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# Redefining “Manly” with Eric Barthold ’12

By Laura Meader

Eric Barthold ’12 runs Man Up and Open Up, an offshoot of the sexual assault prevention program Mules Against Violence he began his junior year at Colby. Man Up and Open Up engages young male athletes in conversations about what it means to be a real man.

Barthold’s workshops begin with an exercise called “the man box” to identify stereotypical images of men. Inside a rectangle he draws on a white board, he writes the words boys use to describe “real men”: e.g. strong, athletic, gets the girls, confident. Outside the man box, he writes characteristics they attribute to unmasculine men: girly, sensitive, gay, cowardly, wimpy. Then they talk.

## How do boys react to the man box?

They love the exercise. Since they’ve never had a chance to talk about gender as a guy, it really gives them a sense of their ability to be open with each other. Sometimes they can be a little rowdy—they don’t take it seriously because they don’t know how to. But usually the man box exercise is really good to give them an outlet to talk.



Eric Barthold conducts a “man box” exercise | Photo credit Geoff Hansen Photography

## **Do they connect with you?**

It's definitely an advantage being a young male who was an athlete in college myself, especially when I speak at schools like ski academies and they know I've been there. They switch on a little bit more than having somebody come farther from their experience.

## **Why focus on male athletes?**

A lot of people talking about masculinity and sexual violence prevention believe we have to build up this movement and then tackle athletics and fraternities ... the perceived problem areas. But for me, it's always been the total opposite. We use athletics as a way to start this movement, and use the energy and the transformative power of sports as a way to change the conversation.

Male athletes have a huge amount of social power, and often that power is used in negative ways or at least to get away with negative behaviors. But most guys, and most male athletes, are not the ones who are actively dictating the behaviors that lead to sexual violence. Most guys are somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. We want to amplify the voices of the guys in the middle ... and start shifting the social power. If you take that power and use it in another direction, it's a hugely exciting prospect to use athletics as a way to change culture.

## **Who are these guys in the middle?**

I was one of them. ... In high school I didn't quite fit into all the behaviors that happened in those all-male spaces. When I first saw the man box exercise in college, I was like, "This makes perfect sense!" I can be competitive, but I can also be really sensitive. I can be the star athlete but also the nice guy. I realized ... this is a socially constructed thing ... and there's no reason you can't be both inside and outside the man box. Many boys in athletics are in that position. As soon as you show them this social pressure that's happening in their lives, they're like, "That's me!"

## **How do you measure success against a rise in reported incidents of sexual abuse on campuses?**

A lot of people want a big solution for a big problem. For me, it's the small disruptions that cause large-scale cultural change. There's a difference between changing awareness and changing behavior, and I think one of the coolest things for me is creating that sense of awareness. There are more people saying, "I never thought about that," or seeing some of this stuff and hopefully making a change.

## **Do you talk about female stereotypes?**

I haven't done a full-blown session with guys on femininity, mostly because I think it's so important to have them look inside themselves, which is not something guys are supposed to do. So we start there. The masculine box has dictated the limits of women in terms of power and privilege. If we deconstruct that masculine box with guys, it's easier to see how women in our lives are affected.

## **What's the biggest takeaway you want after each workshop?**

Engaging conversation and developing empathy are my two guiding philosophies. Starting the conversation in places we're not expected to, and then building empathy, is so important. If we can build a sense of empathy, with guys especially, and link it to sexual assault and violence

prevention, I think we'll see men and women on equal planes.

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