

# in Odd man out

## A MAN'S PERSPECTIVE: REFLECTIONS FROM MY SOM EXPERIENCE

by Adam Skaggs

**W**ith graduation steadily approaching, family and friends are marking their calendars and booking their plane tickets. It will be the fourth time they will see me walk across a stage and handed a diploma. I graduated from Framingham High School, followed by a post-graduate year at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. I then earned a bachelor's degree from Trinity College, and now am receiving a master's degree in management from a nationally renowned school. As the number of days toward graduation begin to wind down, the more questions I begin to receive—"So wait, isn't Simmons an all-women's school?", "Were you the only male there?", "You must have stood out from the majority of the class, right?", "Well, did you benefit from the program?" ...Did I.

About a year after I completed my undergraduate degree, I landed a job in the field I love, working in athletics communications at Simmons College. Almost immediately, peers and colleagues began encouraging me to enroll in the master's in management program offered by Simmons. After 17 years of schooling, I thought I was done with my education, but decided to apply. After all, it was a nationally ranked program that would support me in my professional development; and as a Simmons employee the free tuition was hard to pass up.

While undergraduate studies at Simmons College are for women only, the master's of science in management (MSM) program in which I enrolled is coed, although the majority of the students are women. Before starting

the program, I hadn't given much thought to the implications of furthering my education at a college that boasts its "unique focus on gender, diversity, and power dynamics." I was focused on the more traditional aspects of a master's program—learning about things like finance, entrepreneurship, and marketing.

In my first few courses I was the only male in the classroom. When the material or the discussions veered toward gender issues or focused on empowerment (of women) in the workplace, I often felt like the odd man out. My initial thought was "How is this relevant to me?" I soon found myself sitting alone, and

not always actively participating like I was accustomed to doing during my undergraduate years. But as the program progressed and there were other men



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in my classes, I saw how collaboratively they approached learning in the same environment and it opened my thinking to aspects of the program beyond the academics. Now, as I reflect on the question “Did you benefit from the program?”, I realize that in addition to gaining the practical knowledge I sought at the onset, I also came through with a greater appreciation for some of the underlying challenges faced by both women and men in today’s work environment and a better understanding of the skills needed to successfully manage them.

**Gender Inequality.** As an African American male I know I face unconscious bias all the time, such as someone asking me what is my favorite rap song when I do not even listen to rap music, or a stranger at the Fens Cafe asking me, “What time do you guys close?”

Within the MSM program my eyes were opened to

**Patience.** This is a common sense quality I had going into the program, but I learned the important role it plays in managing differences of opinions, ideas, and processes. At times in class I initially disagreed with various discussions, but I learned that if you wait and fully listen to a person’s argument, you can learn something and have a better understanding of the matter at hand. In life, I will be responsible for managing all sorts of disagreements, and it will be up to me as to how I handle them. Patience and taking the time to listen will play a big part in my approach.

**Communication.** It is not always what it seems. Intercultural, online, or by gender perspective, what is obvious to one person or one party, may not be—or may even be misinterpreted—by another person or party. I experienced this through class discussion as well as in class material. Usually, in my typical classroom self, I

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the gender aspect of this type of unconscious bias and I saw that women face similar situations that they cope with on a daily basis. Before this program I hadn’t given much thought to the parallel inequities experienced by women. For example, discussions around the gender wage gap and the low ratio of women to men CEOs showed me how bias and inequity play out in daily business.

**Flexibility.** While enrolled in the program I worked full-time during the day, plus covered night athletic games for my job that sometimes conflicted with class schedules. Before each semester, I shared my schedule with my professors and explained what it is that I do. They saw me putting in the work, consistently coming in during office hours to learn what I had missed, and meeting the requirements of the class. I began to appreciate their flexibility in supporting me and my success. I experienced first-hand how flexibility can play a role in the workplace to accommodate the various needs we all have in managing our lives. As long as people are putting in the effort and getting the job done, I will support them in the need to be more flexible in managing their time.

would take the lead role in group discussions and call the shots. But I found myself sometimes quieting my own voice because I didn’t think people would agree with my point of view. Through this experience I began to appreciate that everyone has an opinion and that for communication to be successful, everyone’s unique point of view matters. It’s important to have a clear understanding of everyone’s perspective in order to avoid miscommunication or misunderstanding.

While these skills and experiences have been fundamental to my learning over the years, I gained a deeper appreciation for their relevance and importance to my overall success, and to my success in managing others. This is in addition to the strong business education I gained through this program. Already, I find myself conducting SWOT analyses to help me make all kinds of decisions; I am quizzing the ROI of the fundraising activities we undertake at work; and I’m always sure to have a BATNA when I’m pitching my ideas. I’ve asked other men in the program about their experiences. As a whole they agree that this is a terrific program. It provides learning through a unique lens—one that we may not be used to, nor were expecting, but will surely help us all in the long run—and I couldn’t agree more. ■