

Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of College Students

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Sex seems to be everywhere-including the college campus. However, today's college students appear to have different sexual attitudes and behaviors than previous generations. Reviewing the history of the sexual revolution of the 20th century provides a clearer picture of why college students have their current attitudes and beliefs regarding sex. Students today have received more sex education than any other generation, as a result the college's need to reconsider whether their sex education programs are working for their students. Several colleges and universities are trying innovative approaches to sex education to meet the changing needs of college students.

Jerry Springer's guests usually fight over it. Hugh Hefner has immortalized it. President Clinton was accused of doing it in the Oval Office. Viagra has helped many with it. What is it? S-E-X. The media is filled with stories, photos, and images about sex. It seems as if everyone is talking about it, but who is really doing it?

This article will provide a brief history of the sexual revolution of the 20th century of the United States, followed by current research on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of college students. Current programs, policies, and practices of higher education institutions will be examined and recommendations made as to how colleges and universities can best provide services to today's sexually active college students. For the purposes of this article, current college students are defined as traditional aged students who began college as early as 1997 or as late as 2002. This paper also focuses solely on heterosexual sexual behavior, as the unique attributes of each population do not allow for comparisons in this paper.

The Sexual Revolution

In this era of great change-in manners and morals, science and technology, art and literature-America has been on the vanguard. Its attitudes toward sexuality has changed from a rigid propriety to an exhilarating celebration and, some believe excess (Hefner, 1999, p. ix).

"Many of the issues we debate today-sexual expression, sex education, birth control, abortion, disease, law-were first framed at the turn of the century" (Hefner, 1999, p. x).

In order to fully understand the sexual behaviors and attitudes of current college

students, an examination of history is necessary. History provides a context in order to best understand how sexuality has evolved throughout modern history.

In the early 1900s, "America believed in the purity of women, whether it was good for them or not. Men had sexual appetites, women did not" (Peterson, 1999, p. 10).

However, purity was stressed for both men and women, as parents could order pamphlets that included *What a Young Boy Ought to Know* or *What a Young Husband Ought to Know* all written by clergymen (1999). Sex education of the early 1900s focused on anti-masturbation and stressed that purity and sexual repression made a man of character (1999).

As hemlines of skirts rose in the 1920s, so did sexual behaviors of adolescents, "The twenties saw the abandonment of the Victorian women, that angelic being free from the taint of sexual desire" (Peterson, 1999, p. 77). The most significant impact came as a result of the change in courtship rules, "Instead of suitors and proper daughters, America now had created two new creatures: boyfriends and girlfriends" (p.76). Dating rituals and sexual activities and behaviors continued to evolve slowly over the next forty years until the explosion of the sexual revolution in the 1960s.

The Food and Drug Administration approval of the birth control pill in the 1960s changed sexual behaviors for women forever. "By the end of the decade, more than six million women would be on the Pill, performing a daily ritual once occupied by worry beads; its dispenser the badge of the new liberated woman" (Peterson, 1999, p. 261). The Pill was most readily embraced by college-aged women who wanted to have sex without the fear of pregnancy, while still pursuing their education (Peterson, 1999; White, 2000).

The impact of college-aged students on the sexual revolution was clearly demonstrated in a study entitled *Sexual Behavior in the Seventies* conducted by Morton Hunt in 1972. The single most important factor in this study was age. "Those under twenty five [college students] were growing into a lifestyle that was dramatically more pleasure-prone than their elders" (Peterson, 1999, p. 337). The 1970s also came with an increase in the percentage of young people engaging in premarital sex and an increase in the number of sexual partners (Peterson, 1999).

While the 1970s were an era of casual sex and spontaneous sex, the discovery of Acquired Immunodeficiency Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the 1980s led to a change in sexual attitudes and practices for many. Fear of AIDS caused many individuals to rediscover the traditional values of fidelity, obligation, and marriage (Peterson, 1999). In the 1980s, "caution" and "commitment" replaced the 1970s buzzword of "free love" (Peterson, 1999). All of these factors led to a current generation of what Playboy says are students who "incorporated caution and creativity" into their sex lives (Peterson, 1999, p. 457).

Current College Students

Current college students have heard stories about the 'free love' of the 1960s and 1970s and have been taught the fear of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). As a result of hearing and learning from these two different generations, students are safer, but more experimental than previous generations (Peterson, 1999). This has resulted in a student unlike any higher education has encountered. The unique characteristics of current college students' sexual attitudes and behaviors are discussed here.

A 1998 survey found that only 15 percent of college students chose to remain virgins throughout their college experience (Eschbacher, 2002). Similar findings were reported by Elliott and Brantley (1997) in the largest and most comprehensive study on college student sexuality to date. Even more shocking is the age at which teenagers are now losing their virginity. "A third of all freshmen [in highschool]--primarily 14 and 15 year olds-have had sex... By senior year, that number swells to nearly two-thirds" (2002, p. 2). As a result, many students are coming to college with pre-established sexual behaviors.

While there has been an increase in the number of students engaging in sexual activity, their age of the first sexual encounter is also decreasing, "Students set seventh grade as the starting point for oral sex" (Remez, 2000, p. 300). Deborah Roffman, a sexuality educator asserts that "girls sometimes look at oral sex as an absolute bargain--you don't get pregnant, they think you don't get diseases, you're still a virgin and you're in control since it's something that they can do to boys (whereas sex is almost always described as something boys do to girls)" (Remez, 2000, p. 301). Interviews with

eleventh and twelfth graders reveal that they view oral sex as "something you can do with someone you're not as intimate with" (Remez, 2000, p. 301) and carry these beliefs with them as they enter the college environment. Many students do not consider oral sex to be 'sex', and as a result, many who classify themselves as virgins have engaged in this type of behavior. Traditional sex education has not focused on oral sex, or its potential dangers, as many teenagers seem to be especially misinformed about the STD risks of oral sex (Remex, 2000). While students have been encouraged to use a condom during sex to prevent the spread of AIDS and other STDs, the same message is not given regarding oral sex.

Living in the era of AIDS education, the lesson students learned was that sexual intercourse was accepted as long as they used a condom (Peterson, 1999). Despite these lessons taught, only 45% of college students are always having safe sex (Elliott & Brantley, 1997). Although, students have much more factual education about the dangers of sex than previous generations, they still choose to engage in high risk behavior. A study of students in a college human sexuality course showed that few students would abstain from sexual intercourse to prevent STDs and HIV (Feigenbaum & Weinstein, 1995). These results reinforce the notion that college students are still sexually active in spite of the high incidence of STDs and that few students are consistently practicing safe sex (Feigenbaum & Weinstein, 1995).

One of the most common reasons college students state for not practicing safe sex is the influence of alcohol or other drugs on the decision making process. MacDonald (1996) researched four studies that tested the hypothesis that alcohol decreases the likelihood of condom use during casual sex. The survey results provide strong evidence that alcohol use is associated with a decrease in condom use (MacDonald, 1996).

According to Elliott and Brantley (1997), 76% of college students have had sex with a partner who was drunk or high, and many of these students do not engage in safe sex. Media has impacted today's college students' sexual attitudes and behaviors more than any previous generation (Fields, 2002). "Sexual expression has been a significant theme in youth culture for generations. Today, however, sexually explicit content is the cornerstone of youth-oriented music, their approach to style and fashion, radio, television and film, the music video culture, and cyberspace" (Fields, 2002, p. 18). The

creation of the Internet has been particularly influential; "Sex is reported to be the most frequently searched topic on the Internet and the pursuit of sexual interests on the Internet or "cybersex" is a remarkably common activity for users" (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000, p. 6). People believe the Internet provides them with a cloak of anonymity, making it safe to engage in these types of behaviors, without "getting caught." They are also able to search topics of interest without embarrassment. With high-speed internet connections in most residence halls, students are able to access sexually explicit material as well as participate in cybersex from the privacy of their own room.

Sex Education in Higher Education

The extent to which colleges and universities should be offering sex education is a debate that has existed for years. The discussion used to be about whether to teach abstinence or contraception. Although these topics continues today, the debate around sex education has also recently included whether controversial topics such as abortion, masturbation, sexual orientation, and sexual response and dysfunctions should be covered (Feigenbaum & Weinstein, 1995). The sex education topics becoming most prevalent in higher education include: (a) increasing the breadth of students' information about sexuality; (b) affecting their attitudes so that the likelihood of participation in safer sexual behaviors increases, especially in view of HIV and AIDS; (c) teaching students to accept their own sexual orientation and increasing their tolerance and understanding of a variety of sexual orientations; and (d) promoting an understanding of, and appreciation for, gender differences and similarities (Feigenbaum & Weinstein, 1995).

Most colleges and universities realize that some sort of sex education must be present. Contrary to the "don't do it, and if you do, don't get caught" days of old, when the bulk of sexual health resources on campus focused on pregnancy prevention or 'family planning', today's postsecondary institutions offer an array of student support services focusing on sexual health and sexual responsibility. (Fields, 2000, p. 18)

Typical educational efforts range from condom distribution and information on birth control to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and workshops on appropriate relationship behavior and protection against sexual assault. Experts in the field consider these types of services an essential part of ensuring the overall well-being of the campus community (Fields, 2002).

Current college students have been in sex education classes for years and are perhaps the most well-educated generation thus far. When it comes to sex, many college students believe they have heard it all. Most students have been inundated with sex education throughout junior high and high school (Elliott & Brantley, 1997). How can colleges and universities continue to educate students and provide support services for these students? Student affairs professionals and sex educators across the country are developing new and innovative ways to continue to teach sex education to the students who believe that they know it all.

Innovative Programs for Teaching Sex Education

An innovative sex education program at Coppin State involves covering sexual issues in the college's first year seminar course, which is a required course for graduation (Fields, 2002). Coppin State has integrated this into a required class, rather than an elective course on sexuality because administrators at the university believe that, "reaching students early with information about appropriate sexual behavior and maintaining their sexual health is key" (Fields, 2002, p. 18).

Other campuses are throwing away the textbook and lecture method of teaching sex education and utilizing a multimedia approach to sex education. Television and radio programs such as *Loveline* and *Dr. Laura* have generated interest in the use of popular media as an outlet for dealing with personal problems, including sexual problems and relationships. College radio, can also be used to inform listeners about topics such as relationship issues, AIDS, women's issues, crises, condom use, and other relevant student issues such as self-esteem, gender roles, and anger (Zwibelman & Rayfield, 1982). Outcome research has shown that such programs can have positive effects in multiple areas, including increasing condom use (Middlestadt, Fishbein, Albarracin, Francis, Eustace, Helquist, & Schneider, 1995) and increasing awareness of how to respond to critical incidents (White & Rubenstein, 1984). Kansas State University has taken to the air waves to broadcast sex education on the campus radio station. Their weekly show, *Lafeline*, provides sexual education information to both university students and the surrounding community (Van Haveren, Blank, & Bentley, 2001). Many college campuses are utilizing the multimedia approach through the use of the Internet. Colleges and universities have begun providing information on safe sex and

STDs on their health center or wellness web pages. Princeton University operates a website on emergency contraception called "not-2-late.com" (<http://ec.princeton.edu/>). This allows students to access accurate, up-to-date information under the anonymity of the World Wide Web. Educators may soon provide on-line quizzes, similar to those in place with alcohol education, which allow a student to see if their activities put them 'at risk.' These types of quizzes are currently used to allow students to engage in self-assessment and to learn how to have safer sex.

Another innovative approach to sex education involves cultural competency among health educators. Cultural competency involves diversifying the health care and sex education staff, as well as sensitizing them to various cultural issues related to student health. In addition, cultural competency includes encouraging peer involvement from diverse students to diverse students. Traditional sex education does not always include the unique perspectives of students of color, male students, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered individuals. By using cultural competency sex education the university is able to improve its quality of outreach and ongoing communication with these underserved populations (Fields, 2002).

One of the more radical suggestions from sex experts is to teach the "actual how-to of sex" (Elliott & Brantley, 1997, p. x). Psychologist and sex therapist Bernie Zillbergeld argued that educators who are demonstrating how to put on a condom, but not explaining what to do after the condom is on, are creating a great deal of unnecessary human suffering. "Being misinformed and unskillful in sex leads to horrible and widespread problems: in personalities, in relationships, and of course, in sex itself" (Elliott & Brantley, 1997, p. x). *Sex on Campus* (Elliott & Brantley, 1997) suggests humans should be educated on how to masturbate, perform oral sex, and act out other behaviors and understand what they should do if problems arise in these areas, in addition to knowing how to protect oneself and one's partner from the risks of sex.

Conclusion

The sexual attitudes and behaviors of college students have changed throughout the recent history, as has sex education. What has been created is a generation of college students who are more knowledgeable about sexual positions and protection than previous generations of students. This has resulted in a generation who engages in

sexual experimentation earlier than ever before, dangerously mixes alcohol and sex, and can access sex or sex information 24 hours a day with just the click of a mouse. Consequently, sex educators are forced to find new ways to reach this population of students. Inundating students with information during their required classes, utilizing multimedia approaches, and increasing cultural competency among health educators are all innovative ways that educators are successfully bringing sex education to the college campus. However, the dangerous sexual behaviors that college students engage in are not likely to go away over night; educators must continue to be diligent and creative in their efforts to educate young adults.

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