

College Sex and Dating: Mindy Meier on Today's Hook-Up Culture

Derek Melleby

It's probably not surprising to learn that a hookup culture of casual sex exists on college campuses. What might be shocking are three discoveries made by sociologist Donna Freitas in her groundbreaking research and book *Sex & the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. After many years of surveying and interviewing college students, here's what she learned: First, most students don't want to participate in the hookup culture, but feel pressured to for lack of an alternative. Second, while many students identify themselves as "spiritual," their spirituality has very little influence on their sexuality. Third, even though most students are frustrated and have been hurt by the hookup culture, they have very few places to openly discuss their concerns.

Freitas also interviewed students at evangelical colleges. While the hookup culture was not as prevalent, students still felt like they had limited ways to discuss sexuality on campus. There was intense pressure to be engaged before graduation ("ring by spring") and students who were in sexual relationships didn't have many people who they could confide in. Freitas concludes, "The prevailing religious message about sex among students is either to guard purity with one's life or to see sex as irrelevant to one's spiritual practices and religious commitments."

Desiring to address this sobering sexual reality, I spoke with Mindy Meier, author of *Sex and Dating: Questions You Wish You Had Answers To* (InterVarsity Press) about Freitas and her research. Meier serves with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff in the Chicago area with a special focus on working with students in fraternities and sororities. Her book *Sex and Dating* is a very insightful resource for students and parents. She is wise and discerning. What follows is an e-mail conversation to help those who care about college students think more deeply about the struggles and temptations students face.

Melleby: Before we talk about Donna Freitas' book, tell us about your work and what led you to write your book, *Sex and Dating*.

Meier: I work for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational parachurch ministry that serves college students. Part of my job is meeting with students, and sex and dating are frequent topics of conversation. I find that the same questions come up over and over again during Q & A sessions on sex and dating and student appointments. I simply took these questions and gave brief three- or four-page answers to help college students think through these issues. Each question involves a personal story of someone who is wrestling with the issue raised. Students are very busy and a book written in a Q & A format allows them to zero in on topics of interest and skip the ones that do not intersect their lives.

Melleby: From your own experience, do you think Freitas provides an accurate picture of the sexual culture on today's college campuses?

Meier: Yes, I think Freitas presents an extremely accurate picture. She interviewed students from a wide range of schools. The fact that she allowed students to answer in writing and also did personal interviews makes her research very enlightening. She is an academic researcher but also captures subtle nuances with colorful narratives used to describe the people she interviewed. I found her book very engaging. The student stories rang true with my experience on college campuses.

Melleby: *Reading Sex & the Soul, especially the students' stories, can generate a wide range of emotions. What were some of your emotions while reading the book? Which student stories stood out?*

Meier: The stories that elicited the strongest reaction in me were the ones where students admitted being part of the hookup culture and felt empty afterwards, but saw hooking up as the only way to somehow stumble into a lasting and meaningful love relationship. They know in their gut that this process is off target, but do not see any other alternatives for finding the love connection they long for. They find themselves swept down river by a strong cultural pull called peer pressure, which makes them feel powerless. They are afraid to come out and denounce the hookup scene. It's as if there is some invisible gag order on college campuses that renders them mute. I found myself feeling deep sadness as I read those stories. I kept thinking that if only one or two gutsy students would go public with their true feelings, dating with an emphasis on building a rich friendship was seen to be a viable way to find a lasting love relationship, others would find the courage to follow. I wanted them to find that lasting love their hearts were hungry for, and experience the joy and ecstasy God intended them to have.

Melleby: *Did you disagree with any of Freitas' research?*

Meier: No, but I did have some disagreement with a few of the solutions she proposed. Freitas accurately points out that there is a great problem with many college students at non-religious schools (which Freitas calls "spiritual schools") exhibiting a complete disconnect between their spiritual beliefs and their sex lives, because their spiritual beliefs have little impact on their dating and sex lives.

Freitas rightly points out that college students need adult mentors, and that sex, religion and romance should be topics of conversation on college campuses. She cites the wonderful dialogues that students, staff and faculty have at Evangelical colleges, where great effort is made to integrate a person's faith into all aspects of life, whether that be entering the marketplace as a finance major or setting sexual boundaries with their date on Saturday night. This faith-integrated learning atmosphere gives students a place to ask the "big questions" of life. Freitas proposes that this could happen at non-religious schools. She states, "Professors need to embrace the idea of themselves as 'spiritual guides' of a sort and their syllabi as 'confessions of faith.' The campus should be a culture forged by a shared identity, mission, and values of its own, each forming a sense of itself as something special and set apart from the broader culture" (p. 67).

But is that realistic at a large state university? Professors who teach at Evangelical Christian colleges are really bi-vocational. They see themselves as experts in their discipline (geology, computer science, English literature, etc.) but also as deeply devoted followers of Christ who want to shape the next generation in their faith tradition. It is precisely this integration of faith with all of life that energizes them. Many professors at a state university or even a Catholic university would say, "Look, I love physics or microbiology or Russian literature, I am an expert in that area, but I never signed up to be anyone's spiritual guide." People become professors because they know a great deal about a given body of information and have devoted years to be an expert in their field, but they often have no training in how to engage students in meaningful dialogues about faith, romance, sex and religion. And they often have no desire to have that kind of relationship with students.

Melleby: Freitas concludes that most college students, regardless of their institution of higher education or spirituality, lack safe places to discuss sexuality and faith. What advice would you give to those who want to engage students in these kinds of conversations?

Meier: I would tell parents, youth workers and campus ministers to not be afraid to have honest, open conversations about sex, sexuality, dating and love relationships. We must banish the notion that sweeping talk of sexuality under the rug will make for sexual purity. It is crazy wishful thinking to believe that if we don't talk about sex students won't think about it or engage in sexual activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. High school and college students are eager to have meaningful discussions about sex, dating, love relationships and romance in the context of their religious beliefs. Spiritual and emotional health is being able to talk honestly about the things that really matter to us.

In these open and honest discussions, we need to move beyond "sin management" as our primary way to discuss faith and sexuality. Too quickly we want to answer the question, "How far can I go with my girlfriend/boyfriend?" We can get gridlocked by endless discussions about sin management. By doing this, we unknowingly cast sex in a bad light. We focus on the 'don't' of sex. Purity culture in some cases leaves students with the notion that sex is bad. Many devout Christians marry and are very uptight about sex. They have a hard time developing a healthy sex life after they are married, because in their single years remaining pure required them to exert great effort to repress their sexual longing.

When I speak to college students about sex, I start by painting for them the wonderful and glorious picture of God's gift of sex. When students come to terms with the fact that their sexual longings are God-given and fundamentally good, they have a healthier view of themselves and sex. When they understand the purposes of sexual intercourse and the wonderful way it acts as super glue bonding a husband and wife together, this view will inform the choices they make in their dating lives.

As we engage in this ongoing dialogue, we need to hold two great truths in tension. First, that **God has given the gift of sexual intercourse to a husband and wife committed to one another for life**. The Bible is clear in teaching that sexual activity outside the marriage relationship is not God's will. God's prohibitions are not given to spoil our fun, but rather to protect something of great value. The **second great truth is the fact that Christianity is a religion of grace**. We are broken people, living in a broken world. We are not always perfect in living out our beliefs. There must be a way for students who have failed sexually to hear a redemptive narrative. Forgiveness and healing are possible at the cross of Christ. People are not ruined for life or doomed to a miserable marriage because of past mistakes. Our God is a God of new beginnings. Allowing students to hear stories of Christians who have failed to live up to God's ideal but have found forgiveness, redemption and healing will help them in their own journey. Too many Christians suffer alone in shame because of sexual sin. We are told in James 5:16 to confess our sins to one another and pray that we might be healed. Surely this applies to sexual sins.

Melleby: Lacking from Freitas' book was a significant discussion of how evangelicals at secular schools work out their sexuality in relation to their faith. What would you like to add?

Mindy: There are many churches and parachurch ministries like InterVarsity that offer a safe place for dialogue about sexuality in relation to faith on college

campuses. This can take many forms: speakers at large group gatherings, one-on-one counseling sessions, and sharing in Bible or book studies.

Recently, I spoke at an InterVarsity retreat in Virginia where 365 students gathered for a weekend. The title of the conference was “The Sex Conference: Healthy Sexuality in a World of Brokenness.” We began by helping students develop a healthy attitude about sexuality. Then elective seminars were offered dealing with recovery from sexual abuse, singleness, sex in an age of technology (pornography), body image and pursuing holiness in dating. Saturday night we had a time of repentance and healing focusing on the Cross. Sprinkled throughout the weekend were personal testimonies. One woman shared her healing journey after being sexually abused; another man shared about coming out of a homosexual life style. On Sunday I gave a talk entitled, “A Vision for Healthy Relationships.”

So many students who attended this weekend, commented on how much they appreciated being able to bring these topics out in the open, to voice questions and think about how faith in Christ intersects their sexuality. They wanted to know what it would look like to honor God in their dating and romantic lives. An event like this draws a subset of the larger campus—those interested in integrating their faith and their personal lives. Finding like-minded people who share their beliefs and values made them realize that they are not alone. There is a better way than the hookup culture.

Derek Melleby is the Director of the College Transition Initiative, author of Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning (Baker Books, 2011) and co-author of The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness: A Guide for Students (Brazos Press, 2007).



For more information about the College Transition Initiative visit:
www.CollegeTransitionInitiative.com