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# Gender, Masculinity, Femininity and Help Seeking in College

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## Abstract

The current academic performance struggles of college men is gaining increasing research attention (Sax, 2008a, 2008b), but few studies have explored the possible impact of gender-related attributes such as masculinity and femininity on academic help-seeking behaviors and academic performance. In this study of 567 college undergraduates, students who classified themselves as androgynous on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory were more likely to engage in academic help-seeking behaviors than those classified as male sex-typed, female sex-typed, and undifferentiated. No significant differences were found for academic performance. These results highlight the importance of exploring the potential influence of gender-related constructs on academic behavior and performance.

**Keywords:** academic help-seeking, gender differences in achievement, college students, androgyny

# Género, Masculinidad, Feminidad y "Help Seeking" en la Universidad

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## Abstract

Los resultados académicos que están obteniendo los chicos universitarios está siendo una temática que despierta cada vez más el interés de la investigación (Sax, 2008a, 2008b), pero pocos estudios han analizado el posible impacto de los roles de género como la masculinidad y la feminidad en las actitudes ligadas al "help-seeking" académico y a los resultados académicos. En el presente estudio de 567 estudiantes de grado, estudiantes que se clasifican a sí mismos como andróginos en el Inventario de roles de género de Bern, están más implicados en el "help-seeking académico que aquellos que están catalogados como hombres o mujeres, e indiferenciados. No se han diferencias respecto a los resultados académicos. Los resultados subrayan la importancia de explorar la influencia potencial de la construcción del género en los resultados y el comportamiento académico

**Palabras clave:** "help-seeking" académico, diferencias de género en los resultados, estudiantes universitarios y androginia

A topic that is gaining increased attention in recent years is the educational status of boys and men in a number of industrialized societies (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Relative to girls, boys are struggling in terms of behavior (higher rates of ADHD and behavioral disorders) and academic performance (girls earn higher grades and are more self-disciplined in K-12 education) (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006); also, women are more likely to engage in better study skills while in college, graduate from college, and pursue graduate education (Buchmann & Di Prete, 2006; Kinzie, Gonyea, Kuh, Umbach, Blauch, & Korkmaz, 2007; Sax, 2008a). Although the overwhelming focus in discussions of this new gender gap has been on differences between males and females, some researchers have suggested that a focus on gender, and more specifically on notions of masculinity and femininity, would be helpful in developing a better understanding of current gender differences (Laker & Davis, 2011). This focus acknowledges the fact that although on average there are significant gender differences in many educational outcomes, it may be more useful to focus on which variables influence differences in academic achievement *within* each gender (Sax, 2008b).

Although research indicates that male students are on average struggling academically, it may be important to determine how specifically this is manifesting itself, and exactly what characteristics are more related to academic problems. When examining academic success, it is important to understand the many components that make up such a complex phenomenon. That is, ability is simply one aspect of success in higher education; study strategies, time management, and psychological characteristics such as self-efficacy and anxiety are among the many other variables that play a role in academic achievement. In addition, seeking help in the academic environment, such as asking a professor for help or going to the university writing center, also plays a role (Karabanick & Newman, 2006). Academic help-seeking is a concept that has been relatively unexplored in the research literature on gender differences in educational achievement and it may prove useful in better understanding academic difficulties among men. Although a foundational research base has emerged on academic help-seeking (Karabanick & Newman, 2006), the question of how

concepts of masculinity and femininity relate to academic help-seeking has not been addressed. Considering the well-established finding that men are less likely to seek psychological help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Chang, 2007; Quinn, Wilson, McIntyre, & Tinklin, 2009), it makes sense to examine whether men might also be less likely to seek help for academic issues. For example, are men who tend to endorse more traditional masculine norms also less likely to seek academic help, as the research on seeking out psychological help has documented (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Graef, Tokar, & Kaut, 2010; Mansfield, Addis, & Courtenay, 2005)? Although cultural and societal change has opened up the possibility for new conceptualizations of masculine behavior, the pressure on boys and men to act “masculine” continues to be strong (Pollack, 2006). In the current study we explored the potential impact of gender-related constructs by examining academic help-seeking behavior among students endorsing various gender role attributes as identified by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (masculine, feminine, androgynous, undifferentiated). If differences in academic help-seeking behavior are connected to gender-related constructs, then there may be multiple ways of addressing the current educational struggles of boys and men.

### **The Paradox of Male Underachievement**

Traditional male role stereotypes emphasize competition, yet in academics, many male students do not seem to be competing for higher grades and academic recognition (Sax, 2008b). Concern for conforming to various gender roles approved by the culture and peer group intensifies and reaches a high point during adolescence, but the influence continues to be strong into the college years (Arnett, 2010). The combination of poor academic performance and an emphasis on winning, achievement, and competition among male students presents an interesting paradox. Despite the emphasis on competition in some conceptions of masculinity, many college men continue to struggle academically. This presents a need for a better understanding of the various potential influences on male underachievement.

Although the vast majority of the help-seeking literature in psychology has focused on the relationship between masculinity

and physical and mental health (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), recent research has opened the question of how gender-related constructs, including masculinity, relate to academic help-seeking. Wimer and Levant (2011) explored the relationships between various masculinity constructs and academic help-seeking behavior in psychology courses in a sample of 193 male undergraduates. They found that greater conformity to masculine norms and endorsement of some aspects of traditional masculinity ideology (self-reliance and dominance) was associated with engaging in fewer help-seeking behaviors. Wimer and Levant suggested that additional research is needed to test the generality of these findings beyond the particular context studied (help-seeking in psychology courses).

Previous research on help-seeking has also helped establish the importance of gender role (including masculinity) when considering possible sex differences in help-seeking behavior. Johnson (1988) examined the role of sex and gender attributes (as measured by the Bem Sex-Role Identity Questionnaire) on help-seeking attitudes (or attitudes towards counseling) among college undergraduates and found that both gender and sex role were important for understanding attitudes. As noted in other research, Johnson found that women were more open to seeking professional help, and students classified as feminine or androgynous were more likely to recognize a personal need for help and more confident in a professional's ability to help with personal problems. No interactions were found between gender and sex role, leading Johnson to conclude that gender role in itself is an important variable to consider when examining help seeking behaviors. Johnson stated that when studying help-seeking behaviors it is important to consider sex role in addition to gender; a focus on gender may miss important ways in which men and women differ.

### **Masculinity, Femininity, and Androgyny**

An important conceptual distinction in research on gender roles is the difference between the terms of *sex*, which refers to the biological status of being male and female, and *gender*, which refers to the social categories of male or female (Arnett, 2010). Rather than being rooted in biology, the term *gender* acknowledges the importance of cultural

beliefs, socialization, and other influences on how individuals experience being male or female. Although *gender identity* is relatively fixed and addresses how people perceive their own sense of being male or female, gender roles (or sex roles) may be more fluid. One way to explore gender roles among individuals is to measure their endorsement of traits that are typically considered masculine or feminine. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) is a popular measure of traits that are viewed by individuals in American culture as masculine, feminine, and androgynous. For example, typically masculine traits include *self-reliant*, *assertive*, and *ambitious* while typically feminine traits include *yielding*, *sympathetic*, and *warm*. Bem referred to individuals who tended to endorse masculine sex roles as masculine-typed, and those who endorse feminine sex roles as feminine-typed. Individuals could also be classified as androgynous when they endorsed both masculine and feminine traits. A large body of literature has highlighted the potential benefits of androgynous sex roles for both men and women, as it allows individuals to express both masculine and feminine traits that are adaptive for various situations (Arnett, 2010).

### **Role of Masculinity in Academic Motivation**

Although some studies have explored the relationship between masculinity and help-seeking (Farrimond, 2012), other research on the impact of masculinity on broader academic constructs is emerging. Kahn, Brett, and Holmes (2011) explored the role of masculinity for men's academic motivation in college. They emphasized the importance of focusing on gender-related concepts rather than sex when examining the significant difficulties men are facing in higher education. In a sample of 188 male students at a small liberal arts college, they found that conformity to various masculine norms was related to academic motivation. To measure conformity, the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (Mahalik et al., 2003) was used. Using canonical correlation analysis, two functions were significant. For the first function, as the variable of *primacy of work* decreased and *playboy* and *violence increased*, three types of intrinsic motivation decreased. For the second, as *emotional control*, *disdain for homosexuality*, *self-reliance*, and

*winning* decreased, two intrinsic motivation scores increased. Khan, Brett, and Holmes suggested that college men who conform to the masculine norms of *violence* and *playboy* (objectifying relationships) may tend to reject attributes perceived as feminine, such as positive academic behaviors.

Another related area of research is that focused on the concept of *effortless achievement*. In a qualitative study, Jackson and Dempster (2009) studied the reaction of high school and college age males to academic underachievement in Great Britain. They described the term *effortless achievement* as the notion that for a male student, it was “uncool” to work hard academically to succeed; it was acceptable to achieve as long as that achievement was attained without much effort, an accomplishment that only a few male students could attain. Although Jackson and Dempster found that this acceptance of *effortless achievement* was less prominent in higher education compared to the high school level, it was still evident in the responses of the college students in their sample. The concept of *effortless achievement* may be relevant to understanding academic help-seeking behavior. In contrast to *effortless achievement*, seeking out help for an academic challenge is an *effortfull* behavior. Male students influenced by the notion of *effortless achievement* may be less likely to seek out help when facing an academic difficulty.

### **Gender Attributes and Academic Achievement**

Gender attributes may also impact academic achievement and cognitive performance, although the research on this question has been inconclusive over the years (Olds & Shaver, 1980; Burke, 1989; Basu & Chakroborty, 1996). While Olds and Shaver (1980) found that feminine identity was associated with lower academic performance for both girls and boys, Burke (1989) found that feminine identity was associated with improved performance. Still other studies, such as Brewer and Blum (1979), found relative benefits in specific fields by gender; i.e., androgynous females (but not males) reported greater success in math and science, but not in other fields.



Culture can also affect the way androgyny affects achievement. In a study of 121 undergraduate accounting students in Scotland, Paver and Gammie (2005) found that masculinity and femininity as measured by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory were not significantly related to academic performance. However, Shin, Yang and Edwards (2010) found that in a sample of American college females, students identifying as Androgynous scored significantly higher on the American College Test (ACT) than students identifying as feminine. It appears that androgyny and masculinity are associated with improved academic self-efficacy (Choi, 2004), but androgyny, in particular, may lead to a wider range of career options and academic choices (Long, 1982). This benefit for androgyny leading to increased options appears to hold true for girls more than boys (Braza, Carreras, Braza, & Muñoz, 2002). Considering the conflicting results in the literature, we also examined the possible influence of gender role on academic performance.

### **Summary and Research Questions**

Research on the various possible impediments to help-seeking is important considering the difficulties men face in higher education. Compared to women, men are less likely to graduate from college, engage in less effective study strategies, and struggle with a variety of maladaptive behaviors (Marrs & Sigler, 2012; Sax, 2008a; Wilson, 2007). Although there is a large body of research on the relationships between masculinity and help seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), it has focused primarily on help seeking for mental health or health-related issues. With the exception of Wimer and Levant (2011), no published research on masculinity, femininity and academic help seeking was found in the literature. The current study was conducted to help further explore the possible connections between gendered attitudes and academic help seeking among a sample of college undergraduates. Students reported their gender role and also how frequently they engaged in various academically-related help seeking behaviors, such as seeking out tutoring or visiting the writing center on campus. This study has the added benefit of asking students to report how often they engaged in various academic help-seeking behaviors, rather than their

attitudes towards seeking help (as many of the studies focused on psychological help-seeking have done).

The following research questions were explored:

- 1.Are gender and gender attributes related to the academic help seeking behaviors students engage in during college?
- 2.How are gender, masculinity, femininity and help seeking behaviors related to academic achievement?
- 3.Are there differences in academic performance based on gender and gender attributes?

## Method

### Participants

A total of 560 students (184 men (32.5%), 376 women (66.3%)) volunteered to participate from the psychology department research participation pool at a midsize university in the Western United States. For ethnicity, 18 students reported Asian (3.2%), 45 Hispanic/Latino (8.1%), 27 African-American (4.8%), 438 White-Caucasian (78.4%), 5 Native American (.9%), and 26 Other (4.7%). Year in college was 48.3% freshman, 18.2% sophomore, 21.3% junior, 11.3% senior, and .9% grad student or other.

### Instruments

*Bem Sex-Role Inventory* (Bem, 1974). The Bem Sex-Role Inventory is a widely-used measure of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. For this study, the 30-item Short Form version was used. Previous studies have demonstrated good to excellent internal consistency reliability, ranging from .75 to .90 (Hoffman & Borders, 2001). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .83 for masculinity and .88 for femininity.

*Academic Help-Seeking Behaviors Inventory*. An eight-item rating scale of academic help-seeking behaviors was created for this study. Participants were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert-type scale how often they engaged in various help-seeking behaviors, such as gone to professors for assistance or asked other students for help (See Table 1 for items). Cronbach's Alpha for the scale was .76.

*Demographic Questionnaire.* Students were asked a number of demographic questions, including year in college, ethnicity, gender, and whether students transferred from another school. In addition, students were asked to provide their names and student ID numbers in order to obtain academic information from the registrar; 501 students (88%) gave consent to obtain academic records and provided the information, while 71 students (12%) declined.

Table 1  
*Items in the Academic Help-Seeking Scale*

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1. Gone to professors for assistance
2. Asked other students for help
3. Sought help from friends
4. Sought help with my general study skills this semester
5. Sought help from support services
6. Gone to the University Writing Center on campus
7. Sought tutoring on campus
8. Gone to career services

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**Procedure**

Students selected the study from a list of potential studies on the psychology department research participation website. After consenting to participate, students completed the web-based survey instrument online. Students were asked to provide their name and student ID number in order to access records from the university registrar. At the completion of the study, a variety of academic performance data were obtained, including current college GPA, high school GPA, number of units completed, and SAT or ACT scores.

**Results**

*Research Question 1: Are gender and gender attributes related to the academic help seeking behaviors students engage in during college?* A two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in help-seeking behaviors by gender (male or female) or

Bem sex role classification (Androgynous, Female Sex-Typed, Male Sex-Typed, Undifferentiated). A help-seeking behaviors composite score was created by averaging the ratings of the eight help-seeking behaviors. The interaction between gender and sex role was not significant,  $F(3, 550) = .40, p = .78$ . Also, the effect of gender was not significant as there were no significant differences between men ( $M = 17.1, SD = 4.21$ ) and women ( $M = 17.0, SD = 3.84$ ) on help-seeking behaviors,  $F(1, 550) = .46, p = .50$ . However, the effect of sex role was significant,  $F(3, 550) = 8.50, p < .001$ . See Table 2 for means by gender and sex role. Post Hoc tests (Tukey) revealed that students classified as Androgynous ( $M = 18.15; SD = 3.97$ ) were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to engage in academic help-seeking behaviors than students classified as female sex-typed ( $M = 16.34; SD = 3.70$ ; Cohen's  $d = .47$ ), male sex-typed ( $M = 15.93; SD = 3.73$ ;  $d = .57$ ), or undifferentiated ( $16.45; SD = 4.22$ ;  $d = .42$ ). Each of the effect sizes as measured by Cohen's  $d$  (.47, .57, and .42 respectively) would be considered medium effects (Cohen, 1992). No other differences were significant.

Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations for Help-Seeking Behavior by Gender and Bem Sex Role Classification*

	N	M	SD
Male			
Androgynous	75	18.00	4.34
Female Sex -Typed	53	16.47	3.68
Male Sex - Typed	29	16.00	3.67
Undifferentiated	27	16.96	5.03
Total	184	17.10	4.21
Female			
Androgynous	152	18.22	3.79
Female Sex - Typed	165	16.30	3.71
Male Sex – Typed	26	15.81	3.87
Undifferentiated	31	16.00	3.38
Total	374	17.02	3.84
Total			
Androgynous	227	18.15	3.97
Female Sex – Typed	218	16.34	3.70
Male Sex – Typed	55	15.93	3.73
Undifferentiated	58	16.45	4.22
Total	558	17.05	3.97

*Note:* Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for differences for the total sample were: Androgynous/Female Sex-Typed: .47, Androgynous/Male Sex-Typed: .57, Androgynous/Undifferentiated: .42.

In order to examine more specifically the contributors to the significant effects, a two-way ANOVA (gender by sex-role classification) was run separately for men and women. For men, sex-role was not significant  $F(3, 180) = 2.20, p = .09$ . For women, sex-role was significant  $F(3, 370) = 8.95, p < .001$ , with women who were classified as Androgynous ( $M = 18.22, SD = 3.79$ ) scoring significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) on help seeking than those classified as female sex-

typed ( $M = 16.30$ ,  $SD = 3.71$ ;  $d = .51$ ), undifferentiated ( $M = 16.00$ ,  $SD = 3.38$ ;  $d = .60$ ), and male sex-typed ( $M = 15.81$ ,  $SD = 3.87$ ;  $d = .63$ ). As with the total sample, each of the effect sizes (.51, .60, and .63 respectively) would be considered medium effects (Cohen, 1992).

An additional analysis was conducted to see if there were differences in the percentage of students who ever reported seeking out various services on campus based on sex-role classification. Responses of “never” were considered one group, while responses of “rarely”, “sometimes”, and “always” were collapsed into another group, creating a variable of “did” or “did not” seek out services. Chi-square tests were conducted to test for significant differences in the distributions of “did” or “did not” seek out services based on sex-role classification. Sex-role classification was significantly associated with four help seeking behaviors, including “Gone to professors for help” ( $\chi^2 = 8.2$ ,  $df = 3$ , Cramer’s  $V = .12$ ), “Asked other students for help” ( $\chi^2 = 14.6$ ,  $df = 3$ , Cramer’s  $V = .16$ ), “Sought help with my general study skills this semester” ( $\chi^2 = 16.0$ ,  $df = 3$ , Cramer’s  $V = .17$ ), and “Sought help from support services” ( $\chi^2 = 13.7$ ,  $df = 3$ , Cramer’s  $V = .16$ ). For each of the behaviors, students classified as androgynous had the highest percentage (See Table 3). Follow-up post hoc 2 x 2 chi-square tests were conducted to examine how androgynous students differed from the others. To control for Type I error while conducting multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was applied (.05/12, setting the significance level at .004). Androgynous students (99%) were significantly more likely to “ask other students for help” than male sex-typed (89%) and undifferentiated (91%). Androgynous students (81%) were significantly more likely to endorse “sought help with my general study skills this semester” than female sex-typed students (66%), and androgynous students (69%) were significantly more likely to endorse “sought help from support services” than female sex-typed students (54%).

Table 3

*Percentage of Students who Sought Help On Campus*

Help-Seeking Item	Androgynous (n = 227)	Female Sex-Typed (n = 218)	Male Sex-Typed (n = 55)	Undifferentiated (n = 58)	Pearson Chi- square
	P	P	P	P	
Gone to professors for help	95	89	86	91	8.2*
Asked other students for help	99	96	89	91	14.6**
Sought help from friends	96	96	93	98	2.4
Sought help with my general study skills this semester	81	66	66	66	16.0**
Sought help from support services	69	54	49	35	13.7*
Gone to the University Writing Center on campus	37	30	27	28	3.9
Sought tutoring on campus	30	22	26	31	3.6
Gone to career services	36	30	26	31	3.0

*Research Question 2: How are gender, masculinity, femininity, and help seeking behaviors related to academic achievement?*

In order to address this question, simultaneous multiple regression analyses were conducted with gender, masculinity, femininity, and help seeking behaviors as predictor variables and college cumulative grade point average (GPA) as the outcome variable. The regression model was significant  $F = 6.24, p < .001, R^2 = .05$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .04$ . Significant predictors were gender (beta = .10) and help-seeking total (-.19). Gender

(female) was a positive contributor to academic performance, while help-seeking total was a negative predictor. Although the variables explained a relatively small proportion of the variance, they did contribute in ways consistent with previous research. Gender differences in academic performance are well-documented (Sax, 2008b); also, it makes sense that students who are having difficulty academically would be most likely to seek out help such as tutoring or the writing center.

*Research Question 3: Are there differences in academic performance based on gender and sex-role classification?* In order to address this question, a 2 (male, female) x 4 (masculine sex-typed, feminine sex-typed, androgynous, undifferentiated) ANOVA with college cumulative GPA as the dependent variable was conducted. No significant effects on GPA were found for gender ( $F(1, 373) = 3.50, p = .06$ ), sex-role classification ( $F(3, 473) = .80, p = .50$ ), or the interaction of gender and sex-role classification,  $F(3, 473) = .99, p = .40$ ).

## Discussion

This study explored various questions related to the relationship between gender attributes (as measured by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory) and academic help-seeking behavior and performance. Although there is considerable discussion of gender differences in the research literature on academic achievement, there has been less of a focus on gender-related constructs that may help illuminate the considerable variations within each gender (see Sax, 2008b). In the current study we explored the potential role of gender attributes in academic help-seeking behavior and academic performance.

### Gender Attributes and Academic Help-Seeking

Although there were no differences between men and women in this study in academic help-seeking behaviors, there was a significant effect for masculinity and femininity. As predicted from the broader literature on the benefits of androgyny and trends in help-seeking behavior in men, those students who were classified as androgynous on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory were more likely than students classified as female sex-typed, male sex-typed, or undifferentiated to report seeking help in college. Also, students who were classified as masculine-typed had the



lowest mean help-seeking score, although there were no significant differences between feminine sex-typed, masculine sex-typed, or undifferentiated students.

In addition to examining the benefits of androgyny for total academic help-seeking behavior, we also examined differences for specific help-seeking behaviors. Consistent with the results for the total score, students who were classified as androgynous were significantly more likely to report engaging in four specific help-seeking behaviors, including going to professors for help, asking other students for help, seeking help for general study skills, and seeking help from support services. For some of these behaviors, the differences in the percentage of students seeking that type were fairly large. For example, for the item “sought help from support services,” 69% of students classified as androgynous reported seeking help, while the corresponding percentages for female-sex typed, male-sex typed, and undifferentiated were 54%, 49%, and 35%, respectively.

One possible explanation for the significant differences between Androgynous and other participants is the concept of “effortless achievement” identified by Jackson and Dempster (2009). In their study of high school and college men in England, Jackson and Dempster found that male students generally were not engaged in academic activities unless the activities they were pursuing came easily or without much effort. Male students generally agreed that academic success was acceptable, but only if someone was naturally good at it. Having to work hard to achieve was not acceptable for a male student, as it implied that the student was not as capable as others and was a sign of weakness.

Female students, while increasingly academically successful, also contend with what it means to be a “good girl.” Skelton, Francis, and Read (2010) argue that girls must blend pressures to succeed in school with mastering feminine frameworks such as fashion, make-up, dating relationships, and socials. The authors contend that if girls lacked the physical beauty to “do girl” and excel at social settings, they may opt for more “masculine” traits like cleverness. When demands to be acceptingly feminine become increasingly important, some of the girls in their study would learn to be quiet in class and avoid showing their

intelligence. This finding could help to explain why androgyny appeared to benefit female students more than boys in this study. Androgynous girls may be more likely to disregard appearing geeky and simply show their cleverness.

### **Gender, Masculinity, Femininity, Help-Seeking and Academic Performance**

Another research question addressed in this study was the relationship between gender, masculinity, femininity, help-seeking, and academic performance. Although gender and academic help-seeking (but not masculinity and femininity) were significant predictors of academic performance as measured by cumulative college GPA, the predictors accounted for only a small proportion of the variance (4%). This means that the majority of the variance in academic performance was predicted by other variables. This lack of significance for masculinity and femininity was surprising considering the previous research findings addressing masculinity and academic performance. The majority of the current literature on masculinity and academic achievement is qualitative (Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001; Connell, 1989; Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Morris, 2011), so there is little in terms of previous quantitative estimates of how important masculinity is to predicting achievement in comparison to other variables. The general findings of the qualitative research on the relationship between masculinity and academic-related variables is that masculinity is an important variable for academic engagement, particularly for those students who subscribe to traditional notions of masculinity in modern, Western societies (such as Great Britain and the United States). These studies have noted that male students are influenced tremendously by the pressures of 'hegemonic masculinity', and many male students may pay a tremendous social cost among male peers if they engage in 'feminine' behaviors such as reading, studying, and showing interest in intellectual or academic matters.

In this study, masculinity as measured by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory was not a significant predictor of academic performance. Future research is needed to help clarify the potential relationships between aspects of masculinity (gender role, masculinity ideology,

conformity to masculine norms) and academic performance. Although qualitative research has identified numerous ways that conceptions of masculinity may impact the academic experience, more quantitative research is needed. It may be that masculinity and femininity are related to academic performance, but only in particular contexts. For example, at the college level gender attributes may be related to performance in certain academic majors, but not others. The lack of significant findings in the current study may also be reflective of the considerable limitations of the Bem Inventory as a measure of masculinity. Recent research has noted the changing trends in the endorsement of masculine-typed and feminine-typed characteristics over the years (Twenge, 1997), with women becoming more likely to endorse masculine-typed characteristics and men continuing to resist feminine-typed characteristics. Because of the significant cultural changes in the years since the Bem was first developed, the instrument may be less sensitive to characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Also, many new instruments measuring masculinity-related variables have been developed, enabling a more detailed examination of the various components of masculinity (Levant, 2011).

### **Sex Role Classification and Academic Performance**

Previous studies found conflicting results regarding the relationship between sex-role classification and academic performance, with some studies finding that feminine identity was associated with lower academic performance (Olds & Shaver, 1980) and other studies finding it associated with improved performance (Burke, 1989). In addition, more recent studies (Paver & Gammie, 2005) have found no relationship between sex-role and academic performance. In the current study, no significant differences in academic performance (as measured by cumulative college GPA) were found based on sex-role classification. Considering the results of the current study and those of Paver and Gammie (2005), it appears that sex-role classification has little if any impact on academic performance as measured by GPA.

The lack of significant differences based on sex-role classification is interesting considering findings from various qualitative studies

identifying the resistance to education among many male students who take on highly traditional, masculine roles (Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001; Connell, 1989, Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Morris, 2011). In the current study, male sex-typed men achieved at about the same level academically and were no less likely to seek out help than males who were female sex-typed or undifferentiated. These results indicate that further research is needed to explore which aspects of masculinity are related to disengagement and poor academic performance. It is possible that some masculine attributes (such as those measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory) have minimal to no relationship to academics, while other aspects, such as the notion of effortless achievement identified by Jackson and Dempster (2009), may be central to understanding academic achievement. Future qualitative and quantitative research would help clarify which variables are important.

## **Implications**

A key finding of the current study is the apparent educational benefit of androgyny for college students. Students who were classified as androgynous were more likely to report engaging in a number of behaviors helpful for academic success, such as going to professors for assistance, asking other students for help, and seeking out various support services. Androgyny has been identified by previous research as being beneficial for a number of developmental attainments (Arnett, 2010), and the current study provides evidence for its important in seeking out academically-related help.

The results of the current study raise the question of the relevance of gender attributes to not only personal development, but also the academic development of students. If future studies also find connections between gender attributes and academic-related variables (i.e. academic help-seeking, engagement), then a greater focus on gender identity development in school settings may be warranted. For example, O'Neil and Luján (2009) outlined a proactive prevention approach for addressing the interpersonal and achievement problems of boys. They proposed a psychoeducational program that focuses on life skills and the ability to deal with issues of masculinity and gender role conflict.

These results may also have implications for interventions for male academic performance issues. For example, a popular current approach is to focus on the unique learning styles of boys, as promoted by Gurian (2011). Although the evidence of a unique gender-based learning style is still mixed, it may be helpful to also think about how beliefs about gender may impact men's and women's behavior in academic settings. Perhaps a greater focus on how conceptions of masculinity and femininity (i.e. what behaviors are considered appropriately masculine or feminine) might impact the educational experiences of male and female students would be a useful addition to the discussion about possible gender differences in learning.

These findings also reinforce the notion of feminist counseling interventions, which include assertiveness training. Highly feminine females in this study were significantly less likely to seek help than androgynous females. There is some evidence that assertiveness and feelings of academic self-efficacy may be associated with adjustment within college settings (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). Raising androgyny scores may increase assertiveness in females and social skills in males, which could lead to better interconnectedness and improved retention rates.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The results of this study indicate that continued research on the impact of gender attributes for academic development may be useful in understanding the unique experiences of all students in the college environment. More research on all aspects and variations of gender would be useful, but a focus on the experiences of men may be an especially helpful contribution to the discussions of gender differences in achievement. Harris and Harper (2008) noted that little research attention has been paid to male gender identity development.

Another promising research direction would be to explore these same questions in an adolescent sample. As adolescence is a time when gender concerns intensify (Arnett, 2010), there is potential for even stronger effects than those found in the current college sample. Is androgyny associated with more adaptive academic help-seeking at the

high school level? How might adherence to masculine, feminine, or androgynous sex roles impact the achievement related behavior of adolescents? Exploring these questions would likely help inform approaches to encourage healthy identity development for all adolescents.

### **Limitations**

A number of limitations should be considered when evaluating the results of this study. The male participants in this study did not follow national trends, and they were more likely to identify as feminine than masculine. This could have affected the way masculinity and femininity were conceptualized. Additionally, the self-report nature of the academic help-seeking measure is a limitation. Students self-reported how frequently they sought various types of help on campus (i.e. from professors, the writing centers, etc.). It is possible that students who were more likely to endorse feminine or masculine-typed traits were also more likely to report seeking help, regardless of the actual frequency of help-seeking behaviors. Although this is a limitation of much self-report research, future studies could incorporate actual attendance records to verify the frequency of behaviors. Also, although the Bem Sex-Role Inventory is the most popular measure of sex-role in the research literature, recent developments in the conceptualization of the concepts of masculinity and femininity have highlighted the limitations of viewing these concepts of 'masculinity' as a single construct. Future research using instruments that measure the multiple dimensions of masculinity and femininity would be helpful in identifying which aspects of masculinity and femininity are associated with academic help-seeking.

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