

Chris Howard: Raise good men

Christopher B. Howard | Posted: Saturday, May 17, 2014 10:00 pm

The author Malcolm Gladwell writes that it takes 10,000 hours of focused, intentional effort to get good at anything.

I've recently come across another reference to 10,000 hours. A computer game-maker speaking at a TED conference noted that the average young person racks up 10,000 hours playing computer games by the age of 21.

As the president of an all-male college, I find myself thinking about numbers like these and what they might mean for the young men I see every day on our campus.

The statistics are all too familiar. Boys are twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed with an attention-deficit or learning disorder. They're likely to score worse on reading and writing tests, more likely to be held back, more likely to drop out of school, five times more prone to suicide and 16 times more likely to go to prison.

In college, young men make up only a third of students in volunteering, studying abroad, using tutoring, or taking advantage of counseling or health services. They get lower grades and fewer honors than female counterparts. Currently, women comprise 60 percent of the undergraduate college population, and we could soon reach a "70/30" female/male mix in the not-so-distant future.

These numbers and observations come from the pages of a new collection of essays titled, "What Works: Raising Boys, Engaging Guys, and Educating Men" that's just been published by Hampden-Sydney College.

One of the contributors is Dr. Michael Kimmel, who wrote "Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men." If you're the parent of a young man, this description of "Guyland" might sound hauntingly familiar:

"It's a stage of development, poised between adolescence and adulthood, a world in which we postpone entering into adulthood until our late 20s, moving back home after college, drifting through relationships and career paths."

Part of what these young males are struggling with in "Guyland" is the question: "What does it mean to be a man?" And society generally is not much help with that question.

Ask an 18-year-old male to talk about manhood, and he can summon up the centuries-old virtues, says Kimmel: honor, integrity, responsibility. But what that 18-year-old is really told is to "be a man," which he often interprets as "never cry and be tough, strong, rich, and powerful."

The young man is also fully aware, says Kimmel, his peers will constantly “police” him to make sure he “never steps out of the confining box.” As educators, our goal should be to help young men develop a healthy definition of what it means to be good men, devoid of hyper-masculinity and, in the words of “What Works” contributor, coach Joe Ehrmann, a definition that allows men to understand their emotions rather than suppress them.

Women have been struggling with their own issues of gender stereotyping and inequities for generations and, at least since the 1970s, have begun to see advances in their ability to rise to the highest ranks in society and begin to exercise a control over their own lives that earlier would have been inconceivable.

The issues facing young men, I believe, are quieter. The symptoms are more elusive. It reminds me of the dog in the Sherlock Holmes story who provided a key clue by not barking.

The contributors to “What Works” sound a clarion call: We need to pay more attention to the quiet, profound challenges facing boys and young men in society today. Contrary to widely held beliefs, these challenges transcend race, socio-economic strata and even the United States’ vast and disparate geography.

Dr. Michael Thompson writes in “What Works” that it’s “axiomatic that girls cooperate and boys compete,” anticipating the question, “Does research support the stereotype?” and giving a researcher’s answer that I love: “yes and no.” He writes that boys do begin to cooperate and collaborate when they see what he calls “a meaningful goal.”

That’s one of the things that gives me hope about young men today: the possibility of a meaningful goal, one that would warrant 10,000 hours. Echoing Thompson’s sentiment, Lea Carpenter, daughter of a World War II hero and author of a brilliant work of fiction about a Navy SEAL and his mother, notes in “What Works” that one of the greatest gifts she can offer her sons is “clarity of purpose.”

I think a lot about the statistic that “in college, young men make up only a third of students in volunteering.” On our all-male campus, men do not leave the volunteering to women because there are no women. Young men cannot sit in the back of the class, silent with their eyes barely visible below the brim of their well-worn baseball caps while others participate. Faculty will not accept that. On this campus, people notice when a student misses tutoring or counseling. Men are visible, and the students themselves tend to be accountable to one another.

I wonder if the fact that males here tend to look out for one another in what they refer to as a kind of “brotherhood” is a reason for one statistic of which I’m very proud: Hampden-Sydney’s graduation rate is 11 percent higher than the national average for men at all colleges and universities.

I’m also encouraged by writers in “What Works” who think parents should give their boys the opportunity to take (appropriate) risks that build their confidence, self-esteem and initiative. (And I’m

not talking about 10,000 hours of “virtual risks” in computer games.)

Kelly Johnson, the mother of five sons, writes in “What Works” that we need to help boys and young men “hear beyond the cultural noise.” She writes there once was a time when “wisdom was handed down in a game of catch, a day of fishing, or in long hours working in the yard. . . . And when all was said and done, it came in the form of time alone with one’s thoughts, quiet enough that a young man might hear the first whispers of his own innate wisdom.”

Wisdom is hard-won and takes both individual reflection and collective support if it is even to approach its apex. None of us has all the answers. But we need to push this subject higher on the national agenda. What these thinkers in “What Works” have to say is a good place to start.