a campus-wide educational poster series that aimed to expand how people understand and think about masculinity, a core intention of the project was that if men “don’t feel that restrictive masculinity, [they] might not have as much to prove to other people, [they] might not dehumanize women and people who aren’t cisgender men.” Ruth acknowledged that restrictive expectations of hegemonic masculinity can cause harm to men who, in turn, cause harm to others. As another example, Shelby referenced bell hooks’ definition of feminist masculinity to share that, in many ways, feminism is about the relinquishing of dominance and “explaining or showing that these dominator behaviors are harmful to everyone, including the person who’s dominating.” Shelby and other practitioners cited the ways in which hegemonic masculinity hindered men from fully accessing healthy emotions and relationships with others; in response, they created dialogue-based programming that invited vulnerability and honesty without judgment to help men explore and shift what hegemonic masculinity has stripped of them and others. Drawing from her experiences as a therapist, Lani described how she has many men clients who
have anger issues, because anger is the only emotion that they’re allowed to show outwardly and that’s just so freaking unhealthy. So they know how to be angry, then they can’t control their anger, and it’s just a vicious cycle.

To break these cycles of harm, Lani worked to facilitate opportunities within the WGEC for men to support one another as they disrupted stereotypes and found ways to express themselves in healthy ways. In recounting a powerful facilitation experience, Lani articulated the importance of this work. She shared,

One of the most intense moments for me was when one of the students started tearing up talking about how difficult it was for him to show emotion. He had recently lost his dad, and he wanted to emote. He wanted to talk about his grief, but he was just not able to because … throughout his life, what he had heard from his dad was “men don’t cry, boys don’t cry.” And he felt that he would not be being good to his dad’s memory by crying. It was such a conflict of emotions. … [The students in the group] were very supportive. And then what we did afterwards was unpack that and talk about, “Hey, you know, this is something that your dad was taught … that boys don’t cry. At the end of the day, you’re human, and when humans get sad, they show emotion, … it’s okay to cry.” He said that was the first time he actually grieved his dad. That was an unforgettable moment.

Through facilitating conversations about the relationship between masculinity and emotions, Lani saw the potential for redefining masculinity in ways that released men from restrictive expectations of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously disrupting cycles of oppression through their changed behaviors.

As evident in this section, nearly all participants in the study communicated a clear message that the critical examination of topics related to masculinity and the direct engagement of men, predominantly cisgender men, must take place to create change. This approach often served as a foundation for viewing masculinity-centered practices as a complement to violence prevention efforts, which will be explored in the next section.
Masculinity-Centered Practices as a Complement to Violence Prevention Efforts

Many of the participants in the study engaged masculinity-centered practices as part of their center’s violence prevention efforts. As explored in the literature review in Chapter Two, WGECs, while diverse organizations in structure and practice, commonly offer programs, services, and advocacy related to sexual violence. Eight participants in the study reflected this pattern, either offering services and support to survivors from within their respective centers or closely collaborating with the designated violence prevention unit on campus. By seeing a direct relationship between masculinity-centered practices and violence prevention work, these practitioners facilitated diverse initiatives including bystander intervention trainings, campus-wide educational programming, and masculinity dialogue spaces for men and masculine students to support a core aspect of their center’s mission.

For a few participants, masculinity-centered practices first emerged in reaction to violence taking place on their campuses. Ellen shared that a catalyst for masculinity programming was a high-profile sexual assault committed by student athletes on campus. As the incident and trial gained traction in the local and national media, the institution expanded its violence prevention services, and the WGEC began hosting an annual series of programs to explore healthy forms of masculinity. Laura, a current practitioner for over nine years, also initiated masculinity-centered practices to address incidents of sexual violence. Masculinity-related programming became formalized in the center when Laura successfully applied for and received a federal grant from the Office on Violence Against Women to support violence prevention, education, and outreach. Laura, concerned about the lack of institutional response to a pattern of sexual assaults committed by student athletes, prioritized using these resources to
first address rape culture within athletics and “disrupt the toxic culture that’s being cultivated there.” The grant allowed her to form a relationship with a national violence prevention organization which provided direct resources and training for fostering healthy masculinities in campus athletics. Over time, this work expanded to providing small dialogue spaces for men, predominantly student athletes and Greek life members, to discuss the relationship between masculinity and rape culture. It was important to Laura that participants “have conversations about how power-based personal violence impacts men … and how they perpetuate some of those norms that condone violence towards women.”

While not engaging masculinity-centered practices in response to specific incidents of violence, some participants viewed masculinity programming as aligning with their already established commitment to violence prevention efforts on campus. Margaret, who has worked in her center for over nine years, explained that the vast majority of the work within her WGEC, one of the first campus rape crisis centers in the country, involved providing confidential victim advocacy and anti-violence educational programming. On average, the center saw four brand new drop-in survivors a day on top of their already scheduled survivors. Margaret shared, “Last year, we served over 460 survivors. So we are very busy. And that’s a great thing. … It means that students are reaching out for support.” Because direct advocacy is core to the WGEC’s mission, Margaret articulated how they aim to center survivors and violence prevention work in all that they do, including masculinity programming. She stated,

Survivors are our catch-all as opposed to women, we’re really a survivor center. We look at overlapping oppressions that survivors experience. … Even when I think about our masculinities programs, it’s still tying back to anti-violence work or how to support survivors or how to disrupt our stereotypes that men can’t be survivors. So it still comes back to survivor identity. Even if we do a workshop on masculinity and disabilities or
body image within all-male spaces, we still are making some connections back to interpersonal violence.

Margaret engaged masculinity-centered programming as an approach for directly supporting the center’s long-standing commitment to anti-violence work.

For Tegan, addressing sexual violence was also a priority of her center; however, unlike Margaret, masculinity programming did not initially emerge with a primary intention to support violence prevention efforts. Instead, Tegan first developed a ten-week masculinity dialogue program for men-identified students as a way to provide men with a space for consciousness-raising and unpacking masculinity with one another. Tegan shifted her thinking over time, however. She discussed the personal trauma that had come from working in the WGEC over the course of several years, particularly in relation to supporting survivors and addressing sexual violence on campus. She explained,

There were so many survivors who were sharing, “Here’s how the university harmed me, here’s all the experiences that I’ve had related to sexual violence on campus.” And we were pulled in really deeply into the work of trying to restore trust and change culture. … Where I’m at in things that have happened [on campus], I feel a lot more jaded and a lot more tired … Since I’m coming off of so much, my lens being so much about sexual violence the past two years, that’s so much of what I see right now. … And I feel now I am in this place [with the masculinity program] of “we need to fix this because we need to end sexual violence.”

As a WGEC practitioner, Tegan’s experiences with addressing sexual violence on campus gave her a new sense of urgency for masculinity programming within the center. Instead of focusing on men’s consciousness-raising to create a ripple effect of change, Tegan wanted to shift the dialogue program to more explicitly focus on ending sexual violence by working with those who are perpetrating harm. As a result, Tegan positioned masculinity-centered practices as a
complement and extension of sexual assault prevention. By creating space for men to engage as allies in this work, Tegan believed that more people can be free from harm and violence.

As in the previous section, practitioners approaching masculinity-centered practices through a violence prevention lens also relied upon the notion that men, predominantly cisgender men, have a direct role to play in gender equity work. Laura, for instance, argued that men are responsible for addressing violence against women and other men because “knowing that men often are the majority of individuals committing this violence, they have to be part of the solution. Just like white people have to be part of the solution towards combating racism.” Based on the notion that men are the predominant perpetrators of power-based violence, Laura developed masculinity dialogue spaces to engage men in athletics and Greek Life, so that they, as holders of power, could be actively part of the solution to dismantle gender inequities and reduce the violence experienced by people of all gender identities, primarily women. For Laura, masculinity programming was not just about men doing their own self-work; rather, this programming needed to call upon men to take action through bystander intervention and other approaches to address violence. Building upon this approach, Ruth argued that it is impossible to end sexual violence without the engagement of men. Ruth explained that men were the target of this programming because they were predominantly the ones causing harm to women, femmes, and queer and trans* folks on campus. They shared,

And the reason there was so much of an emphasis on women, femmes, and queer and trans* folks was because across the board those people were reporting that the people causing the most harm were the same people, right? So someone might sexually assault someone at a party and then go home and call their roomie an anti-gay slur. We wanted to get, not necessarily to those people, but to the people that have influence in those people’s lives. Like how some of the … men were in fraternities with people that were causing harm. … They were trying to make it uncool to do horrible things, right? To take
that power away and be the “wet blanket for justice,” I think one of them said, which I love. … And that person can influence the other people around them.

Ruth was specifically drawn to bystander intervention as an approach, viewing it as a helpful reframe from solely viewing men as perpetrators. Engaging masculinity-centered practices through this lens, Ruth coordinated programming that asked men and masculine folks to deconstruct masculinity, discuss what led them to harmful or neutral behaviors, and explore ways they can intervene at the bottom of the pyramid of rape culture, using their power and privilege to break intersectional cycles of harm.

By engaging men in masculinity programming as part of violence prevention work, several practitioners emphasized the need for men to apply their learning to action. Moni described engaging cisgender men and masculine folks by building a bridge between the center’s active bystander training and masculinity programming. She explained that the thought process for merging these programs was to help participants explore how to combat toxic masculinity and be active bystanders when witnessing gender violence because “oftentimes, folks with power, in this case cis men and masculine folks, can step in more easily.” Margaret also believed it was critical that men take on an active role. Through the center’s masculinity programming, which incorporated both a cohort-based component as well as open sessions for all students, men-identified students had the opportunity to reflect upon healthier forms of masculinity and creating change. Margaret shared a meaningful experience when participants from the cohort-based program applied what they had learned to collaboratively address violence on campus. She stated,

I think that to have a group of men who have done enough of their own reflection and are committed to staying in it, [where] we can put out a bat signal when something happens, and it’s like, “Hey, this thing happened. Can you all rally and figure out a response?” …
So we have, you may be familiar with sometimes during freshman move-in, houses across the street from residence halls will hang banners like “Thank you for your daughters” – that kind of super creepy shit. So we have that every year. I guess now four years ago, the former [masculinity programming coordinator], … he and a couple dudes in [the program] literally went door to door a couple days before and knocked on doors and were like, “Hey, if you did this last year, please don’t do it. Here’s why it’s a problem.” They had conversations with, some of them are fraternity houses but not all of them, and engaged in conversation about like, “Please don’t do this, here’s the impact.” And then on the day of move-in for the few houses that still chose to hang banners, they did a counter protest or a counter messaging, so they held signs that said “We welcome you. Just say no to sexism,” that kind of stuff. … I think that’s an example of men who are not leading with activism but are able to mobilize and contribute to something that needs to happen immediately, like putting your physical body in front of a sign that is sexist.

This experience stood out to Margaret because she saw participants applying what they had learned about the relationship between toxic masculinity and violence to their practice and behaviors on campus. Margaret appreciated how the men in this example viewed themselves not as activists or saviors for others but rather as having an active responsibility for disrupting violence when they saw it.

As we can see, many participants in the study worked within centers with a core mission or value to engage in violence prevention efforts, and this anti-violence lens directly guided the approach, goals, and content of their masculinity-centered practices. By drawing an inherent relationship between violence prevention and masculinity programming, these practitioners aimed to engage men and masculine folks in recognizing their power so that they could actively disrupt gender-based violence when they encountered it.

**Masculinity-Centered Practices as an Approach for Equity Beyond a Gender-Only Lens**

As WGEC practices have shifted over time, centers have increasingly articulated aligning their work with intersectional feminism. As previously discussed, many participants across the study spoke to the importance of moving beyond a gender-only framework in their practices to
recognize the interconnectedness of oppression. Margaret shared that this framework is necessary because identities cannot be disentangled from one another. While gender is one of the primary lenses through which her center examines oppression, Margaret explained that in their responsibility to dismantle gendered systems, they must simultaneously work to dismantle interlocking, oppressive systems. Jordan also communicated the importance of applying intersectional feminism to the practices within her center. She shared,

We can talk about intersectional feminism, but are we actually bringing in women of color? Are we bringing in trans* folks? Are we talking about disability justice? Are we programming around these things? Are we just saying that we do intersectional feminism because we put an accommodation statement on our flyer but are still only bringing in white women? That’s not intersectional feminism. So whose voices are you centering? How are you shifting the way you do things to actually adopt practices that are outside of these normative, oppressive structures? For me, that’s where the work is.

In naming the intersections of sexism, genderism, racism, and ableism, Jordan made the point that in order to embody intersectional feminism, the center’s practices cannot solely focus on exploring, critiquing, and shifting patriarchy. Multiple systems are at play, and, for some practitioners, masculinity-centered practices allowed for a deeper examination of how hegemonic masculinity can operate across intersecting systems in their work to advance equity beyond gender.

For these participants, grounding their center’s work in intersectional feminism meant framing masculinity-centered practices as an approach for understanding power as contextual and multi-dimensional. A core component of this approach was challenging monolithic and simplistic, top-down understandings of masculinity. As an example, Ruth viewed violence prevention, specifically bystander intervention work, as not “just about sexual assault. It was about racism and disability justice and all the other pieces,” such as interrupting Islamophobia.
Ruth argued, “I think when you’re taught sexism equals men as oppressors and women are victims, and that’s the most nuanced piece, you’re not gonna do a good job of understanding toxic masculinity at all.” By exploring the intersections of masculinity with sexuality, race, disability, and socioeconomic status, Ruth believed participants could understand hegemonic masculinity in more nuanced ways, moving beyond a false binary of women versus men and white people versus people of color and, instead, seeing men “as whole people, not just perpetrators and not just as vehicles for privilege.” By challenging the notion that masculinity can only look one dominant way, Ruth believed masculinity programming could offer critical opportunities for students to feel seen and valued as their whole selves, including the ways they experience oppression, rather than parsing out their identities in limiting and harmful ways. Ruth shared a story of a Black, queer student involved in the masculinity program who had talked about his journey in unpacking masculinity, particularly how pressures around masculinity show up differently for Black folks and for people who are queer. He brought forward the idea for the masculinity program to screen a film on campus and host a talk-back that reflected his intersecting experiences as a Black, queer man, and Ruth worked closely with staff at the LGBT and multicultural centers on campus to collaboratively make the program happen. The event was well-attended, and as Ruth and this student watched attendees arrive, “he was like, ‘I feel like this event is for me. All these people are here, but I feel like it’s for me.’” This moment was powerful for Ruth as the student expressed feeling seen in all facets of his identity for the first time.

Also challenging reductive understandings of masculinity, Margaret expressed the importance of addressing the ways in which masculinity is racialized. She described how the
center’s practices shifted towards a more contextualized and power-conscious understanding of masculinity, stating,

For a while, this was prior to me being in charge of it, but I know there was an, “Everybody [participating in the masculinity program] needs to identify as a perpetrator in some form of continuum because we have all caused harm. We’ve all not asked for consent. We’ve all told sexist jokes. So we need to all stop trying to be a good guy. None of us are the good guys.” Like that’s cool and all unless you’re a Black dude who your whole life you’re trying to fight the stereotype that you’re a perpetrator, like that was not getting Black men to resonate with the word. So we really had to shift that in our current program. We don’t ask people to self-identity along the continuum of perpetration in their own minds, because it’s not fair to Black and Latinx men.

The center’s previous approach of asking men to self-identify as perpetrators demonstrated the ways in which a gender-only approach to masculinity work fails to address distributions of power across systems, thus perpetuating a framework of masculinity typically associated with white, straight, and cisgender men. Margaret made clear that a single, top-down definition of masculinity problematically ignores the racism that Black and Latinx men face, and their experiences with masculinity cannot be divorced from these realities. Margaret also approached masculinity work with a both/and lens in order to recognize the ways in which men experience oppression based on their identities while simultaneously keeping the disruption of masculine dominance at the forefront of the conversation. She explained that “just like with whiteness, it’s really easy for us to lean into our areas of oppression as a way to avoid talking about our areas of dominance.” Therefore, Margaret aimed for the center’s masculinity programming to bring multiple identities in without decentering hegemonic masculinity as the focus of the conversation.

Other participants in the study also contended with the complexity of trying to create space for men to explore how they have experienced harm at the intersections while also
prioritizing the need to disrupt the systemic dominance of hegemonic masculinity. Marie, for instance, supported the development of annual programming in her center for Black men to explore the intersections of race and gender. This programming initially came about when Black students reached out to Marie expressing their desire to discuss the privileges that come with being masculine while simultaneously experiencing racism as Black men. As a Black woman, Marie guided the development of the program and worked with the students to not only discuss racism as it intersects with masculinity but also critically examine gender-based violence within the Black community. Specifically, the program included conversations about the ways in which Black men are targeted as aggressors and perpetrators due to racism while also naming the disproportionate impact of toxic forms of masculinity on Black women’s experiences. Marie wanted to be sure that the programming addressed how Black women can experience pressure to exhibit a “sense of loyalty that they have to their community” and, as a result, feel like, “I can’t talk about it, I can’t tell other people, I don’t want to be a traitor to my own people because we’re all discriminated against and oppressed in these ways.” By emphasizing the complexities of intersecting systems of power and oppression, Marie believed participants could better understand their own experiences with Black masculinity as well as how they can play a role in shifting these cycles of harm.

Moni similarly utilized affinity spaces as a way to more deeply explore power and harm to create change. In discussing the development of masculinity programming in her center, Moni shared,

I didn’t want to do race neutral, gender neutral, like a one-size-fits-all because one-size-does-not-fit-all. When we talk about masculinity work, masculinity harms a lot of folks of color and cis and trans* folks, but it harms folks in different ways for those different reasons. We wanted to talk about that.
It was important to Moni that participants understood that masculinity does not exist in a vacuum, stating, “You can’t talk about masculinity without talking about white supremacy, you cannot talk about white supremacy without talking about homophobia, there are just so many things.” Moni asserted that there are many factors wrapped into what we understand as masculinity, and she wanted to create a space for men and masculine folks to unpack their gender privilege while also exploring what it means to be a person of color, undocumented, trans*, and/or queer. Believing that intersections are embedded in masculinity work, Moni moved away from masculinity programming for a broad audience and created an affinity-based program for cisgender men, queer, and trans* folks of color to explore what masculinity means. Moni viewed this work as a way for folks with shared marginalized identities to be in community to discuss masculinity, healing, and accountability. The facilitators created space for participants to explore what it looks like to heal from the ways they have experienced harm at the intersection of masculinity and racism, genderism, homophobia, and other systems of domination; however, like Margaret and Marie, it was equally important that the conversation included examinations of how men and masculine folks can also cause harm. Moni explained,

So it was never just “men of color are harmed.” It’s “how do we also need to be better at not harming women of color and gender non-conforming and gender fluid folks of color?” The facilitators in that space did a good job of talking about that too, [focusing on] healing and reconciliation.

Moni believed both conversations must be centered within the affinity-based program. She argued that, through engaging in dialogue about healing and accountability, men and masculine folks of color could build bridges and better stand in solidarity with non-men of color within their different communities.
Practitioners applying an intersectional framework to masculinity-centered practices acknowledged the nuances and multidimensionality of power as part of their work to disrupt oppression. Rather than positioning masculinity as one monolithic, dominating construct, these practitioners contextualized masculinity in relationship with other systems of oppression. In doing so, practitioners were better able to expand the content of their masculinity programming beyond a gender-only approach, which invited more nuanced and power-conscious examinations of how masculinity intersects with race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, class, and other identities. It was also important for participants to develop spaces for men and masculine folks to work towards dismantling the systems of oppression that they not only experience but also maintain over others, including women of color and gender non-confirming and trans* folks. By moving beyond a gender-only framework, these practitioners demonstrated how masculinity-centered practices could provide opportunities for humanization, complexity, healing, and accountability as critical components of the change process.

**Masculinity-Centered Practices as a Challenge to Normative Thinking**

Finally, several participants across the study described the role of masculinity-centered practices within their centers as an approach for challenging normative thinking about masculinity. Specifically, they aimed to decenter limiting approaches to masculinity work that reinforce the gender binary and/or whiteness. To complicate binary notions of masculinity and gender, some practitioners developed masculinity-centered practices as a way to disrupt the assumption that masculinity is synonymous with hegemonic masculinity and cisgender men. This approach involved promoting expansive understandings of masculinity in the content of their programming as well as their target audience. Rather than creating opportunities to
predominantly engage cisgender men in conversations about masculinity, these practitioners invited participants of all gender identities to explore these topics.

Alex, who worked to align masculinity-centered practices with the center’s core values of love, truth-telling, community, and engaging students in the fullness of their humanities, believed that masculinity programming should create space for students of all gender identities including trans*, non-binary, and masculine-identified folks; women; and cisgender men. Arguing that building communities is radical and difficult work, they shared, “We want to hold a container for anybody who wants to come in and engage in feminist work and wrestle with patriarchal structures and how they’re hurting all of us – and to me, that can be anybody.” For instance, student staff members in the center created a zine and crowdsourced contributions from any interested students on campus who wanted to disrupt normative notions of masculinity. The students gathered photo submissions, poetry, art, and other submissions that challenged our thinking of the socialization of masculinity in a patriarchal society.

Alex also collaborated with other cultural resource centers on campus to develop masculinity dialogue programming that, through bringing their respective lenses together, aimed to “complicate or challenge what masculinity even is.” In partnership with the LGBTQ center, one of these initiatives invited transmasculine folks to be in community as they shared their explorations of gender. Alex described that some of the students processed their experiences with feeling fullness in “being a man and also struggling with the ugliness of what that means to be socialized into.” As an example, some students shared,

“I pass as a cis dude, and it’s scary what people talk to me about” or “to feel validated and to pass, I’m buying into these things that I know are terrible because I’ve experienced another side of that.” Those have been really deep conversations. … So this insidiousness and being able to have that conversation with other trans* folks, depending how someone
wants to be in engagement with those structures and benefit from them in order to pass
and their own internal tensions with that. … Normalizing those struggles for our trans* students.

For Alex, this type of dialogue programming created a critical space for transmasculine students
to be in community as they examined their own understandings of masculinity while
simultaneously experiencing and contending with dominant and oppressive forms of masculinity.
Alex also collaborated with the center for indigenous students to facilitate programming on
indigenous masculinities, which created space for complicating notions of the gender binary.
Through discussing the role of ongoing settler colonialism and internalized oppression in how
we understand masculinity, this programming explored what has been destroyed as a project of
colonization. For Alex, an important component of this programming was examining how
sometimes these ideas of different forms of masculinity or broader gender categories that
aren’t binary get looked at as these newer things. These are ancient things, these are the
fabric of the lands that we are on. Like, I find it beautiful that the director of our
[LGBTQ] center will talk about the importance of pronouns and talk about that
immediately following a land acknowledgement and that these two things are intimately
connected. Because we know one of the earliest forms of transphobia and homophobia is
colonization, right? And so we talk about these things, like this idea of pronouns
conversations in higher education … there’s a certain rhetoric that this is a new
conversation we’re having. [This program explores that] it’s actually a really ancient
conversation, how we are connected back and grieving the things that were lost there.
Connecting back in ways that don’t erase indigeneity from the conversation but recenter
it.

Instead of starting the conversation with masculinity as the initial focus, Alex suggested that it
can be powerful and valuable to first explore systems such as colonization to frame discussions
of gender. Alex shared that while these programs may differ from traditional approaches to
masculinity dialogues, they believed these initiatives foster different conversations that challenge
our assumptions and norms of what we think we know about masculinity.
Ruth similarly engaged multiple audiences to disrupt hegemonic and binary understandings of masculinity. Challenging the idea that masculinity has to be negative or equated with violence, Ruth argued that masculinity can be affirming, especially as younger people are finding their footing around what it means to them. Further, Ruth asserted that anyone can identify with masculinity. In collaboration with campus partners and students representing various identities, Ruth supported the development of a poster series that promoted expansive, cross-cultural, and intersectional understandings of masculinity. Mel also believed it was important to explore what masculinity means across identities and would incorporate these conversations in workshops with various student groups, including all-women’s spaces. In these contexts, “people assume ‘oh you’re talking to a group of women, so you’re talking about women’s stuff,’” and Mel responded, “This is women’s stuff.” Mel viewed masculinity programming as education for unlearning, and, when facilitating, they asked open-ended questions that pushed students beyond the binary thinking that only one type of person can exhibit femininity or masculinity. Mel asked participants,

What does it really mean to be feminine? And what does it really mean to be masculine? And was anybody ever a tomboy, especially in all-women’s spaces? … What did that mean? What did it mean for the young men in your lives who didn’t do those things? How did we respond to them? … It slips into the binary so fast. And then we break it out to think about how just because someone identifies as genderqueer or non-binary or trans* doesn’t mean that they weren’t raised in a culture in the United States that is so binary still, doesn’t mean that sexism or homophobia didn’t seep into them in all of the same ways.

Approaching these conversations with open-ended and power-conscious questions about students’ experiences, Mel aimed to support students across identities in thinking “about the galaxy of gender identities and expressions that are available to us and how we get to define those aspects for ourselves.” Much of Mel’s approach to this work was informed by their own
personal explorations of masculinity and gender beyond the binary. As a genderqueer androgynous woman, Mel shared that their understanding of masculinity and men was complicated because they felt part of that world; over time, however, they began to unpack the ways they learned sexism and misogyny as part of being masculine. Mel explained how they began pulling those things apart, like I get to be masculine, and the ways I identify masculinity are not those stereotypes, not harmful, not misogynistic, not sexist. … I’m eternally grateful to my queer family, many of whom are trans* men or genderqueer folks who I’ve also watched go through this unlearning process as they’ve transitioned. … We’ve been able to have the conversations about what it means to be masculine in our queer world and then in the world writ large that is different from what we were taught as kids. … This work is to continue that exploration with cis men and trans* men and women and trans* women and everybody, pulling apart and putting back together the ways we want.

Mel’s ongoing personal journey to understand their gender guided their approach to facilitating conversations about masculinity with students across identities. By creating space for curiosity, unlearning, and open explorations of gender identity, Mel hoped participants would leave with more questions than answers and gain awareness that they have autonomy and agency for how they show up for themselves and others.

Along with challenging binary thinking of gender, some participants aimed to disrupt normative understandings of white, cisgender masculinity and, instead, center masculinities on the margins. Moni, for instance, provided context that her center used to take a broad, traditional approach to masculinity programming to reach across groups of students. Arguing that such overarching or neutral approaches actually serve to center white masculinity, Moni helped shift the center’s practices away from attempting to serve “every man” and instead focus on specific groups by offering affinity spaces for cisgender men, queer, and trans* folks of color. Moni’s desire to explore masculinity beyond white, normative understandings was also reflected in her
approach to facilitation. Following masculinity-related film screenings, for example, Moni, instead of asking students how the film related to their lived experiences, wondered in what ways it did not apply. She asked, “What’s missing? Even questioning and critiquing the materials that we decided to show or not show” in order to create space for different lenses for understanding masculinity. By focusing on aspects of masculinity often not discussed or recognized, this approach allowed Moni to push conversations beyond a one-size-fits-all approach that centered whiteness.

Both Shelby and Jordan also discussed their hopes to foster expansive understandings of masculinity by centering those on the margins in their programming. For Shelby, the primary goal of masculinity-centered practices was to expand understandings of masculinity beyond the notion that masculinity is one, unchanging thing. In order to challenge patriarchy, white supremacy, and other systems of domination that uphold one hegemonic form of masculinity, Shelby argued that we need to ask, “What does it mean to be masculine? What does it mean to be a man?” An important part of this exploration was centering those on the margins of masculinity who hold different perspectives from cisgender white men. Shelby explained, “Our practices moving forward is trying to amplify voices that aren’t typically heard.” Jordan also aimed to center those on the margins in ways that she felt mainstream masculinity work does not. She shared,

It’s about the unspoken experiences that our center intends to make more readily accessible and visible. We already know white masculinities. We see it on TV, in every single movie, in our school newspaper, on the athletic field, in the fraternities, we’ve seen the story one million thousand times. And that is not my ministry, I’m not interested in centering or elevating white masculinities because it is centered and elevated in so many other places. For me, it’s really about how do we think about those marginalized, even within masculinity as a privileged kind of sphere. Within masculinity, trans* men are marginalized, women folks who perform masculinity are somewhat marginalized
depending on context, right? I think there’s a lot of room to talk about masculinity within a social justice framework, which is what we’re trying to do.

Jordan explained that the center rarely centered conversations related to cisgender masculinity in its programming. As an example, Jordan highlighted a recent program where the center invited a Black, trans* man activist to speak about feminist parenting as part of a broader masculinity series. For Jordan, this program was meaningful for offering important perspectives about the ways that queer communities create families, how Black men can be feminists, and how trans* parents can offer a unique lens about parenting that cisgender men do not have. To expand understandings of gender beyond white, dominant narratives, Jordan believed it was important to develop programming that centered engaging healthy masculinities at the intersections of gender identity, sexuality, race, and other identities.

By engaging masculinity-centered practices as a way to challenge normative thinking of gender, these practitioners applied an expansive lens for thinking about their target audience as well as the content of their programming. For participants in the study applying this approach, masculinity programming provided a critical opportunity to lift, name, and affirm marginalized experiences with masculinity that often go unexplored and unrecognized.

Summary

As practices within WGECs shifted and expanded over time, some practitioners (re)considered the role of incorporating the examination of masculinity in their work to support social change. As described in this chapter, the first pattern of meaning that emerged from the study demonstrated how participants aligned masculinity-centered practices with the goals and values of their respective centers. They described the role of masculinity-centered practices in four, often overlapping, ways: as a necessary component of gender equity work, as a
complement to violence prevention efforts, as an approach for thinking about equity beyond a gender-only lens, and as a challenge to normative thinking about gender. While participants acknowledged the emancipatory possibilities of these programs and initiatives, a second pattern of meaning emerged in the study that reflected the challenges, tensions, and complexities they experienced when engaging masculinity-centered practices. These tensions will be closely explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS ON NEGOTIATING TENSIONS AND COMPLEXITIES OF

MASCULINITY-CENTERED PRACTICES

Most participants in the study described that, although they saw the value of engaging masculinity within the scope of WGEC practice, they also navigated moments of hopelessness, frustration, or deep cynicism. These feelings were related to four main considerations for this work: positioning masculinity-centered practices in a survivor-centered space, encountering institutional dominance, centering the voices of the marginalized, and creating change. This chapter will provide an in-depth exploration of the ways in which practitioners experienced and negotiated these complexities as they made meaning of masculinity-centered practices.

Positioning Masculinity-Centered Practices in a Survivor-Centered Space

Many participants in the study worked within centers that provided programs, services, and/or advocacy related to sexual violence and violence prevention. These resources were available to all survivors, though many practitioners named that women across identities were disproportionately impacted and thus needed to be centered. Tensions emerged as practitioners navigated developing masculinity-centered practices to engage men in supporting anti-violence efforts towards gender equity while, at the same time, maintaining a safe environment within the center for those who systemically experience harm and marginalization.
“Do I now no Longer Feel Safe in the Women’s Center?”: Maintaining the Center as a Safe Space

Several participants raised concerns that masculinity-centered practices could shift the boundaries of the center in harmful ways. As masculinity-centered practices created an avenue for increasing men’s participation and visibility within the center itself, practitioners wondered if survivors would feel comfortable and safe utilizing the center’s services and resources. Lani, for instance, reflected that opening up the center to men athletes through masculinity programming felt uncomfortable, and it was a decision that she was continuing to process. While she argued this programming played an important role in shifting culture on campus, Lani’s honest reaction was that the center was “a space for women-identified individuals. What is it going to be like when I bring in individuals who identify as men?” As a survivor herself, Lani felt unsure about bringing men into a space that was supposed to feel secure for her and other women-identified students who have experienced harm. Tegan also wondered about the risks related to masculinity-centered practices taking up space in a women-centric center. She asked, “Who is at risk of losing this space? Like, do I now no longer feel safe in the women’s center if men are more in the programming? Will my perpetrator feel like he can show up in the center …?” While it was important for Tegan that the WGEC center those with marginalized gender identities, she also viewed the engagement of men through masculinity-centered practices as worthwhile and part of the process for advancing equity. Explaining that there is no perfect balance to strike, Tegan argued that this tension was worth embracing and wrestling with within WGEC practice.

Tensions were heightened for practitioners whose centers provided direct advocacy to survivors. Working within a survivor-centered WGEC, Moni wondered how men physically
coming into the center may impact the feelings of safety for other students. Moni reflected upon a challenging experience with terminating a student staff member after he committed an act of violence against another student on campus. Because the center provided direct advocacy, this experience reinforced Moni’s belief that folks involved in the Title IX process as alleged perpetrators of harm should not enter the space to participate in center activities. Mel also worked within a center with a professional advocate on staff and discussed the complexities that came with being the space on campus that both supported survivors and engaged men in masculinity programming. Mel explained that while folks who identify as men still struggled to come to the center because it felt like a vulnerable space intended to support survivors, inviting their presence in the space could pose a risk to others’ safety. Mel shared,

There was a day last year when a student who had been originally dismissed for a Title IX situation and appealed that decision and won the appeal and was brought back to campus. … And without my knowledge was sent to me to learn more about consent. … He was on his way to my office by the time I found all of this out, and so then he’s in my office, and my office is literally across the hall from the advocate. And I thought, “Oh my God, what if the person impacted by whatever harm this guy caused is meeting with the advocate and he’s in here with me?” … I don’t believe in cancel culture and I don’t want students who’ve been impacted by harm to show up in the space and met by the person who caused the harm. What are we going to do with that as we expand and hope that by changing our name, folks who don’t just identify as women start coming through our doors? And that’s not just about [cis] men and women, right? That’s about the ways trans folks on our campus feel erased and unheard by cis folks, and are they going to feel safe coming into the space and then being met by somebody in their class who, you know, said some really transphobic thing? How are we going to do this expansive gender equity work in a building that’s not very big?

Mel believed it was important to expand, or arguably remove, the center’s boundaries to include people of all genders, including cisgender men. In their reflections, they contended with these boundaries being both philosophical and literal. While aiming to expand the scope of the center’s work by engaging men through masculinity-related programming, Mel also recognized actual
physical boundaries that presented risks for marginalized students. Specifically, Mel named that the center is housed in a small space and, consequently, its walls increase the chance for survivors and trans* students to run into those who have caused them direct harm.

“Is This Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing Kind of Programming?: Navigating Problematic Program Participants

Practitioners engaging in violence prevention work also found it difficult to believe in the value of masculinity-centered practices when their program participants behaved in problematic and harmful ways. Several practitioners in the study communicated feeling rage, disappointment, or even betrayed when men, including students and staff volunteers, co-opted their status as masculinity program participants. Tegan, as an example, discussed her fear of men using their participation in the masculinity dialogue program as a way to get “good men credit.” This fear came true when one of the student participants in the center’s masculinity program became a responding party to a Title IX issue. Tegan shared,

That was a really negative experience for me where it’s like you co-opted the space, and what happened is he did talk about it in the Title IX hearing. He’s like, “Well, I’m in [the masculinity program], and I’m learning about masculinity. And so I’m not responsible.” I was so mad, everything that I was fearful of happening, happened. And that tainted that cohort’s experience and even my experience with the program, that it was leveraged as a way to not be held responsible for being harmful and violent to women. So I think that’s definitely something that sticks out and it makes me think, what are all the things that I don’t know? How many men maybe were saying “Oh, I’m part of [the masculinity program], let’s go to a party.” I’m always suspicious, and I hate having that feeling, but I can’t not have that feeling.

Although Tegan saw first-hand how masculinity programming made a difference, she also felt suspicious that men would use their participation to cause harm or as a way to avoid taking accountability for their actions. She described feeling many highs and lows when facilitating masculinity work, and the lows felt particularly defeating because “even with the men who are
supposed to be getting this right, they’re effing it up.” Based on her experiences, Tegan made it a point to participate in each cohort’s first session to directly speak with participants about not abusing the program or using it as a way to harm women. Along with concerns about student participants co-opting masculinity programming, two participants in the study experienced a similar dynamic with campus staff members who served as volunteer facilitators for their masculinity programming. One of Laura’s facilitators, for instance, had engaged in problematic patterns of behavior in their professional role on campus. During an inquiry of his actions, he pointed to his facilitator role to demonstrate that he is a “good guy” who is committed to equity work, ultimately placing Laura in an uncomfortable position. To prevent this issue as the program moved forward, Laura was committed to actively identifying and recruiting staff facilitators who demonstrated a commitment to equity work and with whom she had meaningful interactions.

Not only did practitioners feel angry when students and staff attempted to use their program participation to receive “good men credit,” but some navigated tensions when participants caused direct harm to others. For Margaret, these experiences were profound and have ultimately shaped her view of masculinity-centered practices. In the first iteration of masculinity programming within her center, men participants would receive a certificate in bystander intervention training upon program completion. Eventually, three different survivors came to the center to receive advocacy support and disclosed that men graduates of the center’s masculinity program had used their status as program participants to gain access and then commit sexual assault by saying things like, “I’ll walk you home, I’m a [masculinity program] graduate.” Margaret experienced dissonance with the fact that a program facilitated and
promoted by the WGEC had created opportunities for students to cause harm, exactly what the center hoped to prevent. She explained,

[The program] got a lot of national clout because we were one of the only programs in the country, and then to really sit with how difficult it must have been for survivors to come forward and tell the very center who was like cheering on this program that those dudes caused harm.

The center staff felt personally harmed and shocked by the men involved and the lack of accountability, and they decided to disband masculinity programming for two years. Based on the concern that this work is “like a wolf in sheep’s clothing kind of programming,” Margaret only felt comfortable reengaging masculinity programming if the center shifted its approach. She stated that in the new programming structure, “we don’t do certificates, you don’t graduate, … [participants are] no longer thought of as activists in nature. … You are not to be at the front of the Take Back the Night rallies, you don’t have t-shirts.” These changes were brought about in an attempt to avoid the harm and violence caused by the men in the program’s first iteration. Margaret shared that this experience was something she consistently thought about, and she felt it was important to continue asking, “Okay, how could this harm someone?” when developing masculinity work within the center.

“What do we Want to Create in the World as Opposed to What do we Want to Prevent?”: Reframing Violence Prevention

In working to provide advocacy resources and a safe space on campus for survivors and other marginalized groups of students, the practitioners highlighted in this section found themselves navigating the tension that masculinity-centered practices had the potential to both support their violence prevention efforts and perpetuate harm. In response, participants in the
study reflected on several ways to address this tension through reframing violence prevention while also recognizing there is no simple solution.

For some, it was important to acknowledge that survivors can also be cisgender men. Ruth and their colleagues, for instance, developed violence prevention resources with thoughtful feedback from survivors of all genders. Whenever confronted with the “what about-ism of ‘men are survivors too,’” Ruth argued it was powerful to acknowledge, “Yes, men are. And typically, the perpetrators of that violence are also other men. That harms men. We don’t want to harm anyone, right?” Ruth framed their masculinity programming as a way to prevent the ways in which hegemonic masculinity creates violent conditions for all survivors. Practitioners also discussed the importance of doing this work in an accountable way so that they could offer programming for men survivors without marginalizing the experiences of other groups. As Alex and their center staff discussed developing a program for male survivors, they wondered, “How do we do this in a way that we know that this violence is happening and very real and has different stigma when we also know that all these other erasures are happening?” As another perspective, Margaret reflected that acknowledging cisgender men survivors created a dynamic within the WGEC of an “in group out group thing that’s always shifting.” It was important for her that the center could express their frustration with cisgender men but not in a way that makes them feel they cannot access survivor resources in the center space.

Because of these tensions, several practitioners advocated for or supported the separation of violence prevention efforts from the work of their centers. While advocacy and violence prevention are often an integral part of the history and development of WGECs, some argued that a clear separation could allow for them to better focus on educative work and community-
building. Shelby, for instance, viewed the violence prevention unit on her campus as doing the necessary accountability work with white, cisgender, straight men, which allowed her center to do more expansive, intersectional masculinity programming “beyond just the issue of sexual assault.” Similarly, Alex believed there was an important distinction to make between masculinity programming for violence prevention versus broader masculinity programming. They viewed violence prevention efforts as focusing on engaging men through “male allies programs or male survivor stuff,” whereas broader masculinity work engaged people across genders in different ways. Outside of programming considerations, practitioners also raised the hope that separating violence prevention efforts from their centers would better serve students from an advocacy perspective. Ruth received feedback from survivors across gender identities that they would rather receive support separate from the WGEC space, and, similarly, Marie hoped that the separation would encourage more survivors to report and seek services.

Finally, several practitioners discussed the importance of shifting the paradigm for violence prevention work, particularly as it connects to masculinity-centered practices. These practitioners viewed punitive approaches to violence prevention work as not only ineffective but also harmful for framing men as disposable or a problem to be fixed. Additionally, they considered how punitive approaches can both be limiting to survivors and disproportionately harmful to men of color, queer, and trans* folks. In response, a few practitioners discussed the need to move away from punitive responses and, instead, work towards anti-carceral responses grounded in connection, accountability, healing, and love. In Margaret’s experience, masculinity dialogue programming rarely brought about accountability; instead, she saw small groups of men gaining a better understanding of the ways they perpetuate gender violence. Margaret
consequently aimed to shift masculinity programming from being a self-serving space to instead being a critical opportunity for men to reclaim their humanity from the ways that hegemonic masculinity has stripped of them. As part of this reframe, Margaret was interested in exploring examples of masculinity programming rooted in transformative justice or restorative justice that brought about accountability through social pressures and changed behaviors.

Also challenging punitive approaches to violence prevention, Mel discussed experiencing paradigm misalignment with colleagues who viewed men and masculinity work as a way to stop men from causing harm to others. Instead of framing men as a problem to be fixed, Mel wanted masculinity work to resist viewing men from an oppositional lens and acknowledge the ways in which men have also experienced harm in an educational way. They wondered,

What do we do with these constructs of masculinity that are harming our young men and are harming the rest of our communities? And how can we actually have the conversation framed, not from a place of violence prevention, … instead, from a place of curiosity and a place of connection? … We all benefit from reflecting on ways to reduce harm, and that approach is more beneficial than cancel culture or reductionist approaches to behavior change.

It was important for Mel to approach masculinity work with the question, “What do we want to create in the world as opposed to what do we want to prevent?” By focusing on harm reduction, rather than violence prevention, Mel saw opportunities for masculinity programming to engage men as part of the community in ways that centered restoration, collective liberation, and relationships. For instance,

One of the things I stress, particularly when folks are asking me to talk to young men around sexual violence is that, yeah, Title IX exists, it exists to protect the university. And if you’re approaching conversations about relationships and sex from a place of “I’m scared I’m going to get accused of something” instead of “I’m scared I might hurt someone,” yeah, you got to flip your perspective. Because if you’re approaching it from this place of “I know myself as a man, I know what integrity means to me, I know what masculinity means to me,” the likelihood that you’re going to cause harm goes down. The
likelihood that you’re going to talk about what you want and need with someone goes up. … That window allows for, you know, conversations about racism, it allows for conversations about sexism, it allows for conversations about homophobia and trans* folks and the impact of violence on Black trans* women, like it goes all over when you look at it from that place instead of from the place of “here are the behaviors you’re not supposed to engage in, don’t do them.”

Mel believed that applying a relational and collective approach to masculinity work not only more effectively engages men in their humanity, but it also creates opportunities to reduce harm beyond sexual violence.

**Encountering Institutional Dominance**

Along with navigating tensions at the intersection of violence prevention and masculinity-centered practices, participants in the study experienced challenges when confronted with dominance while doing this work within their institutional contexts. Although practitioners engaged masculinity-centered practices with the intention to disrupt oppression, some were faced with situations that served to reinforce patriarchy and white supremacy, thus leading them to question whether this work can be done effectively within higher education institutions built upon and upheld by dominance.

“No Matter What we Said or did, They Already had the Outcomes”: Losing Agency

Although all participants in the study found value in masculinity-centered practices, a few experienced frustrations when they felt pressured or forced to take the lead on these initiatives, especially when directed to do so in ways that conflicted with the values and priorities of their centers. Some practitioners received pressure to create masculinity programming from campus leaders who felt there were not enough supports and spaces for the declining population of cisgender men on campus. For WGECs that aimed to center those on the margins of
masculinity, including non-binary, trans*, and/or queer men of color, these external pressures to recenter cisgender men at predominantly white institutions felt particularly troubling.

Marie experienced a unique situation in which she felt stripped of her agency and forced to develop masculinity programming in a way that did not align with her center’s approach to the work. Although Marie did not necessarily want to take the lead on masculinity work at the institution, she received a directive from senior leaders, two white cisgender men, that the WGEC needed to better engage men. The directive unexpectedly came up during an individual meeting with her supervisor where she felt she received a ding, what I thought was a ding, on a performance evaluation when my supervisor brought up the men and masculinity thing as something I needed to work on for the next year … when we hadn’t really discussed it.

She elaborated,

He was like, “So, what are you all doing for men?” And it wasn’t necessarily the idea of masculinity. He just came out and said, “What are you all doing for men?” I was like, “Well, what we do here is really for everyone.” It became clear to me that even the change of the center’s name [to include ‘gender’] to my supervisor … meant women and male resource center. … I was taken aback by how hard he was kind of pushing me in this way. … In their minds, [senior leaders] didn’t want any of the centers [on campus] to just be monolithic in the sense that they only served one population. … To them, adding the gender piece really meant we have to find a way to include men.

A number of challenges surfaced for Marie during this conversation. First, by framing this discussion within the context of a performance evaluation, her supervisor wielded power in a way that left Marie little room to negotiate the expectations for the masculinity programming. Further, given her positionality as a Black woman, Marie had to navigate dynamics of race and gender privilege as white, cisgender men directly influenced the work of the WGEC without much knowledge of gender programming. Second, the directive to include and engage more men in the center directly conflicted with Marie’s approach to masculinity programming. For Marie,
masculinity work was not intended to exclusively engage cisgender men; instead, she wanted to
develop programming that examined masculinity as a construct or concept and approached
gender identity and expression beyond the binary. In having to navigate the expectations of
upper leadership within a hierarchical institutional context, Marie felt limited in how she could
align masculinity-centered practices with the center’s expansive approach.

Ruth also shared a poignant experience in which institutional leadership took over the
direction of masculinity programming. Instead of being forced to engage masculinity-centered
practices in a certain way, Ruth and their colleagues lost agency as the Board of Trustees worked
to dismantle their masculinity programming. Although institutional leaders had initially been
supportive of campus-wide masculinity work, their enthusiasm drastically shifted when the
programming came under scrutiny in the conservative media. The Board of Trustees, a group of
predominantly white, straight, cisgender men, put pressure on campus leaders to form a
committee and rebrand the program entirely. Describing this process as feeling silencing,
exhausting, and traumatic, Ruth explained,

The [masculinity program] website got taken down. The mission and vision, all of that
was gone and swept under the rug. It got taken over by [another office] and [that office]
said they were going to rebrand it. And there was a committee of people that talked about
getting rid of the language, like they slashed basically everything that had to do with
cross-cultural understandings of masculinity and anything that could tie queerness or
transness to masculinity. They got rid of the word cisgender every time it was used, they
got rid of trans*. They got rid of masculinities, plural. They took all of that out, gutted
everything, all of the work we did, and said they were going to do something new. And to
the best of my knowledge, they haven’t.

While Ruth and their colleagues were in the room, they did not have a voice in the rebranding
process that ultimately served to dismantle the program. It was especially painful for Ruth to see
the co-founders of the program, two individuals who represented marginalized racial and gender identities, not asked to speak or comment. Ruth asserted,

> It felt like it was upholding white hetero patriarchal supremacy, which was literally the whole point [of the program] – to push back against that and to listen to the voices of Black and queer and trans* folks. … [K]nowing that no matter what we said or did, they already had the outcomes. … [The program] just went away in a violent and insidious way. And that is the way that masculinity works. That’s replicating everything that we are trying to fight against.

In recounting their experiences, Ruth highlighted the cumulative nature of institutional violence and its role in further oppressing marginalized practitioners in their attempts to disrupt these very forms of dominance.

“Always Threatened at the Best of Times”: Navigating a Precarious Position on Campus

Several participants in the study also acknowledged that their centers held precarious positions on campus, and threats to their funding and resources prompted them to be cautious and strategic when navigating masculinity-centered practices. These practitioners recognized that holding a precarious organizational position was not unique to their individual centers, and the fact that identity-based centers across the country faced similar concerns made them particularly wary. Ruth articulated that their office had been threatened to be defunded twice by the state legislature, and, as a result,

> There’s nervousness around that for me because I want my students to have a space that is long-lasting and secure. And it was right around the time where an LGBT center was disbanded in Tennessee. And then a women’s center, they fired all of the staff when [something controversial took place]. … There were a lot of chilling effects, things that were happening around that time. So we were really mindful that if we wanted to do something [related to masculinity], we wanted it to be coalitional. We wanted it to be research-based. We wanted it to be peer-reviewed and with white male professors in solidarity but with more marginalized folks leading the way.
Also working within a conservative state, Laura noticed that higher education budgets were continuously being cut and diversity initiatives increasingly under scrutiny. Within her center, Laura’s funding was “always threatened at the best of times, and especially right now with the political climate being what it is.” To stay discreet, Laura and her staff were selective about what they posted on social media and how they funded their masculinity programming. She shared,

> We have to be really careful not to spend state money on that kind of stuff. … I’m not using any institutional money for this programming. I’m using money from a federal grant that I wrote and got. So it’s like, I don’t know what they would have to get their knickers in a twist about because I’m not taking resources from the institution, and I’m delivering programming and education that students want.

Both Ruth and Laura understood that masculinity programming could invite pushback and potential consequences that could compromise the stability or even survival of their centers; as a result, they each employed various strategies to protect their position on campus.

Facing similar challenges, one participant in the study actually leaned on masculinity-centered practices as a way to protect the center. Tegan explained that she had several different intentions for engaging masculinity within the WGEC, and one of them was increasing the center’s relevance on campus. She stated,

> If I’m being really honest in regard to thinking about increasing the audience, I think it also had to do a lot with our budget …. That we could say, “Hey, we’re actually serving a broader audience than what you might think. …” … So that we couldn’t just be relegated to this margin of the university of “we only serve a few handful of people,” we wanted to become more relevant for the university as a whole.

By intentionally including men within the WGEC, Tegan also hoped to shield the center from any backlash. Tegan stated, “I also don’t want to give anybody a reason to sue us and say we’re not programming for all students. By having programming for men and masculinity, it makes it so that it’s not like this inequitable access to education or resources.” In recognizing that Title IX
had been used on other college campuses as a way to promote an equality framework, or the notion that all students must be served equally, Tegan worked to get ahead of any potential risks for the center to be labeled as inequitable, problematic, or irrelevant.

In these situations, dominance was asserted through institutional policies and budgetary allocations that served as ways to control how WGEC practitioners did their work. In response, these practitioners found strategic ways to maneuver hostile institutional and/or sociopolitical climates in order to protect their centers. In regard to masculinity-centered practices, their strategies ranged from doing this work under the radar to leveraging masculinity programming to demonstrate the center’s relevance on campus. It is important to also name, however, that some practitioners, including Tegan, showed concern that using masculinity-centered practices as a way to protect their centers could ultimately serve to depoliticize them. For instance, because Tegan believed it was important to center those with marginalized genders in the work of the WGEC, she wondered if masculinity programming would take up too much space and resources. She asked, “Who are we not supporting because we’re giving this time and energy to men? Who is at risk?” Additionally, Jordan wondered if the adoption of masculinity programming by WGECs served to reinforce patriarchy. She explained that in her culture, there are women who maybe do not identify as non-binary because the community does not necessarily use that language, but,

because of machismo, there’s some safety and protection in performing masculinity. So I’m like, do women’s centers feel with this attack that we’re having on women’s centers, specifically from the right, is there protection under doing masculinity work that we otherwise wouldn’t have? To say, “Well, we’re also catering to you. So it’s okay. … Look at all of these programs we’re doing just for men or masculinity.”
While Jordan recognized the need for centers to act strategically, she believed it was important to consider how engaging men and masculinity as protection might compromise or water down the work of WGECs. Because of these tensions, some wondered if masculinity work in higher education could ever be effective. Ruth spoke to this concern when they referenced Audre Lorde’s “master’s tools,” asking, “Can we use the academy to undo sexism? Whose tools are these?” By acknowledging higher education as a patriarchal, sexist, racist, homophobic, and transphobic institution, these practitioners clearly understood the institutional barriers in place that threatened not only their ability to direct their own programs and initiatives but also the existence of WGECs themselves.

**Centering the Voices of the Marginalized**

When working to develop masculinity-centered practices, participants in the study also faced oppressive dynamics when collaborating with colleagues, specifically cisgender men. These experiences pushed practitioners to think beyond the content of their masculinity programming and consider the on-the-ground process for coordinating, facilitating, and doing the work. As they navigated these dynamics, many participants confirmed the need for centering the voices of those with marginalized identities in the development of masculinity-centered practices.

**“Is it Worth the Emotional Investment?”: Experiencing Marginalization When Working with Cisgender Men**

Many participants across the study recounted feeling marginalized when engaging masculinity-centered practices as genderqueer, non-binary, or cisgender woman practitioners. A few spoke about experiencing self-doubt and harm as they navigated an underlying assumption
that men practitioners are best equipped to lead efforts on masculinity. On Alex’s campus, for example, masculinity-centered practices were hosted by multiple units, not just the WGEC; early in their work, Alex had experienced some tensions with men colleagues regarding who “owned” or should be doing the work on campus. As someone who is genderqueer, Alex felt self-doubt and hurt when questioned about their place in masculinity work. These encounters made them wonder,

Who am I, as a non-cis man, to lead masculinity programming? Where we have some men on campus and cis men on campus who are doing masculinity work but more, in the way I perceive it, how to perform and succeed within the systems that exist versus how to dismantle the systems that exist … [and] I don’t get seen as having the ability to be an expert or bring things to the table on that because it’s not my fully lived experience.

Other practitioners similarly shared that, as non-cisgender men, they were perceived as being less qualified to contribute to masculinity programming due to lack of direct experience. This belief served to reinforce dynamics of internalized sexism as participants in the study questioned their legitimacy and value when engaging in this work. Moni challenged this idea, firmly believing that “anybody of any gender can do this as long as they have a critical understanding of gender violence and how masculinity is impacted by and on different identities.” Moni further explained that, as a cisgender woman, she had firsthand experiences with masculinity and, therefore, very much has a place in the conversation.

Even when participants did not receive this type of messaging, some who worked closely on masculinity programming with cisgender men colleagues began to question who they could trust to do this work in an equitable way. A few practitioners discussed navigating sexism when collaborating with others. Mel, for instance, was “surprised to find out how ingrained sexism was
for my male colleagues who’ve been doing this work for so long.” When working on a committee of about a dozen campus colleagues to develop a men’s initiative, Mel shared,

There were usually only maybe two women-identified folks or genderqueer folks in the room. So two non-cis men in the room. And the number of times I would share a perspective or idea that would be dismissed and then [a man] would share the exact same perspective or idea ten minutes later, and it would be lauded as the best ever was just nearly every meeting. If I wasn’t taking notes, nobody was taking notes. So I was a defunct or default secretary. It was just all of these ways. And the number of times I’d have to sit with [my colleague] and say, “Do you realize what’s happening? Do you realize that this is why I’m concerned that if we remove women and genderqueer and non-binary and trans* folks from doing the work, the work will continue to be harmful to those populations?” Because there’s a big push for men to be the ones to “fix the men,” like “this is a men’s issue, men need to be the ones to take the lead.” … So if I’m not in the room, what I see is that misogyny and patriarchy are actually, and racism in some ways, … just continuing to perpetuate harm.

Through experiencing marginalization as a genderqueer androgynous woman when developing masculinity programming with their cisgender men colleagues, Mel grew concerned that this work could be built in ways that perpetuate harm. These experiences confirmed Mel’s belief that masculinity programing must center the needs of women, genderqueer, non-binary, and trans* folks in all aspects of programming, including the planning stages.

Margaret, a cisgender woman, similarly navigated dynamics of sexism when engaging with cisgender men colleagues to facilitate masculinity programming. When she reflected on the personal impact of doing this work, Margaret felt exhausted being in a position where she needed to be able to rely upon men colleagues to join her in these efforts. She explained,

I have to be very delicate in how I give feedback [to them] because at any point they could be like, “I’m out of here, you’re too high maintenance, you give too much feedback, you’re too angry.” And so even when I’ve chosen a career that addresses an area of oppression that I’ve personally experienced, … within that context, I don’t even get to fully embrace my anger and frustration and expectations for a changed world. … It’s so mentally exhausting. And I have to carefully try to like, I hear a lot of women talk about how in executive positions of power, how they wordsmith emails over and over when they’re talking to people who are above them. I don’t experience that. I experience
this careful stitching of words anytime I’m interacting with someone who’s an “ally” … I’m like, “Don’t run away if I give you this feedback,” because I need to talk to this dude so this dude can talk to other dudes.

Understanding the importance of maintaining her men colleagues’ investment in masculinity programming, Margaret, rather than conveying her authentic expectations, felt she needed to strategically articulate her needs and feedback in ways that were approachable and agreeable. While this approach felt personally challenging, Margaret’s lived experiences taught her that sexism shows up in the workplace in ways that can easily position non-cisgender men as too direct, angry, and difficult to work with. Despite her efforts to support the involvement of her men colleagues, Margaret felt deeply conflicted when she learned that a campus colleague who volunteered for the masculinity program was named as someone who caused harm to a graduate student. She stated,

We feel so often the work around like men’s engagement on college campuses, the men that we think of are the recipients, the students who are going to receive this information from us. There’s not a whole lot of conversation about like, how do you foster a community of men who can help provide some of that education? … We have a paid position, not every institution is going to have that. So they’re going to rely on volunteers, sometimes self-appointed feminists, male feminists who are just sort of saying, “I want to do this work.” It has really given pause for me around, how can I even trust dudes in this work? Can I? Do I want to? Is it worth the emotional investment? … Was the investment that we put into this person as a facilitator worth it? I don’t know.

Margaret explained that trusting who does the work is just as important how programming content is designed and delivered. Participants experiencing this tension in the study shared that, while cisgender men must be involved in the work, there were times when they felt most comfortable and trusting when they and their non-binary, genderqueer, trans*, and cisgender woman colleagues guided efforts focused on masculinity.
“Should it Really be us?”: Navigating Gendered Labor Dynamics

For many participants in the study, navigating the labor of developing and facilitating masculinity programming felt like a double-edged sword. On one hand, WGEC practitioners believed cisgender men must be directly involved in the work of developing masculinity-centered practices; however, practitioners did not trust for this work to be done by them alone. Ruth reflected on this tension when they asked, “When will straight cis white men take responsibility for this work as being their own and … don’t just take it and run with it and do harm? When will there be equal ownership? Can there be equal ownership?” On the other hand, while practitioners asserted that it was critical for folks with marginalized gender identities to directly inform masculinity programming, they also felt frustrated when they were expected to carry the weight of the work in ways that reinforced sexism through gendered labor dynamics.

Several participants in the study who led masculinity-based initiatives wanted to work alongside cisgender men faculty/staff and felt frustrated when they did not step up. Moni, for example, received feedback from men colleagues on campus that there was not enough masculinity work taking place. When she responded,

“Hey, we’re thinking about this, we really need some buy-in though,” folks were silent. And … with a lot of those offices, they are offices that we already do trainings for. So they’re willing for us to come in and spend time to do the bystander training, but when it comes to helping us brainstorm how this can look for students …, it was like All Quiet on the Western Front. … There’s so many frustrations about the work, … but I think that on top was just a reminder of folks wanting us to do the work without wanting to do the work themselves. It was so frustrating. Nobody wanted to be in the trenches to do the work with us. And we recognize that that’s our work, we’re the office, but will you respond to emails with what you’d like to see? [They] didn’t have time to put in the energy to walk alongside us.

For Moni, it was especially difficult that men colleagues asked for her labor around masculinity work but did not want to put in the effort themselves. She further shared,
Doing it as a woman is tough, and there were times when honestly, fuck this. I was tired. I’m tired of holding these spaces … it’s ironic the ways that masculinity gets played when you’re doing masculinity work. But it’s important work. … It is just tough for women, and I’m sure it’s tougher for folks who are genderqueer, and I’m absolutely sure it’s tough for trans* folks, so there needs to be better systems in place to support folks … besides saying that cis men should just do the work. Y’all aren’t doing the work. … Very few cis men want to do this, they want to talk about it and bounce.

By naming how masculinity was showing up in her experience, Moni highlighted the ways that folks with marginalized gender identities were doing the heavy lifting to make this work happen.

Tegan also discussed how women staff members held the burden to create and hold spaces for masculinity work on her campus. She shared feeling resentful because she “expected more men to step up and support this work, and they just didn’t.” This dynamic led her to question whether it was worth the time and energy that the WGEC put into masculinity programming; she asked, “Why us? Should it really be us? … How are we going to actually get men to do this work and to be in it?” Tegan’s frustrations with the lack of initiative from men colleagues was exacerbated by her partnership with a masculinity-based non-profit organization to provide programming for students. She elaborated,

A lot of [the programming] was based on what [the organization] wanted to do, and then fitting it into the rest of our programming. … Working with [them] was super challenging and … they kind of used that as an inroad to say, “Oh, we want to do this programming and partnering with you.” But in the end, it was very much, “You need to do what our grant says that you need to do.” And I was like wait, so you have all this money to do this program. And we’re doing all this work for free for you. Like, we didn’t get money to host, we had to spend money for the event space and the AV equipment and things like that. They didn’t give us money to do that. And it was very much like this, “No, this is the way it needs to be. This is how it needs to be done.” And they’re really not transparent about how much time it would take or things like that. That was one of those moments of like, oh my gosh, these guys are supposed to be talking about men and masculinity and male privilege, and they’re just walking all over us. That felt really defeating.
In this partnership, Tegan experienced pressure to engage in masculinity work with men colleagues in ways that felt uneven and harmful. Despite trying to do work that aimed to examine and disrupt harmful outcomes related to masculinity, this working relationship served to reinforce them.

While these labor dynamics felt exhausting and frustrating to participants, all practitioners in the study maintained the belief that folks with marginalized gender identities needed to be directly involved in the development of masculinity work. Margaret shared an important perspective that the labor associated with embedding masculinity programming within feminist spaces of WGECs could better allow for accountability and liberatory outcomes. She explained,

So, it is additional labor for feminist spaces. And I still think that it is the best avenue towards liberation. … Also in a weird way, it does minimize work on feminist organizations to have them embedded, because there’s a lot of shit that like, when our men’s program coordinator comes up with an idea that we’re like, ‘Yeah, that’s a nice try, that’s not gonna work,’” that were they not embedded in our center, we might not catch it as quickly and then that becomes extra work to not be the “angry feminists” who are, you know. So I think in some ways, while it is more labor, it’s also differed by how much interrupting you don’t have to do because they have to get things vetted early.

By having the opportunity to provide guidance and direction for masculinity work during the planning stages, Margaret argued that labor, particularly emotional labor, could ultimately be reduced.

“A lot of Different Voices in the Room”: Applying Theory and Building Coalitions

Nearly all participants across the study discussed approaches for centering marginalized voices in the development of masculinity programming, both in theory and practice. According to Margaret, folks on the margins can provide accountability for masculinity work through epistemic privilege, the notion that “folks who experience oppression are closer to the truth of
how to alleviate that oppression.” Most participants agreed that in order to stay connected to the needs of all genders, this work cannot be solely done by men and masculine folks; the work must also directly involve those on the margins, including genderqueer, non-binary, trans*, and queer folks; women; femmes; and people of color.

One core approach for centering marginalized perspectives was through the application of critical theories to practice. Several practitioners hoped to move beyond traditional men and masculinities scholarship to guide the work. Shelby argued that this traditional scholarship, or “first wave masculinity studies,” is limited in scope due to its centering of cisgender men’s perspectives as well as its focus on violence prevention efforts. Mel similarly explained that so much of the feminist literature about men and masculinity work has been ignored because I think there have been very prominent white men voices we’ve looked to, right? There’s been the Kimmels, there’s been the … Katzes. … So there’s been these scholars of men’s studies, mostly white, not all, who approach masculinity conversations as a way to fix masculinity, like masculinity is broken and harmful.

In response, practitioners looked beyond both traditional men and masculinities studies literature as well as white feminism in search of different perspectives written by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) folks, Black queer feminists, Black feminists, woman of color feminists, and womanists. Mel, for instance, highlighted the book Unapologetic written by Charlene Carruthers. They stated that while the book is not explicitly about the topic of masculinity, it has masculinity studies in it. It talks about Black radical queer feminism as a response to and a way of reframing the battle that we’re currently in for Black lives and for non-binary and trans* folks’ safety and like, it’s all in there. And why aren’t we, you know, using that as a perspective that teaches us about masculinity as well? I think … the field has been so narrowly defined by white cis men who think in the binary. And feminism also so narrowly defined by cis white women. The scholarship is out there, we’re just not looking in the “right places.”
Several other practitioners discussed the importance of applying Black feminist perspectives to the development of masculinity programming. A few acknowledged the prolific work of bell hooks, who played a pivotal role in their understandings of masculinity. Moni, a Black woman, shared that hooks helped her understand that “violence and masculinity don’t have to be hand in hand.” Additionally, bell hooks talked about vulnerability, love, and masculinity in ways that both set her free and allowed her to identify how she needed support from men, particularly men of color. As another example, Alex implemented a staff reading program in their center so that the work was directly informed by Black and woman of color feminisms. Alex created a learning community-based culture amongst the staff where they read a different book each term by authors such as bell hooks and Adrienne Maree Brown and discussed ways to think differently about their masculinity programming.

Another approach for centering voices on the margins was through coalition-building. Many participants approached masculinity work as a shared responsibility across genders that fostered learning, accountability, and a more equitable distribution of labor. Working with staff and faculty members who represented diverse privileged and marginalized identities, Ruth spoke to the value of developing masculinity-centered practices through a coalitional approach. They acknowledged that because engaging in masculinity work can take an emotional toll on practitioners, a collaborative approach created important opportunities for co-learning, support, and accountability to the goals of their initiatives. Ruth shared,

It felt exciting to be part of a group that had really similar goals. … It was really special to be in a place with people who cared about women and femmes. … And we would never just start a meeting like, “Alright, let’s get to it. Let’s do these things,” like we would really consciously check-in with each other. It was very relational, it was very caring. … How do we take a minute to think about who’s not at the table and get those voices in the room? How can we unlearn and unpack together the baggage that we’re all
bringing into the room? And that was hard, but it was powerful and important. … It’s also I think really dangerous to do that work if you haven’t examined the ways that you are holding up white supremacy and misogyny and trans* misogynoir and all the pieces that were informing the work that we were doing, … it was just a lot of different voices in the room.

For Ruth and their colleagues, it was critical to engage in their own self-work so that they could better center the needs of those on the margins not only in their programming but also within the committee itself. Ruth also shared that working collaboratively allowed them to be mindful of who does what and who goes into which spaces. They explained,

That’s why it was really important to have that coalition, because one of the things we would talk about is, “Okay we got a [masculinity program] request, who’s the audience? What do we need to keep in mind when we’re picking a facilitator [from the committee]?” … And we can also pair off and be like, “Okay what privileged identities do we want to match with some oppressed identities? Who’s in the audience that might feel alienated if two cis white men show up to do this talk? What would make people feel more comfortable …?” We wouldn’t send two cis white women into … a group that talks about Black and Latinx masculinity. … Also, I think sometimes with queer participants there’s a nervousness to share anything negative about queer and trans* relationships because there’s so much homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, that [you need at] least one facilitator that’s queer who’s like, “No, it’s okay if you talk about a negative experience or talk about a power differential or talk about a sexual assault. We’re not gonna make you be the one person who’s explaining everything for queer people.”

By having diverse facilitators to choose from, Ruth and their colleagues could be intentional with how they served marginalized groups of students on campus while also supporting one another.

Several participants in the study viewed coalitional work as an accountability mechanism. Jordan, for instance, sat on an advisory board of mostly cisgender women from across campus that aimed to make sure the masculinity dialogue program housed in the violence prevention unit centered the dismantling of patriarchy instead of centering men. To minimize the possibility of causing harm through masculinity programming, a few practitioners added that working collaboratively must involve discomfort. Alex argued that in order for masculinity work to be
transformative and generative, it was important that the work not be done in isolation. While there were times when “it would feel easier to just go to my center and put my head down,” Alex learned to have an openness to building coalition with others “around a particular part of our work, even if there are other pieces that aren’t in alignment.” Alex expressed,

So there is a quote by Bernice Johnson Reagan, and she talks about coalitional politics and mentions … “If you’re in a coalition, and you’re comfortable, you know it’s not a broad enough coalition.” … I’ve had conversations with colleagues that had been fraught and uncomfortable and make me angry at times. … But what we’re building is probably better for the discomfort those conversations have caused.

Margaret further elaborated on this point when she discussed how the center made sense of supporting students in the aftermath of Kobe Bryant’s recent death. She stated that this was a really important moment for us to sit at the intersections of being an anti-racist center and a place that believes survivors. … We had to understand that for Black folks, particularly Black men, Kobe Bryant was a very important figure. How do we say that we want to hold people in the full range of human emotions and then deny people the ability to grieve? And how do we not support grieving people without also sending a message that we don’t believe survivors? … It feels complicated, but I feel like the less complicated it feels, the more likely it is that we’re leaving someone out or we’re missing something. So I’m not afraid of complicated, I think that’s part of our check. … When we do any program we run through as a staff like the sort of big 10 identities disability, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, like how could this unintentionally cause harm to this group? Who are we leaving out?

Through sharing these examples, both Margaret and Alex demonstrated that doing masculinity work as a WGEC practitioner must feel complicated; otherwise, someone is being left out or potentially harmed. Collaborating with others, particularly those who could bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the conversation, served as a critical accountability check for the work.
Creating Change

As a final consideration, nearly all participants across the study experienced moments of questioning whether or not masculinity-centered practices could actually create social change. As a result, a few practitioners considered the possibility of taking a break from leading masculinity initiatives. Most practitioners, however, asked critical questions for pushing the work forward in more effective ways.

“There’s a Difference Between Inviting Versus Centering”: Determining Target Audience

For many participants, it was important to reflect upon and identify the target audience for masculinity-centered practices. While their programs and initiatives often directly engaged men and masculine participants, often cisgender men, practitioners simultaneously wanted to make sure not to divert resources and energy from the needs of cisgender and trans* women, femmes, and non-binary students. Tegan shared that, at one point, the center was “spending more money on men and masculinity than any other events. And that felt not great for me. … How can we … pull this off and do it well without the expense of it impacting our other programming?” Jordan further argued that masculinity-centered practices were only worth doing if supportive to the aforementioned marginalized groups. She explained,

I’m not jumping at the idea of doing masculinities work. … I can’t fully do that work when there are still women and femmes who are not getting the full breadth of support that they need from the institution, because there’s just still too much work to do to engage in gender equity … and making sure women and trans*, non-binary folks have full access to the institution that it’s hard for me to even engage in any consistent and real way with masculinities work. I can only really engage in it so long as it is helpful to women and femmes at this point. I think … if I have more support in my office …, then I could possibly engage in it in more meaningful ways. Because men need to dismantle patriarchy and do that work in the same way white folks need to dismantle white supremacy and do that work.
As Tegan and Jordan demonstrated, practitioners did not want masculinity programming to take energy, resources, and even physical space away from students with marginalized gender identities. However, this balance was difficult to strike for practitioners who viewed cisgender, heterosexual men as the students most in need of masculinity programming in order to reduce harm and support gender equity.

Many participants across the study reflected that masculinity-centered practices should target cisgender men, particularly “white, cishet men,” as their core audience in order to create change. Tegan stated, “I think I would still have to be more thoughtful about when we say all men are invited to be a part of this, do we actually really mean that?” Tegan compared one of her masculinity program cohorts consisting of mostly cisgender men from Greek Life and athletics with another cohort made up of trans* men and folks who took women’s and gender studies courses. Referencing the latter group, Tegan argued,

It shifts the conversations and sometimes they would get more academic or just a lot more ... they had thought about it in ways that I’m like, “Um, maybe you should be in a 201 [level group rather than 101].” I don’t know if I would change the application or vetting process in a different way that would really try to recruit the cisgender men who have a very different relationship with hegemonic masculinity than the men who’ve been thinking about this for a while.

In order to advance gender equity, Tegan and other practitioners felt it was most pressing to engage cisgender men who have not yet had the opportunity to deeply explore masculinity. On the other hand, several practitioners expressed concern that working with the cisgender men who needed to engage in these discussions could problematically center dominance within their centers. Margaret, for instance, described seeing a trend of cisgender white men on campus reclaiming masculinity and celebrating fraternity by identifying with men’s rights organizations
like Saturdays are for the Boys. While these are the groups of students who could arguably benefit most from opportunities to critically examine masculinity, Margaret shared,

I’m not really convinced that the benefits outweigh the potential harm. I also don’t know how, when I think about incels and first-year white dudes who, you know, hypermasculinity is a slippery slow into some organized white nationalism … and our men’s programming needs to speak to those dudes like, “Hey, this is something you’d be interested in.” It’s very hard to do that without sounding like a rape apologist, without sounding like you don’t think that those views are anything but abhorrent, or even that balance. In some ways, we discredit our own centers and our own anti-racist feminism by trying to create programming that will appeal to the people who need to hear it. It’s so hard and a lot of energy goes into that, that I feel it could go other places.

Margaret argued that by focusing energy on recruiting cisgender men participants who engage in behaviors that perpetuate harm on campus, WGEC practitioners may unintentionally depoliticize their spaces.

In response to this tension, a few participants chose not to center white, cishet men in their masculinity programming. When selecting student staff members to support masculinity programming in the center, Moni received some pushback for choosing students who were queer men of color, one of whom was also undocumented, as opposed to white, cisgender, heterosexual men who could potentially have a broader reach on campus. Moni expressed,

The last two [interns] were not in popular spaces, they weren’t athletes, they weren’t in these popular spaces like music. … They were just chillin’ in queer spaces. And so we have this back and forth of, “Were the folks that you hired, were they really effective?”

Moni navigated an internal conflict that while she could spend her efforts trying to reach a broader audience of white, cishet men on campus and do more “effective” masculinity work, she explained that she would rather spend her time supporting and providing affinity spaces for men and masculine students who were “hungry and want to learn” rather than facilitate programming in “spaces that just don’t really care.” Shelby navigated the same tension. She wondered if
“white cishet men … are doing some of the most harm, … is it our duty to be educating them?”

She later asked, “How do we reach cishet men who are not inclined to be interested in talking about these things or thinking about these things while at the same time supporting folks who identify with masculinity who are marginalized?” Like Moni, Shelby preferred to center Black masculinity, trans*masculinity, and other intersecting experiences in the center’s programming in order to better serve students on the margins and push for expansive understandings of masculinity.

Alex provided another perspective when determining the target audience for their masculinity programming. When considering the scope of the center’s work and who they were trying to reach, Alex argued that it was not the role of the center to reach all women or all students on campus. In fact, Alex shared that

> it was impossible to think we can or should be for all women, right? We’re a majority, woman-identified campus, clearly people are finding community in lots of different places. It would dilute all of our programming if I was trying to reach all of those students. … How are we inviting versus centering? I was thinking about that and the addition of masculinity programs and how we’re serving men and again, it’s not trying to reach all men all the time. We think about, instead of … trying to reach all women or trying to reach everyone, we’re trying to reach students who are wanting to build community and believe a better world is possible, want to work with others to do that. And that transcends gender identity boundaries, right? … We are hurt by patriarchy, we are hurt by white supremacy, we are hurt by capitalism. … While we are mindful of how gender identities show up …, when we think about the scope of who we serve, it kind of transcends that.

Rather than identify their target audience through the lens of gender identity categories, Alex welcomed any student genuinely interested in disrupting oppressive systems to engage in the center’s masculinity programming. They added,

> We need to be holding a container for anybody who wants to come in and engage in feminist work, and to me that can be anybody. … So doing specific masculinity programming … people who might not have come in the door before, maybe they’re
going to come in the door. But doesn’t mean they’re centered. We can make space for people without centering like, “Okay, white fraternity men, the center’s now all about you.” So, I think there’s a difference between inviting versus centering.

While Alex viewed masculinity programming as an invitation for men and masculine folks who may not have previously come through the center’s doors, they were not actively attempting to reach those who need to hear it or need to change. Rather, Alex believed students should only engage in masculinity-centered practices if they are committed to building community with others to support social justice efforts. Alex framed masculinity-centered practices in a way that resisted the centering of dominance within the WGEC space.

“**It’s not Just About Identity Support**”: Individual and Systemic Change

Along with considering who to engage in masculinity-centered practices to effect change, participants across the study also questioned the type of change facilitated by this work. For most practitioners, masculinity programming created important opportunities for students’ consciousness-raising, interpersonal development, and personal learning and accountability. However, many also communicated a concern that masculinity programming predominantly contributed to individual growth without engaging participants in systems-level analysis for change.

Margaret explored this tension when her center’s masculinity dialogue program shifted from focusing on bystander intervention and skill-building to instead helping men “get at the deep connections of the lies that masculinity has taught [them].” She expressed,

In some ways, I feel like the pendulum has kind of swung a little bit too far the other way. … I remember saying to the [masculinity coordinator], … “I want dudes to be able to get in touch with why they can’t cry in front of their dads. But all that does is make them better people.” At the end, all that does is benefit them. We also need them to be engaged in systemic change. So I think we’re starting to now figure out how do we infuse action back into men’s engagement without it being that we are sewing capes for
Superman? … What does it look like to do humanity reclamation work but also stay connected to shifting systems and using power to create change?

By referencing participants crying in front of their fathers, Margaret offered a critique of masculinity programming that aimed to release men from restrictive expectations of hegemonic masculinity, such as the expectation to be strong and unemotional, without placing even attention to disrupting the ways in which these expectations also uphold systems of oppression. Although she witnessed first-hand that individuals changed as a result of participating in masculinity programming, she stated,

I know we hear that from student after student after student, “This changed my life, I am different in my relationships.” So, it’s sort of like that starfish metaphor, like it mattered to that starfish. And from the center having four brand new survivors a day? Yeah, that’s not enough. I guess it’s the difference between individual change versus systemic change. Do I think that it’s worthy on an individual level? Absolutely. And also, as we’re looking at abolition movements and wanting to disentangle victim response from police and carceral systems, we need to figure out an alternative. And part of that alternative is raising boys who understand consent. It’s figuring out methods of accountability within men’s groups. So, I get it up here [in my head], but when you ask how I feel? It feels hopeless.

Without a programmatic focus on using action to shift systems, Margaret wondered if masculinity-centered practices served to only benefit men.

Jordan similarly emphasized the need for masculinity-centered practices to play a role in transforming systems. She stated, “What we’re doing around gender equity has to be about access and systems change. That is our work. It’s not just about identity support; it’s about institutional shift and structure.” Rather than creating opportunities for identity development and awareness within the center, Jordan prioritized investing center resources in institutional advocacy. As an example of the center’s advocacy work, Jordan shared that she had recently
worked to build adequate lactation spaces on campus for students, staff, and faculty who are chestfeeding. When it came to masculinity-centered practices, Jordan shared,

The systems work that is connected to masculinity is literally everything that the institution is built on, right? If we think about higher education and the way we operate, we operate in structures of whiteness and patriarchy. From the way we send emails to the way we do meetings, … everything is rooted in that. And in order to do masculinity work on a large systems level, it would mean exploring, critiquing, and then shifting the very way the institution functions. … So when we’re having these [masculinity program advisory board meetings], and you’re still running meetings within patriarchal structures where there’s a man at the head of the table, … that for me is still problematic and rooted in these larger, insidious, normative systems. We can talk all day about masculinity and about changing systems and structures, but unless we’re actually embodying it and doing it, it doesn’t actually mean anything, right? … For me, that’s where the work is.

By applying a systems-level lens to masculinity work, Jordan highlighted the importance of going beyond the content of programming to ensure that practitioners are also embodying the value of structural change through their facilitation, development, and guidance of this work.

As participants in the study considered individual and systems-based approaches to masculinity work, a few articulated that they were interconnected, and each approach played a necessary role in the change process. For instance, Alex emphasized that individual and systems-level thinking need to be in consistent conversation with one another. They shared that feminist work means “bringing a systems-level analysis and understanding [of the] interpersonal ways that we are upholding, embodying, and feeling in relationship to those systems, and doing the interpersonal work to help us see where we are complicit, where we have a sphere of influence to challenge.” As an example, Alex suggested that doing masculinity work to promote ‘healthy masculinity’ was too individualistic in scope; instead, Alex argued that masculinity work needed to focus on shifting the systems that perpetuate our assumption that masculinity is unhealthy in the first place. They explained,
For me, as I think about my own work in dominance and my whiteness work … in my personal work I went through a long time where I was like, “I just need to have a healthy white identity,” right? That was kind of what I was working towards – what does it mean in a white supremacist [society] to have a healthy white identity? And then I was like, that’s still really white and centered on an individual. But actually, I want to be doing … structural work to dismantle white supremacy. So, I map some of that on when I’m thinking about patriarchy and masculinity work. … Our goal is not necessarily healthy men. Our goal is poking holes in the patriarchy and beginning to dismantle that. I think some of the other programs on campus are more “how do we create healthy men?” versus how do we create healthy people and dismantle the systems that are actually causing the diagnosis that we’re unhealthy.

Arguing that feminist masculinity work must always be mindful of structures and systems, Alex communicated hesitation about programs and initiatives that aimed to teach men how to “perform and succeed within the systems that exist versus how to dismantle the systems that exist,” such as learning to tie a tie or certain affinity-based spaces. Further, Alex highlighted hope as an important element of systems change work to keep in mind when developing masculinity programming. While participants in the study shared how this work can often feel hopeless, Alex suggested that thinking imaginatively and remaining hopeful can contrast with approaches to masculinity programming that may rely on an approach that is the “low hanging fruit” or “the best we can do.” They stated,

> If we keep picking the low hanging fruit, we’re never gonna chop down the tree. … How do we … keep our heads dreaming and imagining the world outside of [patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalistic structures]? And how would dreaming of those worlds help us be in better relationship with each other in real time?

To work towards systemic change when developing masculinity-centered practices, Alex shared the importance of carrying hope, aspiration, and belief that a better world is possible.

**“How do I do the Work and Process my own Stuff?”: Change from Within**

As practitioners navigated these tensions, many reflected upon their personal role within the change process. Participants across the study displayed a commitment to self-work and self-
reflexivity as a necessary component for moving masculinity work forward. Arguing that ego has no place in the engagement of masculinity-centered practices, these practitioners wondered how they could look inward, recognize their assumptions and biases, continue learning, and do better. Lani demonstrated this thinking during her interview for this study. She shared,

Just having this conversation with you kind of helps me address my own biases. I feel like I need to constantly revisit them. Especially that question you asked about masculinity. And the fact that even after seeing your [list of questions] a few times and being quite aware that this is a question you were going to ask, it still made me think, “Okay, this is stuff that I still have to work on.” And I’m like, how do I do the work and process my own stuff?

Like Lani, many participants acknowledged that as they work towards creating change through masculinity-centered practices, they must also facilitate growth and change within themselves.

A few practitioners valued self-work as an important step towards building productive and trusting relationships with their colleagues. Margaret discussed the necessary role of feedback in the learning process, explaining that one of the guiding philosophies of the center is “feedback is love.” She added, “We say it all the time. And when we introduce ourselves, we talk about that that is a core tenant of our office. That we expect that you’re going to give us critical feedback to help us be better.” Similarly, Alex emphasized the role of feedback when collaborating with colleagues to develop masculinity programs. They stated,

I don’t think we should be doing all of the work or doing it alone in isolation. We have established ourselves by showing up and demonstrating our ability to stay in it and take feedback. And if I want to give feedback, I got to be open to taking it.

For Alex and Margaret, supporting a culture where feedback is valued sent a message within the center and to colleagues that learning is an ongoing process and there is always room to do masculinity work in more equitable ways.
For several participants, engaging in self-work allowed them to dismantle the ways in which they upheld and embodied dominance. Jordan, for example, thought about how her behaviors could perpetuate white supremacy and patriarchy. She expressed,

Patriarchy looms heavy in academia and in higher education. And so there is never a moment where I’m not aware that I am a woman in a space. And even in spaces where it feels like men are trying to be conscious of the way they wield power, they wield power. Same with white folks as well. And so I think that’s something I just personally continue to navigate in my role, trying to disrupt the way patriarchy shows up for myself. The way that I feel like I need to come into a room unemotional and hard or really intelligent and know all the answers, right? That is all a product of white supremacy and patriarchy. And trying to think about how I can move and be and direct differently so that people actually have a model of a different way of being.

Reflecting on the challenges of working within a white, patriarchal institution as a woman of color, Jordan acknowledged that she found herself showing up in ways that reinforced the very systems she actively worked to disrupt. This realization served as a necessary foundation for Jordan to practice different, more liberatory ways of showing up in her work.

Mel also reflected on the importance of unlearning dominant ways of thinking and being. In the context of engaging masculinity-centered practices, Mel, like several other participants in the study, navigated wanting to make sure the work was being done the “right way.” Mel, a white practitioner, explained, “It’s a tenant of white supremacy that I’m sure that I’m the person who can do the work the best and should be in every room doing the work. And I’m unlearning that.” This unlearning process entailed unpacking their internalization of white supremacy and patriarchy in the hopes of not causing harm to others or showing up as defensive. Mel recalled a powerful moment when a woman of color colleague helped them unpack their whiteness and realize that “we need to feel okay getting it wrong” without centering ourselves in the learning process. They shared,
I don’t even remember what I said [to my colleague] now. … But it was some off the cuff remark that sounded pretty racist in reflection. And in the moment I said it, I instantly thought, “Wait, what did I just say?” … We all went back to our offices and I sat on it and thought, “Oh my God. … I bet [my colleague] picked up on that. I think I said something really racist. What am I gonna do about it? I should just go talk to her. I can’t talk to her.” I literally talked to every other white person in the office about what I said and how I could talk to [her] about it, and three months passed before I finally sat down across from [her] and was like, “I think I said something harmful and want to own it and apologize. I certainly didn’t intend to,” and blah blah blah. And she just looked at me and she said, “Oh yeah, you’re not that important.” I was like, that was a beautiful lesson. She’s like, “I don’t even remember that conversation. But good for you. You do realize what you’ve done, right?” I was like, “Yep.” I just centered myself for three months. Not [my colleague]. I just made it all about me. I think about, how do we translate that when we’re thinking about the impact of patriarchal structures and misogynist, etc., like how do we stop centering men’s feelings in the same ways that we need to stop centering white folks’ feelings?

Mel directly applied what they had learned from this interaction to their engagement with masculinity-centered practices. Not wanting to perpetuate a similar, oppressive dynamic, Mel aimed to approach masculinity programming in a way that resisted the centering of men’s feelings over the needs of those most harmed by patriarchy and other systems of oppression.

Finally, participants also spoke to their ongoing learning as integral to actively showing up with vulnerability, humility, and a both/and mindset, particularly when collaborating with others who may have a different approach to the work. Alex, who worked on a campus where they were not the only professional facilitating masculinity-centered practices, provided a powerful example of this learning process. Initially, Alex was critical of some of their colleagues’ approaches to masculinity programming. They explained,

What we’re doing in the center is distinctly different from [what they do]. And so I think because of that, sometimes there’s tension of who owns the masculinity conversation on our campus and things being territorial. And we need as many people to do this work from their sphere of influence that we can. And I think I’ve matured in my relationship with colleagues and where I got frustrated by the territorial thing, and I wanted to shame and blame and be like, “You’re doing the very toxic masculine thing that we’re trying to dismantle by drawing the line in the sand over this.” I had to let go of those things, right?
Because that’s not generative. And in some ways, that was like doing the same thing.

As Alex reflected on their critiques of colleagues, they came to understand that they were embodying similar dominant dynamics by trusting their own approach over that of others.

Realizing the limitations of living in these tensions, Alex shifted their mindset away from holding grudges or feeling frustrated, even when colleagues said things that led Alex to feel self-doubt and pain. Alex stated,

I’ve had some healing around some of those toxic relationships and partnerships. … To go back in and build relationships with people, I think that is the work. And to not give up on those people. … I’ve tried to lean into places of healing and finding my own humanity. … My hope is we can continue to be transformed in how we do our work. … I think the program we’re building and continue to build with our [masculinity] work is better for the discomfort that I experienced. And I think having those lessons now leaves me more open to continuing to lean into that discomfort and the possibility of it versus divesting.

Experiencing this shift in thinking allowed Alex to not only value grace and humility when engaging colleagues in masculinity work, but they also could see possibility. Alex later added, “My maturing through those frustrations, I think, has allowed more beautiful things to thrive and grow in the service of students we’re trying to reach.” Instead of either/or binary thinking, Alex opened themself up to a both/and mindset for building coalitions with others around particular parts of masculinity work, even if some pieces were not in alignment. Through daily mindful practice, Alex shared the importance of engaging in self-work to interrupt the ways we have internalized white supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexist, capitalistic messages about ourselves. In doing so, Alex, instead of divesting from colleagues when experiencing tensions, leaned into places of healing in the hopes of creating generative spaces that could be transformative for students and those leading masculinity work.
Summary

Detailing the second pattern of meaning to emerge from the study, this chapter described participants’ approaches for negotiating the complexities, limitations, and contradictions of engaging masculinity-centered practices within WGECs. As can be seen throughout the chapter, participants faced varying tensions, often shaped by their organizational contexts, positionalities, and philosophies related to creating social change. Four main considerations emerged from participants’ experiences that highlight their feelings of frustration and skepticism for the work: positioning masculinity-centered practices in a survivor-centered space, encountering institutional dominance, centering the voices of the marginalized, and creating change. The next and final chapter of the dissertation study will put the findings chapters in conversation with one another to make meaning of these complexities and present implications for future research and practice.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Through examining practitioners’ lived experiences with the phenomenon of masculinity-centered practices, the findings presented in Chapters Four and Five directly respond to the study’s research questions: how do WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices, and what is it like for these practitioners to engage in masculinity-centered practices? The findings, as summarized in the below figure, outline how participants across the study applied diverse perspectives and approaches for engaging masculinity-centered practices as WGEC practitioners. In discussing the value and emancipatory possibilities of examining masculinity in their programming and other initiatives, practitioners simultaneously made clear that engaging in masculinity work elicited experiences fraught with tension and feelings of disappointment, pain, and uncertainty.
Figure 3. Summary of findings

Overwhelmingly, participants’ experiences mirrored the complexities of centering masculinity as both an object of research and practice as explored in Chapter Two. Gender researchers and practitioners across the literature review similarly outlined the possibilities for the examination of masculinity to support liberatory aims while detailing the ways in which this work can also serve to depoliticize efforts for advancing gender equity and social justice more broadly by reifying patriarchy, genderism, and other systems of domination. The purpose of this dissertation study was to not only explore how WGEC practitioners negotiated these tensions within their feminist-oriented, political praxis, as examined in the findings chapters, but the study also aimed to lift these practitioners’ voices and experiences to offer critical insights for engaging masculinity-centered practices in more equitable ways. Because of this focus, this chapter will depart from traditional approaches where discussion and implications are presented separately; instead, they will be woven together to extend an analysis of the findings to inform masculinity work in WGECs and higher education more broadly. To do so, I will apply the
study’s conceptual framework for politicizing masculinities to present implications for masculinity-centered practices in three core areas: challenging the gender binary, dismantling structures of oppression, and building coalitions. I will then conclude the dissertation with considerations for future research and a summary of the study.

**Critical Insights for Masculinity-Centered Practices**

To understand participants’ approaches and strategies for engaging masculinity-centered practices in support of the mission and values of their respective centers, I utilized Cornwall et al.’s (2011) framework for politicizing masculinities as described in Chapter Two. In response to the growing concern that masculinity work can be “palliative rather than genuinely transformative,” Cornwall et al. urged practitioners to consider the following three dimensions when engaging masculinity-centered practices to address “some of the silences and absences in this work” (pp. 1, 5):

- challenge normative perspectives on men, masculinity, bodies, and the gender binary;
- critically examine ‘subordinate variants’ of masculinity and its intersections “as a tool with which to excavate the structures and workings of power” (p. 10); and
- think beyond limiting frames of current approaches to masculinities work and focus on building constituencies and alliances for action and advocacy.

To inform future practice, I will apply this conceptual framework as a guide for shedding light on the ways in which WGEC practitioners in the study negotiated and critically thought beyond limiting frames for masculinity work.

**Challenging the Gender Binary**

As participants across the study recounted their experiences and worked to shift gender practices within their centers, some presented masculinity-centered practices as an approach for promoting more expansive understandings of gender. Along with wanting to better support the
needs and experiences of trans*, non-binary, and genderqueer students, faculty, and staff on campus, several WGEC practitioners engaged masculinity programming and other initiatives to challenge the gender binary. The work of these participants aligns well with the first dimension of Cornwall et al.’s (2011) framework for politicizing masculinities. In this dimension, Cornwall et al. argued that men and masculinities practitioners often assume heteronormative and binary understandings of gender; in response, the authors called upon practitioners to apply insights from queer theory and critical gender studies researchers and activists to “interrogate the relationship between the terms ‘men,’ ‘male,’ and ‘masculinity’ rather than assume a necessary correspondence between them” (p. 8). Citing Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1995), who emphasized that “when something is about masculinity, it is not always ‘about men’” (as cited in Grieg, 2011, p. 233), Grieg further articulated that to seize the possibilities for radical political change inherent within a changing gender order, and its threats to the masculinity of hegemony, the goal must be to deepen the gender insecurities of anxious states, especially as they coalesce around the figure of the masculine. … When it comes to the masculine, this would be work that sought ambiguity not authenticity, complexity not conformity. Above all, this would be work that created enough space between men and masculinity in which to organize around the shared political interests of people of all genders in specific communities targeted by intersecting forms of oppression. (p. 234)

Through complicating normative constructs of our bodies, the gender binary, and multiple identities in relation to them, Cornwall et al. (2011) argued that we can better “interpret and address broader issues of inequity and oppression” (p. 10).

As demonstrated in the findings, several participants in the study approached masculinity work with the intention to challenge binary understandings of gender. As part of this approach, some practitioners explicitly expanded the target audience of their masculinity-centered practices beyond cisgender men. Mel, for example, discussed opportunities to facilitate critical
explorations of masculinity with multiple audiences, including women’s spaces. Alex also welcomed participants across gender identities who were invested in creating social change to engage with masculinity programming. Along with considering their audience, participants in the study developed programming content to interrogate the assumed relationship between men and masculinity. Rather than viewing masculinity-centered practices as an approach for specifically engaging cisgender men in explorations of hegemonic masculinity, these participants aimed to explore masculinity as a construct through focusing on gender identity and expression beyond the binary. Marie, for instance, challenged senior leadership by expressing her view that masculinity programming is not synonymous with cisgender men’s engagement work. As another example, Alex collaborated with colleagues on campus to offer programming that pushed normative, binary understandings of gender through programs centering trans*masculinity and indigenous masculinities; further, both Alex and Ruth fostered student-driven, art-based projects that actively promoted expansive, non-binary understandings of masculinity on campus.

Although approaches for disrupting the gender binary through masculinity work are only emerging within WGECs (Kupo & Castellon, 2018) and uncommon for masculinity-centered practices in higher education more broadly, these participants role model a critical avenue for future directions of this work. While only several of the participants in the study intentionally aimed to disrupt the assumed relationship between men and masculinity through their programming, those that did demonstrate the importance of moving beyond “traditional” masculinity-centered practices. As Cornwall et al. (2011) discussed in their framework for politicizing masculinities, these practitioners highlight a core implication of this study that there
is a need for developing masculinity programming content that frames gender and masculinity as fluid and complex constructs and includes diverse perspectives beyond those of cisgender men. Through drawing connections to how interconnecting systems serve to reinforce oppression and the gender binary, several practitioners provide insightful examples for approaching masculinity-centered practices in ways that challenge our normative assumptions of what we think we know about masculinity. In doing so, they offer a paradigm shift and invite practitioners to reconsider what it means to do masculinity work and who to engage, arguing for approaches that embrace complexity and ambiguity.

It is also important to name that while every participant in the study worked within WGECs that aimed to reflect more expansive understandings of gender in their practices, they did not consistently apply this framework when engaging with masculinity programming. Throughout the findings, we saw practitioners, specifically those whose centers focused on violence prevention, navigating the painful and urgent realities of sexual assault and other forms of violence as they worked to support survivors across gender identities. As these practitioners made meaning of masculinity-centered practices alongside their priority to address gendered violence on campus, they viewed masculinity programming as an important step for creating change through engaging those who predominantly cause the harm – cisgender men. Often, various factors contributed to practitioners’ approaches including the organizational placement of violence prevention responsibilities on campus; the history and continuing priorities of the WGEC; expectations for complying with Title IX policies and federal grant requirements; and participants’ personal identities, experiences, and philosophies. Due to the pressing need to engage in on-the-ground, daily work with survivors, these practitioners arguably could not afford
to prioritize examinations of masculinity for the purpose of challenging the gender binary. In other words, while practitioners worked to support survivors in more expansive ways, acknowledging the needs of survivors across gender, sexuality, and other identities, their approaches to masculinity programming often maintained the gender binary with the primary intention to reduce harm.

This dynamic leads to another implication for masculinity-centered practices, particularly for those who include the examination of masculinity as part of their violence prevention work. While some participants in this study saw the emancipatory potential in directly aligning their masculinity programming with violence prevention efforts, others expressed that they preferred keeping masculinity and violence prevention work separate in order to have space for in-depth explorations of gender identity and expression. Through analyzing participants’ experiences, this study offers that masculinity practitioners should move beyond either/or thinking when determining their approach. While there is a clear need to engage cisgender men in critical explorations of hegemonic masculinity as part of violence prevention education, practitioners can simultaneously frame their program content in ways that resist reductive notions of gender. To do so, practitioners must acknowledge how conversations with audiences of predominantly cisgender men can, if not actively framed, implicitly fall back on genderist and heteronormative assumptions that violence prevention means stopping cisgender men from perpetrating harm against cisgender women. Masculinity practitioners must also consider ways to incorporate gender expansive education within their violence prevention curriculum. Marine and Nicolazzo (2020) directly spoke to the need for violence prevention professionals to apply expansive
understandings of gender in their work to serve all survivors, especially trans* collegians. They explained,

the gender binary discourse within sexual violence prevention education efforts occludes how the devastating effects of sexual violence map onto trans* students’ experiences, or that the rates of victimization for trans* people are equivalent to or greater than the epidemic levels of victimization for cisgender women. When understood in conjunction with the effects of racism, classism, and compulsory able-bodiedness, it is clear that those students who are most on the margins (e.g., trans* students of color, poor and homeless trans* students, and/or trans* students with disabilities) are not even considered, and their experiences rendered invisible. (p. 5020)

Recognizing the institutional constraints that practitioners face, Marine and Nicolazzo (2020) expressed that we can and should be more courageous in order to authentically center how sexual violence impacts people with diverse genders and sexualities. Therefore, through disrupting binary and heteronormative language, thinking intentionally about who gets named as survivors, naming the experiences of trans* and gender non-conforming individuals, and examining gender as a fluid and expansive construct, masculinity practitioners can better address the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and sexual violence beyond limiting frames, even when predominantly working with cisgender men in their programming.

**Dismantling Structures of Oppression**

Participants in the study also discussed approaches for engaging masculinity-centered practices to dismantle structural roots of power and oppression. These practices reflect the second dimension of Cornwall et al.’s (2011) framework for politicizing masculinities. In this dimension, Cornwall et al. critiqued the tendency for masculinity practitioners to focus primarily on individual, personal transformation and called for greater structural analysis and “attention to institutional workings of gender orders in relation to hegemonic social, economic, and political forces” (p. 16). To do so, they encouraged masculinity practitioners to examine masculinity at
the intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality and other identities. By bringing the interplay of identities and structural inequities into closer view, Cornwall et al. contended that the we can better understand and disrupt the workings of hegemony that organize our world. Throughout the findings, we can see several examples of WGEC practitioners creating opportunities for the examination of masculinity at its intersections to disrupt structures of power. Many practitioners, for instance, applied a “gender and” lens to their masculinity programming with the intention to explore interlocking, oppressive systems. Further, participants like Moni, Shelby, and Jordan specifically shifted their programming away from centering normative white, straight, cisgender masculinity to intentionally centering masculinities on the margins. By explicitly programming around the experiences of cisgender men, queer, and trans* folks of color, these practitioners aimed to reveal how hegemonic masculinity can operate across systems to explore ways to challenge patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, and other systems of oppression.

Even when developing masculinity programming to challenge these interlocking systems, several participants in the study communicated the very same concern put forth by Cornwall et al. (2011) that, despite their intentions, their approaches to the work may not reach far enough beyond individual transformation to effectively engage participants in structural analysis. Although every participant emphasized the need for masculinity programming to actively disrupt systems in order to create social change, very few offered tangible examples for how to do so. Margaret, one of the few, named the necessary role of action as an outcome of masculinity-centered practices. Based on her experiences, participants must go beyond personal growth to also actively identify and disrupt oppressive systems in their everyday life. As another example, Jordan argued that, through these programs, students do “an immense amount of [individual]
work but have no idea how to change systems.” Consequently, she discussed the need to scaffold masculinity program curriculum to first start with self-work and then transition to “identifying a policy or practice that exists where you are seeing [inequities] show up, and then thinking about what you could do to shift it.” The majority of participants, however, did not explicitly describe approaches for facilitating systems-level change through this work.

While participants across the study did not offer many concrete suggestions for striking the balance between individual and systems-level outcomes for masculinity programs and initiatives, they expressed a clear desire and need to consistently strive for this aim. These participants understood that individual-level work on its own could serve to replicate oppressive structures; however, in grappling with the contradictions of doing this work, they simultaneously had difficulty articulating what it could look like to engage masculinity-centered practices to explicitly shift systems. This dynamic across the findings is not indicative of a personal failing on the part of participants in the study. Rather, this tension appears to reflect a larger issue that practitioners work within systems intentionally set-up to mute possibilities for radical transformation. Grieg (2011), one of the authors of the study’s conceptual framework, acknowledged the “limitations, contradictions even, of relying on oppressive state institutions to end men’s violence” (p. 226). Directly speaking to this limitation, several participants in the study wrestled with trying to create social change within higher education institutions built upon and upheld by dominance. These practitioners recounted experiencing institutional violence when engaging in masculinity-centered practices in ways that stripped them and other marginalized colleagues of agency and served as a constant threat to the survival of their resources and the existence of their very centers. In making meaning of these experiences,
participants wondered whether they could affect social change within higher education, an institution that upholds patriarchal, sexist, racist, heterosexist, genderist, ableist, and other oppressive systems.

Another core implication of this study, therefore, is that practitioners must actively consider what it means to utilize masculinity-centered practices as a means for dismantling systems of power and oppression. As part of this process, it is important that practitioners identify ways to facilitate systems-level transformation within their institutional contexts. While this can be a difficult task given the oppressive barriers upheld by higher education institutions, a number of scholars have recognized this challenge and provided helpful frameworks for moving change forward. As an example, Stein et al. (2021) offered a framework for decolonizing higher education based on their understanding that they “are agnostic about the question of whether existing institutions can ever be decolonized. Indeed, it may very well be impossible for institutions to ‘right the wrongs that brought them into being’ (Belcourt, 2018)” (p. 16). In recognizing this constraint, Stein et al. encouraged practitioners to develop capacity to work through complexity, uncertainty, and complicity to engage in approaches for reform. These approaches include centering and empowering communities, ensuring more equitable processes for resource distribution, and mitigating harm “in consideration of systemic, historical, and ongoing marginalization/dispossession/subjugation/occupation” (p. 15). They stated,

In encouraging this work, we emphasize the direction, rather than the destination, of decolonization efforts; the movements that are enabled by these efforts, rather than the fixed form they take; and the quality and integrity of relationships that those efforts enable, rather than the quantity. There is no universal formula or blueprint for the practice of decolonization, as it always depends on what is and is not intelligible, contextually relevant and viable in a particular space. (p. 16)
Stein et al. (2021) disrupted the notion that there need to be concrete, tangible approaches to facilitating systemic change and, instead, position this work as ongoing, relational, and contextually dependent. In a similar vein, Grande (2018) argued that by analyzing the “academy as an arm of the settler state” – a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted,” there are “more possibilities for coalition and collusion” in the work to create change from within higher education (p. 47). Applying scholarship related to Black radicalism, critical Indigenous studies, and the politics of refusal, Grande suggested strategies for refusing the university and its systemic perpetuation of dominance. Grande (2018) explained that these strategies are “both material and psychological, both method and politics, and thus must necessarily straddle the both/and (as opposed to either/or) coordinates of revolutionary change” (p. 60). Further, these strategies include a commitment to collectivity and ongoing reflexivity, a commitment to reciprocity and being answerable to “communities we claim as our own and those we claim to serve,” and a commitment to mutuality (p. 61).

Participants in the study reflected these scholars’ assertions that, while there is not one concrete solution for ensuring that masculinity work directly contributes to shifting systems, it is critical to embrace a both/and approach that consistently strives towards creating both individual and systems-level transformation. In the context of masculinity work, Connell (2000) reinforced this sentiment when she “concede[d] that ‘perhaps, we do need to focus for the moment on small-scale, achievable changes,’ whilst also urging us to be looking for the kinds of ‘reforms that might set in motion trends towards systemic change’” (as cited in Cornwall et al., 2011, p. 11). While multiple participants in the study articulated that applying a both/and approach often felt ambiguous, challenging, and complex, they reflected that the work needs to feel this way in
order to be headed in the right direction. As an implication for future practice, masculinity practitioners need to embrace, rather than set aside or avoid, the ambiguities and contradictions of this work with the intention to consistently make meaning of masculinity-centered practices as a tool for creating change. Demonstrating an example of this practice, one of the participants in the study, Alex, collaborated with other WGEC staff members to systematically review and revise program content and also formed partnerships with key campus partners to create opportunities for ongoing reflection and improvement. Wanting to better center community accountability and accessibility, Alex developed and started using a list of guiding reflection questions when collaboratively planning each program. These questions included,

Who are we accountable to in our program? And who are our partners we should work with? And then when [staff] evaluate [the program], what was the community response, and were their community or collaboration challenges? … How do we just pause and go a little bit deeper there?

This example highlights an approach for making “small-scale, achievable changes” (Connell, 2000 as cited in Cornwall et al., 2011, p. 10) while simultaneously demonstrating Grande’s (2018) commitments to ongoing reflexivity and accountability to refuse the university. Systems change occurs in the incremental, and practitioners like Alex show how disrupting systems is just as much about being intentional with our processes as we are concerned about the outcomes. It is also important to keep in mind that, as Stein et al. (2021) previously stated, the strategies and approaches of practitioners depend on “what is and is not intelligible, contextually relevant and viable” in their institutional and organizational spaces (p. 16). Thus, while it can certainly be helpful to connect with colleagues doing masculinity work on other campuses to guide the direction of their work, it is all the more critical that practitioners build coalitional relationships,
practice self-reflexivity, challenge dominant practices, and consider who they are accountable to when engaging this work within their own institutional contexts.

**Building Coalitions**

As an important final point of discussion, a core theme across participants’ experiences was the need to move beyond limiting approaches to masculinity work through coalition-building, directly reflecting the third dimension of Cornwall et al.’s (2011) framework for politicizing masculinities. Like most of the participants in the study, Cornwall et al. acknowledged “the very real danger of existing forms of patriarchal gender relations being superimposed” onto masculinity work (p. 14). Participants reflected this concern throughout the Chapter Five findings as they shared their experiences facing patriarchal dominance in multiple ways, including navigating gendered labor dynamics, marginalization when working with cisgender men, and masculinity program participants who caused direct harm to others. In response to the tensions and contradictions of masculinity work, Cornwall et al. called for its (re)politicization through “forging alliances for gender justice among people of all gender identities” to facilitate action and advocacy (p. 16).

Throughout the findings, participants engaged in coalition-building in two primary ways: through developing collaborative working relationships that centered those on the margins and through practicing reflexive self-awareness. The importance of utilizing both approaches is widely reinforced by scholars and activists engaging in social change work. In the context of decolonization, for instance, Stein et al. (2021) stated that this work involved *affective* work (which entails acknowledging, analyzing, and taking responsibility for processing our often uncomfortable, embodied and emotional responses to the tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties that arise in decolonization efforts); and *relational* work (which entails mending broken relationships in ways that honor the
integrity of this difficult process by focus on the development of deep respect, reciprocity, trust, and consent rather than prioritizing the end or outcomes in transactional ways). (p. 7)

These affective and relational values are similarly emphasized and promoted by scholars and practitioners engaging in feminist praxis. Lather (1991) defined feminist praxis as interacting with feminist theories, values, and ethics through reflexive practice and informed actions. Taking this concept a step further, Long et al. (2020) explored the inherent tensions of engaging feminist praxis within situated, organizational contexts and identified key practices for pursuing feminist collaborations, which will be referenced throughout this section. Through analyzing how the feminist-oriented participants in this study engaged coalition-building through the lens of these key practices, we can apply their insights to inform masculinity work in more relational, reciprocal, and equitable ways.

As evident in the findings, participants across the study named the inherent tensions of including the examination of masculinity as part of their feminist praxis in higher education. In navigating these complexities, they expressed that they could and should not do this work alone. As a result, participants collectively represented diverse forms of collaboration to develop and facilitate masculinity-centered practices including working with fellow staff members and forming informal partnerships between one to three colleagues on campus or more formalized cross-unit or campus-wide working/advisory committees of larger groups of colleagues. Throughout the findings, participants discussed how these collaborative arrangements were pivotal not only for the shared distribution of labor but also for putting the necessary structures in place for centering diverse, marginalized voices when guiding the direction of the work.
Considering who informs and does masculinity work was critical for nearly all participants, particularly as they came across various instances of power relations being reproduced in the development of masculinity-centered practices. Genderqueer, non-binary, and cisgender woman practitioners in the study navigated experiences of marginalization, self-doubt, and harm at the individual and institutional level when engaging this work. These experiences reinforced their understanding that genderqueer, non-binary, trans*, and queer folks; women; femmes; and people of color must be included in the development stages to disrupt the potential for masculinity work to cause harm. Participants like Mel and Ruth, for instance, noticed the perpetuation of patriarchal, genderist, and racist dynamics when collaborating with colleagues and questioned what would have gone unchecked in the work had colleagues holding diverse, marginalized identities not been in the room. By collaborating with colleagues with diverse experiences and perspectives, participants were able to better engage expansive understandings of masculinity, recognize potential harms and gaps, and focus greater attention on centering the needs of the most marginalized in the work.

When applying these insights to practice, it is important for masculinity practitioners to first recognize that centering voices on the margins is not about simplistic or performative understandings of representation. In other words, pursuing feminist collaborations does not mean tapping the shoulders of colleagues across identities and inviting them to the table for the sake of improving the outcomes of masculinity work, nor is it even attainable to have all marginalized identities actively represented in the program planning process. Instead, participants in the study offered intentional ways to center the collaboration process itself as a means for both creating more equitable programmatic outcomes and honoring the capacity, contributions, and needs of
marginalized collaborators. Participants like Margaret and Ruth appreciated having opportunities to focus on developing relationships rooted in trust, respect, and accountability. They both demonstrated that in order to engage in coalitional work with others, colleagues must spend time not only on program planning and logistics but also on co-learning, reflexivity, and healing.

Margaret shared,

Ego cannot be tied up in this work. We do a lot of work as a staff around defensiveness. … I don’t know that we would be able to hold [this work] if we weren’t also doing healing work as folks with marginalized or minoritized gender identities.

For Ruth, not only did members of the working group demonstrate a commitment to ongoing learning by actively sharing articles with one another to discuss during meetings, but they also intentionally considered ways to strategically distribute labor amongst themselves. Not wanting to cause additional harm to marginalized members, the working group collaboratively made decisions to position those with privileged identities to step in and hold labor in strategic ways, especially when working with student groups that largely reflected dominant identities. Long et al. (2020) offered additional suggestions for promoting equitable participation through feminist collaboration. Applying insights from Mountz et al. (2003) and Kamaara et al. (2012), the authors encouraged practitioners to consider “adopting flat power structures and not taking for granted the logistics of collaborations, such as communication expectations, divisions of labor, networks of support, [and] distribution of finances.” They also recommended, “finding a collaborative space that worked for all, negotiating speaking and listening among members, and navigating insider/outside status” (p. 489).

As another consideration, it is also important to note that marginalized perspectives can be centered through interacting with and applying critical theories to masculinity work. While
not a collaboration in the traditional sense, I would argue that feminist collaboration includes active partnership with texts. Several participants in the study aimed to move beyond traditional men and masculinities scholarship, which they perceived as centering cisgender men’s perspectives, and instead applied the perspectives of BIPOC writers, inclusive of Black queer feminists and woman of color feminists, to their development of masculinity-centered practices. Along with closely partnering with these texts to further their own learning, a few practitioners incorporated structured reading and reflection into their working relationships with colleagues. Further, through recognizing that voices will always be missing from the planning process, a few practitioners created structures to collaboratively think through whose perspectives have been centered in the work and who may be further marginalized. When planning programs, they took time to consider how program content may unintentionally cause harm to certain groups and applied theory to address these gaps.

When building coalitions, the participants in the study made clear that masculinity practitioners must center relationship-building based in mutual learning and growth and actively read and apply critical theories; further, when making collective decisions about shared labor, they must consider power relations, identity, capacity, and institutional context. A final core tenet of coalition-building is actively engaging in self-reflexivity. In processing the inherent tensions that come with incorporating masculinity-centered practices within feminist praxis, many participants in the study engaged in ongoing self-work as a necessary step for building productive and accountable partnerships with their colleagues. According to Long et al. (2020), radical reflexivity requires an examination of power relations within collaborations to facilitate both personal growth and relationship-building. While participants discussed harmful
experiences of marginalization when doing this work, several specifically named the importance of also examining the ways in which they themselves reinforced dominance. A few participants throughout the findings, for instance, reflected on disrupting the harmful ways their whiteness showed up in working groups and other spaces. Others discussed applying what they had learned about their whiteness to their approach to masculinity programming. Margaret, for example, had learned that “folks who experience oppression are closer to the truth of how to alleviate that oppression” through her experiences working in ethnic studies and with colleagues of color. She shared,

As a white person who has worked in ethnic studies, I know that I was able to make sure that my guideposts or my compass were oriented in the ways that folks of color wanted them oriented. And I wasn’t over here talking about the things that seemed compelling to me as a white person trying to be anti-racist. That’s the wrong compass.

In working to unlearn their dominance, practitioners like Margaret understood the importance of centering the needs and perspectives of those on the margins when developing masculinity-centered practices.

In a similar vein, a few participants acknowledged the ways in which they embodied hegemonic masculinity. Just as they called upon their fellow masculinity practitioners to do better, these practitioners recognized the need to hold themselves to the same standard through practicing self-reflection and humility. Jordan shared about her experiences trying to disrupt the ways in which patriarchy and white supremacy informed how she showed up in “unemotional and hard” ways. It was important to her that she modeled different ways of being as part of this work. Additionally, Alex provided a powerful example of moving through feelings of frustration when working with colleagues who were being territorial about masculinity work on campus to realizing that, in some ways, they were exhibiting similar “toxic masculine” behaviors by
shaming and blaming them. By acknowledging the ways they embodied hegemonic masculinity, Alex leaned into “places of healing and finding [their] own humanity” to build relationships with colleagues, despite their differences, and approach masculinity work from a place of possibility rather than divestment.

Participants across this study demonstrated how coalition-building inherently comes with tensions shaped by varying approaches, “positionalities and life experiences, norms and conventions, and institutional resources and boundaries” (Long et al., 2020, p. 488). Long et al. argued that by acknowledging and centering these tensions, practitioners are better able to move from a “static prescriptive model to a becoming model” of collaboration (p. 502). A becoming model of collaboration can help prevent group members from believing in the inherent morality of the team (e.g., we are teachers practicing feminist pedagogies, so what we do must be good for the students), or falling into the trap of finding a one-size-fit-all model of feminist collaboration (e.g. we are more feminist because we do not have a designated leader in our collaboration). In addition, a tension-centered analysis reframes failures and frustrations in collaboration as opportunities (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004). Instead of avoiding disagreement or compromising, we use the tensions as opportunities to see another perspective, and to enact alternative practices. (p. 502)

The practitioners highlighted in this section reflected this model of collaboration by committing to an ongoing process of learning, relationship-building, and both/and perspective-seeking while also embracing the opportunities to grow from the tensions they encountered. As seen in the findings, these participants emphasized that coalitional work must continuously feel complicated in order to be moving in the right direction. Thus, when developing masculinity-centered practices in partnership with colleagues, masculinity practitioners must be sure to focus on the process of coalitional work before jumping into program planning and execution. Masculinity practitioners can establish and remain accountable to the values of feminist collaboration (Long
et al., 2020) through incorporating structured opportunities for collaborators to build trust, practice self-reflexivity, and center marginalized perspectives to guide the work forward.

**Future Research**

Along with presenting implications for practice, the findings and discussion also point to important avenues for future research on masculinity-centered practices in higher education. Specifically, two threads emerged throughout this study that could benefit from continued exploration. The first thread relates to masculinity practitioners’ application of gender concepts when thinking about and engaging in masculinity programming. In my attempts to reflect WGEC practitioners’ direct words during our interviews, the findings section presents a diverse and inconsistent use of language to describe gender categories. Most notably, when speaking about masculinity program participants, the practitioners varied in their use of terms such as *men*, *masculine folks*, and, sometimes, *dudes*. Additionally, while some participants made a clear distinction when they were speaking about cisgender men as opposed to trans*men and trans*masculine and masculine individuals, others may have used *men* to only indicate cisgender men or used *men* expansively to include all masculine people. I could often get a sense of practitioners’ conceptualizations of these terms through the context of our conversations; however, it was not always the case that I could determine their meaning. Eve Ewing (2020), in specifically discussing concepts of race, argued that “language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change.” This analysis can also extend to language related to gender and arguably speaks to the varying categories used by participants in the interviews. As these categories serve as the
foundation for the conceptualization, purpose, and development of masculinity-centered practices and the target audience of this work, practitioners’ use of language warrants further study. By better understanding how practitioners frame and apply gender concepts, we can identify more equitable approaches for future masculinity programming.

The second thread to emerge from this study was the influential role of institutional factors in shaping how WGEC practitioners develop and navigate masculinity-centered practices within a higher education context. Based on the literature review on WGEC practices in Chapter Two, it is not surprising that participants in the study experienced challenges related to funding and resource distribution, conservative sociopolitical climate, policy enforcement, organizational change, staffing considerations, and conflicting institutional expectations. While this study highlighted how WGEC practitioners navigate their specific contexts, much remains to be understood about masculinity practitioners across different university units. Given that all masculinity practitioners in higher education work within situated, organizational contexts, future research on masculinity-centered practices should utilize an ecological lens for analyzing the shifting meaning and evolution of this work. An ecological framework could serve as a useful lens for understanding the interrelated processes for engaging masculinity-centered practices in WGECs and other higher education units. As explored in Chapter Two, the focus of gender practice in higher education has shifted and expanded over time, reflecting diverse and even contradictory understandings related to supporting gender equity and equity more broadly. Higher education researchers have acknowledged the influence of institutional contexts in shaping these diverse approaches. Several discussed institutional challenges to facilitating masculinity-centered initiatives including limited resources and financial support (Ashlee &
Wagner, 2019), unique institutional contexts (Barone, 2019; Edwards et al., 2019), lack of assessment data to support the need, as well as concerns either “because of the historical legacy of patriarchy and sexism on campus” or “implicit and explicit fears of using funding to promote the effeminizing of men” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 159). Researchers have also acknowledged the role of individual actors in shaping various approaches. Davis and Laker (2004), for instance, contended that

many educational needs related to college men are often difficult to achieve because of limited staffing and a lack of understanding regarding men’s identity development. Many college educators charged with creating men’s programming find themselves conflicted about what types of initiatives to create, what populations of students to target, and what learning outcomes to pursue. (as cited in Ashlee & Wagner, 2019, p. 75)

Given that masculinity-centered practices sit across many different units in higher education, including violence prevention, Greek life, multicultural, student conduct, residential life, mental health, and other offices, there is an opportunity to examine how various institutional contexts and factors shape the development of masculinity-centered practices.

Both threads that emerged in this study point to a need to more deeply explore how masculinity practitioners arrive at their varying approaches and understandings of what it means to do masculinity work. *Men* and *masculinity*, as the objects of masculinity-centered practice, are shaped and differently applied in ways that reflect practitioners’ priorities, contexts, and personal understandings of gender. The second thread regarding the role of institutional factors is particularly important given the critique that masculinity-centered practices, while fostering individual transformation, often fail to facilitate or focus on systemic change. A limitation of this dissertation study is its replication of this very dynamic. By centering the experiences and perspectives of individual practitioners without explicitly attending to the systems in which they
work, we neglect to apply a systemic analysis to the emergence, development, and limitations of masculinity-centered practices. There is more we can learn about moving masculinity work forward in equitable ways; researchers should more deeply explore how conceptualizations of gender and various institutional and other systemic factors inform the continuing evolution of masculinity work in higher education.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation study was to center the experiences of WGEC practitioners who incorporate the examination of masculinity in their work. Given the potential for masculinity-centered practices to reify systems of oppression, as discussed across the literature, this study focused on revealing the insights and perspectives of WGEC practitioners who utilize feminist and other critical frameworks in their engagement of these initiatives. The data from the study demonstrated that practitioners overwhelmingly applied a both/and lens when engaging masculinity-centered practices. This both/and perspective is organizationally represented in this study by the inclusion of two separate but interconnected findings chapters – one that details the ways in which participants align masculinity work with their feminist-oriented praxis and another that outlines the simultaneous challenges and complexities that participants navigate.

By putting the findings chapters in conversation with one another, we can see the study’s epigraph by Raewyn Connell (1995) come to life – that practices of masculinity, along with sciences of masculinity, may be both emancipatory and controlling at the same time. Collectively, participants across the study reflected this both/and thinking in diverse ways, including the following. Masculinity-centered practices were positioned as necessary for
advancing the aims of gender equity work and it was important that this work not take resources from or further harm those who are most marginalized. This work served as a complement to sexual violence prevention efforts and a violence prevention framework was viewed as limiting, particularly when reinforcing binary notions of masculinity and gender more broadly. In a similar vein, it was important to expand notions of masculinity and invite program participants across gender identities to these conversations and it was argued that cisgender, heterosexual white men most urgently need to engage in this work. Participants in the study saw first-hand how masculinity-centered practices facilitated individual transformation and they argued that individual change was simply not enough when ultimately aiming to disrupt systemic inequities. Further, masculinity work could provide opportunities towards collective liberation and participants often felt that expectations around labor as well as institutional violence inequitably fell upon those who are most marginalized. Finally, participants saw the liberatory potential of masculinity-centered practices and many felt suspicion, disappointment, and pain due to their experiences with the work.

In negotiating both/and thinking when engaging masculinity-centered practices within WGECs, participants revealed the many complexities and tensions that come with the examination of masculinity as a tool for social change. As I reflect on this central aspect of engaging masculinity work, I realize that during my time as a masculinity practitioner, I was in search of best practices, particularly when it came to program content and outcomes. When faced with tensions and unresolved questions about our work, I felt unsettled and would attempt to collaborate with colleagues to quickly “solve” the issue. Through the collective wisdom of the 12 participants in this study, a powerful takeaway for my own learning is the need to shift away
from a focusing on an endpoint and, instead, consider the role of process when engaging masculinity-centered practices. Ultimately, the data from this study make clear that there is not one equitable way for engaging masculinity work. Rather than detailing a prescriptive set of best practices, the study uncovered critical insights from participants’ experiences for guiding masculinity-centered practices forward that include challenging the gender binary, dismantling structures of oppression, and building coalitions. Each of these insights acknowledges the inherent tensions, moving pieces, and contradictions that, according to many participants, should exist when applying critical frameworks to masculinity-centered practices. As we continue to pursue equitable futures, masculinity practitioners must acknowledge and embrace that the examination of masculinity in practice feels messy, unresolved, and ongoing. Rather than seeing these challenges as an overwhelming or impossible project, it is critical that masculinity practitioners hold and integrate these tensions when reimagining how masculinity-centered practices can contribute to the dismantling of inequities in higher education and beyond.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT MESSAGE
Hello,

I am a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Chicago conducting a dissertation study to explore how Women’s and Gender Equity Center (WGEC) practitioners make meaning of initiatives to explore masculinity. As someone who has coordinated a masculinity dialogue program within higher education, I am interested in centering and learning from the experiences of practitioners who do this work within gender equity-based organizations.

I am recruiting **current and former** WGEC professionals who directly work with (or have directly worked with) masculinity-centered practices in WGEC spaces. I define masculinity-centered practices as any embedded departmental initiatives (sponsored or co-sponsored) that examine topics related to masculinity through workshops, speaker series, dialogue spaces, peer education, and other programs.

While these WGEC efforts can be designed to engage college students who identify as men in consciousness-raising activities, others are open to students of all genders and even faculty and staff. I am interested in how these practices, in all its forms and aims, are considered, applied, and navigated by WGEC practitioners.

Please click here if you are interested in learning more about the study and to express your interest in participating. Participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for their time and collaboration.

Thank you for your consideration! Please feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Ashley M. Brown
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT SCREENING FORM
This dissertation study aims to explore how Women’s and Gender Equity Center (WGEC) practitioners make meaning of initiatives to explore masculinity.

I am recruiting current and former professionals who directly work with (or have directly worked with) masculinity-centered practices in WGEC spaces. I define masculinity-centered practices as any embedded, recurring departmental initiatives (sponsored or co-sponsored) that examine topics related to masculinity through workshops, speaker series, dialogue spaces, peer education, and other programs. Examples may include a cohort-based masculinity dialogue group, an annual masculinity speaker series, a dedicated staff member who coordinates masculinity programming, etc.

This study is seeking participants who have had rich, in-depth experiences engaging in this work. Participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for their time.

To participate in this study, you must …
- be a current or former professional staff member of a stand-alone Women’s and Gender Equity Center
- directly and closely support (or have formerly supported) the development, coordination, and/or facilitation of masculinity-centered practices within the center

Participation in this study would involve:
- one 90-minute interview
- an opportunity to review the interview transcript and make comments to clarify meaning and/or provide additional reflections
- one 30-45-minute follow-up interview
- an opportunity to review preliminary analysis from our conversations and provide feedback

For more information, you can view the participant consent form here:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dpYRcrH1dkmII1VWxEHvGfosVce9O43WFpYol-brqjA/edit?usp=sharing

If you are interested in participating, please complete this brief screening form. I will reach out within one week to provide more information regarding participation. Thank you for your time!

Women’s and Gender Equity Center Experience

Are you a current or former Women’s and Gender Equity Center practitioner?
- current WGEC professional
- former WGEC professional

How many years have you worked in a WGEC?
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-8 years
Masculinity-Centered Practices

For this study, I define masculinity-centered practices as any embedded departmental initiatives (sponsored or co-sponsored) that examine topics related to masculinity through workshops, speaker series, dialogue spaces, peer education, and other programs. Examples may include a cohort-based masculinity dialogue group, an annual masculinity speaker series, a dedicated staff member who coordinates masculinity programming, etc. Have you directly worked with (developed, coordinated, oversaw, etc.) a masculinity-centered practice within a WGEC for at least one year?

- Yes
- No
- I’m not sure

How many years have you engaged in this work within a WGEC?

Which of the following best describes the initiative(s)? (check all that apply)
- Workshops
- Speaker series
- Dialogue program
- Peer education program
- Other:

Which of the following best describes how often the initiative(s) takes place? (check all that apply)
- Annual
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Other:

In 1-2 sentences, please briefly describe the initiative(s) and your level of engagement.
**Personal Background**

Name:

Pronouns:

Email address:

In the event you choose to participate in this study, please identify a tentative pseudonym:

What words would you use to describe your …
(feel free to leave any fields blank if you prefer not to respond)
Gender identity
Race and/or ethnicity
Sexuality
Ability/disability
Salient identities not mentioned

[SUBMIT]
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
**Project Title:** Examining the Negotiation of Masculinity-Centered Practices in Women’s and Gender Equity Centers in Higher Education

You are being asked to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Ashley Brown, under the supervision of Blanca Torres-Olave, Ph.D. in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because you are a current or former professional staff member of a women’s and gender equity center (WGEC) that engages in masculinity-centered practices. Your participation in this research study is voluntary. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether or not to participate.

**Why is this study being done?**
This study is being done to explore how WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices. Information from this study may increase understanding of the ways in which WGEC practitioners experience negotiating the complexities, limitations, and liberatory possibilities of these practices in higher education. The research findings can also be used to inform future interventions for examining and transforming masculinity within WGECs and beyond.

**What will happen if I take part in this research study?**
If you agree to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to:

- Participate in two individual interviews: a 90-minute interview and a 30-45 minute follow-up interview. Interviews can take place via phone or video call based on your preference. The interview will be audio-recorded and will include questions about your in-depth experiences engaging masculinity-centered practices within the center.
- Review the interview transcript and relevant analysis that may be used in the final report and provide feedback.

**How long will I be in the research study?**
Participation in the study will take 120-135 minutes for the interviews as well as time you choose to dedicate to reviewing the transcript and relevant analysis and providing feedback.

**What are the risks and benefits that I can expect from this study?**
The potential risk for participating in this study includes professional consequences or retaliation stemming from the information shared in the interview. Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting will minimize this risk. The benefit of this study is the opportunity for participants to reflect on the role of masculinity-centered practices within WGEC spaces.

**How will my confidentiality be maintained?**
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of separating personally identifiable information from the transcript and analyses. Audio-recordings will be deleted after transcription. Pseudonyms will be used, and institutions and centers will be described in broad
enough terms so that they cannot be identified. Transcripts and the coding scheme will be stored in a password-protected folder in an online storage system (Dedoose).

**Will I receive any payment if I participate in this study?**
Yes, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card following the first interview.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**
You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may leave the study at any time without consequences of any kind. You are not waiving any of your legal rights if you choose to be in this research study. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can answer questions I might have about this study?**
In the event of a research-related injury, please immediately contact one of the researchers listed below. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, please contact Ashley Brown at abrown29@luc.edu 847-476-3355 or Blanca Torres-Olave at btorresolave@luc.edu.

If you wish to ask questions about your rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT**
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in the research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

________________________________________
Name of Participant
________________________________________
Signature of Participant Date

**SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT**
In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

________________________________________
Name of Person Obtaining Consent Contact Number
________________________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years as a WGEC Practitioner</th>
<th>Years Engaging Masculinity-Centered Practices</th>
<th>Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>6-8 years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Genderqueer, white, queer, temporarily able-bodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>3-5 years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cis woman, white, asexual and aromantic/queer, currently able-bodied, feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1-2 years, current</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Cis woman, Black, queer, able-bodied, neurotypical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lani</td>
<td>1-2 years, current</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Female, Asian, bisexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Woman, white, straight, able-bodied, immigrant, mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Cisgender woman, white, queer AF, Disabled, survivor of childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault as an adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>3-5 years, former</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cis woman, Black, bisexual, able-bodied, Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>3-5 years, current</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Genderqueer androgynous woman, white, queer lesbian, educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moni</td>
<td>3-5 years, former</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Woman, Black, pansexual/queer, able-bodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Genderfluid/non-binary, white, under the bi/pan/fluid umbrella, temporarily able-bodied with invisible disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>3-5 years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cisgender woman, white, bisexual/queer polyamorous, bipolar II diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tegan</td>
<td>9+ years, current</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Cisgender woman, white, queer, able-bodied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Thank you for your participation in this study. The study aims to explore how WGEC practitioners make meaning of masculinity-centered practices. This interview will last approximately 90 minutes and will include questions about your engagement with these practices.

For this study, masculinity-centered practices are defined as encompassing any formalized, departmental initiatives that examine topics related to masculinity through workshops, speaker events, dialogue spaces, peer education, and other programs. While these efforts are often designed to engage college students who identify as men in consciousness-raising activities, others are open to students of all genders and even faculty and staff. I am interested in how masculinity-centered practices, in all its forms and aims, are considered, applied, and navigated within WGECs.

Please feel free to skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, and you may also ask me to stop the recorder or end the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Background**
1. Please describe your path to working at the center and the number of years you have been employed there. What attracted you to the role?
2. What are your core responsibilities?
3. What is the mission of the center, and who do you predominantly serve on campus?
4. Please provide a brief overview of the types of masculinity-centered practices facilitated within your center.

**Possible Interview Questions**
1. What experiences have you had engaging in masculinity-centered practices in the center?
2. What is it like to develop or coordinate this type of work?
3. What does masculinity mean to you? Can you share how you have come to your current understanding?
4. Is there a situation or moment that stands out for you when you think about your experiences with this initiative? (How did this moment make you feel?)
5. Can you share a story about a time when you felt the initiative/program was successful?
6. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced a challenge or risk when engaging in this work?
7. How do you feel about the current design of the initiative? What works well, and what is something you would possibly shift?
8. Please describe any ‘aha’ moments you’ve had when implementing this initiative.
9. What does it mean to do this work within the space of a Women’s and Gender Equity Center?
   a. What is the role of masculinity-centered practices within WGECs?
   b. How do you perceive this work aligning with the aims of your center?
   c. How have your experiences shaped this understanding?
10. How does it feel to do this work in our current social context? What is it like to do this work within your institutional context? (example: an institution’s Division I athletics culture may shape dialogue groups on masculinity in sports, etc)

11. What questions came up for you when engaging in this work?
   a. What questions or thoughts do you still have?
   b. What do you see as a future direction of engaging in masculinity-centered practices within your center?

At the end of the interview, thank the participant for their time and explain the next steps in the process. Also remind them that you will be sending them a $25 gift card.
APPENDIX F

SUMMARY THEMES EXAMPLE
Tegan
Current WGEC practitioner
Engaged in masculinity-centered practices (MCPs) for 3 years
Pronouns: she/her/hers
Identities

- cisgender woman
- white
- queer
- able-bodied

Research Question 1
How do WGEC practitioners make sense of masculinity-centered practices?

- Masculinity-centered practices can support gender equity, social justice, and creating change
  - Important to be grounded in intersectional feminist, anti-racist, and social justice frameworks
  - Tegan takes a both/and approach to this work. 1) We cannot look at sexual or relationship violence as women’s issues. In order to support gender equity, we must work with those who are perpetrating harm. Women’s issues are everybody’s issues. We all have gender and need to work on this together, and men must be allies in this process. AND 2) Men need a space to discuss masculinity with one another – they are also harmed by hegemonic masculinity. By doing their own work, men will be more inclined to support and address issues that are impacting women. If we create spaces for men to do this work, there will be a ripple effect and more people can be free from harm/violence.
  - Similar to whiteness work (white folks being part of anti-racism work), men have a responsibility to directly play a role in advancing gender equity.

- Considering the audience and outcomes
  - The center has programming for men-identified students (predominantly cis men) and also hosts different programs for people of all genders.
  - For programming for men-identified students, Tegan asks, ‘Who are we really inviting to be part of this work?’ Is this work for cis men (involved in Greek life and athletics)? Trans men? Men who have taken WSGS courses? Tegan noticed that when there are men who have more experience thinking about masculinity, the dynamic in the group shifts. She is considering recruiting cis men who haven’t thought as much about masculinity.

- The role of violence prevention
  - Initially, Tegan did not want this program to be explicitly sexual violence prevention programming. She wanted it to be an outcome but not the primary
purpose. The program was initially focused on providing men with a space to unpack masculinity.
- This has shifted over time, and Tegan is now in a place where ending sexual violence is a priority for the program.
- Professionally, Tegan feels called to do sexual violence prevention work – sees masculinity programming as a complement or extension of this work.

- Facilitation considerations
  - Scaffolding the learning experience for students, from self-reflection (what is my masculinity?) to action in their communities (how does this look in the larger context of my communities? How does masculinity play a role in sexual and relationship violence?). The program is designed to be both informative and transformative.
  - Important to create a meaningful space for vulnerability for the participants, especially because hegemonic masculinity expects men not to show emotion.
  - Just because someone is interested in doing this work, that is not enough. When considering which men could facilitate this work, Tegan felt it was important to trust that they would do the work from an intersectional feminist and social justice lens. Tegan gained trust through relationship-building and learning how people approach their work on campus.
  - Man of color facilitator was helpful in offering visibility for men of color participants.

- Potential to cause harm
  - Tegan makes sure to speak with participants directly about not abusing the program (getting “good men credit”) and using it as a way to assault or harm women. Based on her experience, Tegan can feel suspicious of this work at times, even though she sees its value.

- WGECs as sites for this work
  - By facilitating MCPs through the center, Tegan shared concerns about men taking up space in a center designed for those experiencing marginalization
    - How much space are MCPs taking up in a women-centric space? Who does this work benefit? Who is the center not serving? Do survivors no longer feel safe coming to the center? Will a perpetrator feel he can show up to the center?
  - At one point, the program was the center’s biggest expense. Tegan feels that masculinity programming should not be the priority of the center and its resources.
  - The center is positioned to do this work from a uniquely feminist and social justice perspective. There is less risk of the programming being watered down, which can happen when this work is housed in neutral spaces on campus (campus life units, for example)
Research Question 2
What is it like for WGEC practitioners to engage masculinity-centered practices?

- Personal experiences and motivation
  - Previous experiences with masculinity programming – saw a strong example of programming at another campus and looked to it as a model. Tegan also had a personal relationship with someone who participated in masculinity programming, saw the value firsthand.
  - Navigating masculinity within family relationships – doing this work helped Tegan put some pieces together.

- Rewarding
  - Filling a need
  - Personally rewarding to see men active and engaged in conversations and experience change. Tegan developed positive relationships with participants and appreciated their presence in the center space. Some participants still think about their experience years later, and this shows that masculinity programming can work.

- Navigating tensions, experiencing highs (see ‘rewarding’ above) and lows
  - Embracing and sitting in the many tensions, there is no perfect harmony. Practitioners must commit to soul-searching and heart work in order to hold space for all of the complexities. This is important work, but it doesn’t always feel good doing it.
  - Experiencing trauma as a WGEC practitioner and regularly working with survivors. After recent protests on campus, Tegan admits she has to do unpack feeling tired and jaded about men and masculinity programming. Sexual violence prevention work is heavy, and it can be difficult to believe in the value of MCPs when seeing the impact of sexual violence (men often the perpetrators) every day.
  - Burden of women staff members to create and hold spaces for men on campus, Tegan was frustrated that men faculty/staff were not stepping up to be involved.
  - Colleagues who were actively supportive were mostly women, they played a pivotal role in recruitment efforts. The women all took part in hidden labor, leveraging their power, position, and relationships in doing masculinity work.
  - Partnering with masculinity-centered nonprofit organization. The organization guided how the work looked, and their goals were not necessarily aligned with the center’s goals. They used the center’s resources and did not provide much support from their end. Highlights an example of those doing this work perpetuating the same dynamics they are working to dismantle.

- Reflection
  - Important to ask questions throughout the process of developing and facilitating MCPs. Consistent evaluation and considering implications of the work. How do
we do this work well? Who should be leading the work? Why are men not putting in the same labor on campus? What does it mean for WGEC to lead these efforts?

- Guided by the work of other campuses as well as men and masculinity scholarship. By immersing herself in research and literature, Tegan sees the possibilities of this work and feels hopeful.

- Collaborative
  - Considering collaborating with athletics in the future for additional support and infrastructure to do this work.
  - Colleagues who were actively supportive were mostly women, they played a pivotal role in recruitment efforts. The women all took part in hidden labor, leveraging their power, position, and relationships in doing masculinity work.

**Research Question 3**
**How do social/institutional contexts shape their experiences?**

- Mission and name of center
  - The mission of the center has changed over time. When Tegan first came into the role, the center was focused on women and their academic, personal, and professional development. Tegan shared that the center outgrew this mission and now focuses on gender equity, social justice, antiracism, and marginalized identities more broadly. She refers to this as doing “gender and” work rather than just focusing on gender.
  - Including ‘gender’ in the name is more inclusive – wants the space to be welcoming to trans and non-binary students.
  - If ‘gender’ is included in the name of the center, Tegan feels there is an expectation for men and masculinity work to take place. When ‘gender’ is not included in the name of the center, then it’s something nice to do but not an expectation – they can have more autonomy in how they do the work.

- Title IX
  - Some concern about being sued for not serving all students. By having men and masculinity programming, it positions the programming of the center to be for everyone and not just women.

- Relevance of center
  - If the center serves men as well, the center can’t be relegated to the margin of the university for only serving a handful of people. This work can help the center be relevant for the university as a whole.

- Resources
  - Staff/campus partner turnover impacts the work, right now the program is paused
Feels more comfortable doing this work with more resources. It’s more equitable when the money and time being put into masculinity programming isn’t the number one expense of the center.
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VITA

Ashley Brown attended Loyola University Chicago, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and Women’s Studies and Gender Studies in 2010. Brown then attended Indiana University and earned her Master of Science in Education in Higher Education and Student Affairs in 2012. Prior to pursuing her doctoral degree, she served as a higher education administrator at Washington University in St. Louis, University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago working to support undergraduate and graduate student development, faculty/student engagement, curriculum design, masculinity dialogue programming, and academic program management. In 2017, Brown began her doctoral studies at Loyola University Chicago in Higher Education. While at Loyola, she received the School of Education Research Excellence Award and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Coalition for Men and Masculinities Outstanding Emerging Research Award. Currently, Brown is the Ph.D. Program Manager at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice.