



The Rise of Hookup Sexual Culture on American College Campuses

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Cultures – sets of widely-endorsed ideas reflected in rules for interaction and in the organization of our institutions – are powerful social forces that shape individuals' lives. In colleges, "hookup culture" refers to the idea that casual sexual encounters are the best or only way to engage sexually; and the concept also refers to rules of social interaction that facilitate casual sexual encounters and organizational arrangements that support these encounters.

Today, almost all of America's residential college campuses are characterized by a hookup culture – large and small, private and public, secular and religious, and left- and right-leaning campuses. Students must contend with this culture even if they are not especially sexually active. In fact, many students are not very active. The average graduating senior reports hooking up just eight times in four years; and a third do not hook up even a single time. Individual students can and do opt out of casual hookup sexual encounters, but few can escape dealing with that culture.

The Origins of Campus Hookup Culture

Hookup culture is simply the newest stage in the evolution of sexual norms and behavior in America. Its roots lie in the early city life of the 1920s, the first time in U.S. history that young people routinely socialized in mixed-sex groups beyond the supervision of chaperones. This created intense media interest in "youth culture," as college attendance became accessible to large swaths of the American population. After a couple hundred years of conflict with higher education administrators, fraternity men starting setting the social tone. Their way of experiencing college life – irreverent, raucous, and fun-oriented – was suddenly the way to experience college. Attending college was linked to the idea of being young and carefree.

The Great Depression and World War II put the brakes on such revelry. Young women initiated "going steady" – monogamous, long-term dating – as a response to the loss of young men to war. Yet going steady, a kind of "premature monogamy," was both new and short-lived as an ideal for young people. By the 1960s, young people wanted to remain unattached; and meanwhile gay men in urban enclaves were experimenting with a culture revolving around "hookups." The dangers of AIDs infection slowed down the process by which casual sexual encounters spread into the mainstream for young people, but this process proceeded nonetheless.

In 1978, the popularity of the movie *Animal House* ratcheted up expectations for college fun. Beer and liquor companies took advantage of the moment, spending millions in the 1980s to convince students that drinking was a mainstay of college life. Starting in 1984, when the U.S. government financially pressured the states to raise the legal drinking age from 18 to 21, control over campus parties was thrown increasingly into the hands of men who occupied large, private fraternity residences in which they could flagrantly break liquor laws.

Fraternities again came to dominate the campus social scene. Until today, this remains true on many campuses, but many other factors also reinforce hookup sexual norms on college campuses – including media portrayals of college life, rising individualism, and a halfway transition toward women’s equality. Social and sexual norms originally embodied in fraternities now reign supreme on college campuses.

The Destructive Sense that Hookup Sex is the Only Option

After hearing about hookup culture, many older Americans wonder whether today’s students actually enjoy it. The answer appears to be both yes and no, as I learned from years of fieldwork. About a quarter of students thrive in this culture, at least at first. They enjoy hooking up and adapt well to hookup culture’s rules calling for fun and casual, short-term encounters. At the same time, about a third of students opt out altogether; they find hookup culture unappealing and would rather not have sex at all than have it the way this culture mandates. The remaining students are ambivalent, dabbling in hookups with mixed results. Overall, about one in three students say that their intimate relationships have been “traumatic” or “very difficult to handle.” Many of them experience a persistent malaise, a deep, indefinable disappointment. And one in ten says that they have been sexually coerced or assaulted in the past year.

Notably, my research suggests that hookup culture is a problem not because it promotes casual sex, but because it makes a destructive form of casual sexual engagement feel compulsory. Students who don’t hook up can end up being socially isolated, while students who do engage in this way are forced to operate by a dysfunctional set of rules. Hookup culture encourages a punishing emotional landscape, where caring for others or even simple courtesy seem inappropriate, while carelessness and even cruelty are allowed. At its worst, it encourages young men and women to engage in sexual competitiveness and status-seeking while meeting impossible standards of attractiveness. It privileges immediate pleasure-seeking and heightens risks that students will become either perpetrators or victims of sexual crimes.

Changing Power Structures and Destructive Sexual Norms

Understanding that the forces shaping sexual relationships on campuses are cultural – that problems lie not so much in particular encounters as in hookup culture overall – is the first step toward clarifying what needs to change. Because culture is a type of shared consciousness, many people need to work together to make changes happen. And they can. Especially because of the strong ties in student bodies, campuses can transform themselves faster than one might suspect.

Research shows that today’s young people are more open, permissive, earnest, hopeful for the future, and welcoming of diversity than any other generation in memory. They are well-positioned to usher in the next new sexual culture. But colleges as institutions must change, too. Institutions of higher education need to put substantial resources and time into shifting cultural norms in two ways: promoting casual sexual encounters that involve an ethic of care, and diversifying the kind of sexual encounters that are seen as possible and good. Colleges also need to change the institutional arrangements that give too much power to subsets of students who are most enthusiastic about hookup culture and who benefit from it at the expense of their peers. Doing this may mean disbanding fraternities and sororities as they have existed, because as long as these organizations and their ethics remain power bastions on U.S. campuses, hookup culture will persist.

Read more in Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (W.W. Norton, 2017).

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