"Dating is Dead," a recent headline in one of our student papers declared. The accompanying article went on to describe the "hook-up" culture common on college campuses today. Defining hooking up basically as consuming alcohol and having sexual contact with someone you may or may not know...
Hooking up appears to have replaced dating as the primary context for college men and women to experience romantic connection. This is problematic on a number of levels. Specifically, students who participate in hooking up rather than dating tend to miss opportunities to develop relationship skills and often accelerate the level of physical intimacy before they are emotionally prepared. Additionally, and perhaps most concerning, is the risk for sexual assault, or other sexual misconduct, associated with drunken sexual encounters and intimacy without communication.

Student affairs professionals attempt to address these concerns in numerous ways ranging from educational speakers on the topic, fear tactics, and offering alternatives to the casual sex scene. In an effort to begin the process of changing Washington and Lee University's (VA) campus culture and promoting healthy gender interactions, we combined the educational approach with the programming alternative with great success. Students, Student Activities staff and Counseling Center staff collaborated to develop an innovative programming idea we called Date Night. Here we share a brief overview of the problematic issue of hooking up followed by a description of Date Night. We believe this idea could translate well to other campuses and is a proactive, positive approach to promoting healthy gender interactions.

**Hooking Up, Hanging Out, or Being Joined at the Hip**

There are three primary ways that college students interact with the opposite sex: hooking up, hanging out, and being joined at the hip (Kersten, 2002).

Hooking up, hanging out and being joined at the hip can refer to heterosexual or same-sex relationships, for the purposes of this article we will distinguish in terms of heterosexual relationships.

**Hooking Up**

Kersten (2002) defined hooking up as an isolated encounter that requires neither commitment nor affection during which both parties are generally drunk. College students most commonly hook up as ranging from kissing to having sex outside of a committed relationship (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Many of our students assume they know what hooking up means, depending on the students in question. For example, if I think someone is too sexually active, I will assume that every time he/she hooks up, it involves sexual intercourse. Such perceptions can lead to people being and feeling socially judged or feeling they do not fit into the expected campus norm—problems that often bring them in for psychotherapy. Moreover, many students, particularly women, often leave hook ups feeling awkward and disappointed that no relationship materializes from the encounter (Kersten, 2002). This can lead to further adjustment problems, low self-esteem and depression.

Hooking up often propagates more hooking up, and feelings of awkwardness following a hook up may make subsequent social interaction between men and women less likely, thereby further separating physical intimacy from connected relationships. Students' perceptions about their peers' behavior serves to normalize their own participation in the hook-up scene and can also lead to students having sexual contact in an effort to conform to these social norms.

**Hanging Out**

Another way college students interact has been termed hanging out. Hanging out entails men and women spending time together in informal, loosely organized activities (e.g. watching TV or studying). Whereas this can provide a non-sexual, sober forum for men and women to interact, it often fosters confusion and uncertainty as to the nature of the relationship (Kersten, 2002). Hooking up and hanging out both lack open communication about romantic feelings and relationship hopes. This can lead to misperceptions and further awkwardness. At times, hanging out relationships are transformed into hook ups when alcohol is involved. Given that there was limited prior communication about feelings, this can lead to distance and alienation in friendships, although it can also lead to the formation of a committed relationship.

**Joined at the Hip**

In contrast to the hooking up and hanging out dynamics, the third context for interaction reflects a high-level of commitment. The joined-at-the-hip relationship appears to be the primary dating culture on college campuses today. These relationships tend to be fast moving, highly committed and involve spending a great deal of time together (Rogers, 2003).

Indeed, such relationships tend to be so time consuming that they can interfere with same-sex friendships, leading to potential adjustment problems following a break up. Moreover, they tend to accelerate intimacy in a way that can interfere with healthy relationship development. Often such relationships will start as a hook up. The general rule of thumb we hear from students on our campus is that after three
hook-ups you have the “DTR” (define the relationship) talk in which you either enter a committed relationship, agree to keep hooking up with no commitment, or stop seeing each other.

**Why Not Try Dating?**

It is our hope that students will learn to consider an alternative way to connect, through good old-fashioned dating. If it becomes the social norm to ask someone out, spend time together in an organized way (e.g., having a meal), and get to know one another before the relationship becomes physically intimate, many of the social problems and risks associated with the hook-up culture will be minimized. Specifically, students will learn to be open about their feelings and wishes, which will decrease uncertainty about relationship prospects. Additionally, young men and women who develop effective communication skills will be more likely to openly discuss sexual expectations and wishes, thereby decreasing the risk of some acquaintance rape scenarios. This is where our Date Night comes in.

During the fall of 2004, students, administrators, faculty and counseling professionals at Washington and Lee University joined together to form the Gender Relations Committee (GRC) in order to actively promote a healthier environment for men and women. As part of this effort, four action teams were created to focus on the areas of:

- Activities and Gender Relations;
- Male and Female Outreach;
- Curriculum Infusion and Education; and
- Judicial Review.

The Activities and Gender Relations action team was charged with two main goals:

- Provide social opportunities for gender interactions that are not alcohol based; and
- Collaborate with Student Activities, Greek organizations and other campus groups to facilitate positive gender interactions.

Student members of the Activities and Gender Relations action team chose Date Night as their first project. The plan: recruit the local ice cream parlor, popular restaurants and the nearby drive-in movie theater to accept pre-paid Date Night vouchers on one designated weekday evening. Washing-
ton and Lee University students could purchase the vouchers in advance on campus and then use them in lieu of cash at participating vendors. With a clever marketing campaign and plenty of student involvement, Washington and Lee University students found themselves making big plans for a very non-traditional student activity—dating!

**Keys to Success**

Students approached a variety of restaurants in town. Some restaurants jumped at the chance, others declined to participate. The final available selection ranged from casual pizza and subs to fine dining. Adding the ice-cream parlor and the drive-in movie theater provided a full menu of options for an enjoyable evening.

We covered campus with posters promoting the event and the romantic comedy that would be showing at the drive-in. The posters featured crafty slogans and bright colors to catch the eyes of passing students: "DJ Party lacking in romance...Why not try dating?" Students staffed a table in the student center to sell vouchers during the three days before and the day of Date Night.

**Date Night: How It Works**

Participating vendors signed an agreement to accept the vouchers as payment on a single designated evening. They then returned the vouchers to the Student Activities Office, which processed a University check request for the face value of the vouchers less a five percent service charge. This charge allowed the GRC to cover expenses incurred in organizing and promoting the event.

Vouchers could not be used to purchase alcohol and change was provided only when less than $5. Vouchers were not refundable and unused funds were put aside to use toward future Gender Relations Committee events.
Dating Is Here to Stay

By 6 pm on the evening of Date Night, the voucher table was sold out. More than $2,400 worth of vouchers were sold, and almost 100 percent were redeemed at participating vendors.

Why the success?
A female student believes that “Date Night ... allowed people to come together away from the traditional 'social' scene of frat basements and classroom instruction. It was also a great opportunity for friends to just hang out around town.”

Students enjoyed what many considered a “retro” activity, local vendors appreciated the extra business that came their way, and the Student Affairs team felt like proud parents watching students try and enjoy something new. The Gender Relations Committee felt the event successfully accomplished their goal of promoting a healthier environment for men and women.

Although the concept of Date Night itself was a throwback to days gone by, many students chose to debunk traditional gender roles as women invited men and groups of women went out together for a night out with friends.

Quiana McKenzie, a Washington and Lee freshman, was impressed with the impact Date Night continued to have after the event itself was over.

“The students really started to discuss the dating culture at the school,” she said. “During meals in the dining hall, I could hear table after table discussing what was happening and how positive date night was. I think it’s a fantastic start to promoting healthy interaction between men and women!”

Encouraged by the initial success and overwhelming positive feedback, the Gender Relations Committee is planning for three Date Nights in the upcoming school year. Under discussion is a catered evening at the drive-in, an outdoor cookout with live music at a local park, and another partnership with local restaurants.

Making a Difference

Although cultural change is slow, student involvement in Date Night reflects an exciting first step toward improving gender relations on Washington and Lee University’s campus. Not only did the night promote an opportunity for positive interactions between men and women, but it also provided a forum for talking about the negative aspects of the hook-up culture. Given that all involved found this to be rewarding and fun, we expect that with ongoing programming and outreach efforts we will make a measurable difference in the way men and women interact on our campus.

References

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