

Lessons from the Lekgotla: The UFS Men's Wellbeing Program

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INTRODUCTION

- Division of Student Affairs (DSA) piloted the Men's Well-being Project which was aimed at promoting well-being among male students at the University of the Free State (UFS).
- All university campuses were included in the project.
- Total **participation of 1337** male students in its pilot year.

South Africa has the third highest suicide rate on the African continent, with more men than women committing suicide (Mashishi, 2021).

South African men are four times more likely to commit suicide than women. This indicates a far higher rate of mental battles such as, but not limited to, depression among South African men.

Objective 3 of the University's Strategic Plan 2023–2028, as well as Points 5.2 and 5.3 of its Vision 130, are clear on the University's community responsibilities.

Globally, various male-focused well-being projects have been undertaken, including two in Australia, in Western Sydney at the Queensland University of Technology, as well as at Griffith University.

Locally, similar projects have been undertaken at the University of Zululand (UniZulu), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU), to mention a few. These institutions have focused on various programmes related to men's mental health, using talk-shops to identify and address men's challenges.

The University of the Free State (UFS), however, explored a project that promotes the holistic well-being of its male students.

Theoretical Framing



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This program is anchored on the theoretical framing of the humanising pedagogy and borrows principles of positive psychology.



A **focus on strengths** instead of weaknesses, building the good in life instead of repairing the bad.



Program recognises that most projects relating to men are implemented through the 'fixing men' lenses which highlights their negative conduct

Though the humanising pedagogy was conceptualised for the teacher-student interface, it applies to other contexts of the human interactions that are mediated by power.



The humanising pedagogy is about encountering each other as humans first before our material beings. In other words, it is about encountering each other's soul. **This project is centered on the development of the Self**, the make student's soul before he is a brother, friend, child, student, father, etc

The Program

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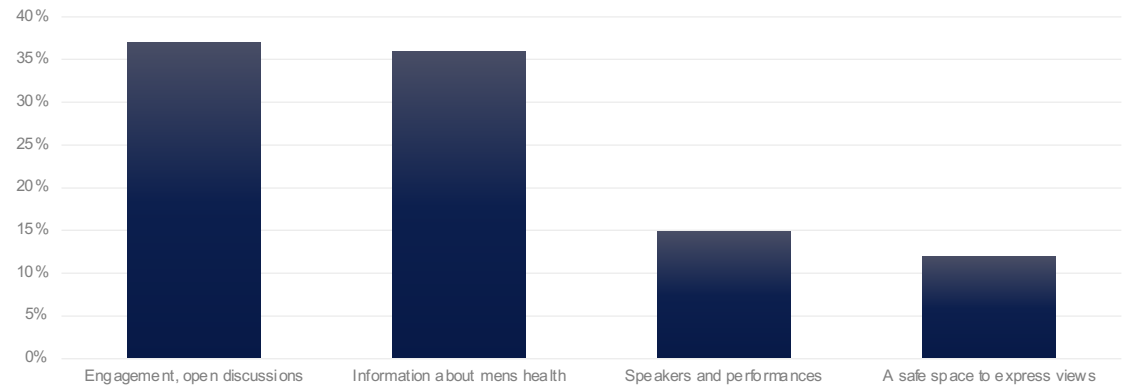
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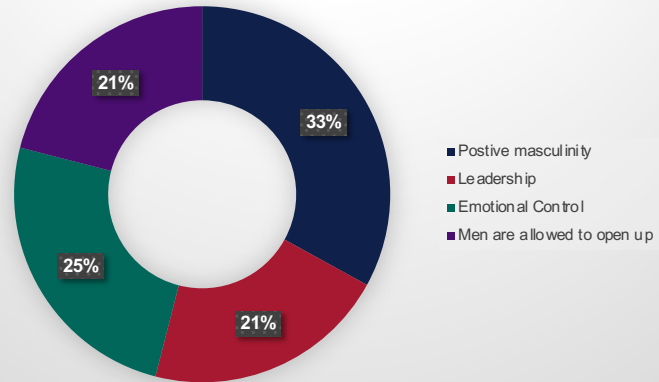


What students enjoyed most about the session - All Campuses



As conceptualized the imbizo served as a platform to inspire and unearth the genesis of courageous conversations amongst men. Following the imbizo conversations, students requested a session to share their walks of life experiences, and the original concept of hiking (GBV) was then changed to accommodate the student's request.

What students learned that they did not know - All Campuses



'That there are men who go through very similar issues and just never talk about them. Today they did and a lot of people can relate to the issues discussed.'

'I learned a lot more, especially on the part that highlights the difference between being a boy and being a man. I also can say that the sexual part also helped me a lot as well as the knowledge about being healthy sexually.'

'As a leader, you must learn to accommodate everyone you lead. The next thing is that you must learn to learn and unlearn new things as you're exposed to different environments.'

The Hiking Pledge

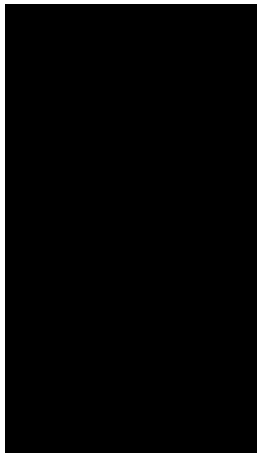
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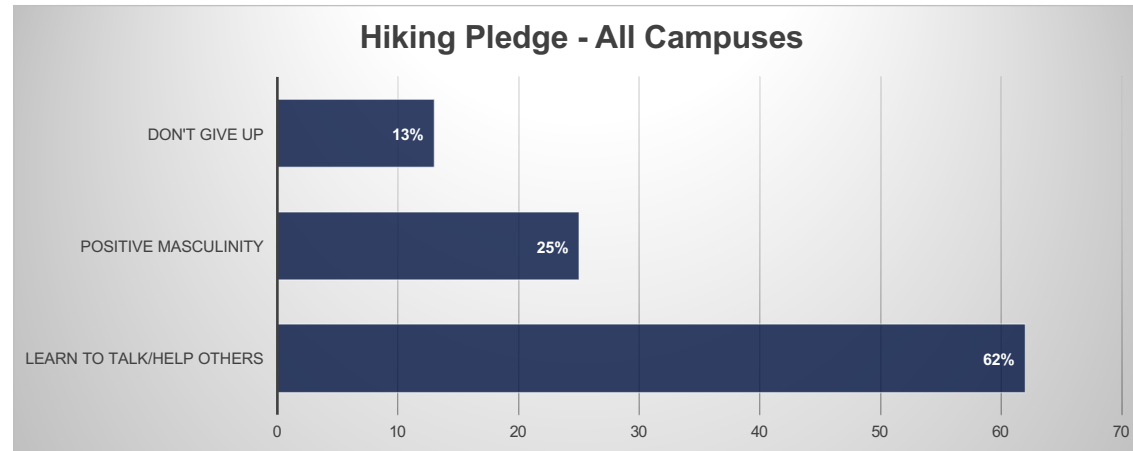
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The aim of the Hiking Pledge was to use the physical exercise of hiking to inspire inward-looking and interpersonal change that is underpinned by a pledge to not die in silence but open up about their stories.



The overall student experience was positive, and students requested more opportunities for events that are of this nature. Below are statements from students of what they have learned:

‘Gave us a platform to share our stories and advise each other.’

‘We were on top of a mountain that I didn't know surrounded by familiar faces of people I didn't know by name but have struggled the way I have despite the different ethnic groups we came from, but we had so much in common in our indifferences.’

‘Nobody was ashamed to speak about their feelings.’

Uku- Phefumlelana

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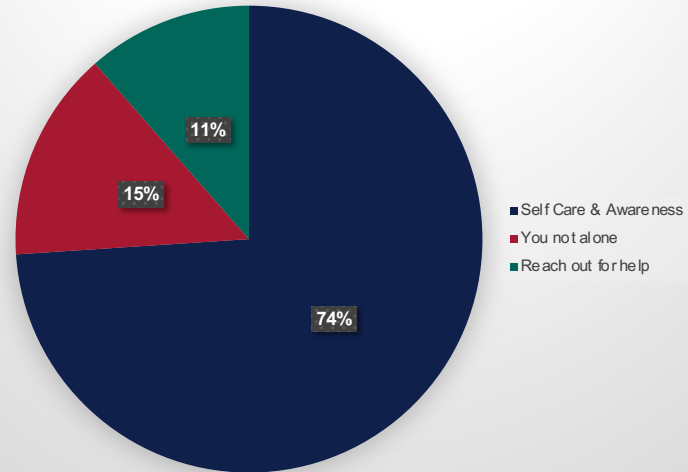
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In understanding that the concept is new, 94.4% rated the concept as positive, requested more time for the event, and would recommend it to another male friend.

Students reflecting that self-awareness and self-care resonated with them the most from the session, indicated that the concept of uku-phefumlelana was well understood by students.

What students learnt - All Campuses



Lessons

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- Co-creation and collaboration.
- Experienced facilitators of complex conversations.
- Mentorship.
- Capacity Building.

Thank You!