

Summary

Most residential campuses today host hookup cultures that cause harm to student well-being. To enhance the student experience and protect them from harm, colleges and universities need to empower them to build healthier sexual cultures. Campuses can do so by giving students practical and theoretical knowledge, empowering marginalized populations on campus, and funding a large-scale, student-led campaign to shift the campus sexual culture.

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Empowering Students to Build Healthier Campus Sexual Cultures

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Most U.S. residential colleges today host "hookup cultures," environments that facilitate presumed one-time sexual encounters with no acknowledged romantic intent. Hooking up becomes cultural when (1) casual sexual encounters are believed to be the best way to engage sexually; (2) students share scripts for how to execute hookups; and (3) hooking up occurs regularly at known times and places. Students choose whether to hook up, but they do not choose whether to live in a hookup culture.

Most students are interested in hooking up, yet hookup culture is also a source of trauma. It demands a level of emotional indifference that many students find difficult to perform and hurtful to receive. It exacerbates unequal outcomes related to gender inequality and serves as a platform for other forms of discrimination. It facilitates sexual harassment and violence.

Overprivileged students—ones who are white, male, ostensibly heterosexual, and from financially secure backgrounds—hook up, on average, more frequently than other students. Athletes and fraternity and sorority members are among the most active. High status men, especially those in historically white fraternities, disproportionately control the spaces in which parties occur, giving them outsized power over their peers' sexual lives.

The majority of students find hookup culture to be unfulfilling. Many would like their hookups to involve greater interpersonal accountability. They would like a lower risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence. Women hooking up with men would like to experience equal pleasure. Those harmed by prejudice would like to be free from discrimination. Most would also like more opportunities to seek love overtly. Many would like to form friends-with-benefits arrangements. Some would like to explore polyamory.

Students want healthier campus sexual cultures. The recommendations below are aimed at empowering students to intervene on their own behalf.

Policy Implications

Give students knowledge.

Hookup culture produces pluralistic ignorance. Students underestimate their peers' interest in romance and overestimate the frequency of hookups. Giving students information may embolden them to be open about their own desires, likely undermining the strength of hookup culture in favor of alternatives.

Widely disseminate data from self-surveys or the Online College Social Life Survey in the form of fact sheets, infographics, table tripods, etc. Information should be provided *before* students arrive on campus and delivery should be ongoing. Outreach should be to the general community, but also strategically crafted for and delivered to vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Curricular efforts should be made to expose students to sexuality theory. Institutions should assess whether they employ sufficient sexuality scholars; incentivize sexuality courses; and assign sexuality-related books for all-campus reads. A high-enrollment course taught every semester could also shift the culture by informing and energizing a critical mass.

Further Reading

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End campus support for unequal power dynamics among students.

On most campuses, the most enthusiastic supporters of hookup culture have structural control over their peers' sexual lives. Level the playing field. De-center Greek life and athletics. Require all single-sex organizations to gender integrate. Permanently shutter organizations that are known dangers.

Do not over-focus on partnering with fraternities and other organizations that primarily serve privileged students. Compared to their peers, these students are more likely to endorse rape myths, hostile sexism, double standards, and a competitive approach to sex. These students are among the most resistant to change and institutions should not spend the lion's share of effort on this minority of students.

Instead, work to lift up other students. Associations for students of color, queer alliances, feminist groups, and multicultural fraternities and sororities could all be given more resources with which to influence the sexual culture. Give these organizations equal footing with historically White Greek and similar organizations. Shower them with attention and money.

Police underage drinking equitably. If men who live in large off-campus houses are given implicit permission to routinely host underage drinking, be equally flexible with the remainder of the student body. Aggressively policing residence halls for alcohol consumption, for example, presses students to attend off-campus parties. This structurally subordinates them to privileged students and exposes them to a higher risk of sexual violence.

Meaningfully engage students in a campus-wide initiative.

Commit to a multi-year, well-funded, and many-pronged re-set campaign. Emphasize pleasure and empowerment rather than danger and punishment. Let students lead and reward them with work-study, class credit, and honors. Give them funds and hire staff to help them plan and implement their ideas.

Be a model of a compassionate, egalitarian, and supportive community. Do you pay women less money than men for the same job? Are people of color disproportionately in low-wage positions? Are STEM fields valued more than the humanities? Does the college affirm self-centered values, worship hierarchies, and promote instrumentalism? Change the institution such that it can serve as a role model for its most impressionable community members.

Policy recommendations

- Provide students with factual information about the aggregate attitudes and behaviors of their peers.
- Design curricula that give students intellectual tools to critique the culture, envision alternatives, and advocate for themselves.
- Reduce the power accorded to overprivileged students and divert status and resources to underprivileged ones.
- Position students as leaders in a large-scale campaign to change the campus sexual culture.
- Build a compassionate, egalitarian, and supportive campus community, then ask students to do the same.