

Advocates make case for men's centres on campus and in communities

BY LAUREN LA ROSE (The Canadian Press)

TORONTO — An American professor specializing in studying the psychology of boys and men, masculinity and manhood is making the case for creating men's centres on campus.

Miles Groth is an advisory fellow for the Canadian Association for Equality (CAFE), which is working to raise funds to create the Canadian Centre for Men and Families.

Advocates on both sides of the border are seeking to fill what they view as a void at schools and within communities — programs dedicated to studying, serving and supporting male interests and needs.

“Essentially, we feel there's no space for men specifically to discuss their issues from a men's point of view; so we're hoping to get something started that will hopefully be a catalyst for maybe some more male-oriented programs running,” said CAFE spokesman Adam McPhee, who also serves as food programs liaison for the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation.

“Male-specific programs are normally in relation to say, homelessness, but they're not normally geared directly towards men.”

McPhee, who works with predominantly gay men, said he's been involved in a number of discussions where domestic violence targeting men has emerged as a key issue. There's also interest within CAFE about father's rights and exploring options for greater shared parenting opportunities for dads following divorce, he added.

Groth, a professor of psychology at Wagner College in Staten Island, N.Y., has established a website seeking to highlight efforts in North America, Europe and elsewhere to create study groups for men on campus — centres for “male-positive discussions of boyhood and what it means to be a young man in the 21st century.”

He was set to speak at an event organized by CAFE in Toronto on Friday. In his address, he planned to examine a number of issues affecting men who have reached college age or are bound for post-secondary study, focusing on the declining rate of enrolment and completion of bachelor's degrees among young males.

During the 2010-11 academic year, women accounted for 56.5 per cent of enrolment in public post-secondary schools in Canada compared with 43.5 per cent of men — a ratio which has remained constant over the past decade, according to Statistics Canada. Females represented 58.2 per cent of total graduates, continuing “a long trend” where women have outnumbered their male counterparts.

“What do I think is going on? The answer is we don't know,” Groth said in an interview from New York. “That's why these kinds of centres are absolutely essential because the answer to the question is not going to come primarily from people like me ... but it's going to come from the boys and the men themselves.

“To make things more difficult, one of the outcomes of this trend is an increasing silence — or I'll say reticence — on the part of young men to talk about their experiences.”

In a piece entitled “Are Colleges Not Welcoming Young Men?” published in August by *Psychology Today* — where Groth regularly posts on his “Boys to Men” blog — he offered a few theories.

Groth wrote of what he saw as a change in environment that left men feeling “less welcome on many — perhaps most — college campuses,” an issue he described as “complex.”

“A changing faculty, changes in content of programs and courses, and the disproportion of male-female classmates are causing young men to say no to college life, even though they know that not attending may mean being at a disadvantage when applying for certain jobs after graduation ...” he wrote.

Certain orientation programs focused on proper behaviour and interpersonal relationships of a sexual nature have tended to portray boys as “dangerous,” Groth said.

“Indeed, what does it mean to a first-year male student to have to attend a date-rape seminar where they are told they harbour dangerous impulses that must be controlled, when they have never for a moment ever in their lives thought about coercing a female (or anyone) sexually,” he wrote in *Psychology Today*.

Annalee Lepp, associate professor and chair in the department of women’s studies at the University of Victoria, said she believes the issue of violence on campus has broadened from a discussion solely centred on women to encompass other targets of potential attacks, such as gay and trans students.

Lepp said while she has nothing against the creation of men’s centres on campuses, she questions the politics behind it.

“I think there has been a lot of work done by men who align themselves with feminism that have been doing the kinds of work that feminism has been doing for many, many years and becoming allies of the movement — or actively calling themselves feminists,” said Lepp, president of Women’s and Gender Studies et Recherches Feministes.

“In some segments of the men’s movement, it’s definitely a backlash against feminism as if feminism has created a context where something has been taken away from men.”

As for the decline in post-secondary enrolment, Lepp said there seem to be “economic options” certain young men are pursuing rather than going to college or university. She pointed to the employment boom in British Columbia where it appears male high school graduates with access to fairly well-paying jobs in the construction industry, for example, would pursue that line of work rather than accumulate student debt.

“There is kind of a rationale for this that isn’t just simply that boys are falling behind, but I think that one could argue that young men have more job options out of high school than women do out of income-generating capacity.”

University of Toronto PhD candidate Christopher Little is completing his dissertation on education, masculinity and development. In an email to *The Canadian Press*, Little said that he had seen “heaps of overly ambitious reasons” purporting to account for the underperformance of boys, including behavioural differences and curriculum changes.

“My personal feeling is that there is no one answer, because this is a complex issue to which there is no one answer,” Little wrote.

“I don’t think we can or should speak of this as simply an issue of the performance of ‘boys’ versus ‘girls,’ and instead we need to look more closely at performance within the category of ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ within particular classrooms. What kind of households are they from? What are their social backgrounds?”

“I think if one parses the data in such a way ... it is likely that he (or) she will see other important trends/issues which need to be addressed.”