



What Men Need

By Scott Jaschik
March 31, 2010

Patrick White was vice president and dean of the faculty at Saint Mary's College in Indiana, a women's college, before he became president of Wabash College, one of the four remaining four-year colleges in the United States that educate only men.

In a talk last week that brought together the presidents of all four of those colleges, White said that Wabash students like to ask him about the difference between a women's college and a men's college. He surprises them by talking about how much they have in common. For example, he said that when he was at Saint Mary's, he used to urge students to "own their intellectual leadership more robustly," saying that they were "dumbing down" in social situations with men from the neighboring University of Notre Dame.

The first time he made that statement at Wabash, White said, a male student responded that "we do that here, too." The student told him that a group of students might be talking about politics or philosophy or literature, and that if a woman walks in the room, the male students will shift the conversation to, "How about those Colts?" What is it about "the bag of mud of expectations about masculinity," White

asked, that makes men lose their intelligence and revert to a jock role around women?

White spoke at the annual meeting of the American Men's Studies Association, along with the presidents of Hampden-Sydney and Morehouse Colleges and Saint John's University of Minnesota. While leaders of women's colleges gather annually, the joint appearance of these four presidents was the first time that those running these institutions gathered together since 2001.

White and his fellow presidents all spoke with great concern about the state of male America. And even if they feel pleased with their efforts to reach young men, all suggested that the United States is in trouble if it doesn't find a way to reach more men. The presidents stressed the importance of linking values to the educational experience—and said that they believed young men need (and want) more structure than they may realize is the case.

Robert M. Franklin, president of Morehouse College, has spent considerable time since taking office at his alma mater in 2007 talking about what it means today to be "a Morehouse man." He has focused—in promoting a dress code—on the importance of "five wells." Franklin wants his students to be "well read, well spoken, well traveled, well dressed and well balanced."

Franklin said that the college is

engaged in a long-term study of the characteristics of the students who succeed and those who don't. Those who do well at Morehouse, he said, tend to enter the college wanting to in some way improve society. Those who don't do well academically, he said, tend to be those who engage in "antisocial behavior" and who wear "inappropriate attire," he said. And this second group of students, he said, tends to have self-esteem issues.

While Morehouse has the academic reputation to fill its classes with outstanding students, Franklin said that Morehouse and other colleges also need to reach those men who may not enter college with the values or academic record he would like to see. Franklin said colleges need to think a lot about their messages, even those that have been successful in the past.

"Young men tend to be hero-worshippers and want to align themselves with winners," he said. But many young men today "don't feel particularly exceptional," so colleges' messages need to be sensitive to that, he said.

For example, Morehouse has long talked about its successful alumni and their sense of duty to black America. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would be the most obvious example. Franklin said that in talking about King today, he doesn't talk only about King's courage and convictions, but also about how he

earned more C's than A's or B's as a Morehouse undergraduate. That message, Franklin said, "is quite empowering to all of us."

Similarly, he said that he wants professors to think of themselves as coaches. He said many professors don't necessarily think of themselves in that role, but that a coach is always both "cheering them on" and "expecting more"—regardless of how well students perform. And to further break down barriers between academic and non-academic parts of student life, Franklin said, Morehouse is adding academic themes to residence halls, so that they will be focused on such topics as globalization, spirituality and environmental justice.

Christopher Howard, president of Hampden-Sydney, said he strongly agreed with the coach metaphor and the idea of defining education broadly, in ways that promote individual responsibility. "There is a false dichotomy between the dean of students and the dean of the faculty," he said. Every professor, he continued, should be teaching Hampden-Sydney students to be men, not just how to master a discipline.

Howard quoted Mark Twain on the dangers of focusing on academics in isolation: "Don't let schooling get in the way of your education."

Rev. Robert Koopmann, president of Saint John's, said he believed that colleges need to pay more attention to "male spiritual development" and that male students—even those not raised with a strong sense of organized religion—need

this type of growth.

At Saint John's, a Roman Catholic institution, he said, faith is present in all kinds of ways. Most of the 22 faculty members who live in dormitories are Benedictine monks. Further, students are invited to join "spirituality groups" of 10 to 12 students each, whose members meet regularly from the time they are freshmen to the time they are seniors, assisted by a monk and one other professional at the university, sometimes a faculty member or a coach.

Father Koopmann described two groups he has led. One was largely of "unchurched" students, whom he found all needing to find ways to talk about difficulties they had faced in the past—such as childhood injuries or parental divorce. The other was of Catholic students, and Father Koopman said that there was more ritual with this group, such as his leading mass for these students. But in both groups, he said, "there was a need to build trust" so that the students could talk about the issues that troubled them—something they had difficulty doing.

"Men do have a spiritual side," he said.

As the presidents spoke about the needs of male students, they also talked about the need to do so in ways that do not suggest any disrespect for the advances of women. Two of the colleges operate side-by-side with women's colleges, Saint John's with the College of Saint Benedict, and Morehouse with Spelman College as a partner in the Atlanta University Center

Consortium.

Howard, of Hampden-Sydney, said that it was important to talk about why male setbacks in education matter not only to men. "We are living in a 60-40 world," he said, referring to female-male enrollment levels at many colleges. "And we are fast becoming a 70-30 world," and are already there at many historically black colleges. But he said that this problem is not because of women and wouldn't be a problem at all if society were doing all it could to help men become educated.

He said he didn't think that was the case, and that the growing gap in educational attainment would end up hurting women, who want men to be well educated. He said that the discussion of men's educational setbacks isn't about "the wonderful steps" women have achieved.

Franklin, of Morehouse, said that it was important to define the men that his and other colleges are educating in ways that overcome past bias. They need to be men who respect women, who respect people of differing sexual orientations, he said.

And he added that in thinking about the need to be more "caring" to male students and in encouraging male students to talk about their fears and goals, he found himself thinking about women's colleges and the language used by their leaders.

