IMPACT CASE STUDY

Men Can Stop Rape’s Impact as a Technical Assistance Provider

Interview with Dr. Joel Bluml, Associate Vice President, Student Life, Washburn University

Before Working with Men Can Stop Rape

Washburn University (WU) is a medium-size public institution located in Topeka, Kansas. Before receiving Men Can Stop Rape’s (MCSR) support, Dr. Joel Bluml said WU’s engaging men work was “individualized,” meaning that it was done by “well-intentioned people, but it was fragmented, and so the work that was being done wasn’t really systemic. It was more individualized based on traditional mentorship….It certainly wasn’t framed in the way that Men Can Stop Rape helped us.” The individualized approach would consist of, for example, a conversation with a specific male student who needs advice in connection with behavior change related to violence prevention education and understanding what is acceptable and what is not. There were no organized efforts to engage campus men.

How Men Can Stop Rape Supported WU

WU’s engaging men work was supported by a Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) Campus Program grant received in 2016. During that time, MCSR served as the OVW Campus Program Engaging Men Technical Assistance (TA) Provider. In that role, MCSR provided WU with a guide and other supplemental materials for organizing a Healthy Masculinity Campus Conversation (HMCC), an event based on an innovative format using personal stories about masculinity to spark conversations and to raise the visibility of healthy masculinity across a community. In conjunction with HMCC planning, MCSR held HMCC planning calls with key staff to discuss progress organizing the event, and conducted a webinar with the storytellers, preparing them to share a personal story related to masculinity. While MCSR staff would serve as one of the facilitators, Dr. Joel Bluml, Associate Vice President of Student Life, would be the primary facilitator, and MCSR held a call with him as preparation for that role.

MCSR traveled to WU in September 2017 to co-facilitate the HMCC and to conduct three healthy masculinity workshops – two for students, one for staff and faculty – and lead two meetings about healthy masculinity, providing technical assistance to staff and faculty. More than 75 people attended the workshops and meetings. The “Strongest Man” exercise, which reinforces aspects of healthy masculinity, especially made an
impression on Dr. Bluml because he felt it was “giving men the space to learn and grow.”

**How WU Used Men Can Stop Rape’s Support**

MCSR suggested that creating a special printed invitation to the HMCC and involving high profile men in the conversation would lead to higher attendance. In response to these suggestions, Dr. Bluml persuaded the university president to both have his name on the invitation and open the event with a brief talk. The printed invitation read, “You have been identified as a man of distinction. Please join Washburn University President Dr. Jerry Farley for: A Campus Conversation about Healthy Masculinity.” Dr. Farley stayed for the entirety of the conversation, which was attended by more than 100 campus men. Dr. Bluml also persuaded high profile campus men to serve as storytellers, which included the Vice President of Student Life, a young man from student government, the basketball coach, and a communications professor.

During the call to prepare the facilitator, Dr. Bluml worried about “imposter syndrome” since he had no expertise in masculinity or gender studies, but MCSR assured him that the format of the conversation created a participatory environment requiring primarily a facilitator’s ability to ask questions, as well as listen and reflect. Following the call, he created talking points and a list of potential questions. Dr. Bluml facilitated for almost the entirety of the event, MCSR only facilitating approximately 10 minutes. Recognizing that the men participating in the conversation would be in different places, he stressed that no one “was required to have an ah-ha moment.” Dr. Bluml felt that the format “took the pressure off to be an expert.”

**Impact of MCSR’s Support**

The idea of engaging men in gender-based violence prevention gained visibility on the campus and in the community. The Healthy Masculinity Campus Conversation received coverage in the local newspaper and news. Also, Dr. Bluml shared the college’s experience engaging men through a National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Critical Conversation on “Men and the MeToo Movement.” WU continued to use the Campus Conversation format with groups such as fraternities. The conversations, the workshops, and meetings helped to bring, according to Dr. Bluml, “people from all over campus together,” which in turn informed the campus culture by creating a new “common language” based on healthy masculinity. The college became more open to engaging men in the prevention of gender-based violence, and more men became involved, as evident since spring 2018 when campus men have participated in every event associated with Domestic Violence Awareness Month and Sexual Assault Awareness Month.