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# Sex and the College Hookup: Gender Differences in Perceiving and Experiencing Sexual Interaction

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SEX AND THE “COLLEGE HOOKUP”:  
GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVING AND  
EXPERIENCING SEXUAL INTERACTION

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\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
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UNION COLLEGE  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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While much literature exists on college students and casual sex, few studies provide an in-depth direct comparison of a male versus female perspective of a specific population. The purpose of this study was to examine the sexual culture and “hookup” scene among students at a small liberal arts college in the northeast United States and to distinguish the differences between men and women in perceiving and experiencing sexual interaction. An open-ended questionnaire was created using the online survey instrument, Google Forms. The survey was distributed to 500 random student e-mail addresses. While some responses were synonymous with previous studies and there were some differences, both men and women appear to be similarly accepting of sexual interaction, regardless of gender. Contrary to their own perceptions about the opposite sex, participants did not perceive or experience the act of hooking up all that differently.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the sexual culture and “hookup” scene among students at a small liberal arts college in the northeast United States. Casual sex and “promiscuous” sexual behavior has become commonplace to students in colleges and universities across the country. Hooking up has become the norm and seems to be more prevalent than the dating scene on most campuses. The intent of this study is to explore the taboo world of college hookups, the kinds of interactions students have with one another, and exactly how men and women perceive and experience sexual interaction differently.

In order to directly compare men and women, an anonymous online survey was sent to 500 random student email addresses. The students were asked to define a hookup and more than a hookup. They were asked if they distinguished between their numbers of sexual partners and their numbers of hookup partners and what those numbers were. They were asked to explain the atmosphere of hookups and the sexual culture of the college. They compared hookup partners and relationship partners. They were asked about peer influence. They were asked to estimate the average amount of sexual partners of their peers, to explain the ways in which they thought the opposite sex viewed hooking up differently, and if there was a “threshold of promiscuity,” or in other words, what number of sexual partners was “too many.” The survey can be viewed in greater detail in the attached appendix.

While differences exist between the genders, men and women are quite similar in the ways in which they experience and perceive hooking up. Both groups are similarly accepting of sexual interaction, regardless of gender. Contrary to their own perceptions about the opposite sex, participants do not perceive or experience the act of hooking up all that differently.

## CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### I. What is a “hookup”?

While the term is quite ambiguous and can mean many things to various people, students generally refer to a “hookup” as some form of sexual encounter between two individuals ranging from kissing to intercourse (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). Often times the individuals do not even know one another. Hookups occur outside of an exclusive relationship with no expectation of further commitment (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Because hookups can continue to occur between two people over a period of weeks or months—still with an absence of future expectations—“to hookup” can also be used as a verb (Kimmel 2008).

#### *i. Ambiguity in Definition*

Of the body of research surrounding college hookups, most studies have found a commonality of confusion amongst students about what exactly a hookup entails. While the hookup scene dominates their campuses, students across the nation struggle to pinpoint and describe to interviewers exactly what a hookup means; All agree it involves something sexual but there seems to be much disagreement when it comes to whether a hookup implies sexual intercourse (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Interestingly enough, Glenn and Marquardt (2001) and Kimmel (2008) claim a “deliberate vagueness,” or the idea that the ambiguity of the hookup is the characteristic that makes it popular among college students. Since other students must infer what happened when an individual claims they “hooked up,” Kimmel argues this ambiguity enhances the reputation of men and protects the reputation of women; Men hope their peers assume they had sex while women hope their peers believe the opposite.

## ***ii. Prevalence***

Today, sex and sexuality among young people is quite prevalent. Over ninety percent of males and females are sexually active by the time they turn twenty years old (Kimmel 2008). Among college students, many studies have shown extremely elevated rates of hookup occurrences. At a high it is estimated that eighty-seven percent of college students have had at least one hookup experience (Kahn et al. 2000; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Paul and Hayes 2002; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000; Lovejoy 2012). A study of 555 college students found 120 participants had never experienced a hookup, 266 had experienced a hookup not including sex, and 169 had experienced a hookup including sex (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2012) found that sixty-nine percent of senior women had reported at least one hookup experience with a median number of three hookup partners. Examining senior men and women, twenty-four percent had never participated in a hookup. On average, the seniors had 6.9 hookup experiences while the median number of hookups was five and as many as twenty-eight percent of senior men and women hooked up ten times or more (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007).

## ***iii. A Range of Sexual Behaviors***

The sexual behavior occurring during hookups can range from kissing to sexual intercourse. A number of college hookup studies have explored the prevalence of specific sexual behaviors. In a study exploring women's orgasm and sexual enjoyment in college hookups, it was discovered that of the women who participated in a hookup, thirty-four percent involved kissing and non-genital touching, sixteen percent involved manual stimulation by one partner of the other partner's genitals, eleven percent involved oral sex, and thirty-nine percent included sexual intercourse (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). Another study of 507 male and

female college students found that eighty-one percent had participated in some form of sexual behavior during a hookup (Reiber and Garcia 2010). Of that eighty-one percent, fifty-eight percent of both women and men had participated in “sexual touching above the waist.” Fifty-three percent of women and fifty-four percent of men had participated in “sexual touching below the waist.” Forty percent of women and thirty-one percent of men had performed oral sex. Thirty-four percent of women and thirty-six percent of men had received oral sex. Finally, thirty-two percent of women and thirty-five percent of men had engaged in sexual intercourse during a hookup (Reiber and Garcia 2010).

#### *iv. Setting*

There is a reason hookups hold a dominant place in college culture. Sociologist Kathleen Bogle (2008) deemed college “a sexual arena” and this description could not be more accurate. College environments are known for their sexual promiscuity and permissiveness (Chng and Moore, 1994; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). Young adults are beginning a new exploratory stage in their lives, away from their parents, surrounded by drugs and alcohol, and in close proximity to the opposite sex with little to no supervision. Needless to say, sexual interaction amongst college students—particularly the modern phenomenon of “hooking up”—increases.

On college campuses, hookups can occur any number of places. Numerous studies have discovered the setting in which the hookup took place depended upon the level of sexual interaction partners planned on participating in (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Bogle 2008). For example, a hookup that only involved kissing or “making out” was acceptable in public places such as on the dance floor, in a bar, at a Greek party, or other party-like setting (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Bogle 2008). One study found as many as forty-four percent of respondents had hooked up at Greek parties or events (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000).

There is also a large body of literature focusing on sexual assault that finds location influences hookup decisions. Women are more likely to report hooking up and being coerced into sex at off campus housing or fraternity houses, as opposed to on campus events or housing. This is due not only to a “‘generic culture surrounding and promoting rape’ but also by characteristics of the ‘specific settings’ in which men and women interact” (Boswell and Spade 1996:133; Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeny 2006:485).

More often hookups take place in private settings such as the students’ residences. Dormitories and occasionally apartments are frequent settings of hookups, although hookups may not necessarily take place within the students’ rooms (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Many factors can influence which partners’ residence the hookup will occur in. Sometimes the decision is as simple as which residence is closer to where the participants are, who has a more private setting, and which is more safe and comfortable to both parties. There are, however, extenuating circumstances that can also influence the decision. Bogle (2008) explores whether students had preferences for staying overnight because of the “awkwardness” that could occur the following morning. Students often left the night of the hookup to avoid waking up with their partner the next morning. Students also discussed wanting to avoid walking home the following morning in the same clothes they wore the night before, otherwise known as the “walk of shame” (Bogle 2008). Bogle found that women were much more concerned with the walk of shame than men, most likely due to the fact that a walk of shame is embarrassingly hindering to a woman’s reputation, whereas men are applauded for their sexual escapades and may take pride in the act. While women dreaded the walk home more than men, they may participate more: England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2007) found that hookups were almost twice as likely to occur in the male’s room than the female’s.

#### *v. Why Do Students Participate?*

Students participate in hookups for a number of reasons. To begin with, the culture of college campuses encourages and even celebrates hooking up. Everyone participates, everyone talks about it, and it has become the “alpha and omega of young adult romance” (Kimmel 2008:191). Many students agree that relationships can be time consuming and hooking up is a way to meet their sexual needs while focusing on their studies, friends, and other commitments (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Kimmel 2008). This also allows students to avoid the emotional drain and potential hurt and rejection that legitimate relationships could bring (Glenn and Marquardt 2001).

In general, college men are part of this bandwagon. According to Kimmel (2008), many men used to get into relationships so that they could get consistent sex. Now that they can get sex without being in a relationship, men get exactly what they want while avoiding “messy things like emotions” (202). Males are now motivated to participate in hookups to increase their sexual experiences, improve their sexual performances, or gain popularity amongst their peers (Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006).

Women, on the other hand, participate for completely different reasons. Some women prefer hookups to commitment in order to avoid the heartbreak of a relationship ending (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Some enjoy the short-term benefits of a purely sexual encounter (Lovejoy 2012). Others are focused on their studies and future careers and do not have the time to commit to a relationship (Kimmel 2008). Still others do because they feel it is their only option. One study found that females participated in casual sex to satisfy their partner and to further a potential relationship (Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006). Hookups have become the gateway into relationships. Even if they want more, claims Kimmel (2008), women take what they can get.

## **II. A History of Relationships and the Emergence of Hookup Culture**

### ***i. The Early to Mid-Twentieth Century***

Bogle (2008) has referred to the early twentieth century as “the calling era” (13). A man would “call” on a woman of interest in her home in order to spend time with her and her family. A respectable man would not only impress the woman but also her family, and more specifically, her mother (Bogle 2008). The women of the household had the power and control over the courting scene. This practice, however, only appeared among the upper classes. The term “date” can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when lower class youths began going places together in order to get to know one another better (Bogle 2008). Eventually, in the 1920s, this practice emerged among upper-class youths who wanted privacy away from their parents’ homes (Bogle 2008). This transition from calling to dating transferred control from women to men and influence from family to peers (Bogle 2008). The privacy of dates compared to calling also led to an increase in sexual intimacy among young people (Bogle 2008).

Michigan Sociologist Willard Waller coined the idea of a “rating-dating-mating” campus romance practice in the 1930s. This was possible because women in this decade, and the previous decade, had emerged dramatically into the public sphere. More women than ever before were attending colleges and universities and entering the work force (Bogle 2008). Waller argued that college men and women would judge prospective suitors and rank each other. Each would only settle for the best which, according to Waller, led to men exploiting women for sexual favors and women exploiting men for financial reasons (Kimmel 2008; Bogle 2008).

World War II and the scarcity of men in the aftermath led to an increased focus on exclusive relationships and settling down, a significant change from the competitive and exploitive nature of the rating and dating 1930s (Bogle 2008). Couples began wanting to “go steady.” Young men and women married earlier and the number of children born to each family

increased exponentially in what became known as the “Baby Boom” (Bogle 2008). Family and domestic life took hold of American society.

***ii. The Mid-Twentieth Century to the Twenty-First Century***

Scholars have suggested that formal dating was replaced by hookup culture on college campuses during the 1960s (Bogle 2008). College students, caught up in the values of social movements of expression and personal choice, rebelled against the in loco parentis system (Bogle 2008). Students fought for sexual privacy and freedom and succeeded in transferring the responsibility of students’ sexual behavior from university administrations to the students themselves (Bogle 2008).

Advancements in and the increased availability of the birth control pill allowed women to separate sexual experience from reproduction (Albanesi 2010). The legalization of abortion in 1973 also aided the sexual revolution because both practices allowed women to be sexually active without fear of unwanted pregnancy and motherhood (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007). Attitudes about sex and sexuality became more liberal and permissive. The gender revolution also contributed to increased sexuality; with more women entering the working world, the age of marriage increased, making sex before marriage more likely and acceptable (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007). Sexual intercourse before marriage became the norm for both men and women, with other sexual acts that had previously been reserved for marriage, such as oral sex, increasing as well (Bogle 2008).

The feminist movement of the 1970s built off of these ideals because many feminists believed sexuality was the most important arena where women could make changes toward liberation (Albanesi 2010). Women were encouraged to play a more dominant role and to assert their authority in claiming their right to sexual pleasure (Albanesi 2010). The women’s

movement and the sexual revolution changed the way society viewed women, leading to less conservative views and a weakening of the sexual double standard (Crawford and Popp 2003). Research in the 1970s indicates that most young people believed premarital and casual sex were acceptable for both men and women (Crawford and Popp 2003).

The goal of empowering women was not one hundred percent successful. While women were free to enjoy their sexuality more than ever before, many felt the pressure to refuse premarital sex was quickly replaced by the pressure to participate (Albanesi 2010). Sexual conservatism returned yet again in the 1980s with the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic followed by a revival of the sexual revolution in the 1990s (Albanesi 2010). Overall, researchers believe the sexual revolution, the women's movement, and the increasing postponement of marriage are the factors that, together, contributed to an increased sexual permissiveness among young adults (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Lovejoy 2012).

### **III. Characteristics of Hookups**

#### ***i. Demographic Explanations***

According to Bogle (2008), several trends are responsible for the hookup culture on college campuses. The median age at marriage has increased. Students are no longer expected to know whom they're marrying by the end of their college careers. While the median age of marriage has increased, men and women usually engage in sexual intercourse by the age of seventeen (Bogle 2008). This contradiction leads to sexually active men and women, in close proximity to one another, having the ability to spend their college careers free of the pressure to enter a serious relationship (Bogle 2008). There has also been a significant increase of women

attending college, with women outnumbering men on many college campuses at a ratio of ten to eight (Bogle 2008).

Put most accurately by Kimmel (2008), “Campus culture is no longer about dating to find an appropriate mate. Now, it’s more about mating to find an appropriate date!” (193). College makes this easy for students to partake. The admissions process narrows the mating pool before they even arrive; Students are surrounded by people that are similar to themselves by race, age, religion, and social class (Bogle 2008). Never before and never again will college students be in such close proximity to sexually active, unmarried members of the opposite sex (Kimmel 2008). College provides the perfect setting and scenario for hookups among students.

### *ii. Planned Spontaneity*

According to Kimmel (2008), most hookups share three common elements: the illusion of spontaneity, the use of alcohol, and no expectation of a future relationship. Spontaneity has a different meaning for men than it does for women. Spontaneity for men is not whether the hookup will occur but instead, whom it will occur with (Kimmel 2008). Women can’t be completely spontaneous when it comes to hookups, although they pretend to be. Since more is at stake for women, they have to consider whether they want to hook up, with whom, under what circumstances, how much they can drink and flirt, if they can remember their birth control, and how to avoid awkward or dangerous situations (Kimmel 2008). In spite of all this preliminary planning, women and men claim spontaneity. Why is the illusion of spontaneity so important? Kimmel (2008) claims that it allows women and men to distance themselves from their sexuality so they can remain “cool” (199). By acting uninterested, they are able to maintain their carefree appearance and no one will see their vulnerability if their plans don’t pan out the way they had hoped (Kimmel 2008). This is an essential theme of hookup culture.

### ***iii. No Strings Attached: An Absence of Expectations***

The illusion of spontaneity as a front against vulnerability may be correlated with an absence of expectations. The idea of “no strings attached” is the basis of the hookup because college men and women aren’t focused on relationships. Although most relationships begin with hookups, hookups are not meant to lead to relationships. The majority of college students have participated in a hookup with someone they did not consider romantic. One study found seventy percent of college students had participated in sexual intercourse with a non-romantic partner (Feldman, Turner, and Araujo 1999; Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006). Another study found seventy-six percent of college students had engaged in intercourse, oral sex, or anal sex with a non-romantic partner (Grello, Walsh, and Harper 2006). Thirty-seven percent of respondents’ most recent casual sexual experiences were with strangers while sixty-three percent were with a friend (Grello, Walsh, and Harper 2006). A third study found that twenty-eight percent of college students in hookups and forty-nine percent of college students in hookups involving sex never saw their hookup partner again (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). Hookups are meant to be that—just a hookup. An expectation of something further does not appear to be part of the deal.

### ***iv. Alcohol and Hookups***

A third notable feature of hookups is that they nearly always involve alcohol. Desiderato and Crawford (1995) found that the quantity of students’ alcohol consumption was directly correlated with their number of sexual partners in the eleven weeks prior (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). In another study, college students in twelve percent of hookups and college students in twenty-two percent of hookups including sex answered “Yes” to feeling “out of control” during their hookup (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). While alcohol allows students to lose their inhibitions prior to and during hookups, it also serves as their excuse afterwards

(Glenn and Marquardt 2001). For men, alcohol can be used as an excuse for many potentially awkward situations such as being rejected, premature ejaculation, or poor performance (Kimmel 2008). On the other hand, alcohol allows women to act publically in ways that would not be acceptable if they were sober. Kimmel (2008) claims that an excuse is more important for women than men because they have their reputations to protect; “Being wasted is generally accepted as an excuse,” he writes. “It’s better to be a drunk than a slut” (200).

#### **IV. Gender and Hooking Up**

##### ***i. Gender Differences in Action***

According to England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2007), hookups are gendered in three ways: men initiate more than women, men have orgasms more than women and their sexual pleasure is prioritized, and women are more at risk of getting a bad reputation. This “masculinization of sex,” according to Kimmel (2008), shows the importance of gender in hookups because an overwhelming amount of research has consistently shown males to have more casual sexual partners than females (Buss 1988; Hill 2000; Grello, Walsh, and Harper 2006:256; Kimmel 2005:3). One study by England and Bearak (2013) provides interesting insight into the gender roles of initiation.

In examining the arrangement of hookups, England and Bearak (2013) found that ten percent of women said they contacted their male partner, whereas twenty-three percent of men claimed their female partner had contacted them. Twenty-one percent of men said they contacted their female partner, while thirty-eight percent of women claimed their male partner had contacted them. In terms of initiating sexual activity, twenty-eight percent of women and thirty-two percent of men were unsure. Ten percent of women believed they initiated sexual activity while twenty-nine percent of men believed their female partner had initiated. Thirty-nine percent

of men claim to have been the initiator while sixty-two percent of women believed their male partner had initiated sexual activity (England and Bearak 2013). The study concluded that while neither sex wanted to be seen as the initiator, women were much more reluctant to admit to initiation than were men (England and Bearak 2013).

Studies have also found differences in gender and discrepancy in reports when it comes to oral sex. Eshbaugh and Gute (2008) found that non-coital hookups were not significantly related to sexual regret among college women because these women, as well as the majority of undergraduate students, do not believe oral sex is sex. They argue women may use oral sex as a compromise to participate in the college hookup scene while continuing to keep their reputations intact (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Oral sex is also gendered in how often each sex gives and receives, as well as in their reporting of this sexual activity. Nineteen percent of women and twenty-three percent of men reported the male partner as the giver and the female as the receiver in their most previous hookup encounter. More interesting though, is the discrepancy in report when it comes to men receiving oral sex: twenty-four percent of women claimed they gave their male partner oral sex in their most previous sexual encounter while thirty-seven percent of men reported receiving oral sex (England and Bearak 2013). The study concluded that receiving oral sex for men was high status and performing oral sex on men was stigmatized for women (England and Bearak 2013:16).

Finally, the act of hooking up is gendered in regard to sexual pleasure. Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2012) claim that men take their entitlement to pleasure for granted while women are reluctant to express their sexual needs. A sample of college students from another study produced the following data: fifty-seven percent of men received oral sex and did not engage in intercourse, twenty-five percent of women received oral sex and did not engage in

intercourse, seventy percent of men engaged in intercourse but did not receive oral sex, thirty-four percent of women engaged in intercourse but did not receive oral sex, eighty-five percent of men received oral sex and engaged in intercourse, and less than fifty percent of women received oral sex and engaged in intercourse (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007:581). Men experienced an orgasm significantly more than women (forty-four percent compared to nineteen percent), in agreement with the claim that male sexual pleasure is prioritized much more than female (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007).

### ***ii. Gender and Potential Partners***

Baumeister and Vohs (2004) explore the concept of “sexual economics,” where sexual interaction is viewed as a marketplace of men exchanging sex with women for other valuable resources. The following factors raised the “price” of sex with a woman: attractiveness, youth, sexy attire, and few or no prior sexual partners while the man has a high sex drive and competition exists (other men desire the woman). The following factors lowered the “price” of sex with a woman: older age, unattractiveness, a high sex drive, is of lower status than the man, and has had many prior sexual partners or a bad reputation. Other women wanting the man (competition) also decreased the “price” of sex (Baumeister and Vohs 2004). From a non-economic standpoint, Bogle (2008) found a similar pattern. Physical appearance was the single most important factor in looking at women as potential hookup partners. While appearance was also important in men, college men were also valued for other attributes such as membership in a fraternity or an athletic team, academic major, and intellectual ability (Bogle 2008).

### ***iii. The “Rules” of Hooking Up***

Hookups are extremely gendered by what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for men and women. College men have barely any restrictions when it comes to hooking up and are

actually encouraged and praised by their peers for sexual activity (Bogle 2008). Men are condemned only for lack of participation. Women, on the other hand, must walk a tight rope of undefined standards in order to protect their reputations. During one study, men repeatedly insisted women shouldn't hookup excessively or with too many partners but none could give an exact definition of what would be too many (Bogle 2008). Men also stated that the "cardinal sin" for women was to hookup with two men who were friends, especially two members of the same fraternity (Bogle 2008:107).

This undefined culture is a learned process that women experience and understand over time. Many women have learned through hooking up that men think less of them if they give up too much too quickly. They have also learned that men are more interested in relationships with women who have less sexual experience. Moffat (1989) found that college men "had casual sex with [women they defined as] 'sluts' until they were ready to settle down with a good woman" (Crawford and Popp 2003:23). Therefore, many women will alter their sexual interactions and, if they romantically like their male partner, they will be less sexual with him in order to keep him interested (Bogle 2008).

#### ***iv. The Sexual Double Standard***

For college women seeking casual sexual encounters, the sexual double standard persists today in the way society continues to view sex and in the way those who do not follow social norms are judged. What exactly is the sexual double standard? The concept concerns society condemning certain sexual behaviors for women while permitting, and even encouraging, the same behaviors for men (Baumeister and Twenge 2002). Women still stand to lose from sexuality while men gain. Men are encouraged to be sexual while women are encouraged to refrain. According to Kimmel (2008), the sexual double standard is a product of gender

inequality, which is reinforced by society in the way we assume men are more sexual than women and that it is unfeminine for women to act in sexually promiscuous ways.

Women may be judged more harshly than men for losing their virginity at an early age and for having casual sex with multiple partners, especially if men are viewing them as potential relationship partners versus potential hookup partners (Sprecher et al. 1987; Crawford and Popp 2003). On most campuses, women who hookup with many partners are called a variety of names such as “slut,” “whore,” “trash,” “skank,” “ho,” and “easy” while men who hook up with many women are known as “players,” “the man,” or even a “stud” (Glenn and Marquardt 2001:21).

The Online College Social Life Survey collected information from men and women at twenty-one four-year colleges and universities between 2005 and 2011 (England and Bearak 2013). The survey found that when it came to the sexual activities of women, nearly as many women as men enforced the sexual double standard. Sixty-one percent of women and sixty-nine percent of men said that if women hookup or have sex with many people they have less respect for them (England and Bearak 2013). The double standard was further reinforced with a drastic difference in what was permitted for men as opposed to women. Sixty-seven percent of women said they did not respect men who hooked up a lot but only thirty-seven percent of men said the same of their peers, a significant and notable difference (England and Bearak 2013).

#### ***v. The Paradox of Women***

The modern sexual double standard leaves college women in a tricky situation. They are expected to participate in the sexual culture of college campuses yet are condemned by society and their peers when they do so. The Online College Social Life Survey found that thirty-one percent of men and twenty-one percent of women said they had hooked up with a person and then respected that person less because of it, while more than double the amount of women as

men—fifty-four percent versus twenty-two percent—said they had hooked up with a person and felt that the person then respected them less (England and Bearak 2013). This feeling, along with concerns for their reputations, can lead to sexual regret among college women.

Herold and Mewhinney (1993) noted that hooking up may be directly correlated with decreases in women's self-esteem because they feel badly about violating social norms (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Paul and Hayes (2002) found that “regretful or disappointed” was the most common response when students were asked their feelings after a hookup and that women were more likely to feel this way than men (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). While Oswalt, Cameron, and Koob (2005) found that seventy-two percent of college students had regretted at least one sexual interaction, several studies have shown that men are more likely to regret inaction while women are more likely to regret action (Dickson, Paul, Herbison, & Silva 1998; Klassen, Williams, & Levitt 1989; Oswalt et al.; Roese et al. 2006; Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Eshbaugh and Gute (2008) found that engaging in sexual intercourse with a partner only once, engaging in sexual intercourse with someone known for less than twenty-four hours, engaging in sexual intercourse and oral sex at an early age, and having had many intercourse partners in the past year were the four most common and significant factors leading to regret among college women.

Feminists have conflicting views on the best steps to take to empower women. Libertarian feminists advocate for women's choice and agency in sexuality. Through this perspective, women participating in hookups could be viewed as rejecting the double standard and society's restrictions (Lovejoy 2012). In comparison, Radical feminists argue that hookups are a risky practice that place women in a vulnerable state. Women are more at risk for STDs, sexual victimization, pregnancy, and the negative judgment of men and other women (Lovejoy

2012). Lovejoy (2012) explores this paradox further. By examining women's empowerment in hookups, she found hooking up was disempowering because it "largely constrained women's sexual power and agency by reinforcing a traditional and gendered sexual script that favored men's sexual entitlements" and "it created substantial costs to women's health and well being that outweighed its largely transitory superficial benefits" (Lovejoy 2012: vii). Well stated by England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2007), advancements and equal opportunity for women have been far more successful in education and the working world than in the realm of sexuality.

## **V. Social and Peer Influence**

### ***i. Suppression of Female Sexuality***

Many scholars believe female sexuality is suppressed through cultural influence with the double standard leading the way as the largest enforcer of restraint (Baumeister and Twenge 2002). There are several different theories behind the suppression of female sexuality. Evolutionary psychologists hold that the difference between the genders in regards to casual sex lies in nature (Baumeister and Vohs 2004; England and Bearak 2013). Because men must contribute a single sperm to create a child, sex is much more casual. Females, who must carry the child for nine months and then raise it, view sex less casually (Baumeister and Vohs 2004; England and Bearak 2013). Another view argues it is nurture in the form of social pressure, rather than nature, that influences men to be extremely sexual and women to avoid being overly sexual (Kimmel 2008; England and Bearak 2013). The Male Control Theory suggests that men have suppressed female sexuality and have prevented sexual pleasure for females (Baumeister and Twenge 2002). In comparison, the Female Control Theory argues that women have suppressed female sexuality. Nancy Cott (1979) argued that sex is a bargaining tool of women, so females have restricted female sexuality in order to remain in control of their "product"

(Baumeister and Twenge 2002). Related to this argument, Oliver and Hyde (1993) discovered that females accepted the sexual double standard more than males (Baumeister and Twenge 2002).

### ***ii. Sex as Male “Bonding”***

Sociologist Michael Kimmel (2008) focuses on the male side of sexuality. Speaking with male college students, he found most did not want serious relationships—either because they’re not ready or they think it is too much work—and instead want only the sexual benefits of a relationship without anything else. He also discovered that good sex is not what they want; if they did, it would make more sense to have a girlfriend (Kimmel 2008). According to Kimmel, sex for guys is not about having sex or the women they have sex with. Sex is about proving something to other guys, bragging to buddies, and competing with one another (Kimmel 2008). Kimmel further asserts that most college guys are inexperienced sexually and they often believe their peers are having much more sex than they are (Kimmel 2008). Therefore, they hookup to keep up with others while keeping quiet what they don’t want others to know (Kimmel 2008).

### ***iii. Pluralistic Ignorance***

It is perception, not reality, that matters and this is certainly the case when it comes to college hookup culture. What actually happens sexually between students on college campuses does not matter; what students believe happens sexually between their peers does. When they think they know the behavior of others, this becomes the norm for the group and, in turn, affects individual decisions. This phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance has been well documented by several studies of college students. Lambert, Kahn, and Apple (2003) found that most students believed other students were more comfortable with sexual experiences than they were, which led them to conform to the group and participate in behaviors they weren’t comfortable with

(Reiber and Garcia 2010). Bogle (2008) asked college men to estimate the percentage of men who had sex on any given weekend. The men guessed eighty percent when the actual percentage ranges from five to ten (Kimmel 2008). In exploring the opinions of five hundred and seven college students, Reiber and Garcia (2010) found that women over-estimated men's comfort levels with sex and men did the same with women.

## **VI. Outcomes, Expectations, and Relationships**

### ***i. What comes next?***

Many students have discussed feeling awkward and confused after a hookup, not because of the sexual encounter, but because they're unsure of what comes next and how to act around their partner (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Multiple studies have explored the potential outcomes of hookups. Grello, Walsh, and Harper (2006) discovered significant differences between male and female expectations after a hookup: eighteen percent of women and three percent of men believed their most recent casual sexual encounter was "the beginning of a romance" while a third of males and sixteen percent of females believed the experience was "the beginning of a casual sexual relationship" (260). Bogle (2008) examined the most likely outcomes to follow a sexual encounter. Bogle's findings conclude "nothing" is the most likely outcome, which doesn't necessarily mean the two will not hookup again. Hookups often happen multiple times without any relationship forming (Bogle 2008). The next possible outcome would be "seeing each other," where students will hookup with the same person and attempt to hang out with that individual outside of hooking up. This type of encounter—variations include talking, hanging out, dating, etc.—is usually short lived and involves low levels of commitment (Bogle 2008). Bogle also found that men often have control in deciding whether or not to continue seeing each other and if

the relationship will evolve further. The least likely outcome of hooking up was the formation of a serious relationship (Bogle 2008).

## *ii. A War of the Sexes?*

Bogle (2008) asserts that hookups become a “War of the Sexes,” where women want relationships, men want to continue hooking up with casual sex, and the dominance of hookup culture shows that women lost the war (England and Bearak 2013). The Online College Social Life Survey determined the following about college students and relationships: ninety percent of men and women said they wanted to marry eventually, sixty-nine percent of women and seventy percent of men wished there were more opportunities for finding a relationship partner at their schools, ninety-five percent of single women and ninety-three percent of single men said they would enter an exclusive relationship if they met the right person, twenty-five percent of women and thirty-eight percent of men said they didn’t want to be in an exclusive relationships so that they could hookup with others and finally, sixty-nine percent of women and seventy-one percent of men stated a disadvantage of relationships would be the possible interference of freedom to move for a job or graduate school after graduation (England and Bearak 2013:3-7). Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) found that only twelve percent of hookups and hookups including sexual intercourse had evolved into a romantic relationship and the average duration of those relationships was four months. England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2007) discovered that seventy-one percent of students had been in a relationship lasting at least six months by the time they reached senior year; they argue that hookups have not replaced relationships but instead have replaced casual dating as the pathway into relationships.

### ***iii. Transition Over Time***

It has also been noted that students, particularly females, change their feelings about relationships over their four years of college. Men and women enter freshmen year ready to explore. They are away from home, many for the first time, without parental supervision and prepared to experience all that college has to offer (Bogle 2008). Glenn and Marquardt (2001) found that freshmen women were more likely to hookup more often, or were more open to hooking up (15). After freshmen year, men continue preferring casual sex while women begin to want something more. Most women interviewed were still willing to hookup but they hoped their hookups would evolve into relationships (Bogle 2008).

### ***iv. Women Wanting Something More***

Solely focusing on pleasure in hookups, Armstrong, England and Fogarty (2012) found that women who were interested in a relationship were a third more likely to orgasm and more than twice as likely to say they enjoyed a hookup (453). Women who were in relationships had orgasms more frequently and reported enjoying sex more than women outside of relationships so women do have purely sexual reasons for wanting more than casual sex (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). In addition to sex, Bogle (2008) argues that women seek relationships because they are interested in marrying a few years after graduation, they need relationships in order to protect their reputations, and because the hookup culture can be a negative experience that can lead to women being labeled as “sluts” (103).

Women wanting “something more” leaves them in a vulnerable and subordinate position. In earlier times it was the man’s job to pursue the woman and risk rejection (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). In modern hookup culture it is the man who holds the power to define the status of the relationship (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Women are usually the ones who initiate

“the talk” (to suggest defining the relationship) but it is the man who has the final say (Kimmel 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007). In cases where a relationship occurred, it was usually the men who had initiated conversation (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007). Women are caught in the hookup system, forced to participate in order to find a relationship but all the while unlikely to end up with the outcomes they hope for.

#### *v. Men Avoiding Relationships*

Bogle (2008) found that college men were aware that women wanted relationships and would develop strategies to communicate their lack of interest, such as avoiding girls after hookups, not calling them back, or coming up with excuses to get out of spending time with them. Kimmel asserts that sex in “Guyland” is purely for the boys—women are pawns in a game dominated by males (Kimmel 2008:192). He also argues that the hookup culture is not only allowing guys to put off adult relationships, it is actually having a negative effect. Most college men he interviewed wanted to marry and have families eventually but had no idea how to transition from drunken, sloppy college sex to mature adult relationships (Kimmel 2008). While hookup culture has negative impacts upon women in the present, it also negatively affects many unaware men and their future relationships.

### **VII. This Study**

As hookups and hookup culture are relatively modern, research of both is quite recent and there is still much to explore. Most research has focused specifically on men or specifically on women, has been collected through restricted surveys, and has been at the national level. While these factors have allowed researchers to collect vast amounts of data, I would like to focus on collecting more qualitative and personal information of both men and women and make a direct comparison between the sexes in a concentrated setting.

Previous research either has percentages of a large population of students or qualitative information gathered from one sex. While our survey is online and anonymous, the questions are in-depth and the responses are open-ended. Responses will come from males and females of the same setting. The study is limited to a small liberal arts institution but the direct comparison will be interesting and unique, as both male and female students will have experienced the same sexual culture. The data may be limited in that it is specific to this particular college but the specificity will help in examining the interactions these students have with one another, as well as how these students perceive and experience these interactions differently.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

An open-ended questionnaire was created using the online survey instrument, Google Forms. An informed consent page, approved by the Collegiate Human Subjects Board, required participant agreement before access to the online interview was granted. The informed consent form can be seen in the attached appendix. The survey was distributed to 500 random student e-mail addresses obtained from the Office of the Registrar. No financial incentives were provided for the students to participate. Participants consisted of male and female students at least eighteen years of age.

### **i. Research Questions and Analysis**

The purpose of the questions asked was to gain qualitative information from the student participants. The survey could not be too long as students could lose interest. The survey consisted of twenty-three questions divided into four sections. The first, demographic/background information, held quick and easy questions such as age, class year, sex/gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, income, and Greek affiliation in order to better understand the population.

The second section targeted the individual and personal experiences of the respondents. Students were asked to define a hookup, more than a hookup, if they had been in a relationship during their college career, if they differentiated between sexual and hookup partners, how many sexual partners they had by frequency of class year, and how many hookup partners they had by frequency of class year.

The next section aimed at gaining a better understanding of sex at this particular institution. The students were asked to define the atmosphere and initiation of hookups, desirable characteristics of a potential hookup partners versus a potential relationship partners, to describe

the “sexual culture” of their college, if they had ever been influenced by their peers, to describe their greatest concerns, likes, and dislikes of hookups, and if they had ever been in an uncomfortable hookups situation.

The final section focused on perceptions of the opposite sex in order to compare perception with reality. The students were asked if they had ever felt uncomfortable sharing their numbers of sexual partners, if they believed their numbers were too small or too large, to estimate the average number of sexual partners for males and females at the college, what was “too many” sexual partners for males and females, if they thought the opposite sex viewed hooking up differently, and what, if given the chance, did they wish they could explain to the opposite sex.

Google Forms automatically downloaded participant data into an Excel spreadsheet within Google Drive. The data was then further divided into two spreadsheets—one containing female responses and one containing male responses. Frequencies and percentages were tallied and calculated. The spreadsheets included sections of the analysis as headers. Select quotes were placed beneath the respective sections and the data was coded and analyzed from there.

## **ii. Sample Characteristics**

Of the 500 students who received the survey, 130 responded. Five of the 130 responses did not agree to the informed consent page and were therefore discontinued from taking the survey. Of the remaining 125 responses, six were eliminated as the students provided no answers to any questions except the initial informed consent. This left us with 119 responses overall and a 23.8% response rate.

Sixty-one percent of respondents were female and thirty-nine percent of respondents were male. Only two percent were Hispanic or Latino. The large majority was Caucasian

(ninety-one percent) followed by Asian (five percent), Black or African American (two percent), and Other (two percent). No respondents identified themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Only three students (two percent), one male and two females, identified their sexual orientations as non-heterosexual. In terms of class year, thirty-one percent of respondents were freshman, twenty-eight percent were sophomores, twenty-one percent were juniors, and twenty percent were seniors. The students ranged in age between eighteen and twenty-two years old with the highest percentage (twenty-seven percent) being nineteen years of age. The distributions for race, ethnicity, class year, and age can be found in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4.

**Table 1: Race/Ethnicity of Respondent**

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Hispanic/Latino	3	2
Non Hispanic/Latino	116	98
Total	119	100

**Table 2: Race/Ethnicity of Respondent**

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0
Asian	6	5
Black or African American	3	2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0
Caucasian	108	91
Other	2	2
Total	119	100

**Table 3: Class Year of Respondent**

Population	Class Year	Frequency	Percent
Male	Freshman	13	28
	Sophomore	10	22
	Junior	11	24
	Senior	12	26
	Total	46	100
Female	Freshman	24	33
	Sophomore	23	32
	Junior	14	19
	Senior	12	16
	Total	73	100
Total	Freshman	37	31
	Sophomore	33	28
	Junior	25	21
	Senior	24	20
	Total	119	100

**Table 4: Age of Respondent**

Population	Age	Frequency	Percent
Male	18	9	19
	19	10	22
	20	10	22
	21	10	22
	22	7	15
	Total	46	100
Female	18	20	28
	19	22	30
	20	16	22
	21	14	19
	22	1	1
	Total	73	100
Total	18	29	24
	19	32	27
	20	26	22
	21	24	20
	22	8	7
	Total	119	100

Students were asked to provide an estimate of their annual parental income. Seventy-six percent of students chose to provide a response. Estimates ranged between \$36,000 and \$800,000 with an average of \$172,200 and a median of \$125,000. \$100,000 was the most frequent response. Forty-three percent of respondents identified with a Greek affiliation. More specifically, thirty-eight percent of females and fifty percent of males were involved with a Greek organization.

## CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS

### I. Hookups and Relationships

#### *i. Defining a Hookup*

When asked to define a hookup, the students' answers were consistent with past literature on the subject. The term "hooking up" is known to be both vague and difficult to define as it can mean many things to many different people. The students' responses were categorized into the generic definitions shown below in table five.

**Table 5: What is a "Hookup?"**

Definition	Male Frequency	Female Frequency	Total Frequency
Spectrum from making out to having sex	23	38	61
Sex		5	5
Everything but sex	5	6	11
Making out	14	19	33
Going home with someone	1	5	6

While the definitions changed from person to person, the most common response in any form was that a spectrum of hookups exists, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse and anywhere in between. As Amy, a twenty-one year old senior stated, "Hooking up is an umbrella term,"—it covers everything. Jason, a nineteen-year-old sophomore explained, "There's actually an interesting difference in how people define the term 'hookup'. For instance, I define a hookup as having sex, going all the way. However, many of my friends will consider just making out a hookup." Put more flamboyantly by Kelly, a twenty year old junior:

A hookup is any sort of sexual rough-n-tumble between two individuals. There is a broad spectrum to 'hooking up.' Anything from a frat floor makeout sesh, to a pants-optional kissing frenzy, to full-blown intercourse... The definition must always be detailed when [my friends and I] speak to each other about a 'hookup.'

Many other students, male and female, mentioned this scenario of friends having to clarify what exactly was meant when the term "hookup" was used. "When I ask someone, 'Did you hookup?"

I mean did you even make out at all,” said Jenny, a twenty-one year old senior. “If the answer is yes, then the question, ‘Well, how far did you go?’ follows.”

Students also explained the term could change depending on the context in which it was used. Some students could guess depending on the person they were speaking to. Some, like nineteen-year old sophomore Benjamin, explained the differences existing in terminology: “The act of hooking up means kissing, so if two people met and hooked up at a party, it means that they kissed and probably more. If two people are currently hooking up (as in multiple times), they are basically friends with benefits.” Others used the setting in which the hookup took place as a way to decipher. “It depends on if it is a DFMO (dance floor make out), or if you go back with someone,” said Kathryn, a nineteen-year old sophomore. “If you go back with someone then ‘hookup’ is usually considered sex.” Tommy, a twenty-two year old junior, shared similar sentiments: “For example: ‘I hooked up with that girl on the d-floor’ would mean I made out with that girl on the dance floor OR ‘I hooked up with that chick last night’ usually means the girl came back to your room and you engaged in some sort of sexual activity.”

Other interesting and representative definitions included, “Meeting up with someone [often a stranger or acquaintance who you don’t know well] with the idea of it just being that night, no strings attached,” “A sexual fling with someone you are not dating,” and “Casual sexual relations without the need to pursue a relationship.” Finally, a small number shared the outlook of Lucy, a nineteen-year old sophomore: “[Hooking up is] an intimate, unplanned encounter of lustful nature. There’s nothing specific it has to include. It’s one of those things that you can’t really define, but you know it when you see it.” While individual answers vary, there seems to be no distinction between men and women when it comes to defining college hookups.

## *ii. What is “More Than a Hookup?”*

Males and females began to differ slightly when it came to defining “more than a hookup.” All had similar answers but, in general, males defined “more than a hookup” on one side of the spectrum or the other. It was either specifically physical or a definitive relationship. Female students’ answers were more equally distributed among physical and situational definitions. The results are shown below in table six.

**Table 6: What is “More Than a Hookup”?**

<b>Definition</b>	<b>Male Frequency</b>	<b>Female Frequency</b>	<b>Total Frequency</b>
Exclusivity/Dating/Relationship	11	16	27
Sober communication/interaction	5	13	18
Emotional attachment	3	8	11
Occurs multiple times/Consistency	4	12	16
More than a make out	8	13	21
Sex	10	9	19

More women than men focused on emotional attachment (having feelings for the other person), consistency (how often and how long the hookup continues), and sober communication (speaking, hanging out, and being together in public outside of drunken weekend interactions). “More than a hookup is when the guy actually pursues you and gets to know you other than being drunk at a frat party and wanting ass that night,” said Jillian, a nineteen-year-old sophomore. Miley, an eighteen-year-old freshman, provided an interesting perspective: “More than a hookup would be continuing to see said person frequently, and being increasingly involved in non-sexual ways on top of it. If it is a friends with benefits type situation...[it] is not really ‘more than a hookup’ because it is still strictly sexual.”

There were a number of men who focused on situational definitions but many more focused on the concrete, black and white definitions of sex, more than making out, or dating. “More than a hookup means feelings are involved and exclusivity is implied,” says James, a

nineteen-year-old sophomore. His classmate Ryan provided the opposite opinion: “In my mind, anything beyond ‘2<sup>nd</sup> base’ is more than a hookup. If I had oral sex or intercourse with a girl, I’d definitely tell my friends that we did more than ‘hookup.’” It is interesting that men and women differ slightly and that the definition of “more than a hookup” is just as vague and as difficult to define as the definition of a “hookup.”

### *iii. Relationships*

The students were asked if they had been in a relationship during their time at college and if the relationship began with a hookup. Most students who answered had either been in a relationship that began with a hookup or had not been in a relationship. The frequency distributions are shown below in table seven.

**Table 7: Relationships**

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Male Frequency</b>	<b>Female Frequency</b>	<b>Total Frequency</b>
Relationship that began with a hookup	13	21	34
Relationship that did not begin with a hookup	10	11	21
Have not been in a relationship	13	19	32

There were also some students who were unsure of their relationship statuses and how to define them. Kelly shared, “I’ve been in a ‘sex-clusive’ relationship...But then I asked for it to be more than that (exclusive boyfriend/girlfriend) and the entire relationship ceased all together (on his terms).” Kelly’s experience echoes Bogle’s findings that men usually have control when it comes to declaring the status of a relationship (Bogle 2008). Lawrence, a twenty-two year old senior, was also unsure of his relationship status: “I have not been in a ‘relationship’ per se, but I’ve hooked up with people consistently for a period of time. Not really sure if that qualifies as a relationship. And yes, in every case it began with a hookup.”

Those whose relationships began with hookups told a similar story to that of Ryan's: "The relationship began with a hookup, the chemistry was there so after repeated hookups we started dating." Those whose relationships did not begin with hookups usually knew the person, either as a good friend or close acquaintance, prior to making the relationship "official."

## **II. Sexual Partners Versus Hookup Partners**

### ***i. A Definite Distinction***

While often times the two overlap, the majority of students differentiated between their numbers of sexual partners and numbers of hookup partners. As Mary, a twenty-two year old senior put it, "YES! They are two completely different ball games." Sixty-seven of seventy-three female respondents (ninety-two percent) and forty of forty-six male respondents (eighty-seven percent) differentiated between their sexual and hookup partners, combining for 107 total respondents (ninety percent) who made a clear distinction. In general, those who did not make a distinction did so not because they felt the numbers were the same for everyone or should be the same, but because in their individual cases they had had sex with everyone they had hooked up with.

### ***ii. The Female Population***

Sixty-nine of the seventy-three (ninety-five percent) female respondents provided their number of sexual partners. While it is not an accurate representation, the average number of sexual partners for female students was 3.75. The numbers provided ranged between zero and eighteen partners with two partners as a median and one partner as the most frequently given answer. The definite distinction between sexual partners and hookup partners makes a dramatic appearance when comparing these numbers for the female population. Fifty-five of the seventy-three (seventy-five percent) female respondents provided their numbers—or estimates of their

numbers—of hookup partners. The average number of hookup partners for female students was 12.3 partners. The numbers provided ranged between zero and 100 partners with nine partners as a median and three partners as the most frequently given answer.

### ***iii. The Male Population***

Forty-four of the forty-six (ninety-six percent) male respondents provided their numbers of sexual partners. While it is not an accurate representation, the average number of sexual partners for male students was 6.3 partners. The numbers provided ranged between zero and thirty-two partners with 3.5 partners as a median and two partners as the most frequently given answer. The distinction between sexual partners and hookup partners is equally apparent in the male population. Forty of the forty-six (eighty-seven percent) male respondents provided their numbers—or estimates of their numbers—of hookup partners. The average number of hookup partners for male students was 12.8 partners. The numbers provided ranged between zero and sixty-two partners with 9.5 partners as a median and three partners as the most frequently given answer.

### ***iv. Female/Male Comparisons***

As expected, the male students' numbers of sexual partners exceeded those of the female students'. The truly fascinating discovery, however, is that the numbers of hookup partners for both genders were nearly identical. The ranges for hookup partners were both large and exceedingly larger than the ranges for sexual partners. The average number of hookup partners for females was 12.3 and the average number of hookup partners for males was 12.8, merely a 0.5 difference. The median number of hookup partners for males was 9.5 and the median number of hookup partners for females was nine, another 0.5 difference. The most frequently given answer for both genders was three hookup partners. It was expected that the number of sexual

partners would differ between men and women. While female students may be more conservative when it comes to actually having sex, the women of the college were just as dominant in the hookup scene as the men.

***v. The Upperclassman Experience***

The respondents were asked to distinguish for both sexual and hookup partners how many occurred prior to college, during their freshman year, during their sophomore year, during their junior year, and during their senior year. While it would be impossible to cross-examine frequencies because all students have not had an equal amount of time in college to participate, we can examine the upperclassmen in an attempt to understand hookups and sexual encounters over a four-year span. The frequency of sexual partners and hookup partners for junior and senior men and women can be found in tables eight and nine below.

**Table 8: Frequency of Sexual/Hookup Partners for Women by Class Year**

<b>Current Class Year</b>	<b>Year of Sexual Encounter</b>	<b>Frequency of Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Year of Hookup Encounter</b>	<b>Frequency of Hookup Partners</b>
Junior	Prior to College	11	Prior to College	44
	Freshman	26	Freshman	125
	Sophomore	16	Sophomore	23
	Junior	7	Junior	11
Senior	Prior to College	4	Prior to College	27
	Freshman	17	Freshman	53
	Sophomore	11	Sophomore	44
	Junior	14	Junior	29
	Senior	10	Senior	30

**Table 9: Frequency of Sexual/Hookup Partners for Men by Class Year**

<b>Current Class Year</b>	<b>Year of Sexual Encounter</b>	<b>Frequency of Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Year of Hookup Encounter</b>	<b>Frequency of Hookup Partners</b>
Junior	Prior to College	29	Prior to College	31
	Freshman	18	Freshman	12
	Sophomore	15	Sophomore	14
	Junior	11	Junior	10
Senior	Prior to College	30	Prior to College	31
	Freshman	32	Freshman	41
	Sophomore	24	Sophomore	41
	Junior	25	Junior	20
	Senior	36	Senior	40

It must be kept in mind while examining these numbers that this is purely speculation as there are many factors altering the data. There are differences among classes and peer groups within those classes. The juniors and seniors are only halfway through their current years; therefore, the numbers they provided are incomplete. There are also outliers pulling the data away from the norm. In spite of these factors, there are some interesting patterns that emerge.

Mary, the twenty-two year old senior quoted previously, did not provide exact numbers of hookup or sexual partners. She did, however, comment: “[I had] significantly more partners during the pre and early college years. The general trend has seemed to decrease as time has gone on.” Mary’s situation may be the case for many female upperclassmen. Of those who provided exact numbers, the junior class women had twenty-six sexual partners and 125 hookup partners their freshman year, compared to the smaller sixteen sexual partners and twenty-three hookup partners of their sophomore year. The senior class seemed to be more consistent with sexual partners; they had seventeen partners freshman year, eleven sophomore year, fourteen

junior year, and ten thus far during their senior year. However, they followed Mary's trend in terms of hooking up. The senior class had fifty-three hookup partners their freshman year and forty-four partners their sophomore year, both higher than the twenty-nine and thirty thus far of their junior and senior years, respectively.

A glimpse at the male senior class reveals a different phenomenon. Men may be more consistent than women in terms of frequency of hookup partners. Of those who provided numbers, the senior class had forty-one hookup partners freshman year, forty-one sophomore year, twenty junior year, and forty senior year. The decrease junior year may be linked to many males stating they had a continuous girlfriend throughout successive years.

Seniority may also privilege men when it comes to sexual partners. Of those who provided numbers, the senior class had thirty-six sexual partners thus far this year—already more than the thirty-two of their freshman year, twenty-four of their sophomore year, and twenty-five of their junior year. It is difficult to decipher whether this pattern is legitimate and consistent because we cannot compare directly with the junior class, as we did for the women, nor any other class for that matter. Future research could focus on the frequency and timing of sexual and hookup occurrences and the difference in patterns based on gender.

### **III. Where and How: The Atmosphere and Initiation of Hookups**

#### ***i. The Atmosphere***

The student body's description of the atmosphere in which hookups occur was unanimous: drunk at a bar/fraternity party/house party either dancing or conversing, possibly making out in the public setting, followed by either an exchange of phone numbers or immediately going to one partners' residence to hookup in private. Many students explained the "frat scene" of the college as having some influence on hookups. Amy explained:

Frat make outs are definitely big freshman year at this college and slowly decline as you begin to know more people. The interaction is usually initiated by being wickered drunk and dancing with someone in a frat. If it is anything more than that, you leave the party and go to someone's room.

## ***ii. Initiation***

Students explained the hookup is either initiated prior to or the night of the hookup.

Jillian provided an in-depth explanation of her hookup experiences:

Usually a hookup occurs one of two ways. The guy has seen me or my friends on campus and thinks we're cute and approaches us at a party or anywhere else on campus. Then you get intoxicated at a frat party and start dancing which is accompanied by a dance floor make out. Then you exchange numbers or he immediately asks you back to his place.

"It could be a spontaneous thing or kind of hinted at via texting before hand," added James. A substantial number of students mentioned that one partner (more often the male) will ask, "Do you want to watch a movie at my place?" when trying to move the hookup from a public to private setting.

## **IV. Potential Hookup Partners Versus Potential Relationship Partners**

As expected, the large majority of students agreed there is a difference in desirable characteristics of potential hookup partners versus potential relationship partners. In general, the qualifications of hookup partners included: "is attractive," "has a personality," and is "someone to have fun with in the present." Attractiveness was important for potential relationship partners as well, but there were many other factors to be examined. Jenny explained the difference:

Hookup partners are usually someone who you think is attractive but you don't have a great desire or interest in getting to know...Potential relationship partners are people with whom you connect emotionally, mentally, and sexually/physically.

For most the hookup is purely about sexual interaction so the most important qualities are those that enhance this particular experience: good looking, knows what they're doing, no

awkwardness, easy to access, and no desire to commit or continue things. When asked what he looks for in a hookup partner, Benjamin responded, “Someone who will have sex with you that night.” Matthew, a twenty-one year old senior, shared his logic: “[I look for] pure physical attractiveness. If I have no intent of spending time with this person, other than to have sex, then what else really matters?” Women’s responses were not as blunt but they generally looked for someone who was attractive, not awkward, and who they believed would please them sexually.

Some discussed the trials and errors of attempting to find relationships through hookups.

Lucy did not believe hooking up was the way to find a relationship:

If I want a hookup partner, I’m looking for someone who is somewhat attractive, has a personality, and knows what they hell they are doing. A relationship partner is extremely different and I don’t expect to find them drunk at a frat. I need to be treated with respect and pursued by a guy. If I want a relationship we need to click on levels other than going out and getting fucked up.

Ryan expressed an opposite opinion: “I’m looking for a relationship. Hooking up is a way of seeing if I like someone.”

Finally, there were those who said they looked for the same qualities and characteristics in potential hookup partners and potential relationship partners; it was only the situation that varied. Miley explained, “A potential hookup should have everything I’m looking for in a relationship partner...BUT without the commitment or emotions involved.” Jenny shared a similar statement: “It depends if I want a relationship. If I’m not looking for anything committed, I look for someone who won’t become emotionally attached too easily.” James agreed, “[There is] no difference really. [With] a hookup usually girls are easier and looking for the same thing [as you are].”

## V. The “Sexual Culture”

### *i. Standard Culture*

As Jillian humorously put it, “Honestly, if there were a ‘hookup web’ for this college, I think it would be the most epic, elaborate tangle of connections any one academic institution has ever seen in the history of collegiate hookup culture.” A bit of an exaggeration perhaps, but a majority of students depicted the college as a frenzy of drunken hookups. Jenny explained:

I believe the ‘sexual culture’ is very much dictated by alcohol consumption. That is not to say that 100% of the hookups here are because the members are drunk; there are exceptions. But, by and large, I think that the students here are much more likely to engage with each other when they have alcohol confidence or compromised inhibitions.

Mary chose to answer as shortly, and sweetly, as possible: “Get drunk, go out, dance floor make out, hookup, walk of shame.” “Hookups happen everywhere on campus and are widely accepted,” explained Ryan. “It’s a tradition to have sex on the football field, so I’d say it’s quite a sexual culture. Lawrence agreed, “The primary focus is definitely on hooking up. As a senior, I can say that the focus on relationships is minimal to none, at least amongst the people I am familiar with. In one word: promiscuous.” Lucy found hookups to be the dominant practice as well: “Two words: hook-ups. You’re lucky if you can get a boy to hang out with you sober. We’re young. No one wants a relationship unless they ultimately click with you. If you have a consistent hookup then you are winning!” Natasha, a twenty-one year old senior, provided the most well rounded response:

I think this college promotes a ‘hookup’ culture more so than many other college campuses because of the type of students who attend this school and the party atmosphere here. Everyone here cares about doing well in school, hanging out with friends, getting involved in Greek life or a sport, etc. A lot of people are not interested in dedicating their time to a relationship. Also I think a lot of people here believe that their college years should be the time in their life where they can be free of any serious relationships and just have fun.

There was no real distinction between men and women in depicting the sexual culture of the college. It seems that for some students, the hookup culture is perpetuated by students' enjoyment of hookups while for others, it continues due to a lack of alternative options.

## *ii. Change Over Time*

While the majority of students declared hookups the primary practice of their peers, a significant number of students mentioned a transition to relationships as class year increased. Zoe, an eighteen year old freshman, stated, "I have been told the culture is mainly focused on hookups the first two years and relationships the second two years. "Relationships don't really happen until junior or senior year," agreed James. Stephen, another freshman, provided a more in-depth analysis:

I'm sure the sexual culture differs by what year you are in college. As a first year student I would say the general culture for most people seems to be: go to a party, talk to a hot girl, come home with hot girl, have sex with hot girl, brag to your buddies about hot girl, and then do it all again the next day or next weekend. Most of the guys I know don't seem to want girlfriends, just as many different girls to have sex/hookup with as they can. From the few upperclassmen I am friends with, they say the culture is more focused on dating and real relationships rather than just adding to your kill count.

It is interesting, though, that these students were underclassmen speaking of relationships on hearsay terms, not upperclassmen speaking of their relationships specifically. As explored previously, we know there were many students who had relationships during their time at the college. It is significant that many of these students would still define the college as a 'hookup only' campus.

## **VI. Peer Influence**

Nearly half of student responses indicated they had never felt pressured by their peers to participate in hooking up. For the purpose of analyzing reasons for peer influence, we will focus solely on those who did feel some sort of encouragement to conform.

### ***i. Lack of Experience***

Of the women who said they had felt pressured by their peers, many had little to no sexual experience, or at least not at the college. Molly, a senior, explained, “My views on sex changed at college. It became a much more realistic and common occurrence and it seemed ridiculous for me to continue to hold it to such a high standard to only do with someone I loved.” Kathryn also felt pressured to lose her virginity the first term of her freshman year. “The culture definitely influenced my sexual experiences,” she wrote. Being a student myself, I can most closely identify with the experience of Shannon, a nineteen-year old sophomore. “I’ve had a long term boyfriend and lots of people will say, ‘Come on, don’t you want to have the full college experience?’” I cannot count the amount of times I was asked this my freshman and sophomore years of college. I always wondered why others cared so much about my hookup experiences. Perhaps it is because many see discussing hookups as a form of social bonding.

### ***ii. A Form of Bonding***

Kelly provided interesting insight from a female perspective. When asked about peer pressure she responded:

Girls don’t really compete in the way guys do for ‘number of hookups.’ Rather than hooking up being a question of peer pressure, I’d argue that it’s peer facilitated. This means that peers urge each other to ‘hookup’ as though being a matchmaker will somehow tighten the bond of friendship between two individuals...One helps his friend ‘score’ or ‘get it in,’ etc.

Many males shared similar sentiments. They weren’t necessarily pressured directly by their peers but felt the need to participate in order to fit in and to be able to partake in conversation. “I think for males there is pressure to hookup because it is often a topic of discussion. People will want to talk about their hookups so people want to hookup in order to participate in conversation,” says Anthony, a twenty-year-old sophomore. Luke, an eighteen-year old freshman, added, “Hooking

up is definitely one of the byproducts of social pressure to impress your friends. I feel like a lot of people hookup not for themselves, but for the stories they will have the next morning.”

## **VII. Concerns, Likes, and Dislikes of Hookups**

### ***i. What Do They Like?***

Both men and women liked the casual, carefree nature of hookups. It's easy, convenient, provides an adrenaline rush, decent physical interaction, and there are no expectations. Many responded that hookups were simply fun. Many also agreed that it was “nice to feel wanted” and enjoyable to receive positive attention from the opposite sex. However, the majority of students focused much more on their concerns and dislikes of hooking up after these initial attractions.

### ***ii. Students' Greatest Concerns***

Topping the charts of students' greatest concerns, both male and female, was contracting sexually transmitted diseases followed closely by pregnancy. Men and women also mentioned the potential awkwardness during the encounter, the morning after, or even interacting with the person soberly around campus in the following weeks. Men and women were also self-conscious about body image and feared the judgment of their hookup partners. “I don't like certain things about my body and I don't want to end up the topic of discussion among a group of boys,” wrote Rachel, a twenty-year old junior. Numerous men rated “Displeasing the woman,” “Performing poorly,” and “If she thinks my penis is small” as their top concerns when it came to hooking up.

Women also had several concerns that men did not mention. The first was being pressured or forced to participate in things they did not want to do. The second was building a reputation. “You can't hookup with too many people or else you may gain a reputation,” wrote Jenny. “I don't want others to know me or look at me because of who I have hooked up with but

because of everything else I have accomplished at this school.” The third was stepping into another girls’ territory. “This college is so small that everybody has hooked up with everybody,” wrote Lucy. “My concerns are ultimately STDs and what girl is going to kill me because I hooked up with some kid she thought she was hooking up with.”

Finally, men and women were both concerned about the possible misinterpretation of an interaction. Women feared getting attached and having it not be reciprocated. Men, on the other hand, feared women would do this. “My greatest concern is one person will think it means one thing, while the other person thinks it means another,” wrote James. Benjamin shared, “I’m scared a girl will become too clingy, especially after only one hookup.” These similarities and differences were expected and consistent with previous research.

### *iii. Definite Dislikes*

STDs, pressure to have sex, and clinginess continued into dislikes, while the theme of awkwardness was expanded upon. “I don’t like how people can have sex and then never speak to each other again,” said Miley. Kelly chose to answer more humorously:

I don’t like how impersonal and disrespectful it is, on both sides of the equation, not just the boy. And since this school is so small, it makes each term’s classes littered with past hookups that you

- 1) Can’t sit next to
- 2) Can’t collaborate on a project with
- 3) Can’t agree with them in class
- 4) Can’t disagree with them in class
- 5) Cannot make eye contact
- 6) Can’t dress down for class, lest they judge your disheveled appearance
- 7) Can’t ask them for homework help or notes even though you clearly have their number
- 8) It’s just an all-around awkward situation. Hookups and one-night stands make for terrible lab partners

The size of the college was also a dislike as many women said they didn’t like people knowing so much about them or the way things spread so quickly across campus.

The greatest dislike, mentioned by both men and women, was hooking up with someone whom they knew had recently hooked up with someone else. “I dislike hooking up with someone who has the reputation of ‘hooking up with everyone,’” wrote Kathryn. “I actually think it’s gross that you know who the person you are hooking up with has previously, especially recently, had sex with,” added Miley. “I very much dislike if I am one of three guys she has hooked up with that night,” Lawrence wrote. Tommy expanded on this concept:

Finding out you’re the fifth guy of the night for her is a major turn off. For lack of a better way to put it, it’s nice hooking up with a pretty girl who has a good personality and is not just a party whore who has already hooked up with every guy in the room. That way you feel like you accomplished something in winning the girl over and you can semi feel like a real man rather than knowing you easily got a girl because, well, she’s just plain easy so to speak.

#### ***iv. Do The Positives Outweigh the Negatives?***

After comparing the responses to this question, it would seem that students dislike hookups much more than they enjoy hookups. This could be the case or perhaps these students took advantage of an anonymous survey to vent and explain their concerns that normally are overshadowed by the hookup culture. Either way, the students continue to participate in sexual encounters that are enjoyable yet also leave them full of reservations.

### **XIII. The Notorious “Number” and Peer Judgment**

#### ***i. Comfortable and Content***

Of those who responded, large numbers of both males and females were completely comfortable with their numbers of sexual partners. As was expected, the number of males who were content with their numbers of sexual partners was significantly larger than the number of females (seventy-three percent and forty-seven percent, respectively). This finding may be directly correlated with the concept of the sexual double standard, where women are judged

negatively for certain behaviors men are encouraged for which leaves women less comfortable.

One female senior, Shelby, did not keep track of her number and provided some interesting insight into the world of peer judgment:

I think people (both men and women) make it seem as though there's a 'right' number to have and then once you've passed that number you have crossed into a sexually deviant category. I think that judgments based on numbers are arbitrary and I bring up this point every time I am asked. Numbers can only show a tiny amount about someone's sexual history and yet we reduce someone's experiences to this stupid number game nonetheless. This is not the school of thought I subscribe to and therefore I do not know my number.

While many students did not mind their numbers, Shelby's perspective was certainly unique.

There were also many others who were quite uncomfortable with their numbers of sexual partners and even more who felt uncomfortable sharing their sexual histories with their peers.

### *ii. Defying Stereotypes or Socially Desirable Responses?*

It was expected that the majority of females would believe their numbers were too large while males would believe their numbers were too small. The results are shown below in table ten.

**Table 10: Feeling About Numbers of Sexual Partners by Percentage**

<b>Feeling Toward Number of Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
% Content with Number	73	47
% Number "Too Large"	5	23
% Number "Too Small"	22	30
Total	100	100

Of those who responded, twenty-two percent of men said their numbers were too small and twenty-three percent of women said their numbers were too large. Contrary to previous studies, there were several men and a significant amount of women who believed their numbers to be too large and too small, respectively.

Of those who provided responses, five percent of males believed their numbers of sexual partners were too large. Ryan explained that his answers could change depending on the crowd:

When you're with a group of guys (not your close buddies) there is always an element of pressure to inflate your hookup/sex total to gain respect. That being said, when you're with a group of girls or a mixed group, there is pressure to lower it as most girls think it's disgusting for a guy to brag about the number of partners he's had.

Carter, a twenty-two year old senior, felt he had been too promiscuous before he got into a serious relationship. "I don't even remember my actual number. I tend to lie and tell people lower than it actually is because I don't see the value in bragging about how much of a man whore you are. It just makes you sound stupid." It is interesting that these men are self-conscious about their large numbers when, usually, their peers would reward them for their behavior. What is even more fascinating, however, is how many females believed their numbers of sexual partners was too small.

Of those who responded, thirty percent of females felt their numbers were too small. All of these women explained they felt inexperienced and inferior when in the presence of others, including their friends, who had hooked up more. "Sometimes I feel embarrassed about not hooking up, so I'll try not to participate in the conversation," wrote Lily, an eighteen-year-old freshman. "I have a pretty small number," shared Nina, a twenty-year-old sophomore. "When I talk to friends who have a much larger number or who consider sex more casually, I often get the sense that my number is inferior. Sometimes I feel self-conscious about it."

The five percent of men who believed their numbers were too large are certainly outliers. Their responses most likely do not reflect the general feelings of any population but they are interesting and worth examining in terms of social pressure. The men gave honest answers about hooking up then said they had hooked up too much. This defied our expectations but also may have to do with providing socially desirable responses. The pressure to conform often makes

males feel their numbers of sexual partners are inferior. Those who felt their numbers were too large didn't want to brag or sound different or stupid. It is the pressure or the want of fitting in and being like others that makes men uncomfortable with their numbers of sexual partners, whether large or small.

The same could be said of women. Forty-seven percent were uncomfortable with their numbers of sexual partners, a substantial percentage but also significantly less than the seventy-three percent of men who were comfortable. As previously discussed, this relates to the sexual double standard. Women may feel less comfortable than men when it comes to participating in hookups because of the negative judgment they may face. While twenty-three percent felt their numbers were too large, thirty percent felt their numbers were too small. These women felt inexperienced and inferior to their peers who participated in the hookup culture more frequently. The social pressure to act "as women should" is being rivaled by a greater peer pressure to participate.

### **IX. Estimation Versus Reality**

As was previously discussed, the concept of "pluralistic ignorance"—students believing their peers are hooking up much more than themselves—has been well documented in several studies examining college students and sexual experiences. The respondents in this study were no different. The students were asked to estimate the average number of sexual partners of both male and female students. Their estimates versus the actual number of sexual partners are shown below in tables eleven and twelve.

**Table 11: Estimates of Female Sexual Partners**

	<b>Female Estimates of Female Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Male Estimates of Female Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Total Estimates of Female Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Actual Female Partners</b>
Average	7	6	6.6	3.75
Range	1-20	1-25	1-25	0-18
Median	6	4	5	2
Mode	3	3	5	1

**Table 12: Estimates of Male Sexual Partners**

	<b>Female Estimates of Male Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Male Estimates of Male Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Total Estimates of Male Sexual Partners</b>	<b>Actual Male Partners</b>
Average	13	6.7	10.5	6.3
Range	2-70	2-30	2-70	0-32
Median	10	5	9	3.5
Mode	10	5	10	2

Both males and females estimated women's numbers of sexual partners to be significantly higher than the actual numbers of sexual partners for females on the campus. On average, females estimated higher numbers more frequently while men provided a greater range in their responses. Combined, the average provided was nearly three partners higher than the legitimate number and the median and mode were significantly higher than actuality. Surprisingly, as many as twelve percent of males who answered estimated women had higher numbers of sexual partners than men did.

Men were much more accurate when it came to estimating men. The average was only 0.4 off of the actual average and the range was quite similar. The median and mode were both larger. Women greatly overestimated the male number of sexual partners, doubling the actual average and the range, tripling the median, and quintupling the mode. Affected by the female overestimations, the total populations' estimates were significantly higher as well.

Pluralistic ignorance is extremely significant to college hookup culture. Beliefs of false perceptions affect reality. It does not matter what the number of sexual partners for males and females are; it is what the students perceive the numbers to be that affect their perceptions of others and their individual decisions in the future which, in turn, further perpetuates hookup culture and misconceived stereotypes.

**X. The “Threshold of Promiscuity”: Is there such a thing as “too much” sex?**

The students were asked if they believed there was a “threshold of promiscuity.” That is, at what point did men and women reach the point of “too many” sexual partners? The responses of men, women, and the total population regarding “acceptable” numbers of sexual partners are compared to the actual numbers of sexual partners below in tables thirteen and fourteen.

**Table 13: What is “Too Many” Sexual Partners for Women?**

	<b>Female Responses</b>	<b>Male Responses</b>	<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>Actual Female Partners</b>
% Provided Responses	93	98	95	
% No Threshold	25	28	26	
% Threshold Exists; Could Not Pinpoint Number	14	24	18	
% Provided Numerical Estimates	55	46	51	
Average	14	10	13	3.75
Range	1-50	3-30	1-50	0-18
Median	10	10	10	2
Mode	10	10	10	1

**Table 14: What is “Too Many” Sexual Partners for Men?**

	<b>Female Responses</b>	<b>Male Responses</b>	<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>Actual Male Partners</b>
% Provided Responses	96	98	97	
% No Threshold	25	39	30	
% Threshold Exists; Could Not Pinpoint Number	19	20	19	
% Provided Numerical Estimates	52	39	47	
Average	9	12.5	16	6.3
Range	1-50	3-30	1-50	0-32
Median	13.5	10	11	3.5
Mode	10	10	10	2

***i. No Threshold***

Twenty-five percent of women, twenty-eight percent of men, and twenty-six percent of the total population believed there was no threshold of promiscuity for women. Twenty-five percent of women, thirty-nine percent of men, and thirty percent of the total population believed there was no threshold of promiscuity for males. While the percentage of males increased ten percent between those who thought there was no threshold for females and those who thought there was no threshold for males, the percentages are still highly significant. A number of these students not only did not believe in a threshold, but also did not distinguish between genders. “No, there is no threshold in today’s sexually liberated age. Nothing is too low for either males or females,” wrote Amelia, a twenty-year-old junior. Colin, a twenty-one year old senior, shared Amelia’s liberal sentiments: “For me, I believe being a ‘slut’ is a socially established thing that should be ignored. Sex shouldn’t be ridiculed in any way, so one can have as few or as many partners as he/she desires, as long as they’re safe about it!”

*ii. A Continuation of Defying Stereotypes or Socially Desirable Responses?*

The students defied our expectation but may also have provided socially desirable responses when sharing their feelings regarding their personal numbers of sexual partners. Some men felt their numbers were too large and a significant number of women felt their numbers were too small. This shows, at least, that the students know of and understand present gender norms. These norms may have influenced their responses as they may have felt pressure to conform.

They again strayed from the norm when sharing their opinions on a “threshold of promiscuity.” In comparing the responses of males and females for what was “too many” for males and females, there was surprisingly little difference. While the averages and ranges were slightly shifted, the medians and modes—much more accurate representations of the population—were nearly identical.

Regarding the threshold for females, the median and mode for responses by both men and women was ten partners. This is extremely significant in that men, who usually believe women should have less partners than themselves, provided the exact same number as a threshold for women as for men. Regarding the threshold for males, the mode of responses by both men and women was ten partners, the same number as it was for women. The median provided by females for the male threshold was slightly higher at 13.5 partners, whereas men provided a lower threshold for themselves at ten. The students again provided “socially desirable” responses by discussing stereotypes and double standards existing on campus, showing they are aware of gender norms, but also provided, in contrast, their honest opinions. Perhaps their beliefs are best explained by a twenty-one year old senior: “There are man-whores and female whores alike, and

there are committed males and committed females in relationships on the other end of the spectrum” wrote Noah. “Gender has nothing to do with the ‘threshold of promiscuity.’”

### ***iii. Promiscuity as a Behavior, Not a Number***

Eighteen percent of the total population responding about females and nineteen percent of the total population responding about males believed a threshold existed but they could not pinpoint an exact number that defined the threshold of promiscuity. This relates to Bogle’s findings where men she interviewed insisted women shouldn’t hookup excessively but none could give an exact definition of what would be “too much” (2008). An interesting theme emerged from these respondents as well as those who believed there was no threshold and those who provided numerical estimates but were unsure of their answers: “Promiscuity doesn’t just mean sexual partners. You can be a promiscuous virgin,” wrote Halle, a nineteen-year-old junior. “It’s an attitude as well as a behavior.

This response was given time and time again by males and females alike. Promiscuity, it seems, cannot be defined by a number. It is much more about frequency and distribution. “I think there is no one number. It depends a lot on circumstances,” wrote Leah, a nineteen-year-old sophomore. “For example, a senior having twenty partners under their belt is a lot less promiscuous than a freshman having that same number.” Bogle 2008 found that many men stated that the “cardinal sin” for women was to hook up with two men who were friends, especially two members of the same fraternity (107). Lucy found the same to be true at Union: “If you have gone through at least two sports teams at Union College then you know something is wrong.”

A large number of students also explained promiscuity in terms of circumstance and attitude. “I don’t think there’s such a thing as too many. That’s just rude to be policing people’s

sex lives,” wrote Mary. “I think the real concerns are why you’re having sex and the kinds of people you’re having sex with, not the number.” Benjamin focused on behavior: “Again it’s about how you hold yourself. If a girl is willing to sleep with anyone, then it’s too much. But it’s not a number; it’s just that the type of behavior seems desperate and unattractive.” It seems, according to the students of the college, that if a threshold of promiscuity does exist it is quite high (much higher than the actual numbers of sexual partners of the students). Even more significant, though, is that if this number does exist, the students believed the same numbers were acceptable for both men and women, regardless of gender.

### **XI. Do Men and Women View Hooking Up Differently?**

The students were asked, “Do you think the opposite sex views hooking up differently? In what ways?” As expected, the dominant answer of both men and women was, “Yes.” Females provided various responses of the same connotation such as, “Boys don’t get attached,” “They’re less emotionally invested,” “They’re more casual about it. It’s low risk for them and not a big deal,” and “It’s like a game for them. They’re expected to do it and they view it as an accomplishment.” Interestingly, a bisexual female provided a similar response: “Absolutely. I think men take it more of just a thing to do where women usually take it more emotionally.” This is notable as the respondent had experience hooking up with both sexes.

The majority of men also believed women were more emotionally invested when it came to hooking up. More men than women, however, believed there was no difference, or no difference by gender. Various answers included, “I think both sides aren’t looking for something serious,” “It varies by person. It is not gender influenced,” “Hooking up is a game. There are players on both sides,” and “Some girls see it as a way to start a relationship and get upset when the guy only wants a hookup...but most girls are in it for the same reasons as guys, to have fun

and not worry about tomorrow.” The most standout response, directly correlated with the findings of this study, was provided by Julian, a twenty-year-old sophomore: “I think the opposite sex views it very similarly. Typically, I believe one sex thinks the other sex views it differently, but they might be wrong.”

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

In conducting this survey, it was expected that the results would be similar to that of previous studies examining college students and sexual interaction. While many parallels were found, there were also a number of unexpected findings in comparing the similarities and differences between men and women when it comes to “hooking up.”

Past studies have found that while the term is quite ambiguous and can mean many things to various people, students generally refer to a “hookup” as some form of sexual encounter between two individuals ranging from kissing to intercourse (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). The same was true of these students. Both men and women defined hookups as a spectrum from kissing to making out. The main difference between the two occurred when students were asked to define “more than a hookup.” Males gave more concrete, black-and-white answers: more than a hookup was either purely sexual or an exclusive relationship. Women provided more gray-area answers, focusing on emotional attachment (having feelings for the other person), consistency (how often and how long the hookup continues), and sober communication (speaking, hanging out, and being together in public outside of drunken weekend interactions). Men and women did not differ by frequency of relationships.

As was expected, men had larger numbers of sexual partners than women did. However, the significant finding lies with numbers of hookup partners. The numbers of hookup partners for both men and women were nearly identical. The averages, 12.8 and 12.3 respectively, held a 0.5 difference. The medians and modes, more accurate representations, were also indistinguishable at 9.5 and nine and three and three, respectively. While men had more sexual partners than women, it seems women at the college are just as dominant as men are in the hookup scene.

In examining just the junior and senior classes, it seems women tended to hookup more as underclassmen while men were more consistent throughout with an inkling of an incline as they became upperclassmen. This distinction may be specific to these classes and this population but frequency of hookups by class year would make for interesting future research.

All agreed, as was consistent with previous studies, that hooking up is initiated drunk at house parties, bars, and more specific to this college, fraternity parties. Both sexes claimed to initiate hookups through flirting, dancing, and possibly a “dance floor make out.” Many students then explained one partner in some way asks the other if they want to return to his/her place of residence. Many women and men stated that men often ask women if they would like to “watch a movie” at the man’s residence as a way of asking the woman to return with him. Either phone numbers are exchanged or the two return home together. There seemed to be no real differences.

Consistent with previous findings, both men and women distinguished between what they look for in potential hookup partners versus what they look for in potential relationship partners. Some who did not said they looked for the same kind of person but knew prior to entering a hookup that no emotion would be involved. Both women and men stated this. The student body also unanimously agreed that the sexual culture of the college could be defined as “drunk hookups.” This could be unique to this particular college because of the strong presence of Greek life. More student parties and events happen on or very close to campus, which may significantly influence the sexual culture of the institution.

Bogle (2008) argues that women seek relationships more than men because they are interested in marrying a few years after graduation and they need relationships in order to protect their reputations. She also found that college men were aware that women wanted relationships and would develop strategies to communicate their lack of interest. Kimmel (2008) argues that

women are pawns in a game dominated by males and hookup culture is allowing men to put off adult relationships. Women wanting more and men avoiding relationships was a common theme cited by many previous studies. This was not definitive at the college. While men had more sexual partners, there were equal percentages of men and women who had been and had not been in relationships. Many students also responded that men and women change from wanting hookups to wanting relationships over time, not just women as past studies have found. Many underclassmen explained that relationships increased by class year, especially with junior and senior men and women who begin to want something more serious.

Over half of students claimed they had never felt influenced by their peers. Of those who had, it was less directly and more socially influenced. Many explained they felt inexperienced compared to their friends and they disliked feeling left out of conversations about hookups. Both men and women felt that talking about sex and hooking up was a form of social bonding amongst their friend groups.

Both men and women shared the same “likes” of the hookup culture—the casual, carefree, fun and exciting nature. They liked having no responsibilities or commitments and the “no strings attached” attitude. Both men and women shared many more dislikes and concerns. Initially they provided the same negatives: fear of STDs, pregnancy, awkwardness, and both were self-conscious about their bodies/succumbing to the judgment of their hookup partners. There were, however, some slight differences in concerns by gender. Men were more individual; they were most worried about displeasing the woman and performing poorly. Women’s concerns were more socially influenced; they feared being pressured into uncomfortable situations, gaining negative reputations, and crossing into another girl’s territory. Men and women both disliked the size of the college, as everyone seemed to know everything about their sexual pasts.

They also disliked knowing whom their hookup partner had hooked up with previously. Finally, both men and women feared that the woman would become “too attached,” which matched the findings of previous studies.

Throughout the history of dating, sex, and hookups there has been discussion of the sexual double standard. That is, women are judged more harshly when participating in sexual behaviors that are acceptable and even encouraged for men. The Online College Social Life Survey collected information from men and women at twenty-one four-year colleges and universities between 2005 and 2011 (England and Bearak 2013). The double standard was reinforced with a drastic difference in what was permitted for men as opposed to women. Sixty-seven percent of women said they did not respect men who hooked up a lot but only thirty-seven percent of men said the same of their peers, a significant and notable difference (England and Bearak 2013). The men and women of this college were not as stereotypical with their responses.

The students were asked about their comfort levels of sharing their number of sexual partners with peers and whether they believed their numbers were “too large” or “too small.” It was expected that most men would respond that their numbers were too small and that most women would believe theirs were too large. Many students were completely comfortable with their numbers of sexual partners but, as expected, more men were comfortable than women. Of those who were not, there were some men and women who answered as we expected. Surprisingly, however, there were some men who believed their numbers of sexual partners were too large and there were a significant amount of women who believed their numbers were too small. The males felt stupid and didn’t want to seem like they were bragging. The females felt inexperienced compared to their peers and felt like they might be missing out. The students provided honest answers yet also socially desirable answers. This shows that both women and

men know of and understand gender norms and social expectations do play a role in their responses.

The phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance has been well documented by several studies of college students. Lambert, Kahn, and Apple (2003) found that most students believed other student were more comfortable with sexual experiences than they were, which led them to conform to the group and participate in behaviors they weren't comfortable with (Reiber and Garcia 2010). Bogle (2008) asked college men to estimate the percentage of men who had sex on any given weekend. The men guessed eighty percent when the actual percentage ranged between five and ten percent (Kimmel 2008). In exploring the opinions of five hundred and seven college students, Reiber and Garcia (2010) found that women over-estimated men's comfort levels with sex and men did the same with women. This proved to be true with these students as well.

Both males and females estimated women's numbers of sexual partners to be significantly higher than the actual numbers of sexual partners for females on this campus. Surprisingly, as many as twelve percent of males who answered estimated women had higher numbers of sexual partners than men did. Men were much more accurate when it came to estimating men while women greatly overestimated the male number of sexual partners.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study came from the responses to this question: "Is there a 'threshold of promiscuity?' In other words, is there a number of sexual partners that you would view as too much? What is that number for males? For females?" In their short answer responses, many students wrote of stereotypes on campus. They believed men were encouraged to hookup while women were scrutinized and condemned for the same actions. It seemed as though the sexual double standard was ever present. However, a contradiction

emerged when students were asked to provide a numeric value for the “threshold of promiscuity.”

Large numbers of respondents, both male and female, did not believe a threshold of promiscuity existed. They felt it was not their place to judge others sexual behavior and that a number could not be representative of an individual’s sexual past. Many also explained that promiscuity was an attitude, not a number. It didn’t matter how many people an individual had slept with; it mattered how they presented themselves, who they hooked up with, and why they were participating. Most significant to our findings were those who provided numerical responses.

In comparing the responses of males and females for what was “too many” for males and females, there was surprisingly little difference. While the averages and ranges were slightly shifted, the medians and modes—much more accurate representations of the population—were nearly identical. Regarding the threshold for females, the median and mode for responses by both men and women was ten partners. This is extremely significant in that men, who stereotypically believe women should have less partners than themselves, provided the exact same number as a threshold for women as for men. Regarding the threshold for males, the mode of responses by both men and women was ten partners, the same number as it was for women. The median provided by females for the male threshold was slightly higher at 13.5 partners, whereas men provided a lower threshold for themselves at ten. Both male and female students provided socially learned and accepted stereotypical responses in their short answers but defied the double standard in their numerical definitions of a “threshold of promiscuity.”

Finally, men and women were asked if they believed the opposite sex viewed hooking up differently. Women believed they were more emotionally invested while men viewed it more

casually and as an accomplishment. Men also felt women were more emotionally invested, however, more men than women believed there was no difference between the genders. One man believed that everyone thought the opposite sex viewed hooking up differently but, in reality, they weren't all that different from one another. The results of this study support his assumption. While some findings are synonymous with previous studies and there were some significant differences between men and women, the results of this study support his assumption.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### **i. Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the sexual culture and “hookup” scene among the students of Union College. Casual sex and “promiscuous” sexual behavior has become commonplace to students in colleges and universities across the country. Hooking up has become the norm and seems to be more prevalent than the dating scene on most campuses. Many studies have examined this phenomenon but most focus specifically on one gender and few directly compare the two in the same setting. The intent of this study was to explore the taboo world of college hookups, the kinds of interactions students have with one another, and exactly how men and women perceive and experience sexual interaction differently.

Overall, men and women differed in their definitions of “more than a hookup.” As expected, men had slightly more sexual partners than women. Women of the junior and senior classes tended to hookup more as underclassmen while men of the junior and senior classes were either more consistent throughout their college careers or tended to hookup more as upperclassmen. Men’s concerns regarding hookups were focused on more individual factors such as performance and body image while women’s concerns were focused more on social factors such as being forced into uncomfortable situations, gaining a negative reputation, and entering another girl’s territory. These were notable differences between men and women regarding the ways in which they perceive and experience sexual interaction.

There were a surprising number of unexpected and significant findings. While males had slightly more sexual partners than females, females and males had equal numbers of hookup partners. Both men and women viewed participating in and talking about hooking up as a form of social bonding amongst their friend groups. The students also provided many non-stereotypical responses. It was expected that men would believe their numbers of sexual partners

were too small and women would believe their numbers of sexual partners were too large. Some men believed their numbers of sexual partners were too large and a significant amount of women believed their numbers of sexual partners were too small. When asked about a threshold of promiscuity, large numbers of men and women did not believe a threshold exists. Others explained promiscuity was more an attitude; a number could not represent an individual's history. Finally, while many students believed the sexual double standard existed on campus, their numeric responses did not support this conclusion. When asked to provide an exact number of what would be "too many," both men and women provided nearly identical numbers of what was acceptable for both sexes. Many of the findings of this study were synonymous with the findings of previous studies. There were also a number of differences in comparing men and women. However, there were a surprising number of findings that support the idea that men and women are much more similar than they believe themselves to be when it comes to perceiving and experiences sexual interaction.

## **ii. Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First is the sample population. The study was strictly focused on students of one small liberal arts institution. The college has around 2,200 students and 500 were randomly selected to receive the online survey. This small sample population may not be representative of the general population. There were also few differences in the demographics of the sample population. The majority of students were Caucasian, extremely well off financially, and all were restricted to one geographic area.

In terms of the actual study, we were limited to an anonymous online interview in an attempt to gain qualitative information. While we received overwhelming responses and support

from the student body, it may have been easier to focus on particular themes and decipher students' intentions and meanings through face-to-face interviews.

This study was also limited in that it was cross-sectional. It focused on a group of students during one moment in time. A longitudinal study of a particular cohort during a four-year college span would provide for a better overall understanding of frequency by class year as well as how student beliefs change over time.

Finally, the study was limited in that it was difficult to decipher students' honest opinions from socially desirable answers. All responses were analyzed with scrutiny and any question with the potential for the provision of socially desirable responses were mentioned in the discussion.

### **iii. Future Research**

While many studies have explored college students, sexual interaction, and hooking up, there is still much to be covered. This study in particular showed different results than previous studies. It would be interesting to conduct this study on a nation wide basis or in a larger population using one-on-one qualitative interviews.

Future research could also focus on particular sections of this study. Student responses were provided over a short period of time. It would be interesting to conduct a cohort study in order to examine frequency of hookups based on class year. Another study could focus gender differences in likes and dislikes of hookups. Men's concerns were more individually based while women's were more social. It is important to further examine and expand upon this concept. Finally, a study could be conducted on the "threshold of promiscuity." These students' beliefs and responses questioned the dominant appearance of the sexual double standard on their

campus. It would be interesting to see if modern beliefs are truly evolving by conducting this more focused research on a broader scale.

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# APPENDIX

## Sex and the "College Hookup"

### Form Description

#### Informed Consent\*

The purpose of this study is to examine the "hookup culture" among college men and women. This is a research project being conducted by Kelsey Fish at Union College in Schenectady, NY. You are invited to participate in this project because you are a Union College student at least 18 years of age. Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating, you will not be penalized. The procedure involved completing an online survey that will take less than 30 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be collected. The survey questions will be about your personal experiences as well as your thoughts and opinions regarding college sex. We will do our best to keep your information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. To protect the confidentiality of others, please do not use names or other identifying information within your responses. The responses of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with Union College representatives. If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Kelsey Fish at fishk@union.edu. This research has been reviewed according to Union College IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. Clicking the "Agree" button below indicates that: you have read the above information, you voluntarily agree to participate, and you are at least 18 years of age. If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "Disagree" button.

- Agree
- Disagree

Add item ▾



## Demographic/Background Information

In this study, we are interested in learning about how students think about sexual relationships and experiences. We are asking for your opinions, and for you to describe your own experiences. These questions do not have correct or incorrect answers. We simply want to hear your views. Detailed explanations for each question are strongly encouraged. We can begin with a bit of basic information about you.

### 1. Sex/Gender

Are you male or female?

- Male
- Female

### 2. Age

In what year were you born?

### 3a. Race/Ethnicity

Are you Hispanic or Latino? (a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race)

- Yes
- No

**3b. Race/Ethnicity**

Please select the racial category or categories with which you most closely identify:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Caucasian
- Other:

**4. Sexual Preference**

Do you consider yourself to be any of the following: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning?

**5. Family Income**

Please provide an estimate of your annual parental income.

**6. Class Year**

Please indicate your class year at Union College.

- First-year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Other:

**7. Greek Affiliation**

Are you involved in a fraternity or a sorority?

- Yes
- No

## Personal Experience

Next we'd like to learn a little more about your personal experiences when it comes to sexual relations in college. Please answer the following questions and feel free to elaborate.

8. What do you (and your friends) define as a "hookup"?

9. Do you consider the number of sexual intercourse partners you have had and the number of people you've hooked up with to be different?

10. How many sexual intercourse partners have you had? Of those partners, how many were before you entered college? How many were during your first-year, your sophomore year, your junior year, and your senior year, respectively?

11. If you differentiate between sexual intercourse partners and hookup partners, how many hookup partners have you had? Please indicate how many of those partners were prior to college, during your first-year, your sophomore year, your junior year, and your senior year, respectively.

12. What do you and your friends consider to be "more than a hookup?" Have you been in a relationship during your time here at Union? Did the relationship(s) begin with a hookup?

Add item 

## Sex at Union

Now we'd like to learn a bit more about the social atmosphere at Union and its impact on sexual relations.

**13. In what atmosphere/context do you normally participate in "hooking up"? How is the interaction initiated?**

**14. What do you look for in a potential hookup partner? Is it different than what you would look for in a potential relationship partner?**

**15. Please describe what you believe to be the "sexual culture" of Union College.**

**16. Have you ever felt personally influenced by your peers to participate in hooking up? Do you believe others' sexual experiences at this college influence your own? Please elaborate.**

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**17. What are your greatest concerns when it comes to hooking up? What do you like? What do you dislike? Please explain.**

**18. Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a hookup situation in which you did not want to participate? Did you feel as though you had no choice?**

Add item 



## The Opposite Sex

Finally, we'd like to hear about your opinions of the opposite sex when it comes to "hooking up."

**19. Have you ever felt uncomfortable when sharing the amount of people you have hooked up with? Have you ever felt pressured to give a false number? Did you feel as though the number was too small or too large?**

**20. What do you think is the average amount of sexual partners for men at this college? For women? Please provide estimates for both.**

**21. Is there a "threshold for promiscuity"? In other words, is there a number of sexual partners that you would view as too much? What is that number for males? For females?**

**22. Do you think the opposite sex views hooking up differently? In what ways?**

**23. What do you wish you could explain to the opposite sex about hooking up?**

**This is the end of the survey questions. Thank you so much for your time. Please provide any additional comments/questions/concerns in the space provided below.**

Add item 

## Debriefing Statement

### Debriefing Statement:

Thank you for your participation in this research study on college hookups. The goal of the online survey was to determine the ways in which college students socially construct and perceive hookups differently based on sex. If any of the material covered in this survey has left you feeling uncomfortable or distressed, please contact any of the following resources available to you:

Union College Sexual Assault Resource Hotline: (518) 388-6600 ext. 1

Wicker Wellness Center, Counseling Center: (518) 388-6161

Wicker Wellness Center, Health Services: (518) 388-6120

Schenectady County Sexual Assault Support Services: (518) 346-2246

Ellis Hospital Emergency Room: (518) 243-4121

Schenectady Police Department: (518) 382-5200

If you have any questions about the interview process, or the study in general, please feel free to contact the researcher at [fishk@union.edu](mailto:fishk@union.edu). You are also encouraged to contact the researcher in the future with any questions you may have about your participation and the future outcomes of the study.