Hybrid-Coed: A Third Treatment Option

By Scott Petersen

As an industry professional of more than 20 years now, I've learned one of the greatest fears parents express when selecting a therapeutic program for their teen is what may happen if their child is sexually promiscuous while attending that program. I can tell you first hand, program owners have that same concern. For many programs, this very real worry played a large role in the movement toward single gender programming.

Most of us are well aware of research that claims single gender *education* results in a more focused and productive academic environment. We've certainly seen that play out in some of our programs. However, to my knowledge there is no quantitative research that indicates *therapy* is more effective in a single gender environment. There are only claims from various programs that a single gender environment is more therapeutically appropriate.

With a lack of research and an abundance of claims, parents and industry professionals should be asking this important question: "How important is appropriate social interaction between male and female students in providing an optimal therapeutic environment?"

Let's consider what a true single gender and a true co-ed program look like. A single gender program simply means no interaction with the opposite sex regarding residential living, education, recreation or any other program function.

Philosophically, there's a natural gravitational lean toward single gender programming because it eliminates the difficulties that come with housing, educating and treating boys and girls in co-educational approaches. A true co-ed program usually offers separate housing, but almost every other program function is combined. Residential, educational and recreational activities involve both genders to some degree throughout the day.

The strengths of a single gender program include fewer hormonal distractions, allowing a higher degree of focus in therapeutic, residential and academic situations. Students just aren't as concerned about keeping up appearances to charm or repel the opposite sex. This program's greatest weakness is that it is not a normal environment. That "real world" environment is a co-ed program's greatest strength. However, it's also its greatest weakness. Many parents and consultants understandably fear working through the sometimes chaotic distractions involving the opposite sex.

I believe there's a third option. It's what I refer to as a hybrid co-ed program. The hybrid model isn't a new approach. Some programs have been using it for years. Many people mistakenly label the hybrid approach as simply co-ed. That label doesn't do the hybrid model justice.

I realized this recently as I listened to the rhetoric between two programs competing for the same child. That conversation forced me to look much more closely at the language being used by consultants and even program personnel. The hybrid co-ed model has a very simple definition but is much more complex to operate than either the single gender and or pure coed programs.

The dictionary defines a hybrid as "a combination of two or more different things, aimed at achieving a particular objective or goal." In a hybrid co-ed program, male and female students are housed in entirely separate buildings. The boys and girls programs run completely independent of each other residentially, therapeutically, academically and recreationally – with one important exception. That exception is when the clinical team determines that co-ed interaction is appropriate for specific students who are therapeutically ready to step toward normalcy, or appropriate social interaction. Co-ed interaction occurs *only* when it is therapeutically recommended – not when it is administratively convenient.

Understandably, these programs are much more difficult to administer. That may be one reason why there are so few of them. However, the benefit to the student is tremendous. Families have the opportunity to take advantage of whichever environment best suits their child's needs and then alter that environment as clinically necessary.

As our industry has matured and specialized, we have managed to label many different program models. But a true hybrid co-ed approach has never been defined or included in the conversations about what treatment milieu may or may not be in a child's best interest. The hybrid model offers another choice to parents. However, they will never truly understand the benefits unless they are properly explained. That's a conversation I believe needs to take place, both inside the industry and out.

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