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TALKING BACK

Is a 'hookup' the first step on the pathway to romance?

Response to Q & A with Donna Freitas,
author of *Sex and the Soul*.

By Kathleen A. Bogle

In *Sex and the Soul*, Donna Freitas makes a very important contribution to the ongoing national conversation on the college hookup culture by putting a much needed focus on how religion and spirituality intersect with sexual behavior. After reading and reflecting on her responses to questions posed by the editors at *Conversations*, I found many areas where our research findings and perspectives are similar. However, in an effort to add a different perspective to the important question of how Catholic institutions of higher education

should be addressing the hookup culture, I will highlight some of our differences.

Freitas and I agree on the basic definition of hooking up and that college students at Catholic universities, like secular institutions, have largely abandoned traditional dating in favor of hooking up. However, we disagree on how to characterize the hookup culture as a whole. Freitas's portrait of the hookup culture reflects the extreme end of a more varied continuum of behavior.

I believe it is important to recognize that although hooking up dominates campus culture, many students do not participate

at all or do so minimally. Research also indicates that most hookup encounters do not include sexual intercourse and many use the term hooking up to refer to "just kissing."

Furthermore, hooking up is not only a system designed to find sexual partners, but is a pathway to romantic relationships as well. Although Freitas believes hooking up is not a good way to find a romantic partner, many students (especially women) are utilizing hooking up to do just that. Although forming a long-term relationship is not the most likely outcome of any given hook up encounter (incidentally, it is not

Talking Back

the most likely outcome of a date either), many students do form relationships via this sys-

Many students come to college with the notion that college is the time to “let loose.”

tem, including serious relationships that eventually lead to marriage. Thus, today’s college students are not entirely lacking emotional attachments and meaningful relationships.

In spite of the hookup system’s dominance, Freitas found that the majority of students do not like hooking up and instead long for forming deeper connections through tradi-

tional dates. This finding begs the question: If *everyone* would rather be dating, then why are they hooking up? In my study, I found that most men were happy with hooking up. Women, especially upperclassmen, expressed more dissatisfaction, but did not necessarily want traditional dating either. I present a more detailed analysis of gender differences in my



Summer Preview students gather and talk in the Hixson-Lied Science Building on Creighton University’s campus.

book, but the point here is that men's contentment with hooking up helps explain why the system stays intact. Another factor that sustains the hook up culture is that this system fits students' idea of how college life is supposed to be. Many students I interviewed came to college with the notion that college was a time to "let loose," "have fun" and delay adult responsibilities. Hooking up, and the alcohol-centered socializing that goes along with it, is one way students carry out this philosophy.

Defining college as a "time to party" is inextricably linked to many of the socio-historical factors that led to the emergence of hooking up on campus, a point Freitas suggests is not essential to examine, but I believe must be. The term and practice of hooking up has been common on campuses nationwide for decades. It is not a coincidence that hooking up emerged at the same time that there were more and more students living on campus (which made it logistically easy to hook up), and more Americans marrying later (which made utilizing college to find one's spouse less essential). There are many other relevant societal trends, but the point is that the current generation of students did not invent hooking up; for better or for worse, they inherited it. These socio-historical factors are as important to understanding the hookup culture as a discussion of contemporary values among youth. In my study, I found that those who lived through the hookup culture in college went on to embrace more tra-

ditional dating after leaving the campus environment, planned to marry, have children, etc.

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lthough I highlighted many differences between Freitas's findings and analysis and my own, there is one point where we agree wholeheartedly. That is, educational forums and courses are an essential part of how Catholic institutions should be addressing the hookup culture on their campus. In addition to examining how hooking up is linked to students' ideas on spirituality, I think social science data can actually be a useful tool in educational forums with the "cura personalis" mission. Consider these facts on hooking up:

On many campuses nationwide, approximately 1 in 4 students do not hook up at all.

The virginity rate is much

higher than college students believe (at least 1 in 4 college students are virgins). One national study found a virginity rate of 39 percent among college women.

The average number of hookup partners a "typical" student has is far less than college students believe. One major study found the median number of total hookup partners *by senior year* was 5.

The majority of hookup encounters do not include sexual intercourse.

In order to address the hookup culture on college campuses, we need to begin by clearing up misperceptions. If we fail to do this, many students will continue to make decisions based on exaggerated, hypersexualized images of youth, which are so often portrayed in popular culture and the media, as well as by some scholars.

I do not believe we can eliminate the hookup culture, and a return to traditional dating is unlikely. However, we can give students the opportunity to reflect and critically analyze this culture they have inherited. Ultimately, this will help students make better choices on their journey to become their best selves which, after all, is a crucial piece of the Catholic educational mission.

Kathleen Bogle is an alumna of Saint Joseph's University, where she also taught for several years. She currently teaches at La Salle University. Her book, Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus, presents a sociological analysis of the hookup culture on college campuses based on interviews with students and alumni from two universities, one public, one Catholic.