he notion that masculinity is a socially constructed concept has been a central argument in the recent discourse on college men and masculinities. To say that masculinity is a socially constructed concept is to assert that it is a performed identity—that is, one is not born knowing how to express masculinities according to socially prescribed expectations but rather learns to do so through social messages and interactions that are reinforced beginning in childhood and persisting through adulthood. A central message that is conveyed throughout this process is that boys should not “act like girls” and should avoid behaviors that are socially constructed as feminine. These lessons about masculinities are reinforced in nearly all of boys’ social interactions—with adults, with other children, in schools, in youth activities, and so forth. Boys also learn that there are rewards (e.g., praise, acceptance, validation) that are associated with performing masculinities according to socially prescribed
expectations. Likewise, there are consequences (e.g., shame, alienation, reprimands) for violating these expectations.

The social construction of masculinities is not a new concept. Informed by the work of feminist theorists, this concept was popularized in the late 1970s and early 1980s by men’s studies scholars, notably Harry Brod, R. W. Connell, Michael Kaufman, Michael Kimmel, Michael Messner, James Messerschmidt, Joseph Pleck, and Don Sabo. But only recently have higher education scholars and student affairs educators begun to approach their research and practice relating to college men from a social constructionist perspective and view college men as “gendered beings” (Kimmel & Messner, 2009). As we noted in Chapter 1 of this book, theories and perspectives that formed the foundation of student affairs as a profession are based, almost exclusively, on research that prioritized the experiences of men (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). However, gender was not a construct that was purposefully explored in this research. Consequently, such studies offer very little insight into the experiences of college men as gendered beings.

Identity development is, as a social process, influenced largely by people’s interactions with others. Thus, understanding the development of college men requires examining their experiences from a social constructionist perspective. Recent studies on the gender identity development of college men (e.g., Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris, 2008) have concluded that masculinities have noticeable influences on the ways in which men experience college—namely, in the decisions they make about friendships, how they choose to spend their time outside of class, the choices they make about careers and majors, and how they engage in sexual and romantic relationships.

The chapters in Part One highlight key issues, processes, and challenges related to gender socialization and identity development among college men. In doing so, at least three key questions are raised and explored: (1) What are the culturally dominant norms, meanings, and expectations of masculinities in America; (2) how do men come to learn and internalize these meanings and expectations; and (3) what are the consequences for men when they embrace them, either knowingly or unknowingly?

Chapter 2, written by Michael S. Kimmel, is a theoretical discussion of masculinity as a socially constructed identity. Kimmel foregrounds several fundamental components of masculinities. One key argument Kimmel advances in this chapter is that men both police and validate the gender performance of other men. Therefore, although it is widely assumed that men perform masculinities to attract the attention of women, it is ultimately other men who are the targets of men’s masculine performance. Kimmel also discusses the “paradox of masculinity.” This concept
suggests that, despite having a disproportionate amount of social power (in comparison to women), men often feel powerless because they are taught that in order to be “real men” they must be tough, fearless, powerful, wealthy, sexually attractive, and successful (among other things) at all times. Of course, this is an expectation that cannot be realized by the overwhelming majority of men, especially those who are low income, ethnic minority, physically disabled, and non-heterosexual (to name a few). This disconnect between what men are socialized to believe about masculinities and what they actually experience as men leads to a host of risky and destructive behaviors to hide insecurities and fears of not measuring up to what others expect of them as men. One way of expressing masculinities is to assume dominance and control over others. Thus, sexism, homophobia, racism, and other oppressive acts are used by men to gain or recapture a sense of manhood. Lastly, Kimmel acknowledges that because gender intersects with other identities (race/ethnicity, social class, age, ability, sexual orientation, etc.), a hierarchy of masculinities exists. In other words, some masculinities are socially constructed as more privileged or dominant than others. Situated at the top of the masculine hierarchy are White, affluent, heterosexual, and able-bodied men, whereas ethnic minority, non-heterosexual, working-class, and physically disabled men are less privileged and valued.

Whereas Michael Kimmel deconstructs masculinity as a socially constructed identity, the three remaining chapters in Part One illuminate the consequences of performing masculinities according to culturally defined expectations—not only for men themselves but also for the people who are important in their lives and the communities in which they interact. Chapter 3, written by James M. O’Neil, Barbara J. Helms, Robert K. Gable, Laurence David, and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, is a groundbreaking piece that offers several important concepts for examining and theorizing about social constructions of masculinities and how they manifest in college contexts. They were among the first to propose men’s “fear of femininity” as an empirically proven phenomenon to explain a host of gender-related conflicts and patterns that are typical among men, including homophobia, a decreased capacity for intimacy, increased anxiety, depression, and poor help-seeking. Building on the work of O’Neil et al. and that of early identity development scholars, in Chapter 4, Tracy L. Davis examines how college men cope with culturally defined notions and expectations of what it means to be a man. One of the most compelling findings from Davis’s study is that college men both recognized and valued the need for self-expressions that lie outside the boundaries of what has been socially constructed as masculine, yet fears and concerns about being perceived as feminine or gay made it difficult for the participants to embrace the psychoemotional aspects of their identities.
That “previous research has neglected to explore identities and development among male students at community colleges” is a noteworthy critique of the published research on college men and masculinities that is offered by Frank Harris III and Shaun R. Harper in Chapter 5. In response to this gap in the published research, Harris and Harper endeavor to move the discourse surrounding men enrolled at community colleges beyond simply reporting rates and disparities in enrollment, persistence, and graduation by infusing perspectives relating to gender and masculinities into this discussion. Harris and Harper profile four community college men who represent diverse backgrounds and experiences and are challenged by gender-related conflicts. This chapter will be of particular interest to community college educators who work with college men in that the authors propose strategies to support the identity development and success of men who are challenged by issues much like the four men who are profiled in the chapter. Harris and Harper conclude their discussion by calling for more research on masculinities as they manifest in community college contexts.

In the last chapter in Part One, James R. Mahalik, Glenn E. Good, and Matt Englar-Carlson explore the consequences of masculinities from a counseling and therapy perspective. Like O’Neil and his colleagues, Mahalik, Good, and Englar-Carlson also propose a set of patterns or “scripts” that capture the gender conflicts that manifest as a result of socially constructed masculinities. Each script highlights specific aspects of masculinities, such as physical violence, aggressiveness, homophobia, and sexual promiscuity. A key takeaway point from this chapter is that although masculinity is a socially constructed concept that encompasses shared meanings and assumptions about gender, some conceptualizations of masculinities will present more strongly with some men than others. Thus, those who work with men in counseling and advising capacities must recognize which socially prescribed messages are most salient for the individual they are treating or working with.

Taken as a whole, these chapters confirm the ways in which narrow and rigid norms that govern gender performance for men limit their ability to be fully human and realize their full potential. Unfortunately, these consequences manifest strongly on college campuses via several gendered trends and outcomes. For example, recent reports conclude that men are underrepresented among college students who enroll, persist, and graduate from college; participate in campus service and leadership activities; and seek help at campus health and counseling centers (Kellom, 2004; Sax, 2008). Despite being a quantitative minority on most campuses, men are overrepresented among students who commit acts of violence, perpetrate sexual assaults, and abuse drugs and alcohol while enrolled in college.
The consequences that are associated with performing masculinities according to culturally defined expectations are well documented. Yet the same narrow patterns of socially appropriate masculine performance have persisted relatively undisturbed for decades (if not centuries), which begs the question: “What, if any, positive functions do traditional social constructions serve in the lives of men?” This question remains largely unexplored in the discourse on college men and masculinities. Yet this seems to be an important starting point for educators who aim to help men develop healthy and conflict-free gender identities. The overwhelming majority of the scholarship on masculinities assumes a negative or deficit perspective, which may leave some educators wondering, “What does ‘good’ masculinity look like and how can we help students achieve it?” James Mahalik and his colleagues suggest that traditional expectations of performing masculinities may be associated with some productive behaviors, such as an increased capacity for problem solving, calmness during crisis, and the tendency to sacrifice one’s personal needs in order to meet the needs of others. Chapter 22 by Shaun R. Harper in Part Five of this volume also considers productive conceptualizations that were observed among a group of African American male college achievers. Beyond the insights offered by these studies, we know little about the positive aspects of masculinities for college men.

REFERENCES


Identity Development and Gender Socialization
Implications for Educational Practice

Upon reading the chapters in Part One, one question that may come to mind is, “How can college educators, particularly those working in student affairs, disrupt long-standing patterns of male gender socialization and support men in recognizing and appreciating their authentic selves?” The typical response on most campuses is to treat male misbehavior and related issues strictly as judicial matters. However, addressing the underlying sociocultural factors that lead to these behaviors is also necessary. Based on the salient themes and findings that resonate across the five chapters in Part One, we offer several implications related to the identity development and gender socialization of college men.

The chapters in Part One have important implications for educators who are responsible for developing programs and interventions to facilitate identity development and student success for college men. A necessary outcome of any program or intervention for college men is to help them recognize the range of options for expressing masculinities. This will be an especially powerful outcome for men who have never felt comfortable embracing socially prescribed male gender roles. Equally important is providing opportunities for men to continually reflect upon their identities and the ways in which gender influences their interpersonal relationships and experiences. In Chapter 4, Tracy L. Davis argues that it is important for men to recognize themselves as gendered beings, as doing so facilitates growth and identity development. College educators can help men achieve this developmental milestone by providing opportunities for critical reflection through one-on-one and facilitated group discussions about masculinities, readings, service projects, and campus activities. For example, we have found the following questions very effective in facilitating reflection and dialogue.
about gender and masculinities among men: “What does being a man mean to you?” and “What are some of the things you do to express yourself as a man?”

These chapters also have implications for graduate education, training, and professional development in student affairs. Given the key issues that are raised in the chapters and the potential impact on students and the campus community, providing ongoing opportunities for professional development for student affairs educators to build their capacities to address gender-related issues among men on their campuses seems warranted and worthwhile. This may be even more important for entry-level professionals, particularly those working in residential education and judicial affairs roles, as they are often the professional staff who spend the most time with students and are perhaps best positioned to recognize and reach out to men who are challenged by gender-related conflicts. Student affairs department directors and senior officers may find the chapters by Michael S. Kimmel (Chapter 2) and Tracy L. Davis (Chapter 4) useful in raising awareness and facilitating discussion within their units of trends, challenges, and outcomes among men on their campuses. These discussions can be contextualized with data from the office of judicial affairs or the department of public safety. Inviting faculty colleagues whose research focuses on the social construction of gender to lead a series of conversations throughout the division may also be a potentially effective strategy. One tangible outcome of these discussions can be a comprehensive action plan for helping men deal with the effects of male gender role conflict, thus reducing incidents of male misbehavior and increasing male student engagement and success.

Educators who earn degrees in student affairs preparation programs are rarely exposed to theories and concepts related to the social construction of masculinities because these issues have not been a part of the traditional student affairs graduate program curriculum. Moreover, as we discussed earlier, classic theories of college student development that serve as the foundation of the profession offer little insight into masculinities on college campuses. Therefore, faculty teaching in student affairs preparation programs might consider incorporating the frameworks presented in Chapter 3 by James M. O’Neil et al. and Chapter 6 by James R. Mahalik et al. into their courses to introduce students to the social construction of masculinities and male gender role conflict. Even more important is for students to learn to use these frameworks to guide their practice in working with college men. Case studies and role-playing exercises requiring students to (1) identify salient gender-related issues, (2) make sense of these issues using the frameworks, and (3) propose appropriate action steps are effective learning activities that focus on the practical application of these frameworks.
Lastly, because student affairs educators experience processes of gender socialization similar to those experienced by their students, it is reasonable to assume that they too have internalized culturally defined beliefs about masculinities. As a result, some educators may unknowingly reinforce socially prescribed expectations of masculinities among their male students. Therefore, it is critical that educators become aware and continually reflect upon their own biases and assumptions about masculinities and their impact on their interactions with male students. Davis in Chapter 4 and Mahalik et al. in Chapter 6 warn practitioners to not allow “sex role expectations” to guide their work with men.