More Than Meets the Eye: Challenges Men Face with Personal, Private, and Public Silence When Seeking Help Academically

Danielle Dupuis

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More Than Meets the Eye:
Challenges Men Face with Personal, Private, and Public Silence
When Seeking Help Academically

Danielle Dupuis

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Psychology

Bridgewater State University
April 30, 2018

Dr. Joseph Schwab, Thesis Advisor
Dr. Teresa King, Committee Member
Dr. Jonathan Holmes, Committee Member
Abstract

Compared to the female population, it is apparent that American men are struggling academically, resulting in higher drop-out rates for men at the university level and higher rates of retention for women nationwide (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2009). Additionally, men are far less likely than women to seek help for social and emotional issues they are struggling with in order to adhere to masculine ideals (Addis, Reigeluth, & Schwab, 2016). It is hypothesized that this silencing of men’s struggles is related to the lack of willingness to reach out for help academically. The present, qualitative study included interviews with seven diverse adult-male Bridgewater State University (BSU) students who have struggled academically. Thematic analysis of each interview was conducted. Results revealed implicit and explicit patterns of personal, private, and public silence in participants, which reinforced the lack of willingness men have to reach out for help academically. The present study intends to contribute to the closure of the achievement gap between male and female students by better understanding the silence men face in today’s university student life.
More Than Meets the Eye: Challenges Men Face with Personal, Private, and Public Silence When Seeking Help Academically

Many have spent years conducting research about men and the problems in their lives. According to that research, men are far less likely than women to seek help for social and emotional issues they are struggling with in order to adhere to masculine ideals (Addis, Reigeluth, & Schwab, 2016). This research provides evidence that stereotypes of traditional masculinity—such as being strong or remaining composed with one’s emotions—are so culturally pervasive that they have become a hegemonic form of masculinity that people of all genders are aware of and perpetuate (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, hegemonic masculinity influences the social and emotional lives of boys and men at different points in the lifespan (Way, 2011).

Emerging adult men in American university settings may also be less willing to talk about their feelings with other people, but previous studies have not investigated this possibility. This current study aims to investigate key aspects of silence, or in other words, the ways in which men silence their own feelings in order to live up to masculine ideals and the ways in which other people silence men’s talk of emotional struggle (Addis, 2011). How does silence develop? What different forms of silence do male students face when dealing with academic struggles? These aspects of silence may be contributing to the struggles men face academically, including withdrawing from or failing out of courses. By identifying the forms of silence male BSU students experience and demonstrating how this may be affecting their academic progress, I hope to influence those at the university level to recognize the struggles men face that can in turn lead to programs and policies that attempt to prevent these silences.
Defining Male Silence

Men are far less likely than women to disclose, and especially far less likely to seek help for issues they are struggling with (Walton, Coyle, & Lyons, 2004). Addis (2011) says that men tend to avoid asking for help and keep issues to themselves, which can promote an unhealthy lifestyle allowing painful feelings and encouraging depression or other mental health issues. Silence can be defined as the struggles that boys and men experience often going unheard, unseen, and effectively silenced. This is because they are regularly seen as weak or feminine if they show they are struggling or talk to others about their feelings. This creates a negative stigma and perpetuates the idea of keeping emotions and problems to oneself.

Legitimization of these characteristics, such as avoiding talking about your feelings, can be seen as hegemonic masculinity, a practice that promotes certain expectations for traditional masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These expectations include the ability to bring in a sustainable paycheck, be a father, be practical, be strong, and keep your emotions internal. Men still frequently engage in negative traditional practices of masculinity such as physical violence, adding to the idea that these behaviors may contribute to the perception that men hold a dominance over women. Over time, expectations of masculinity change as men grow open to the concept of “being a man” and shy away from social embodiment expectations. Silence is one of these behaviors in which men shy away from themselves and keep their emotions internal.

Though there are expectations of silence, many men see masculinity as individual-specific, meaning they each have their own approach and characteristics that they label as masculine. Most tend to view masculinity as an authoritative and independent temperament. Men tend to conform to established ideals while some are proud of their non-conformity, recognizing that adhering to masculine ideals may not always be in their best interest (Wetherell & Edley,
1999). This conformity to masculinity is not innate, instead it develops over time. Though there are the ideal expectations of masculine traits, men as individuals can also set the tone for how masculinity is defined, as they have their own definitions of the qualities traditionally associated with being a man. Many of these qualities traditionally associated with being a man can have unintended consequences, which can give masculinity a negative connotation.

Alternative to the negativity placed on it, silence can promote intimacy between couples. A couple may simply enjoy the presence of one another while watching a movie after a long day at work or tending to their own children, distracting themselves to have a romantic, stress-free night together. The goal is to recognize the difference between problematic and non-problematic silence (Addis, 2011). Though silence is a prominent issue for many men, it is important to ensure that the purpose of their silence is not misconstrued. Three forms of silence, personal silence, private silence, and public silence, tend to formulate into problematic silence.

**Forms of Silence**

Silence comes in many forms, and as mentioned, some can be considered unproblematic, while others are seen as problematic. Addis (2011) discusses polarized lenses, which are the metaphorical lenses that come into men’s vision at various times, shaping what men see, how men feel, and at times, what men choose to do or not do. They provide men with the ability to hide in plain sight, which is where these many forms of silence shine through. Hegemonic masculinity acts as the lens and hiding behind that lens is a metaphor for being silent. Though there are many ways that silence can be identified, Addis (2011) identifies three major forms that silence typically takes: personal, private, and public.

Personal silence is the form of silence that occurs when a man does not have the language or emotional skills to identify and describe his own feelings (Addis, 2011). This is similar to
alexithymia, a clinical diagnosis for a condition that results in low emotional intelligence, meaning patients have difficulty identifying and describing emotions. Though many men would not qualify for the clinical term, personal silence is similar to alexithymia’s “without words for mood” meaning. There are many indicators of personal silence that come from a male’s inability to find words to describe his emotions. For example, a man may not realize that his fast-beating heart may indicate that he is anxious. This can be a problem because the man is not aware that he is silencing himself, let alone how detrimental this silence can be to his well-being.

Private silence is the form of silence that occurs when a man acknowledges his struggles but chooses to keep them undisclosed (Addis, 2011). It can be appropriate at times, but only under the right circumstances. It becomes a problem when the silence becomes default and is not a choice. An example would be a man recognizing that he is becoming depressed about his recent divorce but choosing to keep it hidden from his friends and family members.

Public silence is the form of silence that occurs when others in your environment let you know that they do not want to hear about your vulnerability, whether this is something subtle or straightforward (Addis, 2011). A subtle example would be a professor addressing the class saying, “I hate when students come to my office hours with dumb questions.” This could prevent someone from wanting to attend the office hours in fear of being seen as unintelligent. A straightforward example would be someone saying, “Suck it up, everyone has problems…” to a man while he is discussing his recent health decline that has been worrying him.

Each of these forms of silence differ in the way they present themselves. The presentation affects the daily lives of men in countless ways. Ranging from choosing not to disclose feelings to the pressure to keep emotions internal, male vulnerability is regularly compromised because of
these forms of silence. This can ultimately affect the student, generating various, negative consequences.

**Consequences of Silence**

If men are encouraged to open up more often, negative consequences such as stress, mental health complications, and lack of intimacy in relationships can likely be avoided. Considering how men talk about stressful life events, it is important to recognize that emotional disclosure and vulnerability are not usually present in dominant forms of masculinity. In one study related to emotional disclosure, one on one interviews were held with those who had experienced a recent stressful event (Schwab, Addis, Reigeluth, & Berger, 2016). Particular examples of stressful life experiences included divorce, death of a loved one, or loss of a job. These interviews revealed that men do not tend to delve into their inner lives in order to stay true to their masculine ideals, unless opened up by a skilled interviewer. This is referred to as cloudy visibility, which is when a man opens up, while also restricting the depth of information they release, in order to continue adhering to masculine ideals. With that being said, when a male begins to open up, one should dive in with as many concrete questions as possible in order to get them to elaborate on their experiences.

Walton, Coyle, and Lyons (2004) investigated how men talked about their emotions and how it affected their lives. There was a sample of 16 participants who took part in focus groups about men and their emotions. The men saw themselves as emotional human beings, but only within specific contexts, such as football. In an excerpt from an interview, one participant discussed how it is accepted in today’s culture when emotions come out during football games. Another participant went on to say that it would be acceptable to hug a complete stranger after a win. In a different excerpt from the same study, a participant discusses how he did not even feel
comfortable disclosing that his mother passed away in the workplace. There are particular contexts such as football where men do feel comfortable being emotional, while men’s friendships at the workplace are dominated by silence. Not only are their workplace relationships silenced, but their romantic relationships are also taking a hit.

Korobov and Thorne (2006) analyzed how 32 pairs of young male friends formulated intimacy when instructed to converse about romantic relationships. The study focused on the surfacing of two types of conversational positions: intimate positions and distancing positions. Intimate positions were described as warm, caring, and emotionally vulnerable. Distancing positions were described as diminishing intimacy, care, and vulnerability. While most conversations did not involve relationships, when they did, they stemmed from “hook-up culture” circumstances, such as sexual affairs or brief flings with multiple partners. Intimate positions were not direct though present, while distancing positions were often overpowering, as the men tended to hold an unfavorable position towards discussing romantic relationships. Relationships between men and their significant other, more specifically with a woman, are constantly compromised due to these constraints of hegemonic masculinity. Though men may not see these conversations about intimacy with their significant other as stressful, stressful life events can also lead to these pressures to adhere to masculine ideals.

Gough (2001) studied how society continues to pressure males to remain silent in situations that one would not expect to be stressful. A normal situation that could become stressful for students could include speaking up in class, whether that is asking a clarification question, answering a question, or participating in discussion. With a sample of nine male undergraduate students, Gough analyzed the participants’ silence, operationalized as suppression of their thoughts or actions, in regard to relationship conflict at home, a social setting at the bar
with friends, aspirations for the future, and working with a female colleague. The results indicated that men suppressed action in relationships with women and in the presence of other men. Suppressing their actions included choosing not to engage in conversation and neglecting to express their emotions. The author mentioned that the suppression of thoughts is a man’s way of adhering to hegemonic masculine ideals of remaining silent. Their inadvertent devotion to masculinity promotes control over self-disclosure, which has negative long-term consequences, such as driving away support systems, especially during the transition from out of boyhood.

**Development of Silence**

Boys tend to go through intense changes starting in early adolescence leading up to adulthood. They go from sharing their deepest secrets to losing that connection during the time of their transition between middle school and high school (Way, 2011). These boys then go on to typically feel isolated by their feelings and the constraints society puts on their sociability. Way (2011) interviewed the same boys over four years of high school to track any and all changes they may have had in regard to their feelings and opinions about male friendships. In early adolescence, boys tend to feel comfortable speaking about their feelings, especially holding close to their male friendships as support systems. By middle to late adolescence, all of this diminishes. Boys become aware of “manhood” creeping up on them and they learn what society expects of them as men. Society points out that feelings are supposed to be for girls, not boys, even though their hearts and minds know that they need support. Way hypothesizes that at this time, boys become aware of looming manhood and what society expects of them as men. At this pivotal point in a boy’s development, where they need support and connection, boys have to deal with society telling them that they are unmanly if they truly need those things.
Most of the time, young boys feel as though they have to adhere to the dominant form of masculinity because often times social groups are dependent on the people in them maintaining or challenging the dominant form of masculinity. At a young age, social constraints begin to play an even bigger role on the lives of men, affecting their emotional stability, as well as their academic performance, relationships with their family members, and friendships. Norman (2011) examined how 32 young men, ages 13 to 15, embodied physical masculine traits such as size, shape, and appearance. One 15-year old male said, “It would be nice to have like really big muscles or whatever, but it’s not something I would really care about” (Norman, 2011, p. 431) which showcases the idea that men may feel one way about masculine ideals but get pressured to think a certain way based on societal pressures to conform to those ideals. Due to societal pressures, men seem to create an expectation for themselves in regard to what their bodies should look like. It was also noted that young men who participated in this study displayed heterosexuality and a healthy, active lifestyle, which showcases this need to adhere to specific characteristics of the dominant form of masculinity. It is evident from Norman’s (2011) findings that boys and men strive to attain a social, as opposed to medical, fitness based on looks rather than well-being. Subsequently, men do not usually recognize the consequences and development of silence, leading to how a lack of attention towards their own well-being can become debilitating to various factors in their lives, including their academic progress.

**Students and Silence**

These negative consequences of silence may specifically be affecting the male student. This has resulted in masculinity becoming a topic that has been gaining more attention in school systems. Systems that are comprised of men who are transitioning from their teenage years to
adulthood, such as high school or college, have been a target of conversations surrounding masculinity.

Conversations concerning masculinity often occur as a result of gender roles and status. As stated by Edley and Wetherell (1997), gender roles and the status of men are often difficult to ignore, especially in recent years. They conducted a study that discussed the surfacing of masculine identities within real-life social situations, such as high school. Participants were 17 to 18-year-old students at an all-male, independent school in the U.K. who were interviewed. The interviews were loosely structured around sexuality, relationships, pop-culture males, feminism, and social change. The study focused on how the way a particular group of students identifies themselves could negatively impact other students. If a student deemed themselves as more aggressive, it led to control of the students who do not have the confidence or ability to match them in situations involving physical activity. The best strategy to avoid being controlled by the group of students bearing the dominant masculinity was to stick to values that embodied masculinity in the traditional sense, privately silencing how they truly felt. Self-defined jocks or sports-oriented groups were prominently seen as the true men, though they tended to identify with other groups privately, such as the academically intense students or musical students, which were not seen as the true men. By identifying with other groups privately, these self-defined jocks were unintentionally placing personal silence upon themselves, which can publicly silence other groups of students who believe these jocks are the ideal masculine figures.

In a similar study, Phoenix and Frosh (2001) explored hegemonic masculinities in regard to middle school aged, 11 to 14-year-old, working-class London boys, where students were interviewed individually and in focus groups about how they experience themselves as young men. The concentration of the conversations was related to issues of importance to the boys and
how they viewed popularity. If a male student was able to attract girls, resented school-based learning, had sporting ability, and was fashionable, it was determined that he was viewed as more masculine and therefore more popular to working class boys, who saw the best football players or the fastest runners as the popular boys in most interview accounts. Contrarily, middle class boys valued leadership, sociability, and intelligence when constructing their definition of masculinity. The middle-class boys did not see themselves as not masculine, but as having a more intelligent and less violent masculinity than the boys with the “rouglier edges.” Most of these boys also discussed the pressure that arises from their parents and even their peers to perform well. However, they still conformed to masculine ideals by clarifying that it must be a natural talent to be intelligent because if all a boy does is study, that is “not cool” and they are bound to get teased. The judgment from peers is ever-present, placing a lot of pressure on these male students to remain masculine, which often results in the students silencing their struggles.

Masculinity and judgment of fellow male peers does not disappear with age. Rather, it increases alongside the pressures of making career choices and how your academics tie in with those choices. Artime, Hershberg, Johnson, Lerner, and Lerner (2017) discuss gender roles further along in the lives of young men. In their study, participants were male students of working class families pursuing postsecondary vocational education at an all-male trade school, entering their first year. The study explored how participants talked about gender and how it challenged their development in regard to sexuality, relationships, identity, education, and career choice through semi-structured and life-narrative interviews. They found that students felt becoming a man was a process, centered around size and strength, comparing themselves to other males.
It is apparent that the pressures from society to adhere to these masculine ideals has put an additional pressure on male students in an academic setting. These pressures follow boys and men into their academic lives, whether they are struggling in classes or having trouble making decisions about their career paths. They are silenced from expressing their need for help, reaching out for advice, and even discussing any poor performance regardless of the circumstances that led to it.

Boutwell, Pierre-Louis, and Gentlewarrior (2015) conducted a study exploring this trend through a survey, which was taken by 22 male students at BSU who attended a 60 to 90-minute focus group regarding male student success. Five students stated that “men were not as willing or skilled to ask for help, in part due to pride.” In addition, four students mentioned they faced a lack of direction with college, especially with the pressures of moving past stereotypes of men achieving success solely through sports or music. They also felt overwhelmed by the vast options in choosing a major and felt as though they were responsible for determining a major without support, leaving them silenced. It is clear that these students recognize that some of these expectations are simply stereotypes, but it is important to note that they still list them as a reason for the male achievement gap. This goes to show that there are underlying expectations that most men tend to carry around as added weight or pressure.

Though there has been research conducted on students and silence, there is still much more research to be done. It is unclear if students are silencing themselves by choice in regard to their academic struggles. It is possible that students could feel pressured by masculine ideals to hold back from sharing their academic struggles, which could in turn result in their academic decline. In this study, interviews were conducted with male BSU students to investigate the silence men face in today’s university student life.
Current Study

While serving as a representative on the Student Affairs Committee and Student Government Association President at BSU, I was made aware of the unfortunate circumstances that men face in regard to university-level academic performance, creating a gender achievement gap. Compared to the female population, it is apparent that American men at the university level are struggling academically, resulting in higher drop-out rates compared to women (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2009). Male students at BSU align with this national trend. In regard to three-year retention rates, females at BSU have a rate 3% higher than males and it increases to 8% in regard to six-year retention rates. The rates continue to increase in regard to race, socio-economic status, and first-generation student status.

It has become apparent that silence in the lives of men is everywhere. The struggles that men face with various issues, more specifically academics at the university level, has prompted study of such silence and pain. Issues that will be addressed in the proposed study include the willingness of men to reach out when struggling and if the personal, private, and public silence of men is related to a lack of willingness to reach out for help academically. By identifying the forms of silence male BSU students experience, I can hypothesize how this may be affecting their academic progress, in order to recommend more advocacy at the university level to work towards closure of the achievement gap between male and female student academic success.

This interview study explores how the three different forms of silence are enacted by male students when they discuss their academic struggles after being asked open-ended questions. From these conversations, the interviews resulted in implicit and explicit patterns of personal, private, and public silence in participants. This may relate to the lack of willingness they often possess to reach out for help academically.
Method

Participants

Participants were adult male students at BSU who had struggled academically—meaning they had done poorly in a course, retaken a course, withdrew from a course, or failed a course. There were seven participants, who all completed the study in its entirety. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 25, with a mean of 22 and a standard deviation of 1.49 years. Six of the participants identified as White in regard to their ethnic group, while one participant identified as Jamaican. Five of the participants identified as seniors, one identified as a junior, and one identified as a sophomore. Participants reported a diverse range in their current occupation status, ranging from two not currently working, to two occasionally working (<10 hours per week), one working part-time (10-39 hours per week), and two working full-time (40 hours per week or greater). There was also a diverse range in the highest level of education the participant’s mother completed. This demographic question was used to extract socioeconomic status from the participants. One mother completed college, two mothers had some college or vocational school experience, three mothers simply completed high school, and one mother had less than a high school degree.

Procedure

To recruit participants for the study, a flier created by the BSULife Integrated Marketing Team advertised the study (see Appendix A). Strategically incorporated inclusion criteria asked whether the male students had failed, retaken, or withdrawn from a course in order to ensure that participants were male students who were struggling academically. The flier was advertised through postings in student-populated areas around campus such as the Rondileau Campus Center, dining halls, academic buildings, and residence halls. If a student chose to express
interest, they were instructed to contact the student email provided. Their initial email was responded to with a recruitment email to schedule a time for the interview to take place in the Moakley Psychology Lab (see Appendix B). As the fliers became redundant, we resorted to the snowball method during interviews, asking participants if they knew anyone else that could qualify and benefit from the study at the conclusion of their interview.

Participants were approached at the Moakley Psychology Lab at BSU, greeted, and introduced. They were given the consent form to sign, which explained the procedures of the study (see Appendix C). Once they signed the consent form, they completed a demographics form (see Appendix D). With these forms completed, an audio recorder was turned on and they were then asked about their experience regarding their recent academic struggles from one of two interviewers, Danielle Dupuis or Dr. Joseph Schwab. They were also asked who they had talked to about these struggles, as the interviewers followed a loosely-structured interview guide (see Appendix E). Once each interview was completed, it was reiterated that the participant’s consent form included details about counseling services on campus should they need them. It was also explained that their responses would only be used for the study and their information would remain confidential. Participants were compensated for their time with BSU currency ($10 flex dollars). They were asked if they had any remaining questions and thanked for their time.

**Interview Protocol**

The interview is where I hoped to see patterns of personal, private, and public silence in participants, which may relate to the lack of willingness to reach out for help academically. As part of the loose structure to the interview, participants were asked open-ended questions in order
to provide them with an opportunity to expand upon their experiences however they saw fit (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

In section I of the interview guide (see Appendix E), participants were asked questions pertaining to their college experience and life at home in order to establish a comfortable environment, alleviate concerns, and ensure that the participant was fit for the study. In section II, participants were asked questions pertaining to their academic struggles, specifically about the course they failed or withdrew from, in order to let the participant openly talk about their personal situation to ensure they provided sufficient information. In section III, the participants were asked questions pertaining to how they personally felt about their academic struggles in order to get a sense of how the participant constructed the events and how they experienced them. These questions were aimed at identifying any personal silences these male students may have experienced. In section IV, participants were asked questions pertaining to who they reach out to regarding their academic struggles in order to see who they told about this, if anyone, and to see if they felt comfortable talking to them about their struggle. These questions were aimed at identifying any private silences these male students may have experienced. In section V, the participants were asked questions pertaining to the reactions they got from those they reached out to about their academic struggles, in order to see how their confidants reacted and if there were negative associations with the struggle. These questions were aimed at identifying any public silences these male students may have experienced. Finally, in section VI, the participants were asked questions pertaining to their knowledge of campus resources in order to see what they have been trying to do about the situation.
Thematic Analysis

The audio from these interviews was transcribed verbatim, excluding any identifying information (e.g., names of people or locations). Afterwards, qualitative thematic analysis of these transcripts took place in order to seek patterns that were mentioned in the responses of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Five undergraduate researchers, my honors thesis advisor, and I all read through each transcript once, coding for any instances of personal, private, and public silence. We then met together to discuss what we coded and how we interpreted what those codes meant for the gendered silence of each individual participant. I then re-read each of the transcripts again, further clarifying and revising my codes, and organized them into three overarching themes that arose across multiple interviews.

Results

For all analyses, we de-identified participants with pseudonyms. This was done in order to maintain the human quality when discussing these silencing situations that they disclosed. All seven participants are included in the results. Each of them engaged in various forms of personal, private, and public silence.

Personal Silence

Personal silence is the type of silence that occurs when a man does not have the language or emotional skills to identify and describe his own feelings. These participants often had “no words for their mood” and were unable to find words to describe their emotions. This is a problem because participants often do not even recognize that they are being detrimental to their well-being.

Kyle. When asked about how his academic struggles made him feel internally, Kyle, a 21-year-old senior said, “I just felt like… I don’t really know how to put it into words.” This is a
direct example of personal silence because Kyle could not describe how he was feeling. He was unable to formulate the words that represented the internal symptoms of his emotions. He then went on to change the subject, talking about how he was disappointed and stressed, but still could not explain what that felt like to him.

Later on, Kyle was asked what kind of emotions he associated with any of the feelings he described earlier. He could only reply with, “Um… I’m not really sure… Um… I don’t know.” Pondering and pausing at multiple points, Kyle wrestled to come up the words that could describe how he was feeling. Likely, Kyle did not even realize that he was silencing his emotions about the academic struggles he was experiencing.

Matt. When asked about his general idea of why he struggles academically, Matt, a 22-year-old senior said, “I don’t know what it is now, but it comes down to as soon as I get a test I, not necessarily blank but I start to double guess myself”. Matt moved on from talking about his performance to spending time venting about the difficulty of the courses and external factors that applied. He said, “In high school we hardly ever got homework, we hardly ever needed to study. I would pass my grades with flying colors half the time without even looking at a book [laughing]. And, I think that’s kind of hurt me in the long run in college because now I really don’t know how to study… me not necessarily knowing how to study frustrates me more to the point where when I try to study I’d rather just not study.” Showing personal silence, he answers the question about what it felt like to struggle, but immediately moved on to a different topic, talking about high school and how easy that was for him. This is an issue because rather than finding ways to change his habits, Matt mentions how gets stressed out and continues to fall in the same patterns. He doesn’t even really know how to open up fully about why he struggles because of this personal silence.
Matt continually struggled to come up with a way to describe why he felt he had trouble academically. Later, he went on to say, “Not necessarily knowing how to study frustrates me more to the point where when I try to study I’d rather just not study”. Eventually he got to the point where he would rather not even try because of his frustration. In addition, he could not expand upon his frustration when asked about it. This showcased personal silence because Matt could not describe his feelings. It clearly became a problem because he gave up on studying, which probably contributed to his academic difficulties.

As noted, personal silence is more prevalent when a man cannot come up with the language or emotional skills to identify and describe his own feelings. This may lead to interpersonal problems, poor relational well-being, and relationship dissatisfaction. The other side of the relationship may find frustration with the person silencing themselves. The other side may not understand why the person has such a hard time opening up or explaining themselves, which can also lead to miscommunication. The disheartening part is, in this type of silence, most men do not even recognize that they are silencing themselves.

Private Silence

Many participants acknowledge their struggles but choose to keep them undisclosed. Private silence is the type of silence that occurs when a man recognizes his struggles but makes the choice to keep them hidden. Men can then tend to keep their issues to themselves more than they disclose their issues to a trustworthy source. This type of silence develops into a problem when the silence becomes default.

Kyle. In each interview, students were asked to describe what the first week was like in the class they struggled with. In one instance, Kyle, a 21-year-old senior, failed a course and said, “Definitely should have been going to office hours and reaching out to the professor, but I
didn’t do that either…” Kyle realized that he should have been going to office hours and willingly admitted that he prevented himself from taking this form of support. This shows private silence because Kyle recognized that he needed to express his concerns about his grades and stress level with his professor, but deliberately chose not to. This is a problem because Kyle may have been able to prevent the failure in his class if he reached out for support and talked about how he felt sooner.

In addition to silencing himself from office hours, Kyle also silenced himself from his friends. When asked about how his failure made him feel, he confessed about his stress and disappointment in himself saying, “I doubt many of my close friends even knew I failed the class, because I didn’t really talk about it cause I was just trying to deal with it on my own, so I basically just internalized the fact that like… I was disappointed and like really stressed out.” This is private silence because rather than seeing if his friends would support him, he chose not to speak to them. It is still unclear if he felt as though he could handle the failure without the support from his friends, or if he felt that he needed their support and neglected to reach out.

Kyle later goes on to say, “The only person I told was my girlfriend,” and when asked if he told anyone else, including his parents about the entire situation at all, he said, “No.” Private silence is shown here because Kyle chooses to hold back from sharing his failure with anyone except one person in his life. This is a problem because Kyle is clearly closing himself off from some of his support systems, which may lead to his added stress at school. If he chooses not to reach out about his academic struggles, he may not have the courage or will to reach out when he faces more serious problems.

Rob. When discussing his experience with his semester-long medical withdrawal, Rob, a 22-year-old senior, said, “Um, so the spring semester was pretty rough, especially, you know,
making a ton of friends in the fall and then not coming back. So, I didn’t do much, I just kinda sat around for six months and didn’t do anything… There’s not much you can do with a concussion, so you can’t watch TV, you can’t look at your phone, you can’t read a book.” This is an example of private silence because though Rob was home for the semester, he still had the option to reach out to his friends that he met at BSU. He was depressed and did not make an effort to reach out after leaving campus. This was clearly detrimental to his well-being because he mentions that he didn’t do much. That was probably not the best for someone who went through such a massive transition into college and then another major transition back home at an unexpected time.

Later in the interview, Rob mentions how he felt as though he let his parents down and was disappointed in himself. He was then asked if he told anybody that he was feeling disappointed to which he responded, “Not really.” This is an example of private silence because Rob recognized how he was feeling, but his initial reaction when asked if he shared this with anyone was that he did not. This can be a problem because Rob did not feel as though he could reach out to his support systems to express how he was feeling, likely because he assumed they would be disappointed in him, though they had never outwardly expressed that.

Anthony. Similar to others, when Anthony, a 21-year-old senior, was asked if he told any of his friends that he was going through academic struggles he said, “Not really, I’m more of like a… conservative person when it comes to like… EMOTIONS and like ummm talking about them… so it’s like, I don’t know, I kinda just kept to myself.” He states that he does not reveal his academic struggles to anyone, which is a direct example of private silence. He outright says that this is becoming routine for him, saying that he is typically closed off with his emotions. Again, this can be an issue because rather than reaching out for help, he chooses to keep these
struggles to himself. His choice to close himself off may have contributed to him failing a course and withdrawing from another.

**Matt.** When asked about how he communicated his stress, frustration, and exhaustion, Matt, a 22-year old senior said, “I mean, I never bring it up using the words, but I think the way I word things in general, or like, where I believe my grade’s going when I need to do—I think the way that’s worded in general they get the understanding that I’m getting frustrated.” Matt recognizes that he does not directly tell others how he is feeling. He chooses not to but expects that they still understand him. This shows that he believes that the words he says convey how he is feeling. This seems to result in silence becoming habitual for him.

By the way these participants discuss the ways they silence themselves in their interviews, silence seems to become default rather than a choice. It did not even seem like an option for these participants to disclose how they were feeling about their academic struggles. Even if they did unveil how they were feeling to a couple of their support systems, the men were still wary about discussing their disclosure with professors or people they were close to in their lives. Typically, the men did not seem as though they even wanted to deal with the problems themselves, but felt as though they had to in order to combat the issue at hand and avoid further struggle. Private silence can to lead a person to believe that avoiding the problem at all costs, or attempting to handle it on their own, is the answer. In reality, they could have reached out to other support systems which may have been a healthier habit.

**Public Silence**

Public silence occurs when others let someone know that they do not care about their vulnerability. This can be either straightforward, expressing disappointment that ultimately shuts the person down, or subtle, including displaying apathy. This pressure of silence can potentially
prevent someone from wanting to attend office hours in fear of being seen as unintelligent. Ultimately, public silence is directly present in many of these participants’ lives.

**Brian.** Another student, Brian, a 21-year-old senior, mentioned that his friends supported him throughout his academic struggles. When asked why he believes they supported him, he laughed and said, “It’s probably because they didn’t want to hear me complain,” which shows that they never said this outright, but he imagined that his friends would feel this way if he approached them to talk. It seems more humorous, but it is still obvious that Brian struggles to confide in his friends because he feels as though they would shrug him off, even though Brian does not seem personally offended by his friends.

Later in the interview, when discussing withdrawing from a class and referencing his friends, Brian said, “Um… they pretty much were like, oh yeah, it probably won’t matter that much anyway though so like you shou— shouldn’t worry about it.” This is public silence because Brian’s friends essentially told him not to worry about withdrawing, almost incentivizing him to just withdraw and stop talking about his worries. They are immediately shutting him down by telling him that he should not worry. This could be detrimental to Brian’s willingness to reach out and talk about his problems, academically or not. By confiding in friends, one would hope that they would listen. This could lead to Brian feeling a lack of support. Whether their intention was or was not to shut Brian down, his friends did, which could have resulted in him making a snap decision to withdraw when it may not have been the best decision for him.

It is also unclear if Brian even got the support he was looking for from his friends. When asked if he felt if his friends supported him, Brian said, “I guess in a way that contributed to my… like… self-assurance.” It seems as though Brian is still unsure if his friends truly supported
him during his academic struggles. This is a problem because Brian could have had support from his professors and family that may have prevented him from withdrawing from the class. If he was unsure about the degree of support from his closest friends, this may have resulted in him making the choice to disregard reaching out to his professors.

Kyle. When Kyle, a 21-year-old senior, was asked why he did not speak to his professor about concern for failing the course he said, “I think it was because… I was so far behind that I didn’t want to like say, like, I have one project due and I didn’t finish it, and then he assigned another one. I didn’t want to go to him about the first project because I felt like… um… like he was gonna, like, judge me, I guess. Which he probably wouldn’t have, but like the fact that I was still working on this one and hadn’t done it when there was another one due, I just didn’t feel comfortable to, like, go talk about that, I guess.” It is still undetermined why Kyle was nervous about his professor judging him. He did not have any concrete examples of a professor expressing their disappointment in him before. This may be due to the idea that students are expected to get high grades and stay on top of their work. This is a problem because Kyle may continue to feel as though other professors or potentially future employers would judge him for being overwhelmed. This could lead to him neglecting to reach out when there is an issue, causing more problems such as stress or miscommunication down the road.

Kyle’s parents did not know that he failed a course, but he was asked how he thinks they would have reacted if he would have told them. He said, “I feel like my parents would have… um, they would have been understanding, maybe like a little disappointed, but like, understanding that I was struggling, and that, like, they wouldn’t have been happy about the point, like, the like, point where I just gave up, but um, they’ve always been understanding like—as long we are trying our best or whatever they like wouldn’t be, like, upset about it,” yet
he still did not tell his parents that he failed a class. His parents were still unaware that the event even occurred at the time of the interview. Public silence takes over here because Kyle essentially does not tell his parents because he assumed they would have expectations of how he should perform academically. This is a problem because even though they never directly said this, it is how he imagines they might react, and he therefore does not reach out to his family for support.

Additionally, when Kyle mentioned that he did not speak to anyone but his girlfriend about failing, he added, “I didn’t want to tell anyone because I, like, didn’t want anyone to view me differently.” This displays public silence because he feels as though he has a certain potential to meet and outsiders may see him as not meeting those societal expectations of success if he was known for failing a course. Again, this is a large problem because Kyle felt as though he could not reach out to anyone for help and may continue to neglect support from those who may be willing to provide it.

Matt. When asked if there were any other additional pressures he was facing, aside from his family and professors, Matt, a 22-year-old senior said, “I’ve been in that fraternity now for four years and people in there are like family to me now so, I think, it’s almost like disappointing everybody else that I can’t take these, like, take positions because of grades and all that.” Matt was discussing how he is ineligible to take a position in his fraternity due to his grade point average and their high expectations. Though no one in his fraternity outwardly expressed disappointment in him, he still feels the pressure due to his ineligibility. This can be seen as a problem because he feels as though he is being indirectly judged by his fraternity brothers, who are arguably his closest support system at BSU. If he feels judged by his closest peers, he will
likely feel judged by those he does not even have that connection with if they were to find out that he was not eligible to hold a position.

**Mark.** Mark, a 21-year-old sophomore, mentions how academic probation discouraged him about school even more. At BSU, academic probation is when a student’s GPA falls below a 2.0 cumulative. Mark discussed the regulations and pressures behind academic probation, mentioning, “The second year of freshman year I was on academic probation. Like, that really puts a strain on people, and like, I don’t really mess with that. That whole academic probation was not a good stress, like, it could be motivation, but it could also be very destructive.” This portion of Mark’s interview shows that indirect opinions or external forces can still have a strain on men. The status of academic probation puts a label on Mark, which makes him feel silenced in regard to his struggles, and potentially his abilities as well.

Mark and I also had a great conversation about the promotion of success at BSU. He began to vent about the demographic statistics of those who have failed classes and said, “Does everyone have to go to the diversity office? Would you have to go to the diversity office?” For context, I am White, and he is Jamaican. He went on to say, “I’m not trying to be messed up or anything. In a sense, that is creating division. If that division wasn’t real, then that office wouldn’t be there. Everyone would be getting the same type of help, from the same type of people, in the same type of way, if that was the case.” It was determined that Mark was talking about the Student Success and Diversity Office. This is an example of public silence because the office seems to only be targeting a certain demographic of students who are on academic probation, rather than keeping it inclusive and having the same strategies for each student. Though there was likely intention behind this strategy on the Student Success and Diversity Office’s end, it seems to have silenced Mark. This is a problem because he may neglect reaching
out to these offices in the future because of how the meeting went. Mark later went on to say, “After I got referred there I set up a meeting with the individual, I went to go see the individual and talk to them, and then that was really it. A faculty referred me to a faculty, that’s how the connection went.” This shows that he was recommended to go there and though this was intended to help, Mark felt as though it simply created even further division.

When asked why probation made him not want to be at BSU anymore, Mark said, “So, like, because I knew my GPA was low, I would just choose not to share. Because if my GPA is low, then they will judge me and say, ‘Oh, that’s because he doesn’t work hard, that’s why.’” Mark believes that due to his low GPA he is judged for not meeting the standards of being a student, which is a common example of public silence in students. This is a problem because he chose to not reach out about his academic struggles, due to fear of judgment. This may lead to him not reaching out for even more daunting issues later down the road if he comes across an issue like anxiety or depression.

In addition, he faced the pressures of his “friend group’s” judgment. When asked who “they” were that was judging him, he responded with “Did a certain group judge me based off of my academic performance? No. But when that certain group of people do try to judge me, it is very irritating. I do not constantly need to be reminded of your GPA or mine. It does not matter to me, and it should not matter to them. A circle of people just reminded me.” When asked, “When you say a specific group, do you mean like friends or people you lived with?” he laughed and said, “Well, not really my friends, because friends are supposed to understand. You just kind of sit there and talk about it with friends. So, it’s outside associates that make it very present for you. So, and the school itself is reminding you when you look at your degree audit and see nothing’s completed.” This is public silence because his friends used to constantly remind him
about his GPA, telling him that he needed to do better, talking about how they managed to pull off the grades. He felt as though the reminders were bashing him, rather than supporting him and finding constructive ways to respond to his struggles. The reminders were a problem for Mark because he did not feel as though the constant reminders were helpful because he already knew he was struggling and they were not providing him with any constructive feedback. If Mark could not even reach out to his closest support system, how could he be expected to reach out to others beyond that circle? This is a problem because Mark may no longer wish to reach out to others because others have expressed disappointment in him multiples times when he confided in them about his struggles.

Noah. Noah, a 25-year-old junior, spent some time discussing his academic struggles with one particular class he took. When asked if he failed or withdrew from the course, Noah said, “I ended up failing. And I went to tutoring, I went to a study session every week. I would ask [the professor] to meet with me and help me, which he refused to do. He didn’t even have his own office hours.” This is an example of public silence because despite reaching out for help, Noah’s professor did not give him the help he was asking for in his time of need. The professor shut down his request for support, which most certainly contributed to Noah’s failure. Also, this could have potentially resulted in Noah feeling uncomfortable reaching out for further help because he was already neglected and shut down by this professor.

Noah was then asked if he communicated his concerns to the professor about the possibility of failing the class. He responded with, “Yeah, I explained everything to him, how it was my last class and it was all I needed to graduate, and he was actually very rude about it and, in a way, mocked me for not understanding what he was teaching. I remember him specifically saying, ‘I don’t get how you don’t understand it,’ and I was, like, ‘Well, help me understand it,
don’t—don’t mock me for it. Just teach me how.’” This is a clear example of public silence because when reaching out for help about the subject matter, Noah was directly silenced by his professor who shut him down about his lack of knowledge. This is a problem because one might take this personally and no longer reach out for help at the fear of being ridiculed again.

Not only did Noah feel mocked by his professor, but he also felt as though his girlfriend was ridiculing him. When asked how the other people in his life reacted, Noah said, “My girlfriend at the time was actually very rude about it and made it worse, cause she—I get it though, she wanted me to graduate at the same time as her… She pretty much told me that she was disappointed that I didn’t pass, and I was disappointed that I didn’t pass, but, it meant—it hurt more coming from her.” This was displaying public silence because his girlfriend expressed direct disappointment in Noah for his failure when he was already having a hard time himself and looking for someone to lean on during his academic struggle. This is a problem because this may prevent Noah from overcoming the failure, having it sit in the back of his mind that his girlfriend was disappointed. He may not want to share this information with her or others again, knowing that they may express the same disappointment in the future.

It is apparent from these examples that the participants experienced all three forms of silence; personal, private, and public. Each student is silenced in regard to their academics or they silence themselves from reaching out for help. It is also clear that each of these silences has potential for severe consequences if not broken, such as failure and withdrawal from courses they are struggling in, which could ultimately be leading to the gender achievement gap at BSU.

**Discussion**

There are many consequences of silence, with consequences respective of each type of silence. This study examined each form of silence to learn more about how the three types of
silence have consequences that can become detrimental to their well-being. In each of the interviews, the men discussed each of the three types of silences, and sometimes, they even recognized that the silence was problematic and effected their well-being. A portion of their well-being that is often comprised by silence is their academic success. This study has also found that there are many external factors that contribute to this silence. These external factors include expectations from society to adhere to masculine ideals, or in the case of a student, to attend college and perform well academically because college is often deemed as the most viable path to success. Many often perpetuate these problems, some without even realizing it.

One limitation of this study is the small sample of seven participants. This study plans to be extended by gaining more participants from BSU in the future. This research could be conducted at other campuses in order to understand the topic on a more widespread level. In addition, some of these men that feel silenced are at least comfortable enough speaking out about their academic struggles to someone they likely did not know, so there may be some self-selection bias in this sense. If they are experiencing private silence in particular, they may be reluctant to express it in the interview as well, which may have resulted in personal silence within the interview. Furthermore, future studies could be more intentional with follow-up questions, asking about the specific expectations of society when brought up.

**Perpetuating the Problem**

It is important to note that though men can be directly silenced, their silence can also come from external factors that may not be directly stated. There are also many expectations that society specifically brings upon men through the media and feedback, whether that is direct or indirect. Masculinity is a social construct that almost forces men to withhold their emotions, be the “bread winners”, be physically fit, and be athletic, just to name a few of the characteristics.
In addition to society’s expectations of masculinity, it seems as though society also assumes that a person will go to college. Many students who were interviewed from the current study also felt pressured to attend college because of these indirect expectations. They mentioned that they felt as though they had no choice, they did not know what other path to take in regard to their future, and their whole family went or encouraged them to go. These hidden pressures are almost like hidden public silences that are not directly stated, yet the men feel as though they are concrete expectations due to the way society portrays and feeds into them. There is no way to determine what the hidden pressures are in regard to these forms of silence, but research has continued to attempt to break this down further.

In a similar study, 219 college aged males were asked, “Did you always know you were going to college?” The overwhelming response was along the lines of, “Yes—it was never a question of if, but where” (Harper, 2012, p. 9). Parents consistently conveyed what many of the men illustrated as non-negotiable expectations for furthering their education. Their families and mentors reinforced that college made the most sense and would uplift their success. One of the most interesting findings of this study was the fact that nearly half of the men came from a family that had neither of their parents attend college. It seems as though these parents cultivated the idea that college was the only next step for their student after the completion of high school.

Essentially, many college-educated men are sent into the world with troubled masculinities and underdeveloped gender identities because of the way that are expected to behave. They do not get time to express their emotions, nor do others spend the energy to pay attention to it, let alone ask the men. Harper (2012) goes on to say, “Poor help-seeking tendencies and disengagement are often byproducts of troubled masculinities” (p. 33). Perpetuating the male student success agenda, institutions of higher education are often one of
the guiltiest culprits in the maintenance of these habits. Though BSU may unintentionally be one of them, they are making efforts to break these habits by continuing their own research that will hopefully contribute to the decline of these stigmas around masculinity and trends in lower rates of male success.

Students in the current study even mentioned that they felt these hidden pressures as well. When asked about his decision to attend college, Kyle, a 21-year-old senior said, “My whole family has gone to college, so I just felt that that was like what I was supposed to do.” He mentioned that everyone in his family has gone to college, so he always felt the pressure to attend too. Kyle feels indirect demands from his family since they have followed a path that he feels pressured to head down as well. This can be a problem because Kyle may not have even wanted to go to college, but he felt as though he had to. Statistically, not going to college could also be detrimental to male success. These pressures can lead to making decisions that may be detrimental to his success and welfare.

Mark, a 21-year-old sophomore was asked the same question and said, “It really wasn’t my choice to go to college, you know what I’m saying?” Mark goes on to talk about how there are expectations that everyone should go to college. Though he had a choice, he mentions that he felt as though there wasn’t one when it came down to carving his future. This is a problem because Mark may make other choices around societal expectations which can negatively impact his future and/or happiness.

It is clear that as a society, not only do we hold expectations of masculinity, but we hold these expectations that the path to success is to pursue post-secondary education. We are only perpetuating the problem through the innuendos we offer, sometimes even unintentionally. Ultimately, this seems to be contributing to the silencing of these male students’ struggles. If we
are aware of these hidden pressures, we may be able to determine where they are coming from in order to prevent and diminish them. Fortunately, there are many steps towards prevention of these habits and assumptions that can lead to potential solutions and ensure intervention.

**Potential Solutions**

One might ask how others can help ensure that male college students do not engage in these silences. BSU is already taking steps to improve male student success. Student success advocacy has been implemented as a large focus of the campus strategic plan (Clark, 2018). The first goal of the strategic plan is to allocate resources and decision making toward the “overarching priority of student success” in order to eliminate gaps, create pathways to degree completion, support student wellness, and provide access to high-quality, affordable education. Under the direction of President Fred Clark, the university aims to improve access and affordability, which includes steps toward reducing the achievement gap between men and women.

With each goal of the strategic plan, there are breakdowns that identify the key steps being taken to see attainment of their intentions. The main objective of the first goal is to prioritize and advance retention and graduation goals, which will work to eliminate all achievements gaps. Furthermore, BSU aims to support the success of a diverse body of students in regard to first-generation status, race, Pell Grant eligibility, and gender. In future years, the Strategic Plan will be revised, and the current study aims to contribute to those revisions. Hopefully, the current study can bring enough attention to the male achievement gap and that progress can be made towards closing it. The current study can hopefully offer insight and awareness that could diminish the silences men face that may be contributing to this achievement gap by the time the next strategic plan review comes around. There is already attention being
brought to the topic through the President’s Cabinet, the Student Affairs and Enrollment Management Committee, the Office of Student Success and Diversity, and even the Academic Affairs Division at BSU. There are many ways in which BSU seeks to achieve the goals they have set forth, including specific student success initiatives in recent years.

Stemming from these student success initiatives, a male student success focus group survey took place prior to the current study, and results were compiled into a report that was used to focus on three main goals (Boutwell, Pierre-Louis, & Gentlewarrior, 2015). The first goal was to improve students’ ability to identify and access student success resources available to them. Participants valued the resources BSU made available to support their success but felt as though the information about these resources has been difficult to obtain. To combat this, BSU has been aspiring to create a streamlined way to organize resources for students. The focus group recommendations also wanted to support providing additional training or information for staff and faculty. This would hopefully increase the number of BSU students utilizing available resources early in their college career. The second goal was to continue to support academic success through data-driven interventions. Collecting campus-level data from male students could only help BSU assess students’ gender-specific needs. Eventually, a cross-divisional committee was created to provide leadership in identifying and implementing data-driven male student success interventions. The third and final goal was to implement a male student success program if it was determined to be necessary after reviewing the existing male success program, such as the BSU Office of Student and Leadership Male Retreats. These goals were taken very seriously and BSU has been striving to achieve them ever since. If prompted with the right questions, students from the focus group may also be willing to contribute more about their
struggles with silence. The current study can provide this focus group with the tools to address silence in future years.

To align with the mission of the strategic plan and to address the goals they set forth, BSU felt that the next best step was to employ the Office of Student Success and Diversity with the mission of creating a program that would address the retention gap specifically between males and females. Michael Walsh, Assistant Director for Student Success and Diversity, is the coordinator of the Male Mentoring Dinners that take place each month, free of charge to BSU students. It is Michael’s goal to see students that identify as male have a rewarding experience at BSU that will continue beyond graduation. One step in this program that Michael finds crucial is the mentorship the men will receive from the dinners, which has the potential to supply students with the assistance they need to achieve success.

The current study may be able to influence the mentoring program by coming up with new topics of discussion for the speakers and dinners in regard to silence, in order to address the growing concerns that face the male population at BSU. Steps are already being implemented to work with the Office of Student Success and Diversity to determine what may be the driving factors of these silences so that they can be addressed with male students who attend the program. It may also be beneficial to solidify a headcount of students for a weekly or monthly class where the same participants come through to establish a comfortable safe-zone, which can also allow for more refined data collection and allow participants to more openly discuss the silences and challenges they face.

The current study is able to offer ideas for the right questions to ask to ensure we are addressing silence and the academic struggles male students may be facing. Whether these are the questions from the current study’s loosely-structured interview guide, or new questions
inspired by this research, hopefully this study will magnify the issues at hand. In addition, demographic data could be collected about the pass/fail rates of students before and after the program. This could directly tie the program to the male achievement gap to see if students are being supported academically and retained through being informed about campus resources and success strategies throughout the dinners.

Overall, the Male Mentoring Dinners seem to have contributed to the goal of closing the achievement gap and providing males with an outlet for success. Not only do the statistics show the increasing closure of the gap, but students find themselves gaining helpful perspectives on an individual level as well. When asked if he utilizes campus resources, one student from a recent focus group report said, “Even last year, I didn’t know some of the opportunities or resources that I could actually use, and now that I’m using them, I’m getting better with all the things that I’m doing” (Boutwell, Pierre-Louis, & Gentlewarrior, 2015, p. 8). Many other students agreed and mentioned that they now understand how this lack of knowledge was disadvantageous to their success. It is apparent that students are growing from the program, as the learning outcomes are being achieved. It seems as though many more students have the potential to benefit from these success dinners, as long as they are provided with the resources and are made aware of this opportunity.

Programs that encourage men to break their silences are needed. One such program that is currently trying to address this is the Male Mentoring Dinner Program. It is possible that the current study could send more participants towards the program if it is continued. The current study can encourage funding to be prioritized for this program in order to give it more attention, which could intensify and refine it so that it can be even more effective for male students. Currently, this program only runs once a month on Monday nights. The Office of Student
Success and Diversity could also expand upon the program by offering it more often or on different days throughout the week to ensure that a diverse population of males are able to attend. Efforts to offer the program with additional participants or more often at different times could expand the reach of those who could benefit from it, which could even further reduce the achievement gap. It is possible that this interview process, or a streamline version, could serve as a diagnostic of these struggles and silences. This may be able to target particular students for specific assistance, such as incoming first-generation or first-year students.

While there is a lot BSU can do as a whole to improve the climate of male student success, we as teachers, faculty, staff, peers, and members of society have a responsibility to address the problems men face. We need to be the ones to initiate conversation with our male students, brothers, partners, children, and parents about their emotional experiences. This has potential to combat their expectations of public silence. Can we create an alternative narrative where being masculine includes being in tune with your emotions and expressing them?

It is my hope that further research is conducted on the silences that contribute to the male achievement gap at BSU and beyond. I hope to see more attention brought to these silences, so students can become aware of the effects that keeping quiet can have on their personal and academic lives. With the efforts already being made at BSU, I am confident in our abilities to keep closing the gap of success between men and women, while also informing the community about ways to support men.
References


Appendix A
Appendix B

Hello (participants name),

My name is Danielle Dupuis and I am a senior here at Bridgewater State University, completing my Honors Thesis. Thank you for reaching out to express interest in my study!

I am seeking current male Bridgewater State University students to participate in a research study who are at least 18 years old and have either withdrawn from a course, failed a course, retaken a course, done poorly in a course, or struggled academically.

Participation in this study involves:

- Roughly a 1-hour time commitment to be interviewed
- Compensation of 10 flex dollars for your participation

If you agree to participate, I will interview you using open-ended questions about the challenges you have faced academically, how those made you feel, and how you handled them.

I am typically free to interview on the following days and times during the week:

Mondays 10am-4pm  
Tuesdays 10am-5pm  
Wednesdays 10am-5pm  
Thursdays 10am-5pm  
Fridays 2-4pm

Do any of these days and times work for you? I will do my best to schedule a time to meet with you in the Psychology Lab on the third floor of Moakley that accommodates your schedule.

I look forward to hearing back from you. Please do not hesitate email me if you have any further questions about the study.

Best regards,  
Danielle Dupuis  
Co-Investigator  
(Email Signature)
Appendix C

Bridgewater State University Informed Consent Document

Title of Research: More Than Meets the Eye: Challenges Men Face with Personal, Private, and Public Silence When Seeking Help Academically

Researchers:

Dr. Joseph R. Schwab, Primary Investigator, Psychology Department (jschwab@bridgew.edu)
Danielle Dupuis, Co-Investigator, Psychology Major (d2dupuis@student.bridgew.edu)

Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Bridgewater State University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Nature and Purpose of Project

This study is being done because we are aiming to see what academic struggles students have, what they do to help relieve these struggles, and who they talk to about them.

Explanation of the Procedures

You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your academic struggles and how you and others responded to them. You will be audio recorded, and your participation in the study should not last longer than one hour.

Discomfort and Risks

Talking about your feelings and experiences of stress and struggle may cause some discomfort. Should you experience any discomfort or wish to talk to someone about your feelings after the interview is completed, there are resources provided at the end of this consent form.
Benefits

On the other hand, many find talking about their feelings and struggles relieving. It can feel comforting to get some stress off of your chest. We hope this study helps you and others with similar circumstances find comfort in discussing your feelings with others.

Also, this study is important to science and society because we can better understand the academic struggles students face and how they handle those struggles.

Confidentiality

Your information will be kept confidential. Your name on this consent form will not be connected to the audio from our interview. The transcript that will be made from this interview will not include your name, and no identifying information will be included. The audio will be kept locked on a password-protected computer, and it will be destroyed upon the completion of the project.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;

* Representatives of Bridgewater State University, including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at BSU.

Refusal/Withdrawal

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

By signing below, I am indicating that I understand that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks. I agree that all known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction.

Participant Signature and Date

Witness Signature and Date
Any questions regarding the conduct of the project, questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or research related to injury, should be brought to the attention of the IRB Administrator at (508) 531-1242.

Any questions about the conduct of this research project should be brought to the attention of the principal investigator: Dr. Joseph R. Schwab (jschwab@bridgew.edu) and/or Danielle Dupuis (d2dupuis@student.bridgew.edu).

Should you wish to discuss your feelings or topics mentioned during the interview, please contact the Bridgewater State University Wellness Center, Counseling Services, located in Weygand Hall at (508) 531-1331.
Appendix D

Demographics Information

Please answer each question by circling one response or by writing the appropriate response on the line provided.

Age (in years): ______________

Select the one major ethnic group that best describes you:
1. African, African American
2. American Indian, Inuit
3. Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
4. Hispanic or Latino
5. Asian American/Pacific Islander
6. Other: _________________

Your current year in college:
1. Freshman
2. Sophomore
3. Junior
4. Senior
5. Graduate school
6. Not in school

Your current occupation status (outside of school):
1. Full time (40 hours/week or greater)
2. Part time (10 – 39 hours/week)
3. Occasional (< 10 hours/week)
4. Not currently working

Mother’s highest level of education completed:
1. Less than high school degree
2. High school degree
3. Some college or vocational school
4. Vocational school degree
5. College Degree
6. Some graduate school
7. Graduate school degree
Appendix E

Interview Script – Dupuis Honors Thesis

Thank you for taking the time out of your day to participate in my study. Let me tell you about it before we begin.

What’s in it for us… With your help, I am working towards the completion of my Honors Thesis and research that focuses on helping break the silences that men face when it comes to academic struggles.

What’s in it for the men who participate… It is often helpful to talk about struggles, or get stuff off of your chest and talk through things. I want to remind you though that this is not therapy and I am not a therapist. I am just a researcher trying to understand your experiences. There are resources that I will provide to you after the interview, should you want to talk further about your experiences.

Do you have any questions or thoughts about the study so far?

Just to let you know, I have this notepad so that I can jot down topics I want to come back to.

Before we begin, I will have to administer a general consent form stating that you agree to participate in the study but will be able to withdraw from the study at any point should you choose to do so.

Administer General Consent Form

Administer Demographics Form

Interview Protocol

I. Thank you again for taking the time to participate in my study. Based on the entry question, I am assuming that you have either failed, withdrawn from, or struggled with an academic class. A lot of the questions I will ask you will be centered around that experience. Before I ask those questions, it would be great to hear a little more about you, if that’s okay. Feel free to tell me anything about yourself; your major (if you have one), you career goals or what you have in mind post-graduation, what you like to do for fun, what’s important to you, etc.

Why are you here? Why university and why Bridgewater, specifically?

Do you live at home or on campus? What is your family life like?

Goals: Establish a comfortable environment, alleviate concerns, and ensure they are fit for the study
II. I know that you recently failed a course, withdrew from a course, had some academic struggles. Could you tell me about that?

Why did you take that class? Was that course a part of your major, a core requirement, an elective?

What was the first week or so like?

What about the course do you find challenging?

Why do you think that happened?

*Goal: Let the participant openly talk about their situation until you feel satisfied with the amount of information.*

III.

**Personal:**

How has it affected you?

What has been most difficult about it? Is it viewed as a problem?

How did you feel internally? There are often feelings that go unnoticed because they are internal, what no one else can see.

What did your body feel like?

What kind of emotions did you associate with those feelings?

How did you respond to the struggle?

*Goal: Get a sense of how he constructs the events and how he experiences it*

**Private:**

Did you tell anyone this is what you were feeling?

Did you reach out to your professor?

Did you tell your family and friends?

Poorly – How did this make you feel?

With support – How did they support you?
Do you know anyone else dealing with the same struggles as you? How was your experience similar or different to theirs?

Did they have similar reactions or approaches to resolving the struggle?

Goal: Who did they tell about this?

Public:

How did your professor/family member/friend/partner react?

Why do you think they acted that way? How did you think that they supported you?

Goal: How did they react when you told them? See if there are negative associations with the failure/struggle

IV. What have you been doing to try to do about the situation? Are you trying to get help academically or are you back on your feet?

Have you been utilizing campus resources?

What has been helpful? What has not been helpful?

Now that we have talked, how did you think that you will handle future situations that are similar?

Anything else to add? Anything we may have missed about your academic experiences, anything that you may have forgotten?

Administer Debriefing Form

Here are ways that you can find further information.

If you have more questions about the study, feel free to contact my Mentor, Dr. Joseph Schwab, or myself. Our contact information is on the sheet provided.

If you are anxious, confused, or have any further struggles that you think warrant seeking attention from a professional, we have listed contact information for the Wellness Center as well.

Snowball

Is there anyone else who you could think of that would be fit for this study? Please pass the information along to them and they will too be compensated for their time.