This paper describes an approach to sex education on a college level. The basis is a course which has been given to some 5,000 students in New England colleges and universities since 1967. The philosophy underlying the activity, and developments that have occurred during this period are discussed in detail.

A COURSE IN HUMAN SEXUALITY FOR THE COLLEGE STUDENT

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A content analysis of current offerings from television, the cinema, the theater, magazines, and books might convince an outsider that Americans are preoccupied—perhaps even obsessed—with sex. Four of the ten books on the current nonfiction best seller lists are about sex, "X" rated films attract a high percentage of moviegoers, and our contemporary agony about the issues of obscenity and pornography coincides with a burgeoning volume of erotica in all the media. The consequence is that massive sex education is being accomplished wholly within the context of sensationalism and commercialism—a context which is far from reality and which is promoting sex in a most pejorative sense. At the same time, "society" is at odds about many issues concerning responsible sex education—whether it should be done at all, if so by whom and, especially, what should be told and when.

The recent controversial report of the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography opens with an emphatic statement concerning this:

The commission recommends that a massive sex education effort be launched. Its purpose should be to contribute to healthy attitudes and orientations to sexual relationships so as to provide a sound foundation for our society's basic institution of marriage and family. It should be aimed at achieving an acceptance of sex as a normal and natural part of life and of oneself as a sexual being. It should not aim for orthodoxy; rather, it should be designed to allow for pluralism of values.

It should be based on facts and encompass not only biological and physiological information but also social, psychological and religious information. It should be differentiated so that content can be shaped appropriately for the individual's age, sex, and circumstances. It should be aimed, as appropriate, to all segments of our society, adults as well as children and adolescents.

The two authors of this paper both function primarily within the university counseling community—as a psychologist and as a gynecologically trained sex counselor. Courses dealing with various areas of human sexuality are certainly not new within the college curriculum. For decades the topic has been dealt with as a part of courses in the sociology of marriage and family living, psychology, religion, and home economics, and the ubiquitous "sexual hygiene" course has provided an umbrella for handling everything from venereal disease to sexual ethics.

In this paper we would like to describe an approach to college-level sex
SEX EDUCATION ON A COLLEGE LEVEL

education that we have developed over the past four years. Some 5,000 students at Yale, Mt. Holyoke, Amherst, Brown, Smith, Albertus Magnus, Dartmouth and the University of Massachusetts have participated in these courses which began at Mt. Holyoke College in 1967.

Course Description

Our course is called "Topics in Human Sexuality." It is an evening series of lectures followed by a question period after which the students attend small group discussions. It is offered on a noncredit basis and sponsored by a campus Committee on Human Sexuality. The committee is a group of interested students and faculty willing to take the extra time to organize the course, "spread the word" throughout the campus, make arrangements for the smooth functioning of the lectures and discussion groups, prepare the readings, questionnaires, and evaluations, and register the students. Although no formula has been imposed, the committee usually consists of 10 to 12 students from all four classes, one or more faculty members, a member of the dean’s office, one of the campus chaplains, and a physician from the college’s health service.

The lectures, given by the authors, focus upon our clinical experience in working with students. The course format is shaped by critiques of past students given at the end of the lecture series. At present it consists of a series of six to eight lectures covering such basic areas as psychosexual development, interpersonal relationships, sexual response, pregnancy and birth, contraception, and abortion. Omitted by student demand have been previous lectures on demography, abnormal sexual behavior, and morals. In other words, in this course students want to focus on issues of personal sexuality; not global problems or abnormal situations but the everyday realities with which they must learn to cope. The number of lectures in a series is expanded or contracted depending upon the situation at a particular school. We have found, however, that the course is best when limited to a maximum of eight lectures. In the fall we try to finish by Thanksgiving and in the second semester by the spring vacation.

The discussion groups are coeducational. Student innovation is at times necessary in order to obtain an approximately equal number of males and females, especially in one-sex schools such as Smith, Mt. Holyoke, and Dartmouth. In the case of Yale, where there is a six to one ratio of males to females, another college—Albertus Magnus—was tapped in order to supplement the Yale females. The small groups are led by students who have taken the course in the past or who have expressed a special interest in leading a group. (For example, at Yale this semester, 14 medical students are among the student leaders. The medical students in turn are being trained to go out to other groups in the community as sex educators.) The group leaders have groups of their own which meet weekly with members of the faculty for the purpose of learning how to work with the particular issues in their groups.

The Lectures

Interestingly enough, the most popular subject is pregnancy and birth. A brief description of this lecture will convey the philosophy and method of the whole course. The session begins with a discussion of the physiological and psychological factors which lead to conception. The focus is on teen-age pregnancy. One concept that is developed is that pregnancy occurs in the teen-ager when the need to get pregnant is greater than the need not to be pregnant. Also stressed is the frequency on the campus of the
“Goodbye Columbus” syndrome—the girl who has intercourse without contraception, who is “so spoiled” that she can not believe that anything terrible can happen to her. A pregnancy test (the two-minute variety) is performed in the classroom. The elements of medical care are mentioned, and, more important, the relationships of the couple to each other, to their obstetrician, to their families and to their peers are described as they are altered during the pregnancy period. A film on natural childbirth is shown which stresses the closeness of husband and wife during labor and delivery. The woman plays an active role in the delivery of her baby and watches the delivery as it occurs. The camera shows the baby as it is being born.

Couples who have recently had a baby are asked to come and discuss their experiences. Young couples who are either students themselves or who are close in age to students are most effective. The couples are told: “Students have many fantasies about childbirth. We would like you to come and honestly discuss what your experience was like and what it has meant to you. If it’s convenient, bring the baby.”

After the film, the couples come to the stage and in a relaxed and informal way, usually with the baby, and talk candidly. After all, how many parents get an opportunity to show off their baby to a thousand people! What comes through is family life in its many aspects—the decision, sometimes agonizing, sometimes inadvertent, to have a child; the adjustments of the pregnancy period; the joy and exultation of the experience of delivery; the pride in having a child; the experience of becoming a parent. Student reaction is impressive. Babies become real. Pregnancy is no longer a “clouded mystery.” They have come to know about the experience in many of its dimensions.

Afterward, in small groups, they have an opportunity to react and to talk about their own observations and anxieties. This lecture is probably the most important in terms of family planning and responsible sexual behavior. The striking contrast between the hassle of an unwanted pregnancy and the unique quality of a pregnancy in a context of family life has a sobering impact on many students.

Other lectures try to zero in on those aspects of the issues presented which are most relevant to the college students. Lectures on “Interpersonal Relations” and “Psychosexual Development” deal with the range of constitutional and social factors that lead to gender development and establishment of sexual roles. Specific emphasis is placed on the family and peer group influences that subtend differences between the sexes in sex drive, attitudes, and behaviors. For young people the issues of romantic infatuation, sexual exploitativeness, and the “cult of masculinity” are especially salient. The differences between men and women that make for differences in attitude toward the meaning of sexual relations—differences that lead to the perennial question of “do we or don’t we?”—are elaborated. The current and topical controversies of the Women’s Liberation movement are discussed in the light of its implications for college students.

The “Contraception” lecture describes the various types of contraceptives, shows them in the classroom, tells how to use them, describes their effectiveness and complications. We stress, however, the factors that go into making the decision to have intercourse as well as the factors that inhibit a couple from obtaining birth control. Our students are taught that “you don’t have intercourse without birth control—unless you want to get pregnant.” The students are told how and where to obtain birth control.
They are also taught, usually through descriptions of our own college cases, the factors that determine contraceptive failures—factors ranging from ignorance (the student who claims he "thought you had to do something else to get pregnant") to mechanical failure (our studies indicate that as many as 28% of Yale males believe that the condom is the most effective contraceptive available) to psychosocial failure (the instances are too many to describe briefly).

In a lecture on "Abortion" the emphasis is placed on the religious, moral, legal, medical, and sociological aspects of abortion in the past, the present, and also with a look into the future. But the focus is on abortion and the college student. The alternatives to abortion are described and the decisions to be made are illustrated. Emphasis is given to the roles of the boyfriend and the parents in turning the negative effect of an abortion into a learning and maturing experience. The students are told how an abortion is done, and the complications are presented. They are told how to obtain a safe abortion, both legally and extralegally, and are given the telephone numbers of the Clergy Counseling Services for Problem Pregnancy in each of the cities where such a service exists. At Yale, students are counseled for abortion through a special sex-counseling service in the Department of University Health. When approved within the confines of the Connecticut law, the students are aborted at the university.

The lecture on "Sexual Response" draws upon Masters and Johnson's findings and those of other sex researchers. However, we emphasize the hang-ups of students, once again through case example. Most of these hang-ups are based more on a lack of understanding of sexual response than upon an individual's problem. By emphasizing the developmental aspect of sexual response, we hope to protect students from the tyranny of arbitrary goals in sex such as simultaneous orgasm or multi orgasmic response in the woman.

All of the lectures are supplemented by readings and occasionally by films. Each of the students is given a copy of Brecher and Brecher's *An Analysis of Human Sexual Response*. Other books are recommended, including J. L. McCary's *Human Sexuality*, Alan Guttmacher's *Pregnancy and Childbirth*, the Time-Life special book on *Contraception*, and Rollo May's *Love and Will*. Sometimes, a part of the course fee is used to establish a reading shelf of sexual materials in residence college libraries.

The Groups

Group discussions are most frequently led by "peers" who have received brief training. They are supervised by the faculty consultants to the course. The sessions are held out as a chance to share with others one's own feelings about sex, to exchange information and ideas, and to expose one's values to the challenge of diverse points of view. An opportunity is also provided to practice using the language of sexuality—something that many have never done. It may be too much to expect that students can so readily drop the games and verbal tactics that frequently characterize the dating situation. While they are cautioned that the group session "is not a confessional nor an inquisition," there can be pressures to reveal sexual secrets. Although we insist that "it is not a stage or a podium," we know that some students will parade their exploits or try zealously for converts to their beliefs. Even though we warn against making the sessions amateur group psychotherapy, pressures do mount to "cure" those with sexual hang-ups.

At their best, groups can provide a truly exciting educational experience. Honest, concerned, probing, looking to help each other work through sexual
attitudes and behavior, students develop new and fuller concepts of themselves as sexual beings. One student in an early course, now married and in graduate school, remarked: "Before the course, I felt that I would never have a baby and, therefore, should never marry. My attitude changed completely. I am now married, very happily, and look forward to having children when we are ready for them." Another student, who had spent her precollege life in all-girl "prep schools," had never had an opportunity to talk with males about male sexual feelings. Whenever she had been with a male it was within the context of a "date" and there had always been the superficiality and "gamesmanship" of the dating scene. As a result, she had no clear idea of what men felt and thought about women. Two years ago she confessed: "I can't talk about sex. I'm all hung up on it." Now a group leader herself, she has become, according to students in her group, a very able "peer-teacher" on sex and the hassles of sexual relationships.

Notwithstanding our new age of "sexual enlightenment," group discussions confirm that negative sexual experiences are common among students. First intercourse is sometimes a disappointing and occasionally a traumatic experience. Masturbation, not infrequently discovered and punished in childhood, is still a guilt-ridden practice for some. Contraception is "dirty." As a result, there is the need to work out these experiences and to replace them with more positive attitudes if only to free the individual to expend his or her energy in more productive ways. The groups can accomplish this goal.

In a recent group session a striking incident occurred. The seminar had been meeting after the lectures for six weeks. At this particular meeting the members decided that they would stand in a circle holding hands. The object was for them to simply verbalize what they were feeling at that moment. One of the girls, who had attended every week but had said very little, stated: "This is so important for me. It's the first time in my life I have held hands with a man. I can't tell you how good it feels just to overcome that fear of contact with a male." A prurient vein within our society insistently diverts our attention toward the highly visible sexual vagaries of the young; it may be that the real and far more frequent sexual casualties are the unheralded young for whom nothing is happening.

Certainly not all groups succeed in finding that delicate balance between openness and privacy, intimacy and exploitation, seriousness and light-hearted humor. Some groups just do not jell. They break up or, worse, "just drag on," supporting a collective delusion that something is happening. Experience indicates that the groups function best when there is a nearly equal representation of males and females. Too many of either sex tend to suppress or distort the presentation of individual attitudes.

Student Response

Whatever their reasons for "electing" to participate, students have responded enthusiastically whenever the course has been offered. At Yale last semester, 1,200 students registered and paid the $5 course fee. At Brown, after a first-semester series, it was thought that not enough students would be interested to warrant a second presentation during the same year. But students asked for a repeat and the course limit of 400 was completely filled within 24 hours with equal numbers of men and women. At Smith, two years ago, the course was limited to 400 students from Smith and Amherst. So many students were left out that the series was broadcast on the campus radio network. At Mt. Holyoke, "Topics" has become a permanent and popular part of the scene organized by a self-perpetuating Student Committee on Human Sexuality.

From the beginning, we have asked
our students to evaluate the lectures, the lecture material, the groups, and the readings. As mentioned earlier, several subjects are no longer included because we have responded to student demand for material related to sexuality as it is manifested in their daily lives. Student evaluation also indicates that peer group leaders are better tuned in than the faculty leaders of the past and, therefore, lead to more meaningful group interaction. The two strongest student opinions have been that the course should remain co-ed and optional.

We originally asked for evaluations at the end of the course, then went to a mid-course and end-course routine. During the present semester we are using a Post Meeting Response (PMR) form developed at the University of Pennsylvania for the evaluation of small groups. We use the PMR both for the lectures and the small groups. It asks the students, each night, to evaluate the lecture and the seminar, to indicate what they liked and disliked, and what suggestions they have for improvement. Over 90 per cent of the PMRs are being turned in weekly and are an in-course means for us to tailor the course presentations.

The Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test (SKAT) is a questionnaire developed by Dr. Harold Lief and Dr. David Reed of the University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Sex Education in Medicine. Designed originally for medical students, Drs. Lief and Reed have allowed us to alter it for other university students. The students are given the SKAT when they pay the course registration fee and are told that it will be their admission ticket to the first lecture. As a result, we have a complete survey of all the students in the course. The 195 questions are then keypunched and the data fed back to the students before the end of the course. It is presented for the purpose of showing them where they were “at” when the course began. Studies done last year indicate that students who take the course have more sex knowledge but less sex experience than students in the control groups who did not take the course. Last year we also studied the students at the end of the course and found changes in knowledge, attitude, and behavior.

Finally, an outgrowth of last year’s course was the development of the concept of a continuing program in sexuality. Course funds were used to finance the writing and publication of a booklet, Sex and the Yale Student. The booklet was written by the Committee on Human Sexuality. Ten-thousand copies were distributed free to all Yale undergraduates and graduate students this fall as well as to those members of the faculty who wished a copy. At the present time, several of the other schools where the course has been given are either planning their own or to distribute a modified version of the Yale booklet.

Discussion

“Too late!” is often the response to the idea of college-level sex instruction, and it is true that the ideal “sex education” model calls for instruction to begin at an early age and proceed smoothly with new learning phased with psychosexual stages—a kind of “sexual readiness” model. Indeed, we seem preoccupied with when to tell what and just how much. We vacillate between tempering the sexual wind to the shorn lamb and anxiously worrying if we have not been too late with frankness. But because college students have been exposed to a welter of competing versions of sex education—ranging from ascetic warning through self-consciously administered “sexual hygiene” to an occasional objective enlightenment—the college setting can be ideal for developing that “final revised edition” of sexuality before adulthood and marriage.

By college time, there is no longer
need to avoid or postpone any topic whatsoever; now it is time they knew! And in college, for the first time perhaps, we can talk of sexual activities in the present tense, as if they are happening right now rather than "when you are married." We no longer need use the evasive and impersonal third person in discussing sex. Instead of "when one reaches orgasm" we can now say "when you reach orgasm." Similarly, college students can be encouraged to gain from their sexual experience and to practice communicating about sex. It is possible to approach masturbation, premarital sexual intercourse, homosexual experience, and sexual varietism as types of human sexual experience rather than as necessarily sinful and pathological. The more neutral ground of college also allows for more dispassionate examination of both traditional moral teaching and the peer group values. It is precisely because the young can challenge the former that they will allow closer examination of the latter. A goal of college-level teaching is to give students a chance to "hold at a distance" these assumptions so that they no longer work automatically and blindly in determining sexual behavior.

Traditionally, sex education has fallen between the stools of academic scholarship and clinical detachment—too practical to win scholarly respectability and considered too kitsch to attract professional concern. That our program originates with individuals concerned with college mental health counseling suggests that sex education is "preemptive therapy." It is the alternative to waiting for the individual to show up at the clinic with anxiety about sexual feelings, pregnancy, homosexuality, or for contraceptive information.

Precollege courses are usually under pressure to "teach morality" along with sex information, and this usually means defending current laws and religious beliefs. The average individual, when asked what he means by "morals" usually cites his own particular beliefs. At the college level, we take a clear-cut stand on many issues and make it explicit in our presentation. We feel that we should not hide our convictions. We are convinced that abortion should be more a medical issue than a political or moral one. We feel that unmarried individuals should not have sexual intercourse without proper contraceptive procedures, and we feel that all individuals who choose to have sexual relations should have access to conception control methods.

We feel that many of our sex laws should be changed. As soon-to-be-voting citizens, college-age students should be made aware of the absurdity of laws that treat as criminal acts sexual behaviors that are matters of personal choice. They should be apprised of the gross discrepancy between laws in different jurisdictions: a sexual act considered legal in one state can be punished in another as severely as manslaughter or murder.

We feel that specific rules cannot be laid down for such issues as sexual experimentation; we consider it inappropriate to either encourage or discourage such activities. We recognize that some young people may not be psychologically ready for such encounter and need to be supported in their decision to postpone. We feel that some individuals can handle and even profit from sexual experimentation; they should be educated toward personal responsibility and maturity rather than subjected to the psychological overkill of dire warnings of "terrible consequences." Our case examples include students who have gained as well as students who have suffered from sexual experimentation. Our attempt is to motivate the individual to evaluate himself in the light of such experience.

We feel that education toward responsible sexuality is also education toward effective parenthood. Since we hold that sexuality begins in infancy, we see that adult attitudes can be most creative
when based on a life-long development that is sex-affirming rather than sex-denying.

We feel that, by and large, society still continues to be “two-faced” about masturbatory activity and noncoital sexual practices. Concerning self-stimulation, we disagree with the injunction that “it won’t hurt you if you don’t do it too much”—what is too much?—and affirm that for some individuals, women included, it can enhance the development of sexual response; under some conditions it can serve as a substitute for coitus, can temporarily relieve honest sexual tensions, and need not result in self-devaluation. We insist that traditional notions of “perversion” need re-evaluation, and encourage focusing on mutuality, nurturance, and respect rather than specific acts and techniques) as the real criteria of “healthy” sex.

Another main objective is to strip away the aura of “gloomy” secretive-ness that surrounds some sexual areas. We invite the young to look freely into an “adult” world they have only seen by an inadvertent look into mother’s bedside cabinet. They are invited to see and examine contraceptive devices, to see a pregnancy test performed before their eyes, to see films on childbirth, and to see the curette used in abortion. They are introduced to the unforgiving statistics concerning pregnancy, abortion, and venereal disease. Candor about sexual topics invites open inquiry and objectivity in an area where these are seldom welcome or possible; the goal is not to parade sexual arcana before the young for its shock value, or to attempt to “disinfect” sex. We believe that accurate sex information and objective, nonpejorative attitudes on the part of professional educators provide the appropriate context for dealing with sex.

The recent popularity of college courses in human sexuality merely signals a surfacing of curiosity and concern that has been there all along—but there is a new ingredient. Relaxed parietal rules were first met with exhilaration at the new freedoms, followed by the more sobering realization of the responsibility that freedom entails. On many campuses last year’s furtive smuggling of girls into “off-limit” quarters changed to this year’s unselfconscious (and legitimate) overnight visits. Similarly, students became less secretive about sex. One of the more interesting phenomena that has developed is the practice of noncoital sleeping together by couples who wish to share a kind of experience of intimacy but who do not share the commitment that intercourse may involve. It was as if the nonparental approach of some colleges allowed students to view themselves as adults. Sex information, too, need no longer be “bootlegged.” Out go the unisex courses “open only to seniors”; in come mixed audience courses and candid peer group discussions open to all students.

Perhaps the most important ingredient of all is the role of the student in making the course a possibility. “Topics in Human Sexuality” is a course organized and presented by them for their fellow students. We, as the lecturers, base our material upon our experience with students. The ambiance which results from this combination of student initiative and sharing of professional experience provides, we believe, an effective context for learning about sexuality.

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