

## The Date's not Dead after all: New Findings on Hooking Up, Dating and Romantic Relationships in College

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### **Abstract:**

For more than 100 years, Valentine's Day has been a time for romantic candlelit dinner dates. But today, many observers worry, romance and courtship are falling out of favor. According to the *New York Times*, "traditional dating in college has mostly gone the way of the landline, replaced by 'hooking up.'" With women outnumbering men on most college campuses, we are told, women can't attain the long-term relationships they *really* want, because there aren't enough men to go around. Men, "as the minority, hold more power in the sexual marketplace," and they use it to promote a culture of casual sex on campus. Instead of going out on dates, young adults are supposedly meeting up at their homes to "Netflix and chill" or hooking up at big parties, then moving on to the next in a long series of casual sex partners. This is said to harm their chance of entering long-term romantic partnerships.

**Keywords:** romantic relationships | college students | hookups

### **Article:**

For more than 100 years, Valentine's Day has been a time for romantic candlelit dinner dates. But today, many observers worry, romance and courtship are falling out of favor. According to the *New York Times*, "traditional dating in college has mostly gone the way of the landline, replaced by 'hooking up.'" With women outnumbering men on most college campuses, we are told, women can't attain the long-term relationships they *really* want, because there aren't enough men to go around. Men, "as the minority, hold more power in the sexual marketplace," and they use it to promote a culture of casual sex on campus. Instead of going out on dates, young adults are supposedly meeting up at their homes to "Netflix and chill" or hooking up at big parties, then moving on to the next in a long series of casual sex partners. This is said to harm their chance of entering long-term romantic partnerships.

How accurate is this picture? We recently analyzed a survey of over 24,000 college students, collected at 22 colleges and universities around the United States between 2005 and 2011, and found that reports of the death of dating are greatly exaggerated. College students have essentially equal rates of hooking up and dating. Since beginning college, approximately 62

percent reported having hooked up, while 61 percent said they had gone out on a date. Only 8 percent of all students had hooked up without ever going on a date or being in a long-term relationship. More than 3 times as many students – 26.5 percent — had never hooked up at all, but instead had dated and/or formed a long-term relationship. So while it is clear that hookups are widespread, they have certainly not replaced the traditional date.

Men's rate of hooking up was 3.5 percentage points higher than women's – a difference that is statistically significant but very small. However this was not necessarily because men preferred more casual relationships. In fact, 71 percent of the men, compared to just 67 percent of the women, said they wished they had more opportunities to find a long-term romantic relationship. And almost two-thirds of the men expressed the desire for more chances to date, compared to less than half who reported wishing they had more chances to hookup.

The idea that men are leveraging their scarce presence on campus to avoid long-term relationships and force women to settle for unsatisfactory hookups is also called into question by a number of other findings in the survey. Women were not substantially more likely than men to regret their last hookup; only 14.5 percent of women, versus 12.5 percent of men, regretted their last hookup. Overall a similar number of men (48 percent) and women (45 percent) instead reported being glad about their most recent hookup encounter (the rest were neither glad nor regretful). Other [recent research](#) finds that even though men are more likely than women to have an orgasm during hookup sex, men and women are almost equally likely to report enjoying their most recent hookup. Our research also revealed that on campuses with a higher proportion of women, women were not more likely to hookup with men or less likely to form long-term relationships with them. They were instead more likely to have dated other women.

While hookups certainly do not carry the expectation of a lasting commitment, many do in fact lead to one. [A recent report](#) found that one-third of recent marriages that they studied began in a hook-up context. And despite the prevalence of hookups during their college years, female college graduates are in the long run *more like to marry* than women with less education. Since women now earn more degrees than men, this means that many marriages are between a woman and a less educated husband, but contrary to widespread concerns, [recent research](#) finds this is no longer a risk factor for divorce.

Our survey did find some problematic behaviors associated with many college hookups. A full half of all men and 46.5 percent of women reported engaging in *binge* drinking (defined as 4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more for men) during or right before the hookup. Students who were binge drinking (male as well as female) faced a higher risk of sexual assault. And even when sex was consensual, each additional drink during or right before a hookup was associated with lower sexual enjoyment from the hookup for both men and women. Other [recent research](#) confirms that women in particular are more likely to feel discontented with their hookups when they drink beforehand. In fact, 31 percent of women and 28 percent of men report they would not have hooked up with the partner at all had they not been drinking.

Most students who described themselves as having 'hooked up' either didn't have sex during their last hookup or used a condom when they did. Overall, 42 percent of hookups included vaginal or anal sex. Of these, only 13.3 percent included *unprotected* vaginal or anal sex. In other

words a majority of hookups did not end with sex, and more than two-thirds of students who did have sex during hookups used a condom. Students who had sex on dates also used condoms two-thirds of the time, but since only 22 percent of dates included sex, that meant that only 7 percent of all dates included unprotected sex. So the chance of having unprotected sex was almost twice as high in a hookup as on a date.

Students who were intoxicated were more likely to have unprotected sex during a hookup. Binge drinking increased the likelihood that students would have unprotected sex during their hookup by around one-third, and using marijuana during a hookup (which 11 percent of students reported) was associated with nearly double the risk of unprotected sex.

Surprisingly, truly casual hookups tended to be safer than others. Women who reported knowing their partner 'very well' were almost 60 percent more likely to have unprotected sex during a hookup, despite not having an exclusive relationship with that partner, than women who only knew their partner 'somewhat.' When students had repeated hookups with the same non-exclusive partner, they were more likely to have unprotected sex in later hookups; each additional hookup with the same partner increased the risk of unprotected sex by 17 percent. These students may feel a false sense of security with that partner, leading them to take unnecessary risks. Also, women may worry that asking their partner to use a condom would be seen as mistrustful and, as a result, avoid the issue when hooking up with a friend or otherwise well-known partner.

Hookups were most common among fraternity and sorority members, who were more than twice as likely as non-members to have hooked up but were no more likely to form a long term relationship while in college, despite the fact that sorority members were about 50 percent more likely than non-members to want more opportunities to form long-term relationships in college, and *not* more likely to want hookup opportunities. Fraternity and sorority members were also both about 50 percent more likely to binge drink while hooking up compared to non-members. On the other hand, sorority members were less likely than other college women to report unprotected sex during their last hookup.

Religious service attendance was also related to whether or not students hooked up, but in distinct patterns for men and women. Women who attended religious services at least once a month were significantly less likely than women who attended services less frequently or never attended services to have ever hooked up in college, and when they did hookup they were less likely to have unprotected sex, or any sex.

For men, a different pattern emerged. Men who attended services a few times per year but less than once per month were the *most* likely to have either hooked up or dated in college – more likely than men who never attended services. And college men who attended services most frequently – at least once a month – had hookup rates similar to those who never attended. Religious service attendance also had no impact on the likelihood of a man engaging in unprotected sex during hookups. Religious standards of sexual morality seem to constrain the behavior of very religious women; men, on the other hand, may be using religious social networks to find casual sex partners, counteracting any suppressing effect religious doctrine may have on casual sex.

Three groups stood out as having significantly lower rates of unprotected sex during hookups compared to other students: men hooking up with men, women who were members of sororities, and students who met hookup partners in dormitories. What do these groups have in common? Each has been the target of accurate, non-judgmental public health and sexual education campaigns.

Spreading accurate information about risks related to binge drinking during hookups and emphasizing clear, honest communication with partners about condom use, even with trusted partners, could mitigate the many risk factors found in our research. In the absence of these risk factors, hooking up does not appear to have the bad results that are often attributed to it. Rather than panicking about the death of romance on campus, accepting hooking up as part of the normal campus scene while educating about the specific behaviors that make it risky or unpleasant can more effectively protect college youth.

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*Research discussed in this report appears in:*

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