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Donna Freitas

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and the single student today and the longing for romance

An interview with Donna Freitas

My book, *Sex and the Soul*, on which this interview is based, includes data from seven different colleges and universities, with participants from all across the United States and diverse geographic locations. The campus types include both urban, semi-urban, and rural, and include Catholic, evangelical, private-secular, and public colleges and universities. Across the participating universities, there were over 2500 students who took the online survey. Out of these survey participants, 534 students volunteered to do intensive, one-on-one, in-person interviews, out of which I selected 111 with whom I conducted these interviews. The gender break-down for the interviews was about 50/50, women to men, though in the online survey about 67 percent of the participants were women. Also, about 10 percent of the survey participants identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Introduction: Donna Freitas is an alumna of Georgetown University who has taught at St. Michael's College and Boston University. Her book, *Sex and the Soul*, and some articles stemming from it, caught *Conversations'* eye and we asked her for an interview to give our readers some of her insights into the 'hook-up culture' currently the subject of much interest among observers of campus life. Her responses seem to fit well into the topic of this issue.

1. *Conversations:* First of all, how would you characterize "hook-up culture" for our readers?

Freitas: First I'll define it. Most people (and studies) define hooking-up as 1) engaging in sexual activity in a casual context, and 2) that the range of sexual activity is often described as anything from kissing to oral sex and/or different types of intercourse. (Also, alcohol is typically part of the equation.) While this description is accurate, it leaves out what truly distinguishes a hook-up: the shared goal between partners of erasing or at least shutting out emotional (and, for some, spiritual) content from the experience. Theoretically, a hook-up should be purely physical. Aspiring to pure physicality for the encounter allows partners to believe casual sexual intimacy (no strings attached) is feasible. This distinguishing factor cuts across gender and sexual orientation.

So, it's possible to see hook-up culture as a kind of training ground where, at least on a college campus, students (to borrow from Aristotle) habituate themselves to understand and experience sex/sexuality as devoid of emotional and spiritual intimacy. And this "habit" requires practice, providing a circularity to hook-up culture. Not surprisingly, few students spoke of such "successful hook-ups," where they enjoyed hooking up without any emotional or spiritual cost. The aver-

age college student—regardless of what she or he brags or tells is friends—is terrible at shutting out the emotional and spiritual (which for many students is simply "the meaningful") dimensions of sexual intimacy. They try and try (so to speak) and still they fail. Eventually, this exhausts them, sometimes quite literally.

This brings us to why the vast majority of students interviewed at participating Catholic, private secular, and public colleges and universities—where hook-up culture is the norm when it comes to student sexual practices and ethos on campus—are so unhappy with it. Students will say that "everyone hooks-up," that hooking-up is supposed to be "the best ever" (especially if you are a man), and become skilled at acting this part of the "typical" college student. Yet, deep down, when given a safe space to express how they really feel about peer student attitudes and behaviors about sex on campus with regard to sex, they are quick to express dismay, to distance themselves from it, and to wish hook-up culture simply didn't exist.

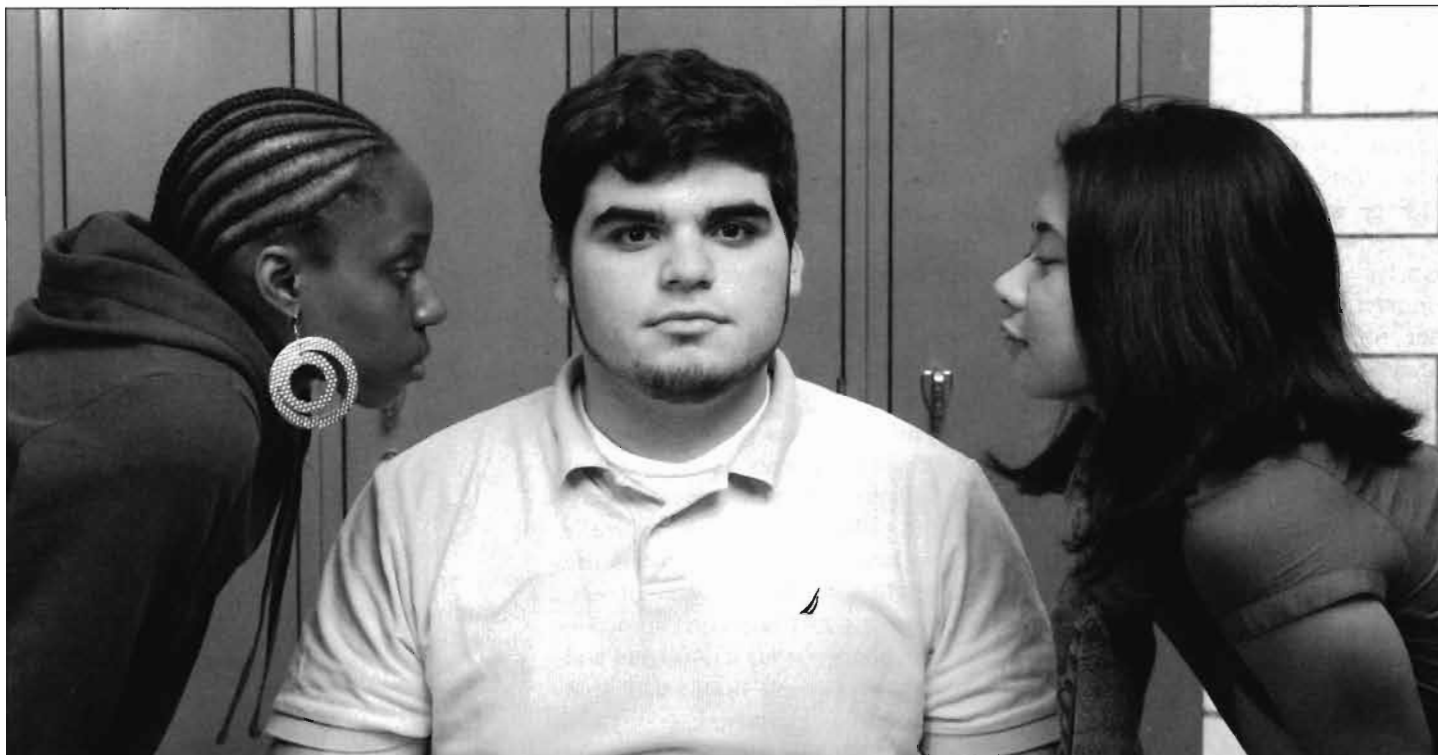
Two last comments: the first related to my study's findings about romance, and why both women and men separated romance from sex so drastically. Both men and women expressed a strong desire for what sounds like chaste romantic encounters—most involving hours upon hours of talking, the kind where you bare your soul and share with another person your deepest cares and hopes and dreams, your favorite things to do. Almost universally, men and women described romance as the opportunity to get to know someone and be known by another, typically in a stereotypically romantic setting (candles on the table, a walk by the beach, a nighttime picnic under the stars) and, in many cases, expressly said, in their answers on romance, that this encounter *would not involve even a*

During a hook-up, ideally there is no talking — often because the two people are too drunk to talk.

kiss. Or, if it did, it would be "the kind you see in the movies."

Almost no one mentioned sex as part of this equation. This led me to wonder what happens when students move on to sexual activity—does an encounter stop being romantic? Is romance somehow asexual to students and if so, why? When you begin to look at how students talk about hook-up culture, how they prepare themselves to hook-up—divorcing the emotional from the physical—and how during a hook-up, ideally there is no talking (often because the two people are too drunk to talk), the separation of romance and sex makes more sense. If students habituate themselves to experience sex as purely physical, and understand romance as emotional and spiritual connection and revelation, then it's easier to comprehend why the context in which most sex occurs on campus occurs is not romantic. In order to find romance, students feel they must step outside hook-up culture and stay away from sex.

A final issue to note regarding students' attitudes about hooking-up: it's not that most students think all hook-ups are bad—some students talk about positive hook-ups either they or their friends have experienced. But the reason students end up with such a negative attitude toward hook-up culture has to do with its cumulative effect on their college social and romantic experience. Living within a dominant, student sexual ethic that fosters hook-up culture over the course of the college experience leads



students to reject hook-up culture as positively contributing to satisfaction and fulfillment in their romantic and sexual relationships.

It is very common for students to have a “wake up” experience during sophomore, junior, or senior year, where they realize they are exhausted, spent, and emotionally emptied out, having realized that living in the context of hook-up culture robs meaning from sex, and denies them the experience of romance.

2. Conversations: *What is different, or distinctive, about this generation of students with regard to their sexual behavior? Not just different from the pre-Vatican II years, but different from the '60s and '70s?*

Freitas: Let me start by saying that paying attention to generational differences and fostering intergenerational conversation—especially with regard to theology and religion—is a priority I’ve defended and advocated throughout my scholarly career. I’ve often said that scholars and theologians (especially Catholic ones) pay attention to every particularity (gender, ethnicity, class, etc.) *but* generation.

That said, focusing on genera-

tional comparisons—when it comes to the heart of the issues that *Sex and the Soul* raises—gets us off topic, if what we are trying to do is truly understand students’ experience of sexuality/sexual activity and its larger (or lack of) meaning in their lives today. Like the scholarly tendency to value hard data (statistics) above qualitative (narrative) data—which does little toward practically addressing the quality of life and meaning for college students on this issue—we (faculty, clergy, administration, staff) need to do our best to avoid the temptation to default to “what happened way back when vs. now,” and on statistics alone to guide our attitudes, programming, and even selection of course materials.

My job, as the primary researcher of this study, and subsequently as I was writing *Sex and the Soul*, was to get out of the way—I did my best to mark out the contours of a conversation that college students today (unique to today) are having (or wish they were having) about sexuality and spirituality on campus. In order to understand, offer counsel, pass judgment, and yes, even comparisons to times past,

we first need to listen attentively and carefully to what students want to tell us (think Bernard Lonergan here). We need to encourage *students* to set the parameters for this conversation—and then we need to contemplate what they say for a while before responding. Otherwise, we risk missing our very goal: to address student needs in practical, lived ways.

To give one concrete example: while many students who participated in my study had plenty of sexual experience, many (even most) had little to no experience with dating. College students—both women and men—expressed a longing to simply go on a date, to receive flowers from someone who likes them, to have long conversations over dinner with someone for whom they have romantic feelings. When I’ve dis-

We first need to listen attentively and carefully to what students want to tell us

cussed these desires among faculty and staff during the lectures I give on this study, I often hear groans, and complaints that “we are going back to the 50’s” and/or that the pendulum is swinging back in the other direction—*away* from the hard-won sexual freedoms of the ’60’s and ’70’s.

Given my own scholarly background, I too can offer extensive theoretical critiques of such desires, but because of this project, I’ve had to learn to hold back my desire to do so, my tendency to react in a similar manner, since doing so usually results in bypassing the address of our students’ concrete reality on campus. We can talk all we want on the level of theory—and this is an important piece of the conversation—but it is not the first thing we need to do if our goal is to meet the practical needs, struggles, desires of students grappling with hook-up culture.

This does not mean past eras or theoretical critiques have nothing of value to benefit today’s students, but we need to stay in the present for a bit, focusing on (to take the basic example of a student wishing for flowers) the fact that we have unfulfilled, frustrated students who not only a) wish for flowers, but b) are not getting this wish fulfilled, c) do not even believe it is “safe” to express this wish to anyone else because they fear ridicule and rejection (for the desire itself—it sounds so 1950’s!) and d) believe this practice is simply not in the cards because campus culture doesn’t accommodate such desires on any level.

3. Conversations: *According to your studies, can you tell us what percentage of students have had sexual intercourse by the time they arrive in college, how often they would have it each year, and how the pattern compares to non-Catholic colleges?*

Freitas: While I collected a large amount of quantitative data, my priority was to find out the why’s

behind student behavior, its meaning (or lack of), and how students’ experienced hooking up and sex at college—as opposed to *how many times* they hooked up. The one thing I will say, and which I address in the book, is the following: there is no significant difference, quantitative or qualitative, that differentiates Catholic schools from private-secular and public colleges and universities when it comes to hook-up culture. Hook-up culture at a Catholic college is as robust and dominant as it is at private-secular and public institutions. A Catholic religious affiliation does not have a discernable impact on student attitudes about sex. (This is quite the opposite for evangelical Christian colleges, but that is a separate conversation.)

4. Conversations: *Let’s imagine that a group of Catholic students are sexually active. Would they consider themselves good Catholics and might even attend Mass and communion regularly? Would they see this as a contradiction?*

Freitas: Many students I interviewed who identified as Catholic were not practicing, if practicing means attending Mass and communion regularly. (As an aside: I’ve been speaking a lot recently on how we need to re-envision the nature of practice in ways that better accommodate generational changes and activities, so as to include and respect the way a new generation of Catholics “practice”—just some food for thought.) These students—as I emphasize in *Sex and the Soul*—are not so much apathetic, as so many studies and scholars have characterized younger generations of Catholics—as they are often passionately angry at their faith tradition, hostile, and deeply searching for spiritual meaning wherever they can find it, usually privately.

That said, I found Catholic students who went to Mass and com-

Three-word Catholic teaching: “Don’t do it,” and “Don’t be gay.”

munion regularly who were also regularly sexually active and participatory in hook-up culture, and who saw no conflict between these two dimensions of their lives. The reason most of these students (and others who identified as Catholic but did not regularly go to Mass) gave for this is that a) the Catholic Church’s teachings on sex are outdated and irrelevant to their lives, culture, and generational experience and b) the only “teachings” they got from Catholicism about sex were what I called the “three word teachings”: “don’t do it” and “don’t be gay”—which, understandably, these students find as impoverished.

Students generally expressed incredible frustration about the hostility they believe Catholicism shows toward sex, the fact that often the only people who talked to them about sex in the context of their faith were either celibate and/or were elderly, and what they knew of Catholic teachings was simply laughable. Never mind the confused looks students gave me when I asked questions about whether anyone talked to them about dating and romance in the context of their faith—those conversations simply didn’t exist as far as they knew.

In my opinion, the way to enliven the Catholic tradition in ways that are useful for students today is not to default again and again to the “usual suspects” (*Humanae Vitae*, *Theology of the Body*) from moral theology, which typically lead to a lot of do’s and don’ts (legalistic teachings) about sex, and which, for most Catholic students, fall on deaf ears. It’s instead, to begin with the knowl-

edge that our students are *starving* for practical, spiritual resources to help them reflect on the meaning of sex in their lives, as well as make good decisions about sex, dating, who they go out with/partner with, etc... The best resources Catholicism has to offer this disillusioned and disenfranchised population are teachings that, at least directly, have *nothing* to do with sex. I typically mine Catholic spiritual traditions for resources and doorways toward new conversations. As another example, I would suggest the work of Father Jim Keenan for the way he has redirected virtue ethics toward this reimagining endeavor.

5. *Conversations:* *Do you think stricter enforcement of parietal hours would help address the issue of the girl who brings her boyfriend in regularly and the roommate can do nothing about it? When she complains to the authorities they act as if it's "her" problem.*

Freitas: No. Absolutely not. Besides, we must remember the myriad ways students have deeply intimate access to each other today—if not in person then virtually—as a result of technology. The avenues for explicit, sexual intimacy are many, and the real question is not how we restrict access in one particular, very literal way, but instead, how do we help students to navigate sexual intimacy within these many new avenues, personal and virtual, in a way that is healthy emotionally, spiritually, and physically? On both individual and larger, communal levels?

What students want—and need—is a discussion about spiritual formation, not yet another, negative conversation about rule-making and rule-breaking. Legalistic attitudes about sex are what fostered the belief among young adults that Catholicism is more interested in compliance to rules than in human flourishing, meaning, choice, and good, informed decision-

making. Adding more rules or falling back on old ones will only go farther toward tuning students off and out, whereas rethinking how to address relational formation (romantic, friendship, sexual) from within a spiritual context, addressing the pressures and roots of hook-up culture, and fostering overall conversation regarding peer attitudes about sex, romance, and dating on campus, would be a far more effective approach.

(As a side note: on some campuses — not evangelical ones, where visiting hours are par for the course, and by and large have student support — parietals sometimes foster the development of terrible hazing rituals as students, especially seniors, may take the attitude of “rules are meant to be broken!” — thus ratcheting up hook-up culture instead of staving it off.)

6. *Conversations:* *Fundamentally the basic issue is the underlying values of the students. They feel free to disregard the church's teachings on sexual morality as if these ideas are meaningless to them. What kind of teaching and what kind of student life policies might confront and educate their value systems?*

Freitas: Again, less policy and more opportunity to move conversations about sex, romance, dating, hookup culture, etc. on campus *beyond* do's, don'ts, warnings and negative student affairs programming. (On the other hand, programming about rape, for example, is incredibly important and common; often, except from the safe sex conversation, this is the *only* programming on campus that has to do with sex.)

Students want courses on these subjects, with meaty readings, assignments, and discussions that will empower them to talk to each other and with faculty about these issues in a safe, moderated, intellectual environment, as well as offer a chance to meaningfully reflect on

these issues on individual, campus communal, and wider communal levels. Further, students are hungry to “try on” spiritual practices—which all Catholic campuses are well equipped to offer, with a little shape-shifting and creativity—that will help students better decision-make as they face social situations at parties, in residence halls, and in general among peers on campus. Giving students weekend/outside the classroom assignments that force them to apply practices and ideas discussed inside the classroom, with the knowledge that they will return to class the following week and debrief and analyze how these assignments went when applied in their real lives are always a great success, in my experience. (Practicing “discernment” within their decision to hook-up with someone on a Friday night is a favorite assignment of mine. Another is “exploring human dignity” at a party on the weekend: a great assignment, since human dignity is a central value to most students.)

As far as specific sorts of student affairs programming, many students are dying to know how to date—literally, the basics: how to ask someone out, what to expect, who pays, where you go, when is it right for a first kiss? Students talk about how they have all sorts of very explicit knowledge about sex, about sexual assault, STI's, etc., but then no one has ever had a conversation about how to date, or how to know if someone likes you (while you are sober) or how to express that you like someone (again while sober). You'd be amazed how many stu-

Students want courses and readings on these topics.

dents want opportunities for these conversations but are too embarrassed to admit this or ask for them. One I've suggested for first year orientation programs is something like a tour of the most romantic spots on campus to take someone you like—this kind of program is light, fun, and also, by offering it, we communicate to first year students that it's okay to date, not just hook-up, on this campus—especially if a junior or senior student leads it. These are just a few ideas.

7. Conversations: *It seems that sexual activity in the minds of students is so absolutely an unlimited right to every individual, so basic to one's autonomy, that to suggest any limits on it, even to protect your life and health, is unreasonable. How does that sound to you?*

Freitas: When you dig deep into students' feelings—the ones they often hide from their peers or don't find opportunities to express to faculty, staff, etc., on campus—most students say they feel pressured to have as much sex as possible and to boast about it, even if they don't want to be having sex at all, or even if they want to only have sex with someone they love, etc. Hook-up culture is by nature a coercive culture — students, especially men, typically talk about how they hook-up because they feel they have to — it's how a man proves his masculinity to other men on campus, and sometimes to women too. Women often say it is their only way into a relationship because “nobody on campus dates,” even though they also know that a hook-up is a terrible way to achieve this goal. Many students discuss how hooking up is a kind of “college requirement” everyone is supposed to experience, even if they don't want to.

On the topic of setting boundaries and abstinence: many students see the idea that they can set boundaries with regard to sex and their



Students from the Loyola University of Chicago enjoy time together at the beach.

bodies beyond the right not to be assaulted as revolutionary, exciting, and new. Course assignments and programs (spiritual and general) on campus designed to help students think and rethink boundaries, the many types of abstinence (taking “time off” from sex and hook-up, as one example, even for a weekend or sometimes for a semester while they take a course on the topic), what they want from their bodies, how they feel about their own bodies and experience pleasure and suffering in the context of past experience and hoped for experience, how they want to treat other's bodies and want others to treat their bodies, etc.—all of these are extremely desirable conversations students want to have.

8. Conversations: *You've said (in U.S. Catholic, November 2008) that young Catholics “don't know” what the Catholic Church teaches about anything aside from volunteering and social justice.” In recent years Jesuit education has put huge emphasis on forming “men and women for others.” Are we at risk of fostering a disconnect here?*

Freitas: No actually—not at all. In my experience (from attending and later working at Georgetown University in the 1990's), Jesuit education has always placed an emphasis on the communal-social, ethical dimensions of the Catholic tradition—which students respond to in incredibly positive ways. The real question is not, “Are we at risk of fostering a disconnect here?” but rather: “How can we take this emphasis on volunteering and social justice and *explicitly connect it* to sexual identity, practice, and attitude formation on campus among our students?” The volunteering/social justice dimension of Catholic campus student life is one of the richest, most *underutilized* resources when it comes to empowering students to encounter hookup culture in ways that are healthy, critical, and enriching toward spiritual, emotional, and relational growth. All it takes is some creative rethinking, and you have a ready-made, Catholic framework that students are *already* on board with, and one that avoids the stereotypical teachings on sex that those same students don't want to hear.

I would also suggest creatively

Students are eager to try on spirituality regardless of what tradition it comes from.

adapting Jesuit spiritual practices and values with an eye toward offering students practical, spiritual resources for reflection and discernment about sexual attitudes, practices, hooking-up, romance, dating, etc., on both personal and wider, communal levels. Jesuit spirituality includes so many concrete spiritual practices — among others, spending periods of time in silence, where prayer, guided reflection, and spiritual direction are possible. (One of my most memorable experiences at Georgetown University was participating in a weeklong silent retreat.) I often think about how to adapt this experience to the student college experience today, particularly in relation to their attitudes and struggles with hookup culture and sex on campus. Why not adapt periods of silence coupled with spiritual direction (say, beginning on a Saturday morning, included on this day a talk — perhaps a Jesuit who cedes the floor to a student who has the kind of “authority” to truly speak to her or his peers — and topped off with some individual spiritual direction before the student heads out to the party on Saturday night)? Why not take all that social justice work that students are taught and volunteer for off campus and “export” to other communities, and help them turn what they learn, value, and think about with regard to these experiences on their campus communities, their peers, the party culture on campus? There are so many ways to apply Jesuit spirituality and values to campus culture—again, it just takes some creativity and openness to who, how, when, and where.

And keep in mind that statistics

show that interest in spirituality is at an all-time high among teens and college students in the US (take my study as one example, the UCLA’s HERI study as another). While it’s true that these same students often regard religion with a good deal of skepticism, or are resistant to committing themselves wholeheartedly to one tradition—especially if it’s the Catholic tradition—students are eager to try on spirituality regardless of what tradition it comes from. So what’s keeping them from practicing their spirituality? I often hear colleagues scoff at how their students talk all about spirituality but have no idea what spirituality is. Well, isn’t it our job to help them explore possible meanings—especially if we can offer resources and practices to “try on” in the process?

9. Conversations: *Would your own experience convince you of the value of courses enabling students to face questions about Catholic teaching on sexuality? Would you have any cautions about that?*

Freitas: I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for faculty across disciplines to offer a range of courses on these issues—students crave them. Yet if you look at course catalogues as they stand, sexuality, dating, and relationships, especially with respect to religion and spirituality, are few and far between. Often the argument that these topics are not “rigorous” enough is given to justify why these topics aren’t addressed in classroom. The message this sends to students (and don’t forget the other things I’ve said about their emotional lives at college) is the following: the emotional, the personal, the relational is not significant enough to warrant rigorous reflection and intellectual energy. Never mind the gender biases embedded in such arguments, which is a conversation for another day.

My biggest caution for Catholic

schools, though, is the following: while I am aware that “Marriage & Family” (or something of this sort—including the Catholic Sexual Ethics, which is more or less the same) courses are staples in theology/religious departments, this is *no longer the way to go to enter into this discussion!* At the very least, the tendency for schools to rely on this one and only staple is an example of how impoverished relevant conversations for teens and young adults on dating, romance, hook-up culture, and relationships (overall) are within a Catholic context. People default to teachings on marriage and family, as if this is the only conversation to be had, and despite the fact that the vast majority of students aren’t even *thinking* about getting married, never mind starting families, within the next decade of graduation. I can already hear the argument—“but they fill up so quickly!” Well, yes, if there is nothing else offered near the topic and because students are dying to talk about relationships in any way they can in an academic, classroom context—even if they are stuck doing so only through marriage.

My challenge to faculty on campus: develop a course on relationships (in general), or, even better, on dating, romance and hook-up culture. You not only will have your course fill up in minutes, but I promise lively, engaged discussion of the readings and topics throughout the semester, *and* best of all, empowering your students to take up their own authority on these issues as members of a new generation. In my experience, at least, it can cause a revolution on campus—on all sorts of levels. If it weren’t for teaching a course on dating, I wouldn’t have done a national study (in conjunction with students from the course) and written *Sex and the Soul*. ■